

Navigating our culturally interconnected world

The concept of interculturality between Asia and the world was a central theme at the 9th International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS 9), held recently in Adelaide, Australia. While the notion of interculturality is relatively new, its prominence at ICAS 9 highlighted the importance of rethinking the diverse cultural variations in existence and their impact on our increasingly interconnected and interdependent world. The notion encourages mutual understanding between various interacting cultures. Academic researchers play a pivotal role in identifying, analysing and articulating the differing cultural phenomena, and all being well, they also help to increase levels of intercultural understanding. Equally important is that policymakers take into account the effects of intercultural issues on societies, and consider findings produced by academic researchers.

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(Dis)connect between research and policy

Many research findings presented at ICAS 9 were particularly relevant for our increasingly interconnecting world. The findings would be valuable sources of information for policymakers in their efforts. However, practice appears to indicate that there is a lack of focus on the broader implications of academic research, and on policy strategies reflecting the relevant research findings.

A study presented by scholars from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, for example, found that the indigenous Indian caste system continues to operate within Indian communities residing in Britain. The Dalits (untouchables) are at the base of this caste system, with the Valmikis being the lowest of all Dalits. Members of the Valmiki community are traditionally assigned to menial work only, such as sweeping and sanitation tasks. The Indian diaspora communities in Britain continue to observe practices related to the caste system despite the changing societal context, that is, a Western democratic society.

Several questions could arise from this particular research finding. For instance, what will happen in the British workplace where Indian Hindu employees, with different caste identities, have to work as a team? What would be the impact on the team when a person of a lower caste but in a senior position encounters a person of a higher caste but in a lesser position? The same questions would also arise in the event of similar scenarios occurring during international negotiations, socially or politically. Nevertheless, this particular study focused primarily on the Indian migrant communities in Britain, and their opinion of the practice of the caste system in general. While the study did state the importance of examining transformations of indigenous value systems for understanding various aspects of different societies, it would

have been helpful to articulate the implications of indigenous value systems being observed under differing, transnational circumstances. In the case of the Indian caste system being observed in Britain, it would be critical to consider the impact of this inherent cultural system within an environment that is based on equality and individuality.

My own presentation at ICAS 9 articulated the fundamental differences between the Chinese and Western conceptualisation processes with a focus on the notion of democracy. My research demonstrated a conditional nature to the understanding of democracy in China. This conditional nature is rooted in China's ancient Confucian philosophy and cultural practices that prescribe the rights and responsibilities of individuals in relation to their designated position in the societal hierarchy. These prescriptions are explicit in emphasising the supremacy of the state over society, and of society over the individual. This contrasts with the prominence of individuality that is fundamental to Western notions of democracy. While it is beneficial to identify the differences between Chinese and Western conceptualisation processes, it would also be useful to examine the implications of such differences. With regard to the Confucian construct, the impact of such prescribed conducts for individuals in a societal environment that emphasises individual rights and freedom should also be a focal point of research. However, my experiences seem to indicate that there is a lack of emphasis on implications of particular researches. In truth, I have spoken to Asia scholars in the past who admit to not concerning themselves with implications of their research in any way.

(Re)connect research with policy

Making practical use of academic knowledge needs to be a concerted effort by researchers as well as public or commercial policymakers. It is important for academia and policymakers to

function not as different entities, but with the intention of collaboration, while maintaining their respective independence.

Academic requirements for the element of research implications appear to suggest that simply contributing to academic debates, or providing fresh and under-explored aspects to phenomena, is sufficient. Yet academic research is conducted with scientific and systematic rigour, producing robust findings. Research is also strengthened by the academic peer review process to ensure validity and ability to withstand closer scrutiny. Adding practical applicability to the research process by articulating and providing examples of its relevance to the current society would further enrich the particular research, as well as ensure its constructive legacy in the society of the future. Improved awareness of and access to such findings would allow policymakers to incorporate research evidence into policy considerations, and help ensure the relevance and viability of their policies.

For scholars there needs to be an increased emphasis on how particular research findings relate to current and future societies, and what the advantages and disadvantages would be when the particular findings are incorporated into relevant public or commercial policies. In particular, considering the varying, inherent cultural values and practices that exist within any current national border, it is increasingly critical to identify and articulate where the particular differences lie between Asian and other various, co-existing philosophies and practices; why they are different, and how these differences would transpire and effect impact under differing social and political contexts.

Coming together

For the policymakers of (Asia-related) multicultural societies, conferences such as ICAS 9 offer ideal opportunities to access current research. Research presented at such conferences often emphasise findings rather than methodology. This is advantageous for the often time-conscious policymakers, allowing them to obtain a considerable amount of research information concerning a wide range of social and political issues within a relatively short period. Furthermore, they would have the opportunity to interact directly with relevant researchers who are able to address related policy issues immediately, or to collaborate in devising potential research plans that are both relevant to current policy concerns and to the researchers' interests.

In sum, it is no longer sufficient for scholars of Asia to simply observe and acknowledge cultural or political phenomena. New scholars of Asia need to go further. They need to explore the idea of intervention through articulating their research impact on the society and encouraging considerations of academic research findings in policymaking processes.

Above and below:
Supporters en route
to Tiananmen Square
during the 1989
Student Movement
in Beijing; case
study photographs
by author.



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