
Academic Colonialism and the Struggle for Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Taiwan

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This article reviews the operations of academic colonialism in subjugating the epistemological and cultural characteristics of scholars in former colonies. It focuses on Taiwan and the particularly difficult circumstances faced by Indigenous scholars in Taiwan to gain recognition of their knowledge and cultural perspectives. The article goes on to examine ways in which Indigenous academics and new institutions are acting to surmount the oppressions of academic colonialism.

How Academic Colonialism Works

Academic colonialism stands for how states occupying the centre where knowledge is produced, transmitted, and ordered, in an unfair academic division-of-labor at the global level have successfully coerced scholars located in the peripheral states to accept their dominated relations in thoughts and ideas by standardising, institutionalising, and socialising academic disciplines (Friedman 1965; Lander 2000; Alatas 2003; Heilbron et al. 2008). In the past, the empires would utilise colonisation for waging direct control. Nowadays, when most colonies have obtained their formal independence, the former can still resort to academic dependency implanted on the minds of the academics in the latter so that indirect control is no less useful. Accordingly, Alatas (2003, 602) terms it academic neo-imperialism or academic neo-colonialism.

Within this academic colonialism, scholars in the center of knowledge, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, or France,¹ may enjoy the following advantages: (1) producing enormous amounts of research outputs in the forms of journal articles, academic books, or research reports, (2) transmitting thoughts and information through these media, (3) influencing scholars in other countries by promoting academic consumption, and (4) enjoying over-proportionally prestigious status domestically and internationally (Alatas, 2003, 602).

On the other hand, native scholars in knowledge-dependent states have to ask for endorsement by 'foreign monks' in areas such as research agenda-settings, definitions of research problems, applications of methods, or selections of scientific indicators. Psychologically, these scholars are not only passive or inactive. More fundamental is their deep complex of inferiority, which makes them refrain from exercising any autonomous thinking. For those who are relatively more aggressive, the best strategy is to edge themselves closer to the inner circle of the academic network (Alatas 2003, 603).

In order to guarantee that original ideas must come from the centre, measures to domesticate, if not, control the thoughts² of peripheral scholars are necessary. First of all, a broad paradigmatic and theoretic circle is firmly drawn, so that those peripheral scholars know only how to mimic whatever originated from the centre. Then, to entrench their eventually voluntary submission, various institutional mechanisms have to be constructed, such as acceptance of papers at international conferences or articles in journals. The object is to make sure that no single dissent exit is allowed to exist. Finally, by accepting the few selective incentives provided for, these trapped in the imposed tall walls of knowledge would willingly and habitually accept whatever is offered. In the words of Smith (2006, 65) this amounts to 'paralysing fatalism.'

Since this is basically a kind of patronage, the patrons will look after the clients while the latter have to show their loyalty to the former. As academic territories are considered 'private reserves' (Gareau, 1998' 172), both the imports and the exports of knowledge have to be regulated by the latter, who are in essence cheap brokers of the first order in academia (Mignolo, 1993, 130). While they may be dignified as scholars par excellence domestically, these humble 'intellectual other,' to borrow the words of Mignolo (1993, 123), turn pale and secondary when turning around and facing those supposedly polite and yet snobbish masters.³

Academic Dilemmas in Taiwan

In contrast to natural sciences, social sciences have their common origin in solving relationships among human beings. Therefore, they are by nature sensitive to cultural differences between states. To no less a degree, cultural sensitivity is demanded in handling researches on scientific problems pertaining to different ethnic groups within any single country. Similarly, since there are inescapably paramount differences in norms resulting from cultural boundaries between Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies, much more imaginary tolerance is required in order to create multicultural spaces within

the academic community domestically. If those senior professors in social sciences, who control the access to tenure and promotion, fail to possess any minimum cultural sensitivity and insist on employing one-size-fits-all indicators while being impatient and reluctant to listen to those seemingly heretic views upheld by junior Indigenous scholars, academic seeds can never be rooted within the indigenous community. As a result, those few indigenous scholars, as if stranded in the time machine, are destined to be caught in the middle of well-established traditional fields of studies, such as anthropology and sociology, and an interdisciplinary area of indigenous studies.

As Jack D. Forbes (1998, 14) puts it: 'Enslaved minds won't operate effectively'. If human minds are designed for only accepting whatever the colonists have decreed, no intelligentsia is about to come to existence. In their forever struggle for spiritual de-colonisation, Indigenous scholars, knowing that they run the risk of being rejected, marginalised, or silenced, are reluctant to yield their own personal identity to professional acceptance. They thus put forward the idea of 'intellectual sovereignty,'⁴ in the hope that they may reclaim their own lead in knowledge interpretations, including agenda-setting, problem definitions, framework constructions, theory makings, method selections and paradigm adoptions. The goal is quite unmistakable: the development of an Indigenous intelligentsia within a hostile non-Indigenous academic society (Warrior 1992; Forbes 1998; Deloria 1998; Smith 1999; Rigney 2001).

Just as Taiwan has been playing the role of manufacturing-agents in world economics since World War II, so the Taiwanese academia has been pursuing the status of academic soldiers- of- fortune in the production of knowledge. Since knowledge is deemed as precious imported goods, in order to solicit approval and endorsement from international masters, Taiwanese scholars have learned how to gain their favor in their efforts at indiscriminate implantations of knowledge. For some, it appears that getting hooked to international networks is imperative. Some tenured full professors would dwarf themselves as research assistants – just as they did in graduate schools decades ago – in the hope that they may be awarded exclusive franchise, for instance, of econometric models developed elsewhere.

For the Taiwanese doctors, the fast track toward successfully establishing international connections would be to attend the annual convention of traditional disciplines. In recent years, as some conferences have become the outlets for doctoral candidates and conference papers are accessible on-line, academic socialisation tends to prevail over mutual academic enlightenments.

Generally speaking, international academic encounters would take the form of inviting experts in the field to deliver speeches, offer a short course, or take a sabbatical leave in Taiwan. Step by step, one minimal goal envisioned by native scholars is to be listed, at least, as one co-author of articles on international journals. Becoming correspondent authors or first authors would be the next anxious goal. If possible, it would be delightful to be invited to sit on the editorial board of an international journal.

After frequent visits to the periphery, scholars from the center would automatically become experts on certain countries. It doesn't matter whether they understand native languages in terms of listening comprehension, speaking, reading or writing since there are many local scholars—eager to claim the role of exclusive knowledge representative—ready to serve as informants. For those internationally renowned experts, whose academic interpretations are considered free from any flaws, whatever native scholars have contributed to the work can at best deserve a footnote. Usually, the latter's perspectives may just be neglected or, to the worst, silenced, perhaps in the convenient excuse that they are not written in English, or simply denounced as inaccessible to those in the mainstream.

For the Taiwanese scholars, it is nice if they are invited as visiting or exchanges scholars, so that there would be one more entry on the list of their current curriculum vitae. Especially for those who are locally trained, this credential may be highly helpful in their career planning. Academic dependency is thus gradually consolidated in this asymmetrical exchange of academic knowledge.

The Struggle of Indigenous Scholars in Taiwan

At the domestic scene, Indigenous scholars in Taiwan take a more difficult winding path than do non-Indigenous scholars. If Indigenous scholars are positioned at the peripheries of the center, those in Taiwan are relegated to the periphery of the knowledge periphery. Facing the destiny of double marginalisation, the only hopeful resurrection is to seek practical illuminations from international experiences. Nonetheless, they still have to defy suspicious eyes from their non-Indigenous colleagues.

If Indigenous people around the world, having managed to escape such structural violence as poverty or discrimination, decide to enter into academic research as a career, the most critical challenge would be what appropriate disciplines are allowed for them. While natural sciences may seem neutral and draw little attention to their Indigenous background, the choice of humanities or social sciences is further determined by the availability of scholarships in addition to affirmative action plans in any form. Except for the emerging interdisciplinary area of

Indigenous Studies, the most popular fields of studies, in recent years, would be anthropology, sociology, linguistics, law, and political science.

For non-Indigenous scholars coming from the mainstream society, Indigenous Peoples are better conveniently preserved as 'objects' for the purpose of 'scientific' observations.⁵ Within this grandiose and impartial context, Indigenous tribes are considered living museums, while they are presumed to live in historical sojourns. For the future advisers, particularly anthropologists and linguists, prospective Indigenous graduate students happen to be the most perfect candidates as research assistants for on-site interpretations or data collection. From time to time, Indigenous students, who depend on the support of these supervisors for their degrees and future careers, have to turn deaf ears to confrontations in this research, such as, in the field, determining which community members are qualified to speak as experts between the advisers and Indigenous elders.

Having eventually become employed as college teachers, Indigenous scholars—for the sake of career development—need to resolve whether to take up an 'orthodox' discipline or Indigenous Studies as their focus of research. For cautious ones, sticking to a 'traditional' area of study may be the safest approach to receive their tenure. For most of them, no energy should be wasted on such miscellaneous errands as Indigenous Studies before they become full professors or, at least, they are awarded associate professorship. With this pragmatic priority in mind, Indigenous issues will not appear on the top of their research agendas.

On the other hand, if some avowed Indigenous scholars are determined to pursue Indigenous Studies as their dedicated academic end and concentrate their professional training on such issues as how to protect Indigenous rights and how to promote Indigenous welfare, they are immediately bound to meet the charge of being 'too practical'—read as 'lacking theoretical contributions'. Even if they may be enlisted by government agencies to tackle urgent Indigenous issues, before long, another pivotal question is waiting on the line for a prudent answer: in order to be acknowledged as a professional, what discipline will be designated for evaluating their teaching, research, and service works? A similar question is: what kind of academic journals, disciplinary or interdisciplinary, are targeted for submitting research papers? The Indigenous academics are forced to make a career and moral choice: should they tactically disguise their Indigenous identities and tone down their Indigenous positions while appeasing the dominant paradigm and values in each area?

Redemption by Indigenous Knowledge Sovereignty

In the face of benign neglect by the non-Indigenous, society, how are Indigenous scholars to break away from the inevitability of being patronised? Starting with the idea of Indigenous knowledge sovereignty, we envision a determination to made Indigenous Peoples as the 'subject,' rather than 'object,' of Indigenous research and education. A solemn pledge must be made to embark on the momentous task of indigenisation of thoughts.

Rigney (2001,10) considers Indigenous knowledge sovereignty a procedural concept, which is process-centered rather than outcome oriented. Likewise, Summer (2008) lays emphasis on the importance of institutional power, especially the control of educational institutions. Alatas (2003, 2000) would proceed with both substantive and structural dimensions. Firstly, in terms of substance, even though professional knowledge, including theories, methods, and philosophies of science, may be borrowed from without, the operation of agenda-setting needs to be dictated from within. Secondly, in terms of structure, existent academic boundaries, if not barriers, including degree-awarding, educational investment, research granting, technical transferring, and output publishing, need to be transformed.

In the wake of the ratification of the United Nations Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, never have Indigenous Peoples had such amicable circumstances to promote their inherent rights as enshrined in this international document. Within this favorable context, Indigenous scholars have the exact opportunity to uphold their knowledge sovereignty. For them, in order to be caught in the iron cages of traditional disciplines, their first priority would be the development of an interdisciplinary Indigenous Studies.

What then, is Indigenous Studies? According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, 172–175), the nature of Indigenous Studies ought to be of, for, and by Indigenous scholars. While sticking to these requirements, all efforts must be made for transformation, decolonisation, healing, and mobilisation, so that the goals of survival, recovery of traditional territories, economic development, and national self-determination may eventually be sought (Smith, 116–117).

Institutionally, the College of Indigenous Studies at National Dong Hwa University was established in 1991 to show the government's commitment to enhance Indigenous education as well as research. It is probably unique in the world in being a dedicated faculty to local Indigenous studies. Born under the unpleasant pressure of Indigenous legislators and the bumpy collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the Council of Indigenous Peoples, it is making modest and yet

promising progress toward teaching, researching, and servicing excellence. Right now its publication the *Taiwan Journal of Indigenous Studies* is entering its second year, and the Dong Hwa Series on Indigenous Studies has published eight research, culture, and policy books since its inception in 2008. This is in addition to broad and multi-faceted undergraduate, postgraduate and research training. Strong community engagement and involvement evolves naturally out of the staff and student networks and through association with Indigenous organisations and the government ministries.

Whether in the form of Mignolo's idea of 'de-center' (1993, 124) or that of Smith's 'voice from the margin' (2006, 66), we hope for the college to become a hub for Indigenous intelligentsia, a consortium of Indigenous Studies, and a think tank on Indigenous policy. In the immediate future, we expect that a few young Indigenous scholars who are finishing their doctoral programs will join our team soon. In the median and long terms, plans need to be made to train, in the minimum, dozens of Indigenous scholars, perhaps through the help from our Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues all around the world.

Notes

1 Alatas (2003: 606) would list social sciences in Australia, Japan, the Netherlands, and Germany as semi-peripheral states since academic dependency there may not be so severe while they may not so far have significant academic contribution. In other words, compared to the former, they may not have shown scholarly originality. And yet, in terms of providing for generous research grants, post-doctoral research positions, and organizing international conferences, they have made headway over those in the Third World.

2 Include concepts, theories, models, and methods. See Alatas (2003: 608).

3 If there are native scholars who dare to speak out their own voices, that is, with the so-called "subjectivity," it would face the fate of being judged as too "subjective" (Mignolo, 1993: 123, 127).

4 Forbes (1998: 14) has such similar terms as "intellectual self-determination" and "intellectual autonomy." Deloria (1998) also treats "intellectual self-determination" and "intellectual sovereignty" as synonyms.

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