

# Internationalisation, indigenisation and educational research in China

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Intimations of globality are challenging old ways of doing things in the social sciences. The new phase of reflexive thinking has seen many turning their thoughts to indigenous thinking. Within today's world of knowledge, one pressing task is to capture as many voices as possible to reaffirm a moral universe that respects the plurality of perspectives and paths to truth in order to avoid the homogenising monoculture of the mind. This article investigates how Chinese educational researchers respond to this momentous challenge. It finds that, at their maximum, they are emulating their more prestigious western counterparts, and are thus losing their opportunity to contribute more substantially to nurturing an international knowledge order that reflects and supports the rich diversity, although they are well positioned by their wealth of unique cultural heritage.

## Introduction: China's' international visibility in social sciences

We are living in a turbulent and unpredictable world. Such times are, however, also ideal for localised struggles to create new forms of knowledge and power, free from the tyranny of massive and totalising ideologies. Within today's world of knowledge, one pressing task is to capture as many voices as possible to reaffirm 'a moral universe that respects the plurality of perspectives and paths to truth' in order to avoid what Rajni Kothari (1987) saw as 'the homogenising monoculture of the mind' (p. 284). This vision is shared by Brenkman (1987) who appeals to 'relativise and reinterpret the Western tradition, which has staked its claim to universality' (p. 230).

Under this scenario, there is a worldwide pressing need in social science and the humanities to promote internationalisation. Although there still lacks an overall consensus about its concept, unlike globalisation (with which it is often confused), internationalisation is relatively more closely tied to a country's specific history, culture, resources and priorities (Yang, 2002b), with focus on mutual understanding, respect and the growing relationships and interactions between national entities and cultures (Marginson, 2000).

Recent studies have shown that the meaning of internationalisation, the means to implement it and the extent of internationalisation policies all depend on specific subject matter (Knight & de Wit, 1997). The general situation is that the 'hard' sciences usually attain higher levels of internationalisation than the 'soft'.

Development in the 'hard' sciences tends to be much more emphasised, whereas social sciences become under-represented in international programs (Callan & Djajanegara, 1997; de Wit & Callan, 1995). This is due to the varied ideologies, paradigms and discourses inherent in social sciences, their high dependency on language to convey their meanings, and the fact that domestic considerations are given more weight in these fields (Altbach, 1998).

In the People's Republic of China (PRC), social scientists have not achieved the emerging visibility of their natural science and engineering peers in the international community. Although China's overall representation in the international scientific community has grown rapidly since reopening itself to the world (World Bank, 2000; Zhong Wen-hui, 1998), few publications produced by Chinese social scientists have appeared in international citation indices, an assessment that has become increasingly important in the evaluation of research in natural, technological and medical sciences, but has not been popularly employed as an effective means in social sciences, precisely because Chinese social scientists rarely publish internationally (Cheng, 1991; Deng, 1995).

Social sciences in China are, however, confronted with an unprecedented global context. With the exponential growth of the Internet (Farquhar, 1999) and the fact that English has become a global language (Crystal, 1997; Yang, 2001), the international knowledge network, which has divided nations into centre, semi-centre and periphery (Altbach, 1998), has substantially strengthened its function. Meanwhile many signs indicate that in the 21st century, China's Open Door policy is going to continue.<sup>2</sup> One urgent task for China is thus to raise the level of internationalisation of its social science research, as an indicator of its intent to integrate with the international scholarly community.

It is high time that we look at the tensions, dilemmas, costs and benefits in the process of internationalising China's social sciences. Focusing on educational research, this article attempts to understand how China's social research is influenced by external forces while maintaining and even strengthening its local relevance. After exploring the meaning of indigenisation, this article provides a historical trajectory of China's educational research. It then delineates the status quo by looking closely at two major issues in educational research: perspective and referencing. It is based on my substantial research fieldwork within recent years and longstanding personal working experience at a Chinese university, and on some primary as well as secondary Chinese language sources of information about the current situation in China.

### **Abandoning universalism for indigenisation**

Since the 1960s, driven by theories of post-modernism, post-colonialism and feminism, as well as some eastern philosophies, the authenticity of science and its methodology as the arbiters of 'truth' have been increasingly questioned. Principles of positivism, verification, objectivity and western reasoning have been rejected (Yang, 2002). People are becoming dissatisfied with the inability of western science to describe all that occurs in people's experience of the world, in Morgan's (2003) word, the nature of people's 'reality'. Although western culture remains largely

committed to a reductionistic worldview in which reality is divisible and knowable in terms of discrete things, many have turned their thoughts to indigenous thinking which, by contrast, is mostly holistic and contextual. There has been increasing recognition of holistic ontologies where the components are not stripped from the context that gives them meaning (Capra, 1983; Swain, 1993).

Some have launched passionate attacks on the 'paradigmatic tyranny' of the natural sciences, which has often served to subjugate indigenous knowledge and subvert sustainable development practices rooted in such knowledge. They call upon universities to liberate themselves from the need to create unitary bodies of theory and take pride in approaches to truth rooted in local knowledge, in the hope that there will be mutuality and even companionship in the journey of learning across cultural boundaries, rather than the approach whereby western scholars are seen as providers of 'advanced knowledge' to the Third World (Rahnema, 2001).

In social sciences, Zahre Al Zeera (2001) critically reviews the conventional positivist paradigms in the west. She finds that emergent paradigms of postpositivism, critical theory and constructivism have provided some space for alternative ways of thinking and understanding. She suggests that they are nevertheless connected by an 'invisible string' to the Aristotelian principle of 'either/or', which holds that every proposition must be either true or false. This principle fails to integrate the material, intellectual and spiritual dimensions of life, enable individual and society to advance to higher stages of being, and avoid the kinds of fragmentation that have tended to characterise social thought in the west. This is where Chinese traditions of unity, harmony and oneness can play a significant role. Potentially China's efforts to indigenise its social research can make important contributions to a re-balancing of western and eastern patterns of knowledge.

Here indigenous knowledge refers to the knowledge unique to a given culture or society characterised by the common-sense ideas, thoughts, and values of people formed as a result of the sustained interactions of society, nature and culture. It is accumulated by a group of people who develop an in-depth understanding of their particular place in their particular world by centuries of unbroken residence (Sefa Dei, 2002). It rejects colonial imposition and signals the importance of problematising anything which is imposed or dominating (Fanon 1966; Memmi, 1967).

In social research, indigenisation means to integrate one's reflections on the local culture and/or society and/or history into her/his approaches. Indigenous studies are not necessarily to be conducted in all indigenous terms, nor by indigenous researchers only (Geertz, 1984). One shining example is that, in many fields of Chinese studies including education, some world best scholars are not of Chinese origin.

The theme chosen for the Symposium of National Perspectives of the Fifth Association of Asian Social Sciences Research Councils (AASSREC) Conference in Sydney was National Perspectives on Social Science Development. At the conference, William R. Geddes (1985), Emeritus Professor of Anthropology from the University of Sydney and organiser on behalf of AASSREC of the Symposium, pointed out:

There may not be much disagreement with the statement that underlying the concepts of Western social science are certain premises about the nature of man and of the ideal society. Therefore if the national ethos and eidos of another country differ from the commonly accepted vision of the Western social scientist then we can expect that fruitful conceptualisation and analysis will require a more indigenous understanding. (p. 5)

In the Greater China region, the call for indigenisation in social studies has been heard for at least two decades, often in the name of Sinicisation. In Taipei, for example, a symposium on the Sinicisation of social and behavioural sciences research in China was held in late 1980 (Yang & Wen, 1982). In 1983, two conferences on the modernisation of Chinese culture were convened by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, of which one major topic was the Sinicisation of social sciences in China (Wang, 1996, p.49).

Despite some remarkable early achievements in the 1930s<sup>3</sup>, and sporadic reflections in the late 1980s (Yang, 1991), discussions of Sinicisation of social studies did not attract much attention in the mainland until the mid-1990s. The first symposium dealing specifically with this theme was organised in Beijing by two Hong Kong based journals, *Chinese Social Science Quarterly* and *China Book Review*, on 23–24 December 1995 (Zhang, 1996). Nevertheless, compared with the then major arguments in Hong Kong and Taiwan, which had been largely positivistic, mainland social scientists have given much attention to theories other than positivism.<sup>4</sup>

Although there are different interpretations of the Sinicisation of social studies, the term has been generally accepted as the equivalent of ‘indigenisation’. Indigenous culture here, however, refers to traditional Chinese culture, of which the predominant part is the Confucian tradition. It does not indicate local cultures, such as the *Gelao* culture in Taiwan and the *Lingnan* (south of the Five Ridges) culture in Hong Kong.

Recently there have been calls for indigenisation from a few Chinese educational researchers. Lu Jie (2001), for example, draws attention to two important value orientations in indigenous Chinese educational thought—the importance of fostering moral character and a greater emphasis on collective rather than individual interests. She insists that the previous Chinese experiences of westernisation and Sovietisation had left little space for an appreciation and understanding of China’s indigenous pedagogy, or its possibilities for supporting modern educational development. Using Chinese pedagogy as an example, she remarks,

There still exists in Chinese academic circles a strong Westernisation thrust, which tends to incorporate into Chinese pedagogy a somewhat simplistic transplant of pedagogical trends and theories based on Western scientific knowledge . . . ‘Indigenosity’ is the road China must take if the country is to take its place in world learning and pedagogy. (p. 251)

Citing Yang Kuo-shu<sup>5</sup>, she notes that, although China and Chinese people are the object of study, the theories and concepts used are western or reflect western orientations.

While in daily life we are Chinese, in our studies we are Westerners, accepting and adopting Western concepts, theories and approaches. Under such circumstances we are only able to ape Westerners at every step. In both the quantity and quality of our studies we cannot compare with Westerners. As a result, up to now we have failed to establish a position of importance in the field of social and behavioural sciences. This historical lesson serves to remind us that consistency with our origins is the only way for Chinese pedagogy to progress toward world status. (Lu, 2001, pp. 251–252)

Her determination is to build theories of education and teaching that are rooted in China's own cultural soil, and develop them into something that can be contributed from China to the global community. Such voices, however, remain rare and thin in mainland China.

Conceptually the term 'indigenisation' is not very much different from the Sinocisation (widely used in Hong Kong and Taiwan) and 'with Chinese characteristics' (a catchword in China Mainland). This article prefers indigenisation because Sinocisation could mislead readers to mean exclusivism and/or ethnocentrism, and the term 'indigenisation' is in line with the current worldwide movement.

Generally speaking, indigenisation is a movement of self-reflection in response to long term western domination of social studies (Yeh, 1994). Specifically it is quite proper to define indigenisation from a methodological standpoint; yet, as a methodological strategy serving to challenge the overwhelmingly western-dominated conceptualisations of social science research, indigenisation is not a viable alternative to the existing formulations, which are able to bring about the sound and valid figurations of reality claimed by positivists. However, indigenisation tries to form an alternative perspective by which a researcher, as an observer and a participant simultaneously, with firsthand cultural and historical experience, is able to express an empathetic understanding of the world in which she lives. It thus provides a reconstruction of the daily life and a formation of the *Weltanschauung* of the people under investigation. Far more than a methodology, indigenisation presents an epistemological construction that pertains directly to a course of action leading to a cultural enterprise of popular democracy.

In the case of China, indigenisation is based on the premise that social sciences accept (not necessarily without criticism) what has already been achieved internationally. The meaning of indigenisation is twofold: although it aims at resisting western domination and strives for academic independence, it has, more importantly, epistemological significance. One major problem in the international mutual borrowing of social science knowledge is that current mainstream theoretical conceptions and methods are exclusively rooted in western experience. Such knowledge is fairly particular rather than universal. Western social theories face serious problems in their application to other societies/cultures. On the other hand, indigenisation stresses local relevance. It is a rather complicated process, as any experience cannot be practically handled without the assistance of existing knowledge, and understanding one's own experience must be aided by the experience of others. Instead of building up a system that is thoroughly different from the

existing social sciences, indigenisation problematises the universal and integrates it with local experience by means of exposing and reflecting on the hidden premise. It thus calls for thorough knowledge of the local and the global.

The movement towards indigenisation is in line with the recent phase of reflexive thinking in social studies, where social researchers realise increasingly the limitations of social studies, and therefore reinterpret truth' and objectivity. Social sciences are no longer utterly relied upon to display social facts fully. The long-lasting pursuit of universalism is no more widely trusted to be beyond time and space limits than those in natural sciences.<sup>6</sup>

Although indigenisation has never been a serious issue for western researchers, for Chinese social scientists, wholesale acceptance of western-dominated social theories can be very misleading. However indigenisation, or Sinicisation, should not be an excuse for the widely spread non-normative practices in Mainland China's social studies. Social science as knowledge can and should be somewhat normative. Due to a lack of such norms, Chinese social studies become 'trifling matters' (Deng, 1995, p.164). A lack of norms has led to a number of problems including impetuosity and poor research quality, and has seriously thwarted China's ability to communicate internationally in social sciences.

Chinese intellectuals are traditionally related to official ideologies (Misra, 1998; Wang, 1996). Their academic life has, since 1950, been tightly controlled in terms of academic growth and development, research focuses and intellectual and ideological directions. Although there have been increasing opportunities for them to avoid being directly involved in politics, within the ongoing reform process, very few have taken advantage of this. The current has moved towards reviving traditions against a backdrop of globalisation full of twists and turns.

## **The trajectory of education as a field of academic inquiry in China**

Educational studies in China were originally imported from the west and Japan (Zhong Qi-quan, 1998), as a striking example of 'subordinate theory' (Zhou, 1996, p.35). Starting from the late *Ming* and early *Qing* dynasties, western missionaries propagated western knowledge. As more western educational works were introduced into China, especially after China's doors were burst open during the Opium Wars, China's educational studies emerged, symbolised by the publication of a translated Japanese *Pedagogy (Jiaoyuxue)* in the *Education in the world (Jiaoyu Shijie)* in 1901. Terms such as 'education' and 'pedagogy' then became popularised. Within the past century, different periods were characterised by different features. Dividing this history into five periods provides convenient units of analysis (Jin, 2000); although such periodisation is not hard and fast, the phenomena are fluid and overlapping.

The first period (1901–1919) was the embryonic stage of China's educational research. Large scale import of foreign (western) knowledge flooded into China via Japan, partly due to the fact that the use of Chinese characters in the Japanese language could better secure the original meaning of the translated west-

ern works (Jin, 2000). Many terms, including *jiaoyuxue* (pedagogy), *jiaoxuefa* (teaching methods), *jiaoyushi* (history of education), *xuexiao guanli* (school management), *deyu* (moral education), *zhiyu* (intellectual development) and *tiyu* (physical education), were directly transplanted from Japan. So was the disciplinary structure. Most university education courses were lectured by Japanese nationals using Japanese textbooks.

The content of the then imported education courses focused on Herbartian pedagogy as a result of its dominance in Japan. Other theories, however, were not absolutely absent. It is worth mentioning that China's education discipline did not emerge to investigate and serve Chinese reality of education, rather it aimed at passing on foreign pedagogical knowledge (Bastid, 1987). Nevertheless Chinese scholars began to compile Chinese textbooks on pedagogy and made efforts to link them to China's actuality, by drawing from imported textbooks. Criticism of the inappropriateness of foreign textbooks and attempts to modify them were not rare.

The second period (1919–49) witnessed further import of western educational theories. This period was crucial for China to develop its educational studies into maturity. By the late 1940s, nearly all educational fields in the west could be found in China, covering a wide range of different theories, views and methods, and offering a variety of perspectives and approaches. They elevated Chinese researchers' level of theoretical understanding, and thus facilitated the development of China's highly specialised educational studies. During this period, Chinese education researchers were quick to respond to new theoretical trends overseas and introduced them into China. A number of them experimented in areas of vocational, rural and teacher education and stressed the combination between the latest foreign (western) educational theories and China's actuality (Wang & Yan, 1994). Western theories were modified according to China's practical needs.

There was clear imbalance between regions and among different disciplinary areas. Well-developed fields included educational foundations, psychology and philosophy, whereas economics of education and educational administration fell far behind. Overall China's educational studies had been built up on the basis of western experience. Such an imported system relied on scientific thinking, experiment and observation. Although it paved the way for further large scale systematic absorption of western knowledge of education, it was largely divorced from the wealth of China's educational traditions.

Moreover the impact of western experience was often confined to the elite groups and some coastal cities. Indeed its advocates were almost exclusively returned students. Among them, 34 per cent resided in Shanghai in 1915, 39 per cent in six other major cities, and no one lived in small towns or countryside (Wang, 1978, p.161).

The third period (1949–1966) was highly politicised, starting from the time when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came into power. The newborn republic was soon deliberately isolated from the west headed by the United States, and was forced to lean to the Soviet Union. Qian Jun-rui, Vice Minister for Education, said at the first national education conference that learning from the Soviet experience was designated as the direction for building a new education

(China National Institute for Educational Studies, 1984, p.4). This continued thereafter to be the starting point of and the sole base for the construction of China's educational research during the entire period. Soviet textbooks were introduced into Chinese classrooms. Kairov (1893–1978) was first introduced into China on November 14, 1949 when his works were published in the *People's Daily* (Jin, 2000, p.14). Marxist and Leninist educational views were established as the guiding theory.

Marxism and Leninism, although based on western rationality, were worshipped as the one and only universally applicable truth. Educational theories that were based on Soviet interpretation of Marxism and Leninism were profound and lasting. The influence, however, was different in different stages: during the initial two years (1949–1951), much attention was paid to reform the so-called 'old education,' featured by western, especially American, influence. This was followed by the indiscriminate copy of the Soviet (1952–1956) in both theory and practice. After China and the Soviet Union split up in 1956, China began its Great Leap Forward (1957–1966) targeting its own socialist educational studies. Although the officially designated task was fanciful, there emerged some criticism of the Soviet theories and practice. Such criticism was, not surprisingly, completely biased and politicised.

The politicisation of educational studies went further during the fourth period—the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), of which the official verdict by the CCP was that it was a period of 'civil strife.' From May 1966 to November 1977, China cut itself off from the outside world. The whole academic system was closed for almost a decade. Educational research was one of the most severely affected. Both western experience and China's longstanding traditions were radically denied, and severely criticised. Class struggle was the central focus.

The fifth period started from the late 1970s with a regulation of education in the name of reform. Corresponding to China's open-door policy and rapid, profound socioeconomic transformation, China's educational studies have achieved unprecedentedly. By 1981, educational studies had been restored and rebuilt. It was not simply to repeat what they were before the Cultural Revolution. Instead the reconstruction aimed at international trends. There were comprehensive discussions and reflections on the past experience and future development. Many sub-fields within education were developed fast, and greatly deepened by practical demands.

Since 1985, China has continuously implemented educational reforms at all levels. Accordingly China's educational studies have demonstrated a series of new developments. There was a substantial growth of educational research during this period, including both translated and locally produced research works. In 2002, for example, the top 100 Chinese publishers released at least 9000 books in education (Guo & Yang, 2004).

According to Wang Zhan (2004, p.3), Vice Minister for Education, China has established a nationwide educational research network with institutes from county up to national levels, based at schools and universities, both public and private. Since the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1996–2000), these institutes have carried out 6227 projects. China now has 30 144 fulltime educational researchers, 130 professional journals, 24 specialised newspapers and 60 websites.

According to Zhou Nan-zhao (1991, pp.111–112), the 1980s and early 1990s have witnessed an unprecedented upsurge of and progress in educational research. Planning of research at both national and local levels has been strengthened. The quality and effectiveness of research projects have improved and the impact of research is increasingly making itself felt in the practice of educational development through the wide dissemination and application of research findings.

Zhou also listed problems in different aspects of research, including data collection, staff research training, infrastructure development, theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and quality of research output. Ironically Zhou did not locate China's educational research in a clearly international context in his presentation to an international audience. Nor did he adopt a historical perspective to look at the tensions in China's century-long attempts to build up its own identity of educational research and to absorb foreign (western) knowledge and experience.

In retrospect, within the past century in educational research, indigenous Chinese wisdom and the imported western knowledge have never been on an equal footing. It is the western experience that has always been the dominant. The introduction of western knowledge was, is and will be a real need for China. The imported knowledge, however, is always highly contextualised and needs to be substantially modified when applied in China. It is here that China's educational research has fallen short.

### **Perspective: How researching is done and research outcomes are presented**

The first issue I choose to focus on in order to illustrate the present situation of China's educational research is perspective. As epistemology bears mightily on the way research is conducted, here I examine how China's educational researchers justify their choice and particular use of methodology and methods, and reach into the assumptions about reality that they bring to their work. These are epistemological questions, dealing with the nature of knowledge, its possibility, scope and general basis.

There is a range of epistemological stances, each of which implies a profound difference in how to do research and how to present research outcomes. Objectivism epistemology holds that meaning, and therefore meaningful reality, exists as such apart from the operation of any consciousness. In this objectivist view of 'what it means to know,' understandings and values are considered to be objectified in the people who are studying and, if we go about it in the right way, we can discover the objective truth (Crotty, 1998).

This stance began to influence educational research in China in the 20th century and gradually occupied a dominant position. Shi (2004, pp.15–16) divides the history into three periods: early 1900s–1949, 1949–1978, and after 1978. By the late 1990s, objectivism had been deeply rooted in China's educational research circle, embedded in every aspect of daily work, including researchers' beliefs, their research goals and the way they conduct research.

Fan's (2000) following comments serve as a good example:

In terms of values and methods of social science research, Chinese traditions have been characterised by pure assertion, commentary and literary grace, with close attention to the 'sublime words with deep meaning' in classics, while ignoring investigation and demonstration and, therefore, the social effects of theories. (p. 3)

According to most Chinese social scientists, social sciences have historically fallen behind natural sciences in their value orientations and methods, which is the major reason for their low efficacy in solving practical problems and in promoting social progress. This is also seen as an international phenomenon. In the west, for example, social science was once heavily scholastic. Although the Renaissance brought about ideological emancipation to western academia, research methods remained even more scholastic after it. It is the emergence of modern natural sciences that exposed such flaws and urged people to reform social sciences. The value orientation and methods of modern social sciences were demonstrated by Adam Smith's economics and August Comte's sociology ('social physics' in his own word), whose features have had profound influence on the later developments of economics, sociology and other applied social sciences. It is further believed that Marxism accomplished the scientification of social research. Karl Marx is indisputably regarded as the most prominent figure in modern history of social sciences.

Another factor contributing to China's social science research has been the fact that such endeavour has been tightly controlled by the state. Critical voices are rare.

Therefore, far from the mainstream international practices, the reality of China's educational research is a mix of traditional ethical sermon, Chinese interpretation of Marxism, and policy explanation and/or justification in line with governments. When Chinese educational researchers are invited to contribute chapters to books edited by international scholars and published by major academic publishers, their works often contrast sharply with thoroughly researched academic analyses. Hayhoe (2001) politely calls such work as 'more informal dialogic approach' (p. 3). She also correctly points out that these differences may reflect the different scholarly traditions represented.<sup>8</sup>

In Cheng Kai-ming's (1991) judgement, China's situation of educational research is 'rather odd':

First, a large proportion of research pieces in China are informative in nature. Particularly when the research is favoured by the policy agenda, it often takes the form of something between an experiment and action research, such that the researcher takes an intervening role attempting to arrive at some desired product at the end of the research (e.g. the ongoing research about rural education in the context of comprehensive rural development and the recent project on moral education). Second, there are also a large number of research works, particularly those carried out as post-graduates studies, which have little practical value (e.g. biography of a 14th century English educator) or which try to draw simple conclusions on a well-discussed and complex matter (e.g. the relations between education and national development). Third, in recent years, a large number of research pieces have adopted the quantitative mode, but few

of them deviate from the linear causality model which is often questionable by international standards. Fourth, most attention is paid to applied research of immediate policy and implications and little is done on basic research. Fifth, which is related, much more attention is paid to the output of research than what is paid to methodology, rendering such research hardly acceptable in the international scene.

Indeed China's educational research relies overwhelmingly on the traditional Chinese way of argumentation. Researchers publish almost exclusively in Chinese. Academic journals are rarely refereed. Publication relies heavily on personal contacts with editors and adaptation to political environment. Impetuosity and poor quality research can be easily found in many publications. These contribute to the fact that much research in China's humanities and social sciences cannot win sufficient recognition internationally.

As reported by Jiang Kai (2004, pp.68–69), also in accordance with and partly speaking for the referencing situation noted below, *Educational Research (Jiaoyu Yanjiu)*, China's most influential journal in educational research, carried 204 publications in 2001. Among them were 165 scholarly articles, 39 reports, interviews, conference summaries, book reviews and projects in progress. According to Jiang's calculation based on research methods, among the scholarly articles, 15 were commentaries, 14 historical and 12 comparative studies, 12 social surveys, 7 experiment reports and 3 statistical analyses.

Jiang (2004, p.69) further comments that 'qualitative studies' characterised by assertion, historical and literature analysis and comparative studies occupied 86.7 per cent of the journal's publications in 2001. An overwhelming majority of them were personal reflections. Many of them either lacked theoretical contribution or were short of tight logical reasoning. He concludes that those publications combine to be one spot on the leopard of mainland China's educational research today.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising to see increasing disappointment and severe criticism by many even within China. The China National Institute for Educational Studies, for example, hosted a symposium on Educational Research: Methods and Practice on 17 December 2003. The participants, including some leading academics from Peking University, Beijing and Capital Normal Universities, concluded:

Major methods in educational research have long been literature review and logical reasoning. With the integration of other disciplines in natural and social sciences and the sped world process of globalisation, we must conform to the international practice and methods, advocate scientifically based research, normalise our methods and behaviours, improve our research quality in order to achieve scientification of our educational research and serve our educational practice and policy making" (Ding, 2004).

This has been repeatedly confirmed by my fieldwork in China within recent years. Among dozens of my interviewees, I have met only two academics who seriously challenged such epistemological stance. One was Professor Chen Xiangming at the Graduate School of Education, Peking University, who has been one

of the strongest advocates of qualitative research in China. The other was Ai Xiao-ming, Professor of gender studies at Sun Yat-sen University. Both have substantial training experience in American and British universities respectively.

Considering the fact that empirical quantitative studies still have an important role to play in educational research in China mainland, this is why some scholars are defending objectivism strongly (see, for example, Zhou, 2001). Nevertheless critical voices are becoming louder from constructionists.

According to constructionist epistemology, there is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it. Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of human engagement with the realities in the human world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed. In this understanding of knowledge, different people construct meaning in different ways even in relation to the same phenomenon. Subject and object emerge as partners in the generation of meaning (Crotty, 1998).

Since the mid-1990s, such criticism has kept looming large. Mao (1999) questions the dominant methodology in educational research in his doctoral thesis completed in 1995. Shi (1999) continues this task and argues that, instead of discovering objective laws, educational research should, based on certain cultural values, aim at criticising, defending, reconstructing and reflecting on educational practice. Based on her research at Harvard University, Chen (2000) plays a major role in introducing contemporary international literature on qualitative social studies, their epistemological beliefs and ontological basis.

As an important component of postmodernism, such a stance holds a critical attitude towards objectivism, and insists that objectivism has caused serious historical outcomes despite the superficial prosperity and vitality of educational research in China mainland. To constructionists, objectivism must be thoroughly criticised and even abandoned. A constructionist outlook must be established to further develop China's educational research in the 21st century (Shi, 2004). Most constructionists are active in practice. Their efforts have led to growing popularity of some western figures including Foucault, Habermas and Lyotard, and a rapid increase in the use of certain research techniques such as narrative inquiry of educational experience (Ding, 2003).

What China's educational research circle has demonstrated is similar to what Ali Mazrui (1975, p.330) cautioned African countries against many years ago—that is, to adopt a second western-derived orthodox, Marxism-Leninism. The difference in China's case is the pattern to be reformed was not imposed by former colonisers, but invited by the Chinese themselves. Interestingly Mazrui suggested that African countries should develop their indigenous languages and culture in a domestication of the colonial heritage, and should diversify the sources of knowledge they brought into the university by drawing upon scholarship from China, India and the Middle East as well as the west.

China's Sovietisation of its educational research violates a taboo described by Johann Galtung (1972, 1980) in his 'structural theory of imperialism' which demonstrated how many parallels there were in the patterns of domination and penetration between western capitalist influences in developing countries and

Soviet socialist influences. One example is China's failure to accord importance to the epistemological break in Marx to distinguish the earlier scientific Marxism from the later critical form, which was rigorously critical of the claims of the natural sciences, and their pretensions to a universal methodology (Welch, 2003).

There has been little attention to the totalising tendency of postmodernism discourse itself, and its sweeping, ahistorical assertions. Although there are merits in constructionists' criticism of the serious flaws in the modernist legacy, including its demonstrated capacity to contribute to an increase in social control, via our confinement in Weber's 'iron cage of rationality' (Welch, 2003), rather than to fulfil its promise of social emancipation, there needs some acknowledgement that there is still some virtue in the modernity project.

Advocates of constructionism will certainly contribute to future prosperity of China's educational research. Their merits are particularly evident in counterbalancing the deeply embedded scientism in modern Chinese thought (Davies, 2001). Although often without realising it, these theorists, rightly or wrongly, have followed the same old road in modern Chinese history—to import foreign ideas and make a fetish of them.

Since the second half of the 20th century, there has been a major transformation of the prevailing order of knowledge production, an extraordinary transition in conceptions of what does and does not constitute 'knowledge' (Weiler, 2001). Both the criteria to judge the validity and the adequacy of knowledge and the structural arrangements under which knowledge is produced have been and continue to be profoundly challenged. There is a deepening sense of crisis in the modern knowledge system, a remarkable mixture of uncertainty and liberation, of a loss of dependable standards and an openness towards new ways of knowing, of a profound doubt about established conventions in the production of knowledge and the exhilarating sense of new beginning.

Although this provides China's social scientists with a unique opportunity to move towards indigenisation, the above-noted educational research delineates a positivist picture, which demonstrates that China's social scientists are attempting to emulate the western objectivist epistemology. Most of them would agree with Parsons' (1977) view that 'There is not "natural" or "cultural" science; there is only science or non-science and all empirical knowledge is scientific in so far as it is valid' (p. 61).

The above analysis also shows that some Chinese scholars are using local materials and western theoretical frameworks. Such practice per se gives no cause for much criticism. Nevertheless, according to the advocates of indigenous social studies (Yang & Wen, 1982; Yang, 1987), social sciences research that uses local material without adapting indigenous approaches could be a futile effort, even misleading. The shortage of critical indigenous perspective, however, is the common practice in China mainland today.

### **Referencing: Knowledge of the global and the local**

The second focused issue is referencing. This is based on a belief that it is crucial for contemporary educational researchers to have a thorough knowledge of the

subject matter and the ability to understand the intent of previous writers in their fields. Original research reviews the existing literature and adds a new dimension to an ongoing debate. The writer must have the ability to see through a vast accumulation of factual data and expressed opinion in order to determine the central points of debate.

This, however, is not the case in China. According to Fan (2000, p.42), among the publications of 395 surveyed 'core social science journals' in 1995, only 36.44 per cent (2500 out of 6823) listed references. In education, 165 publications included references with a percentage of 26.7. Fan went on to show that 24.4 per cent of the referenced literature in educational research were newspaper articles (p. 55), 32.11 per cent were translated works (of which an overwhelming proportion was works by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Vladimir Lenin), 27.34 per cent were Chinese classics and reference books, 2.75 per cent were government documents, archives and degree theses (p.56). The amount of cited foreign literature did not change much. From 1978 to 1995, their percentages were respectively 0, 0.11, 1.22, 1.65, 1.52, 1.35, 1.73, 1.72, 1.63, 1.46, 2.12, 1.85, 1.33, 1.03, 1.18, 0.96, 0.52 and 1.19 (p.58).

In educational research in 1995, 74.31 per cent cited literature was originally in Chinese, 10.83 per cent was translated foreign literature, 4.22 per cent was in foreign languages, and 10.64 per cent was unclear in terms of the original language (Fan, 2000, p.60). By the mid-1990s, it had been extremely rare for mainland Chinese educational researchers to publish internationally, and even more in foreign languages.<sup>9</sup> Few publications produced by Chinese social scientists appear in internationally reputable journals. According to Fan (2000, p.62), international publications by mainland China's social scientists increased from 80 in 1985 to 202 in 1996, despite Chinese governments and universities having taken initiatives in encouraging international publications in social sciences.

Meanwhile China's social science literature increased dramatically from 12 232 in 1978 to about 130 000 in 1993. This formed a sharp contrast to the international average of 3.35 per cent during the same period (Fan, 2000, p.20). Education literature increased 14.7 times. The total number increased from 1031 in 1978 to 11110 in 1983 and reached 18 088 in 1994, with an average annual growth rate of more than 20 per cent. Education literature wavered between 8.3 to 13.4 per cent in China's total social science literature in the 1980s, and stabilised at 15 per cent since the 1990s, which was about 5 per cent higher than the international average (Fan, 2000, p.103).

In order to illustrate the current referencing situation in China's educational research, I have selected the *Tsinghua Journal of Education* (previously *Research on Education Tsinghua University*) as an example. The Journal is one of China's national core journals in social science, based at Tsinghua University's Institute of Education. I have collected all the 19 issues during 2000–2003.<sup>10</sup> Some major findings are summarised in Table 1.

Overall there had been a considerable increase of references cited in each article. It is especially so considering 14 out of 26 articles in one issue in 2003 were notes to presentations at a symposium. None of them listed any references.

**Table 1 Selected facts of referencing in *Tsinghua Journal of Education*, 2000–2003**

	<i>Total references</i>	<i>Number of publications</i>	<i>References per article</i>	<i>Translated works languages</i>	<i>References in foreign languages</i>	<i>Policy documents</i>	<i>Website resources</i>	<i>Journal articles in Chinese</i>	<i>Books in Chinese</i>	<i>Newspaper articles</i>	<i>Marxist works</i>
2000	711	118	6.03	101	126 110 English 16 Japanese	16	4	169	166	36	26
2001	824	113	7.29	112	166 123 English 23 Japanese 13 German 7 Russian	14	37	194	147	51	11
2002	753	107	7.04	103	163 121 English 35 Japanese 4 Russian 3 German	8	39	179	191	33	4
2003	872	100	8.72	161	307 294 English 8 Japanese 3 Korean 2 Russian	22	48	118	152	27	8

Moreover most issues contained a few speeches by university presidents and/or well-known academicians, often placed at the beginning, without any references. Some issues carried 'discussions of work-in-progress', which did not include references. Meanwhile articles with 30–40 references were emerging.

The increase of foreign language references was all the more dramatic, as shown particularly by those in 2003. Again the authors were divided; although many did not cite any foreign literature, an increasing few were relying on foreign resources almost exclusively. The fifth issue in 2003, for example, contained two articles on corporate management and college English testing. Only two of the fifty-five and one out of the twenty-one references listed respectively by them were in Chinese (including one by the author himself); others were all in English.

Compared with the previous period reviewed by Fan (2000), one striking feature the journal demonstrated was the rapid growth of foreign language references, usually concentrated in a few articles mainly by returnees from long academic training overseas with higher degrees. This parallels the returnees' role in modern history, and shows their significant role in the development of China's educational research. For example, one article on the studies of creativity included eight references, of which one was in Chinese (Xin, 2000). In contrast, another article on engineering curriculum had forty-four references (Zhang, 2000), of which all were in Chinese and one was translated from Japanese. Two articles in the same issue were respectively on the debate over science education in the west and the tension between science and classics education in 19th century England. Whereas the first contained forty-two references of which thirty-eight were in English (Ding, 2000), the second had twenty references, of which seventeen were in English, and three were translated from English (Shan, 2000).

It is evident that different writers have a striking variety of sources to cite, and different fields of studies have different pools of literature resources. Similar to the aforementioned Ding (2000) and Shan (2000), one article on computer imitation in discovery learning listed one Chinese and twenty English references (Zhang & Chen, 2001). In the same issue, all references listed in an article on Japanese higher education were in Japanese except for one by the author himself (Hu, 2001). Similarly but in another foreign language, an article on historical study of education in the United States listed forty-three English references with one Chinese by the author himself (Zhou, 2002).

One article on the economic nature of education listed eighteen references, among them sixteen were translated Marxist classics and one was Karl Marx's work in English published in Moscow in 1947. However a clear sign was that citation of Marxist works was declining. In sharp contrast, citation of websites is increasing dramatically.

## **Conclusion: Towards indigenisation and international dialogue**

The above analysis of China's educational research shows that Chinese social researchers are, by and large, far from responding to their momentous challenges. Rather, similar to the situation in most non-western parts of the world (Inayatullah

& Gidley, 2000), they are at their maximum in emulating the strategies and standards of knowledge production in the west and aspiring to its recognition and rewards in funding, acknowledgement and publication. This is the current priority,<sup>11</sup> although the achievement remains far from satisfactory by western standards.

The majority of Chinese social scientists have taken the rationality and progressiveness of science as an obvious fact. Their confident attitude has been almost inescapable given the cultural biases in favour of science in modern culture. It is further justified by the fact that powerful international organisations establish specific yet universal criteria for what is to be considered acceptable research, and assure conformity through their political and economic might, which makes deviance from the established knowledge norms a costly proposition (Weiler, 1990).

Although well positioned by the wealth of unique cultural heritage and the huge demographic and geographical size with sufficient centre of gravity to operate with relative autonomy, the practice of educational studies shows that Chinese social researchers are losing their opportunities to contribute more substantially to nurturing an international knowledge order that reflects and supports the rich diversity in access to knowledge around the world, and that counteracts the tendency towards homogeneity and standardisation fuelled by the interests of technology, communication and commerce (Ma Rhea, 2000).

With absorption of western knowledge as the pressing matter of the moment, China's real effort is to upgrade academic programs based on western experience. Despite the conventional posture on Chinese culture and society as both a starting point and the final settling place, the wealth of educational knowledge and experience in Chinese rich civilisation is often missing in most social studies. Indigenous Chinese knowledge has been given little opportunity to influence the ideas and practices of social research in Chinese higher learning institutions. They are seldom presented as established and coherent sets of beliefs, and are largely devalued and even ignored as processes or coherent methods of learning and teaching. After the establishment of western-styled higher education for more than a century, fundamental assumptions of Chinese indigenous knowledge have been excluded by the very nature of the dominant western paradigm to a surprising extent.

This is ironic considering that, in principle, the Chinese communist government has always had a strong sense of tradition in Chinese education dictated by a particularly intense vigilance in regard to outside knowledge (Bastid, 1987). In practice, the way social sciences are taught and researched has almost turned Chinese universities into becoming instruments for the creation of a westernised or semi-westernised elite. Equally ironic is the fact that theoretically rebellion against Eurocentrism in China appears far less than that in some major western countries, particularly in reality.

Nevertheless there are some who have realised the great potential of Chinese indigenous knowledge. Neville (2000) notes that social sciences in the west have tended to be lame and stumbling over normative matters, and suggests the possible redemptive value of Confucianism. Tu Wei-ming maintains that the Enlightenment,

in terms of a set of values of instrumental rationality, individual liberty, calculated self-interest, material progress and rights consciousness, has disturbed social and environmental problems. He insists that much can be learned from Chinese indigenous culture (Tucker & Berthrong, 1998). Giving the Southwest Associated University (*Lianda*) as an excellent example,<sup>12</sup> Hayhoe (2001, p.347) illustrates the enormous potential of a melding of values from western academic traditions with aspects of the Chinese traditional scholarship. This reminds us that the indigenisation of China's social sciences requires rich, thorough understanding of both the Chinese and the western traditions.

The above review of China's educational research proves that Ye Lan's (2001, p.4) judgement that today's reconstruction and development of educational research is based on local innovation, in stark contrast to the historical fact a century ago, lacks solid ground. However indigenisation has been under discussions among a handful of scholars. Building up China's unique school of educational studies is also on the agenda (Li, 2004).

Concurrently dialogue with the international community is becoming increasingly prominent. This is happening at all levels, from individual and institutional exchange, collaboration between education publishers to joint symposiums and workshops. However, as questioned by Mohrman (2003), little has been discussed about what China can bring to the world. Perhaps Ding Gang (2001) is one of a few exceptions, who had really given thought to this. Supported by what we have understood about the global-local nexus (Robertson, 1992), indigenisation and international dialogue could and should both be achieved at the same time. Yet Ding's efforts have been rarely echoed to date.

### Keywords

Chinese culture  
educational research

indigenous  
internationalisation

Knowledge  
social sciences

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I use 'China' and 'people's Republic of China' interchangeably throughout this article for ease of expression. The situation of social research in Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan are not included in this article. I recognise that, in constitutional terms, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan are all parts of China.
- <sup>2</sup> After being closed to international intercourse for decades, China adopted its Open Door policy at the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China held in December 1978.
- <sup>3</sup> Pioneering explorers of social science Sinicisation in 1930s have been well recognised in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China. Among them, the most prominent were Wu Wen-zhao (1901–1985) and Fei Xiao-tong. Wu graduated from Tsinghua University and went to study in the United States in 1923. He received his Doctorate in 1929 from Columbia University. Upon his return to China, Wu became the founding head of the sociology department at Tsinghua. The department later became the cradle of China's best-trained sociologists. One of them was Fei Xiao-tong, whose *Peasant life in China*, originally his doctoral thesis at the London School of Economics and Political Science, represented Bronislaw Malinowski's 'dreams and pursuit.' According to Gan Yang (1994), such a classic study by Fei marked the inception of Chinese social theories.
- <sup>4</sup> Currently, Chinese social scientists have keen interests in a wide range of contemporary foreign (mostly western) social theories. Among those theorists that have been widely studied are Thomas

- S. Kuhn, Karl Popper, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jurgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Clifford Geertz and Friedrich A. Hayek, to name but a few.
- <sup>5</sup> Yang Kuo-shu is a professor of psychology at the National Taiwan University. He received his PhD from the University of Illinois and has since published widely on psychology and behaviours of Chinese people, personality psychology and social psychology.
- <sup>6</sup> I want to thank Professor Simon Marginson for his helpful comments. He correctly points out that a critique of universalism is not equivalent to an assertion of indigenisation. On one hand, locally grounded philosophies are just as liable to the sins of universalism, on the other indigenisation needs to be located concretely. The first does not automatically lead to the second. There are two steps here in the argument, rather than one.
- <sup>7</sup> I tend to use terms such as 'perspective' and 'tradition' instead of 'paradigm.' This is because when Kuhn introduced paradigm into the philosophy of science, he used the term in relation to natural sciences. Kuhn's philosophy and his definition of paradigm originated from his observation of the relation between natural and social sciences. He noted the differences between the debates among social scientists and those among natural scientists (Giddens, 1996).
- <sup>8</sup> Surprisingly there has been little research into this issue in English literature, apart from a few exceptions (see, for example, Zhong, 1998; Yang, 2002a). In contrast, there are increasing discussions in Chinese (see, for example, Deng, 1998, especially chap. 2 and pp. 43–46).
- <sup>9</sup> By that time, it had become much less rare, however, for some of them to publish in Chinese in Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and Singapore.
- <sup>10</sup> The journal changed from quarterly to bimonthly in 2002. By the time I was at Tsinghua to collect them, the last issue of 2003 had not yet been available.
- <sup>11</sup> This is widely acknowledged in China, although not without contest, from the late national leader Deng Xiao-ping to ordinary academics. In March 1979, Deng Xiao-ping said, 'We have to acknowledge that our natural sciences lag behind those in foreign countries. Now we should acknowledge that our social sciences research is also behind foreign countries in those comparable aspects. Our level is fairly low, even without statistical data for years. Such a reality will certainly confront genuine social sciences researchers with great difficulty'. See (Deng, 1994, pp. 180–181). The generally acknowledged lag indicates a strong desire to catch up with the west on the one hand, and western standards employed by the Chinese in their assessment on the other. Such western only criteria could hinder indigenisation, if not managed appropriately.
- <sup>12</sup> *Lianda* was formed by the combination of Peking, Tsinghua and Nankai Universities during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). Although functioning under the most difficult of circumstances, it had remarkable vitality and outstanding scholarly standards (Hayhoe, 2001; Israel, 1998).

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