



5-2004

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Recommended Citation

Yang, Honggang (2004) "Editor's Reflections: Academic Indigenization," *Peace and Conflict Studies*: Vol. 11 : No. 1 , Article 6.

DOI: 10.46743/1082-7307/2004.1047

Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/pcs/vol11/iss1/6>

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Editor's Reflections: Academic Indigenization

Abstract

Excerpt

The movement for academic indigenization has been growing swiftly in the social science fields over recent decades. From a historical, sociological perspective, for example, Lee (2000) recognizes that Western social sciences were implanted in East Asian countries like many other developing societies where there were abundant cultural traditions and indigenous frameworks of understanding human interrelations. As early as the 19th Century, several Chinese intellectuals had called for "Eastern Way and Western Technology" or "Chinese Body and Western Utility" in their search for solutions to "saving the nation" from feudal corruptions and imperialist invaders. These thinkers and reformers were trying to better the fit between Western theory and China reality.

Keywords: *academic indigenization, China reality, East Asian countries, globalization, social science fields, Western theory*

Author Bio(s)

Honggang Yang is the Dean and Professor at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (SHSS) at NSU. He is an anthropologist by training, and worked for The Carter Presidential Center of Emory University. He chaired and taught in the Antioch program in conflict resolution. He has served on several leadership councils and boards, and is currently on the editorial boards for Conflict Resolution Quarterly, and American Review of China Studies. In 1998-1999, he launched the distance learning programs in conflict resolution at the SHSS with the support of his colleagues and students. His specialties include reflective practice, distance and experiential learning, and ethnographic methods.

Editor's Reflections: Academic Indigenization

Honggang Yang

The movement for academic indigenization has been growing swiftly in the social science fields over recent decades. From a historical, sociological perspective, for example, Lee (2000) recognizes that Western social sciences were implanted in East Asian countries like many other developing societies where there were abundant cultural traditions and indigenous frameworks of understanding human interrelations. As early as the 19th Century, several Chinese intellectuals had called for "Eastern Way and Western Technology" or "Chinese Body and Western Utility" in their search for solutions to "saving the nation" from feudal corruptions and imperialist invaders. These thinkers and reformers were trying to better the fit between Western theory and China reality.

In contemporary political economic contexts, the painstaking research and reflection attempts have become a profound journey to respond to both colonial histories and neo-colonial influences. In psychology, there long exists an ardent tension between the tendencies: globalization and indigenization, as a meta-theoretical thesis holds that the generation of psychological knowledge is culture dependent (Ho, Peng, Lai, and Chan, 2001). Ho (1995) conducts a comparative examination on the culturally embedded relational conceptions, i.e. selfhood and identity, in four Asian cultural traditions: Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The four cultural values are inherent frameworks for developing indigenous models in the region.

Do peace and conflict researchers have a responsibility to further indigenous models in the field? The answer is a resounding YES, as peace and conflict studies are an interdisciplinary field of inquiry and practice across cultures and societies over time. Peace researchers are often trained in different disciplines, applying different approaches to their committed fields in a given cultural context. The fundamental conceptions of "peace building" and "conflict resolution" are as much culturally defined and political-economically shaped as those of human identity and social role.

Over the years, I have worked closely with colleagues and students from overseas, who shared moving stories of their intellectual journeys. Being an anthropologist from another culture, I feel very passionate about meeting the academic indigenization challenges. I believe that peace and conflict studies should not only continue to examine the cultural and cross-

cultural issues, but also ought to utilize relevant experiences from our sister disciplines and respective professions such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, political science and economics, history, and so forth, to foster more comparative research and indigenous models.

In this connection, I would like to share a story of Professor Fei Xiaotong, a Chinese social anthropologist, his persistent efforts in Sinicizing the disciplines.

Dr. Fei was one of my professors at Nankai University in China where I studied social psychology and sociology before coming to the U.S. Fei studied social anthropology with Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), a Polish functionalist anthropologist at the London School of Economics, in the 1930s. He wrote a classic piece in anthropology "Peasant Life in China" (1939) based on his fieldwork in Southern China. Fei has long realized a pressing need to make the academic discipline indigenous in China, a vast ancient country where anthropology as a body of systemic literature was introduced from abroad.

Notably, various national versions of anthropology have been developing for decades. Even within the West, there is American anthropology, British anthropology, and French anthropology, to name a few. In Chinese, "anthropology" literally means a study of humankind. As broadly connoted, it is vaguely intertwined with sociology, especially ethnology (i.e. the field studies of ethnicity and ethnic group relations). Anthropology as a discipline in contemporary China has had an interrupted history (Yang, 1991). After being banned for its "bourgeois roots" from the west in the 1950s, sociocultural anthropology was partially merged with the studies of minority nationalities. It regained an academic status in the late 1970s. This academic status was restored to meet the demands of rapid modernization.

Malinowski repeatedly told Fei to value his advantages of being a Chinese studying Chinese society (Fei, 1981). Chinese society exhibits enormous regional variation and ethnic variety, but China has been a peasant society for centuries. This societal nature and cultural context is crucial to understanding and reforming China. Fei has been playing an important role in the course of the discipline's re-establishment, sinification, and growth. As he proposed in the early 1980s, Chinese social scientists were engaged, for example, in projects on small towns (i.e. rural urbanization and industrialization), marriage and family, ethnic groups, and underdeveloped areas in China. Small towns in the rural areas presented demanding issues in agriculture under the reform of China (Fei, 1986). Family, a cornerstone in Chinese society, has been transforming with the increasing appearance of

nuclear families. China has 55 minority nationalities whose socioeconomic development has been a significant component in the modernization.

To avoid unnecessary political ramifications, Fei dismissed “isms,” and instead, calls on social scientists to go to the field, to understand concrete things, and study theories from practical reasons. He promoted social investigations adaptive to the local community systems. Material and technological considerations are more emphasized than ideological ones, methodological deliberations rather than theoretical ones, as the government acknowledges of research skills and techniques as “classless” belongings. More attention is given to a Chinese point of view for solving Chinese social issues, since there is a wide belief that Western innovations should not be copied without adaptation to Chinese soil. During a 1988 interview, Fei said:

“The main purpose, the sole aim of my life, has in fact been to understand China, the Chinese people. It’s a thread that began in 1930. Ever since that time I have been driven to understand China in order to solve Chinese problems..... Revealed in Chinese social organization, and behind it, is the Chinese mind, the Chinese way of thinking, the Chinese way of behavior..... I am aware of the necessity of introducing Western things, but there is always the danger that we will excessively disturb the system’s balance. Western innovations are never precisely appropriate; we need to Sinicize them.” (Pasternak, 1988)

There is a growing need and appreciation for social scientists to study their own cultures and societies. Hsu (1983), who was also Malinowski’s student, critically analyzed the role that Malinowski played in his own seminal fieldwork, indicating some common limitations encountered by Western anthropologists. Hsu insightfully found that Malinowski never seemed to relate to his natives as human beings who might be his equals or trusted colleagues, much less as intimate friends or affectionate partners in pursuit of common goals (Hsu, 1983). The real difference here lies, intentionally or unintentionally, between treating the studied solely as research subjects or taking them as the people to be served for their welfare.

In this close connection, the journal of Peace and Conflict Studies (PCS) will continue to encourage and invite native researchers from different continents and countries to share with the field their perspectives and approaches to peace and conflict resolution. PCS also invites international scholars, educators, and practitioners to reflect on research of peace, conflict,

and other social complexities from the natives' own point of view. In 1995, 1998, and 2002, for example, PCS published "Indigenously as a New Global Norm" (Nelson), "Facilitation and Mediation in South Africa" (Van der Merwe), and "Environmental Work and Peace Work: The Palestinian-Israeli Case" (Chaitin, Obeidi, Adwan, and Bar-On).

To encourage a greater academic indigenization, we must introduce, translate, and study more traditional frameworks of reference, and at the same time recognize biases from the West and from the East. For those communities and societies that are rich in oral traditions and grassroots narratives, the field must try to co-create with our native colleagues appropriate ways and sensible means to presenting and preserving their totalities. By contrast and comparison, academic indigenization will lead to a greater advancement of the field in both local and global contexts.

As social science history has shown, peace research development is shaped by political economic contexts and historical conditions as well. The indigenization movement is not an isolated endeavor. It has many intellectual ancestors and relatives, for example, multiculturalism in the U.S. (Ho, Peng, Lai, and Chan, 2001). Others include feminist and environmentalist perspectives. The call for indigenization is a call for creativity and originality (Lee, 2000). Indigenization is not an end in itself; rather, it is a necessary step toward achieving a thoughtful synthesis of unity and diversity (Ho, Peng, Lai, and Chan, 2001). It is a crucial acknowledgement that there must be prosperity in the growth of indigenous models before the birth and maturity of a valid, meaningful, global version of peace and conflict studies can come to fruition.

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