

Impossible Conversation – Reflective Interview with Chung Li Li- Full Transcribe Version

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Anastasia Lata: Thank you so much for participating, I am Anastasia and I am an intern at Building Conversation and as you have already read in the email, we are collecting profound reflections from previous participants and we reached you through the email that you send us...um...do you also work in arts, because I saw your website with the photographs, it was really nice.

Li Li Chung: Thank you. So, I'm retired corporate work but I have a foundation that I set up in 2015, so I am the founder of "Exactly Foundation" and basically, I commission photography projects on Singapore social and political issues, and only in photography, only in Singapore, the photographer doesn't have to be from Singapore, but most of them are...umm...So, that is what I do. I basically do the projects about three or four a year, so I've done sixteen projects now and my goal is to do thirty.

Anastasia Lata: That is nice. The photographs were so beautiful...so, let's start a little bit reflecting on the Impossible Conversation the performance, and first of all I want you to tell me a little bit, to refresh a little bit our memories, your memory, what happened and what were you asked to do during the conversation?

Li Li Chung: Ah, so I've participated in Singapore International Festival of the Arts. So, there were two conversations, two topics, that I've participated in. One on obedience and the other one was on trust. I didn't know anything about this Jesuit method, so that was new to me, and both conversations were the same in terms of methodology. So, what I remember was kind of...being given a question that we all think about for ten minutes, then we all write in complete sentences for ten minutes and then we read whatever we wrote, on our own record we were not

introduced we just jumped in and did that...then we spend about a few minutes, I think, just us thinking again about what we've heard from our participants and we wrote again the second time in complete sentences, and then we read from that, and then I think the last ten minutes was the only time that was kind of free flow conversation.

Anastasia Lata: Yes, and what was the reason for participating in this project in the first place?

Li Li Chung: Well, my projects are all about difficult conversations in Singapore, so I was very curious about how another group would do this kind of conversation and I certainly didn't know anything about the Jesuit method, so I was curious, I was intrigued. So, that is why I did it and I thought the topics were interesting, trust and obedience, which really have no correct answer, there is no black and white...just depends on how a person feels. So, I thought it was good. I learned kind of a few things.

Anastasia Lata: Yes, and I think in these kinds of conversations you rely on your personal experiences...

Li Li Chung: That's right...

Anastasia Lata: And your personal life, so did you feel that, that your life influenced you in order to answer to those kinds of questions that you were asked?

Li Li Chung: Yeah, definitely. I think all of us reached back into memory and then we had to figure out which memory, was a good memory to share....and I don't mean good as in a good memory...but as in appropriate memory to share with basically people who are strangers to us right...I mean I recognized a few faces but there were people from elsewhere...there were couple of people from Europe as well in the conversation...so, um yeah definitely reach to our own lives.

Anastasia Lata: Yes. You did this online right?

Li Li Chung: Online.

Anastasia Lata: So, did this influenced you a little...that it was online...you are facing strangers by a screen and not in a physical setting...did this influenced you a little bit?

Li Li Chung: Uhm...no, not really. I mean it's been a year and a half now of Covid right, so there's been a lot of screen time...I am comfortable looking the screen of people, and then I am comfortable speaking kind of like this, you know on screen. The only thing that was kind of funny was, like this right (*fixing her shirt*) I have to make sure I have a proper shirt on, you know, I am sitting on my bed and made sure I didn't show my bed you know...and the lighting wasn't great sometimes, because it was night time and the light was too bright...yeah, I didn't show my face, most of the webinars I go to I don't show my face and I realized that is kind of bad, because then is just a black screen, right, with my name on it...But I am comfortable speaking to strangers...

Anastasia Lata: Yeah, I know it is weird, I've noticed that also, like how we have normalized Zoom meetings, and getting to know new people through an online platform...and how we actually sometimes stage ourselves, like as you said wearing a nice shirt, fixing the setting a little bit...and it is kind of weird what you said about not wanting to share your face, turn off the camera...because you know the main purpose of Zoom is actually to see each other, cause it's a video sharing platform right?

Li Li Chung: Well, if it is a meeting, like this, I will show my face. But if it is a webinar, just a panel of people talking to me, I am not talking expect when you want to ask a question...so, when I ask a question, I will turn my video on but most of the other time I want.

Anastasia Lata: Yeah, but during the Impossible Conversation you had your camera turned on right?

Li Li Chung: Oh yes, yes. We all had to turn our cameras and our mics on the whole time, yeah.

Anastasia Lata: And you said that there were people from Europe?

Li Li Chung: Yeah, I think so. I think there was a gentleman from Germany of Belgium, and I think there was somebody from Denmark, it might have been from the Netherlands, there was a lady...not many...most of the people were from Singapore...we had like six-seven people and maybe two were outside of Asia.

Anastasia Lata: But it was an international performance...

Li Li Chung: The Festival is international. So, as in the programs are international...you know in the past when we could all be seen shows and play's and all that, so the people would come to Singapore to perform, but I think this time most of it was recordings and screenings, lots of film screenings, and there was a panel discussion...yeah, then it would be people coming on the screen... but it tenses to be...the people short of performing as well as people attending, most of the time people attending are from Singapore.

Anastasia Lata: Yeah, because that makes me think of the different stories that were shared during the performance...you had all this cultural spectrum...because you were a lot of people...so, do you remember anything that stood out for you...form the stories that people shared?

Li Li Chung; Oh yeah, many. I think on the non-Asia side the lady who spoke, it was the conversation on obedience, and she was a teacher and she disobeyed...um what was...I can't remember what the topic was, I think it was something to do with climate change. So, she basically went to a protest and they were not supposed to go to this particular garden, but they climbed the

fence and basically trespassed you know into the...so, she, they broke the law. And so, that doesn't happen in Singapore, I mean it does but rarely and we are very strict here, you know, about those kinds of things, you know our laws are very strict. And so, to me that was really intriguing to hear her talk about, how she felt, she never done it before, and how proud and happy she felt and then her, the whole time because it was a social issue, she was really thinking about the life that her daughter was going to have or her children are going to have. Because this was a social protest and the end, I think she was very happy her daughter complimented on her kind of participation. So, she felt like what she did actually not only felt good to her, but that her daughter noticed and complimented her. So, that was the one story outside Singapore. The Singapore stories were kind interesting. There was one girl who had such a big difference on opinion in safety with her parents, so this was obedience... She had to obey her parents and not be traveling alone, not be going out alone, not be doing anything alone...that she invented a travel friend that would go...so she went through this whole thing about how she managed to have a non-existence, fiction friend with a phone number and all that, I mean...and then she locked her bedroom because she wouldn't allow her parents in her bedroom...and so, she was like she really went out to of the way disobeying...this is what she said "I disobey without...without giving the impression that I was disobeying, so my parents thought I was a good daughter and obeying"...so, I was kind of like...(laughs)...

Anastasia Lata: that was insane...that is so amazing...

Li Li Chung: It is, but she was like...I thought many stories I will go through all of them, but I just thought everybody was so special, you know.

Anastasia Lata: Yeah, everybody was so special and you are kind of like find a piece of you in some of their stories...

Li Li Chung: That's right...

Anastasia Lata: Because you also said about how strict things are in Singapore, for example the parents were strict, and the laws are strict, you wouldn't imagine yourself breaking the law as the lady did...

Li Li Chung: Yeah, so here is an important point from your interview with me. I thought that the methodology facilitates this kind of connection. The silence, the silent thinking and the writing...you know by the time you got to read your story and actually listen...so, it was very active listening...and by the time we got to the third part, you know, we were all kind comfortable with each other...and by the time we got to the open discussion we were almost like friends already, you know. So, the comfort level was reached I think because there was so much silence in the beginning, you know. I think that silence was important, which is not something that we do now, right...if you meet a friend the first thing you do is blablabla, you know, and you would never meet a friend and spend ten minutes just looking at each other, right, and being quiet, and certainly you not going to write comments, you know, "last week happened this to me" ...you are not going to do that right... So, it was uncomfortable as a form of conversation between friends, but I think in a discussion it would have been...it gave you time to settle down...

Anastasia Lata: yeah, and silence can speak for itself sometime. It doesn't have to be awkward; it also means that you have to take time and think...you should have participated in another Building Conversation performance which was called Digital Silence, which was one hour in silence...you leave your room open, your camera open and the camera should be visible to your room, and you go away....and the Zoom is showing all

different of apartments and sounds coming from different rooms. So, you create a dialogue between sounds, but a dialogue where it should not have to be with words, it's a dialogue with sounds. You experience this silence together and it' is a real special performance, so I think that you had liked it, because you said this thing about silence....

(Phone ringing in distance)

Li Li Chung: Yeah, I don't know about an hour...(laughs)...about an hour in silence....

Anastasia Lata: Yeah, an hour it sounds a lot but actually time is very relative and sometimes you don't know how time passes...so, you are kind of lost in the sounds, in your thoughts also during that hour, so it is really nice, but let's go back to the Impossible Conversation, sorry for this small interruption about Digital Silence...

Li Li Chung: Is your phone ringing?

Anastasia Lata: Yeah, I know its ok. Someone is calling me, but he can call later also. Oh, it stopped.

Li Li Chung: Ok.

Anastasia Lata: So, what did you enjoy the most?... aside from the sharing conversation?

Li Li Chung: I think the whole experience as a total, was very good. It is certainly memorable. I thought about it several times after it ended. It has a lingering effect on me, it lingers, you know it stays with me. And I think because the group was small and the methodology was unique, and I thought the people were special. The moderator, Satchit, was very good, immediately you felt comfortable when he started to speak. Like this was not going to be impossible to do, you know. So, I think that the moderator is quite of important and I think he was also very

aware of everybody, although we were all on screen, you know, he was looking at us...because if you are together in a physical space, you can see things better, but still I felt like he was, he was with us...

Anastasia Lata: Do you think that if you did this Impossible Conversation in a physical setting, you would have a different experience?

Li Li Chung: Possibly...possibly. I think we would pick up on the small gestures, you know, quickly...you know how we sit, where we are sitting, do we cross our legs or not, you know, when you are silent and thinking...I know some people just quietly thinking, he told us not to write but I have to write, because that is the way I think. So, it is quite easy that he could tell me not to write, then I would get uncomfortable because that is not my style.

Anastasia Lata: Yes. But if it was in a physical setting, the silence that you found really important in the online, would still be important in the physical setting.... the silence in the beginning?

Li Li Chung: Oh, yes... yes, if the silence wasn't there, I think it is quite possible that it might take longer to kind of have a good conversation, you know. I think the silence kind of...like I said it settles you, you know, it is kind of like settles you...like you say, because this is my own room I know it so well, but if it is in a setting physical it would be a new space for me and I would be looking at everything right...try to get my relationship, shorted out with the room...let's say if I am sitting in your room I'll be looking your bicycle and all that crap that you have behind you....

(Both laughing)

Anastasia Lata: Yeah, sorry for that setting....

Li Li Chung: No, that's ok, it's ok...it's telling you are alive...

Anastasia Lata: Yes, exactly...yeah. So, it is important...I think it contributes the fact it was online and you were in two dimensions, your room and the second dimension the setting in Zoom...did you feel that this influenced on which stories are you going to share...to choose because it was online?

Li Li Chung: Uhm...I don't know if that would make a difference...I think I'd probably share the same story, you know...because I've always been comfortable with strange places and strangers...so, yeah...

Anastasia Lata: So, you did you feel comfortable like sharing a more personal story...?

Li Li Chung: No, I think it would have been the same, it would have been the same story.

(Bad internet connection)

Anastasia Lata: Can you hear me?

Li Li Chung: Ok you are back; you froze a little...what was the question?

Anastasia Lata: I was just saying that you said that you thought the performance after it finished, so what did the performance provoke to you?

Li Li Chung: What did what?... I am sorry

Anastasia Lata: What did the performance provoke for you?

Li Li Chung: Ohh, whose performance, my performance?

Anastasia Lata: The Impossible Conversation, the whole thing.

Li Li Chung: What did it provoke...uhmmm...well it provokes a kind of thinking about how I was going to start the story and how I was going to make it interesting as well as sincere on my part, but I also wanted to end with something memorable right...because you...it's not just a story is...I wouldn't call it the moral of the story, I call it just a point, I had a point...and because I was

sharing a memory with everybody at the end of that memory I did learn something....back then when it was happening...and I wanted to tell everybody what I learned...and I was happy with that conclusion as well. So, I had to organize my story and organize my thoughts...and I don't know if that, if that is provoking me...it provoked me to organize my head and my thoughts and the conversation...and then when I was listening to other stories, the other people were saying I mean what was the point that this person is trying to make...there was only one story that I couldn't figure out what he was trying to say and it's either the accent or you know how some people talk and hop around, hop around and you are wondering what the hell are you saying (*laughs*) and I not so sure if I...I can't even remember what his main point was, I just remembered that he talked a lot...right. So, in conversations you have people like that, you know, they just kinds of emptying their mind, you know, emptying whatever their thought is....and they're conversations like that...Not everybody has a point right...when you have a conversation not everybody has a point...

Anastasia Lata: So, what is conversation for you? Did the term conversation changed after participating this performance?

Li Li Chung: No, I think it didn't change anything but I think it confirmed to me some thoughts I had about a conversation. And a conversation is basically a dialogue or an interaction between at least two people...and um not everything has to be organized and framed, but I like conversations where...it's like dots, you know, you can keep extending the dots and along the way sometime you agree sometimes you disagree and then...you know the whole point about conversations, the kind of conversations I like is that I become shopper after that conversation about something even if it is very small, even if it is something stupid like how do you cut carrots, you know...at

the end of that conversation I say “oh gosh I learn something new today, I’ve been cutting it wrong, you know this is another way to cut carrots”...and then that is enough for me...you know, but of course you can have more complicated conversations like climate change...then that is like bubblyness[?] ...it can go on for a lot of time, it can continue for a lot of time...but then I am also aware that some conversations are very umm...very light...like if you talk to a child, the child is actually playing when he or she is talking to you, and so you just play along...you know it doesn’t mean anything...conversation can be play it’s not always about learning or agreement or you know business plan...

Anastasia Lata: Yeah, it doesn’t always have to be about important stuff...you also need conversations when you are just chatting or gossiping or...but you always take something from them...

Li Li Chung: That is right....

Anastasia Lata: Yes, I agree with you.

Li Li Chung: And I think my conversations now...and I think going through the Building’s Conversations short of gave me a few ideas about making sure that some conversations, that are very...more serious and not a waste of time right...because it can be very quality and fulfilling, it can be very fulfilling for my friends and me you know, when you have these kinds of quality conversations...so, I thought it was good and confirmed to me that the kind of slowly taking, slow is good and then slowly talking, slowly talking listening, thinking a bit giving people a change to finish their stories you know...and I think that is important...because sometimes we are so quick, we don’t even let people finish their stories or some people who talk to me you know, they can ask you like “how are you” and I am saying...getting ready to answer they’ve gone on to the second question already (*laughs*)...

Anastasia Lata: Yeah, or sometimes they might just ask you and then they have already built what they want to respond to you, and they don't really hear to what you are saying, they don't really take the time to listen to you and understand you...and respond properly sometimes...

Li Li Chung: That's why I don't do well in cocktail parties and I don't do very well in the pub...in bars or if...European restaurants are really terrible they are very noisy, because your buildings are very old and the ceilings are low and so when you sit together you know a few people around the table...and there is something wrong your tables. Your tables are either square or long, see Chinese tables are round, so everybody sees everybody. If you have a long table of eight people you can't talk to the other end of the table, you are basically talk to the four people around you, that's the maximum and then it's just so noisy I just can't stand it...

(Both laughing)

Anastasia Lata: Yeah, you are right...I like the point with the round and the circle thing...that you can look all the people and engage with all of them.

Li Li Chung: yeah, or at least there is a possibility for you to go across right...to somebody and you can sit with sic people, eight people and you know like...I mean you live in Greece right, your gardens are great, you know, sit in the gardens, outdoor sitting, outdoor is good because you can manage the noise level better right...

Anastasia Lata: Yeah, but sometimes also the noises are becoming part of the conversations, aren't they?

Li Li Chung: Of course, but I'm just...if I get do tired, exhausted for having to speak louder that I have to, then I just lose it...I just shut down...I just kind of like...

Anastasia Lata: But do you think that conversation has to do with two people speaking or can conversation be a person speaking with the objects that are surrounding him...the nature that surrounds them...?

Li Li Chung: I suppose so, although I don't speak to objects, I don't speak to plants, I don't speak to animals...

Anastasia Lata: I am not saying speaking to them directly, but actually (*both laughing*) creating a dialogue with yourself based on them or hearing the noises...

Li Li Chung: Yes ok, yeah...yes of course...of course that is possible...and I've become now that I am retired, I have more time and I am not driving anymore, so we have great buses here...so, riding the bus I get to see more and I am a lot more aware of trees and plants...yeah...I almost look at them a little longer that's true...

(Overlap voices)

Anastasia Lata: Please go I ahead...

Li Li Chung: So, a lot of my conversations are involving some short of eating right, so we always having tea or it's lunch, usually it's lunch or some short of tea, and we drink a lot of coffee here and we have a lot of outdoor, we call it hawker centre, kind of dining which is outside...and is also relationship building with the food that each one of us have, we admire it, we like it, we comment on it you know know....like you say is not just with people is also with our surroundings....yeah so, especially now it's much safer to eat outside in open air than indoors, so we like that... I am alone most of the time and I am in my kitchen, and I love my kitchen, you know the chair that I sit on. The thing I feel in sitting in the kitchen is the breeze, because we are very hot here this is like humid hot...and this window that I have, between the window and the door the wind is like, you

know...it's like bathing...It's just a hot tropical breeze and it is just bathes me and it makes me so happy (*laughs*)...

Anastasia Lata: It's like the breeze keeps you company...

Li Li Chung: That's right...and Covid has made me more aware of that because...you know we are not going out running around try to get somewhere, to attend something and not doing all the stuff, you know we used to be shopping, doing things, meeting friends you know, getting on the bus, getting on the taxi blablabla...always on the go...but now I am just sitting in my kitchen you know...most days...and I am very happy sitting in the kitchen...yeah and I quite happy to do it...but I am also happy to have a conversation, I mean...and sometimes in that kitchen I've got a webinar going on right...so, I am just listening...more like a podcast is not like this...

Anastasia Lata: Yes, maybe that is why podcasts are so popular nowadays because it is something that keeps you company, but also gives you the ability to be alone and have your time...

Li Li Chung: Yeah, that's right...

Anastasia Lata: So, do you hear a lot of podcasts, you are fan of podcasts?

Li Li Chung: I do a lot of webinars that are like podcasts, you know because I am not participating at the panel, and since I am not working, it's not my work...so, I just listening. And some topics I don't have to listen very closely, you know...so some topics are...

Anastasia Lata: Just to hear the noises...

Li Li Chung: Yeah, because it seemed interesting and I sing up for it...

Anastasia Lata: Yeah...is there...

Li Li Chung: Ok what other questions do you have, let's go through all your questions. What other questions do you have?

Anastasia Lata: No, these questions are not strict, there is not wrong or correct way to do this conversation that we are having. But since we are going towards the end, I wanted to ask you is there anything else that you want to share?

Li Li Chung: No, no nothing in particular. I appreciated very much, in fact I am suppose to get in touch with somebody from the Netherlands team, because I had a question about my own projects, how to do conversations...because that used to be done in person and I wanted to know if there is another way, other than the Jesuit method...Are you a facilitator? Do you facilitate these? What do you do?

Anastasia Lata: As an intern you mean?

Li Li Chung: Ah so as an intern are you a student?

Anastasia Lata: Yes, I am a student at Utrecht University on the Ma Contemporary Theatre, Dance and Dramaturgy and I am doing my internship at Building Conversation.

Li Li Chung: Oh, I see.

Anastasia Lata: Yeah, and with another college Jolien, she is in The Netherlands, we have taken over a little bit this Experience Archive project. So, we are heading towards the end of the internship, so...

Li Li Chung: Okay. Very good.

Anastasia Lata: But one last question I wanted to ask you was, you said that you always taking something from conversations, and I don't know if you want to share what you took for our conversation today, or at least did our conversation influence you a little bit?

Li Li Chung: You mean today?

Anastasia Lata: Yes, our interview

(Both laughing)

Li Li Chung: Okay, I was very much aware in the thirty minutes you probably had to cover questions, but I thought that you made it very natural, you know, for me to speak with you and you allowed me to say what I wanted to say or say not just yes/no kind of thing...so we had a conversation it wasn't just like a Q&A (*laughs*). So, I appreciate that. Thank you.

Anastasia Lata: Thank you so much.

Li Li Chung: I hoped you like the conversation.

Anastasia Lata: Of course, and I hope in the future to have another conversation either at Building Conversation or in one of your projects...either in Singapore or in Europe...so I am looking forward to our next conversation.

Li Li Chung: Thank you. So, if you left out something or if you want me to respond to something just send me an email.

Stops recording...