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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Be(com)ing an Asian tangata tiriti

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ABSTRACT

In Aotearoa-New Zealand, talk of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand's foundational colonial contract) often centres on Indigenous Māori and Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent) relations. But, as an Asian New Zealander, where do our Asian (im)migrants/communities fit into such discussions? What are our responsibilities to Māori, the Indigenous people of the land, and Te Tiriti? How might wisdom inherited from our ancestors, in particular, Asian philosophies, help us to think through these questions? Here, I document my journey hitherto of be(com)ing an Asian tangata tiriti – a person/people group belonging here via Te Tiriti. I critically reflect on my (family's) story and struggles with (not) belonging as Asians in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Learning from te ao Māori (the Māori world), I then reach for wisdom inherited from my own ancestors. I demonstrate how Chinese, Thai and Theravāda Buddhist philosophies on relationality and ethics teach me to live a virtuous life with others and, by extension, to have good, productive relationships with Māori and Te Tiriti. This paper creates possibilities for other (Asian) (im)migrants to reimagine their relationships with Indigenous peoples and treaties here, and elsewhere, and to be(come) tangata tiriti (or equivalent) too.

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Introduction

Often overlooked in social and political discourses in Aotearoa-New Zealand are the relationships between Asian communities, and Indigenous Māori and Te Tiriti o Waitangi – a founding document of the nation (discussed in the next section). Asian communities have a long association with this whenua (land). Some Indian and Chinese people, for example, settled in Aotearoa-New Zealand as early as the nineteenth century (Leckie 2010; Ip 2015). At the 2018 Census, those of Asian ethnicities accounted for 15.1 percent of the country's overall population, while Māori comprised 16.5 percent (StatsNZ [date unknown]). Asians may soon outnumber the Indigenous Māori in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Yet how do we, Asian (im)migrants, understand ourselves in relation to tangata whenua (Indigenous people of the land) and the treaty that is core to the constitutional arrangements of our nation?

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Here, I document my journey hitherto of be(com)ing[1] an Asian tangata tiriti – a person/people group belonging here via Te Tiriti. I set the context for this paper by introducing Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the notion of 'tangata tiriti', as well as explaining key terminology. I then turn to, and critically reflect on, my (family's) story and struggles with (not) belonging as Asians in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Learning from te ao Māori (the Māori world) – which looks to the past to find a way forward – I reach for ways of knowing, be(com)ing, doing and seeing inherited from my own ancestors. I demonstrate how Chinese, Thai and Theravāda Buddhist philosophies on relationality and ethics teach me to live a virtuous life with others and, by extension, to have good, productive relationships with Māori and Te Tiriti. This paper thus creates possibilities for other (Asian) (im)migrants to reimagine their relationships with Indigenous peoples and treaties here, and elsewhere, and to be(come) tangata tiriti (or equivalent) too.

Setting the context

Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Te Tiriti) is considered a founding document of Aotearoa-New Zealand.[2] First signed on 6 February 1840 at Waitangi, Te Tiriti was/is an agreement between rangatira (tribal leaders) and the British Crown, 'based on the promises of two people to take the best possible care they can of each other' going forward into the future (Bennett in Waitangi Tribunal 1992, p. 30). Two texts of this treaty exist: one in the Māori language and one in English. The Māori text is sometimes referred to as 'Te Tiriti o Waitangi' or 'Te Tiriti', and the English text as 'The Treaty of Waitangi' or 'The Treaty'.

For some, the distinction between 'Te Tiriti' and 'The Treaty' is critical because these texts are not direct translations of one another (Beausoleil 2021). In Te Tiriti, Māori gave *te kāwanatanga* (*governance*) of their lands to the British Crown, while retaining their rangatiratanga (chieftainship). This text acknowledges the co-existence of two forms of authority in Aotearoa-New Zealand: rangatira and the British Crown. The English text, on the other hand, claims that Māori ceded 'absolutely and without reservation all the rights and powers of *sovereignty*' over their territories to the Queen, enabling New Zealand to become a nation-state.[3] The Māori text was signed by 540 rangatira and Captain William Hobson on behalf of the British Crown, while the English text was signed by 39 rangatira (Ministry of Culture and Heritage 2016). However, the English text was (and remains) privileged by successive governments and, as the eminent Māori scholar Ranginui Walker (1996) asserts,

> The Treaty of Waitangi paved the way for British imperialism and the eclipse of Māori mana by British sovereignty. Pākehā [New Zealanders of European descent] dominion was spread gradually over the land by the colonial techniques of extinguishing native title to land. (p. 30)

Te Tiriti permitted non-Māori to settle in Aotearoa-New Zealand (Waitangi Tribunal 2016b). As Walker argues elsewhere, 'The Treaty of Waitangi is the charter for New Zealand's first immigration policy … the 540 chiefs who signed it agreed to migrants settling in New Zealand from Europe … [Pākehā] too need the treaty as it legitimates their presence in the land' (in Ip 2003, p. 245). Walker's sentiments echo those of Sir Edward (Eddie) Taihakurei Durie – a former Chief Justice and Chairman of the Waitangi

Tribunal,[4] and leading expert on Te Tiriti. In his 1989 Waitangi Day address, Durie described Pākehā as 'Tangata Tiriti', stating that: 'if we [Māori] are the Tangata Whenua, the original people, then the Pakeha are the Tangata Tiriti, those who belong to the land by right of that Treaty' (in Borrows 2018, p. 45). Some now argue that tangata tiriti encompasses all non-Māori as 'people who have a special status in this land of ours [Māori] by right of Te Tiriti o Waitangi' (Turia 2016, p. 36; see also Network Waitangi Ōtautahi 2020).[5] The notion of 'tangata tiriti' in Aotearoa-New Zealand differs from the concept of 'treaty people' used in the Canadian context where, according to Epp (2008), the latter encompasses both Indigenous peoples and settlers.

Tangata tiriti is not a passive identity. Rather, it is a relational orientation that invokes ethical-political responsibilities. These responsibilities include seeking to understand settler identities, building productive relationships with Māori, engaging with critical histories of Aotearoa-New Zealand, and supporting Māori struggles for justice (Delahunty 2021; Dewes 2022; Ngata [date unknown]). Be(com)ing tangata tiriti in Aotearoa-New Zealand is broadly akin to being 'allies'/'settler allies' to Indigenous peoples in other settler contexts, such as Canada (Davis et al. 2022).

Yet, as noted earlier, Māori–Pākehā relationships continue to remain the focal point of Tiriti discourses, and Indigenous–Settler relations more broadly, in everyday Aotearoa-New Zealand and scholarly writing (Ip 2003; Mok 2005; Ng 2017; Shui 2020). Talk of 'Māori–Crown relations' also typically centres Māori–Pākehā relationships, even though the Crown represents all New Zealanders. As Chinese New Zealander Steven Young (2004) argues, in practice, 'the Crown has represented the position of the majority "white" New Zealanders with little acknowledgement of its non-white citizens'. On that basis, some Asian (im)migrants to Aotearoa-New Zealand consider Te Tiriti as of little, or no, relevance to them and/or that they are thus vindicated from any complicity in the colonisation of Aotearoa-New Zealand.

Notes on terminology

The preceding section demonstrates the variable understandings and uses of 'Te Tiriti o Waitangi'/'Te Tiriti' and 'The Treaty of Waitangi'/'The Treaty' among scholars. In this paper, I use 'Te Tiriti o Waitangi' and 'Te Tiriti' to refer to the Māori text of the 1840 treaty. I privilege this text as an ethical-political turn towards Indigenous tangata whenua in the pursuit of justice. I also privilege the Māori text in accordance with international law, namely the principle of contra proferentem. This principle states that, in the event of an ambiguous contract, the text against the drafting party takes precedence; that is, the (Indigenous Māori) text which works against the interests of the Crown.

I recognise that my use of the label 'Asian' may seem problematic. The label can imply a monolithic identity, homogenising very different groups of people within and from Asia. However, uniting under the pan-ethnic 'Asian' umbrella need not – and should not – come at the expense of diversity. Some Asian worldviews, such as Yin-Yang, teach us that unity and diversity always-already co-exist; all identities are interconnected and come about in relation to each other (I return to these ideas at greater length later in this paper). Understood in this way, Asian and Chinese/Thai/Cambodian, for example, do not negate one another but, rather, are always-already entangled and interanimating.

To be Chinese/Thai/Cambodian, for example, as in my own case, is to be part of a larger familial entity (Asian), and to be Asian is always-already to belong to a more specific kinship group(s). As Indian Buddhist philosopher-monk Śāntideva (1995) writes, 'everything is dependent upon something else. Even that thing upon which each is dependent is not independent' (p. 52).

My use of the label 'Asian' could also be interpreted as an instance of *strategic essentialism* (Spivak 2005). Here, I *momentarily* downplay differences and assert a simplified pan-ethnic Asian group identity for *political mobilisation and action*. I do so to bring together the pan-ethnic Asian community in Aotearoa-New Zealand to reimagine our relationships with tangata whenua and Te Tiriti. Strategic essentialism already occurs in practice as evident via #StopAsianHate[6] and Asians Supporting Tino Rangatiratanga.[7] Such movements and groups demonstrate that much can be achieved through mobilising and organising around a collective Asian identity.

That said, in what follows, I deconstruct the 'Asian' label that I employ, too. Continued critique must accompany strategic essentialism as a safeguard against essentialism – the assumption that there are defining, essential features attributable to all members of a particular group or category (Bell 2021). As will become apparent, I shatter any sense of a fixed, homogenous Asian identity by highlighting the very different and rich cultural antecedents that constitute my own Asian identity, namely Thai, Chinese and Theravada Buddhist ways of knowing, be(com)ing, doing and seeing. My use of 'Asian' here, then, is characterised by a double imperative: it seeks to call together people with genealogical links to Asia for political mobilisation and action, while keeping space open for our differences. I turn now to my (family's) story and struggles with (not) belonging as Asians in Aotearoa-New Zealand.

Longing for belonging: my (family's) story

My family's relationship with Aotearoa-New Zealand began in 1984. In March of that year, my ethnically Chinese father arrived as a refugee and survivor of the 1975–1979 Cambodian Genocide orchestrated by the Khmer Rouge (members of the Communist Party). Like others during that Genocide, often also referred to as the 'Killing Fields', my father was imprisoned in state-sanctioned communal agricultural labour camps, where he was forced to grow rice and dig irrigation canals for hours on end, with little to eat. He watched helplessly as family, friends, and others perished from starvation and malnutrition, or were executed in the name of the 'purification of the Khmer/Cambodian race' due to xenophobia and other ideologies of the Khmer Rouge. It is estimated that approximately 1.7 million people perished during the Cambodian Genocide (Kiernan 2004). The fates of some members of our family remain a mystery to this day. Due to enduring trauma from this period, my father has not returned to Cambodia since arriving in Aotearoa-New Zealand. He credits this country – now his only home – in part for his survival.[8]

My father was 23 years old and held no qualifications when he arrived in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Upon departing the Māngere Refugee Resettlement Centre in Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland), the primary point of contact for refugees to Aotearoa-New Zealand (see Figure 1), he found employment as a trainee upholsterer with Vita New Zealand on Rosebank Road in West Auckland, with the help of his Pākehā (New

Figure 1. My father (right) and his friend at the conclusion of their stay and orientation at the Māngere Refugee Resettlement Centre in 1984. They are about to begin their new lives in Tāmaki Makaurau.

Zealanders of European descent) sponsors. He remains in this industry almost 40 years later. My father was reunited with my Thai mother – his childhood sweetheart – in the late 1980s through community networks both here and abroad. After countless hours working overtime and a few years of saving, he flew to Bangkok and married my mother in 1990. She arrived in Aotearoa-New Zealand later that year and I was born at National Women's Hospital on the foothills of Maungakiekie (One Tree Hill) in Tāmaki Makaurau in 1991. Although Aotearoa-New Zealand is the only whenua (land) I know as home, my sense of belonging to this place has often been precarious, particularly throughout my childhood.

I started elementary/primary school in the mid-1990s when the country was in the midst of an 'Asian Invasion' moral panic. This moral panic began with the publication of 'The Inv-Asian' – articles by journalists Pat Booth and Yvonne Martin that appeared in free, Auckland community newspapers in 1993 (Spoonley 2017).[9] The articles drew attention to the 'problems' presented by the recent and rapid rise of Asian migration at the time. This migration was facilitated by the introduction of the 1987 Immigration Act, which ended kinship migration from the United Kingdom and Ireland, and instead sought skilled migrants to fuel economic growth. Those from Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong were among the first to arrive in significant numbers (Spoonley 2017). The articles by Booth and Martin 'set the tone for print media coverage until the 1996 general election' and led to the rise of the anti-immigration New Zealand First Party (Butcher and Spoonley 2011, p. 102).

'The Inv-Asian' articles also set the tone for my own schooling experiences. I became aware that I was racially-ethnically different (in a pejorative sense) at the age of six because of what I now understand as the 'Inv-Asian' discourse. I had just embarked

on a journey at a new school where I was one of two Asian students in my class – a common occurrence in all of my classes in the first few years of school (see Figure 2). The bullies were ferocious and unrelenting. They learnt I had an-other name – Ittichok (it-tee-chalk) – which they pronounced 'itchy cock'. They repeatedly told me that my 'ethnic' lunch 'smells and looks like puke [vomit]' and that I should, 'Go back to China/Asia'. 'You don't belong here!', the bullies protested unceasingly in the playground at morning tea and lunchtime. So powerful were their words that they would ring uncontrollably in my ears for years to come.

My face was shattered, the meaning of which will become clear shortly. I was left feeling insecure in my own body and wished that I could 'just be normal' (or, in other words, Pākehā/white). To avoid ridicule, I concealed at all costs the name, Ittichok, gifted to me by Buddhist monks and elders – a trauma that has not yet fully healed with the passage of time. To evade further persecution, I refused to eat my 'ethnic' lunch with my peers on the (emotionally and physically) uncomfortable wooden bench outside my classroom. To avoid a reprimand from my parents, I devoured my lunch on my way home in solitary confinement or tossed my lunch into the school bins. Such was the rightful place of my ethnic culture, or so it was made clear to me at the time. These lived experiences and discourses would characterise the rest of my formal schooling and their traumatising impacts remain to this day.

Noticeably, from the 2000s, I recall occasions at school where I was in contradistinction to feel good about my Asian identity. The 'Asian Invasion' moral panic had slightly subsided as public attention shifted to apparent Māori privilege in Aotearoa-New Zealand following the 'Orewa Speech' of Don Brash (2004). Brash, then Leader of the Opposition, criticised the then Labour (left-wing) government for its affirmative action

Figure 2. My first school photo, taken in 1996 (not the school mentioned above). I am in the front row, third from right, in the yellow gumboots.

policies for Māori and described Treaty settlements as a 'grievance industry'. Accordingly, I found myself and other Asians increasingly pitted against our Māori (and Pasifika) peers. Juxtaposed against the so-called 'long brown tail of underachievement', we Asians were paraded as the poster children of the model minority myth (Ip 2003; Ng 2017). Unlike our Māori and Pasifika counterparts, we were ostensibly studious. All Asians excel in Mathematics, I was reminded throughout the rest of my schooling. We were also the desirable classmates for group projects because we were sure to complete our homework and get good marks. Later, in my last year of high school, it was expected that I would take the 'Asian Five' (Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Statistics, and Calculus) – the most difficult, 'academic' subjects – since all Asians apparently go on to study Medicine, Science or Engineering at university.

The model minority myth also extended beyond the school gates. I remember that Asians were heralded by Pākehā for their uncomplaining and apolitical stance, unlike Indigenous Māori activists who had organised a hīkoi (march) in 2004. This hīkoi challenged proposed government legislation that vested the foreshore and seabed, for which Māori had customary rights, in Crown ownership. On other occasions, Asians were commended for requiring little to no government support in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Some Asians – like my father, for example – arrived here with little but still managed to make good lives for themselves and their families. Why could Māori (and Pasifika peoples) not achieve the same? – or so the argument went. As a result, such perspectives came to be embraced and espoused by Aotearoa-New Zealand Asian community members too.

I seldom felt comfortable with my Asian identity at school and in wider society, even when I apparently should have. I was uncomfortable with the comparisons drawn between Asians and those of Māori and Pasifika ethnicities. I felt the full force of othering and pejorative stereotyping throughout my own childhood and adolescence and would not wish those experiences on anyone else. I also performed poorly in the subjects in which I was expected to excel. I preferred literature-based subjects such as Social Studies, History, Geography and English, over the Sciences and Mathematics. These experiences further exacerbated my identity crises at the time.

My home life was a different story. I enjoyed learning from my parents about our culture, particularly Buddhist teachings on ethics, and eagerly awaited our weekly visits to the temple. I was later ordained as a novice monk in rural, northern Thailand at the age of 15, during the first Aotearoa-New Zealand school holidays that year (see Figure 3). Every morning for a month, I walked barefoot along roads neighbouring the temple to receive alms from devotees and offered them blessings in return. I would have my last meal for the day with other monks before noon. I looked forward to the afternoons, which were dedicated to studying and discussing Buddhist teachings. I was also enthralled by a peculiar black and white symbol which decorated our family home for as long as I can remember (see Figure 4). The symbol – which my parents called 'Yin-Yang' – would later teach me about the importance of relationships and difference (I return, in the next section, to the influence of Yin-Yang and Buddhist philosophies on my life-work; see also Dam 2018, 2021). It was in my family home and the temple that I felt most comfortable (and accepted) in my own skin.

As I got older, I often found myself caught in the middle of a tug-of-war. At school and in wider Aotearoa-New Zealand society, I was often reminded that my culture was an anathema and inapposite to be(com)ing a New Zealander, when that identity was

Figure 3. With my teacher (left) and mother (right) in April 2007. I had just begun a month-long ordination as a novice monk at Wat Phra That Suthon Mongkhon Khiri, a temple in Den Chai, Phrae, northern Thailand.

Figure 4. A Yin-Yang ottoman, made by my father, in our family home.

available to me. At home, I realised that there were aspects of my culture from which I could not completely escape, nor did I necessarily want to. How was I to reconcile these competing perspectives? I thought to myself growing up. Confused and torn by these competing perspectives, I delineated stringent borders between my public (e.g. school) and private lives. I relegated my 'ethnic culture' to the safe and private sphere of my own home and other spaces, such as temples. Never the twain (my public and private lives) shall meet.

Further compounding my precarious sense of belonging throughout my schooling was the fact that Asians in Aotearoa-New Zealand were – and still are – often framed

outside of Te Tiriti commentary and associated discourses of national belonging. 'We/our ancestors were not the colonisers and/or signatories to the Treaty', I often hear(d) from Asians in Aotearoa-New Zealand. 'We just got here' (see Shui (2020) for similar experiences). Such views were/are not surprising. The *New Zealand (School) Curriculum* – of which I am a product – stipulates the need to 'create an Aotearoa New Zealand in which *Māori and Pākehā* recognise each other as full Treaty partners' (Ministry of Education 2007, p. 8; my emphasis).[10] Ostensibly, non-Māori and non-Pākehā were/are not Tiriti partners – a perspective to which I naïvely subscribed throughout my schooling.

Finding my place to stand, be(com)ing an Asian tangata tiriti

My longing for belonging, for a place to stand, has led me to reimagine my relationships with Indigenous Māori and Te Tiriti, and my own identity, as an Asian New Zealander. This journey began over a decade ago on a final school year Geography field trip to Waitomo – a community just over two hours south of Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland), renowned for its underground cave system and glow worms. The class was prompted to examine how the Māori concepts of whakawhanaungatanga (the process of establishing relationships and relating well to others), manaakitanga (hospitality, generosity, care for others), and kaitiakitanga (guardianship) contributed to tourism in Waitomo. I became intrigued by the similarities and differences between te ao Māori (the Māori world/view) and the worldviews of my own Asian cultures that I had hitherto suppressed, at least in public.[11]

A year later, I began a Bachelor's degree, majoring in Education and Politics, at Waipapa Taumata Rau/The University of Auckland. In my final undergraduate year, I was appointed as a research assistant in Te Puna Wānanga (TPW), the School of Māori and Indigenous Education. Here, I became further captivated by the relationships between Māori and Asian ontologies and epistemologies, manifested in the boundless aroha (love) and manaaki (support/care/hospitality) afforded to me by Māori staff members in the School. Comforted by these relationships, I enrolled in postgraduate study in TPW in 2013. I drew inspiration from kaupapa Māori[12] (theory and praxis (in)formed by Māori ways of knowing, being, doing and seeing) while enrolled in TPW's research methods course. I began to explore the public application of the ontologies and epistemologies inherited from my own ancestors, in my studies and everyday life. Contrary to the anti-Asian sentiments imposed on me as a child and through the Aotearoa-New Zealand school system I experienced, I learned from te ao Māori that my Asian heritage was not an anathema after all. Nor was my culture something that I needed to banish to the private sphere.

In what follows, I thus attest to the value of Asian meditations on relationality and ethics for reimagining Asian–Indigenous relations in Aotearoa-New Zealand (and other postcolonial settler societies). Ngāti Hau and Ngāpuhi scholar Te Kawehau Hoskins reminds us that, 'Māori don't want you to be Māori, they want you to think positively about how you can have productive relationships with Māori' (UniNews 2021, p. 7). Responding to this challenge, I demonstrate how Chinese, Thai and Theravāda Buddhist philosophies – in particular – teach me to live a

virtuous life with others and, by extension, to have good, productive relationships with Māori.

Be(com)ing-in-relation

An orientation to relationship is at the heart of many Asian ways of knowing, be (com)ing, doing and seeing. Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism, for example, encourage us 'to become aware of the unity and mutual inter-relation of all things, to transcend the notion of an isolated individual self' (Capra 1975, p. 24). Ivanhoe (2018) similarly argues that, in South and East Asian thought in particular, the self is 'organically and inextricably interrelated with other people, creatures, and things' (p. 44). In Buddhism and Hinduism, relationality is evident via teachings on kamma/karma (actions/the results of action), though not exclusively[13] (Keown 2000; Hodge 2004). Put simply, such teachings suggest that our present experiences are shaped by past actions and that our present actions inform our future. The interconnectedness and mutual constitution of all things is also underscored in *Tao te ching*, a foundational text of Taoism. Chapter II contends that:

> The whole world recognizes the beautiful as the beautiful, yet this is only the ugly; the whole world recognizes the good as the good, yet this is only the bad.
>
> Thus Something and Nothing produce each other;
>
> The difficult and the easy complement each other;
>
> The long and the short offset each other;
>
> The high and the low incline towards each other;
>
> Note and sound harmonize each other;
>
> Before and after follow each other …
>
> (Lao Tzu 2009, p. 4)

These Asian worldviews posit, in different ways, the same underlying reality: that all phenomena in the world exist not as atomistic, self-sufficient entities but *through and as relations.*[14]

The unity and interrelation of all things is visually apparent in the Yin-Yang symbol[15] and attendant philosophy (which was a key symbol in my own home growing up). According to this philosophy, the universe is produced through the intra- and interactions of energies/forces known as Yin and Yang – an idea graphically portrayed in Figure 5. Yin is the black side of the symbol and Yang is the white side. United, they form the symbol, which denotes the universe and all phenomena within it.

Although considered separate energies/forces, Yin and Yang are also – paradoxically – inseparable. Yang can only exist and be defined in relation to Yin, and vice versa. The mutual constitution and inseparability of Yin and Yang are further depicted by each side bearing remnants of the other within it – the black dot within the white side and the white dot within the black side.

I offer here a deliberately light and partial explanation of Yin and Yang. The reason for this treatment is that Yin and Yang are not fixed concepts and, consequently, they evade

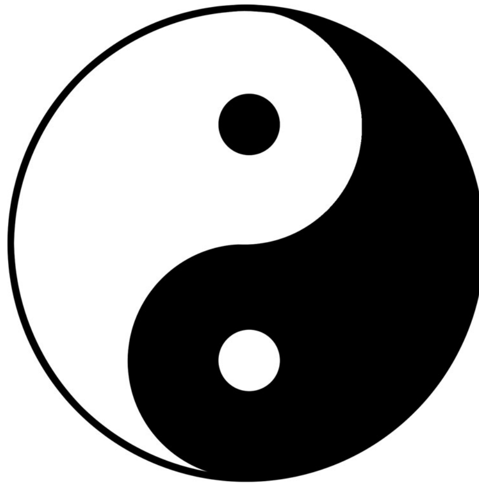

Figure 5. Yin Yang – Symbol. Credit: https://wordpress.org/openverse/image/dda8fdd9-f083-4546-bf9b-c5f44ba59dff/?referrer = creativecommons.org

an absolute and tidy interpretation or definition. Yin and Yang are instead (re)defined in situ, in the specificity of contexts. In one context, Yin could be defined as death and Yang as life/birth, which, together, constitute existence. After all, how could we understand life/birth without death and vice versa? In another context, Yin could be defined as darkness and Yang as light. Together, they comprise a day. However, Yin and Yang should not be simply considered as total opposites. Rather, they are *relative* to one another. Yin and Yang exemplify the very philosophy they espouse; they are determined in relation to the other, to what is beyond themselves, since nothing in this world is self-contained.

The orientation to relationship postulated thus far renders untenable the view that Te Tiriti and colonisation do not concern Asians in Aotearoa-New Zealand because 'we just got here'. Te Tiriti and Pākehā/European colonisation cannot simply be relegated to a distant past, compartmentalised and divorced from the present and future (and vice versa). As teachings on kamma/karma and Yin-Yang remind us, the past, present and future are inherently entangled and interanimating since they only come into being in relation to each other. This relational understanding of temporality underpins cornerstone social practices and obligations central to some Chinese (and other Asian) families such as filial piety. Implanted in some of us from a young age is the non-negotiable responsibility to care for 'those who have brought you up' (Sterckx 2020, p. 191) – a recognition that our present and future are possible because of the past. This cultural and ethical obligation extends to those who have entered the afterlife, as manifested through the Ching Ming/Qingming Festival (or Tomb Sweeping Day) celebrated in early April of every year. During this festival, families visit the gravesites of their ancestors to clean tombs, pray, make offerings, and give thanks for past sacrifices that make the present and future possible. Chinese and Buddhist philosophies encourage me to see the past *before* me in both senses of the word. The past inevitably *precedes* this very moment in which I find myself, but the past is also always-already *in front of* me, shaping present realities (and future imaginings). A similar relational understanding of temporality is

evident in te ao Māori via the following whakataukī (proverb): 'Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua' ('I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past') (Rameka 2016, p. 387; see also Walker 1996).

The Asian philosophies discussed hitherto remind me that I am always-already bound to Te Tiriti, notwithstanding its signing 151 years prior to my birth. Indeed, even Asians in Aotearoa-New Zealand (and others) who claim no association with Te Tiriti are themselves partially bound to it – their relationship to Te Tiriti is a relation by way of (an apparent) non-relation. There are, however, more productive ways to understand our, Asian, relationships with Te Tiriti than simply one of 'non-relation'. Those of us living in Aotearoa-New Zealand cannot avoid Te Tiriti because, as the Asian philosophies above posit, nothing exists outside of relationships. As the preamble to Te Tiriti makes explicit, a treaty was necessary, in part, because 'many of her [the Queen's] subjects [were] already living on this land and [with] *others yet to come*' – 'he tokomaha ke nga tangata o tona Iwi Kua noho ki tenei wenua, a e haere mai nei' (Waitangi Tribunal 2016c; my emphasis). Those who signed Te Tiriti in 1840 could foresee a future in which other (im)migrants would come to Aotearoa-New Zealand. In effect, Te Tiriti created the conditions for my ancestors and I to settle and remain here, into the future. We were/are among the 'others yet to come' imagined in 1840. The signatories to Te Tiriti were thinking of us/me. In time, my ancestors and I have come to be here through Crown immigration policies and, by extension, we, too, be(come) partners to Te Tiriti. We are, like Pākehā, tangata tiriti, though from Āhia (Asia).

The aforementioned Asian meditations on relationality and temporality also remind me that my hands cannot be washed clean of associations with colonisation. Again, traces of the past inevitably shape and permeate the present and future. To be in Aotearoa-New Zealand is to be embroiled in the myriad of social, political, cultural, economic and historical structures, processes, laws and relations that have made, and continue to make, the nation-state colonial. For instance, people of refugee backgrounds in Aotearoa-New Zealand – like my ancestors and me – find refuge in a settler colonial state that protects our human rights. At the same time, however, along with other (im)migrants/settlers, we also come to occupy lands confiscated from Indigenous people(s). Put differently, it is through the (ongoing) dispossession of Māori that families like mine are afforded political protection, a new identity via citizenship, and the privilege of being here more broadly. Espiritu refers to this vexed positionality as the 'refugee settler condition' (2018, p. 9). As I have argued elsewhere, 'The other is implicated in my be[com]ing and my stories, as am I in theirs' (Dam 2021, p. 10). My ancestors and I are complicit in colonisation as beneficiaries of a system that exacerbates violence towards Māori in Aotearoa-New Zealand – a reality from which we cannot escape and for which we are infinitely answerable (Hancock 2020).

Be(com)ing ethically-politically responsible

The preceding section established that self-sufficiency is a fallacy. All subjectivities and identities are partial and come into being in relation to what is otherwise. Understanding that all things are interconnected and mutually constituted – as some Asian (and Māori) worldviews do – gives rise to attendant practices of ethical responsibility for the other, human and otherwise (Hoskins 2017; MacKenzie 2020). I alluded to this obligation

towards others previously in my brief discussion of filial piety and Ching Ming/Qingming. Thai considerations of the face, and Theravāda Buddhist virtues of mētta and karuṇā, also espouse an ethic of responsibility for others. These philosophies, I find, are potent guides for be(com)ing in relation with tangata whenua, for be(com)ing Asian tangata tiriti. It is to these considerations that I now turn.

The face (หน้า) is widely considered sacred in Thai culture[16] (Dam 2021). For many Thai people, the face is a metaphor for one's social standing. The face attests to a person's reputation, honour, integrity, authority, influence and identity, which must be safeguarded (Komin 1990; Ukosakul 2005). In Thai worldviews, 'the face is identical with the … "ego"' (Komin 1990, p. 691). The metaphorical face is not dismembered or disembodied, however. Rather, the metaphorical face is bound to, and partially disclosed through, a literal face. The face, both metaphorically and literally, is radically singular. Every face conveys individual narratives of social standing and authority, hopes and desires, trials and tribulations, and identity/identities more broadly. Every face enriches the world with its alterity and irreplaceability.

Like Yin and Yang, Thai notions of the face reflect relational and paradoxical characteristics. The face contains traces of the other within it. The face is not an individual's alone but is inextricably intertwined with the community/communities to which one belongs. Again, nothing is self-contained. 'My' reputation, honour, integrity, authority, influence and identity are derived in part from others with whom I am in relation (relatives, acquaintances, colleagues, groups/associations, etc.). It follows, then, that my conduct affects not only 'my own' face but, most crucially, the faces of others. I am accountable to others, interrogated for my (mis)conduct.

The face regulates sociality in Thai culture. The face is venerated, as discussed previously. The face is also considered very delicate by many Thai people (Komin 1990). The face is exposed, vulnerable and susceptible to wounding as 'my' social standing and those of others are not fixed. Through one's own conduct or that of another, a person's reputation, honour, integrity, authority and influence can be diminished or enhanced. The face summons me to be ethically responsible, both to 'my own' face and those of others, given its sacrosanctity and susceptibility.

This cultural and ethical order is evident in a number of idiomatic expressions in the (central) Thai language. Implanted in many Thais from a young age is the non-negotiable responsibility to take care of or to preserve the face (รักษาหน้า) and to give face (ให้หน้า) in our face-to-face interactions with others. For harmonious relations with others, one must avoid (in)actions that may lead to 'someone losing face (เสียหน้า), tearing someone's face (ฉีกหน้า), snapping someone's face (หักหน้า), shattering someone's face (หน้าแตก), not keeping face (ไม่ไว้หน้า), or displaying a thick/shameless face (หน้าหนา)' (Dam 2021, p. 11). I am bound to the face by ethical responsibility.[17]

There are parallels between Thai considerations of the face and philosophical understandings of mana in te ao Māori. Similar to the face, mana 'is approximated by power, authority and prestige' (Stewart 2021, p. 89), and is considered the 'unique force/identity' of others (Hoskins 2017). Mead (2013) argues that the mana of others must be respected and enhanced in interactions with others – '[a]ctions that diminish mana result in trouble' (p. 50). Such is the case for Thai understandings of the face too, as described above.

In different ways, an ethic of responsibility for others is also at the heart of Theravāda Buddhism. This orientation is particularly evident via the virtues of mētta and karuṇā – two of four Brahmavihārās (measureless states/sublime attitudes) Buddhists are encouraged to cultivate (Thera 1999; Keown 2000). Mētta is the practice of unconditional love or loving-kindness. As Sri Lankan Theravāda monk and scholar Venerable Dhammananda suggests, Buddhism encourages us 'to love and protect all beings' without desire for ourselves to be loved (1989, p. 178). 'Love' here does not refer to romantic or emotional affection and attachment, as everyday understandings of the term may evoke. Rather, mētta is the cultivation of altruistic 'benevolence, friendship, and goodwill' towards all living beings – human and otherwise (Keown 2000, p. 91).

Karuṇā (compassion), too, reminds us of our obligations to others. Buddhism emphasises that existence is dukkha (suffering/pain/unsatisfactoriness/stress/unhappiness). To be in the world is to suffer universally and individually, for example, from dis-ease (dis-ease and disease) and the impermanence of our very being. However, recognising that suffering is an inescapable condition of life should not propel us into a state of paralysis. The omnipresence of suffering, and our own everyday experiences of it, prompt us to be mindful of fellow earth dwellers and to turn towards the dukkha of others by practising and cultivating karuṇā. In addition to 'compassion', the late Venerable Pandita describes karuṇā as, 'The quivering of the heart in response to others' suffering; the wish to remove painful circumstances from the lives of other beings' (1992, p. 284).

Thai considerations of the face, and Theravāda Buddhist virtues of mētta and karuṇā, remind me of my obligations to others, specifically Māori in the context of this paper. Thai considerations of the face stipulate that I must not, at all costs, deface the face, or trample upon or diminish the faces of Māori. Rather, I am held captive by the (Māori) other, bound to them by an obligation to act righteously and with generosity to their irreplaceable face that adorns our world. As tangata tiriti, I must face the other, and cultivate and practise mētta and karunā towards Māori – to keep my heart open – not least in the face of dukkha brought about by colonisation and from which I am a beneficiary. These orientations challenge me, as they challenged my ancestors before me, to envisage and work towards a better world – a world in which I live productively with Māori, a world where my happiness is born from compassion for the (Māori) other. As Śāntideva (1995) contends, 'All those happy in the world are so because of their desire for the happiness of others' (p. 99).

Ethical responsibility to the face, mētta and karuṇā may – on the surface – appear empty and lack heft. On the one hand, these orientations prescribe virtuous conduct towards Māori (and others) – they suggest how we might be with one another in good, productive relationships. On the other hand, what exactly constitutes practices of ethical responsibility to the face, mētta and karuṇā are not defined. However, this partial emptiness that characterises ethical responsibility to the face, mētta and karuṇā need not be understood simply in deficit terms. There is merit in emptiness too. As the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu reminds us, 'it is by virtue of Nothing that … [Something] can be put to use' (2009, p. 13). The hollow centre allows bamboo stems to be used as pipes for the transportation of water. The void within a pot allows it to carry tea. The emptiness inside a house (physical building/structure) allows it to be fashioned into a unique home. It is precisely the partial emptiness of ethical responsibility to the face, mētta and karuṇā that keeps space open for the

other and their otherness. Like Yin and Yang, ethical responsibility to the face, mētta and karuṇā are defined and redefined in situ, in the particularity of contexts. What constitutes ethical responsibility to the face, mētta and karuṇā are to be (re)invented in the intimacy and immediacy of the face-to-face relationship(s), at service of the singular (Māori) other before me.

Thai considerations of the face, and Theravāda Buddhist virtues of mētta and karuṇā, cannot be seen only through rose-tinted glasses. '[P]ain and loss are inescapable', as classical Indian thinkers impart to us (MacKenzie 2020). And, as various threads of Asian thought remind us, nothing exists in and of itself. Ethical responsibility arises in part by virtue of something other than itself: through the unavoidable co-presence of irresponsibility. If we are to take differences seriously, then ethical responsibility towards one face entails irresponsibility towards other faces. To cultivate and practise mētta and karuṇā towards the other is, inescapably, to betray (other) others to whom I am also universally obligated. There is 'a non-loving opening of love', a non-ethical opening to ethics, a non-compassionate opening to compassion (Dam 2018, p. 144). Ethical responsibility is always-already political. Understanding ethical (ir)responsibility to the face, mētta and karuṇā in this way reminds me that my work is never done. There are always other others – other Māori whānau (family group), hapū (collections of whānau) and iwi (tribe) – to whom I am simultaneously obliged.

Closing reflections-openings to the future

My aim in this paper was to rupture the notion that Te Tiriti speaks only to the Māori–Pākehā relation. I did so here by exploring my positioning in Aotearoa-New Zealand growing up as an Asian New Zealander, as well as my evolving relationship to this (living) document and to tangata whenua. I have been assisted in this endeavour by meditations from Asian philosophy, particularly those that assert a primordial relation to the other – human and otherwise. Such worldviews remind me that, as an Asian New Zealander, I am always-already entangled with tangata whenua and Te Tiriti since all things are interconnected and mutually constituted. Tangata whenua and Te Tiriti are, in part, the other(s) that enable me to be here. Tangata whenua and Te Tiriti gift me, too, the identity of be(com)ing tangata tiriti – a unique status and relation for which I have ethical-political responsibilities.

Be(com)ing tangata tiriti does not negate my Asian and Chinese-Thai-Cambodian identities. Be(com)ing tangata tiriti affords me new possibilities to be(come) Asian in ways that are unique to Aotearoa-New Zealand and encourages me to think about how I can nurture productive relations with Māori. Be(com)ing tangata tiriti permits me to cultivate and sustain cultural practices at the heart of my Asian heritage; practices such as ethical responsibility to the face, and virtues of mētta and karuṇā, towards tangata whenua. Such considerations have become the panacea to the identity woes that have characterised much of my life thus far, and through which I have found my place to stand as an Asian/Chinese-Thai-Cambodian tangata tiriti and New Zealander. Te Tiriti is for me, as the Bodhi tree[18] was for the Buddha, a locus of awakening and sanctuary.

I do not intend, through these scholarly reflections, to impose a universal way of be(com)ing (an Asian) tangata tiriti. Rather, by exploring my own relationships with

tangata whenua and Te Tiriti, I hope other (Asian) (im)migrants will reach for thinking and praxis unique to their culture(s), to (in)form their relationships with Indigenous peoples and treaties here and elsewhere. For, as te ao Māori teaches us: 'Nā tō rourou, nā taku rourou, ka ora ai te iwi' ('With your food basket, and my food basket, the people will thrive').

Notes

1. My representation of the word 'be(com)ing' seeks to convey that being is also a process of becoming. Change is constant, as the Yin-Yang philosophy reminds us. Rotating the Yin-Yang symbol on an axis visually reveals the incessant, cyclical metamorphosis of Yin and Yang (Dam 2021).
2. I intentionally refer to Te Tiriti o Waitangi as *a* founding document, and not *the* founding document, of Aotearoa-New Zealand. Te Tiriti was preceded by He Whakaputanga o te Rangatiratanga o Nu Tireni (the Declaration of Independence of the United Tribes of New Zealand), which was first signed in 1835. Margaret Mutu (2019) notes that, 'Many hapū [collections of whānau/family groups], especially in the north, still consider He Whakaputanga to be the founding constitutional document of New Zealand and refer to it constantly as they exercise their mana [power, authority, unique identity/force]' (p. 6). For more on He Whakaputanga, see Department of Internal Affairs (2017); and Healy et al. (2012). Unlike other countries, Aotearoa-New Zealand does not have a single written constitution but, rather, a set of documents and customs that together create the framework for government in New Zealand.
3. See Beausoleil (2021), Mutu (2010), Orange (2021) and Waitangi Tribunal (2016a) for more comprehensive discussions of the textual differences.
4. The Waitangi Tribunal was established as a permanent commission of inquiry in 1975. The Tribunal investigates and makes 'recommendations on claims brought by Māori relating to legislation, policies, actions or omissions of the Crown that are alleged to breach the promises made in the Treaty of Waitangi' (Waitangi Tribunal 2022).
5. 'Tauiwi' is another Māori term for non-Māori. I do not see 'tauiwi' and 'tangata tiriti' as mutually exclusive since tauiwi *are* tangata tiriti and vice versa. However, I prefer the term and identity 'tangata tiriti' for its immediate and apparent orientation to Te Tiriti.
6. Asians (and others) rallying together in Aotearoa-New Zealand, Australia, the US, Canada, and elsewhere, in opposition to anti-Asian racism which has intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic.
7. A pan-ethnic Asian group supporting Māori sovereignty in Aotearoa-New Zealand.
8. See Dam (2021) for an extended account of the Cambodian Genocide and my father's experiences.
9. A copy of one of the articles can be found in Wong (2016) – see chapter 7.
10. In 2019, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Minister of Education Chris Hipkins announced that, by 2022, New Zealand history would be taught in all schools and kura (schools where teaching is conducted in te reo Māori and based on Māori culture and values) (New Zealand Government 2019). The new Aotearoa-New Zealand history curriculum was released in March 2022. This curriculum now frames Te Tiriti as a relationship between 'tangata whenua and tauiwi' (Ministry of Education 2022, p. 1).
11. My gratitude to Geraldene Gillies, my teacher at the time.
12. See Hoskins and Jones (2017).
13. The unity and interrelation of all things is also evident via Dharmakaya in Buddhism and Brahman in Hinduism – see Capra (1975), Hodge (2004), MacKenzie (2020) and Shroff (2011).
14. A relational ontology is present in te ao Māori too. See, for example, Connor (2019), Hoskins (2017), Rata and Al-Asaad (2019) and Stewart (2021).
15. The symbol is also known as the 'Diagram of the Great/Supreme Ultimate'. For more on the Yin-Yang philosophy, see Capra (1975) and Sterckx (2020).

16. The sacrosanctity of the face is also articulated in other Asian cultures. For example, see Buckley et al. (2006) for Chinese understandings of the face; Haugh (2005) for Japanese understandings; Liev (2008) for Khmer/Cambodian understandings; and Yang and Rosenblatt (2001) for Korean understandings.
17. For more detailed accounts of Thai considerations of the face, see Komin (1990), Persons (2008) and Ukosakul (2003, 2005).
18. The sacred fig tree (Ficus religiosa) with heart-shaped leaves under which the Buddha sat and obtained enlightenment.

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