



A Multiversal Adventure in Decolonising Education: *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

Sheng-Hsiang Lance Peng

University of Cambridge, UK

• <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1825-6146>

Abstract

This article is a conceptual creative piece, drawing a parallel between the themes of the 2022 cinematic work *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (EEAAO) and decolonising education. Initially, I examine the career trajectories of the film's two leading protagonists, both of whom originally hail from tropical Southeast Asia, expounding upon Asian media representation and juxtaposing their personal narratives with the discourse surrounding decoloniality, inclusivity, and diversity. Secondly, through a close analysis of key scenes and motifs, I highlight the film's relevance to debates around decolonisation, including the need to challenge dominant narratives, recognise diverse perspectives, and acknowledge the intersectionality of identity and experience. Thirdly, I suggest incorporating playful pedagogies and praxes that draw inspiration from the imaginative ingenuity of EEAAO as a means of overcoming the continuing ramifications of colonialism and Western-centrism within education. By positioning the film as a catalyst, I hope to contribute to broader efforts to decolonise and transform the structures, systems, and practices that shape our social fabric. This paper is a valuable resource for educators aiming to connect Eastern philosophies, quantum physics, and decolonising approaches to teaching and learning with adolescent learners, using the themes of interconnectedness, multiverses, and collective action.

Keywords: tropical Asia, film analysis, decolonising education, playful pedagogies, Eastern philosophy, quantum physics, multiverse adventure

To begin, with a film

In this article, I explore the potential of the film ‘*Everything Everywhere All at Once*’ (2022), henceforth referred to as EEAAO, to inspire and inform decolonising efforts through the film’s themes of intersectionality and interconnectivity that align with decolonial pedagogies that seek to break down hierarchies and value diverse perspectives.

Figure 1. *Tian1 ma3 xing2 kong1* [the heavenly horse crosses the skies]



Cinematic promotional material of *Everything Everywhere All at Once*.

This 2022 cinematic production has been circulated under diverse designations in a multitude of Mandarin-speaking markets, many of which are in tropical Asia, spanning from Southeast Asia to Hong Kong and beyond to the vast Chinese diaspora. On the film’s poster (see Figure 1), the specific title presented is ‘天馬行空’, which corresponds to the idiomatic expression ‘tian1 ma3 xing2 kong1’ that signifies a fervent and unrestricted creative capability. This title serves as a succinct encapsulation of the entire film. Despite the evocative title of the film, which suggests unbounded creativity, the written text that follows is characterised by a more measured and structured approach. To facilitate a fluid discussion on the subject of decoloniality and tropical

Asia, it may be advantageous to commence with a succinct summary and some background particulars.

EEAAO is a 2022 sci-fi action film directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, referred to collectively as the Daniels. The film dominated the 95th Academy Awards and the 80th Golden Globe Awards, winning several categories for Asian and Asian American representation. The plot follows an uptight middle-aged woman named Evelyn as she embarks on numerous journeys in discovery of her connection to various parallel universes, which she must navigate through to protect both her family and the multiverse from impending doom. The film has been praised for its positive impact on Asian representation in film (Ono & Pham, 2009; Xing, 1998). The movie features a diverse cast that includes several Asian actors in leading roles, including Michelle Yeoh as the uptight Evelyn Wang, Ke Huy Quan as her relaxed husband Waymond Wang, and Stephanie Hsu as their rebellious lesbian daughter Joy Wang. The film has garnered plaudits for its multifaceted representation of characters of Asian ethnicity, exceeding the conventional stereotypical depictions prevalent in Western media.

There have been several critically acclaimed and commercially successful Asian movies that have made a significant impact on Western cinematic industries over the past two decades—from Taiwanese filmmaker Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *Life of Pi* (2012) to American film director Jonathan Murray Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), South Korean film director Park Chan-wook's *The Handmaiden* (2016), and Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019). In the 2020s, the discourse surrounding inclusivity within the film industry and its concomitant media representation has become increasingly pronounced in response to social trends that have foregrounded the importance of diverse and representative storytelling. The growing trend of diversification in media culture production includes not only films produced in America by culturally diverse directors, but also production beyond the borders of the US, with Asia serving as a dynamic example of this phenomenon. Thus, this demonstrates that cultural globalisation 'does not just mean the spread of the same products of Western (mostly American) origin all over the world through these media conglomerates' (Iwabuchi, 2010a, p. 198). The heightened aptitude for creating media cultures, encompassing various forms of entertainment such as television, film, and popular music, within Asia has engendered the emergence of regional co-production, intraregional circulation, and consumption of these cultural products (Iwabuchi, 2010b; Ryoo, 2009). The significance of cultural production and representation in diversification is of great magnitude for society and is integral to the decolonial process.

Here I shall draw upon the theoretical framework of social mirroring (Cooley, 2017), a psychological construct that elucidates the process by which individuals unwittingly

internalise the behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs of their social milieu, as a means of explicating the phenomenon of conformity to social norms and expectations. Specifically, this framework posits that individuals are inclined to seek cues from their social environment to guide their behavioural responses, which they then mirror as a means of aligning themselves with prevailing social conventions (Besana et al., 2019; Buchanan & Settles, 2019). If media producers and writers draw upon prevailing social conventions to inform their portrayal of Asian characters and settings, this may result in a skewed and narrow representation of the region that reinforces existing stereotypes (Atkin et al., 2018). The media consumption patterns of audiences can be subject to influence, which subsequently shapes the demand for particular media content. If individuals display a proclivity to emulate the media preferences of their peers, this may foster a homogenisation of media consumption behaviour (Brown & Richards, 2016; Johnson & Callahan, 2013; Slaets et al., 2021), which can serve to elevate the popularity of certain genres of Asian media content, while downplaying or disregarding others. For instance, the longstanding stereotype of Asian women as submissive and exotic has influenced the portrayal of Asian women in media content (Ono & Pham, 2009; Rajgopal, 2010). This has resulted in the homogenisation of media consumption behaviour, with certain genres of Asian media content such as 'yellow fever' films (Chou & Taylor, 2018; Joubin, 2022; Zheng, 2016), that fetishise Asian women becoming more popular, while others that do not conform to such stereotypes are marginalised or overlooked. This trend is perpetuated by the emulation of the media preferences of peers.

The detrimental consequences of media representations are 'especially harmful to an audience of young viewers who may not possess the intellectual tools that allow them to distinguish which messages are meant as storytelling functions' (Goodall, 2012, p. 160) and can lead to the erasure of heterogeneous viewpoints and experiences, potentially resulting in the neglect and censorship of dissimilar viewpoints. EEAAO is instrumental in bringing about a favourable alteration in the portrayal of Asians in the entertainment industry, representing a significant departure from the Hollywood status quo by defying prevailing stereotypes and challenging the conventional representations of Asian actors, who have historically been marginalised and largely excluded from significant roles in mainstream cinema.

Synchronous professional trajectories: Yeoh and Quan

The plot of the film presents several noteworthy elements of creativity, yet an equally intriguing aspect to explore pertains to the career trajectories of its two primary actors, Michelle Yeoh and Ke Huy Quan. It is noteworthy that despite portraying Chinese immigrants in the movie, each actor was raised in Chinese minority societies in tropical Southeast Asia—Yeoh in the colonial tin mining town of Ipoh, Malaysia, and Quan in

Saigon, southern Vietnam. These communities are themselves constituent elements of the diasporas forged through the impact of colonialism across the tropics.

Michelle Yeoh's career pathway serves as a compelling illustration of how an individual from an underrepresented community can navigate the film industry and leverage their platform to advance greater inclusivity and diversity. As a Malaysian actress, Yeoh's path towards triumph in Hollywood was not bereft of impediments. She began her career in Hong Kong, where she became a major star in action films like *Police Story 3: Supercop* (1992) and *Tai Chi Master* (1993). However, when she transitioned to Hollywood, she initially struggled to find roles that were not limited to stereotypical Asian characters. Despite encountering these impediments, Yeoh persevered and diligently constructed her professional trajectory within the Hollywood film industry. She made a breakthrough with her role in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), which showcased her martial arts skills and acting ability and garnered critical acclaim and widespread recognition. She went on to play prominent roles in major Hollywood films like *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997), *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005), and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). As the fervour surrounding *Crazy Rich Asians* was 'just one of many landmark accomplishments within what has been called an Asian American entertainment boom' (Lopez, 2021, p. 141), the inception of which can be traced back to the network television show *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015), integrating insights from critical race theory is imperative for apprehending the perils of essentialising an ostensibly heterogeneous community and the consequential significance of encompassing more extensive phenomena of racialisation.

In the encoding-decoding model (Hall et al., 2003), producers encode media messages with preferred meanings, but audiences have the agency to decode these messages in different ways based on their own cultural and social contexts. In a more specific sense, Yeoh's combat proficiency and beauty were initially marketed to Western audiences in stereotypical ways, as exotic and submissive. Nevertheless, Yeoh strategically navigated prevalent stereotypes by selecting roles that confronted these prevailing meanings and showcased her as a powerful and self-determined female figure. This negotiation allowed her to become a pioneer for Asian representation in Hollywood and beyond. Moreover, Yeoh's achievement can also be understood in terms of her ability to appeal to different audiences in different cultural and social contexts. Through her adept steering of diverse film industries and genres, Yeoh has established herself as a prominent and influential figure on the global stage, surpassing the confines of race, culture, and gender. The triumph of Yeoh's career circuit can be interpreted as an interplay between hegemonic representations entrenched in media discourse and her own agency to decode and negotiate these representations through a lens that aligns with her cultural and social identity. The trajectory of Yeoh's professional achievement epitomises the intricate interdependence between media producers and consumers in the interpretation and

reception of media messages. This underscores the dynamic agency of actors in the film industry, enabling them to actively transact and subvert the dominant meanings encoded in these messages.

Reflecting on Yeoh's portrayal of her character in *EEAAO*, one can observe a middle-aged Chinese immigrant woman who exhibits an unwavering commitment to protecting her family while also grappling with personal challenges such as her strained relationship with her daughter and the difficulties stemming from her husband's interactions. This is a demonstration of the fact that the depiction of Asian Americans in the media has progressed from 'the traditional blatantly negative yellow peril, coolie, gook, and deviant stereotypes to the current seemingly positive model minority stereotype to suit the changing political, social, cultural, and economic circumstances' (Zhang, 2010, p. 21). In T. S-T. Wong's argument (2022), when unpacking representations of Asian subjectivities in filmic texts, there exist three inquiries that necessitate scrutiny and re-evaluation. Firstly, it is essential to identify and explicate the precise nature of the Asian persona that is being depicted. Secondly, an examination of the portrayal of Asian subjectivity in the film is imperative. Lastly, an exploration of the rationale behind the particular representation of Asian subjectivity at this specific juncture in history is warranted. Utilising Yeoh's character in *EEAAO* as a point of reference, we can address these issues. Her character embodies the experiences of a Chinese immigrant living in America as well as the established norms that come with being an Asian woman. She is portrayed as possessing robust and persevering attributes and contesting the societal constraints enforced upon her by preconceived notions. The depiction of Asian subjectivity in such a manner during this historical period can be attributed to the heightened visibility and acknowledgement of Asian representation in the mainstream media. *EEAAO* lauds the multifaceted intricacies of Asian culture and identity, surmounting entrenched stereotypes and entrenched bias that have historically subjugated Asians in the sphere of entertainment.¹

In addition, Yeoh has also used her platform to advocate for gender equality and women's empowerment. She has been involved in various organisations and initiatives that seek to address gender-based violence and discrimination, such as the Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Development Programme and her involvement with The Women's Foundation in Hong Kong. The endeavours of this artist are fundamentally aligned with the overarching feminist movement, insofar as they contribute to dismantling the hegemonic and exclusionary structures that have

¹ Despite the efforts to subvert negative stereotypes, a few residual tropes persist in *EEAAO*. Yeoh's portrayal as a frugal proprietor of a laundry business and an overbearing mother who dominates her spouse perpetuates such archetypes. Similarly, Quan's depiction as the submissive and emasculated husband, Waymond Wang, represents yet another stereotype. Nevertheless, the film does challenge these clichés, and this aspect will be further expounded upon in the subsequent section of this article, wherein the film's dialogic elements are discussed.

historically defined the entertainment industry. By leveraging her creative output to promote the representation and inclusion of diverse voices, she has been an active agent of decolonisation, striving to disrupt the entrenched power dynamics that have traditionally privileged a narrow set of cultural and social identities. In so doing, she has advanced a vision of a more equitable and pluralistic entertainment industry (Brannon Donoghue, 2020; Tally, 2021), one that is better suited to reflect the full range of human experiences and aspirations.

Her husband co-star, Waymond Wang, is portrayed by Ke Huy Quan, whose work-related development can be scrutinised using a parallel analytical framework. Quan is a Vietnamese American actor and stunt choreographer known for his roles in popular films in the 1980s and 1990s. He began his acting career as a child in the Steven Spielberg-directed film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), where he played the role of Short Round. He also played a memorable role in the popular 1985 film *The Goonies*. Later, he transitioned into a career in stunt choreography, working on films such as *X-Men* (2000) and *The One* (2001), and took a hiatus from acting for several years. Quan has faced systemic barriers (Erigha, 2019; Karniouchina et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2021) and limited opportunities due to the lack of representation and diversity in the industry. As he stated in an interview, 'I thought I wasn't tall enough, I wasn't good-looking enough, I was not a good enough actor. I didn't have the maturity to think they were just not writing roles for Asian actors' (Salisbury, 2023, para. 3). Quan frequented multiple locations, including the US, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. As a multifaceted individual, he has assumed various roles, including those of assistant director and assistant fight choreographer.

Quan's multiple career paths can be viewed from different angles that draw attention to cultural perspectives. Western film-making practices tend to prioritise a system of specialisation and compartmentalisation, whereby individuals are expected to devote their attention to a particular area of expertise. However, in Asian cultures, there is often a greater emphasis on collaboration and working across different roles and responsibilities (Gelfand et al., 2007; Leung & Bond, 1989; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Quan's background and experiences immersed in Asian cultures may have engendered a propensity and adeptness to undertake diverse functions within the film industry, considering he was taught, from a household that espoused traditional Chinese values, to adopt an outlook that eschews external attributions and instead emphasises personal accountability (S. Wong, 2022). Quan's experiences of facing career obstacles and attempting to transcend stereotypical roles can also be viewed through racial stereotypes. Media stereotypes (An & Kwak, 2019; Liao et al., 2020) have played a significant role in shaping perceptions of Asian men in the movie industry. Research has demonstrated that male Asian actors are often subjected to limited opportunities and pigeonholed into specific roles since 'media frequently stereotype Asian Americans as "model minorities."' Primarily, they represent Asian

American males as techno-nerds or geeks' (Oliver et al., 2019, p. 247). The stereotype of Asian Americans as model minorities emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to the civil rights movement and the struggle for racial equality in the US. This stereotype depicts Asian Americans as diligent, conscientious individuals who have attained success solely through their own initiative, without recourse to affirmative action or other forms of support. By pitting Asian Americans against other racial and ethnic groups who were deemed less successful or more prone to criminal activity, this stereotype was instrumental in rationalising and perpetuating unjust treatment and marginalisation (Atkin et al., 2019; Lee & Zhou, 2015; Wu, 2006). Islamophobia (Erentzen et al., 2021; Farooqui & Kaushik, 2022), cultural differences (Muurlink & Taylor-Robinson, 2020; Yu, 2020), and colonial legacy (Bettache, 2020; Chaudhury & Colla, 2021) are factors in the model minority stereotype that has been present not only in the US but also in the UK and other Western countries.

Additionally, tokenism (Chong & Kim, 2022; Paner, 2018) may have played a role in Quan's disappearance from the movie industry. As an Asian actor, he may have faced challenges in finding roles beyond stereotypical 'token' characters (Eder et al., 2010; Khanna & Harris, 2015). After his early successes, he may have found it challenging to secure leading roles or to be taken seriously as a versatile actor. Given these points, Quan's extended absence from the film industry can be viewed as a manifestation of the systemic erasure of Asian American narratives (Ngai, 2021; Waxman, 2021) and experiences in Hollywood. This exclusionary phenomenon is a result of deeply ingrained historical, cultural, and systemic biases that have long hindered diverse representation and opportunities for Asians in the entertainment industry. From the perspective of cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1980), Quan's disappearance can be explained by the cultivation effect perpetuated by media outlets and critics who reinforce and amplify negative stereotypes and biases about Asian Americans (Kawai, 2005; Potter, 2014; Stamps, 2020), leading to the lack of diverse and nuanced roles for Asian American actors.

A few specks of chaos: love, family, and everything in between

The scope of this paper now turns a decolonising lens from the lead actors' careers to an analysis of their multiverses² within the movie plot of EEAAO through a critical

² The notion of the multiverse posits the existence of an endless number of universes beyond our observable realm. These alternate universes encompass boundless versions of our own universe, in which all feasible events, choices, actions, and scenarios occur. Evelyn subscribes to this concept and believes that her present reality represents the worst possible outcome resulting from the numerous choices she has made in life. Despite considering herself proficient in diverse areas such as singing, writing, cooking, teaching, and being a Watsu technician, she feels unsuccessful in these pursuits. From one of the movie review standpoints, her tax receipts serve as evidence of her aspirations, and many of her parallel lives reflect these ambitions. Moreover, Evelyn holds a belief that had she not left with Waymond, she might have enjoyed a more fulfilling life as a Kung Fu master and actress, akin to Michelle Yeoh.

examination of movie dialogue quotes to deconstruct and challenge the dominant discourses and representations, revealing how they contribute to the perpetuation of existing social and cultural hierarchies.

Evelyn Wang: There is no way I am the Evelyn you are looking for.

Waymond Wang: No, I see it so clearly.

Evelyn Wang: See what? I'm no good at anything.

Waymond Wang: Exactly. I've seen thousands of Evelyns, but never an Evelyn like you. You have so many goals you never finished, dreams you never followed. You're living your worst you.

Evelyn Wang: I cannot be the worst. What about the hot dog one?

Waymond Wang: No. Can't you see? Every failure here branched off into a success for another Evelyn in another life. Most people only have a few significant alternate life paths so close to them. But you, here, you're capable of anything because you're so bad at everything.

One could focus on the concept of the model minority myth and how it relates to Evelyn's self-perception. The model minority myth (Shih et al., 2019; J. Yi & Todd, 2021; V. Yi et al., 2020) portrays Asian Americans as successful, high-achieving, and hardworking while ignoring the systemic racism (Poon et al., 2019; Yellow Horse et al., 2021) and discrimination (McMurtry et al., 2019) they face. In the dialogue, Evelyn sees herself as a failure because she hasn't achieved what she believes is expected of her as an Asian American. However, Waymond's proposition, as Alpha-Waymond, challenges the prevailing perception by positing that Evelyn's purported inadequacies have, in fact, propelled her towards an unparalleled and boundless potential. The exchange of dialogue here serves to subvert yet another commonly held stereotype. This contravenes the stereotypes propagated by the model minority myth. Another angle to consider is the idea of multiple identities and the intersectionality of identities. Here I take a brief intermission from the current discourse to explicate the notion of intersectionality.

Intersectionality (Bartlett, 2018) is a theoretical framework that recognises the interconnected nature of social categories, such as race, gender, class, sexuality,

In the midst of the tumultuous and dynamic narrative of EEAAO, there is a serene interlude that adds depth and nuance to the whirlwind of experiences that surround it. Upon being transported to a barren universe devoid of life, Evelyn and Joy take on the guise of rocks. Though they are unable to articulate themselves verbally, the two stones engage in a conversation, conveyed through subtitles, that probes fundamental existentialist ideas regarding the nature of existence and the value of life. A further illustration can be found in a reality where the evolutionary path of humankind diverges, leading to a peculiar outcome where individuals have fingers shaped like hot dogs and filled with ketchup and mustard. This particular segment has gained significant popularity among viewers. In this alternate universe, Evelyn is romantically involved with the Internal Revenue Service agent tasked with investigating her in the primary universe.

religion, and ability, and their interplay in shaping an individual's experiences of privilege and oppression. This framework acknowledges that individuals hold multiple identities and that these identities cannot be understood in isolation from each other but rather intersect to produce unique experiences (Parent et al., 2013; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Sawyer et al., 2013). Intersectionality acknowledges that social categories and power relations are not distinct and independent but rather intersect and shape each other, resulting in a complex system of privilege and oppression (Cho et al., 2013; Ramsay, 2014; Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008; Severs et al., 2016) that varies across different contexts and individuals. Evelyn's challenge with self-evaluation and a sense of inadequacy may not solely arise from societal norms as an Asian American but also from other intersecting identities such as gender, age, and socioeconomic status. A decolonial analysis could scrutinise the intricate interplay of these intersecting identities and their impact on Evelyn's lived experiences while also delving into the ways in which she navigates and transcends them across the film's narrative. In this instance, I offer a further illustration of the concept of intersectionality between Evelyn and the Internal Revenue Service inspector, Deirdre Beaubeirdre (see Figure 2).

Evelyn Wang: What did my silly husband say to you?

Deirdre Beaubeirdre: He told me about your situation. I remember when my husband served me papers. I drove his Kia Forte through my neighbor's kitchen. But you know what I say? It's cold, unlovable bitches like us that make the world go round.

Evelyn Wang: That's not true. You're not unlovable.

Figure 2. Conversation: Evelyn Wang and the IRS inspector Deirdre Beaubeirdre.



This dialogue can be explored through the framework of intersectionality, where Deirdre's identity as a white woman and Evelyn's identity as an Asian American woman intersect with their respective positions of power and marginalisation. It is interesting to note that Deirdre and Evelyn's interaction is centred around their shared

experience of being married women who have been served with legal papers for divorce. This common ground allows for a brief moment of connection between them, despite their initial adversarial positions. From a feminist perspective, Deirdre's use of the word 'bitch' can be seen as an attempt to reclaim the term that has been historically used to insult women who speak up or demand equality. By using the word herself, Deirdre is trying to take away the negative power that the word has had in the past and use it as a way of showing her own assertiveness. By describing herself and Evelyn as 'cold, unlovable bitches', Deirdre is both acknowledging the negative stereotypes associated with this word while also attempting to subvert them. This represents a manifestation of feminine agency (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019), whereby women assume authorship of their own stories and repudiate societal norms prescribing the characteristics of a virtuous woman. Evelyn's response that Deirdre is not unlovable can also be seen as a moment of solidarity between women. Evelyn's provision of support and validation to Deirdre serves as a testament to the notion that women can act as allies to each other (Bishop, 2015; Vergès, 2021), even when confronted with initially oppositional circumstances. This is a form of female empowerment that challenges the idea that women are inherently catty or competitive with one another. In examining the use of warm moments as a noteworthy motif in EEAAO, it is germane to cite the following soliloquy delivered by Evelyn's husband, Waymond Wang (see Figure 3).

Waymond Wang: [to Alternate Evelyn] You think I'm weak don't you? All of those years ago when we first fell in love...your father would say I was too sweet for my own good. Maybe he was right.

[to verse-jumpers³] Please! Please! Can we...can we just stop fighting?

You tell me that it's a cruel world...and we're all running around in circles. I know that. I've been on this earth just as many days as you. I know you are all fighting because you are scared and confused. I'm confused too. All day...I don't know what the heck is going on. But somehow...this feels like it's all my fault. When I choose to see the good side of things, I'm not being naive. It is strategic and necessary. It's how I've learned to survive through everything. I don't know. The only thing I do know...is that we have to be kind. Please. Be kind...especially when we don't know what's going on. I know you see yourself as a fighter. Well, I see myself as one too. This is how I fight.

³ In EEAAO, the multiverse operates under specific rules. One of these rules is the ability to 'verse-jump' using Alpha-Verse technology. This is not the same as teleporting from one universe to another. Instead, verse-jumping is the ability to take control of a doppelgänger's consciousness from another parallel universe for a short time. It requires effort to slingshot one's mind across the multiverse and into the consciousness of the desired doppelgänger. The Alpha-Verse technology calculates precisely what is needed for the verse-jumper to accomplish their task, which often involves strange and ridiculous situations, such as declaring love to one's enemy or shoving a sharp object up one's butt. The verse-jumper is able to take control of the doppelgänger's mind without the other person realising it.

Figure 3. Monologue by Waymond Wang on being kind.



The theme of power struggles and the pursuit of control is evident in this monologue. Waymond's acknowledgement of his own fragility and susceptibility can be perceived as a repudiation of patriarchal constructs of masculinity that valorise virility and ascendancy (Hobbs, 2013; Nguyen, 2008; Roper & Tosh, 2021). By electing to perceive the optimistic aspects of events, he exercises agency and command over his own personal story, thereby interrogating the hegemonic power structures (Christensen & Jensen, 2014; Hearn, 2004) that frequently prescribe the behavioural and emotional norms of individuals. Moreover, the monologue evidences an appeal for kindness, empathy, and understanding in a world that is all too often marked by fear, confusion, and conflict. Exhibiting kindness, particularly in situations of uncertainty, can be regarded as a disavowal of colonialist ideologies that value supremacy, hostility, and aggression (Ciccariello-Maher, 2017; Elliott, 2016; Ricketts, 2021) as mechanisms for survival, often quoted via colonialist social Darwinism as 'survival of the fittest'. In contrast, Waymond posits that adopting an optimistic outlook and displaying kindness constitute a calculated and indispensable approach for manoeuvring through the intricacies of existence. Within the context of decoloniality, this reflects a form of resilience (Howitt, 2020; Santiago Vera et al., 2022; Santiago-Vera et al., 2021), as it enables individuals to navigate and contest oppressive systems while safeguarding their physical and emotional well-being as well as their sense of dignity. As demonstrated, the protagonists portrayed in the film exhibit extraordinary resilience when confronting difficult situations. It is crucial to examine the extent to which this tenacity is strengthened or challenged by the characters' relationships with their family members—the overarching theme of EEAAO.

Joy Wang: Mom, just stop! Good for you. You're figuring your shit out. And that's great. I'm really, really happy for you. But I'm tired. I don't want to hurt anymore. And for some reason when I'm with you, it just hurts the both of us. So let's just go our separate ways, ok? Just let me go!

Evelyn Wang: Ok.

[pause]

Evelyn Wang: Wait. You are getting fat. And you never call me even though we have a family plan. And it's free. You only visit when you need something. And you got a tattoo and I don't care if it's supposed to represent our family. You know I hate tattoos. And of all the places I could be, why would I want to be here with you? Yes, you're right. It doesn't make sense.

Waymond Wang: Evelyn, stop. That's enough!

Joy Wang: Let her finish!

Evelyn Wang: Maybe it's like you said. Maybe there is something out there, some new discovery that will make us feel like even smaller pieces of shit. Something that explains why you still went looking for me through all of this noise. And why, no matter what, I still want to be here with you. I will always, always, want to be here with you.

[Joy starts crying]

Joy Wang: So what? You're just gonna ignore everything else? You could be anything, anywhere. Why not go somewhere where your daughter is more than just this? Here, all we get are a few specks of time where any of this actually makes any sense.

Evelyn Wang: Then I will cherish these few specks of time.

[Evelyn and Joy embrace]

Figure 4. The moment when Evelyn and Joy embrace in a small speck of time.



This culminating conversation (see Figure 4) highlights the complex relationship between a mother and daughter, who are both Asian and navigate the tensions and struggles within their familial bonds. Joy articulates her weariness with the anguish and distress that arise from her relationship with her mother, who is likewise embarking on a process of self-exploration. This observation highlights the intersectionality of

their identities as Asian women who have undergone familial trauma and encounter difficulties in negotiating their relationship within the wider societal milieu. Furthermore, the conversation brings up issues of body image, communication, and generational differences. Evelyn's remark on Joy's body weight may be construed as an indication of the Asian family's proclivity to communicate affection through modes that may be perceived as uncomfortable or inappropriate as Asian familial culture is often characterised by a significant emphasis on filial piety, which manifests itself in the form of profound family obligations and responsibilities. Such cultural practices may give rise to modes of expressing care that can appear uncomfortable or intrusive to individuals outside the culture (Huntsinger & Jose, 2006; Tsai et al., 2001). It is imperative to acknowledge that these cultural practices are not dichotomously categorised as positive or negative; rather, they are indicative of the cultural norms and principles that underpin them. EEAAO was effective in providing the audience with an insightful comprehension of the intricate societal dynamics prevalent in Asian families, prompting a reexamination of the biased stereotypes and presumptions that commonly result in misapprehensions and misconstruals (Kvanvig & Southwestern Philosophical Society, 1995; Sidanius et al., 2004). In addition, Evelyn's desire to cherish the 'few specks of time' with Joy highlights the importance of family ties and the interconnectivity of relationships. This resonates with the broader societal context of collectivism in many Asian cultures (Ireland et al., 2018; Sastry & Ross, 1998), where the importance of family and community is emphasised.

Here I pause the ongoing discourse again to explicate the concept of interconnectivity in relation to the subsequent narratives. Interconnectivity refers to the state or quality of being interconnected or interconnectedness, meaning the mutual or reciprocal connection or interdependence of different things or elements (Lock & Farquhar, 2007). This notion suggests that these constituents are not discrete entities but rather integral components of a larger system, and their conduct and demeanour are subject to the influence of their associations and transactions with other constituents. EEAAO deftly employs the concept of interconnectivity and intersectionality, skillfully weaving these notions into its narrative fabric, thereby creating fertile ground for fruitful and expansive dialogue among viewers. Overall, the film expounds on the concept of interconnectedness, underscoring the profound influence of our actions on the larger fabric of society, transcending individual existence and encounters. Through its interlocking and interdependent storylines, the movie demonstrates the intricate and unexpected ways in which the characters' lives and decisions are intertwined. EEAAO also touches on issues such as generational trauma, assimilation, and cultural identity, accentuating the multifaceted ways in which various aspects of our identity intersect and contour our lived experiences. Additionally, the cinematic work showcases an assorted array of individuals with distinct identities and attributes, underlining the intersections between race, gender, sexuality, and other dimensions of identity.

Bagels, rocks, and googly eyes: playful praxes

Throughout this article, the discourse has primarily centred on the junctions of the film's plot and the concept of decoloniality. In line with the notion that a transdisciplinary practice means 'an engagement with other fields that invites us to seriously and critically rethink the premises and assumptions underlying the diverse ways we approach, understand, and act upon the world' (Chao & Enari, 2021, p. 43), I intend to contextualise this discussion within the realm of education as a concluding remark, given that incorporating decolonising perspectives within the educational framework is paramount, particularly considering the pivotal role that youth assume in comprehending and advancing decolonial discourses. It is vital to stress that one need not be professionally engaged in the field of education or possess pedagogical expertise to comprehend the ensuing discussions, for decolonial practices are universally relevant and are germane to various domains and contextual settings (Archibald et al., 2019; Battiste, 2013; Smith, 1999; Windchief & San Pedro, 2019). It is also noteworthy that pedagogical approaches within educational settings can serve as effective tools for reevaluating and reflecting upon various facets of one's quotidian existence to aid in decolonising pursuits (Giroux, 2010).

In the closing remark, I aim to explore the film's use of metaphorical arrangements—bagels, rocks, and googly eyes, as well as several scientific and Eastern philosophical questions, which serve as powerful tools for shaping meaning and influencing audience interpretations. The goal of this inquiry is to identify and examine the mechanisms of control and influence depicted in the film, illustrating the impact of these dynamics on the replication and endurance of social and cultural hegemony, and facilitating educators to engage with these decolonising practices in a playful pedagogical manner as a useful stimulus for initiating discussions on decolonisation in the classroom.

Figure 5. *The 'everything bagel'.*



Throughout the movie, the recurring black circle motif is evident from the beginning. It is depicted as a black marker pen vigorously encircling a figure on a receipt; the revolving motion of a laundromat's dryer cycle; and the emblem of allegiance for the followers of the multidimensional antagonist who brandish the black ring upon their foreheads. The 'everything bagel' (see Figure 5), a huge, portentous black bagel that absorbs everything, represents the daughter, Joy Wang's, profound sense of emptiness and existential anguish. Initially introduced in a humorous tone, the concept evolves into a poignant and affective portrayal of Joy's outlook on life as the film delves into her emotional turmoil and longing for maternal connection. The film also employs the use of googly eyes as a metaphor that contrasts with the bagel's representation of emptiness.

Figure 6. *The googly eye as a third eye on Evelyn's forehead.*



Initially as Waymond Wang's absurd little googly eyes that he busily sticks to various surfaces, the googly eyes become more important as they form a relational movement of a black dot in a white void countering the white void in a black bagel. The Ancient Asian Yin Yang symbol of good in evil and evil in good is set in motion. Waymond's habit of placing googly eyes everywhere is a defining characteristic of his personality. In contrast, Evelyn, in the final scene, adorns a googly eye as a third eye (see Figure 6), symbolising the power she gains from adopting kindness and also adopting her husband's perspective—literally 'seeing' his perspective. This emphasis on kindness bears striking similarity to the Buddhist concept, also observed in the multiverse through the jewelled net of Indra, a concept originating from Hinduism. The representation of the donut and googly eyes in conjunction, similar to the Yin Yang symbol, reflects the Taoist principle of harmony and flow. The synthesis of Eastern philosophy and western science offers an opportunity to decolonise thought through education. Waymond's philosophy of prioritising kindness in the face of life's uncertainties is embodied in the simplicity of the googly eyes. The metaphorical value of these eyes lies in their ability to spread joy and levity. Although Joy struggles to see beyond the bagel, she ultimately understands the significance of kindness. The

metaphors of the bagel and googly eyes are central to the film's theme of prioritising kindness in difficult times. The bagel functions as a tangible and relatable visual aid in counteracting negative emotions, with the googly eyes serving as the culmination of the film's principal motif (Farnell, 2022; Lockyer, 2023). The motifs are founded upon the underlying concept of Asian Yin Yang and of the Schwarzschild radius—an object that 'when you compress it down to that radius becomes a black hole. It becomes a singularity and it's hypothetical' (Bove, 2023, para. 12). Employing the concept of the Schwarzschild radius can be a creative and engaging means of helping adolescents understand decolonisation as the process of breaking free from the gravitational pull of colonialism.

To encourage critical reflection on the impacts of colonialism, educators can develop an interactive activity for learners. This activity involves imagining themselves as objects subject to the gravitational pull of colonialism and exploring how they are limited in their beliefs, perspectives, and experiences. Building on this, we can introduce the concept of the Schwarzschild radius as an analogy for decolonisation, highlighting the need to abandon the colonial system's constraints. In small groups, learners can generate ideas for actions to challenge and dismantle colonial structures, such as connecting with their cultural heritage, engaging in activism, and seeking alternative ways of thinking and living. As the flexible and spontaneous approach of art and design pedagogy demonstrates an exceptional receptiveness to and inclusivity of the diverse perspectives and concepts brought forth by each learner (Cremin & Chappell, 2021; Sawyer, 2017), the implementation of googly eyes can also serve as a tool to note various perspectives and worldviews, thereby facilitating a nuanced examination of the effects of colonialism. Learners may be instructed to produce googly eyes utilising materials and hues, subsequently using them to investigate various themes pertaining to decolonisation such as cultural misappropriation, representation, and hegemonic relationships. Additionally, they can be prompted to compose brief narratives or poetry which explicate the significance of benevolence and compassion in the decolonisation process, and how these values can foster cross-cultural bridges and enhance comprehension.

As the exploration of quantum physics combined with Eastern philosophies is not a novel approach (Capra, 1992; Zukav, 2009), I aim to further broaden the educational scope of discussion by examining Asian symbolism and related concepts that pertain to quantum mechanics, the multiverse, and other branches of physics. This follows Lundberg's point of view (2013, p. 9), that 'quantum physics and Eastern philosophies shake our very foundations—there are no foundations'. Within quantum physics, the presence of an observer has a significant impact on the object being observed. Moreover, the nature of reality in this domain is described utilising the framework of probabilities instead of absolutes. Along the same lines, Eastern philosophical traditions place significant emphasis on the concepts of impermanence and

interconnectedness, as well as the illusory nature of the self. By way of example, the principle of interconnectedness, as embodied by the jewelled net of Indra, the non-dualistic ideology of Buddhism, the harmonious equilibrium of Yin Yang, and the adaptable fluidity of Taoism, present alternative modes of comprehending quantum and multiverse theories, which transcend the binary and hierarchical frameworks that have been perpetuated by colonialist ideologies. Also, the intricate and nuanced concept of resonating space is shared among Eastern philosophies and the multiverse in EEAAO. Rather than being perceived as vacant and impartial, space is conceived as a complex interweaving of networks. It is inextricably linked to material objects and simultaneously contributes to the formation of spatial experiences. Furthermore, space is connected to human beings and vice versa. The multiverse underscores the imperative of comprehending the cosmos in a dynamic fashion as it perpetually oscillates, pulsates, and gyrates, positing that the natural world is not a fixed entity, but rather a constantly fluctuating entity that is governed by a state of dynamic equilibrium. This concept bears resemblance to the Asian philosophical principles of Yin Yang and the jewelled net of Indra (Capra, 1992; Komjathy, 2014).

Incorporating these ideas into the educational curriculum has the potential to disrupt conventional educational frameworks that prioritise Western perspectives and linear thought processes. It can also foster a sense of interconnectedness and empathy among students. Practically, the six criteria argued by Lange (2018)—the whole,⁴ process thinking,⁵ participative knowing,⁶ aliveness,⁷ approximations such as story,⁸ and balance toward partnership⁹—can serve as a framework to reshape our perceptions of education, with a particular emphasis on fostering physical, virtual, and imaginative aspects of spaces of learning and engaging students in matrixial space.

⁴ The dynamics of the whole encompass the contexts, properties, and patterns of interactions in which an individual is embedded, extending beyond an individual's worldview. This comprehensive approach includes geographical location and other nonhuman relationships, diverse work, personal and familial connections of learners, along with broader cultural, social, economic, and political relations, as well as cosmic mythology and spiritual relationships existing at the historical moment.

⁵ Process thinking posits that novel concepts and actions can resonate throughout a network, unveiling the patterns of energy and resource flow and network connections. Such perturbations may also unveil latent potential for creativity and innovation within the system.

⁶ Participative knowing involves co-creating actions with other species or groups of learners. This co-creation shapes their activities and constitutes transformative learning. It is essential to be discerning in what is said and the energy brought into a learning space, with deep breathing or meditative stillness being effective starting points for creating a conducive learning environment.

⁷ Aliveness posits that the properties and existence of all members in an ecological community are derived from relationships, which intersect with larger cycles in the bioregion and planetary biosphere. Life forms are complementary rather than oppositional.

⁸ Narratives serve as a portal to significant ethical inquiries by stimulating moral intuition and instilling optimism, a crucial element for humankind in the present time. Additionally, the rhythmic and vibrational capacity of language and tales can educate and motivate, allowing for communication about intangible concepts. Moreover, specific rhythms and repetitive phrases can establish an extraordinary state of awareness.

⁹ Ecology challenges the belief that violence and domination are intrinsic to organised society by presenting a cooperative view of the natural world. Furthermore, research on human health, brain science, biology, and consciousness, contradicts the long-held belief that humans are inherently aggressive and self-interested, demonstrating instead a propensity for affiliation, connectedness, caring, and empathy.

Figure 7. *The rock universe, where Evelyn and Joy are represented as rocks.*



The rock universe (see Figure 7), in which Evelyn and Joy are portrayed as rocks, serves as the initial instance wherein both protagonists establish an emotional connection. Through sharing a nihilistic outlook that nothing ultimately holds significance, they develop a sense of camaraderie (Horner, 2022). This scene elucidates the notion that adopting nihilism as a philosophical stance can potentially engender a sense of emancipation and release from the weighty obligations of societal and cultural norms. The characters' embrace of nihilism confers upon them a sense of liberation from the societal and cultural expectations that weigh upon them. This concept is intrinsically imbued with Buddhist and Daoist elements, particularly evoking the notion of emptiness in the latter philosophy. In accepting the proposition that existence holds no ultimate significance, they are unburdened by the constraints of normative ideals and conventions, allowing them to manifest their authentic selves, unfettered by the fear of societal reproach or criticism.

In totality, the rock scene depicted in EAAO presents a profound inquiry into the tenets of nihilistic philosophy and its plausible repercussions for the human condition. It underscores the significance of acknowledging the intrinsic meaninglessness and lack of direction in life as a vehicle for realising individual liberation and genuineness. The tenet being conveyed is in accordance with the precepts of Eastern philosophy. In educational settings, a potentially innovative and playful approach to impart the concepts of decolonisation to adolescents would involve the application of nihilistic principles with a metaphorical framework, such as the act of relinquishing colonial baggage (Bhambra, 2017; Fellner, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Similar to how nihilism allows for the emancipation of individuals from the constraints imposed by societal norms, decolonisation serves as a catalyst for the liberation of individuals from the limitations and constraints of colonialism. Adolescents can be stimulated to introspect on the elements of colonialism that still impede their growth, and how adopting a nihilistic perspective can facilitate them in relinquishing those emotional and cognitive burdens. Furthermore, existential and nihilistic inquiries may prove beneficial to

present to adolescent learners in conversations centred around decolonisation: What aspects of our culture or society are based on colonialism, and how do they contribute to our worldview? Is there such a thing as free will, or are our actions predetermined by factors beyond our control? What role does power play in colonialism, and how can we work to dismantle systems of power that perpetuate colonialism? The interposition of such inquiries can initiate an interrogation of the tacit presumptions and cultural mores that have been internalised by learners. These queries can also cultivate a sense of individual agency and accountability (Mameli et al., 2019; World Health Organization, 2017), as adolescents become cognisant of their ability to shape their own existence and partake in beneficial societal transformation.

Looking through a lens that decentres Western epistemologies, EEAAO challenges viewers to reassess their preconceived notions of reality and invites them to contemplate the implications of a world that is not bound by linear time and space. In doing so, it prompts a critical reevaluation of the Western epistemological paradigms that have long dominated discourse on the nature of existence (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2018; Knaus, 2009). The inclusion of an inquiry into Indigenous epistemologies and their correlation with the natural environment has the potential to disrupt the Western paradigm of human superiority over nature and facilitate the promotion of a more environmentally viable ideology. Moreover, delving into the intricacies of Buddhism (Chansomsak & Vale, 2008; Le, 2022) and Taoism (Cheng, 2022) fosters a sense of inquiry and skepticism towards the underlying assumptions and values of Western civilisation. This, in turn, may facilitate the cultivation of a more discerning and introspective outlook on one's own cultural milieu.

Also, the themes of power and resistance hold crucial significance in the domain of decolonising education. The film critically examines how power can be harnessed to confront entrenched limitations and oppressive structures, emphasising the significance of actively resisting these structures. A pedagogy for investigating power dynamics is to scrutinise their interconnections with other forms of oppression, comprising, but not limited to, racism (Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020; Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021), sexism (Ayala et al., 2021; Navarro-Pérez et al., 2019), and ableism (Lalvani & Baglieri, 2019; Moreira et al., 2022). Through this lens, adolescents can investigate the ways in which these power structures overlap and reinforce one another, and analyse the diverse approaches necessary to combat them. A comprehensive examination of this subject may involve exploring how Indigenous peoples and people of colour have historically experienced disempowerment and marginalisation (Eichas et al., 2021; Josefsson & Wall, 2020) due to the enduring effects of colonialism. Further analysis can be carried out to understand various means of resistance employed by these groups, such as through resistance movements and decolonisation initiatives.

Finally, it can be argued that the themes of hybridity and syncretism presented in EEAAO have significant relevance and transferability to education. The film effectively amalgamates a diverse range of cultural elements, comprising Chinese and American traditions, to engender a distinct and hybridised representation of its characters and setting, and exhibits a noteworthy transcendence of conventional genre boundaries, artfully interweaving elements of science fiction, martial arts, comedy, and drama to generate a *sui generis* cinematic experience. It also explores the concept of syncretism, which is the blending of different spiritual beliefs and practices. For instance, EEAAO reflects the school of thought of philosophers Slavoj Žižek and Eugene Thacker (Pascual, 2022). Multiverse positions often adopt the notion that 'nothing matters, therefore everything matters', and while this sentiment can be poignant, EEAAO takes it a step further into the realm of absurdity with whimsical visual cues. Joy rejects existence, while Evelyn embraces mistakes and responds with love, ultimately prevailing amid chaos.

The themes of hybridity and syncretism can be used as a foundation for teaching decolonising education to adolescents. The pedagogical introduction of the concept of hybridity affords adolescents the opportunity to gain insight into the intermingling of disparate cultures, thereby illuminating the emergence of novel and idiosyncratic identities. This theoretical framework can be readily applied to the study of colonial history, wherein cultural amalgamation engendered the development of innovative identities, as exemplified by the emergence of not only award-winning actors—such as Michelle Yeoh and Ke Huy Quan, but also cultures of Malaysian Chinese, Vietnamese Chinese, Chinese American, Afro-Latinx (Salas Pujols, 2022) or Indo-Caribbean (Maharaj & Mahase, 2022). Through the examination of these distinctive identities, adolescents may acquire a nuanced understanding of the opposition to colonialism, and the way hybridity served as a mechanism to undermine the coloniser's efforts to exert cultural dominance. In a comparable vein, the theoretical construct of syncretism may be employed as a pedagogical tool to impart knowledge regarding the amalgamation of diverse religious and spiritual traditions. Through an analytical exploration of syncretic practices, such as Santeria (Carr, 2015; Zerrate et al., 2022) or Vodou (Goldberg, 1984; Montgomery, 2019), adolescent learners can gain insight into the tenacity of enslavements, and their capacity to synthesise their own religious beliefs with the dominant faith of their colonisers.

In summary, cinematographic productions as pedagogical prompts exhibit considerable promise for didactic employment within academic settings. As decolonising education should apply 'pedagogic methodologies as they are depicted in the creative, intellectual, philosophical, artistic, conceptual, and theoretical paradigms' (Mabingo, 2015, p. 135) of the communal tapestry and quotidian intricacies of our daily lives, EEAAO exhibited commendable efficacy in its portrayal and

utilisation of multiple components that may be harnessed and incorporated for practical purposes.

Parallel lives, shared struggles

In this article, I adopt a decolonising lens to critically examine the Daniels' film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), juxtaposing the protagonists' vocational trajectory and the film's narrative arc with various tenets of decolonial theory. The convergence of intersectionality and interconnectivity has been deliberated to coalesce with decolonial pedagogies, striving to dismantle hierarchical structures and appreciate multifaceted viewpoints. The concluding paragraphs also posit an educational stance to engage with the compound process of decolonisation, arguing that pedagogical expertise is not a prerequisite for comprehending the discussions on decolonial practices, given the universal relevance of these practices across domains and contextual settings. It is significant that educational settings offer a forum for the critical assessment and self-reflection of diverse aspects of one's daily life, thus rendering the learning environments an effective tool for the pursuit of decolonisation.

EEAAO presents a complex and delicate portrayal of parallel universes, highlighting the interconnectedness of various realities. In a similar vein, the struggle for decolonisation is not confined to a singular time or place, but rather occurs simultaneously in multiple regions of the world (Chakrabarty, 1992; Mignolo, 2012; Quijano, 2000). The shared experiences and struggles of different communities reflect the parallel lives of those who strive to combat oppression, irrespective of their geographical or historical context. By acknowledging and examining these shared struggles, we can transcend barriers of the colonialism and Western-centrism in education and foster a more impartial and fair society. The film serves as a potent reminder that our efforts towards decolonisation are not isolated, but rather connected across time and space, and that we are all part of a collective struggle.

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Acknowledgements

Within an EEAAO YouTube clip, user @ethsofresh commented: *We are small and insignificant...but we are not alone and we have each other during the hard and good times. Remember to be kind, everyone is struggling enough.* A special shout out to all the incredible individuals with overlapping identities who are trying to find their balance in life. Despite facing challenges, you still believe in the power of kindness. This piece is dedicated to you, as an emotional recognition of your strength and steadfast belief in being kind.

Sheng-Hsiang Lance Peng has a background rooted in Taiwan, where he was raised and educated. His journey began at NCUE, where he earned a BA Secondary Education Major in English and had the opportunity to work as a high school English teacher for a short period. Later, he relocated to the UK to pursue postgraduate degrees. He attended the University of Warwick, focusing on drama education, and he is currently enrolled in a PhD programme in education at the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Education.