

## BOOK REVIEW

*Asia as Method in Education Studies: A Defiant Research Imagination.*  
By Hongzhi Zhang, Philip Wing Keung Chan and Jane Kenway (Eds.)  
(2015), 182pp. ISBN: 9781138785960, New York: Abingdon, Oxon.

This book is an edited volume of ten chapters with “Asia as method” as their thematic focus. This phrase, used by all chapter authors and editors to frame their discussion, comes from the title of a book by Kuan Hsing Chen published in 2010. It refers to the reclamation of Asian scholarship from Western dominance, and is a subject of great import but insufficiently discussed. Often associated with colonialism, this phase has passed but Western education has spread not only by large numbers of students studying for higher degrees in the West but by the expansion of transnational education.

If the contents of these chapters are anything to go by, the book by Chen must have offered much food for thought. The topics covered by these chapters traverse a wide landscape, ranging from discussions of concepts to empirical studies. Of the former type are the relationship between colonisation and imperialism related to education (Wu in Chapter 4), the concept of “self” compared in Asia and West (Nguyen and Leihy in Chapter 5), and an argument against Asia-centrism as the remedy for Western academic hegemony (Singh in Chapter 9). Empirical studies dealt with case studies of China – Australia research (Zhang, et al. in Chapter 2), the Japanese notion of silence in the Australian context of academic discourse (Bao in Chapter 3), education strategies in Indonesia (Kuswandono, et al. in Chapter 6), language teaching practices in Vietnam (Vu and Le in Chapter 7), education research in Bangladesh (Rashid et al, Chapter 8) and a curriculum incorporating China – Australia knowledge co-production at the University of Western Sydney (Singh in Chapter 9).

A range of positions relating to the arguments put forward by Chen, and explained in the first chapter by one of the editors were taken – from elaboration and validation (Chapters 2,3), to doubts about some concepts’ applicability (Chapters 6, 7 and 8), and to openly questioning the principles advanced by Chen (Chapter 9). This breadth of views gives the volume a balanced treatment of the subject, even if benchmarked against a single author.

While there is little doubt that the “West” broadly defined dominates the academic arena whether in terms of concepts, theories, pedagogies, and institutions, the use of cold war terminology like imperialism and colonialism exaggerates the divide and exacerbates the “us vs. them” mentality in the discourse. This is no better illustrated in the book’s subtitle – “a defiant research imagination”. But why does it have to be defiance? The large numbers of Asian students in tertiary education in the West are there by choice. Their decision takes in the fact that foreign degrees are given greater weight by employers when they seek employment, and the general view that Western education institutions are generally better than Asian ones. In making their choice, it cannot be that they are unaware of the fact that they will be learning Western concepts and in English. But it is a choice they make, conscious of what they are getting into. Invoking Cold War terminology to describe a phenomenon that is no longer related suggests a contest of ideology and thereby diminishes, unintentionally or otherwise, the role of pragmatism in decision-making by key stakeholders in education. To be fair, Chen himself would have Asian scholars rise above that divide, but the very fact he thought it important to do so signals its existence in his mind.

Reliance on Western source material, as a source of academic dependency, is only to be expected since instructors in Western universities naturally recommend sources with which they are familiar, and students take cue from their instructors. Further, in much of Southeast Asia, there is a paucity of materials in local languages. For students from countries facing no such constraint,

namely China including Taiwan, Japan, and Korea, efforts need to be made by scholars from these countries to also make use of academic materials written in their own languages.

It is also not true that Western ideologies and models are being peddled against the wishes of Asian universities and academics. On the contrary, universities like the National University of Singapore and others have been trying to benchmark themselves to emulate Harvard and MIT by using Western ranking criteria and systems. And they, as well as leading universities in Asia, are advancing in these rankings. The drive for publishing scholarly work in English has seen China move up to second place globally behind the United States. These efforts – to try to beat the West at its own game – should also be seen as reducing Western dominance and at the same time bringing local contexts to bear in Asian scholarly work.

An interesting issue raised in the book relates to whether the use of a Western language, specifically English, amounts to academic imperialism. As Chapter 7 noted, the debate was framed in terms of nationalism vs. the colonial past. But for former colonial countries like Malaysia, this argument has no substantive merit. In the Malaysian case, the switch from English to Malay was more motivated by affirmative action. In Vietnam, French, not English, is the language of the colonialists. The demand for English in Asia comes from the pragmatic view that English is no longer a colonial language but the *lingua franca* of business.

Another related issue, given the title of the book, is how Asia is defined. As the seminal paper by Milne and Johnson (1997) shows, this is no easy task. Chen echoes this difficulty by embracing a broad and complex definition (Kenway, p. 15). The problem with this definition is that Asia is so culturally and linguistically diverse and beset with so many historical and political fissures that it has become not a particularly useful frame of reference. Some of these problems are discussed in this book, when Kuswandono, et al. (Chapter 6, p. 109) stated that Chen's notion of 'Asia' "do not speak to the Indonesian context".

On the book itself, although its contents are fairly wide-ranging, it draws its contributors from a single faculty (education) in a single university (Monash). Even the contents which have major academic significance are framed against a single scholastic work. This narrowness certainly has done no harm to the breadth and depth of perspectives expressed. But it represents a missed opportunity to explore and debate this important subject about which not just Chen but scholars before (e.g. Alatas, 2003; Marglin, 1996) and after him (e.g. Beigel, 2013; Mentah, 2015) have made contributions. Levelling the playing field in terms of acknowledging the contribution of the many scholars would have added richness to this discussion, moving it beyond the need to address Chen at every turn.

And in terms of the field of study, education, it should be noted that Western academic hegemony has different meanings in different academic disciplines. It is obviously a major issue in the social sciences, of which education is a part, but likely less so in the physical sciences. The law of gravity is the law of gravity whoever seeks to explain it; it just happened that leadership in science fell to the West from the time of the Industrial Revolution. But even in the social sciences it cannot be assumed that Western methodologies should be superseded by Asian-grounded methodologies. Thus, Rashid, et al.'s (Chapter 8) claim that difficulties with implementation invalidated Western data collection methods is unfounded. All methodologies must be adapted to specific circumstances, including cultural practices, whether in the West or Asia.

Overall, both in the breadth of its coverage and the depth of its analysis, this book makes a scholarly contribution to a major subject that has not received as much attention as it deserves. Still, in limiting its scope to focus on a single scholar's ideas, opportunities for a broader debate have been missed. In addition, given this singular focus and the uncompromising use of jargon, the layman reader and even an uninitiated scholar should be forgiven if he/she believes that this is a book written about insiders by insiders for insiders.

*Cheong Kee Cheok*  
*University of Malaya*