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Indigenization in a globalizing world: A response to Yunong and Xiong (2008)¹

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Abstract

In a recent paper published in *International Social Work*, two writers from Mainland China – Huang Yunong and Zhang Xiong – presented an insightful analysis into indigenization in social work. This paper responds to some of the issues and challenges they raise and, in so doing, outlines some diverse views on indigenization in contemporary social work literature.

Keywords: Indigenization, Indigenous social work, localization, cultural relevance, China

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From their Chinese perspective, Yunong and Xiong (2008) present a provocative, well-argued theoretical analysis of the literature on indigenization which will certainly stimulate debate on this complex issue. They begin by noting that the indigenization of social work in mainland China has recently received considerable attention from social work academics and become a popular, i.e., oft-used, term in the literature on the development of social work education in China. They draw attention to the broader social science literature where 'indigenization ... has many models and can take many forms' (p. 612), all seeking to make the social sciences relevant to local contexts. Hence they argue that indigenization 'is not something new or special ... but an implicit requirement of social work' (p. 619). By this they mean that social work does not need the theory of indigenization to know that cultural sensitivity is a basic requirement of its practitioners. However, as the discussion which follows show, the debate on indigenization has not just been raging in the broader social sciences but has been a central feature of the international social work literature for over 50 years.

Yunong and Xiong (2008) note indigenization's postmodern overtones in questioning western social work values and principles. They write from the perspective that (western) development means improvement and progress and raise the possibility that indigenous people might themselves pursue and prefer western social work. They are thus critical of what they see as unsubstantiated claims that social work introduced or imported from western societies cannot work well in non-western contexts, since 'there has been little empirical social work research inspired by indigenous conceptions and methodologies' (p. 611). They base their analysis on four main arguments: First, proponents of indigenization blindly adhere to existing indigenous cultural and social structures and question western social work's values and principles. Secondly, almost

all proponents of indigenization insist that social problems and people's needs should be understood and addressed in the unique locality-specific context presuming that only they recognized this principle, while most western social workers did not. Thirdly, proponents of indigenization tend to overemphasize the differences between western and indigenous cultures without considering the commonalities between them. Fourthly, claims relating to professional imperialism need further examination.

Their analysis raises many questions. Where is the evidence that western models work well? Why are there so many dissenting voices? If it is a requirement that social work is made to fit its context, why does the profession continue to struggle with diversity and relentlessly search to find practice models to work with non-western and Indigenous Peoples, and why does the literature on indigenous social work and indigenization and associated topics, such as spirituality, ecology and so on only occupy a marginal position within the broader social work discourse? These are among the many issues overlooked by Yunong and Xiong (2008).

Indigenization in social work

The international literature on indigenization in social work dates back to the early 1970s. As early as the beginning of the 1980s, Midgley (1981) contended that the term indigenization, due to its overuse and popularity, was becoming something of a cliché with a lack of clarity as to its meaning. Since then indigenization as a process concerned about the application of western models to diverse contexts and cultures, both non-western and Indigenous Peoples, has given rise to a growing body of literature and research on local and traditional indigenous helping practices (e.g., Hart, 2002; Ling, 2003) and decolonizing Indigenous research methodologies (Sinclair, 2004; Smith, 1999). The Asian social psychology indigenization literature referred to by Yunong and

Xiong (2008), therefore, has a different focus to the social work indigenization literature. It is more concerned with narrower theoretical and philosophical thought than with practice and research, social work being associated with the latter. There is a much broader social work literature on indigenization than that reviewed by Yunong and Xiong (2008) wherein it becomes clear that, indigenization, like most topics in social work, is subject to multiple interpretations as writers from diverse contexts interpret from their particular standpoint on, or experience of, social work. A review of the literature on indigenization reveals that most authors use the term to refer to the 'irrelevance of Western social work to non-Western contexts'.

Gray (2005) noted that China presented an interesting case study on Western social work's transportability and drew attention to debates surrounding the development of social work education in China, where, as yet, no formal practice exists, noting that China had reignited the indigenization question (Cheng, 2008; Gray, 2005, 2008; Hutchings & Taylor, 2007; Jia, 2008; Taylor & Hutchings, 2008; Tsang, Yan & Shera, 2000; Yan & Tsang, 2008; Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002). It is heartening to see our Chinese colleagues entering into discussions on the nature of social work and its development in or transfer to China.

Indigenization is not new to China and is discernible in a range of fields, including educational research (Yang, 2005), religion (Nield, n.d.) and anthropology (Kjellgren, 2003), for example. It has been a long-standing concern in African social work, where Midgley's (1981) *Professional Imperialism in the Third World* became the dominant text on this subject. At the time that this seminal work was published, there was a growing literature on social work's translation around the world that cautioned against 'adapting imported ideas to fit local needs' (Shawky, 1972, p. 3). Hence

criticisms arose over the wide use of US textbooks and inappropriate casework models and there were repeated calls for the development of indigenous education and practice (Brigham, 1982).

In Asia today, as in Africa then and now, there is increasing acceptance that ‘a discursive space’ needs to be created ‘for the emergence of indigenous [meaning locally relevant] models’ (Tsang et al., 2000, p. 149; see also Gray et al., 2008). Contemporary writers call for a more grounded approach involving ‘critical examination both of Western and local articulations’ in order to establish a common basis for ‘conceptual engagement’ (Tsang et al., 2000, p. 151). The ongoing challenge is to draw the best from international influences while developing models of social work education and practice relevant to local and regional contexts and cultures. But this social work literature overlooks an important fact, to which we will return later, that indigenization occurred naturally when indigenous people encountered colonialism moulding and shaping cultures and practices in which indigenous and western ways began to adapt to and accommodate one another. Indigenization is not always a conscious or strategic process and can be seen as a process of reflection on the interactions between cultures, history, colonization, modernization, and so on (Yang, 2005). It provides a language for the analysis of a process of acculturation and social development. China is a product of diverse influences, made unique by a particular brand of Marxism expressed in Chinese communism (Yang, 2005). This has shaped a unique scholarship which tends to be supportive of government policy and ambivalent about Western influences. There has been a greater adoption of Western methods in the hard sciences, like medical science and engineering, than in the soft social sciences where a critical stance is paramount. Yunong and Xiong (2008) reflect these tensions when they seem to favour a universal

western form of social work and question whether Chinese Indigenous people prefer 'indigenous social and cultural structures' (p. 616), as they call them, to western social work values and principles.

Granted that western social work is not homogenous and there are differences even in western contexts, it is nevertheless important to be cognisant that social work developed in Europe and the US and that it is largely the US form of social work that has been spread internationally in various ways, such as through the use of US texts and US educated graduates returning to research and teach in their home countries. US knowledge and practice models are assumed to apply universally. Thus western social work refers to a professional model of practice with a largely clinical and individualistic focus which is tied to the provision of social welfare services. It assumes a service and policy infrastructure wherein social work professionals play a therapeutic and social role, advocating for marginalized and oppressed groups in society. Others have questioned just how well this model fits Chinese social work (Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002).

Indigenization and internationalization

From the above we can deduce a clear relationship between indigenization focusing on the local and particular and internationalization or westernization seeking commonalities across diverse contexts. Debates about the nature of international social work and its universality are ever more pressing in the face of internationalizing bodies' formalization of social work in their universal definition of social work and global standards for social work education and training (Gray et al., 2008; Gray & Fook, 2004; Gray & Webb, 2008). There are enormous tensions when national/local bodies are attempting to devise culturally relevant education and practice programs while outside

influences attempt to impose universalistic values and a professional culture, which might be quite alien (Gray, 2005; see also Ling, 2008; Osei-Hwedie & Rankopo, 2008).

Thus despite Yunong and Xiong's (2008) claim that social work should be adapted to fit local contexts and that this is 'an implicit requirement of social work' (p. 619), they overlook the innate origins and value base of the profession which gives preference to a western worldview and related values (western or Euro-American). This has led to gross examples of insensitivity which helps to explain why social work has not been particularly successful within its own borders, especially when working with minority or Indigenous populations, as Yunong and Xiong (2008) acknowledge (p. 619-619). Social workers cannot easily dismiss the damage wrought by colonialism. The problems which authors on indigenization were confronting arose precisely because of social work's Anglo-American heritage whereby indigenous modes of helping and natural kinship networks were overlooked.

With the acceptance of Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (IASSW & IFSW, 2004), a discussion of locally and culturally relevant social work education and practice in China is most appropriate. But the discussion cannot proceed very far unless it first recognizes the limitations of the worldview from which the profession arose, and engages in a discussion of just what in social work is universal (Gray & Fook, 2004). The values of social work, which are essentially Judaeo-Christian in origin, fit well with neoliberal, rights-based, democratic systems. They regard non-democratic systems as unjust and out of step with international human rights conventions. So how do its standards relate to China? (see Cheng, 2008; Hutchings & Taylor, 2007; Jia, 2008; Yip, 2004) How do its standards and values cohere with the

more enduring, less flexible aspects of Chinese cultures, which people do not easily relinquish?

In this regard, Yunong and Xiong (2008) allude to blind adherence to the 'existing indigenous social and cultural structure' (p. 616) possibly referring to the tendency to romanticize or simplify indigenous or non-western cultures, i.e., to uphold indigenous cultures as good and western influences as inherently bad. However, indigenization is a concept or lever used, as outlined above, to discuss, question and promote debate around the appropriateness of western social work. It is but one concept among many that highlights or attempts to address this issue. Also used are concepts like anti-oppressive practice, critical whiteness or white privilege, cultural and ethnic-sensitivity, human rights and so on. Too often the dominant western model has been unquestionably imposed from the outside. This is why there have been dissenting voices from non-western and Indigenous social workers. This does not mean that one cannot question unjust or outmoded customs and cultural practices.

Diverse views on indigenization

Yunong and Xiong's (2008) theoretical approach provides few concrete examples to support their claims about indigenization, e.g., examples of the failures of western social work which are evident throughout the international social work literature (see Gray et al. (2008) for several case studies). In overgeneralizing, Yunong and Xiong (2008) overlook the different and emerging understandings (and definitions) of indigenization within social work assuming that 'all proponents of indigenous social work' (p. 618) have the same position on the inappropriateness of western social work in all indigenous contexts, which is quite untrue. Further still, they do not consider that the rise of indigenization in many contexts is part of a larger political process of empowerment, as

is the case in North America and Australia. They make a valid point, however, that social workers should be open to the desires and ambitions for change among and within Indigenous communities. However, problems have arisen not from ‘blindly adhering to existing [I]ndigenous social or cultural structure’ or ‘blindly questioning western social work’s value’ (p. 617) but from blindly applying western knowledge and values while being insensitive to local values and helping methods, even in China (Chan & Chan, 2007; Yan & Tsui, 2007; Yip, 2007). *It is exactly this insensitivity to local contexts that has contributed to the need for the indigenization debate.* In light of Yunong and Xiong’s (2008) omissions, let us briefly examine some diverse views on indigenization in the contemporary social work literature.

Yunong and Xiong (2008) pick up on indigenization as part of the modernist agenda and equate it with Western development, social improvement and progress claiming that ‘Modern Chinese people do not want to be seen as non-progressive’ (p. 10). Hence they argue that Indigenous people may actually want and prefer western social work. In so doing they:

1. Adhere to normative claims regarding the value base and nature of social work, which is assumed implicitly in their article.
2. Overlook the true purpose of indigenization in social work, i.e., social work’s struggle with diversity.
3. Limit space for critical discussion regarding the question: What should ‘Chinese’ social work look like in practice?

Rather than a postmodern view, Yunong and Xiong (2008) opt for ‘shared or universal values’ and a professional culture which seeks to be universalizing without recognizing the tensions inherent in simultaneously being tolerant of difference. Postmodernists, like

indigenists, reject international, universalizing standards and definitions that do not take into account the diversity of cultures and their situatedness. From a critical postmodern point of view, social work is transformative and emancipatory and indigenization part of a process of reform, a medium for transformation from externally imposed to locally developed models of practice and solutions. In this sense it aims to counter dominant Western models of social work so as to give precedence to local solutions and practices, i.e., to accommodate cultural diversity. Yunong and Xiong (2008) wrongly dismiss these as ‘empty statements’ (p. 620) rather than engaging in the current ‘debate’ on social work in China, not least the tensions between the desire for western modernization and Chinese political control of ruling ideology. There are several examples of how western – US academics and education models – are directly imported to the Chinese context (see, for example, Chan & Chan, 2005; Tsang & Yan, 2001; Yip, 2007). Yan and Tsui (2007) argue that the development of social work in China is about the ‘quest for western social work knowledge’ stating that the ‘re-emergence of social work education in China can be understood as part of China’s attempt to achieve modernization’ (p. 642). In this sense, Chinese academics use the terms ‘indigenous’ and ‘indigenization’ in the way in which it is often used in the community work literature to mean something ‘originating from’ and indigenization as corresponding to being ‘developed from an “indigenous” Chinese context’. In other words, the terms indigenous and indigenization are widely used without any reference to Indigenous Peoples. What does this, if anything, mean for China’s own Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous minorities whose rights need to be upheld? Indigenous or First Nation’s Peoples’ central fight is for social justice and political recognition and they constantly highlight the injustices suffered by Indigenous Peoples at the hands of the most

powerful groups in society – the colonizers or political majorities who have subjected Indigenous minorities to heinous treatment. Their fight is for cultural and political recognition, which is even more important given the increasing diversity of modern, multicultural, pluralistic Western societies.

Modernization in China, as elsewhere, through internationalization or globalization, continues to confront and challenge cultural identities. Modern Chinese people do not want to be seen as non-progressive but neither do they want to lose their cultural traditions. The indigenization debate highlights these tensions..Social work is a product of modernity. It is secularistic. It pursues a professional culture which does not work easily with traditional cultural practices. In multicultural modern societies, where we are constantly confronted with the stranger or ‘Other’, the literature on indigenization and cultural diversity brings into stark relief ‘the ethical demands of coexistence’ (Yeatman, 2000, p. 94) and of finding ways of living with strangers from other cultures. Engaging in ‘ethical-political discourses’, such as dialogue about indigenization, helps different cultural groups reach a shared understanding and makes harmonious coexistence possible.

Yunong and Xiong (2008) correctly note the tendency of indigenization theorists to overemphasize differences between western and non-western cultures in order to highlight culturally appropriate practices despite commonalities. They are critical of the indigenization literature which, they say, does not focus on commonalities. But the very point of the critique offered by indigenization scholars is that the *same* social work values, theories and approaches are transferred from one context to another such that social work looks the same wherever it is being practised, whether in China or Africa or the UK or anywhere else. It *presumes a commonality of experience*. Critics of this

blanket transfer of social work highlight diversity and difference, even within indigenous contexts. For the purposes of outlining differences, broad generalizations are often needed. With respect to China this has been highlighted by a recent debate in the *International Journal of Social Welfare*, which draws attention to the diversity of cultures even within China and debates the very idea of ‘Chineseness’ (see also Sin, 2008; Yan & Tsang, 2008).

Indigenization, then, is implicitly a form of critique which draws attention to ‘difference’ (see McDonald, Harris, & Wintersteen, 2003). Thus contemporary writers on indigenization are not necessarily ‘proponents of indigenization’, as Yunong and Xiong (2008) refer to them, but often critics of this phenomenon who believe that attention must be paid to cultural relevance. Gray et al. (2008) deliberately use the term ‘cultural relevance’ rather than ‘cultural sensitivity’ or ‘cultural competence’ because of their concerns with the way in which social work has previously dealt with issues of culture and diversity, mindful of concerns that it masquerades as a new racism (see Park, 2005; Pon, 2008). Furthermore, mindful that the term indigenization is offensive to the Indigenous Peoples of the world for whom Indigeneity goes right to the heart of their personal and collective identity and place in the world, Gray et al. (2008) suggest that indigenization be abandoned in favour of terms like localization or cultural relevance.

Gray and Coates (2008) argue that the globalization discourse in social work contains exaggerated claims regarding social work’s universal nature and global influence and provides ‘further evidence of the profession’s territorializing agenda ... [which] follows hard on the heels of social work’s colonializing past and continues its penchant for spreading itself with missionary zeal’ (p. 13), even now into China (Yan &

Tsang, 2008). This has not been beneficial for Indigenous Peoples (see for example, Briskman, 2008 in relation to Australia). This globalizing or internationalizing thrust relates to social work's professionalizing interests rather than its concern for people in local cultures and contexts. Most social workers are not aware of, and not concerned about, international social work and the sensitivities involved in transferring social work to culturally diverse contexts:

In positing a unified identity and an enhanced global role for itself, social work belies the organizationally driven, bureaucratic and culturally contingent contexts in which most social workers work. In the western nation states, social services are highly managerialist and frequently part of restrictive welfare reform regimes where empowering and liberating people is not the regular function being performed (Gray et al., 2008, p. 14).

Even less does it enjoy this function when working with Indigenous Peoples. Yunong and Xiong (2008) make the mistake of seeing the concept of indigenization as normative, meaning that it implies 'what *should be* done'. Most of the literature is critical citing 'what *is* being done' and not liking it. Hence the Indigenous social work literature is largely critical (see Briskman, 2008) highlighting that:

... social work's dominant modern foundation that includes individual rights, individualism, and materialism, cannot adequately deal with the responsibilities that membership in a particular community and place, relationship patterns, and or longstanding cultural traditions require. For Indigenous Peoples—for whom relationship to community is experienced as part of the fabric of their identity—this denial of history and place has been immensely damaging and

disempowering, and challenging it lies at the heart of Indigenous social work (Gray et al., 2008, p. 15).

It is, therefore, important to acknowledge the historicity of the indigenization literature. If it weren't for indigenization scholars, there would be little awareness of the issues and concerns they raise. As Midgley (2008) notes, concerns about professional imperialism are as current now as when he wrote his seminal text in 1981. This is especially important to the reawakening of the indigenization critique in relation to China (Gray, 2005; Tsang et al., 2000; Tsang & Yan, 2001; Yan & Tsang, 2008; Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002).

Conclusion

Gray (2005) proposed that such crosscultural dialogue and exchange is moulding and shaping new forms of localized and culturally relevant social work parallel with internationalizing social work forces. This localization discourse challenges universalizing tendencies in social work such that imperialistic applications of Western notions of social work might be avoided. Having said this, however, Indigenous social work, rather than lauding the centrality of culture, as Gray (2005) has proposed, reiterates critical social work's agenda to draw attention to power relations and the politics inherent in crosscultural and Indigenous social work. Against this Indigenous social work discourse, social work continues to laud commonalities across context, as Yunong and Xiong (2008) have done, arguing, like Gray and Fook (2004), for some universals in social work. Social work continues to push for common standards, e.g., in its global education standards (as if this were possible or desirable, see Gray & Webb,

2008). This, in itself, is paradoxical since cultural relevance challenges universal knowledge and standards (Gray, 2005).

The indigenization literature must, therefore, be seen, not as normative but as an attempt 'to bring out multiple voices and ways of knowing that are *situated in particular socio-historical and cultural locations* so as to establish a solid local basis for localized social work practice' (Gray & Coates, 2008, p. 19). It encourages a deeper understanding of culture and a critical gaze on contemporary approaches to cultural competence in social work. Culturally relevant social work is 'a political position that asserts the intellectual and professional autonomy of ... social work academics and practitioners' (Tsang & Yan, 2001, p. 435) *in particular contexts*. It attempts to counteract the influence of internationalization which conveys the idea of a one-way process of cultural transfer where Western social work knowledge is seen as superior to local, Indigenous knowledges. The indigenization literature on the other hand argues that social work perspectives, theories, values and skills must be influenced by local factors *including local cultures* (Osei-Hwedie, 2003). As Tsang and Yan (2001) note, so context bound is social work that 'any universal claim regarding the nature, purpose and method of the profession must be regarded with caution' (p. 448).

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