

## Spotlight On ACCeNT Member: Ellen Yun



**M**y name is Ellen Shuk-Yee Yun, 甄淑妮. My parents were immigrants to the UK, who met and married here. I was born and brought up in the UK; I am Chinese with Cantonese and Toishanese heritage and I identify as Chinese British.

I have been working as an Integrative Psychotherapist for over 16 years and also as a Supervisor and Visiting Lecturer.

In recent years I have intentionally focussed on integrating and training in the Internal Family Systems Model (IFS) of therapy and I am IFS Level 2 trained, starting Level 3 in April. I have found IFS to be a compassionate way of relating

to ourselves and others. IFS believes that we are all born with a core Self that is a natural leader, who can lead the whole internal family to work harmoniously together. IFS also believes that we are born with parts that make up our personality, that have valuable and beautiful qualities to help us live our lives, but that trauma, wounds and attachment injuries force our parts to take on extreme roles because the experiences, feelings or memories are too much. All parts have good intentions even though the way in which they do things might be unhealthy and even destructive. IFS offers a way that compassionately and respectfully welcomes all parts, so that the

buried and hidden pain, suffering and trauma that has been stuck in the past can be heard and seen by our core Self. Wounded parts can be healed, and the parts protecting them (like, for example self-harm and people pleasing) can be liberated and transformed into their original valuable qualities.

I have found that IFS integrates well with my Christian faith, as I believe we are made in the image of God and that our loving Father welcomes all parts of ourselves to Him with compassion and with open arms, to redeem and transform them, like the story of the prodigal son:

'...while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him' (Luke 15:20).

IFS has also offered a way of naming intergenerational trauma/sin and legacy burdens that might be unconsciously impacting us individually and collectively, that my body always knew and carried, but were nameless. The impact of racism through the generations in the UK and the impact of the shame and honour culture through my Chinese heritage have been areas that I have been able to give more open space to explore. I have come to experience the fact that God welcomes these areas too, for individual and collective redemption, connection and transformation.

## WHY I JOINED THE ETHNIC TAPESTRY GROUP

Prior to George Floyd's murder I had various questions regarding racism, diversity and inclusion, the lack of representation of people of the Global Majority (Campbell-Stephens 2003) in Christian counselling and pastoral care, but I did not know where to start having these conversations. The Ethnic Tapestry group started after the murder of George Floyd and it was the ACC's response to intentionally uncover, acknowledge and address historical systemic racism in the ACC and within the counselling profession. It also sought to intentionally amplify voices and experiences from the Global Majority who have historically been massively under-represented and marginalised in a white and Eurocentric profession. The therapeutic approaches and the research available have also centred Western culture, values and standards.



*This old family photo is of my grandparents who were immigrants to the UK. (Other faces are blurred out.)*

It was great to finally have a space to be able to share, name and validate our own experiences. It also gave me time and collective space to further explore how racism in the UK has affected me unconsciously since birth. Likewise, it provided me with the space to explore more deeply my bicultural identity as someone who identifies as Chinese and British, where there are similarities and also differences to other minoritised people.

Emotional health, wellbeing and mental health can still be taboo and stigmatised in Christian communities. This stigma and taboo is also present within East and Southeast Asian communities, whilst also acknowledging that there is a huge lack of access, resources and culturally sensitive awareness of the emotional and mental health needs of the hugely diverse East and Southeast Asian communities that are in the UK. I would like to contribute to normalising emotional and mental health in these communities.

## BICULTURAL IDENTITY, INTERNALISED RACISM AND BEING ANTI-RACIST

George Floyd's murder activated many questions about racism and how it operates in ourselves and society at large. IFS recognises that each of us carries different legacy burdens that can be passed down through our ancestral lineage in the form of emotions, thoughts, beliefs, cultural norms or through societal groups or subcultures that we are a part of. I attended an IFS workshop that focussed on the collective legacy burden of white supremacy culture and anti-Black racism in America. As much as I wanted to learn and understand, I also wanted to genuinely listen to the experiences of Black people, not centering myself. In doing so, I was able to become more aware, and connect with the parts of myself that held racist narratives and beliefs about Black people that had been passed onto me consciously or unconsciously through societal

values and the media, in the UK and Hong Kong.

What I had seen and heard could not be unseen and unheard. Some of my parts became updated to what was happening in 2020 and gave me space and trust to start the journey of being anti-racist. I used to think that not being racist was enough, but as Angela Y. Davis says, "In a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist." Becoming anti-racist is not passive but about being intentional and active.

Liz Pembleton offers this definition for racism and anti-racism, "Racism is not just about harmful and offensive language used to dehumanise, discriminate, oppress and marginalise people of the Global Majority (Campbell-Stephens, 2003), but it is also about the subtle and explicit ways that prejudice plus social and institutional power is used to normalise this behaviour . . . Anti-racist practice . . . is about making consistent, intentional and conscious choices to challenge and disrupt the many ways that it shows up in our practice and in its presence within the systems and structures ..." (Pembleton, L. 2022)

The journey towards being anti-racist has also been a deeper trail of my experiences of racism and oppression, passed to me through my Chinese and British heritages, but also an invitation to continued unlearning, healing and transformation.

All my life I have been navigating consciously and unconsciously what it means to be me, a Chinese person in the UK, who also identifies as British, navigating where and if I belonged as someone living between cultures. As the Nigerian poet Ijeoma Umebinyuo says, "So, here we are, too foreign for home, too foreign for here. Never enough for both."

Growing up in the UK, there was a lack of positive representation of East and Southeast Asian people in the media and society. Any

attention given was stereotypical and othering where our customs, cultures and our accents were an open target for ridicule or we were exoticised and appropriated. Largely, East and Southeast Asians were ignored and invisibilised.

When I used to watch *Eastenders* I would say, “the day a Chinese person/family becomes a main character in *Eastenders* is when we know Chinese people are a part of British society.”

Any Chinese representation for me was from my family or the Chinese communities I was a part of. As the British and Chinese cultures and values can be different, yet also similar, I found I had a part of my personality that helped me survive by ‘code-switching’, performing

rigorous mental gymnastics in self-censorship, adapting how I presented myself according to the context I was in, in order to ‘fit into the norm’.

On reflection I have never felt truly welcomed as a Chinese person in predominantly white spaces. My many parts felt like I had to leave any hint of my Chinese-ness at the door before I walked in, assimilating to whiteness and Britishness as much as I could.

I would even speak with an exaggerated British accent when my ‘code-switching’ part felt it necessary in order to justify my existence in whatever situation I found myself in. However, parts were left sorely disappointed, unsurprisingly, when the micro

insults, subtle acts of exclusion and othering statements would undoubtedly come; “you speak really good English . . . where did you learn it?”, as well as the fact that I am clearly East Asian in appearance. I learnt from a very young age in white spaces to separate myself from things that were ‘Chinese’, but in the process lost much of the heritage, pride and joy of showing up as Chinese, out of fear of racist rhetoric and ridicule. I had learnt to minimise myself in a culture that did not see me or people who look like me.

I have also become aware that some of the legacy burdens of my Chinese and British heritage includes forms of silencing and self-censorship (e.g. ‘having a stiff upper lip’ or ‘saving face’ with regards to expressing emotions), which I have come to appreciate can be highly protective and much needed parts for survival from trauma through the generations. Speaking out or having one’s own opinion could lead to unwelcome visibility. I came across Resmaa Menkam’s quote based on his book *My Grandmother’s Hands*, “Trauma decontextualized in a person looks like personality. Trauma decontextualized in a family looks like family traits. Trauma decontextualized in a people looks like culture”. This deeply impacted me as it helped me see that cultural traits that I might have perceived as a norm in my Chinese (and British heritage) may be inherited trauma that has been decontextualised through the generations.

Covid brought a level of overt and unrestrained racist rhetoric towards Chinese people, to a degree I had not overtly seen or experienced previously. Stories of significantly increased racist acts and attacks towards people of East and Southeast Asian appearance throughout the world quickly brought visibility to communities that have largely been marginalised in society, and the visibility was anything but good. It was deeply horrifying. But,



*Toddler photo of me on a beach in the UK*



Photo by LeeAnn Cline on Unsplash

in this, I have seen a growing rise of East and Southeast Asians around the world starting to speak up; speaking out against racism and other forms of systemic oppression in a way that I have not witnessed before.

In attending to my own parts that have held various individual and legacy burdens and being able to unburden some of those, there has been more courage to be seen and heard, to have a voice about issues and to be welcomed. The Ethnic Tapestry group has been a wonderful place of growth in intentionally hearing one another and seeking ways to create equitable space for the issues that are pertinent to our communities.

### MOVING FORWARD

I have come to see that racism affects us all; it is a 'we' issue, and it is not a topic any of us can opt out of, though understandably we may have parts that may protect us from engaging with it because

it could/can evoke a whole host of uncomfortable feelings and thoughts. However, none of us are immune from the impact of racism and this will inevitably show up in our therapeutic relationships, consciously or unconsciously. Being anti-racist is a continuous lifelong journey of unlearning and updating.

It takes courage to welcome parts of us that hold racist beliefs, attitudes and feelings, but as we move towards them with the compassion, patience, love, curiosity and connection that we have in us from God, these parts will consent to telling their stories and what they have carried, when in a place of safety, and be given opportunities to unburden what they have carried.

Turning towards uncomfortable feelings and thoughts cannot happen without safety and some people's systems/personalities will have more layers of protection than others. This makes sense if you

have had to navigate yourself in unsafe spaces or places. Therefore it is completely understandable that it will take some people's parts much longer than others to have even a semblance of safety, to give a glimmer of space with consent to turn towards some discomfort and at a manageable level.

Moving forward, I hope to offer focussed IFS groups, offering a contained, clear and safe space for people to get to know their systems, as groups can be a wonderful context for healing and transformation. Groups have a special dynamic as parts of us get activated in these settings, which might not necessarily do so in a one-to-one format. There can be potential for growth and healing for ourselves in groups as we give space to notice what parts of us come up, what's happening inside of us, in relation to others.

Specific IFS groups that I am hoping to offer will be for:

- \*Christian Counsellors and Therapists who want get to know parts of themselves who may hold unconscious racist beliefs, biases, attitudes and feelings.

- \*People of East Asian heritage to give a safe space to explore their experiences.

I am hoping to start offering these groups at some point after May 2023: intentionally small groups of a maximum of 5-6 people. (This will be a private enterprise.)

**If you would like more information please email me at [ellen@ellenyuncounselling.com](mailto:ellen@ellenyuncounselling.com)**

