Anthroposophy and Culturally relevant Preparation
(Rethinking Anthroposophy in a Pluralistic World)

By Hornfay Cherng; ITEF meeting for Europe-America-Africa on October 14, 2026

I. A Voice from Asia

Asian voices seem not easy to hear. There may be many reasons for this. Language is certainly one factor. Many of us have to express ourselves in English, which is not our first language. Meanwhile, in my own experience, respect for those we regard as teachers can also make it difficult for us to voice questions or disagreements openly.

There is also a deeper question I would like us to explore together. For many years, those of us working in Waldorf education in Asia have mainly occupied the role as learners. We learned primarily from teachers of the Western world. We read Rudolf Steiner. And we asked ourselves: Is what we are doing truly "Waldorf"?

Even when Western teachers encouraged us to develop something rooted in our own context, an unspoken question remained: Who has the authority to decide what is truly Waldorf? Who has the authority to define what is truly Anthroposophy? For a long time, I lacked the confidence to offer my own experience as part of the answer.

But something is changing.

In different parts of Asia, I am gradually sensing a desire to meet one another, to listen to one another, and slowly to find our own voices. Our monthly ITEF Asia-Pacific online gatherings are one small sign of this. Next July, we also hope to welcome teacher educators from different parts of this region to attend the in-person teacher educators' conference in Taiwan. I do not yet know what will grow from these gatherings. But I see a growing confidence among us to speak from our own experience and contribute to our shared work.

Speaking with you today is one step in that process. I speak as one person, rather than on behalf of Asia. Asia contains many voices and experiences, and mine is only one among them. My perspective comes from my life in Taiwan, shaped by Chinese culture and nourished by Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist traditions. I was also raised in a Christian family, and Anthroposophy has deeply influenced my life.

II. From Polarity to Encounter

In an article I recently submitted to the Newsletter of the Pedagogical Section, I began with an image of East and West drawn by Rudolf Steiner.



by Rudolf Steiner (1922)

What truly attracted me was the tension within that image. I began to ask myself: Must this tension remain a polarity—East and West as two opposing forces? From my own cultural background, another image naturally arose: yin and yang.



Yin and yang are different, but they are not simply opposites. There is something of each within the other. Their relationship is reciprocal and dynamic. And it is within this movement that something new, or even a higher unity, can emerge.



So I gradually arrived at a question that has become increasingly important to me:

How can we deepen the sharing of Anthroposophy across cultures through encounter and mutual learning? The sharing of a tradition often begins with those who know it well offering what they have learned. This generosity has been essential to my own journey as a learner. As these relationships deepen, I believe learning can grow in both directions. Encounter invites us to take this relationship further. A genuine encounter can change everyone involved.

Anthroposophy has changed many of us in Asia. I believe our experiences can also contribute to how Anthroposophy is understood and lived. This is what I mean by mutual transformation: we remain rooted in what nourishes us, while allowing what we learn from one another to deepen our understanding.

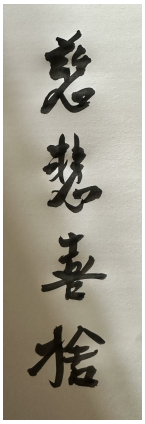
III. A Simple Story: From Christmas to the Winter Solstice

Let me begin with a very simple example. When Chun-Shu Chang, one of the early pioneers of Waldorf education in Taiwan, began her kindergarten decades ago, she naturally inherited Waldorf festival traditions. Christmas was an important festival. She prepared for it with great care. But gradually she discovered something.

Many of the parents, grandparents, and people in the surrounding community did not come from Christian backgrounds. Their spiritual and cultural lives were shaped more by Buddhism, Daoism, or Chinese traditions. Christmas was beautiful. Yet she found that this form of celebration did not resonate as deeply with some families' cultural and spiritual lives.

So she made a change.

Instead of celebrating Christmas in the original way, she began to celebrate the winter solstice. In Chinese culture, the winter solstice already carries deep meaning: the return of light, family reunion, warmth, renewal, and a sacred turning point in the cycle of the year. Within this festival, she also introduced the Buddhist Four Immeasurables: 慈悲喜捨
loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.



Through this change, the festival took on a new life. The Waldorf approach to celebrating the seasons met a local tradition intrinsically meaningful to these families. From that encounter, a new form of celebration emerged.

At first glance, this may seem like a simple example of "localization." Many Waldorf teachers may recognize and welcome this kind of initiative. But if we take this example seriously, a deeper question appears: How far can such transformation go? At what point does "localization" begin to touch the spiritual foundations of Anthroposophy itself?

IV. When I encounter a Wall

This question touches a tension in my own experience. When I came closer to Anthroposophy, I encountered many ideas that deeply nourished me. But I also encountered a very specific spiritual narrative: Christ and the Mystery of Golgotha, Michael, the hierarchies of spiritual beings, the post-Atlantean cultural epochs, and a particular history of the evolution of human consciousness. For many Anthroposophists, these are profound spiritual realities that sustain their lives and practice. I respect the depth of that commitment, even where my own understanding differs.

I also want to speak honestly about where I stand. I find meaning in aspects of these accounts, but I cannot affirm that they describe spiritual history in a way that speaks equally to every cultural and spiritual tradition. Some arise from Rudolf Steiner's spiritual research, which I cannot independently assess. Others seem to give Europe a central place in human history and development. These are questions I want to understand more fully, and I welcome dialogue about them. At times, this feels like reaching a wall. I do not experience it as deliberate exclusion; I struggle to see how these accounts can meet the spiritual traditions that have also shaped my life. I want to enter Anthroposophy with my whole self.

But can I bring my Buddhist heritage with me? Can I bring Confucianism and Daoism with me? Can these traditions contribute in their own terms, as well as enter into dialogue with Anthroposophical ideas? How can I enter more deeply into Anthroposophy while remaining faithful to these sources of meaning? In order to enter Anthroposophy more deeply, must I first leave part of myself outside the door? This is not an abstract question for me. It is an existential question. When I feel that belonging might require me to set aside part of my spiritual heritage, I experience a division within myself. I do not believe I am the only person who feels this tension.

V. Shiori Itagaki: Eurythmy Growing into New Life

My friend Shiori Itagaki is Japanese. She is a highly experienced eurythmist and teacher educator. I am not an expert in eurythmy, so I can speak only as an observer. When I watch Shiori move, I sense something different. There is softness, continuity, and flow, as well as a particular relationship with gravity, the earth, space, and nature.

Recently, I saw a video of her practicing eurythmy in a beautiful natural setting.





The images reminded me of East Asian landscape painting. So I asked her: Is there something Japanese, or perhaps something Eastern, in your eurythmy? Her answer was very important to me. She had not consciously added “Japanese movements” to eurythmy. Rather, after decades of practice, eurythmy had entered deeply into her body and spiritual life, while the Japanese spiritual sources within her had also entered deeply into her eurythmy. The two could no longer be separated. Something new had grown. It was still eurythmy. Through her practice, it had also become a living expression of her own being as a Japanese eurythmist.

For me, this is a beautiful image of encounter. The new form did not seem to arise from a planned combination of cultural elements. It grew organically through a living human being. Her practice shows me how localization can grow beyond adaptation. It has become a generative process of metamorphosis.

VI. Ute Craemer and the Thirteenth Sense

My third example comes from Ute Craemer. She is a German woman who went to Brazil when she was young and spent most of her life living and working with people in impoverished communities. Her story reminds me that sharing a tradition can also open us to learning from the people with whom we work. Brazil changed her as well. The land changed her.

The people changed her.

She spoke of qualities she encountered in the bodies, warmth, will, and vitality of local people—qualities from which Europeans could also learn. For me, this reciprocity is deeply meaningful. Those who share their knowledge can also become learners. Teaching and learning can nourish one another within the same person. Ute once imaginatively proposed a “thirteenth sense”—an additional sense along with Rudolf Steiner’s twelve senses. As I understand it, this thirteenth sense would be the capacity to perceive the earth as a whole, and to perceive the humanity of people who are profoundly different from us.

This capacity cannot be formed by the intellect alone. It requires encounter. It requires living together. It requires the body. And it requires allowing another person to change us. I believe this capacity can help Anthroposophy grow as a global movement.

VII. Ibrahim Abouleish and the Synthesis of Two Worlds

The final example I would like to share is the story of Ibrahim Abouleish, the founder of SEKEM in Egypt. I have long been fascinated by how Anthroposophy, which first emerged within a European cultural context shaped in part by Christianity, could take root and flourish within an Islamic cultural and spiritual tradition. I have shared Abouleish's story on several occasions, because I see his experience as a particularly inspiring example of how a genuine encounter between different spiritual and cultural traditions can lead to something new and transformative.

Abouleish described his experience in these words: "I existed in two worlds…the oriental spiritual stream I was born into and the European, which I felt was my chosen course. But during this time I also started experiencing moments when these two streams met in my soul, when I was neither Egyptian nor European…I could live in both worlds, think both ways. But what I experienced was not a cheap compromise, nor just tolerance, but a synthesis, even an elevation…a real uniting of the two cultures within me. This experience gave me a wonderful sense of freedom and these moments were filled with greatest happiness and joy."

For me, these words express something essential about genuine encounter. Such encounter gave Abouleish an autonomous inner self-identity that transcended external religious recognition.

As he concluded: "I do not want to be known as a religious person, but rather as a striving, practicing person."

VIII. The Difficult Question of Eurocentrism

I would now like to address a difficult question with care and honesty. Some of Rudolf Steiner's statements about different peoples, races, and cultures are uncomfortable, even painful, for me. I know that these statements have complex historical contexts. I also know that thoughtful readers differ in how they understand these passages and their implications. I cannot resolve that debate today, but I can speak about my experience of reading these words.

For me, understanding the historical context is essential, but it does not remove the need to consider how these words may be heard and experienced today. For example, in his 1916 lectures on The Karma of Untruthfulness, Steiner discusses Britain's role in the Opium Wars against China and describes what he saw as a possible "Sinicization" of Europe (GA 173b). These passages need to be read within their historical context, but they also invite us to reflect carefully on how such language and cultural characterizations may be received by readers today. When I read certain descriptions of Chinese people as a Chinese person, I cannot treat them merely as historical documents. Because I am one of the people being discussed. And that completely changes the experience of reading.

Sometimes I imagine having a conversation with Rudolf Steiner. I imagine that he is sitting in front of me today. I might ask:

“Dr. Steiner, I would like to share how some of your words about Chinese people sound to me as a Chinese reader today. I would also like to understand more fully how you came to see us as you did.”

Then I would ask: “Here we are, meeting one another. You have heard something of my life and spiritual background. I have tried to listen carefully to your ideas. What can we learn from one another that our earlier understanding did not allow us to see?”

I would hope that such a conversation could lead to deeper understanding. Perhaps I, too, would discover something I had not understood before. Such a conversation might help us both recognize the limits of our perspectives. I would also hope it could make room to acknowledge the pain these words have caused. I cannot know how that conversation would unfold. More importantly, I cannot base my moral responsibility on an imagined answer from Rudolf Steiner. Even if such a conversation left our differences unresolved, I would need to remain open to learning.

IX. My Own Moral Responsibility

At the same time, I would still have to take responsibility for my own judgment. I would still have to decide for myself: What will I continue to carry? What must I let go? I see the exercise of our own judgment as one way to honor his concern for human freedom.

X. Making Room for Dialogue

Earlier, I used the image of a wall. I recognize that a tradition needs boundaries as well as openness. I do not mean we should tear down this wall. Walls can protect precious things. Maybe there could be windows in the wall? Maybe there could be a door? Maybe there could be a bridge? And in some places, perhaps we really do need to move a few stones.

The question is: How can we create more ways to enter into dialogue. This includes examining inherited forms together, with respect for their meaning and an openness to renewal.

Our task is to sustain the depth of Anthroposophy while allowing it to grow through encounter. And how can we make this possible in a pluralistic world? How can people for whom Christ is central to Anthroposophy remain faithful to that understanding and engage openly with people whose spiritual lives have other centers? How can those who find spiritual meaning in Michael enter into dialogue with people who use a different spiritual language? How can we learn from Buddhist compassion, Daoist transformation, Confucian cultivation, Indigenous spiritual traditions, and other sources of spiritual insight, while also sharing what Anthroposophy offers? What might these encounters help us understand more deeply?

I believe we can offer and receive this nourishment with both confidence and humility.

XI. What Does This Mean for Teacher Education?

Many of us here work in teacher education. I would like to bring these reflections back to the teachers we educate and the work we share.

Through the reflections above, I have come to understand more deeply how important a sound grasp of the foundational principles and methods of Waldorf education is for teacher education. It provides both the substance for renewal and the continuity that makes renewal possible.

Shiori, for example, could not have developed the work she is doing today without decades of rigorous eurythmy practice. Such mastery does not limit further development; rather, it can provide the ground from which something new is able to grow.

At the same time, the capacity to perceive, to remain open to cultural differences, to ask questions, to enter into dialogue, and to listen deeply is equally essential if we are to continue renewing ourselves and responding to a rapidly changing world. We need, on the one hand, to recognize and respect one another's distinctiveness and differences; on the other, we need to explore together and share those ideas, values, and methods that may carry a more universal significance.

Perhaps this is also what teacher education can become through genuine encounter: a space in which continuity and transformation, rootedness and openness, can meet and give rise to something new.

We can help teachers study Anthroposophy deeply and at the same time, bring it into lively relationships with their own lives, cultures, lands, and languages, and with the students they teach.

For me, Shiori's work offers a living example of what can happen when a spiritual and artistic tradition truly enters another cultural environment and takes root there. She is now teaching at 3ei Eurythmy School in Taiwan. And the graduates of the school have become eurythmy teachers in many Taiwanese Waldorf schools.

Perhaps what can emerge from such an encounter is neither simply "Western eurythmy" nor "Taiwanese traditional culture," as Shiori said, "but something new and alive—something that has passed through both and has become an authentic expression of who we are, living here and now." Lastly, I believe a genuine encounter invites us to enter into a relationship without deciding in advance which side is the teacher and which side is the student.

We will no longer ask only: "Have you understood Steiner correctly?"

We will also ask: "What have you seen?" "What is your experience telling you?" "What might your cultural experience help me notice that I have overlooked?" "What is emerging here that has never existed before?"

A demanding question for us as teacher educators is: “Can I welcome what my students discover, even when it takes me beyond my own experience?”

XII. An Invitation

Preparing this talk has asked me to examine my own assumptions and speak more openly about questions I have carried for many years. My commitment to Anthroposophy is what brings me to these questions. It has helped me bring different parts of my inner life into relationship. It has also helped me reconnect with my own cultural and spiritual roots. So I speak today with gratitude. And I hope to express that gratitude through honest and respectful dialogue. We may understand some of these questions differently. I welcome those differences, and I invite us to keep exploring together.

For me, this is the movement from polarity to encounter. From encounter to transformation. And from parts to the whole.

Thank you for listening and for exploring these questions with me.