

REFLECTIONS ON ESEA CONFERENCE ORGANISING

ESEA Hub
Working Paper 1
Sept 2022



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<https://www.eseahub.co.uk/scholars-corner/reflections-on-esea-conference-organising>

To cite this paper: Qiuyang Chen, Xianan Jin, Leilei, Ruoxi Liu, Taoyuan Luo, & Shuling Wang. (2022). *Reflections on ESEA Conference Organising* (Working Paper No. 1). ESEA Hub.

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Introduction to 2022 ESEA Conference

This conference was titled “ Doing Race and Gender in the Age of Uncertainties as ESEA Scholars: Emerging Themes and Theories, Reflections and Resistance”. The conference was organised under the context that East and South-east Asian (ESEA) scholars have become an indispensable force in an unprecedented level and scope in ESEA community organising since the pandemic around the globe, but there is a dearth of research on ESEA communities in the UK, compared to the United States. Systematic racism that ESEA communities have been experiencing and rallying against is far from being fully acknowledged in higher education institutions and the wider British society. Meanwhile, ESEA scholars also need to cautiously navigate their life and research in ESEA field sites as they may be marginalised and stigmatised out of their gender, sexuality, political orientations, or activism. Particularly, as with the increasingly rigid social-political context of ESEA and alongside the pandemic, ESEA scholars have faced rising precarities and uncertainties in Higher Education institutions, their fieldwork sites, the labour market, and broader social spheres. These situations see an urgent need to bring ESEA scholars from cross-disciplinary backgrounds to theorise and disrupt racial and gender inequalities through their reflections and resistance.

This conference therefore created a communal space where race-and-gender-related research conducted by ESEA scholars were presented, discussed, and disseminated. Through these conversations, the conference reflected on the issues that have occurred during the ESEA researchers’ fieldwork and lived experiences, and deepened understanding of the risks and precarities faced by ESEA scholars in the age of uncertainties. Moreover, by further discussing the agencies, creativities and alternative seeking of ESEA scholars, this conference summarised and suggested potential approaches for negotiations, resistance, and activism. This conference provided an opportunity to tackle inequalities in various forms inside and beyond academia and become part of the ongoing ESEA campaign.

The conference was organised by five PhD candidates from different universities and took place in University of Cambridge on 13th September, 2022. It consisted of three sessions. The first session convened an academic panel, providing ESEA scholars

with a platform to delve into the nuances of conducting race and gender research. In the second session, a roundtable discussion fostered a dialogue between ESEA scholars and activists, offering a reflective space to share insights and experiences, particularly those shaped by the pandemic. The final session was an immersive feminist body mapping workshop, designed to explore and visualize personal and collective experiences through an artistic and interactive lens.

Rationale for a collective reflection on ESEA conference organising

Organising the conference “Doing Race and Gender in the Age of Uncertainties as ESEA Scholars” became more than a scholarly endeavour for each of us involved; it evolved into a journey deeply enriched with personal, social, and political resonance. As critical ESEA feminist scholars, we recognised the intertwining of our identities and experiences with the themes and challenges of conference-organising. This collection of reflections, therefore, serves not just as an archiving of this conference and a documentation of our diverse voices. This writing journey also leads to further exploration of our commitment to feminist praxis, our connection to the broader ESEA community, and our dedication to anti-racist advocacy.

These reflective pieces delve deep into the multifaceted challenges we encountered while organising a conference that aims to be feminist, anti-racist, and decentralised. Each narrative emphasises its unique standpoints, elucidating the richness and complexity of our individual and collective experiences as ESEA scholars. A recurring motif in these writings is the integration of feminist principles into the organisational practices. These accounts showcase the ways in which we navigated both the theoretical constructs and tangible implementations of feminist engagements. A pivotal focus of this ESEA conference organising shown throughout our reflections is to prioritise the need of the community. To achieve this, we have made efforts to ensure that knowledge production is rooted in lived realities and experiences. Moreover, these reflections cast a spotlight on our unyielding efforts to challenge and overcome the existing institutional limits when organising such an event. We recognise these limits lie in gendered and racial structural inequalities in the Higher Education system in the UK, while we hope our writing somehow underlines our mission and efforts to craft more inclusive and equitable HE spaces.

In documenting our reflections, our aim is not only to share our personal experiences but to also provide insights, knowledge and inspirations for future scholars and organisers. Through this endeavour, we aspire to bridge the gap between academic theory and praxis and between researchers and activists. We want to re-imagine and practise more relatable, grounded, and transformative academic engagements.

Note: The reflections in the following are primarily arranged according to the alphabetical order of the authors’ last names.

Learning Politics for Conference Organising

Ruoxi Liu (University of Cambridge)

How everything started

I had seen CRASSH¹'s open call for event funding in January 2022 and was thinking of organising something different from the existing conference frameworks. As an international PhD student coming from Mainland China studying sociology in a privileged and white-dominated institution, I was not confident to organise a conference in a purely academic setting. But thinking of ESEA scholars' experiences in the UK education institutions and thinking of the past discussions with my ESEA friends and Chinese feminist friends, I really wanted to create an occasion and safe space for us to talk about our research and lived experiences, concerns and struggles.

But I was very hesitant because I knew how many creative souls I needed to engage with for this venture, how much time we would dedicate to it, and how little chance there was for us to get the funding. But the fact that I probably wouldn't have a second chance to apply for CRASSH funding before I finished my PhD urged me to have a try. I made up my mind in early February and reached out to 5 feminist friends studying around the UK: Leiyun, Qiuyang, Shuling, Taoyuan, and Xianan (name in alphabetic order). I was very lucky to get their interest and trust and we formed a conference group on 11 February 2022.

In our first meeting, we spent much time discussing what kind of conference we would like to organise, how different it could be from others, and what themes we would like to focus on. I really enjoyed this brainstorming process and I appreciate so much the wisdom of my feminist fellows. As ESEA scholars based in different disciplines of the UK higher education system, namely, education, development, gender studies, history and sociology, we tackle different themes in our research and studies; but we shared some similar feelings in our lived experiences in the UK – we are all East Asian female PhD students from the Chinese mainland; we came to the UK for our graduate studies; and we are not satisfied with the existing marginalisation and lack of credits and supports from Higher Education institutions to the ESEA

¹ CRASSH is the University of Cambridge Centre for Research in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

researchers and students, the population on the rise but lacking in attention. After two hours of intense discussions, we finally set the theme to be ‘doing race and gender as ESEA scholars’. We started writing the funding application for the CRASSH conference, and gradually formed our draft initiative as below,

“The past few decades have witnessed the Global South to be a rising context for academic research and activism, where race, gender and their intersections have drawn much attention. Accordingly, an increasing number of East and South-east Asian (ESEA) scholars have contributed to the emerging themes and questions around gender and race. ESEA scholars have become an indispensable force in an unprecedented level and scope of ESEA organising since the pandemic in a global sphere. However, as researchers have recently pointed out, there is a dearth of research on ESEA communities, especially compared to their American counterparts. Systematic racism that ESEA communities have been experiencing and rallying against is far from being fully acknowledged in British society. This serious situation calls for the active participation of ESEA scholars in more rigorous research and discussions on this field.

Particularly, as with the increasingly rigid social-political context of ESEA and alongside the pandemic, ESEA scholars have faced rising precarities and uncertainties in Higher Education institutions, in their field sites, in the labour market and in broader social spheres. Against such backgrounds, this conference targets at speakers from ESEA graduate academic communities and early-career researchers in the UK and EU who work, think and reflect on gender and race during this age of uncertainties, regardless of their research contexts. “

(Extract from the funding application form)

By the end of February, we sent out the applications to CRASSH conference funding and researcher-led event funds at the university of Cambridge.

A journey of money-seeking

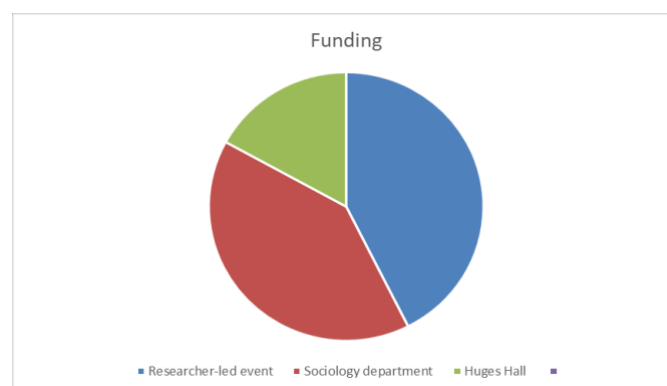
We received both good and bad news by mid-March 2022. We first received confirmation from the researcher-led event: they agreed to grant us £500, and this added to our confidence to get the CRASSH conference funding. But on 14 March,

we received the rejection from CRASSH, and this was a bit disappointing: for me at least, our proposal was a strong and honest statement that shows reflections on the positionality of the ESEA scholars and further discussions on research methodologies, ethics and positionality. But was it a reasonable result? Again, I questioned: Were we good enough? Although the theme is timely, it is unconventional. Anyway, we are just six international PhD students from mainland China.

Nevertheless, the £500 from the researcher-led event we received meant that our project still had some potential to be held, and the efforts we had put in to it also made us desperate to make it happen. So we started our journey of finding other sources of money.

Our conference is also unconventional in this sense. While most conferences in Cambridge seems to be fully-funded, finding money and funding also became part of our conference journey. I tried Sociology and Magdalene College and Shuling tried Hughes Hall College. It did not take me much time to hear back from Sociology: on 14 April, I received good news from our head of department confirming that it was a very good opportunity and that they would like to fund us £475; Hughes Hall later expressed their willingness to offer us a free venue and another £200.

We are really grateful for their help. Without their generosity, this conference wouldn't have happened. And with this combination of £500, £475 and £200, we started our CFP and final conference preparation in June.



Funding Sources

Food politics

Food might be a minor point in most ‘academic’ conferences but for this conference, it became a significant part. As PhD students studying in the UK, most previous meals included in conferences that we used to attend, and to present at served us (cold) sandwiches. Sandwiches are convenient for a short break, and conventional for an academic setting that emphasises intellectual conversation and efficiency. But shouldn’t food, that is so important to us, be taken into better consideration at the conference? Would there be any other choices and alternatives to the conventional conference food? We were thinking of serving ESEA food to our conference attendants – we were thinking of delicious hot food that brings together our memories and experiences as ESEAs: Thai Curry, Bibimbap, MaPo Tofu, Gyoza, spring roll, Asian pastries, etc. By doing so, I was also thinking of engaging local ESEA businesses in this conference. I believe that it is worthwhile thinking about our position and relationship with the ESEA community as ESEA scholars or those who work on and within the ESEA contexts.

While we continued working on this idea, we continuously confronted practical concerns: we were not sure whether the college venue could allow us to have such food. Would our conference venue be suitable to have hot food? When we applied for CRASSH conference funding, it was said that only university-served food is accepted for the conference dining. So again, we were concerned about these limits in the requirements until Shuling also confirmed with Hughes Hall that food from outside is allowed inside of the conference venue.

Our seeking for support from local ESEA restaurants and business is also a process. As my MPhil thesis is about the Asian self-employed workers in Cambridge, I used to know some local ethnic businesses and have had conversations with them and thought that there would be many choices. But I was a bit too optimistic. When it came to practice, I found that the conference lunch box would be another story. Among a number of Cambridge-based ESEA restaurants, those with affordable prices were few. Also, I, as a conference organiser who cannot get over all conventions, think about its quality, cleanness, package, even formality for conference food: Would they fit into people’s expectations about an academic conference? – Anyway, it would not be like when we ordered food from the college or other professionalised conference venue and when we are guaranteed to be served ‘standard food’ within a promised time.

There were more uncertainties for small businesses, especially those that only have one or two chefs. Besides, we needed to select the dishes that could satisfy different needs, and we would need to pick up and clean up afterwards.

I am a person who easily gets anxious, and in this process of food preparation, I seemed to understand more why sandwiches are popular for academic conferences – Maybe because they are easier to prepare and budget-wise, so they have been institutionalised. Also, because they are institutionalised, they are guaranteed. This means that there won't be any mistakes and risks as they are already standard, even the standard food is of poor quality. But I wonder – isn't food important? Even if it's minor, it's about our agency. The efforts that we made in food were usually escaped in most conference preparations and exceeded our expectations. But still, I think it is very necessary and meaningful. Food, just as this ESEA conference organisation, is full of politics.

But despite all these back-and-forth thoughts and worries, we attempted to reach out to the local ESEA restaurants. We went to five restaurants at last, including three Chinese restaurants, one Korean business and one Thai restaurant. We finally managed to order food from one Korean food business and one Chinese restaurant locally operated in Cambridge. Here is the list of food we have provided:

Korean Vegetarian Bibimbap 야채비빔밥 (Vegetarian)
Korean Vegetarian Bibimbap 야채비빔밥 (Vegan)
Korean Spicy Pork with Rice 제육볶음덮밥
Fried Kimchi & Pork with Rice 김치삼겹살덮밥
Ma Po Tofu 素麻婆豆腐饭 (Vegetarian)
Beef Brisket with Rice 牛腩饭
Chinese Cabbage & Pork with Rice 包菜五花肉饭



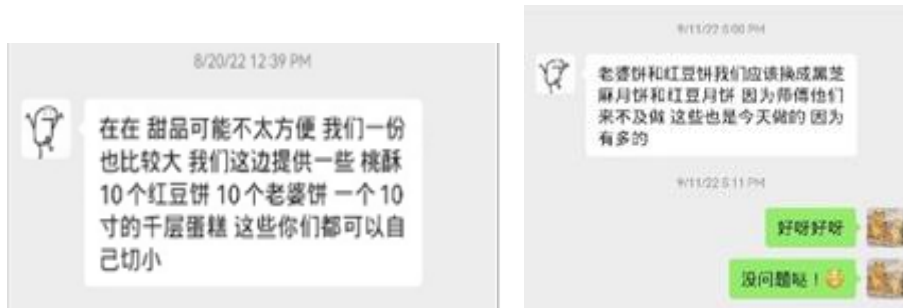
Lunch provided

Last but not least, when we were short of funding at the later stage of the conference preparation moment, Shuling and I started another round of money-seeking and support. We asked for more funding and sponsorship from the local business, including two Chinese supermarkets, one Chinese restaurant, for funding, one Chinese bakery and one Taiwanese bakery. Most of them politely refused: they don't have such the capability because they have already funded other projects and done many charities; or they don't find our conference fit into their calendar.

However, the Chinese bakery where I used to work part-time (a long time ago, before the pandemic) agreed to offer us some desserts. This was to my surprise: although I kept my attention on this bakery for a long time, I haven't talked with the owner for some time since the pandemic. But the owner was so generous to provide some food for us for free. We finally received 6 boxes of Chinese walnut cookies, 20 spiced sesame seed mooncakes, 20 red bean paste mooncakes and 1 mille-feuille cake. The simple 'yes' message I received from the bakery owner is one of the most encouraging comments I have received during the whole conference organisation. I feel that this conference was somehow accepted or supported by the local ESEA community.



Desserts during conference



Messages with bakery owner

Decentralising ESEA?

In the whole programme design, I was thinking of making the conference as ESEA as possible. But soon I realised my limits. As a Chinese mainlander, my social contacts in the UK are still Chinese-dominated: the friends and people that in my mind might have been interested, the institutions and centres I could think of to help us promote the event were also quite east Asian oriented. Although I made a list of ESEA-focused institutional contacts, schemes, institutions, and programmes, when I send out the CFP and seek help for advertising, many of them are still East Asia related or focusing on China, Japan, Korea etc.

This geographical concentration may partly come from our bias and limits and it was raised many times as a ‘problem’ in our pre-conference meetings. Apparently, there is a need to decentralise East Asia, or to decentralise China. We kept thinking: What about Southeast Asia? What about Taiwan, Hong Kong, Indonesia, etc? How can we reach more non-Chinese ESEA scholars and audiences? And perhaps a more profound question behind this was: how can this conference be more inclusive?

It is easier to ask than to achieve these goals, and this conference itself also received and observed some feelings and moments of ‘exclusiveness’ during its progress. A Taiwanese scholar commented herself feeling ‘quite queer’ in the afternoon’s panel discussions. I was grateful to hear such a comment which, from another aspect, suggested a relatively safe space that this conference created. But it also reminded us that there was much space for progress and improvement. I think this comment is one of the most rewarding takeaways I received from the conference because it reminded me that one should never stop thinking making efforts in achieving inclusivity. I will keep asking myself in future events: What does ‘inclusivity’ really mean, for a conference, for the academic setting, for higher education, and daily life?

Final words: The start of something different?

The ‘Doing Race and Gender as ESEA scholars’ conference was our first attempt to hold an unconventional event within the academic setting. Although I am very much aware of its limits, I have learnt so much from this organisation experience and my fellow feminist organisers. I have also been inspired and empowered by the roundtable, workshops, chairs and discussants’ comments, and the conference presentations, and feel our gathering and discussions were very rewarding. Hopefully, this conference will be the start of some alternative academic and activist practices as junior researchers and activists. By furthering this initiative, we can continue thinking about the relationship between activism and academia, and that between academia and community. In terms of the possibilities for future organisation, I am thinking maybe we can open up the committee and let in more voices, and networks in the preparation.

‘Was it a conference we wanted to organise?’: Navigating positionality, expectations, and evolving perspectives as a team

Qiuyang Chen (University of Warwick)

I and other organising members had a reflective meeting after the conference. During that, I found that what we envisaged of an ideal conference had become very different from the initial idea when we applied for the funding from Cambridge. Some of us felt sort of unsatisfied for the accessibility and inclusiveness of the conference, especially on the activism part.

I think this dissatisfaction partially reflects the shift of my, and probably some other members’, personal career interests. Since 2020, I started to doubt if conventional academic exchange would really tackle the difficulty and inequality we, and the larger minority community, are going through. This feeling has been growing stronger as I get dismayed by the global political situation. In the conference, I realised I was looking for some presentations that could show how we researchers partnered with activists or advocates to actually make some impact on the lives of our research participants. The goals we stated in our funding proposal, which we had indeed largely attained, was to provide a platform for ESEA scholars to reflect their positionality in both their field sites and the British society and to promote the visibility of ESEA scholars and their research. We did not place activism at the centre of our aims originally — a more or less conventional academic conference had been anticipated.

During the organisation and preparation, I sometimes felt we wanted to attend to everything in an exhaustive manner. I’m very grateful that other members have been very responsible to consider every detail, such as budgeting, catering and advertising. Yet, we were quite restricted by our own position and resources. All of our organising members are from mainland China, we spent most of our time in academic and research, and (at that time) we were still looking for an opportunity of academic output, like publishing in an academic journal. These conditions made it more difficult for us to reach beyond our academic networks. We tried very hard to promote our Call for Proposals. I remember I was quite excited when I saw a diversity in the proposals we received.

Regarding the schedule, it was very tight for us to have time to either reflect on theory and methodology or to discuss more on solidarity and activism. This was also mentioned by some conference participants. We also questioned whether Cambridge as our site of venue had limited our ability to engage with a broader, non-academic audience. Nevertheless, I did find it encouraging that for some, our conference gave them a rare opportunity to not feel marginalised in an academic setting.

While there might be a sense of dissatisfaction, the post-conference reflection process has been immensely valuable. We delved deeper than just evaluating whether we had achieved our initial objectives; it served as crucial moments of introspection, showing us how our changing positionality had quietly yet profoundly redefined our expectations. We came to realise that as a team, the collective mindset was also evolving, not just as a static group, but as individuals who were growing and changing. This, in turn, affected what the group as a whole considered important at various stages of the conference planning and reflection.

Producing Knowledge from the Community

Xianan Jin (University of Exeter)

Panel Invitation

I was involved in the invitation of discussants and chairs for the conference. During the conference, among chairs and discussants, they demonstrated different levels of engagement with the paper presenters and the conference in general. In any future organisation of such a conference, it might be necessary to have a preliminary meeting with chairs and discussants to set up expectations from both sides. Besides, many papers discussed and used Black Feminist theory, considering transnational knowledge exchanges, it might be a good idea to invite Black academics for our panels.

Knowledge Production

In this conference, most participants have experiences in social mobilisation and activities, which is rare in the larger academic environment. I really appreciate this intimate connection between knowledge production and grassroots movement. However, most discussions were still limited to an academic paradigm, which might have bored or excluded certain audiences from non-academic backgrounds. It might be better to put the roundtable discussion on ESEA social mobilisation in the morning, which could have encouraged the academics to respond to the highlights in social movements in their sessions.

Community connection

Some participants in the conference pointed out their marginality in the conference, especially from a geopolitical point of view. I was wondering if we could have more online interaction with the participants before the conference to better understand the geographical tensions and solidarities among each other. Dr Pyi also suggested organising an ESEA reading group for future ESEA intellectual community building.

Doing Conference as a Feminist Practice

Leilei (University of Warwick)

Before Ruoxi invited me to participate in organising a conference about doing race and gender as ESEA researchers, I didn't expect that I would organise a conference in a university setting. After all, I no longer had any interest in building up my academic career anymore. However, the trust between myself and Ruoxi made me rethink about the possibility of doing a conference as a feminist practice and to help those young ESEA scholars in a white-dominant academic environment.

Attending academic conferences has never been easy for me. As a Chinese student who majors in food history, very often I was one of a few ESEA faces in a room. After years of self-navigation, I had accepted this kind of scenario and used to feel a bit awkward when talking about a topic that was often unfamiliar to most audiences. This kind of uncomfortable experience made me ponder, if I had the power as an organiser, how should I provide a safe space for young scholars like me to feel valued in a conference? This is a difficult task since there are very few examples that we can learn from.

Luckily, I was working with several like-minded feminist sisters: Ruoxi, Xianan, Taoyuan, Shuling and Qiuyang. We had several meetings to discuss the ways that we could make our participants feel valued. We shared our experiences of attending conferences and workshops and those details that made us feel comfortable. We mentioned that we could use a white board for participants to draw or write things that could represent themselves. That led to the idea of "ESEA Table". We hope this 'table' could provide a creative platform for participants to know more about each other beyond presentations. We also talked about the anxiety of presenting a paper in English for the first time. Therefore, we made 'first-time presenter' sticker for people who needed it. We also anticipate that those more experienced researchers could give those first-time presenters more encouragement.



ESEA Table

Another thing that we felt important was the writing of the so-called ‘rejection emails’. I knew the feelings of being rejected with some ‘cold’ words and even ridiculous reasons. So, when I drafted this email, I wanted those recipients feel that they and their work were appreciated by the committee. After I drafted this email, all the other committee members reviewed it and gave their opinions. In this email, we emphasized that it is **not** the case that the recipient’s paper was not qualified enough for our conference. On the contrary, it was our conference and our committee members were not capable of inviting them to share their research in a one-day conference. In this email, we also invited them to participate in activities such as our ‘mini talk’ series so that we would be able to hear their presentations on other occasions. By doing so, we practised feminist care with those who could not present their work in our conference.

Practising feminist care during this process was not easy. It required a lot of emotional labour and creative thinking and doing. Luckily, I was not alone in this process. After working together in organising different feminist and anti-racist activities in the past few years, our committee members shared many same values in feminist ethics, which made it easy for us to discuss each step during the conference organising. This was particularly important when this organising process was long, while we all had very limited time, energy, and resources to devote to it. Doing a conference easily becomes a burden for organisers when communication is difficult.

In fact, creating a safe space for working committee members was one of the key factors of a successful conference.

Very often, people feel hesitant to talk about their difficulties with their colleagues. People often feel ashamed to admit that they are not able to fulfil their commitments. These problems are not often addressed or shared within academia. To tackle these potential problems, in our committee, we often shared our daily lives in our group chat so that we understood each other's circumstances. Sometimes our members expressed feeling guilty of not being able to take more responsibilities because they needed to focus on other important issues or were ill. We assured those members that it was ok not to take more responsibilities. We had the flexibility to accommodate our own needs and circumstances to do the conference. We carried each other so that none of us would burn out.

Conference organising work is a devalued work in academia, especially compared to publication. Pragmatically speaking, holding a successful conference might not contribute to our future academic career. Doing a conference is an unpaid labour and student organisers are not valued by institutions. In fact, here, the student organisers had to constantly negotiate and even fight with institutions to cater to their needs, and especially those of students from minoritised groups. In this circumstance, doing a conference in an established academic institute might not be an ideal option for us to practice radical feminism. However, by doing small things like caring each other, we were practising a better future we want.

Inclusivity in Conference Materials: Moving beyond Chinese-ness and Contending with the Pre-assumed Academic-ness

Taoyuan Luo (University of Leeds)

Organising the conference titled Doing Race and Gender in the Age of Uncertainties as East and South-east Asian (ESEA) Scholars with my feminist cohort – Leiyun, Qiuyang, Ruoxi, Shuling, Xianan – was rewarding. I worked on making advertising materials, including the cfp poster, individual panel posters, daily twitter pictures, and the conference programme. I was also the media person for our conference, working as the conference photographer and live-tweeting information about our conference. As a feminist researcher, I hoped to use these organising actions, particularly small things in the conference, to help our audience, presenters, guests, and friends feel welcome. In my reflective blog piece, I am going to talk about inclusivity in the conference materials. Far from being an expert in making inclusive materials, I would like to talk about my strategies of representing all presenters and some emerging questions alongside these strategies, as a PhD student and a junior event organiser. By sharing my experience of creating inclusivity through small things at this conference, I hope to help other feminist scholars, researcher-activists, and students to create their own inclusive events and somehow reduce the stress of doing feminism/ working in feminist ethics in an event.

Seeking a better way to represent ESEA community through pictures

I will begin with the making of the conference posters. As an organiser who hoped to use every detail to create visibility for young ESEA scholars and activists, I attempted to go beyond words and use iconic images on the conference programme poster to represent every presenter. For example, I used the image of orchid as a way of representing Singapore and the image of marriage rings to represent the student presentation on transnational marriage in South Korea. My action of using iconic images in fact raise many questions and is somehow problematic. Is this the inclusive way of representing presenters/ audiences from a certain culture and a certain nation? Would this become a way of strengthening stereotypical images of ethnic minorities?

With my strong desire of making young ESEA scholars' voices heard, I have been more or less hijacked by creating media visibility. I keep thinking about this question:

would it be possible to balance the hope of creating media currency but also not strengthen stereotypes of ESEA in the West due to the use of pictures? Reflecting on the ways of using iconic images for certain nations and certain ethnic minorities, I was restricted by my limited knowledge of vibrant and different ESEA cultures. As a person who was born and raised in mainland China, I am an outsider to many ESEA cultures, and the way I represent these cultures is shaped by many other media representations of these cultures. This echoes the extensive discussion on “insider” and “outsider” positioning in academic scholarship but what I would like to raise is more nuanced – was I acting out Chineseness to my East and Southeast Asian peers? This is different from ‘gazing’, but also a potential (and problematic way of) ignoring the differences between countries. I will explain and discuss this question later in the next section. In a conference that advocated inclusivity and comfort of speaking about the unspeakable, using iconic pictures on the conference programme may not be inclusive. If I have more time in the forthcoming mini-talks or other activities, I would like to invite these young ESEA scholars and activists to select an image to describe their research and activism on the conference programme.

Moving beyond Chinese-ness

Continuing my reflection on selecting pictures, I realised that the use of Chinese characters on panel posters and programme posters is very likely to generate a sense of China-centric sentiment. With peers’ suggestion, I changed these materials, but I started questioning: how can we move beyond Chineseness and build up solidarity with the ESEA community in the UK?

I remember one of our participants shared their experiences of being assumed as Chinese because of their appearance but they are not Chinese. This was not a singular encounter but a constant, irritating everyday experience. I was sitting in the conference room and fidgeting due to my anxiety about imagining such encounters. I understand this anger and frustration. I hope to give my ESEA peers who had such experiences hugs. This question – how can Chinese researchers and activists move beyond Chineseness and reduce the China-centric actions in many things – becomes an imperative question and a necessity of inclusion for me.

Also, one of our participants asked a question about inclusivity at the conference. They asked, “does inclusivity mean including as many countries as possible for this conference”. This question in fact relates to my proposed question. In the context where these questions are raised, participants indicate their sense of this conference ignoring a China-centric situation. They expressed a sense of decolonizing Chineseness as a significant part of event inclusion.

Contending with the pre-assumed academic-ness

For making posters, raising questions about making “first-time presenter” stickers, and designing one ESEA conference sticker, I sensed the conflicts between the stickers and the supposed academic-ness of a conference. As one of our committee members exclaimed, “I have never seen such vivid materials at any academic conferences.” I was frustrated. This frustration does not come from my committee colleagues’ comments but my realisation of the conflicts between stickers/ pictures as a part of creating an inclusive conference and the supposed academic-ness of the event. My frustration comes from my worry about not being qualified to offer a professional conference setting and my anxiety about not being able to make participants feel included.

As a PhD researcher, I have attended workshops and conferences before. I felt timid. It was daunting to speak to people as a first-time presenter at my very first research presentation. I sometimes also feel hesitant to talk to people, although I really enjoyed listening to their presentations. This also happens to my peers who are early-career research fellows. So as an organiser, I hope to reduce such feelings and create a comfortable space for participants to socialise with each other by offering a “first-time presenter” sticker (credits to Leilei who makes my ideas come true). For those who have a “first-time presenter” sticker, committees should spend more time greeting them. I learned this from a group of my respectful feminist scholars who organised inclusive and touching activities.

This is what I think about inclusivity and stickers but are they (as well as the posters with pictures) suitable for an academic setting? Although I know our conference has interactive sections and a body-mapping workshop, I realise it tends to become very academic (because of its location and its programme order). I realise my plan of

making inclusive stickers as well as my posters may not be suitable and they may even become a sign of being unprofessional and inexperienced. This is still a question for me to ask the more experienced activity organiser and our audience: are the small things in an academic conference helping to create a more inclusive conference or do they become a sign of being unprofessional?

ESEA Feminist and Anti-racist Conference as a Site of Empowerment

Shuling Wang (University of Cambridge)

The conference organisers held a conversation about how to improve future ESEA conferences after the event. One particular concern was how the academic format of the conference might actually improve the community and the way marginalised ESEA people live in society. The conference did not directly address the problems facing the ESEA groups that were being studied, thus the organisers thought that more should be done as activists. But what I appreciated most about this conference was the venue that allowed ESEA researchers to get together to talk about race and gender issues that need more widespread public attention, which itself is an empowering action.

I seldom had a chance to meet so many ESEA researchers conducting research in my areas of interest in predominantly white higher education institutions, and this created a really unique dynamic in the space both physically and intellectually. ESEA researchers' presence was a protest against the dominance of whiteness in academia, where our presence, our work, and our voices are consistently ignored. By occupying this place, I could sense the ties that bind ESEA researchers together, the legitimacy of our work, and the worth of our voices being heard. What bell hooks called 'the communal sensation of sweet solidarity' (2014, 67) was what I experienced. Our debates were significant because we took a critical stance against the intersectional oppressions and discriminations that the ESEA community experienced. bell hooks (2014, p67) is cited once more: 'I saw our words as an action, that our collective struggle to discuss issues of gender and blackness without censorship was subversive practice'. In my view, the fact that we were occupying that once 'white space' and having uncensored talks about gender and race constitutes subversive activity.

It is also empowering to plan the event alongside critical feminist organisers. This empowerment results from the collaborative efforts we made to make things happen, to practise inclusion, and to challenge white standards down to the smallest of aspects, while understanding that we weren't striving for perfection.



Pic: Selfie of organisers and participants after conference

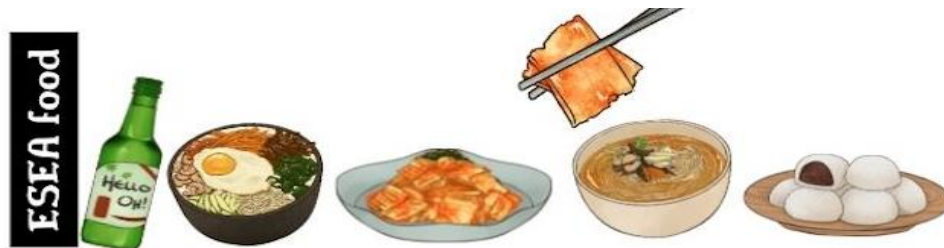
The emphasis on individual and collective power that gives people "the ability to act, with strength and ability, or with action that generates a sense of achievement" (bell hooks, 2000, 89) through internal democracy is what the organisers put into practice when planning the conference. Every decision was made based on group consensus. This included giving each member full autonomy in deciding what to do in their roles, which promoted creative contributions. Each member also defined their own role, which could be multifunctional and involve both marketing and communication work, depending on their availability. When creating conference posters, for instance, Taoyuan ingeniously requested attendees to consider their own favourite foods and emoji as ESEA experts before using these pictures in posters and handbooks.



ESEA Sticker

We were particularly proud of being able to serve our participants with hot Asian food. We were concerned about the politics of food, where cold sandwiches—the

main course that dominates UK conferences—should be addressed because we wouldn't be comfortable eating cold food, as we are from places where hot food is highly valued. Food is a significant and nearly monopolistic source of income for institutions holding conferences, and businesses owned and operated by people of colour are rarely among the licenced caterers. We declined to select from or accept the few food suppliers' pricey and unappetizing meal selections. As a result, we started negotiating with the institution that was hosting the conference to have Asian food served there.



We appeared to be the first conference planners to provide hot Asian food to the audience instead of purchasing pricey sandwiches from the institution. This accomplishment was significant because it signalled the beginning of the movement to assert organisers' freedom to bring cuisine that is not exclusively Western. By doing this, we gained more control over our food budget and gained support for our unique cultural demands. And we expect that in the future, this approach won't require any requests, negotiations, or oversight from the authorities.

I also felt the welcoming community of researchers. Without such a conference, I would have never learned about the many other ESEA scholars and their fascinating, innovative, and creative activities. Due to my responsibilities as an organiser, I didn't have much opportunity to meet and speak with participants in the venue, such as guests, speakers, and audience members, but I am aware that they were, and are with me.

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Authors' Information

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Qiuyang Chen is a social and gender historian specializing in modern and contemporary China, with her research situated at the intersection of gender history, financial history and anthropology. Her work explores women's social and economic roles in modern China. In particular, her recently completed PhD from the University of Warwick examined the relationship between women's credit activities and the local economy to understand China's economic transformation in the 1980s and 90s. Currently, Qiuyang is an Early Career Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study at Warwick, and a visiting lecturer at the University of Birmingham.

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Ruoxi Liu is a final-year PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of Cambridge and Chinese feminist. As a sociologist, she is concerned with marginalised groups at the intersection of culture and work, focusing on their individual agency and how they achieve self-realisation. Her PhD thesis is entitled ‘The Meaning of Being Independent: Precarities of Work and Lifestyles and Alternative-Seeking among Chinese Self-Employed Cultural Workers’.

Inspired by people she studied who keep experimenting with alternatives in their cultural production and everyday politics, Ruoxi is keen on exploring ‘alternatives’ throughout her research and life practices. She receives much energy from crafts, nature, and communities.

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Shuling Wang

Shuling Wang is a critical feminist scholar and educator. She is an associate lecturer at the University of York and a final-year PhD researcher in the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. She is particularly interested in the intersections of race, gender and English language education. Her PhD research focuses on Chinese women teachers’ encounters with whiteness.

Shuling is the founder of *Cambridge Against anti-Asian Racism Group*, co-founder of *East and South East Asia Researchers & Activists Network*, an organizer of *The Race, Empire and Education Collective* (reecollective.co.uk), and Chair of 2021 Cambridge China Education Forum.

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