

South-North Dialogue and Globalization Research in China and Canada

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My Own Research

I am currently conducting two research projects directly related to globalization. One concerns the transnational care-giving experiences of Chinese seniors in Canada. While most skilled immigrant Chinese women have participated in the labour force in Canada, the ongoing reform of welfare — itself caused by neo-liberal globalization — has resulted in the shrinking of care provided by the state. The child-care burden has been downloaded onto the parents of the skilled immigrants: either the seniors come to Canada to look after their grandchildren, or the children are sent back to China to live with the grandparents. In particular, I am interested in examining the transnational effects of Canadian domestic social policy in the contexts of neo-liberalism and immigration.

The other project is about the vulnerability of Chinese and Indian immigrant communities in Canada to HIV/AIDS. Unlike the old pattern of immigration, where immigrants would live in the host country without ever revisiting the homeland, it has been observed that some immigrants (especially men) from China and India may continue to travel back and forth even after their immigration, in part because of the employment challenges facing them in Canada. My colleagues and I are interested in understanding the impacts of the new pattern of international migration on these immigrants' vulnerability to HIV, and how health inequality may be further complicated in the process of the global flow of people.

Here I want to highlight my so-called "in-between" research position — a position that cannot be classified as either Northern or Southern, or either Canadian or Chinese. The in-between position allows me to see what is happening at global and transnational levels, and to identify the connections among the problems and the responses of different countries. This approach or standpoint also makes it easier to problematize what we take for granted within a nation state, and to make visible globally what is invisible domestically. Take, for example, HIV/AIDS. If we look at the AIDS pandemic in an African country, we may leap to explain high prevalence rates in terms of the role that poverty plays. Indeed, poverty has exacerbated vulnerability to HIV and diminished access to medical treatments, such as antiretroviral drugs. Yet, if we look at the same issue from a broader perspective, we may explain the same high prevalence rates in terms international inequality. African poverty has, for instance, been closely related to Structural Adjustment Programs imposed by North-influenced international financial institutions such as the World Bank; Africans infected with HIV cannot access medical treatment not only because of their financial incapacity but, more importantly, because of the WTO-protected drug patent control that benefits the multinational pharmaceutical corporations in the North. The "brain drain" has meant the migration north of local medical professionals, yet further impeding the ability of African countries to respond to HIV/AIDS. What I am trying to say here is that *what* we research about globalization is important, but so is *how* we research it.

Most Pressing Research Questions related to Globalization

In thinking about my own research and that of my Canadian colleagues, I find the most pressing research questions related to globalization to include: how globalization processes have affected people, especially the socio-economically disadvantaged, at both local and global levels; the role of scholarship (regardless of discipline) in understanding and responding to the effects of globalization processes; and how to facilitate a dialogue on globalization with colleagues in the Global South, not only to exchange ideas, but also to co-construct knowledge about globalization. Although most current research has focused on exploring the consequences of globalization processes for us as humans both individually and as a society, I feel that it is equally important to pose questions from the opposite direction: What can we do to respond to the effects of globalization processes? Have globalization processes also provided us with the means to respond to their effects?

Many of my colleagues in social work have conducted research on various issues related to globalization (either as a dimension or consequence of globalization processes), including poverty, new immigrants, refugees, child protection, housing, racism, mental health, and Indigenous communities. Yet, the term "globalization" is not frequently used in this field, perhaps because social work is largely a locally-based profession. The term "globalization" still sounds a bit "foreign" to many social work students. Yet, the relative absence of "globalization" from social work has begged such questions as why the people who do research on and work with those whose lives have been heavily affected by globalization processes (either through immigration or poverty) would feel indifferent to globalization both as a term and as a subject of scholarship.

The same is the case in China, a country I lived in for almost thirty years. While Chinese scholars are eager to learn new (Western) vocabularies related to globalization and globalization studies, and to communicate with their counterparts in the North, local Chinese who have been adversely affected by globalization processes, whether laid off by economic restructuring or living with HIV/AIDS, are little acquainted with the term, let alone its meanings. I suspect that "globalization" has been used in some elitist discourses that have alienated people at local and grassroots levels. My suspicion is that a lack of vocabularies that can be accessed, comprehended, and felt by ordinary people, especially the most disadvantaged, has hidden from them the links between their own lives and the bigger picture, and has prevented them from grasping the need for fundamental social changes that will challenge the essence of neo-liberal globalization.

Questions for Research Collaboration

In my opinion, the question that may benefit the most from more systematic collaboration with colleagues outside Canada in larger projects is: what can we do to respond to the effects of globalization processes through the scholarship that has developed based on South-North collaborations? Such collaboration may have to start with collectively reflecting on our current knowledge of and discourses on globalization, on the relationship between scholarship and social realities, and on the relationships among scholars from the South and North. Situating globalization scholarship in a relational framework (e.g., relationships between disciplines, places, realities, fields of knowledge, and scholars) is helpful for contextualizing what we know about globalization in terms of both problems and responses, and for laying a foundation to develop alliances and solidarity among globalization scholars across contexts. Such alliances and solidarity among scholars may prevent some powerful groups (e.g., international financial institutions, the government, transnational corporations, politicians, and economic elites) from hijacking globalization discourses for their own purposes and interests.

What Researchers and Others Mean by "Globalization"

When activists speak of globalization in Canada, they are usually referring to economic globalization that is driven by neo-liberalism and reinforces inequality across countries and within nation states. In academia, scholars' understanding of globalization may vary based on their discipline or research area. In social work, for instance, those who focus on social policy or the study of social welfare usually link globalization with the erosion of welfare states in the North: in other words, the conflict between the state's decreased capacity to provide for its citizens and the increase in citizens' need for social protection due to economic restructuring. In recent years, the term "globalization" has been increasingly used in social work publications addressing international inequality and global social justice. For the scholars who focus on social work education or practices, globalization often means internationalization of social work and international collaboration.

In China, many scholars use globalization as a synonym for modernization, Westernization, or "connecting the trail with the (developed) world," although recently some have preferred the term "neo-liberalism." The positive "causal relationship" between globalization and modernization — of which economic development is supposed to be the proof — was emphasized by the Chinese government during the 15-year-long (1986-2001) process of applying for membership in the WTO, while its negative impacts on the economy and welfare have been downplayed. Many ordinary people may see China's participation in the WTO as constituting its embrace of globalization, while rarely noticing the connections between globalization and the economic and welfare restructuring that has gone on for more than two decades.

Obstacles Faced by Globalization Studies Researchers

The principal obstacles faced by globalization studies researchers in Canada are the same as those confronting international collaborative projects and include: finding appropriate collaboration partners or institutions; language proficiency (if not English or French); familiarity with the local social, economic, cultural, and political contexts; communicating and interacting with the research team throughout the collaboration; and quality control of the research process. In terms of the international dissemination of research results, language/translation and identifying and contacting local stakeholders (e.g., scholars and interested people) are among the challenges. If the research is conducted by Canadian researchers in Canada, however, the challenges should be manageable.

In China, the obstacles facing globalization researchers are multiple and include: availability of research funding; access to electronic academic resources (e.g., electronic scholarly journals); time and energy to carry out the research (Chinese scholars are not uncommonly overwhelmed by the sheer size of the tasks they face, such as teaching, supervising, and administration); lack of foreign-language proficiency (for reading the literature published in English or other Western languages and communicating with foreign colleagues); familiarity with Western theories (given that this field is dominated by Western scholars); cultural competence (for cross-cultural communication and interaction); and international communication (not only access to telecommunication facilities, but also time differences) and travel. In terms of dissemination of research results, the challenges may include funding, state censorship (if they are politically sensitive), translation (if they are disseminated internationally), and how to reach the concerned public. Chinese scholars may face greater constraints, in terms of financial resources and the freedom to research, than their counterparts in Canada.

Overcoming Obstacles and Collaborative Research

Some of the aforementioned challenges (such as funding and access to research resources) may be

solved by cross-national research collaboration. But international collaboration may not be able to overcome other obstacles, such as the domestic research environment and constraints on freedom of research. At the same time, new problems, such as unbalanced power relationships between scholars in different countries and contested/conflicting perspectives on research matters, may arise in the course of cross-national research collaboration.

Here I want to add that for cross-national research collaboration, the selection of the research topic and the design of the research project are also very important. In China, for example, identifying a project as being about poverty reduction is more strategic than vaguely defining it as a "human rights" one. Developing a sustainable and egalitarian relationship among collaborative scholars requires a research design that permits scholars from different contexts to make unique contributions.

Reflections on Appadurai

Appadurai's analysis of differences in research approaches and research ethics across the world is relevant whether its conclusions are applied in Canada or China. In Canada, the major producers of knowledge about globalization are Westerners or scholars who were trained in Western academic institutions. Despite their individual identities/characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, race, and immigration history) and their specific research topics or areas (focusing on the South, the North, or the in-between), their conceptual frameworks are basically consistent with Western (though not necessarily Eurocentric) pedagogy. Various gatekeepers in the process of knowledge production and dissemination (e.g., editors of scholarly journals) also ensure that diversity of the knowledge does not go far beyond the scope of "common sense" or comprehensible logic. As long as the "knowledge of globalization" is formally constituted through mainstream peer-reviewed scholarly journals, for instance, it will automatically gain the power and privilege to be part of the process of "globalization of knowledge," although, in reality, some knowledge is more globalized than other types. In countries like Canada, located at the centre of the world power and dominant knowledge systems, the disjuncture between "knowledge of globalization" and "globalization of knowledge" may be minimal, although the "knowledge of globalization" may not well match the reality of "globalization," especially when it comes to the globalization processes that involve countries located on the periphery of the power structure. In addition to the commonly accepted ethical standards used in Western academia, therefore, research ethics in the Northern context of globalization studies should also mean scholars' pursuit of comprehensive and contextualized knowledge, awareness of and critical reflection on the power imbalance in the process of knowledge production and dissemination, discussion of equality and global social justice, and recognition of the possible bias and limitation of the knowledge produced.

In China, the disjuncture between "knowledge of globalization" and "globalization of knowledge" is more profound. For more than two decades, "globalization of (Western) knowledge" has, to some degree, replaced the local production of "knowledge of globalization." Since China re-opened its doors to the world in the early 1980s, Chinese scholars have positioned themselves as learners and followers of Western knowledge. Until the late 1990s, some Chinese scholars raised questions about the relevance of Western knowledge in the Chinese context, and advocated developing theories and approaches appropriate for issues in China. Yet one of the major obstacles facing these advocates is the neo-liberalism that has influenced both economic and academic development in China. Constructing world-class universities has been a priority of the Chinese government. Scholars' productivity and international competitiveness, both of which are often evaluated based on the number of their publications in world-class peer-reviewed scholarly journals (which are commonly published in English), are strongly encouraged. Scholars who were trained in Western academic

institutions often receive better positions and salaries than their domestically trained colleagues. Although a Eurocentric standpoint has been criticized in Western academia, the general academic environment in China is somewhat Eurocentric, in part because of the privileged positions of Western academia and the Western economy in the world system. For Chinese academics, therefore, research ethics should be first conceptualized as equal to academic independence: that is, scholarship, whether on globalization or anything else, should not be subject to neo-liberalism as an ideology, to political pressure from the government, or to the dominance of the Western knowledge system. For instance, globalization studies in China should be accountable for understanding local issues and contributing to the construction of knowledge of globalization on a global scale.

Meanwhile, the use of Western research approaches in China also generates questions about the socio-economic conditions in which research ethics and standards familiar to Western researchers can be realized. For instance, the pressure of productivity and the lack of research funding sometimes results in the exploitation of graduate students by scholars/professors in China, while this may not be as big a problem in Canada.