

## Chapter 9

### Indigenising Social Work Education: Experiences of the Students from the People's Republic of China in Hong Kong

Angelina Yuen-Tsang and David Ip

#### Introduction

The call for the indigenisation of professional knowledge is nothing new. In the field of social development, the appropriateness of strategies imposed upon developing countries by developed ones has long been a topic of heated debate (CPA Team 1984 cited in Garming 2008). In the field of education, there has also been much deliberation on the need for indigenising curriculum (Altbach 1978). However, it was not until Foucault's (1980) theorisation of the relationships between power and knowledge, which revealed how the production of knowledge can also become a significant reproduction of power, that this discourse was fundamentally reshaped. With Said (1985), who contributed an understanding of the power inherent in and emanating from a Eurocentric knowledge system and, in response, advocated an anti-colonial project for contesting the dominance of Western discourses in the production of knowledge, the universality of knowledge was problematised. In countries whose academic and social settings are least similar to conditions in the West, this has led those in social work who engage in pedagogical activities and service delivery to consider the need for indigenisation in the production of knowledge, especially in the face of increasing globalisation (Midgley 1981, 1992, 2008; see also Walton and Abo El Nasr 1988, Yip 2004, Osei-Hwedie 1993, Wang 2000).

While the views of Foucault and Said have been influential, their deconstructionist and post-colonial perspectives are not shared by all involved in social work education. Walton and Abo El Nasr (1988), for example, saw indigenisation as a stage of transition, of putting an imported knowledge through a process of authentication, thus making it relevant to the local social, cultural, political and economic characteristics. Yan (2005), however, proposed that inter-dependence is more important when a more mature indigenisation of social work practice is introduced in a developing country. Similarly, Yan and Cheung (2006) found it more meaningful to reinterpret indigenisation as a process of re-contextualisation, that is, of the selective appropriation and tweaking of the Western social work discourse on values, theories and practices, to frame a new local social work discourse. These

observations led Gray and Coates (2008) to declare, rather frankly, that indigenisation is an outmoded concept because there are other ways of overcoming professional imperialism or universalistic claims of the superiority of Western social work. In their view, since the 1990s a basic consensus seems to have been emerging from the discourse and debates on indigenisation. It includes the following elements:

- a) Recognition of the importance of the local (Nimmagadda and Cowger 1999);
- b) The inevitability of cross-cultural contacts and exchange, and hence the necessity for cultural sensitivity in social work practices (Coates *et al.* 2006);
- c) Opportunities for and benefits of integrating, adjusting, synthesising and enriching the imported and the local, particularly in terms of ideology, epistemology, technology and teleology (Tsang and Yan 2001, see also Ling 2003, Barise 2005).

For these reasons, they conclude that it would be more appropriate for the discourse on indigenisation to move on and shift its focus from professional imperialism to the concept of cultural relevance.

While these debates have tackled the macro issues of indigenisation and greatly informed the recent development of international social work, the actual processes of indigenisation on the micro level, that is, the ways in which knowledge in social work is imported, filtered, fused, reconfigured, tested, grounded and reproduced in the experiences of non-Western countries, remain under-explored. The primary aim of this paper is to provide a case study of students from the People's Republic of China who have been educated and trained in the Masters of Social Work programme at the Department of Applied Social Sciences of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University since 2000, the year the programme began<sup>1</sup>. The text begins with an investigation of the learning experiences of this group of students from their own perspective, and proceeds to delve into the question of how they attempted to indigenise or make relevant what they had learned upon returning to their homeland and embarking on their professional practice. Hopefully the reflections, insights and assessment of their situations will provide a useful and meaningful foundation which could serve as a basis for further research on international and comparative social work education.

The data on which this chapter is based was collected mainly from 56 student feedback surveys implemented by the Masters of Social Work programme between 2001 and 2005. About two-thirds of these students were female, and half of them studied social work and work in social service organisations. More in-depth interviews with 6 recent Ph.D. graduates and current



<sup>1</sup> This program is funded by the German Catholic church charity, Misereor, and the Hong Kong-based Keswick Foundation.

candidates at the Department of Applied Social Sciences were selected using purposive sampling; these were carried out to elicit additional information on the current progress of and efforts in the indigenisation of social work in the People's Republic of China. They also provided a point of reference for checking data consistency, validity and reliability.

### **The Development of Social Work and Indigenisation Efforts in China**

Social work education and social work practice were first introduced in China by American academics at Yanjing University, the predecessor to Peking University, in the 1920s. By 1930, social work courses were quickly embraced by other prestigious tertiary institutions such as Jinling University, Lingnan University, Fudan University, Qili University, Tsinghua University and Furen University (Lei and Shui 1991, see also Yuen-Tsang and Wang 2002). Then in 1941, due to military invasion by Japan, all teaching programmes in social work ground to a halt, not to be offered again until the end of the Second World War (Li 1991). Together with sociology, social work was terminated by the Communist regime as an academic program at universities in China in 1952. Its approach and content were branded as more relevant to capitalist societies, and thus unfit to serve the needs of the country and the people (Yuan 1988, see also Yip 2008). Instead, the government, and in particular the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MoCA), was to become the sole care provider for all citizens by carrying out political work, mass work, or community work through state-owned factories and work units.

Understandably, the MoCA had a mandate and responsibility to coordinate relief work for all marginalized groups, provide relief work and operate welfare facilities. However, its work was mainly administrative, and many of those employed by the Ministry were simply unable to deliver social welfare tasks effectively and efficiently. It was not until the early 1980s, in the framework of the national drive for modernisation and the realisation of the growing need for social services and increasing demands for properly trained personnel to deliver these services, that the Ministry decided to upgrade its social services to more professional levels (Nie et al. 2004). A two-pronged approach was adopted – on the one hand, the decision was made to look to Western models and transplant what was considered beneficial in order to improve current practices. On the other, having benefited from the reinstatement of sociology at major universities, the Ministry, together with a group of leading university academics, advocated the reintroduction of social work as part of tertiary education curricula in 1986. The following year, the State Education Commission formally approved social work courses as part of the academic programme at the Department of Sociology at Peking University. Other universities, including Jilin University, Xiaman University and Renmin University, followed suit. At the same time, the MoCA had also begun to run its own training classes.

Nonetheless, the growing demand for qualified teaching staff outstripped the number of graduates produced by these universities. In 2000, with financial support from Misereor and the Keswick Foundation, Peking University and the Department of Applied Social Sciences at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University decided to introduce a 'train the trainers' Masters Degree in Social Work (MSW) programme, with the purpose of producing more competent and professional social work educators and practitioners in China. At the same time, formal social work training in China was also expanding rapidly. In 1998, only four social work academic programmes were offered in the entire nation. By 2005, this figure had climbed to 160 (Yan and Cheung 2006), and then to 200 in 2006, with over 95,000 social welfare organisations employing more than 400,000 social work practitioners (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2009). Of course, this was fuelled by policies introduced in 2003 by the MoCA for professionalising social work education and social work practice, which required that social workers not only be trained professionally to acquire formally recognised qualifications, but also that they gain proper accreditation through a national examination before being allowed to practice in the field (Chan *et al.* 2009). Also, the communiqué issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party at the 2006 Plenum, which declared that it was high time for China to build a large, well-structured and qualified corps of social workers, has no doubt given greater impetus to the professionalisation of social work education and practice.

However, it must be noted that, from its introduction in China in 1988 to the call for its expansion and professionalisation in 2006, a constant factor in social work education has been the government's overriding concern for social work's relevance and ability to meet the practical needs of Chinese society, in particular by offering solutions to a host of problems deriving from China's rapid economic transformation and providing stability (Yuen-Tsang and Ku 2008). Another issue surrounding the introduction of social work education that was key for the Chinese government was the possibility that Western 'scientific and systematic' knowledge would be uncritically accepted by academics at universities. While this is a legitimate and reasonable concern, it is also an important political matter because social or helping services in China have long been the exclusive domain of the statist bureaucracy. The adoption of a Western model of social work education could pose a threat to the political influence traditionally enjoyed exclusively by the government bureaucracies (Yuen-Tsang and Ku 2008).

For these reasons, the indigenisation of social work education in China over the last decade or so has always been marked by tensions between practical and theoretical concerns, as well as by conflicts between bureaucratisation and professionalisation. It is easy to understand why Hong Kong and Taiwan, having gone through the process of developing and consolidating their own brand of social work education by adapting and transforming Western knowl-

edge and practices, became a role model of social work indigenisation in China, and, at the same time, Hong Kong was allowed to see itself as a conduit for assisting China in making its own imprint on social work education.

### **Experiences of Students from the People's Republic of China in Hong Kong**

When the Masters of Social Work programme was first instituted at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, its goals included instilling a set of core values of social work and incorporating respect for human dignity, mutual help and support, social justice and human rights in pedagogy and curricula for students from China. It had a multi-disciplinary approach, requiring students to develop, alongside concrete intervention strategies, a broader perspective in appreciating both macro and micro issues in analysing problems. The programme emphasised reflection on lived experiences and practices derived from practicum and preparation for action research and social praxis, encouraging students to obtain knowledge not only through experiential learning, but also through critical thinking and self-reflection (Yuen-Tsang and Ku 2008).

Given that the content and teaching of the courses were largely reflexive, many key teaching staff in the programme had accumulated experiences of indigenising what they had learned overseas to make their curriculum and practicing skills culturally relevant and appropriate for the social milieu in Hong Kong. They were most conscious of and keen to avoid professional imperialism in delivering their knowledge.

Initially, students from China enrolled in the programme were mostly uncertain as to what its outcome would be; however, at the end of the first year, their feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

What stood out in their feedback was not how much they were appreciative of the special efforts their teachers had made to ensure that teaching materials were culturally sensitive and appropriate, particularly by trying to find relevant Mainland Chinese case material to illustrate the cultural differences embedded in concepts pertaining to political rights and values implied in intervention strategies. In fact, feedback obtained through their evaluations of the teaching showed they were not particularly aware of the efforts the teaching staff had made until later, when they had to put into practice what they had learned. During the time they spent learning at the college, they were more excited about the fact they were coming into contact with new ways of learning and thinking. As one of the students wrote in the feedback form:

It was a revelation for me to find out that there is such a big world out there in terms of social work knowledge – all the new unfamiliar names, concepts and theories, and so much to learn. At the end of each lecture, I always felt I had touched on something new. However, that was not only about theories, but more about the learning process, how one's thinking could be stirred up by simply talking and interacting with classmates and teachers.

Another student gave a more reflexive statement:

I did not think too much about the issue of indigenisation – the issue simply did not come up. Perhaps we were just not ready to ask, especially when we were so busy trying to understand all the new materials we came into contact with. What struck me at the time was that I had never imagined social work could be like this, that it is not a simple act of helping people, but there is a philosophy, an ideal behind it, and that it is a profession. Like others, I was so inspired that I wanted to do all the reading, but my English language was not good enough... Instinctively I just kept making copies of all the readings we were supposed to read and hoping one day I could learn all at my own pace.

It was not until they started putting into practice what they had learned in class that they began to confront the issue of indigenisation. In one of the course evaluation questionnaires, a student wrote:

Before I began my practicum, I thought being a social worker was like taking up just like other job – I didn't think social work is a legitimate profession, and I thought it was good enough just to acquire the basic tool, knowing the theories and concepts. But once I was in the field dealing with real people and real situation, everything started to change for me. Suddenly I was forced to think about issues I was not aware of and had to come up with interventions; I could not find answers from the books and articles I read because the socio-cultural backgrounds of the people I came in contact with were Chinese, and Western-inspired intervention strategies just would not work.

A similar reflection was provided by He, a graduate from Hong Kong City University's social work programme. As a beginning social worker with a Chinese Mainland background practicing in the Tin Shui Wai<sup>2</sup> area of Hong Kong, she was immediately confronted with feelings of confusion and frustration arising from having to deal with cultural differences and the indigenisation of social work practice standards in the case of the corporal punishment of young children in the community. As someone who grew up in China, she could identify very well with the effectiveness of corporal punishment for disciplining young children. She wrote:

My experience tells me that it is OK for kindergarten children to play out of their parents' sight, and that physical punishment serves a purpose in disciplining children; just as in the old saying, 'No sticks, no disciplined kids'.



<sup>2</sup> Tin Shui Wai is a new town in Hong Kong's New Territories where many migrants from the Chinese Mainland and South Asian countries have settled. It was labeled the 'city of sadness' after a number of cases of killings caused by domestic violence was widely reported by the mass media. These tragedies also inspired a number of films made by Hong Kong directors.

However, after working as a social worker in Hong Kong, she also learned something different, and uncertainty arose, particularly from not knowing what to do when she witnessed a possible case of child abuse:

The professional stance and the Hong Kong culture tells me that some measures might need to be taken if such situations arise. These two different perspectives sometimes confuse me and cause me to fail to act. One evening in the community the sound of crying accompanied by a father's scolding was heard. Through the window, a chicken-feather duster could be seen. My supervisor asked us to advise different agencies of the situation, and finally she asked me to report it to the police. I hesitated and wondered whether it was serious enough to do this. (He 2007: 651)

Although the feedback from the Masters students of Hong Kong Polytechnic University did not provide examples as detailed as the one above, a number of students wrote about their concerns over the issue of indigenisation and the cultural relevance of teaching and practicing social work when they return home:

In the process of the practicum, it made me think about how I should integrate what I learned in Hong Kong with the social situations in China when I get a teaching job or working for an NGO.

It made me realize that social work education is a political arena – because when you are teaching or practicing, you are making a statement reflecting your ideal, mission and choices. You learned new theories, perspectives, professional techniques and standards for practices and you want to see changes. But changes are not always easy and they are political, and you cannot just change things for the sake of bringing changes...

I did wonder whether what I learned would be helpful in preparing me to work with the system of institutions, organizations and individuals when I return to China. I worry that when I now have a much broader view of what social work and social work education could be, whether I would feel constrained to be working under a system with a different set up in terms of values, visions and attitude.

### **Teaching and practicing social work in China**

Indeed, the worries of the graduates of Hong Kong Polytechnic University seemed to be justified when some of them began their professional career upon returning to their homeland. Many found the institutional setting for social work education and practice to be somewhat woeful. Firstly, the immediate overall impression of those who continued to teach in social work was that of a big letdown. One graduate pointed out that because he had seen how the teaching staff in Hong Kong were able to blend local expertise with perspectives from mature external models, he was disappointed by the resistance exhibited by his colleagues, who came from a number of different backgrounds, ranging from sociology, history, and politics to Marxist philosophy, and worked together to develop an interdisciplinary approach to and deeper understanding

of social work. Similarly, another graduate grumbled about her frustration over how many of her colleagues in the department continued to teach only theories about social work, altogether ignoring a search for more effective ways of indigenising social work practice. 'They simply did not want to have anything to do with practice because they thought practice was inferior to theories without knowing that practices do inform theories.' For this reason, she expressed concern that 'if theories and practice are not integrated in social work education, not only the quality of students in the discipline will remain inadequate... Social work will never become professionalised in China.'

A third informant interviewed for this paper agreed. However, he also commented that at present, a critical issue confronting social work education in China is the lack of experienced social work practitioners in supervising social workers and students. In his view, the problem was two-fold:

On the one hand, formal education did not prepare them to deal with complex problems. On the other, in spite of the best efforts...in their front line work, they are simply unprepared and inexperienced for handling complex problems. Worse still, advice from teachers and supervisors is often not there because the former is not interested and the latter is hard to find.

Some typical frustrations and difficulties could be illustrated by the cases described by the graduates. One example pertains to a graduate working with a group of young people between the ages of 12 and 16 who were considered repeat offenders at a high school due to truancy, bullying, brawls, extortion of money, theft, lack of motivation to study and addiction to computer games. In her view, the school authority strongly believed that the best way to handle these 'troublemakers' was to discipline them and bring them under control. As a school social worker, however, she found it hard not to take a more sympathetic view of the students' perspective, particularly when better alternatives, such as showing these young people trust and care instead of isolating them through penalties and harsh criticism without considering their predicament, were suggested by literature from Hong Kong and the West. Yet, few teachers and administrative staff would support her approach, and she found it difficult to access advice and assistance.

Another graduate who was working with women suffering from domestic violence in Beijing had similar complaints. Strongly influenced by feminist theories and concepts, she found it absolutely infuriating to have to refute the commonly held biases against women in China, which often lead to women being blamed and made the obvious targets of any subsequent treatment or intervention every time family violence occurs.

Another graduate mentioned how, when he started advocating an empowerment approach in helping migrant rural workers settle in urban areas, insisting on developing mechanisms and channels that would allow the vulnerable group to have their 'voices' heard and recognised, as well as using oral history



and other participatory methods for conducting research in social work, he was ridiculed and pelted with derision.

If there is a common thread running through all these cases, it is the gradual discovery that indigenising social work should not only involve making theories, concepts and methods culturally relevant in the Chinese setting. To these informants, a pressing need for a much deeper level of transformation of systems and their mindsets, institutional set-ups and actors affiliated with social work was more important. According to one of the informants currently completing a doctorate in social work, systemic flaws exist which made the indigenisation of social work as a discipline difficult. This is because there is a rift between those who regard social work as a practice profession and those who consider it a pure academic discipline. According to one of our informants, the former are more likely to be returnees trained in the West and Hong Kong, while the latter are those who have been working for the MoCA for some time, as bureaucrats or administrators. Typically, the former believed that a number of social services, including child protection, residential care, community development and counselling, should be delivered and managed by properly trained social workers. The latter, on the other hand, tended to not agree that one needs social work credentials 'just' to deliver these services; they view service delivery as a matter of administration, and as a carefully guarded traditional political domain which is now under threat. Interviews with other informants show that these lines are also commonly drawn among academics in tertiary education institutions, with some emphasising that social work and social work education should be configured to a totalising framework integrating theories and practice, and others, particularly those who were historically transferred to social work teaching from other disciplines, such as politics and philosophy, at a time when there were few qualified and trained social work lecturers, convinced that only theories should be taught.

These rifts have led to a number of unfortunate consequences. Upon their return to China, those who were formally educated as social workers found themselves receiving little support in dealing with problems emerging from front-line practice because formal local social work education had not produced many graduates with competence in supervision. Furthermore, as many lecturers currently teaching social work in tertiary education institutions were originally trained in non-social work disciplines, they did not see the necessity of or have the capacity for preparing students with solid skills in delivering and supervising social services. This has made life even more difficult for those who regard practice as an integral part of social work education. One of the informants who participated in this study complained that:

It was frustrating enough for us [those who were properly trained] to be regularly put down or made inferior by those who know little about professional practice. More discouraging was that if we were employed by the MoCA, where most employees were administrators, we would have

no say in our work, ranging from service delivery to peer performance review or program evaluation. Everything was decided and managed by a rigid set of administrative protocol devised by superiors who had little training and understanding of social work as a profession. Within this system, activities extending from service delivery to professional development and advancement are only matters of administrative concern.

For another informant, this was not even the worst-case scenario. This informant contended that when social workers were employed by the MoCA (a significant employer of social workers in China), they were often assigned to work in government departments and work units where most people had little idea of what social work was or what it is supposed to do. Some responded to the social workers with nonchalance, while others were so confused by their presence that they did not know how to handle having social workers around. Ultimately, it was not unusual to find social workers performing tasks that were completely unrelated to what they were trained for, such as strictly administrative tasks or cleaning offices. Not unexpectedly, many social workers felt uncertain about their professional identity, and would question their self-worth and professional esteem and harbour feelings that they were no different from ordinary white collar workers randomly allocated by the government to work anywhere within the government bureaucracy with hardly any consideration of their potential professional contribution. For these reasons, several of our informants indicated that, despite the current official rhetoric of professionalising social workers and making social work practices more relevant to Chinese cultural contexts, changes in the indigenous Chinese bureaucracy, especially those pertaining to educating bureaucrats about the role and tasks and mission of social work, are of paramount importance.

Equally troubling for many social workers was the fact that they found that they lacked professional status and respect in the community at large. A common misgiving they had was the way they were treated by the government, which assigned them to serve communities where local residents had become increasingly recalcitrant about the social problems they encountered. While many of the workers did not resent what they had to do, that is, implementing intervention strategies and services to meet community and individual needs, some could not help but feel rather disappointed by the community residents' attitude towards them. As one informant remarked:

Ordinary citizens don't know what social work really is, and many believed that we're either good-natured, compassionate 'volunteers', or front-line government officials sent by the government to conduct 'political work' or 'mass work', controlling or placating their anger when things began to get a bit out of hand.

For many social workers who were inspired by the noble humanitarianism and compassion of the profession, it was wearisome not only to find that

people were so ignorant about their work and life mission; they were also let down by the fact that they enjoyed little professional credibility and authority among their clients. In some cases, this led to further disillusionment stemming from the perception that they had few prospects for professional development and career promotion. The fact that social workers in China do not command a very high salary doesn't help either. As one informant (a graduate) lamented, 'if we do not earn more than a clerk or an office worker, how can people be convinced that we are "professional"?' A number of informants expressed their disappointment about how little had been done by the government, their professional association and their work units to publicise and 'educate' the general community in order to increase awareness and knowledge of their profession.

### Further Steps in the Development of Social Work in the People's Republic of China

In many ways, the communiqué issued in October 2006 at the plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party was a turning point for the continuation of the indigenisation of social work in China. Since its call for the development of policies and relevant mechanisms for building, educating, assessing, employing and encouraging social workers, specific measures have been introduced to rectify some of the problems faced by social workers formally trained overseas or elsewhere. The municipal government of Shanghai, for example, was the first to attempt to give the profession a higher profile: in 2003, it created three social worker agencies outside of the MoCA to work with disadvantaged young people and drug abusers, and backed this up with a subsidy of 40,000 *yuan* (4182,66 Eur<sup>3</sup>) to cover salaries and overhead. In 2006, the Shanghai municipality employed an additional 8,000 social workers. However, the effort backfired, as only one-third of these were graduates from social work departments at universities (Chang 2006), and many university graduates were unhappy about how high school graduates were allowed to enter the profession of social work.

Nonetheless, in the same year, in a measure intended to professionalise and raise the standards of social work education and practice, three ministries in China, including the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Ministry of Personnel and Labour, introduced a national certification system requiring all social workers to gain proper accreditation and registration by passing a set of exams, regardless of their educational background. A classification of different levels of social workers and a pay scale based on experience were also introduced. Furthermore, as a quick fix to allow cities greater flexibility in managing the severe shortage of supervisory staff in support of social workers, the



<sup>3</sup> All exchange rates are from July 2009.

city of Shenzhen in southern China was allowed to develop its own strategy for building up the capacity of local social workers by allowing government departments as well as NGOs to 'purchase' or import the supervisory services of experienced social workers from Hong Kong, who work part-time or full-time as supervisors to help locally trained social workers become more 'professionalised' and skilled in handling difficult cases (Yuen-Tsang *et al.* 2009).

Despite the introduction of these new measures, for many social work practitioners, the certification and registration of social workers in China will do little to educate the public at large about social work. Through the new system, different levels of social workers have been introduced to provide the professional with a formal trajectory for professionalisation and career development; however, social work practitioners remain divided as to what this could mean for their professional development. In a survey commissioned by the MoCA in Shenzhen in 2008 to assess the development of social work as a profession in the city, Yuen-Tsang *et al.* (2009) found that many respondents were less than pleased about the examination. They complained that, unlike national examinations designed for lawyers and doctors, which require candidates to have completed specified basic training prior to taking the exam, there were no prerequisites for those who took the examination for social workers. In other words, if the examination is open to everyone, it does not confer a professional status upon social work. Some respondents were also worried that the examination focused too much on candidates' knowledge of basic theories and concepts, and too little on their professional values and ethics. Its legitimacy was therefore questionable.

Nonetheless, the government in Dongguan City in Guangdong Province has recently taken note of social workers' complaints, and plans to lift the pay scale for social workers to a level comparable to that of other professionals in China. By its latest revised pay scales for social workers in public social organisations, a social worker at the bottom of the scale – an intern social worker with high school graduate qualification – will fetch a relatively modest monthly income of 2,000 *yuan* ( 209.044 Eur). However, as soon as he or she gains more experience and qualifications and enters the basic entry point (point 13) for social workers, his/her monthly salary will be increased to 3,000 *yuan* (313.508 Eur) per month; it will continue to increase all the way to an impressive 7,000 *yuan* ( 731.485 Eur) at point 8, with even higher salaries available through negotiation (Office of Dongguan Municipal Social Work Leading Team 2009).

## Conclusion

The indigenisation of social work education, both in terms of theory and practice, has been a topic of heated debate. Conventionally, the narrative of indigenisation was associated with the political undertones of knowledge

and professional imperialism; however, in more recent times, the focus of the discourse has shifted to questions of cultural relevance. In other words, how can social work effectively and appropriately respond to unique cultural contexts (Gray and Coates 2008: 24)? To date, the bulk of the literature on making social work culturally relevant seems to have focused on the transfer and re-contextualisation (Yan and Cheung 2006) of professional knowledge and practices. However, observations of experiences of the indigenisation of social work in China, and particularly feedback from graduates who were trained in Hong Kong and returned to their home country to practice, have led us to believe that there is another dimension, one which the current discourse on indigenisation seems to have overlooked. In addition to making knowledge transfers culturally relevant and free from external or top down domination and embracing self-determination, indigenisation should also mean setting up systems and institutions that make it possible for social work knowledge and practitioners to take root and grow in a sustainable manner.

The experiences of students from the People's Republic of China who were trained in Hong Kong have been very informative. Through joint academic programmes and professional practicum, they seem to have found ways to question, digest and rethink what was offered to them in the social work profession and turn it into culturally relevant tools for professional pedagogy and practice. In doing so, the stage has been set for them to become pioneers and trail blazers for the future of social work education and practice in China. On the other hand, social work educators and practitioners continue to face challenges, especially those embedded in the system and institutional set up, such as the unfortunate rift between an emphasis on theory and an emphasis on practice in teaching and a lack of professional support for social work practitioners in the government and NGOs. Both aspects have been rather disheartening for social work education and practice and their goal of taking root, growing and becoming professionalised in China.

Since 2006, when the discipline received unambiguous support from the central government, there have also been encouraging portents for the development of social work education and practice. New measures, including the introduction of a national certification examination and registration system, have aimed at standardising, qualifying and, hopefully, professionalising social workers. Greater flexibility was also given to the MoCA, NGOs and other government departments in selected cities in China, such as Shanghai and Shenzhen, to experiment with purchasing supervisory services from imported experienced social workers to alleviate the severe shortage of supervisory social work staff and provide beginning social workers with better access to supervision in their work. And the plans recently revealed by the Dongguan Municipal Government in southern China include providing more support, both financial and in kind, for social work training, supervision, and service delivery, as well as the introduction of a professional classification

system and a pay scale for social work practitioners that formally rewards professional training and experience (Office of Dongguan Municipal Social Work Leading Team 2009). These are good indications that the indigenisation of social work is making great leaps forward. Admittedly, there is room for fine-tuning the policies and measures already introduced, and bottlenecks will need to be overcome.

The lessons gained from the case of China are illustrative of the complexities and multi-dimensionality of what the indigenisation of the transfer of knowledge and practice involves. At the same time, some may question whether the Chinese experience of indigenising social work is useful and relevant for other countries, such as Vietnam and Cambodia, which are beginning to develop their own social work identity, but are facing analogous problems (Collins 1998, see also Nguyen 2002, Hugman *et al.* 2007, Evans and Harkness 2008). Either way, the Chinese experience will serve as a valuable reminder of the necessity and importance of conducting comparative research in international social work development.

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