

Grandmother's Dinners

Challenging and Redefining Notions of Leadership

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Cet article explore le leadership dans le contexte des soupers hebdomadaires de la grand-mère de l'auteure, avant la pandémie COVID-19. Les soupers de sa grand-mère font office de lieu où le leadership est adopté et où les théories traditionnelles du leadership sont mises au défi. L'auteure utilise un cadre discursif anticolonial, la pensée féministe noire et du tiers monde pour donner un sens au leadership de sa grand-mère.

Introduction

Every Saturday night, I go to my maternal grandmother's home for dinner.¹ She cooks elaborate meals and tells us grand stories about growing up in the Pearl River Delta, which leads into the South China Sea. I was told that the Pearl River is named after all the pearl shells that lay in the river. My grandmother 李金笑 Lee Kam Siu's name means "Golden Smile." She was born in the Canton province of China and grew up between what is presently known as Zhuhai and Macau, a former Portuguese colony from 1557 to 1999, and Hong Kong, a former British Colony from 1842 to 1997.² In her teens, after the end of the Japanese occupation in the second Sino-Japanese War, she took the ferry from Macau and settled in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong she found work, married, had a family, and made a life there.

In the early 1990s, my family, including my grandmother and I, migrated from Hong Kong to Turtle Island (Tiohtia:ke/Montreal, territories of Kanien'kehá:ka; and later to Tkaronto/Toronto, territories of the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas of the Credit River, Chippewa, Haudenosaunee and Wendat peoples, governed by the Dish with One Spoon Wampum). Since then, Saturday nights have always been reserved for dinner at my grandmother's. My

grandparents, immediate family, aunts, uncles, cousins, new members of the family (newborns, spouses, and partners), elderly and young friends, and guests gather. On occasions, we dine out, have potlucks, or order takeout. But for the most part, we gather around a round table with plentiful colourful dishes steaming, aromatic smells, a mix of flavours and textures, sounds of chopsticks and bowls, people speaking and telling stories, faces attentive as they listen, and there is always an indescribable warmth that can be easily felt. My grandmother, who is in her late eighties, is tired and has scaled back on the amount of cooking, but she refuses to stop ensuring that we continue gathering. She has held these dinners for decades, and as time passes, I gain more clarity on the meanings of these dinners.

In this paper, I explore my grandmother's dinners to think about her leadership and how it challenges traditional leadership theories. I start by locating myself within this paper to define my entry point into this work. I then explore my grandmother's leadership through different leadership theories—how she fits in and the gaps that exist. Next, in the absence of leadership theory that speaks fully to my grandmother and her dinners, I utilize an anti-colonial discursive framework, as well as Black and third-world feminist thinking, to make sense and build on my grandmother's leadership. I end with a reflection to situate the transformative impacts my grandmother's dinners and her leadership have had on me.

Locating Myself

I am my grandmother's grandchild. The majority of my family and ancestors come from around the Pearl River

Delta. I myself was born in Hong Kong and migrated to Turtle Island at a young age. I recognize my complicity as a migrant in the settler colonial state of Canada, and my responsibilities of inhabiting the Dish with One Spoon Territory, an agreement between the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee Confederacies.³

I have been in the process of actively learning and unlearning, while reclaiming my humanity, culture, and my spirituality. For most of my life, I had been unable to express my worldviews, as it did not fit neatly into a

and dishwashing. As a child, I was tasked with bringing out bowls of soups to the table, but as I got older, I became engaged in other ways.

There are often prescribed notions of who leaders are. For long, society has repeatedly instilled that leaders are often masculine, white, able-bodied, of a certain age, and within corporate, capitalistic, and institutional settings. The leadership styles that are often portrayed in media are charismatic leaders—charming, able to sweet talk and influence; authoritarian—as making the “best” and final

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category of “religion” and it had been deemed as “superstitions.” In my own academic research, I discovered that the words “religion” and “superstition” were introduced into China by the West, through Japan, in the late nineteenth century (Yang). Understanding that the ways of knowing and being that have been passed down to me through my family and ancestors preceded these words, helped to undo the invalidation of my worldview and knowledges. These dinners at my grandmother’s house have been central to my understanding and expression of my worldviews, and they impact how I function within social, professional, and academic spaces. While reading Wane’s learnings with elders from Embu, Kenya, I also understood myself as being at a crossroad—in the midst of re-establishing my understandings of myself while carrying out academic work.

Challenging Leadership Theories

Every Saturday, my grandmother wakes up, eats breakfast and goes on her daily walk where she meets other grandmothers from the neighbourhood—they chat, exchange grocery store deals and cooking recipes. She returns home and heads out to buy groceries with my grandfather. At times, she has spent a whole week gathering ingredients just for these Saturday dinners. She comes home and spends the remainder of the day cooking dinner for our family, friends, and guests. The Saturday dinners are spaces where we, as a family, gather and connect when our lives are increasingly individualistic, busy, and disconnected. We all take on roles and responsibilities for the evening—these range from buying groceries/ingredients, food preparation, setting up space, childrearing, finishing the food, clean up

decisions on behalf of their followers; and even transactional—a relationship built on exchanges, where leaders reward subordinates for their efforts and performance (Nanjundeswaraswamy and Swamy). Western concepts of leadership centre around individuals, outer qualities and perceivable traits, quantifiable outcomes/measurements of leadership, and relationships based on hierarchies, domination, and oppression. Such leadership models often require individuals to fit into and re/produce notions of leaders while preserving the economic, institutional, and oppressive systems they function within.

My grandma, in orchestrating these Saturday dinners, deviates significantly from the aforementioned notion of leaders. Rather, the leadership I see my grandmother exhibiting is a culmination of different leadership styles and theories, particularly that which evoke inner leadership, not only for herself but for all those engaged in her dinners. Inner leadership is best exemplified in leadership models such as the social justice, authentic, and transformational leaders. These leadership styles centre around the inner qualities and values, collective settings, processes, as well as speak to how goals and values are embodied or realized.

Wang conceptualizes social justice leadership as leadership that centres on collective concerns, celebration and rituals, sharing of responsibilities, and focuses on efforts rather than outcome. My grandmother’s dinner, as its own space of learning, focuses on addressing our familial concerns over disconnect from culture, loss of language, spiritual injury, and displacement. As Chinese Cantonese diaspora, within a settler colonial state on Turtle Island, survival has meant centring Western ways of knowing and being in our daily lives. Saturday dinners address voids and allow us to recentre our culture, verbal and

non-verbal languages, relationships, spiritual worldviews, and connection to land, on top of material nourishment. These dinners serve as weekly celebrations and rituals, where we are able to gather at the end of the capitalistic work and school week. At the same time, these dinners represent collective responsibilities to one another, how we function as a family and community, and acknowledge the interdependencies inside and outside of the dinners.

Authentic leadership is based on values, acting based on one's integrity and supporting goals grounded in these values and humility (Winton), as well as involving the personal, ideal, and social (Bush and Glover). In delving into her own authentic leadership, Hattori centres authentic leadership in Chamoru understandings of belonging, reciprocity, respect for elders, temporality, and primacy of the natural environment. In calling on and centring Indigenous knowledges, authentic leadership can rupture the dominancy of Western axiology, ontology, and epistemology, and create spaces to ground individuals and communities in their Indigenous and ancestral ways of understandings and relating to one another. Hattori describes authentic leadership as occurring when individuals embody their truthful selves, so that it can be understood as truthful by others. The leadership my grandmother exhibits at her dinners conjures space where our family can recentre and ground ourselves in our ancestral values and knowledges—values and knowledges that are typically disregarded in our workplaces and schools. The Saturday dinners create humbling spaces where we collectively revalidate ways of knowing and being—our values and how we relate to one another.

Critics of authentic leadership define it as self-regulation, and detrimental gendered stereotyping of the behaviour of women that prevents them from accessing leadership (Gipson et al.). Such perspectives dismiss the lived experiences and realities of many individuals and communities—particularly those whose identities intersect at gendered, racialized, and migrant have been colonized, and are facing other systemic oppressions. It disrupts abilities of such individuals and communities to be/come their truthful selves, and it requires one, and communities, to constantly constrain and dismember themselves. This perspective dismisses the values, truthfulness, and agency in leadership of certain individuals and communities, in favour of what dominant society has continued to dictate and prescribe.

Nanjundeswaraswamy and Swamy describe transformational leadership as that which allows for spiritual encouragement, intellectual stimulation, consideration of goals and visions of individuals, open culture, and trust (57). Transformational leadership must allow for individuals engaged to feel inspired, it must instill creativity, and

it must consider the needs and desires of the whole group (Lai). Growing up, these dinners allowed me to feel as though I was part of a process, responsible for something more meaningful and greater than my personal experience. Our roles and responsibilities at the dinners require a sense of trust, and that we are meaningfully engaged in the dinner. The dinners are based on truthfulness, participation is not imposed, and rather it reflects our relational responsibility to one another. Saturday dinners are fluid—as a family we adapt to changes and find ways to make meaning out of it.

These dinners have empowered me to view food, meals, and gatherings in a different light. It has allowed me to think differently on how I relate to others, our ancestors, other beings, and the land. There is a calling in of ancestors and our connection to our homelands—from the foods we eat, the stories we tell, to the reminiscing of old photo albums. Through my grandmother's leadership, these Saturday dinners allow for a transformation in how we connect, how we feel, and what we embody, from the past, present, to also imagining the future.

I do not perceive of my grandmother as fitting neatly into such categorizations of leadership, or as embodying just one or another. There needs to be a further rupturing of leadership categories, to disrupt containment within leadership theories that constrain or deny the humanity of people, and/or continue to uphold and re/produce oppressive systems and structures. The leadership my grandmother lives and exemplifies must be taken in and of itself.

Furthering Leadership Theories through Anti-Colonial/Black and Third-World Feminist Thought

My grandmother, family, and some of my ancestors have lived most of their lives in Western colonies and spaces. Colonialism affected the land and space, but also through the ways of knowing and being. At Saturday dinners, I hear stories that centre connection to a distant land that my family and ancestors once knew, migration and relocation. At the same, I hear stories about my grandmother, family, and ancestors attending Western or Christian schools learning European languages that were used officially in institutions, training, and working in industries and economies brought by the West, adaptation of Western traditions, manners, thinking, and ways of life. Over time, I became familiar with stories, phrases, and idioms that my grandmother and family use, that allude to these colonial conditions.

Within stories told at Saturday dinners, I am prompted to think about how colonization and Western ways of knowing and being have been intertwined with continued oppressive practices within Chinese traditions and philosophies in the region. In Lee's *Gender and Change in Hong*

Kong, Lee writes on how Western colonial domination in the region changed the structures of family, promoted individualism, and also compounded patriarchy and the dominance of men in society. From 1966 to 1976, the Cultural Revolution implemented communist ideals, but at the same time, sought to destroy historical, cultural, and spiritual sites and traditions throughout China. During the Cultural Revolution, despite Maoist political slogans that spoke of gender equality in political consciousness, Yang and Yan found that perceptions of gender were often distorted, which allowed gender inequality and discrimination to remain unchallenged post-revolution. All of these seemingly distant, finished, and spatially distinct events linger into the present, are entrenched within systems and institutions, and can be felt at the core of our beings. To address questions of colonization and patriarchy, I utilize an anti-colonial discursive framework, alongside Black and third-world feminist thought to find ways to comprehend my grandmother's leadership.

Colonization implies that which has been imposed or dominating (Dei and Asgharzadeh, qtd. in Dei and Lordan x). Thus, the anti-colonial can be understood "as being tied to questions of Land, Indigeneity, local cultures, knowledge and spiritual ontology" (Dei, qtd. in Dei and Lordan x). In order to subvert the continued domination, the anti-colonial requires thought and action that address all of the above. In thinking about the land, there needs to be a subversion in which land has been treated as just property or resources for profit.

When my grandmother prepares dinner, she starts with soups that are cooked in large pots over low fires for up to six hours, in a style of preparation that is distinct to our home. These soups are our medicines; she combines ingredients, herbs, and knowledges of traditional medicines. The use of herbs reflects our relationship to plants—in traditional Chinese medicines, we recognize the healing, medicinal properties, and dependence on plants that the earth provides. My grandma cooks with ingredients, spices, and sauces that remind her and us of our homelands, the land, and the history. When we gather, it is an occasion to cook steamed fish and seafood. When I ask about the fish and seafood she cooks, my grandmother reminisces about growing up and seeing the fishermen return with their daily catches to her village that faces the sea. She describes the sea that has sustained her family and ancestors over time. There are greens, vegetables, meats, and rice prepared and cooked the ways that honour our connection to the Pearl River Delta.

When stories are told over dinner, they illustrate our family's relationship beyond the human connections.⁴ The stories, sayings, idioms, soups, and foods speak of our beliefs and our connections to others rooted in our

ancestral understandings of ways of knowing and being. The anti-colonial requires invoking Indigenous and local ways of knowing and being that recentre cultures, knowledges, and spiritual ontology. As I mentioned, these dinners allow us to relate and connect with others in more meaningful ways.

Through colonialism and imperialism, the introduction of Western capitalist economic systems significantly favoured the individual over the collective, and changed familial structures to be more centred on dependency as a result of low wages rather than traditional Chinese familial structures and housing (Lee). Saturday dinners allow our family to connect beyond mere reactions to the harsh conditions set forth by capitalism, migration, colonialism, and imperialism. We are able to reclaim cultural and spiritual knowledges while we survive and thrive. Dei and Asgharzadeh speak of the celebration of oral, visual, textual, political, and material resistance that is beyond the preoccupation with victimization as necessary for countering colonialism.

As with social justice leadership (Wang), my grandmother is able to create weekly ritual and celebratory spaces, where stories told are grounded in ancestral ways of expressing our histories, lives, culture, spirituality, and life that do not centre around despair from colonization, war, revolution, and migration. Even within the food and soups that nourish us, there is celebration of that resistance. Within my grandmother's soups exist knowledges that have existed before her; these knowledges sustain our health and bodies in ways that Western allopathy cannot. Traditional Chinese medicine understands the body to be made up of interrelated energetic entities (Ng), and these understandings of energy can be understood in Chinese spiritualities as energy that animates the universe (Fan and Chen), as well as nourishes and connects all beings, non-beings, and our world.

As diasporic peoples living on stolen and occupied land on Turtle Island, my family continues to live under dominant Western ways of knowing and being. On Saturdays with my grandmother's leadership, we can authentically bring in and validate our ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies. As with Hattori's centring of Chamoru Indigeneity in authentic leadership, when my grandmother's leadership is centred around truthfully and honestly honouring herself, ancestral values, culture, and spirituality, it allows for everyone at the dinner to also understand this within her and themselves. Anti-colonial thought can thus deepen understandings of authentic leadership, and how it disrupts the colonial project's attempts at disauthentication and to turn persons and groups devoid of their Indigenous identity, ancestry, and history (Dei and Asgharzadeh). As with Gipson et al.'s writings on critiques on authentic

leadership, we can comprehend this similar colonial attempt to disauthenticate, dismember, and diminish the lives and identities of individuals and communities. At my grandmother's dinner, we disrupt colonial processes to collectively return to our truthful selves.

Further, I wish to elaborate how my grandmother has continually subverted patriarchy from traditional Chinese familial structures, colonization, the cultural revolution, and migration. Dei, Hall and Rosenberg articulate that there has been, and continues to be a negation, devalu-

of oral traditions in folkways, such as ritualistic chants, riddles, songs, folktales, parables, that have preceded the written and have been muted by colonialism and cultural imperialism (102). In Trinh's *Woman Native Other*, Trinh speaks of the power of storytelling and storytellers. Stories are cures, protections, they heal in their ability to contain the living memories, and they keep knowledges that are informed by and inform communities and families (Trinh 140). For Trinh, storytellers engage in "act[s] of healing as a socio-cultural act, a collective, motherly undertaking"

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ation, and denial of Indigenous and local knowledges, but particularly knowledges of women (4). At Saturday dinners, my grandmother creates spaces to "talk back" (hooks) against this continued degradation. She "talks back" to challenge essentialist perceptions of who a Chinese Cantonese woman should be, and who she may be. It is precisely why Lorde in *Sister Outsider* speaks of the need for Black women and men to define themselves for themselves, otherwise perceptions created by the dominant and white supremacy would be used against them. In talking back, my grandmother creates spaces that allow her and us to move from silence into speech (Lorde; hooks).

When my grandmother tells stories, she talks about growing up as the only surviving child; about her parents; separation from and losing her parents; adulthood, marriage, children, family, work, migration, and about everything—her life. Within stories about herself, my grandmother describes fighting against gender norms and notions of family that have been emplaced on her, and constantly challenging and questioning the status quo in her life, work, family, and in society. She speaks on her honesty, and how she is known for her ability to keep her word, to thrive, and to live authentically. My grandmother has told us stories about rejecting what has been prescribed to her—defiantly refusing the paths dictated to her by society or even from street fortune-tellers. At these dinners, she continues to tell stories that defy imposition and domination.

In "talking back," my grandmother's stories honour and validate her and her ancestors' lived experiences and knowledges. Elabor-Idemudia writes that for people brought up in Western societies, there is often a discount

(140) while at the same time engaging in "tradition as ongoing commitment, and in women's own terms" (149).

At Saturday dinners, my grandmother creates spaces in her and our collective terms, to engage in the healing centring of oral traditions and stories. In the process of storytelling, my grandmother creates a space that allows us all to share our own stories at the dinner table. Not only do these Saturday dinners allow for "talking back," but my grandmother's leadership creates sites of knowledge production, and the normalization of knowledge production in spaces such as the dinner table. For Dei et al., knowledge is produced and acquired through collaborative processes, and they exist in relation to specific times and spaces. Through the use of an anti-colonial discursive framework and Black and third world feminist thinking, notions of leadership and leadership theories can be expanded, thought of more critically, and re-envisioned—particularly, when adding in questions of disrupting colonialism and patriarchy.

Self-Reflection

Hattori's writing prompted thinking about the importance of self-reflexivity for inner leadership—of knowing where one comes from, and remembering what existed prior to and despite colonization, patriarchy, and the subjugations of knowledges. Self-reflexivity requires locating one's self, and understanding the interconnectedness with the community, the collective, the world, and beyond. In writing about my grandmother's leadership and her Saturday dinners, I have thought about the ways that the dinners have transformed my understandings of the world, my

relationships to others, and my engagements beyond these dinners. My grandmother's dinner and leadership exist beyond leadership theories; they subvert dominant and imposed ways of knowing and being, and "talk back." How does it all impact me, where does it leave me, and where do I go from here?

As discussed, I believe that it is necessary to challenge existing notions of who a leader is, and to use alternative lenses to explore leadership. My grandmother's embodiment and exhibition of her leadership exists on her own terms. Her form of leadership is distinct and unique; it can only be described as the 金笑 "Golden Smile" leadership. Like Monzó and SooHoo, I do not utilize what I learn at my grandmother's dinner, or her leadership, to think about transplanting dominant ways with ancestral knowledges or her ways of leadership. Rather, I am interested in ways to "braid together" multiple knowledges and types of leadership to challenge oppression (Monzó and SooHoo 160) and to envision a different future without hierarchies, categorizations, imposition, and domination. It is thinking about the counter-possibilities (Dei and Lordan xiv).

In reflecting on the storytelling and "talking back" of my grandmother's dinners, I think of what Mohanty writes, that the existence of third-world women's narratives is not enough; it must be understood, read, listened, recorded, received, and disseminated differently. Trinh writes how telling stories builds consciousness, and can serve as processes of unlearning to unwrite and write anew—but warns we must never become rigid, "so that life keeps on nurturing life, so that what is understood as the Past continues to provide the link for the Present and the Future" (Trinh 149). As there are different ways of knowing the past, present, and how we relate to other beings, there must be approaches and ways of getting to possible counter-futures. We must be able to utilize our knowledges to engage, build relations, and work with others to address oppressions and the continued domination in this world.

I know our connection to our own culture, spirituality, and land is not enough; I question how we can engage in the liberation of our land and our people, but also the land we have settled on, and with those we are in relation with. Simmons and Dei posit that though diaspora can be a space to claim and reclaim collective identities; we must think critically of how our bodies are complicit in the settler-colonial state. We must be critical of nation-building and nationalist projects, and the ways that we can be complicit in the oppression and marginalization of other groups (Dei and Lordan xiv).

I am reminded of a phrase I sometimes hear during Saturday dinner at my grandmother's: 食碗面反碗底, a Cantonese saying that translates to: "to eat from one's bowl, and turn it over"—which reminds us that we do

not eat from someone's bowl or dish, to benefit from a friend, only to betray them by flipping the bowl or dish over once you are finished. The bowl or dish needs to be replenished, taken care of, and shared, just like that of Dish With One Spoon Wampum, the territory we currently live on. In using our own ancestral knowledges, it can help us better understand the knowledges of the Original stewards of the land, water, and air. We must find old/new ways to understand and make sense of the world and our relations to others, so that we can collectively and meaningful move forward in action.

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Endnotes

¹ This paper was originally written in 2018 and describes Saturday night dinners at my grandmother's home pre-COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has drastically altered life for many, changed and impacted the earth, and pushed us to rethink our "normal." As the whole world confronts the realities of the virus, the weekly Saturday night dinners have halted, been reimagined, remade and resumed in very different ways to follow public health orders, as well as to protect our elderly, young, and immunocompromised communities. The global pandemic has amplified the injustices and violences globally as a result of colonization, imperialism, capitalism, racism, heteropatriarchy, and other systems of oppressions. I continue to remind myself of Arundhati Roy's powerful words in "The Pandemic is a Portal," that the pandemic presents us with a gateway to imagine and fight for another world.

² From 1941 to 1945, Hong Kong was under Japanese occupation.

³ As I review this paper in 2023, I respectfully acknowledge the unceded, ancestral and traditional territories of the hənqəmínəm and Skwxwú7mesh speaking peoples—the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations—where I presently reside. I am grateful to the Indigenous communities and the array of leaders that teach me to learn/unlearn and practise being a better guest to these territories.

⁴ Beyond human connections, including ancestors, animals, spirits, the sky, the land, the sea, and the air.

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