

“ความอ่อนใจ (Kharm Unn Jai)”: Honouring Transcultural Experiences in Supporting Women*

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Abstract

This paper presents autoethnographic accounts from women design researchers, each sharing their culturally grounded approaches to support women in a transcultural mentoring programme. The authors examine the concepts of ‘safety’ and ‘safe spaces,’ by unpacking these terms through decolonial perspectives. The paper’s title ความอุ่นใจ (Karm Unn Jai), roughly meaning warm hearted, represents the first author’s state of being, relating and co-becoming during the programme and became an invitation for all authors to reflect on diverse personal experiences of safety. This paper offers six reflections on atmospheric and felt dimensions of codesign practice as prompts for readers’ own explorations. Their differences and resonances point towards the intersectional positionalities and relationalities that comprise codesigning, rather than collapsing them under generic guidelines for designing ‘safety’ or ‘safe spaces’. We highlight the transcultural emergence of trust and kindness, and expand the scholarship on inclusivity in multilingual and multicultural contexts. This work advocates for a more nuanced understanding of codesigning that recognises and values diverse lifeworlds, thereby contributing to efforts in decolonising and pluralising codesign discourse.

Keywords

Autoethnography, codesign, transcultural women, decolonising, mentoring

Introduction

“I often worry about the women in our programme who might be very tired from their daily chores before our sessions. They may spend hours in traffic or have children to care for. So when we come together, I want to ensure that we are building a supportive atmosphere. I feel our sessions become ways we care for each other and trust one another. We bring energy to their exhausted days and offer the support they need to face new challenges without worrying about failure because we are here to support them. This is how I aim to be, to place ความอุ่นใจ (Kharm Unn Jai) in my heart to support each other.” (personal reflection by the first author).

This paper shares auto-ethnographic accounts from women design researchers. Through writing and visual forms, we each explored our respective intersectional and culturally grounded ways of building relationships to incubate trust, respect and generosity in a mentoring programme by and for women.¹ We present six granular accounts to demonstrate how notions of ‘safety’ and ‘safe spaces’, which aim to welcome diversity, equity and inclusion in codesigning, are always culturally configured. In tethering notions of ‘safety’ and ‘safe spaces’ to the authors’ lived experiences of supporting women, we also make another argument. We start by observing where design and related literature have insufficiently acknowledged the situated nature of ‘safety’ and ‘safe space’, when these concepts have in fact emerged from specific cultural experiences. As such, this paper aims to expand codesign discourse to recognise and accommodate cultural plurality and the situatedness of all life worlds. Here, we are reminded that codesign is always contingent, shaped by the various intersectional positionalities and conditions of those immersed in the dynamics of social change (Akama and Light 2020). Contingency extends to how ‘safety’ and ‘safe spaces’ emerge: depending on by whom, where, when and how work is undertaken. Altogether, we hope to encourage design researchers to ground all concepts with which they engage, and to offer prompts for employing auto-ethnographic methods to articulate the concepts integral to their work.

The paper’s title features ความอุ่นใจ (Karm Unn Jai), which in Thai roughly means warm hearted. This represents the first author’s state of being, relating and co-becoming during the programme. This is one of six reflections on atmospheric and felt dimensions of codesign practice offered as prompts for readers’ own explorations. Aligned with historical and contemporary feminist and decolonial practices, our contribution lies in the differences and resonances that articulate the various intersectional positionalities and relationalities that comprise codesigning. The desire for scalable and transferable design research is an

¹ We use ‘women’ to mean women-assigned and women- identifying individuals.

expression of a positivist view that privileges objective, detached and unlocated knowledges as possible (Suchman 2002). Our emphasis on situated practice means that we deliberately resist replicability. We side-step positivist approaches that proffer generic guidelines for ‘how to’ codesign ‘safety’ and ‘safe spaces’. Instead, the paper offers three key contributions. First, we show how conditions often associated with ‘safety’ and ‘safe spaces’ – including trust, respect, kindness and generosity – emerged and were thus fostered through transcultural relationships between women who are themselves transcultural. In specifically articulating the range of emotional and atmospheric dimensions present in our collaboration, we aim to help others recognise resonant aspects in their own codesigning.

Second, we demonstrate how autoethnographic accounts in multilingual, multimedial form can be vivid and rich in providing granular, intimate and reflexive details of the embodied worlds and relationships of people undertaking codesign. The process of writing, sharing and discussing our autoethnography became a ‘cultural interface’ (Nakata 2007) to facilitate ways of knowing and being beyond our previous awareness. This approach both reminds and demonstrates transcultural features that one language alone – including English and particularly standardised academic language – cannot express (Bennett 2014). Our autoethnography aims to amplify the politics of omission and repression at play whenever research cultures favour one mode of accounting.

Third, within wider attention to intersectionality, we expand the scholarship on codesigning to catalyse critical awareness about cultures that shape and situate how we are, how we design, and how we condition socio-material worlds through our engagements. In doing so, we aim to contribute to the work in decolonising and pluriversal designing to welcome underrepresented lifeworlds within design discourses.

The context for our autoethnographic work: delivering a transcultural mentoring programme, by and for women

Women internationally continue to face discrimination and inequality (UN-Women and DESA 2024). Within Asia specifically, women experience structural exclusion including substantial workplace discrimination (Benson and Yukongdi 2005, Cho et al. 2015, Parmar 2004) and internalised misogyny in patriarchal societies (Rahmani 2020). Women are expected to shoulder the bulk of family caring responsibilities. Even in relatively high-skilled creative industries, women in paid work navigate socio-economic challenges while balancing the demands and expectations of multiple culturally-embedded roles.

The co-authors are women with lived experiences of inequities, often ‘othered’ by patriarchal and Eurocentric cultures. We funnelled these concerns into an 18-month peer mentoring programme with 36 women across sectors and cultures working principally in

Japan, Thailand, Malaysia and Australia. The programme aimed to foster atmospheres of trust to support critical reflection, self-awareness, and mutual learning. We posited that these conditions were central for building trusting relationships that could then support them to feel able to overcome their own challenges. We codesigned multiple measures to ensure that participants felt welcomed and listened to. These learnings have been reported elsewhere to recognise and work with respectful hierarchies (Anonymous et al, 2024a) and how emotional and affective labour forms part of designing in participatory practices (Anonymous et al, 2024b). In this paper, we employ autoethnography to surface, recognise and reflect on how plural ways of being allowed us to co-create these particular conditions of emotional support.

Culturing ‘safety’ and ‘safe spaces’

The concept of safe space emerged amongst marginalised groups in the US in the 1970s, as physical meeting places offering refuge against violence (Ali 2017). In the past decade, researchers have adopted the concept from the US and the UK for recognising and supporting intersectional experiences in the public realm (Arao and Clemens 2023, Escobar-Tello et. al 2021; Sheringham and Taylor 2022). In design discourses, the concept has become part of methods for ensuring safe, physical or virtual environments to help participants feel comfortable, and foster care and trust for open communication, knowledge exchange and mutual learning during the codesign process (Bustamante Duarte et al. 2021; Calvo and Sclater 2021; Kambunga et al. 2023; McNally et al. 2018). The widespread application and adoption of the concept in multiple locations – along with public critiques – forms part of a broader shift within design, as in neighbouring areas, towards recognizing and addressing power differentials within organisations, communities and societies.

At the same time, the assumption that knowledge is valued when it can be easily transported is, in itself, a product of particular knowledge systems. The global circulation of concepts from the UK and US that carry specific values and perspectives to contexts with different worldviews raises concerns for this reason. As one example, it can inadvertently promote ‘safety’ and ‘safe spaces’ based on individualised experience over those deeply intertwined with cultural identities and community practices (Flensner 2019). Chilisa (2011) argues that research paradigms should be grounded in the worldviews of the communities they serve, rather than imposed externally. Similarly, critics have argued that Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) guidelines for public institutions in the UK further replicate whiteness that assumes values as universal, not contingent, relational or dynamic (Liu 2022; Tuhiwai Smith 2012). Though well-intentioned, applying policies generated in one context into another risk becoming what Ahmed (2007) has described as "performative documents"—

policies that superficially might appear to signal 'safety' and 'safe spaces' but fail to engage with the deep, often invisible structures of harm that different groups continue to experience.

Concepts, languages and metaphors that relate to 'safety' vary widely. For example, the concept most proximal to 'safety' in Thai is ความปลอดภัย (Khwām plǎdphay), which translates as 'being without danger'. In Taiwanese 安全 (an-tsuân) means the avoidance of hazardous physical environments. In Japanese 無事 (buji) means no major event or accidents. As a team, we attempted to explore many meanings of 'safety' and 'safe spaces' as we experienced them, as well as reflecting on what the women in the mentoring program shared. However, we encountered some conundrums. For example, in responding to a seemingly benign prompt '*when was the last time you felt safe?*', we started by identifying situations when we felt unsafe so that we could contrast that with notable shifts to feeling safe. This binary, reactive effect was puzzling. Cartesian dualisms, reflected in research language, can often separate the heart, mind, body and spirit. However, many languages reflect ontologies that have retained their inseparability. This interfusion is seen in Japanese as kokoro 心, referring to mind, spirit and emotion (Akama 2017). In Taiwanese, to experience and know something deeply is to know it in your 心肝頭 (sim-kuann-thâu) translated as the head of your heart and liver. In English, having a 'gut feeling' indicates intuitive, embodied understanding. In Thai, ใจ, (Jai) or heart is connected with feeling, thinking, caring and respect. Similarly, ความอุ่นใจ (Kharm Unn Jai), meaning warm hearted, refers to a feeling of being supported, usually from friends and family. This helped us recognise that terms like 'safety' or 'safe spaces' that inadvertently invited binary and reactive responses could be bypassed if we explored other words and phrases that retained a relational inseparability.

Reflecting upon and writing about our experiences in our chosen languages helped us to further contextualise the terms 'safety' or 'safe spaces' as culturally specific. The liberation from writing academic standard English (Bennett 2014) also allowed nuance and emotional resonances. We discovered that together, the reflections helped to describe co-design work which is inherently personal, relational and situated. Building on Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, which highlights the importance of overlapping identities and experiences, we see that embracing diversity in perspectives is essential. Within

intersectionality more generally, the plurality of language, experience and concepts is central to our understanding of how autoethnography can support codesign.

The next section presents how our team started reflecting and writing asynchronously, prompted initially by the notion of ‘safety’ and support we experienced in the mentoring programme. Each co-author's contribution shared differing states of being through autoethnographic approaches. We then read these asynchronously and made further written and visual reflections. In this process, we recognized that the reflections articulate emotional support in intersectional, culturally grounded ways. These accounts provided a shared foundation for exploring feelings throughout and beyond the programme, revealing both intentional and backgrounded cultural features that have nurtured us.

Noticing *what mattered* through autoethnography

Autoethnography is a rich methodology for sharing personal and relational experiences, to bring readers into a scene and understand cultural experience (Ellis 2004; Ellis and Adams 2014; Jones, Adams, and Ellis 2016). In design practice, autoethnography is also noted as an effective strategy for elevating critical awareness in a design process (Munro 2011). Using visual materials, drawing and writing as forms of recordings are common for reflective practitioners (Schön 1992) and can be employed in autoethnography.

Our autoethnographic work emerged from discussions held at the end of the mentoring programme. It began with an invitation to co-authors to contribute individual reflections within a shared online document. We revisited team meeting recordings, workshop documents, visuals, and individual meeting notes from the mentoring programme, allowing co-authors to access, write, read, and share their reflections, as well as comment on others' inputs. We facilitated online group discussions to further understand and share our insights. These collaborative reflections were expanded on a Miro board, where we integrated illustrations and photographs to further express feelings that couldn't be articulated solely through writing. We then collectively curated what to present in this article. Through this process, our autoethnographic accounts went beyond self-focussed (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang 2010) towards becoming a collective account. This aligns with Chang's (2016) explanation of collective autoethnography as the process of understanding and researching insights beyond one's own culture. Collaborative autoethnography can connect “between self and other” (Roy and Uekusa 2020). These collective and collaborative autoethnographic approaches reveal interesting discoveries. Collecting fragments from our project's records and beyond shows that our experiences were and are always intersectional. In sharing our reflections and witnessing how we each communicated what and how we had felt and experienced, we aimed to make intersectionality momentarily tangible and legible to one

another. We hoped that the serendipitous juxtapositions would help us discover how our multiple languages helped describe elusive, fleeting, multiple, evolving and constantly shifting dimensions.

The reflections we share in the following section are intended to offer opportunities for nuancing and analysing the experiences we had as team members delivering the codesigned peer mentoring programme. As you will see, they share transcultural perspectives, within our broader intersectional positionalities.

Co-creating atmospheres of emotional support

ความอ่อนใจ (Khram Unn Jai): warm hearted feeling



Figure1: a photograph from KT's reflection (illustration: author's own)

The photograph (Figure1) of ปิดทองหลังพระ (Pid Thong Lang Phra) shows the gold-leaf behind a statue of the Buddha, and is an evocative metaphor that illustrates the beauty behind-the-scenes. KT, a Thai researcher, sees this invisible feature as essential to make experiences complete. KT, chose this image during an activity where we tried to express our thoughts about mentoring through visual and multilingual expressions. She remarked that mentoring is like ปิดทองหลังพระ (Pid Thong Lang Phra), meaning that everything she does to support women and their work is important, more so, because the acts may go unrecognised and she does not need to seek appreciation. KT hoped that this would foster warmth and

confidence and support women to find the courage to face the challenges in their lives. This is ความอุ่นใจ (Khram Unn Jai) in Thai. Through KT's reflection, we see that our programme aimed to create warm-hearted feelings by supporting women from behind the scenes, which benefits both the project participants and team members.

"I want to do my best, even if no one knows how difficult it is! I want all of our participants and team members to feel happy doing activities together, meeting face-to-face, creating a great atmosphere, and having rich conversations. I also try my best to find cosy accommodations for them and their families, as well as great places to enjoy delicious meals together. I hope we create good memories from this event. However, I've realised that the most important thing isn't just cosiness or comfort. Warm hearted feelings aren't solely about having a meal and watching the sunset together; they come from sharing experiences, creating understanding, building trust, and caring for each other. The warm-hearted feeling of ความอุ่นใจ (Khram Unn Jai) fosters the courage and strength to face problems and challenges that might arise in the future. One of our participants clearly expressed the feeling of Khram Unn Jai when she said that no matter what difficulties she faces in the future, she knows who she can talk to, consult with, and seek support from. Not only did our participants feel this warmth, but I also felt the same way."

心構え Kokoro-gamae as mindfulness

Team member YA reflected on ways to be prepared before meetings as 心構え (kokoro-gamae). Kokoro-gamae speaks to rituals to arrive at states of being mindful. We see this in her preparing tea, being early before meetings, and trying not to show how tired she is.

"I watch the wispy line of steam furl upwards from the spout of my stained teapot. It waits patiently next to the keyboard. Our dog sprawls on its back like a black sheep-skin rug as I give her an uncoordinated belly rub with my foot. The clock on the screen ticks to time. I open the video conferencing software. It's an awkward moment catching oneself on the screen. I make ill attempts patting down my hair and arranging my facial features but I can't disguise how tired I look from the long working day. As the women pop up into rectangles, I see dwindling daylight through their window in Japan. Collectively they cast a refracted light into my darkening studio. It's just past 5pm there. The end of a working day for them, too."

こんばんわ。お疲れ様です。(Good evening. You're working hard!)

どうもどうも。 どうですか、その後は？(Hi and thank you! How have you been?)

今ちょっと忙しいんですけど、おかげさまで元気でへす。(I'm quite busy right now, but thank goodness, I'm doing okay.)

Their Japanese words soak through my body, like immersing into a mild, pleasurable bath. Sayaka's infant son blends in and out of a green meadow she uses as her video conferencing backdrop. His peachy cheeks perfectly match the colour of the flowers. My reply in Japanese, on the other hand, feels clunky as the words stumble out of my mouth. When was the last time I spoke Japanese? Much like a trickle of water finding its shape guided by the course of an ancient riverbed, my words start to find its flow. It soon becomes a thicker stream, and being carried by that current, my body starts to ease into the flow. I pour my rooibos tea. Yes, it's bright reddish-brown, so it was worth the wait. I take a long sip and the warmth puddles in my belly. I listen to the pitch and roll of their calm voices. They sound eager to catch up on each other's news, current activities and hear plans for the next steps, and I lean in to take notes on the keyboard."

心構え (kokoro-gamae) is seen as a practice, habit or know-how of 'readying' 心 (kokoro), meaning heart-mind-spirit-soul, to be calm and considerate. Practices of readiness and cultivating self-awareness then take the emphasis which, in YA's case, means working on states of feeling grounded and present in the moment. Everyday Anglophone life in Australia makes speaking Japanese both awkward and comforting for her. Being multiple, in language and more, means one is always fleeting and adjusting, in moments, times and with others.

温もり Warmth enabling risk-taking, within the limits of care

Team member ST chose to reflect on atmospheres of relationships within teamwork. Over time, working together prompted ST to sense that the team created 温もり nukumori, atmospheric warmth sensed in and around the body, in moments of

teamworking. But she was also conscious – in part from her own responses – that impressions can be partial. Here is how she described this, in a written reflection:

“From the start of working together, I [resonated with] how vocal you are about reflexivity, placing respect and relationality at the centre, and respecting and foregrounding the dispositions that come from cultural formation as a woman in East/South-East Asia (saying this from my own positionality), rather than tucking them away out of sight, or pretending they weren’t ‘appropriate’ in design research. This includes tacit aspects around supporting others, constantly questioning whether we are actually hearing, constantly questioning whether others felt reflected, seen, heard or comfortable to be themselves, and other ways of trying to put ourselves down or back, and to place the people with whom we’re relating at the centre. It also includes caring about each others’ lives, not just the job at hand. This resonates with how I’ve been raised – multi- and transculturally and as a woman – to anticipate others’ needs before others identify them.

Partly because of this way of caring, when we come together, it’s as though there’s a 温もり nukumori, a soft sense of warmth, generated around and within us. Perhaps because we often meet in the evening my time, when I sit in an old wooden room, with soft copper lighting at my feet and sometimes the evening sun and residual heat of the day coming through the window, it feels warm, soft and golden.

It’s a sense I associate with teamwork and projects based in deep mutual care – towards supporting particular communities but also for each other. It’s also an atmosphere that assures me I can be myself, rather than restraining and confining and guessing at how to be (while terrified that I’m getting it wrong, whatever that means) – most of the time. Partly for this reason – and it’s difficult to say this – I also wonder whether everyone experiences nukumori, despite our multiple and overlapping commitments to creating it? How would we know, especially if people are centering us, too?

For ST, working relationally means doing what she can to create an atmosphere of nukumori by attuning to others and showing appreciation for the efforts others make. But there are limits with even the most reflexive practice, and attunement does not always mean we’re tuned to hear. ST’s reflection also reminds us that states of being

or feeling within relational working – nukumori or otherwise – are contingent and momentary. Feelings of warmth, like sunlight through the window, pass and return.

Aussie (Australian) humour in creating energy and connection

Humour is a situated form of cultural experiences. It can invite us to participate in laughter, but humour can also be misread. It is risky because ‘humour reveals our incomplete understandings of how the world beyond us works and the mystery of its ways’ (Nakata 2007). It is embodied and beyond knowing. Participatory design researcher SK selected two out of many animal and pet photos she posted on the team’s group chat (Fig. 2) as an example of her contribution to reflect on humour as a powerful but delicate way she helps to create comfort, connection and build trust.

“As the most early-career member of the team, I feel like part of the role I could play is like the “fool” archetype in literature, through humour to provide levity in heavy or awkward moments, to lean into being flawed or silly to let others relax, make satirical commentary or bring an elephant in the room into conversation to allow people to comfortably talk about it in a way that can be difficult for people in other positions...like in zoom meetings when we were waiting for everyone in different time zones to gather, especially in the early days. While the online space made working across countries possible, it can take a lot to warm those spaces up. I noticed how important the jokes we all made were to help set the tone of the meeting, break a silence that felt too long or if the energy felt a bit low as it was at the end of a long day for some.

I was always hyper aware though that humour is double edged and the wrong joke can make people uncomfortable and destroy trust. Quickness is a big part of humour and as someone with ADHD I think the accompanying impulsivity helps, but joke first, regret later is common practice for me and I was aware of how an instantaneous miscalculation could not just reflect badly on me but the whole team and could negatively impact the generous, warm atmosphere of the project. I was cautious about how humour might translate (or not) across languages and cultures, knowing that as an Australian of Eastern European heritage my sense of humour can be bluntly irreverent and that I use gallows humour as a coping mechanism, both which could come across as disrespectful. Trying to find a word or expression that summed up Aussie humour, the fact that none of them were appropriate to publish exemplified the point.”

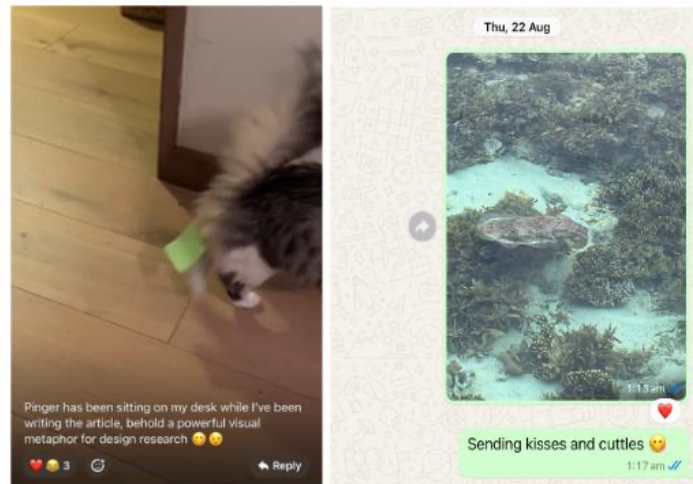


Figure 2: two screenshots as examples of SK' humour
(illustration: authors own)

For SK humour is a mode of connection that is characterised by dualities such as comfort and tension, safety and risk, impulsivity and control, connection across cultures as well as being culturally shaped.

安心 (an-sim), feeling safe hearted in allowing myself to be *different*.

KL is a feminist design researcher based in an Anglophone institution. She reflects on how, being immersed in a network of transcultural women, she felt 安心 (an-sim), which connotes feeling supported, encouraged and reassured, to draw on her Taiwanese upbringing. This shift has influenced her feeling inspired, in ways that are deeply connected with her cultural identity.

"I am trilingual in the sense that I can switch between speaking Taiwanese, Mandarin and English relatively stress-free. But I have found that I am most likely to be whispering Taiwanese words of comfort, in moments that are tender, or when my children are ill, difficult to settle or have had an accident. Despite this deep connection to my language, I find fewer opportunities to engage with my cultural knowledge in my role as a feminist design researcher working in UK academia.

YT is a feminist journalist and researcher whose work focuses on socioeconomic issues within South East Asia. Despite researching her CV and reading her work, I felt unprepared—not because I didn't understand the subject, but because I was uncertain about how our feminist identities might differ.

I started the meeting with my five-month-old baby on my lap. She greeted both of us warmly, and I quickly jumped into the interview, eager to hear her thoughts on feminist struggles in Malaysia. However, YT took the conversation in an unexpected direction. She pointed out that we share the same surname, something I hadn't noticed

due to the various English translations of it. She also demonstrated a deep knowledge of contemporary Taiwanese cultures and politics, much more extensively than my understanding of Malaysian cultures.

As the interview progressed, YT eventually shared stories of feminist activism in Malaysia, particularly regarding the vertical and horizontal hostility between feminist activists. But as I revisited this interview (and others) countless times after our programme ended, I began to interpret YT's stories in more nuanced ways. Unlike during the interview, I no longer set aside my ignorance of Malaysia in order to make sense of feminism based solely on Anglophone literature. Instead, I felt encouraged to explore the differences, seeing them as sources of creativity and knowledge.

YT's casual observation about our shared surname triggered a seismic shift in my thinking, prompting me to confront how I had been masking parts of my identity at work. Through rediscovering ways of nurturing and being nurtured in the transcultural dialogues I shared with the women in our programme, I am reminded that the way I reassure my children is not just a reflection of how big a part my Taiwanese family played in my upbringing, but also how my ways of interpreting my environment is engendered by my knowledge of Taiwanese language, cultural norms, and rituals."

うち (Uchi) & 安 (ān): being home

It is difficult to notice or know for certain when someone trusts and is comfortable, since these feelings are contingent and fleeting. However there have been instances where glimpses of this emerge through our interactions. In JY's case, her reflection of what it means to feel safe but also offer safety to others drew on a specific encounter when she was contacted out of the blue by a mentee.

"AS messaged me a few months before we were supposed to meet in Bangkok to ask if we could arrange a call. I was surprised by her request as it was out of the ordinary. However, I remembered noting how significant this moment was as it indicated that AS felt comfortable enough to reach out to me when she needed to. It transpired that she was suffering from a crisis of confidence and just needed someone to talk to and to listen. The fact that I was available, and also not someone she usually talks to, made it easier for her to open up."

This moment made a lasting impression on JY, who was touched on one hand that the participant felt comfortable enough to reach out to her personally, and humbled by being trusted to act as a confidant. JY likens this feeling in two connected concepts. The Japanese word うち (uchi) has several meanings but in this instance, refers to being part of a group, family, and with those social responsibilities and obligations. Relatedly, the chinese character for safety 安 (ān) is made up of two sub-characters,

a woman 女 (nǚ) in the house ㄣ (mián) which further emphasises this team member's feeling of being part of a home and family, being 'inside' of a personal circle. The illustration (Figure 3) by Jun-yi Mah (a mentee in the programme) prompted this connection of warm-feeling to being 'inside' this circle, and part of a social group in a caring 'ecosystem'.

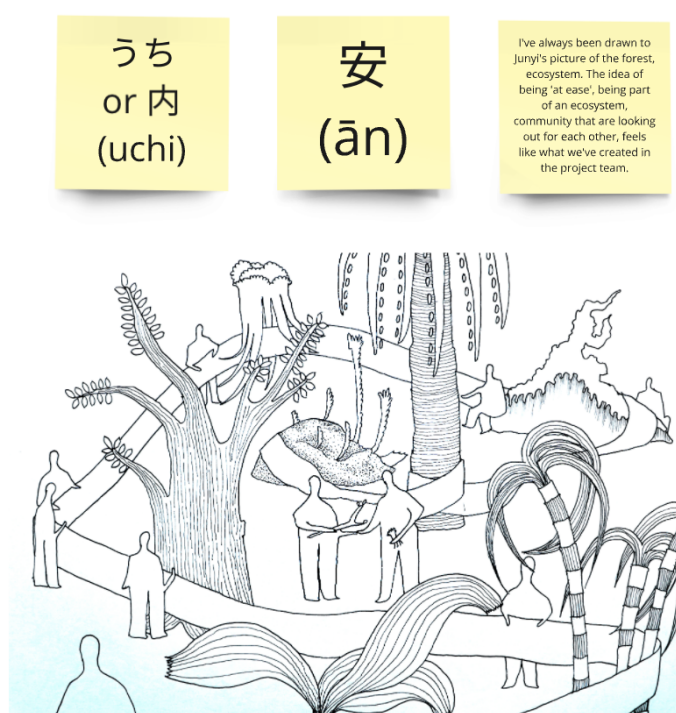


Figure 3: a screenshot of JY's reflection of the two concepts prompted by an illustration drawn by Junyi-Mah to represent the mentoring programme (illustration: authors own)

A respectful dimension in autoethnography in codesign

Collaborative writing among multiple authors involves challenges, particularly in aiming to foster a shared understanding across languages and cultural perspectives. The diversity of languages and cultural backgrounds among co-authors adds complexity, as it is nearly impossible to fully comprehend all the cultural nuances embedded within each language and worldview. More challenging than simply navigating language differences is the need for co-authors to respect the cultural perspectives and philosophies that shape one another's reflections. This collaborative writing process fosters a rich exchange of ideas among

transcultural women, employing a collective autoethnographic approach that respects and honours cultural nuances. This paper highlights how collaborative writing fosters a respectful space for each author's voice and emotions, emphasising sensitivity to co-authors' perspectives throughout the collaborative process.

The autoethnographic 'fragments' illustrate the contingent nature of how feelings and states of being emerge. Ways of being together cannot be guaranteed from careful planning and rational decision-making processes, nor are they simple or possible to understand, however, we can always plan to anticipate differing and dynamic relationalities in codesigning. Allowing the space for uncertainty and lack of cohesive understanding is just as important. States of being that shift from feeling prepared, cared for, exposed and vulnerable is a constant. The stakes are higher when working with and in newly forming relationships. Words, gestures or actions in a particular moment can catalyse a myriad of responses. For example, the video conference camera reveals and confirms just how exhausted one might feel, as seen in YA's account. ST's reflections remind us that we can never fully know whether work aimed at making others feel safe and comfortable can be achieved, and underlines the importance of in-time evaluation and reflection. KL's example re-positions the researcher-participant relation in a project as mutual and equal. We discover from their stories that, when codesigning, these situations ebb and flow throughout the work, emerging in teamwork as well as in relationships with participants. Alongside this, embracing uncertainty, discomfort and the impossibility of knowing are integral to respectful codesign work, whether in evidently transcultural or otherwise diverse contexts or in contexts where diversity might sit beneath the surface, unvoiced and un-visualised.

The process in allowing ourselves to voice our ideas authentically did not put any of us at ease. KT celebrates the Thai philosophy of ปิดทองหลังพระ (Pid Thong Lang Phra), which teaches people to do good behind the scenes (Fig. 1), rather than allowing their labour to become visible, manifesting in rituals where worshippers would paste gold leaves on the back of a statue of the Buddha. Traditional autoethnography encourages us to centre ourselves, our own bodies, and to draw directly from personal experiences and juxtapose them with our observations of other's living conditions in order to identify and explore social processes that are previously invisible (Ellis et al. 2011). However, this approach in centring the individual, can contradict with said Thai teaching. As a result, KT has adjusted the autoethnographic lens to prioritise what she believes as her cultural values of codesign, to support women in her locality. In their own way, each author negotiated a way of undertaking – and sharing – autoethnography that felt true to their values of codesign. Rather than fully subscribing to the expectation to scrutinise micro interactions (which would require self-centring) between different people in our team and programme, in crafting an autoethnographic voice that

simultaneously resisted and adjusted autoethnography to better reflect the ethos of our programme and our approach to codesign.

We hope our work has thrown some light onto the intersectional conditions that affect those undertaking research, as well as participants in codesign. We have learnt from various scholars in autoethnography that collective writing and sharing can be meaningful in amplifying, crystallising and catalysing deep encounters with one another (Chang et al. 2016; Roy & Uekusa, 2020). Likewise, our reflections reveal that respectful interactions among co-authors are vital in collaborative autoethnography, particularly when working transculturally. The process of sharing and collectively reflecting on our efforts highlighted the unseen epistemic labour and invisible emotional labour (Anonymous et al 2024b) involved in aiming to create a comfortable atmosphere for both ourselves and participants. This collective and reflexive autoethnography, which differs from an individualised process, still relies upon trust and respect. While each member reflected individually, sharing these reflections allowed for deeper transcultural discussions and a shared desire to understand what it means to codesign together.

Recognising many codesigning practices

The conditions we aimed to foster in our mentoring programme, such as trust, respect, kindness and generosity, can sound hollow and generic in the process of analysing and synthesising accounts of codesigning. We noted how relying on or expecting to be able to create or find safety and safe spaces run similar risks of flattening and eroding nuanced, cultural, relational dimensions in response to conventions in research reporting. We hope we have demonstrated how this risk can be addressed by inserting multilinguality, personal reflection and multimedial modes of expression into spaces more commonly – and comfortably (for some at least) – rendered as monocultural academic writing.

Following this, we have also used our multilinguality and multimediality to anchor our states of being. Rather than continue the exhausting work of ‘code switching’ to fit cultural and patriarchal expectations in our life and work contexts, we have aimed to be true to ourselves in the way we are. This includes the way we have collaborated in our transcultural project, the way we collaborated in the reporting of it, and how we have undertaken the reporting itself.

This approach enabled us to meet the women where they are and create conditions for mutual learning and flourishing. We might go as far as arguing that transculturality, multilinguality and intersectionality is more the norm than an exception in contemporary practices of codesigning. The push to respectfully acknowledge the diversity in codesign communities and work towards inclusion will need courageous and experimental approaches

in doing, reporting and reflecting on codesign. We hope we have made a start in this paper and this project.

We also demonstrated how emotional support is deeply intertwined with cultural specificities. In our case, being deeply immersed in the presence of transcultural women among the team and participants, further enriched our understanding of nurturing practices. Arguably each term we chose is one facet out of a complex bundle of emotional and mind-body-heart-soulful encounters. Finding analogies in pre-existing cultural concepts like *Kharm Unn Jai* or *Kokoro-gamae* is our initial attempt to provide conceptual and culturally relevant footholds for others to consider and think about. We hope they offer fresh perspectives of emotional dimensions in order to show that such practice is not only about individuals giving and receiving necessary and important support, but there are atmospheric and transient dimensions that often evade definition. These untranslatable dimensions are important to highlight and recognise, including for the way they complicate any suggestion that it is straightforward to unpack, theorise, and practise codesign.

Conclusion

In this paper, we explored elusive dimensions of emotional support for women and demonstrated how they are deeply intertwined with cultural specificities. Our inquiry was guided by a collaborative, culturally nuanced approach to autoethnography, enriched by the lived experiences of the co-authors and the women we supported. Our collective experiences on co-creating nurturing learning environments has profoundly impacted us and motivated us to share these insights with transcultural communities of designers and researchers. ความอุ่นใจ (Khram Unn Jai), 心構え (Kokoro-gamae), 温もり (Nukumori), 安心 (An-sim), 安 (ān), an intersectional Aussie sense of humour, うち (Uchi) and visuals with these concepts, are just some examples of how we aim to co-create supporting environments for transcultural and more widely diverse women. Our approach contributes to decolonising design scholarship, and challenges the current reliance on English as the language for international codesign scholarship. Each co-author tried to grapple with respectful and culturally-grounded ways to articulate insights that emerged across borders and professional boundaries, focusing on the atmospheric and felt dimensions of cultures was our way to more authentically express what it means to be at ease, be open and build trust. In codesign practices, we have observed that emotional support is vital for fostering understanding across differences, especially among co-authors, research collaborators, and participants from diverse cultural backgrounds. By drawing on intersectional, culturally grounded practices, we hope the paper offers under-

recognised perspectives that can be understood and articulated in codesign practices, paving the way for further exploration in future research.

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