

Intercultural dialogue in support of indigenous cultures: Indigenous knowledge curriculum design at Sichuan University, China

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Introduction

This chapter describes and analyses the development, the perspective and the significance of the training of university lecturers at Sichuan University in Chengdu in March/April 2006. Ten days were dedicated to designing indigenous knowledge (IK) courses for masters' students in Ecology, History and Anthropology (Culture studies). We held the training course for 12–24 participants, with the larger group joining the first six days of theories, methods, rights and ethics of IK, while only 12 lecturers from the three disciplines actually designed the courses based on innovative pedagogical principles.

The course was embedded in a general philosophical-theoretical framework of knowledge as a human intellectual effort to explain reality. It was conceived of as a learning experience, by which the participants took part in a self-reflective process of their own knowledge premises in order to come closer to other ways of thinking reality. Although dealing with concrete human practices regarding the environment, the course included the embodiment in human ideas and values – cosmovision/knowledge – behind those practices. Ecological, sociological as well as anthropological approaches to knowledge were the principal sources, which help to link IK to ethno-development as a mutually enriching encounter of different worldviews.

From a teaching perspective, the course aimed to develop understanding about how to develop the basic elements of a curriculum. It created an opportunity to assess and decide how to develop a holistic learning approach, and theoretical and practical teaching methods that not only enhance the learning capacities of those being taught, but also improve the practical application of this knowledge to benefit biodiversity and the cultures of indigenous people/nationalities.

Reshaping academic education

In July 2005 representatives of three institutions from Chengdu founded the Upper Yangzi Indigenous Knowledge and Nature Conservation Network as a contribution to the Indigenous Knowledge and Peoples (IKAP) Network for Capacity Building in

Mainland Montane South-East Asia (MMSEA),¹⁸ whose secretariat is located in the regional hub of Chiang Mai. The confluence of the three institutions is significant for the reshaping of the relationships between education, research, development and policy as the acknowledgement of IK and ethnic cultures is novel within the educational system in China.

Convened by WWF's Chengdu office, the lecturers of ecology at the Life Sciences College of Sichuan University and a local NGO named Shuoguang that engages in grassroots development projects in different parts of China, decided to promote IK for endogenous development by undertaking action research in areas linked to panda reserves in the Minshan Region of Northern Sichuan. WWF intends to reshape the relation between police-like nature reserve staff and the local populations, who are Qiang, Baima, Tibetan, Hui and also Han, so that fruitful contact and dialogue can happen about the still-existing knowledge and wisdom of the local ethnic cultures for the benefit of nature.

The Life Sciences Institute of Sichuan University, as scientific advisors to the Minshan Initiative of WWF, recognized the importance that their graduate students not only learn about biodiversity and natural sciences, but also the concepts and methods of IK and cultural affirmation to be applied in the ethnic areas. Their graduates should be able in the future to engage in endogenous development projects and acquire the skills to promote IK and ethnic cultures for the benefit of local environment and peoples. Therefore we were invited to train the lecturers of Sichuan University on concepts, methods, rights and ethics of IK and to coach them for the design of a complementary curriculum for masters' students starting in September 2006.

The Upper Yangzi Network is engaged in translating the base texts on IK into a Chinese language reader, in funding case studies on indigenous biodiversity knowledge of Baima, Tibetan and Qiang villages in Maoxian, Jiuzhaigou, Baishuijiang and Pingwu Counties, in writing a manual on how to discover, understand and encourage the use of IK for local development, and in developing a series of events and courses to broaden the awareness of IK. As part of the Regional Network of IKAP the Sichuan-based group of professionals received intellectual support from a capacity building advisor of IKAP.¹⁹ A team of Chengdu-based professionals are specializing as trainers to train indigenous facilitators in areas close to nature reserves, starting first in Minshan Watershed area with a perspective to involve institutions and rural villages from the western and southern parts of Sichuan (diversity of Yi ethnic groups, Tibetan, Jiarong, Pumi and Mosuo).

Characteristics of the minority areas of Sichuan

The mountainous areas of Sichuan in the west, south and north (prefectures of Da Liangshan, Ganse and Aba) are the homelands of a diversity of ethnic minority

¹⁸ Includes the mountainous areas of Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and SW-China (provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou).

¹⁹ PSO and ICCO from The Netherlands funded our work as capacity building advisor at IKAP between September 2003 and September 2006.

cultures that belong to the nationalities of Zang (Tibetan), Qiang and Yi within the official classification system. The Tibetan, Baima and Jiarong ethnic groups belong to the Tibetan nationality, the Qiang are an ethnic group and recognized as a nationality, and the Yi encompass a diversity of ethnic groups (in Da Liangshan prefecture, the main Yi culture is the Nuosu), all belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language group. In these homelands, the ethnic groups constitute the majority of the rural population, who still keep their traditional livelihoods and cultures alive. It is a rough geography and landscape of gorges and steep mountains, difficult to conquer and dominate. The Yangzi River and its tributaries cut through this mountain range. Indigenous groups and some Han adventurers settled here many centuries ago to become herders and farmers, developing original indigenous technologies and knowledge systems. It is considered by ecologists to be one of the most important and least-studied areas for biodiversity on earth, not only because of the habitat of the giant panda, but also its inhospitable mountains have created pockets of microclimate and plant resources that unique in the world. Some of the indigenous homelands are still not easily accessible to foreigners due to political reasons, security problems or lack of transport and roads.

IK is not only vital to survive in the mountain ranges, it is also the key to the ethnic cultures and languages, which have resisted assimilation into the Han civilization. For science and development, the accumulated wisdom of indigenous peoples is also the key to understanding nature and promoting endogenous development. Therefore the scholars and lecturers of Sichuan University have opted to include the theory and methods of IK and cultural affirmation in the academic curriculum with an option to specialize as an applied researcher.

Curriculum design workshop in Chengdu, March–April 2006

From 23 March to 3 April 2006 we organized the 'Curriculum Design Workshop on Theories and Methods of Indigenous Knowledge' for the lecturers and some selected graduate and postgraduate students of Sichuan University in Chengdu. The course consisted of the following interrelated parts:

- Concepts of IK;
- Methods of IK, including the design of fieldwork plans;
- Rights and ethics of IK;
- Pedagogical (teaching) concepts related to IK – experiential learning;
- IK Approaches defined in context of learning at Sichuan University – time frame, structure and content.

The first three modules of the course (six days) encouraged students and teachers to gain intellectual and academic insights of the basic theoretical and methodological elements of IK, and introduce research perspectives about community-based sustainable development (ethno-development) with an ethical attitude and rights-based approach.

Preparation of course material

Between November 2005 and March 2006 we prepared a reader on theories, methods, rights and ethics of IK), which has now been translated into Chinese for the graduate students of Sichuan University.

Participants

Besides the lecturers/researchers/professors of Sichuan University (who came from three different colleges of Ecology, History and Cultural Studies), graduate students of all three disciplines and interested persons from local NGOs (including WWF) joined the first six days of the workshop (a total of 24 participants). This reduced to the core design group of the university lecturers (12 persons) during the last four days focused on the curriculum design. The participants were keen to know more about the concepts and methods for the recovery of IK within the approach of affirmation of cultures. Even as natural scientists they were highly motivated; from their field experience they felt that the local ethnic minority people could contribute much to their research. They also felt that to be able to apply their expertise in the field, they needed to understand better the wisdom of the local people. They hoped to learn how to engage in a dialogical work for the benefit of local development action. This is also a requirement of WWF for ecologists who work in the WWF field programmes with nature reserves and the surrounding ethnic communities.

Workshop process and methodology

A course on IK requires a special learning attitude. This involves active participation, meaning that each person attending is particularly motivated to join the course by thinking, feeling and acting. Since the learning subject of this course is knowledge, it cannot be taught conventionally, rather each participant must cultivate his/her own mental capacities.

Moreover, the particularities of IK require an understanding of epistemological foundations. That is, to rely on the observation of own ways of thinking, sensuous impressions, states of mind and cognitive skills such as intuition, recalling and imagining, and capacities of constructing and deconstructing, linking theories and practices.

In each module, the visiting professor introduced concepts but at the same time asked that the future lecturers penetrate the concepts intellectually and discover the premises behind them. Learning took place by using particular methods and tools such as visualization, mental mapping and interpreting, which are qualitative forms of approaching knowledge. Group discussion and exercises supported the adaptation and incorporation of the new concepts into the own repertoire of knowledge.

Participants had to document and analyse their own experiences, and translate the contents of the course into a new meaningful Chinese version, suited specifically to the Chinese cultural context and not simply a replica of the course. Concepts like knowledge, culture and indigenous cannot be translated by dictionary, but require reflection on the meaning of each concept and an adaptation to the Chinese context. There is always a danger or chance that during translation the meaning changes.

The intention of the course was to move away from the standard teaching-learning process, where the contents of the course are simply transmitted from teachers to students. It was a workshop designed to be a dynamic group workshop, triggering the learning capacities and curricula design skills of the participants. Through their involvement in results-oriented intellectual tasks, interactive exercises, group discussions and ultimately grounded, practical applications of what they learnt, the future lecturers were able to design the course elements for future curriculum of the masters courses.

Part A: IK concepts (two days)

The first sessions of the course dealt with the question, what is knowledge? From the point of view of different authors, the lecturers learned following concepts: the social construction of knowledge (Childe, 1956); the knowledge perspective (Havelock, 1986); the knowledge system (Marglin, 1990); the science of the concrete (Levi-Strauss, 1966); and cultural, linguistic and biological diversity (Smith, 1999).

Departing from these concepts, we concentrated on selected historic and current approaches to IK in development action: ITK (indigenous technical knowledge) (Brokensha et al, 1980); research on traditional environmental knowledge, its development and its role (Johnson, 1992); TEK (traditional ecological knowledge) (Berkes, 1999b); CCP (cosmos corpus praxis) in ethnoecology (Toledo, 2001); and cultural affirmation (Ishizawa, 2002).

In order to gain ideas regarding the most crucial elements of the debate on the role of IK in the modern world, the participants of the workshop dealt with Ellen and Harris's (1996) concepts of indigenous environmental knowledge; Rist et al's (2004) discussion of epistemic monoculture and cooperation between epistemic communities and the lessons learnt from development research.

Part B: IK research methods and action (2.5 days)

The 20 participants got acquainted with basic research principles of Fals-Borda's (1988) participatory action research and the methodology and application of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) (Mukherjee, 1993) and participatory technology development (PTD) (Salas and Tillmann, 2003), which rely on ideas such as intercultural dialogue, facilitation, joint visualization, qualitative and hermeneutical interpretation. Tools related to IK such as conceptions of time, perceptions of space, hierarchy of values, life stories, beliefs, myths, legends and songs were highlighted with examples of our research experiences. Mapping as a form of indigenous representation of space was taken into consideration following Berkes (1999a) and Strang (1997).

We presented cases of cultural affirmation and the nurturance of IK practices of agro-biodiversity, maintaining food and seed diversity, curing with medicinal plants, performing local arts and crafts, and learning approaches that value and encourage diversity. From the literature, the lecturers learned of outstanding cases of indigenous perception and representation of sacred mountains, plants and animals as spiritual approaches to the environment.

Part C: IK rights and ethics (1 day)

In this part was discussed Colchester's (1994) indigenous peoples' rights and sustainable resource use; and the concepts (Posey, 1996) related to the rights of sustainability, knowledge and cultural diversity, customary laws and traditional resource rights (TRR) stewardship, equitable partnerships and others.

The participants studied international instruments for the protection of IK, such as the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the 2005 Convention on Cultural Diversity (UNESCO) and instruments such as intellectual property rights and the TRIPS Agreement (Khor, 2002), as well as biodiversity and ethics (Hamilton, 1993) that propose ideas such as fair and equitable benefit sharing, prior informed consent, consultation and best practice. We applied role playing as a tool to adapt the international principles to their own work situation and experience in Sichuan.

Part D: Pedagogical concepts related to IK – experiential learning (1.5 days)

Having in mind that the Chinese educational system still relies on the Confucian principles of listening to the master (teacher), we tried to propose innovative pedagogical concepts and look at a learner-centred approach. Helpful are the concepts of experiential learning developed in Hawkesbury (see Bawden, 1996), action research (Levin and Kolb, 2005), learner-centred education as promoted by Carl Rogers (see Smith, 2005), training workshops (Race, 2003; Race et al, 2005), VIPP- *Visualisation in Participatory Programmes* (Salas, 2006) and community of practice for teams of graduate students (Wenger, 1998).

Part E: Curriculum design (2 days)

During the last two parts of the course, the participants were reduced to a group of future lecturers from the different disciplines. The group consisted of 12 professors, assistants and a handful of graduate students who assist in teaching and field practice as tutors of the new graduate students. The participants, divided into three disciplinary teams, elaborated in detail the elements of the curriculum on IK to be included in their respective masters courses. They also reflected about the fieldwork that the graduate students have to fulfil during their studies as research practice and the basis upon which to write their theses in the third year of their courses. Experience in the field is not only vital to be able to write a thesis but also to establish rapport with local ethnic villagers, understand the value of IK and to decide on a professional career as a development worker and facilitator.

Supplementary contents

Over the 10 days of the workshop, some time was invested in introducing participants, the programme and methodology, and at the end, in evaluating of the process with the intention of deciding jointly on how to prepare complementary classes for the different masters courses in Ecology (biodiversity and sustainable development), Cultural History and Tibetan Cultural Studies, to begin in September 2006 with the newly arrived graduate students.

Outcome

The outcome of the curriculum design workshop was a work plan to introduce IK in the different disciplines, which comprised the curriculum for the first year, a proposal for fieldwork and thesis writing during years two and three of the masters courses and necessary preparation tasks, such as translation of the reader, collection of Chinese material on IK of ethnic minorities, and documentation of the research experiences based on the IK methods practiced during the workshop. The documentation of village research on IK and cultural affirmation is vital to construct a repertoire of graphic material about concepts and methods and to achieve experience in interpretation of local ethnic testimonies on specific topics, which can be used as teaching material by the lecturers in the masters courses. They also established a university club for students on ethnic and cultural studies (similar to the already existing environment groups) and to identify students with ethnic origins who may become intercultural facilitators in the future, as they know the language, have a village background and may eventually be motivated to engage in village work with their own ethnic group.

Perspectives

The lecturers of Sichuan University, in coordination with the Upper Yangzi Network, are planning to cooperate with external institutions and organizations to identify tasks and communities where the professors and the students can apply the concepts and methods within an ethical orientation of intercultural dialogue and respect in the field. They will link with local administrators, NGOs, the Academy of Sciences and biodiversity conservation projects to place students for internships and field research. It is foreseen that after the first year of theoretical classroom learning that we organize a specific fieldwork methodology training course to enable lecturers and graduate students to prepare themselves for the field (define the content of IK to be studied, practice the field methods, think about the outcome, develop interpretation skills (hermeneutical concepts) and anticipate the needs of documentation and writing/presenting the results).

Significance of the curriculum design workshop and challenges

Research–development–education relationship

While research and education is highly oriented towards a scientific understanding of nature and culture (in separate disciplines and research topics) the workshop created an option to link research and education for endogenous development, by providing and promoting the concepts and methods to understand and to promote IK as a means to maintain and affirm local cultures and the livelihoods of indigenous peoples.

The new partnerships, which the researchers/educators want to establish with ethnic villages aim to strengthen local cultures and also improve the reality base for academic contents and research. To carry on this relationship, academic education will

create a group of young professionals, who constitute a 'community of practice' on IK, which will enable government bodies and NGOs to support their efforts for promoting sustainable and endogenous development.

Applications: Ecotourism, seed-conservation, food sovereignty and arts and crafts

The field of action is not an abstract construction because the future researchers look at specific topics of IK. The graduate students develop their fieldwork around the cultural understanding of nature, the conservation of indigenous seeds and technologies, the production of food (optimizing natural conditions and biological resources), cultural attractions for ecotourism initiatives, the specific livelihoods of the diversity of ethnic groups including their own local institutions, and the wisdom of the elders expressed in local healers, intellectuals and historians who act as the shamanistic intermediaries between people and nature.

Civil society and NGO contribution

By creating cooperation between academics of Sichuan University, WWF and the local NGO, Shuo Guang, the Upper Yangzi Network is a contribution to building the capacity of young professionals to engage in endogenous development initiatives. Of course these local initiatives need not only stimulate their ownership by the local villagers, who belong to indigenous cultures, but also cooperation agreements with the local administration and official institutions in charge of regulating and developing the different local resources (forestry bureau, nature reserves, watershed bureaus, township and administrative village authorities, minority committees and civic affairs offices). The local institutions need to sense that the endogenous development efforts fulfil the overall objectives of development and poverty alleviation by enhancing local cultures and IK. The local villagers can be empowered to decide on their own futures and lives, and so create a responsible and peace-oriented civil society as a counterpart and complement to party and government structures.

IK and cultural affirmation

If IK is one key to understanding and managing natural resources, where external scientists can contribute with their capacity to facilitate a process of participatory action research leading towards endogenous development, this knowledge needs to be recovered, strengthened and promoted. As knowledge is part of ethnic minority culture and conveyed in action, skills and language, local projects need to deal with the context of knowledge: promote indigenous education, construct local history, promote local institutions within the own cultures and at village level, design community development plans with cultural categories, and support wise elder groups and networks.

Biodiversity conservation

The aim of the IK approach (concepts and methods) integrates the affirmation of cultures and the recovery of IK and values with the conservation of biodiversity. It has become evident that cultural diversity and biological diversity are intrinsically linked, and that modernization has not only adverse consequences for indigenous

cultures (loss of identity, language, family and community integration) but also has damaged natural resources and landscapes (deforestation, landslides, pollution of air, water and food, affecting human health). The conservation of biodiversity needs to refocus on indigenous cultures and their role as stewards of nature, while science – with an open mind and heart – can contribute by recognizing the impact of global changes – markets, products, climate – and providing a supportive role to local structures and networks. And the impact of this work is not only local – the recognition of the inherent values and achievements of ethnic cultures (enclosed in their particular languages, of which there are more than 300 in South East Asia) is vital for the destiny of humankind.

The IK approach promoted by IKAP since 2003 is a platform for the support of a civil and open society, for innovation, and for the defence of the rights of indigenous cultures within the framework of international conventions; it is not an academic research topic or an exotic entertainment object. It is a political standpoint that requires the corresponding ethics to value it, support it and stand for it.

Challenges

Time and continuity

The initiative needs to be continuous and long term, as new students arrive every year. The organizing group of teachers should update the curriculum year by year, especially to identify and motivate students from different ethnic backgrounds to learn the IK approach and get involved with the group of facilitators. The workshop was not a one-off seminar, but requires commitment and ongoing enrichment of case studies developed in the multiple ethnic communities of Sichuan.

Scope

This is a small contribution if we look at the scope of cultural and biological diversity in the natural and cultural region of South East Asia, with more than 40 million ethnic peoples in mountainous areas of South West China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma and Laos. Because it is innovative, the programme will have its critics: 'pure' scientists who deny the value of IK, modernizers who ignore the existence of IK, and teachers who reject experiential learning and action research as valid educational methods.

It is necessary that the community of practice on IK links up with other IK networks in neighbouring provinces and countries to promote the IK approach, to support each other through exchange of village facilitators, students and lecturers, and to contribute to the indigenous networks supported by organizations like IKAP. An academic network can be envisioned that could create a school of thought and action on endogenous development issues, able to achieve a significant scale of impact.

Place (local–global relevance)

IK and ethnic cultures are often considered as local practice (see CBD article 8j) with no universal or global value and scheduled to die. IK anecdotes are collected and researched, stuffed as dead objects into museums of cultural heritage, packed into

exotic tourist programmes, music CDs, dance shows and collected in databanks and encyclopaedia with government support, but they lose their meaning as a tool for cultural survival. A shift of paradigm is necessary to recognize the crucial role of indigenous cultures, their knowledge and wisdom, and to adopt a new role as facilitator of local processes within a global exchange between like-minded people.

Decolonizing the mind and ethnocentrism

In China the mainstream culture considers within its evolutionary model of societies that ethnic minorities belong to a lower level and their IK is primitive. Such minorities thus need to be civilized, becoming integrated into Chinese civilisation, which is at the centre of the world. This ethnocentrism is not limited to the Chinese mainstream society, but exists worldwide in most societies with a dominant culture dealing and cohabiting with ethnic minority cultures. The consequences are felt at various levels: with the aim of civilizing 'the savages', mainstream culture creates assimilation programmes, introduces Mandarin in rural schools for ethnic minority children, classifies the people and their customs, standardizes cultural expressions like dances and songs for entertainment purposes, and promotes rice as the only true staple food. Modern clothes and calendars have long since been imposed on local traditions and customs, and mainstream knowledge is pushed and spread with different degrees of force (for example, the Cultural Revolution repressed local cultures and the spiritual leaders of ethnic minority groups were killed). At another level is the adoption of the mainstream ideology by the ethnic minorities. Indigenous leaders themselves deny the value of their traditions and their spiritual leaders, forget about their traditions, send their children to learn Mandarin, and dress like urbanized people. Part of the decolonization of the indigenous mind is to regain pride in being different, having one's own identity and a culture that worthwhile holding on to (see Smith, 1999).

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