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Assessing the Impact of Western Psychology in Hong Kong

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The impact of Western psychology in Hong Kong can be seen in its institutions and practices. Local students however acquire their knowledge of psychology through the medium of at least two foreign languages; English (the medium of instruction) and the technical language of its subject matter, which does not find ready equivalents in Chinese. Some examples of psychological terms in Chinese and English are presented to support this. Problems of translation and of the models implicit in much of psychology's subject matter reduce its impact. Because indigenous beliefs are more likely to shape psychology's development than imported ones, they should be made explicit in psychological practice and reworked into future educational curricula so that the discipline as a whole may benefit.

Bien que la psychologie occidentale ait profondément marqué les institutions et les practiques sociales du territoire britannique de Hong Kong, il n'en reste pas moins vrai que les étudiants sinophones qui abordent cette discipline, soit au secondaire, soit au tertiaire, sont obligés de surmonter deux obstacles de taille, l'un constitué par la langue anglaise—langue d'enseignement—et l'autre par la terminologie technique du sujet, terminologie qui souvent n'a pas d'équivalent direct dans la langue chinoise (voir examples). Or, les problèmes que pose la traduction ainsi que le modèle de l'homme que sous-tend la psychologie occidentale ont pour effet de réduire l'impact de celle-ci. Il faudrait donc privilégier les notions chinoises de psychologie humaine en les incorporant dans la pratique psychologique ainsi que dans les programmes de formation scolaire et universitaire, étant donné que ce qui est propre à la culture chinoise est plus susceptible de contribuer au développement de la psychologie telle qu'elle est practiquée en milieu chinois que ce qui lui est étranger. Les effets ne peuvent être que positifs

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INTRODUCTION

The question of Western psychology's "impact" in Hong Kong, merits some consideration. If we take it to mean a growth in resources (institutions, courses, manpower) for propagating the subject, then psychology shows all the conventional signs of having "arrived". It was originally introduced as part of a general arts degree to prospective teachers, at the (then) only University in Hong Kong. It is now taught as a subject in its own right, at bachelor and higher degree levels at the two universities, one of which is based on the British redbrick model of education, the other on an American model. Postgraduate training is offered in Clinical and Educational Psychology. Hong Kong's other tertiary institutions, the two polytechnics and the post-secondary colleges, also offer courses in psychology as part of vocational training degrees and diplomas. Government and voluntary bodies maintain a small but growing establishment of these professional psychologists. There is a Society, modelled along the lines of the BPS, that monitors psychological activities in Hong Kong (see Blowers, 1987).

Outwardly, then, Western psychology would appear to have made a significant impression on the populace by becoming institutionalised, and by shaping developments in educational, medical, social, and correctional services. What is most evident is the adoption of the subject's terminology and in some form, its attendant practices. Students and practitioners alike are adept at speaking its language, particularly when communicating in English in formal settings, (which suggests it has some utility). But whether the theories that crucially support and inform these practices have also been adopted locally is far from clear. If it is the case that the theoretical underpinnings of the subject are fundamentally rejected, then the consequences of upholding the status quo through the implementation of present educational curricula and professional training must be in some doubt. For psychology's impact may be nothing more than window dressing. Its outward appearance may be one of conformity to a model based on western, individualised, theories; in reality, however, the subject's utility may be shaped by different imperatives. If these can be identifed and their effects reworked into local educational curricula, both future practice and the discipline as a whole stands to benefit.

My suspicions that such efforts are warranted are based on doubts concerning the difficulties encountered in translating Western psychological terminology into Chinese. On the one hand there are the general problems facing students acquiring their education in a second language; on the other, there is the question of whether modern psychology, embodying a Western conceptual framework for the study of the mind, has a counterpart within Chinese culture.

Although resources for the learning and acquisition of psychological skills are increasing, it is not clear why this should be so, nor indeed what is gained by this expansion. These activities may be only an epiphenomenon of an expanding educational system, the purpose of which is to enable more people to acquire "paper" qualifications in order to reach a higher step on the employment ladder. Or they might actually resonate with indigenous beliefs held about mental functioning, despite the fact that descriptions of them often appear in (Western) technical and linguistic disguise; in which case they will have some utility.

THE PROBLEM OF THE LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION

Historically, within the secondary school system two quite separate types of school developed: the Anglo-Chinese Secondary School in which all subjects (except Chinese) are taught in English, and the Chinese Middle School where the medium of instruction is Cantonese. Before 1948 curricula of the Chinese Middle Schools were related to those of China and students completing courses looked to China for their higher education. With the Communist takeover in 1949 many students who would otherwise have joined a university in China to further their studies looked closer to home. At the same time there were large numbers of refugee students from the Mainland who wished to continue their studies (Fulton, 1963). Neither group was sufficiently versed in English to meet the University of Hong Kong's entrance requirement of a pass in Use of English at Matriculation level. This led to the unfortunate situation where only the exceptional students from Chinese Middle Schools were accepted into HKU—many capable students being rejected because of the language requirement.

In spite of recommendations made in the early fifties for the removal of the English language requirement at the University and the institution of Chinese as the language of instruction (Keswick, 1952), the relevant authorities could not agree on what form of Chinese instruction should be given in, (i.e. Mandarin or Cantonese) nor what should be the appropriate texts. This is because the Hong Kong milieu is essentially monolingual and Cantonese-speaking, for which there is no precise written form. Thus the attempt to implement a Cantonese medium of instruction requires overlaying the spoken form with the written form of Mandarin (for which the "true" spoken form is Putonghua).

In several respects the written form of Mandarin and the spoken form of Cantonese do not correspond. For example, some sounds in Cantonese have no corresponding ideograph (character). Some others have ideographs specific to Cantonese speech, which are not therefore found in Mandarin. Also some combinations of characters are specific to Cantonese and are different from those used to convey the same meaning in Mandarin. Nearly all written forms of Chinese (with the exception of certain sections of some

local newspapers) use the ideographic conventions of the national language. While this is understood by native Cantonese speakers who freely use it, it does not capture the colloquial nature of much Cantonese and therefore constrains local expression. Although neither a foreign language, nor one which exactly matches local speech, written Mandarin (for native Cantonese speakers) operates as a second language, making a bilingual education unavoidable.

This state of affairs continues with the result that only linguistically competent students find their way into local tertiary education. To some extent this safeguards the interests of the community, which will only be able to afford to educate their most capable students to this level (assuming they will be able to handle foreign ideas presented in a foreign language). If these students have any difficulties in understanding such ideas, so the argument goes, it is because they are inadequately trained in their second language. Lack of understanding however, may be due to another problem: that certain Western ideas do not fundamentally mesh with Chinese.

THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATION

Unlike the situation in China where instruction is primarily in Chinese (Putonghua), and all the textbooks are printed in that language, secondary education in Hong Kong may be in English *or* in Chinese, and at tertiary level texts are available to students in *both* languages.

Nevertheless the question of what the study of Western psychology entails for Hong Kong students is an open one. If it involves simply translating concepts from one language to another, in that once the code is broken the meaning of the term becomes transparently clear, then learning remains a relatively straightforward exercise. But if it is a matter of coming to terms with, and ultimately accepting, an essentially alien point of view, then learning will require a radical shift of attitude on the part of the learner. Either way students must take pains to grasp foreign concepts in their second language and then wrestle with them in their first.

Ideally this process ensures two outcomes. Firstly, it enables an understanding of Western conceptions of Man. It's relevance within a Western context can then be better understood. Secondly, its application to the local culture can be assessed by the degree of concordance between its Western theoretical assumptions and their validity as models of local social life. If it transpires that some psychological concepts and/or theories are found wanting they can be modified or rejected.

The ease with which learning proceeds is dependent on the ability of a word in one language to be translated into that of another. Some English psychological terms find ready equivalents in Chinese. Where such equivalents are not available the translator has at least two options: (1) resort to

transliteration, which is not translation at all but phonetic borrowing, (2) coin new words, that may or may not fully convey the meanings of the original. Indeed with the latter process meanings may be entirely, if subtly, transformed, as examples in the next section show.

SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL TERMS

The following examples of monosyllabic words of classical origin have ready equivalents in English: *ji*[1] (知 —"knowledge") *tsing* (情 —"emotion") *yih* (意 —"volition") and *yuk* (欲 —"desire"). To each of these may be added a more or less synonymous morpheme to create the following binomial terms without changing their respective meanings. Thus *ying ji* (認知 —"identification") *tsing gam* (情感 —"feeling") *yih ji* (意志 —"aspiration") and *yuk mong* (欲望 —"expectation").

Two relevant examples of transliteration are *lo tsup* (邏輯 —"logic") and *tou tsang* (圖騰 —"totem"). Many terms however are not subject to transliteration: rather, new combinations of characters are coined to express what is hoped will be the equivalent meaning. It is here that the problems arise.

Thus the modern term for "psychology" involves three characters (*sam leih hohk* 心理學) each signifying concepts of ancient origin. Loosely back-translated this means "knowledge of the heart", but what is the conveyed sense in Chinese? *Sam* certainly refers to the heart, as well as the organ of thought, and the process of thinking. It also has a meaning synonymous with *sing* (性) meaning the nature of something, and in the aforementioned triad can mean the nature of human beings.

A whole philosophy of Man revolves around the single term beginning with the Confucian ethic that humanity is innate, resides in the heart, and is positive. According to Mencius humanity is Man's propensity to internalise moral rules through the process of socialisation. One explores one's own natural propensities to benevolence (*yahn* 仁), justice (*yih* 義), propriety (*laih* 禮), and wisdom (*ji* 智) through an understanding of one's own mind. From the beginning then *sam* forms part of a collective or social activity—the development of personal skills to enhance the livelihood of others.

Since the time of Confucius other philosophers, for example Seun Ji (荀子), have implored self-exploration for precisely the opposite reason: that instincts are bad and need to be overcome through a discovery of what one has in common with others, and in working for the common good. In both these and other philosophies the mind is an instrument of the soul,

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[1] The phoneticisations in this paper are Cantonese and are scripted according to the Yale System

which discovers itself in a social world, and is not perceived as an organ or a mechanism of activity in the service of a solitary individual.

Leih from the time of Mencius has meant human nature, an ethical form of activity and an ordering of the world. However *leih* also refers to "principle"—a central concept of a Neo-Confucian school that was prevalent during the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties and combines discussion of the mind with that of humanity and of the order of nature. Its ethic was that Man finds humanity only with a clear mind. Therefore in order to be virtuous one must remove human desire and restore the natural order of *leih*. All men are guided by this cosmic principle but what differentiates them is the presence of *heih* (氣) or "substance" ("essence") which can be pure or impure. Later still in the Ching dynasty philosopher Dai Chun (戴震) inverted the relative importance of these two concepts stressing the universality of *ji*, which varied only in the *manner* (*leih*) in which their substances were arranged (see Creel, 1954).

Hohk is simply the study of something, although it can also indicate learning by experience (Ward, 1985). The three characters together, however, are made up of two dyadic combinations (*sum leih, leih hohk*) whose meanings overlap and have led in contemporary usage to a blurring of the precise meaning of the three character term. Thus, *sam leih* refers to the mental processes that reflect objective reality, and is also a collective name for feelings, sensations, thinking processes and mood. It is also a descriptive term for the expression of any human thought or emotion. By contrast *leih hohk* is a general term for the study of "principles" as we have seen previously, but here again based upon Neo-Confucianist thinking that all existent things are made up of "principles" plus "substance". The term is often applied as part of a specific designation of the natural sciences (as in *mat leih hohk* (物理學)—physics, but literally "the study of the principles of matter"). In this sense the meaning would appear to coincide with the development of the sciences as systematised forms of knowledge of the natural world.

With the combination of all three characters into *sam leih hohk* we have a completely artificial term directly translated from English and not being found in Ancient Chinese literature. It is understood here in only a very broad sense as the study of mind, consciousness and behaviour, and although bilinguals will be able to refer to the Western subject through this term, the historical development of the meanings inherent in each of the three characters bears little resemblance to anything that currently passes for what, in the West, we call psychology.

The word "individual" presents another interesting example. Only four centuries ago this meant "indivisible", the almost exact opposite meaning of the current sense. As Williams (1983: p. 161), has said, " 'individual' stresses a distinction from others; 'indivisible' a necessary connection". It was a combination of logic (something is individual which cannot be further

divided) and biology (the final classification of members of a species) that brought about the beginnings of the modern sense but always with reference to the group from which a thing was derived. Now the group is largely absent from discussions utilising the term, and in much modern psychology too. Perhaps because it has tended to be employed in discussions of entities divorced from groups it has not found much favour in Chinese culture. In ancient literature the term is absent and only appears in modern Chinese (as *go yahn*個人) to draw a distinction between a person and a group of people. The related term, "individuality" (*go sing*個性) retains something of *sing* and humanity—collective or common cause.

Similarly the term "personality", when indicating the unique qualities of an individual (also a modern development in English) is usually translated as *sing gaak* (性格—character) e.g. Li and Yang (1972) but what is usually understood by the term is the general nature of man (*yahn gaak* 人格), the Confucian notion of an ideal personality that a man shares with others. In both these terms the shared component of human nature plays a significant and vital role in understanding the concept. The common features do not figure prominently in Western conceptions of personality at all; what they stress by contrast is the uniqueness of everything—every "individual".

CONCLUSION

This very brief and selected etymological excursion pinpoints some of the difficulties inherent in assessing the impact of a foreign discipline on a host culture. Translation, in a simple sense, can achieve the matching of ideograph to alphabetic word. The meaning and the lexical utility of the terms involved however cannot be easily guaranteed. Some concepts, once translated, can seem obscure, or may be based on beliefs or ways of seeing the world that are radically at odds with those of the "importing" culture. Concepts can be understood very differently even when people appear to be talking the same language.

In the aforementioned examples we see that although some terms are easily translatable, others are not because there is disagreement in places about what the precise equivalent term is. Also characters employed to reference Western terms come complete with a set of predetermined and sometimes conflicting meanings acquired over an historically long period that are still in common use. As anchor points for imported terms they often embellish, enhance or distort their intended meanings, transforming the fundamental understanding of the subject in the process.

Problems involved in translation and in locating precise meaning confound and inhibit a clear understanding of psychology. Unless and until we make explicit our understandings of what is being transposed we will be

unable to make full use of what our subject has to offer, both to those intent on practising it, and to the theoreticians eager to improve the discipline.

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