INDIGENISING SOCIAL WORK:
Research and Practice in Sarawak

LING HOW KEE
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LING HOW KEE

She is an anthropologist, Sarawak welfare academic, and community leader.
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Dedicated to

My late parents Ling Tung Hing and Huang Su Ling,
who would have understood and supported the ideas in this book.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot

Theoretical Concern, Personal Journey

The last 40 years has seen an accelerated pace of socio-economic development in Sarawak, Malaysia. The resulting socio-cultural transformation is manifested by rural-urban migration and increasing urbanisation, changing family patterns, loosening of traditional support networks and emerging social problems. This warrants the need for a more formal system of social services, which in turn provides opportunities for professional social work to assume greater importance. While the impetus may be to embrace Western social work theories and methods,
a pertinent issue which remains to be resolved is whether these theories and methods are suited to the local socio-cultural milieu.

Experience in other countries has shown that the indiscriminate transfer of Western social work theories and approaches is not only impractical but also unsuitable. Indeed, there is increasing debate around the question of the relevance and applicability of Western social work in Asian and African countries, highlighting the need to develop indigenous theories and approaches (Hodge, 1980; Hokenstad, Khinduka & Midgley, 1992; Intercultural Seminar, 1967; International Congress of Schools of Social Work, 1972).

It is well recognised that professional social work has very much been a transplant from Western socio-cultural milieu. In many developing countries, social welfare services were initially established by the colonial administrators in response to mass disorganisation, either as an aftermath of World War II or as a result of industrialisation (MacPherson, 1982; Midgley, 1981). This earlier development of social welfare based on the Western model has been influential in the development of social work roles and in the designation of social work fields of practice in these countries. This transplant of social welfare models and social work approaches is based on the assumption of the universal applicability of social work philosophical tenets, methods, skills and conceptions of normal human behaviour.

Midgley (1981) described this as 'professional imperialism', and his view was supported by others who termed it as 'cultural imperialism' (Hodge, 1980; Ngan, 1993; Prager, 1985). These writers have argued that the nature of social problems in non-Western developing countries is substantially different from that of Western developed countries, and so entails different fields of practice and different roles for social workers (Clifford, 1966; Gangrade, 1986; Midgley, 1981). Also, the community-oriented social structures of many non-Western societies render Western individualised casework approach irrelevant (Bose, 1992; Midgley, 1981;

1 I use the term 'indigenous' throughout this book to refer to the local, or 'homegrown'. I use 'indigenising' to refer to a process of developing indigenous social work practices.
Rao, 1990). Further, the values and philosophical foundations of social work being rooted firmly in liberal democratic values which espouse individualism, self-reliance, equality and freedom are also at odds with Asian and African cultural values (Bar-On, 1999; Chow, 1987, 1996; Canda, Shin & Canda, 1993; Dasgupta, 1967; Gangrade, 1970; Goldstein, 1986).

Following on from the above, various approaches to developing alternative models of social work for non-Western contexts have been advanced. Although different terms are used by various writers, these approaches can be categorised into three main positions in accordance with their theoretical arguments. First, the indigenisation position argues for a process of adaptation of Western social work practice theories so that they can become more suited to the local cultures in non-western developing countries (Cox, 1989; International Congress of Social Work, 1972). Second, the authentisation position argues for a process of reconceptualisation, to break away from Western encapsulation to develop indigenous, culturally appropriate social work practice (Meemeduma, 1993; Osei-Hwedie, 1993; Ragab, 1990; Walton & Abo-El-Nasr, 1988). Third, the multicultural, international position promotes a way forward for social work to develop the ‘fluidity’ to be able to transcend cultural and national boundaries and relate to diverse cultures nationally and internationally (Sanders, 1980, 1984a, 1984b).

My interest in indigenising social work has been a long-standing one arising from my social work training in Australia and practice experience in Sarawak, Malaysia. The questioning of the transferability of Western social work theories and methods went back to the days of my training in 1979-80. When I came back to practise, my initial experience was akin to that of the ‘reverse culture shock’ of a returned sojourner. I was continuously struck by the divergent world views and cultures of the people in my own homeland, and the world views from which dominant social work practice framework emanate. I recall one of my earlier experiences of working in the field of disability which was particularly enlightening. When I visited some Malay parents with disabled children, I was amazed to find that there wasn’t any feeling of shame and guilt;
instead, to them, all children were God's gift. Coming from a Chinese background, I was more familiar with the thinking that the birth of a disabled child has something to do with bad *feng shui* or punishment for past sin, and therefore shame and guilt was expected.

Practice experience such as this, and general life experiences in Sarawak, one of the most culturally diverse states of Malaysia, led me to believe in the need for developing indigenous practice theory, yet this theory has to be able to incorporate the multicultural reality of Sarawak. The search for this theory has led me to a journey of exploration.

This journey involved, first, the exploration of different approaches to develop indigenous social work in different non-Western countries. While I drew lessons from the indigenisation and the authentisation positions, the multicultural, international position appeals to me as it resonates with my own view of culture(s) as always plural, always hybrid, and always heterogeneous. Coming from this view then, I found a pertinent issue is overlooked in the existing literature – that is, a critical conceptualisation of culture. As a result, the approaches proposed tended to be a formulation of descriptive and, in some, prescriptive framework of indigenous, cultural appropriate social work practice based on a categorising of cultural characteristics for different ethnic groups. This raises concern as I feel a prescriptive framework, because of its disregard for cultural heterogeneity, may pose the danger of internal domination, negating the very reasons for developing indigenous, culturally appropriate social work practice.

This led to the second part of my exploration, which was focused on a critical conceptualisation of culture and its interconnection with research and ways of knowing. This arises from the realisation that while we question the Western biases of social work knowledge theory, the epistemological base of this knowledge needs to be challenged as well.

The third part of my exploration entailed an undertaking of an empirical research of examining help-seeking and help-giving practices in Sarawak in order to explore issues and illuminate complexities of indigenising social work. This involved uncovering knowledge about help-seeking experiences of local people, specifically social work clients,
in order to examine underlying cultural themes and world views. It also involved an understanding of the help-giving practices of local helpers (non-social workers) to examine how their approaches reflected their core values or cultural beliefs. The empirical research was also directed at exploring the experiences of social workers in applying Western social work knowledge and values, and in adapting their approaches to local cultures and settings. In other words, the aim was to examine the nature of indigenisation that was already in place.

This empirical process is also aimed at opening up a way for a culturally based method of knowledge generation. Affirmed by an understanding that practice and research mirror each other (Peile, 1988; 1994), I envisaged the empirical process to be a journey of discovery which allowed issues of cultural appropriateness to unfold to inform the development of indigenous social work practice. Taking on the position of an insider researcher conducting research at home (Jackson, 1987; Lockhart, 1994; Narayan, 1994), I adopted a reflective learning approach (Chambers, 1986; 1995; Fook, 1996; Korten, 1980; 1984; Schon, 1983) in which the method of inquiry is attuned to the culture of the informants. This book tells the experiences and insights I have gained from the journey of exploration.

The reader is now introduced to the context of my study, Sarawak.

Sarawak: The Context

Geographically located in the north-western part of Borneo and constituting one of the 13 states of Malaysia since 1963, Sarawak has its own unique features in terms of geographical characteristics, ethnic composition and historical background. With a population of 2.2 million comprising about 35 Bumiputra groups (Natives; literally means ‘prince of the earth’) and non-Bumiputra of mostly Chinese and Indian origins, it is well noted for its cultural diversity. The Native communities of Sarawak consist of the Iban (the largest group), the Bidayuh, the Malay, the Melanau and many other smaller groups including the Kayan, the
Kenyah, the Kelabit and the Penan collectively referred to as the Orang Ulu (the Interior People). This ethnic diversity is further accentuated by rural-urban differences, albeit a trend towards urbanisation and industrialisation.

Sarawak's colonial history began with the reign of three White Rajahs (James Brooke, Charles Brooke, and Vyner Brooke) from 1841 to 1941. The Brooke era has been variously described as a mix of adventure and battles, of pioneering and entrepreneurship, of rebellion and resistance (Chew, 1990; Pringle, 1970; Turnbull, 1989). It, however, laid the foundation for a Western-based system of administration which was further strengthened when Sarawak was ceded to the British Crown in 1946 after the Japanese occupation between 1941-45.

Part of this Western legacy is reflected in the local social welfare organisations today. The War years (1941-1945) resulted in massive disorganisation such as destitution, illness and malnutrition, crime and delinquency, prompting the then colonial government to set up the Advisory Committee for Social Welfare in 1948. This led to the formation of the Sarawak Social Welfare Council in 1950. A glimpse of the list of organisations set up during the 1950s and 1960s and still existing today indicates their Western origin, such as the Salvation Army Children's Home and Boys' Hostels, the Sarawak Cheshire Home, the Catholic Relief Society, and the Red Crescent (Cross) Society. Other organisations that sprang up include those involved with the care of elderly persons, outreach service for children with disabilities, or others in medical-welfare fields such as the Anti-Tuberculosis Association, Leprosy Rehabilitation, Family Planning Association and Mental Health Association. Since the 1980s there has been sporadic emergence of a number of self-help, rights-based groups, such as the Association of the Blind, the Association of Parents of Intellectually Disabled Children, and Sarawak Women for Women Society.

The government Social Welfare Department also provides an array of services including financial aid to the poor; relief schemes to victims of natural disasters; care, protection and rehabilitation of children, elderly persons, people with disabilities, and homeless persons;
reformatory services for young offenders and underaged girls involved in prostitution. Family and counselling services are also provided for couples experiencing marital discord, and adolescent problems. In more recent years, community-based Rehabilitation Programmes for children with disabilities, and community development projects for the rural poor and women have been introduced in line with the Malaysian National Welfare Policy (1990) of promoting community development (Kandiah, 1991; Welfare Division, 1986). Prior to the establishment of the Social Welfare Department, the Administrative Officers in the Divisional and District Offices were charged with the responsibilities of handling interpersonal and family matters such as marital problems and adoption matters, and in many rural regions, their role continue to this day.

However, although the welfare and social work ethos are aimed at steering away from the welfare state of the West and at promoting community self-help, a strategic plan for doing so has not been clearly stated. The rapid rate of rural-urban migration and its ramifications on the lives of both the rural and urban people, and traditional social structures and welfare networks have not been critically examined. In addition, although the marginalisation of rural native communities is acknowledged, the concern is more one of bringing them to the 'mainstream of development', and issues related to cultural diversity are overlooked.

Besides government and voluntary organisations, other forms of helping and natural social support systems which have been around much longer. Helping and welfare activities need to be seen in relation to the social organisations and the cultures of the different ethnic groups in Sarawak. For example, the activities undertaken by religious and ethnic-based organisations in catering for the needs of the destitute and the elderly persons in the Chinese immigrant community in the early 1900s reflected a non-Western origin in the self-help and philanthropic organisations in China (Chin, 1981; Tien, 1953). In addition, the role of the village heads and community leaders in helping with problems and mediating conflicts needs to be acknowledged. The significance of the bomoh, manang and temple medium (names for Malay, Iban and Chinese
shamans respectively) as a source of help also has to be taken into consideration. Another important feature to note is that in Sarawak is the presence of legal pluralism - the civil/criminal law, the Islamic Syariah Law and the Adat (Native customary law). All these pose implications for developing indigenous social work.

Preview of Chapters

This chapter has provided the background of my study. It discussed the theoretical concern of developing indigenous social work and introduced my experience of conducting a study on help-seeking and help-giving practices which form the basis of this book.

Chapter Two is a critical exploration of three major theoretical positions of indigenising social work - the indigenisation position, the authentisation position and the multicultural, international position.

Chapter Three highlights the need to rethink the applicability of Western research methodology to non-Western contexts and explores the interconnection of culture, ways of knowing and research methodology. A discussion of how culture is to be conceptualised followed by a positioning of culture as transactional and as knowledge use to guide behaviour and interpret experiences open up the issue of a culturally-based method of inquiry and the need for developing an indigenous research paradigm.

Chapter Four takes the reader through my journey of exploring the help-seeking and help-giving practices in Sarawak. It describes how a reflective learning approach to research facilitated exploration and discovery, and how embracing diversity and attuning to differences allowed for issues related to indigenous, culturally appropriate practice to unfold. Using border crossing as the metaphor, I explore the issue of language and power, and elucidate how knowledge arises out of a dialectic process between subjectivity and objectivity, as well as between the researcher and the researched.
Chapters Five, Six and Seven identify issues and illuminate the complexities involved in indigenising social work based on the data on help-seeking and help-giving experiences. Chapter Five discusses the complex interplay of help-seeking behaviour and the underlying cultural values and world views, and highlights the key areas of divergence between the local world views and those embodied in Western social work practice theory.

Chapter Six examines the underlying cultural themes and core values of three major existing helping systems identified in my field work. The mutuality between these cultural values and those of help-seekers is a crucial point to consider in drawing lessons for developing culturally appropriate social work practice. The co-existence of the helping systems, despite their divergent central beliefs and the ways each undergoes adaptation and change, is also a source of insight for indigenising social work.

Chapter Seven explores the practice experiences of local social workers in adapting social work knowledge and methods to local situations, and in working with individuals and groups of different cultural backgrounds. Pertinent issues concerning the nature of the social work relationship and roles, practice approaches and service delivery methods, are discussed. This chapter also highlights the challenges and dilemmas of social workers engaging with 'differences within differences', underscoring the need for an indigenous yet a multicultural practice theory.

In Chapter Eight, I draw together the issues and challenges and examine the tensions and dilemmas involved in developing an indigenous practice theory and recognising the need for a multicultural approach; between grounding social work in the local world views and acknowledging multiple value perspectives; between developing professional social work and strengthening existing helping systems. The Chapter advances a way forward for indigenising social work by engaging with the dynamic balance of competing needs and perspectives and the creation of a borderland of a third culture through which culturally appropriate practices emerge.
Chapter Nine concludes by presenting the major themes and argument of this book and discusses future directions for research, education and knowledge development within and beyond the present context of study.
In reviewing literature on approaches to developing indigenous theory of social work practice, three different positions can be identified: the indigenisation, the authentisation, and the multicultural, international practice positions. This chapter explores the arguments in the three theoretical positions and examine the approaches and models of practice for each. It concludes with a discussion of the contributions of the three positions in developing indigenous social work practice and in clarifying the direction taken in this book.

**Indigenisation**

The term ‘indigenisation’ gained popularity in the 1970s, when the questioning of the appropriateness of Western models of social work for non-Western developing countries began to gather momentum (International Congress of Schools of Social Work, 1972). Indigenisation
is concerned with adapting social work practice to fit with the cultures and nature of social problems in non-Western developing countries. Two recurring themes emerged. One argued for a shift from casework to community work or social development approaches, the other argued for the adaptation of social work values and techniques to suit local cultures.

**Casework to Community Work and Social Development**

Proponents of this approach argue for adopting alternative fields of practice and roles of social workers in non-Western developing countries based on the needs of the general population. Rather than the individualised casework approach of social work in the West, they argued that social workers in these countries should be more concerned with problems associated with modernisation and social change, particularly the disintegration of rural communities, unemployment and squatter problems in urban areas (Clifford, 1966; Gangrade, 1986). The fields identified for social work are adult education, family planning and rural community development (Gangrade, 1986), or development and social planning (Stein, 1976). While different terms such as ‘community work’, ‘community development’, ‘social development’ and ‘developmental social welfare approach’ have been used, the general emphasis is that of working with groups and community, with planning and implementation of broader social policy affecting large segments of the population, as opposed to the narrow focus of individual casework. For example, the Malaysian National Welfare Policy (1990) adopts a developmental perspective underpinned by an ethos of developing the human potential, maximising human resources and promoting community cohesion and a ‘caring culture’ (Kandiah, 1990). Bose (1992), writing in the context of India, conceives social work developmental role as that of being at the forefront of efforts to address the country’s massive problems of poverty and deprivation. Stein (1976:3) refers to the developmental functions of social work as “those that have an impact on the analysis, planning, and implementation of broad social policy affecting large segments of the population”. A shift from casework and individual counselling to
Different Approaches To Indigenising Social Work

Community work and social development, or a developmental social welfare approach (Kendall, 1986; Midgley, 1981; Rao, 1990; Sanders, 1982) is therefore promoted as the way forward to indigenising social work.

However, several writers have critiqued this argument. Cox (1992) expresses concern about the disregard for individual casework. He maintains that while the emphasis may be shifted from the individual to the community, casework should be continued, as discarding casework would contravene the social work principle of working with the ‘person-in-environment’. It is noted that social work has had a long standing position of maintaining the dual focus of individuals as well as society (Bartlett, 1970; Billup, 1984). In addition, the adoption of a policy or planning role to the extent of abandoning direct service to people is antithetical to one of social work’s basic principles of working with people (Midgley, 1981).

Other writers caution against the notion of development, highlighting instances where development projects have had negative impact on the lives of people. Dasgupta (1978) and Hyung (1985) critiqued the way in which development processes in Asian contexts have led to relative poverty by benefiting only a small group of people, and has aggravated the social imbalances between the powerful and the powerless, contributing to new forms of dependence, frustration, tension, inequalities and violence. Examples of such situations as a result of top-down developmental projects are already evident in Sarawak (Colchester, 1989; Hong, 1987; IDEAL, 1999). This is because broader social development directions and agendas in post-colonial developing countries have remained the domain of a few powerful elite, reflecting their vested interests, rather than the choices of the large majority (Hyung, 1985). As proponents of people-centred development contend, development has by and large not been grounded in the perspectives of the people (Chambers, 1983, 1986, 1987, 1995; De La Court, 1990; Friedmann, 1992; Freire, 1970, 1972; Gran, 1983; Korten, 1990; Korten & Klauss, 1984; Seabrook, 1993).

A very pertinent point to note is that while development models are
associated with non-Western developing countries, they do not necessarily represent indigenous approaches to uplift human well-being. Indeed, many of the methodologies and philosophical underpinnings of community development have been closely connected with the colonisation process. For example, in some African countries, community development was the approach used by the colonial government to ‘educate’ rural populations and to encourage their involvement in cash crop production and other economic activities necessary for economic growth (Hardiman & Midgley, 1989; Macpherson, 1982).

Furthermore, a more critical examination of where social work should locate itself within different development theories or paradigms is lacking. As argued by Midgley (1984), the major development theories (modernisation, dependency theory and classical Marxist theory) while providing broad analytical frameworks for understanding the nature of development and underdevelopment, do not offer suitable normative prescriptions for the formulation of welfare policies, nor a discussion of the roles of social workers.

From the above perspectives, we can see that the argument for a social development approach in place of the dominant casework approach of Western social work has not seriously taken into consideration the issue of culture. Neither have the proponents of this argument explicitly defined development from the people’s world view as to what is desirable and what is not. Insights could have been drawn from other writings which argue that culture is central rather than peripheral to both development analysis and practice (De La Court, 1990; Freire, 1970; Ife, 1995; Seabrook, 1993). As succinctly put forward by Verhelst (1990:159):

It is the idea of culture that gives both meaning and direction to economic activity, political decisions, community life, social conflict, technology and so on. ...It is each people’s culture that must decide what for them is a ‘good life’. ...Culture ...is, properly speaking, the basis of development.
Adaptation of casework and Culturally Sensitive Practice

Proponents for adaptation of social work value principles and casework techniques acknowledge the importance of recognising cultural differences between Western social work and the people in non-Western contexts. The difficulties of operationalising Western social work value principles have been well discussed; for example, the application of the principle of self-determination is problematic arising from the cultural emphasis of respect for elders and those in authority, dependence and interdependence between family members and society, communal responsibility and social cohesion (Ejaz 1989; 1991b; Gangrade, 1970; Silavwe, 1995).

Also, a non-directive counselling approach may be unacceptable to clients, as social workers are looked upon as authority figures, and therefore are expected to provide guidance. This argument, however, needs to be further evaluated. Counselling work with Asian-Americans suggests that, rather than being directive or non-directive, a more active and involved stance from the counsellor, such as providing concrete advice or resources, and a short term, problem-solving oriented approach is more acceptable or more effective (Huang, 1991; Fong & Sandu, 1995; Sue & Sue, 1990). Ow (1990a), with reference to Singapore, suggests that the clients' way of deferring to the social worker is related to the concept of 'face'. Her study reveals that a client may outwardly agree to the social worker's advice for problem resolution to 'give the worker face', but may utilise indirect ways of disagreeing such as procrastination.

Recognising the need for adaptation of social work values and practice approach has led to a burgeoning development of theoretical and conceptual frameworks of social work practice with people from non-Western people in the Western contexts generally termed as ethnic-sensitive or culturally sensitive practice (Cox, 1987, 1989; Devore & Schlesinger, 1999; Lum, 1982, 1996; Lynch & Hanson, 1992; Morales 1981; Mokuau, 1988, 1991). These frameworks of practice contain substantial ethnographic details about the cultural characteristics of different ethnic or cultural groups to help social workers from dominant Anglo-Saxon backgrounds to acquire knowledge about other cultures.