Avoiding harm: medical decision making and East Asian values


This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/57848/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.
Avoiding Harm: medical decision making and East Asian values

Biostathists discussing family values often refer to ‘traditional’ and ‘secular’ notions of the family. Behind these lie holistic notions of the ‘Eastern family’ and ‘Western individualism’. These notions can affect decisions of life and death.

As a believer in the merits of individual choice and transparency, Stephen Wear of the University of Buffalo defends the practice of truth-telling under all circumstances. The individual should be able to decide for him or herself. Wear illustrated an argument with the example of a Taiwanese woman diagnosed with breast cancer. Her parents did not tell her and she should receive Chinese medicinal treatment. The cancer spread, when she returned to the hospital for help it was too late.

Traditional and harmony

Defending what she regards as the traditional Chinese family, Samantha Mei-chen Pang from Hong Kong argues that, because harmony in the Chinese family is important, the family in some cases may justly decide for the individual – to protect the patient. Confronting the patient with his or her imminent death is too painful; it therefore becomes taboo in the patient’s presumed interest. But consider the following example of a Japanese family, one that raises the issues of gender, the generation gap, and issues of institutional power. When the husband visited the nurse at the clinic, the nurse told him his wife had cancer. He chose a course of treatment, and presented the family with the facts. His disease subse- quently became terminal.

At the same time, the grand- mother was also diagnosed with cancer, but neither her daughter nor the physician told her the truth. As a result, her situation received little attention.

Economy and civil society

The economy was another major field for comparison at the conference. Ash- wani Saith, Jean-Louis Rocca, Franciose Mengin and Lu Xiaobo dealt with a spec- trum of issues from the political to the economic perspectives. Saith raised the crucial question whether China will face developmental questions of growing inequality and poverty long evidenced in India. Rocca, Mengin and Lu explored the ways in which civil society and eco- nomic activity are intertwined.

Democracy in India and China was addressed by Jaffrelot, Bhalla and Ho Jaf- frelott took a long historical perspective on Indian state formation to explain caste politics, Bhalla looked at intellectual dis- cussions on democracy in China, while Ho explored the issue of NGOs, specifi- cally in the field of green politics. Indian and Chinese foreign policy were exam- ined by Yang Baoyun. Finally a session was devoted to the Chinese and Indian diasporas. Xiang Hao tried to develop a comparative framework for Indian and Chinese diasporas. The conference, as a whole, was an inspiring step towards the development of India-China comparisons.

India-China Comparisons: state and society

Indian and Chinese societies seem an obvious case for comparison, but until recently there has been little intellectual interaction between Indian and Chinese scholars, while comparative works remain few and far between. The India-China Comparisons: State and Society workshop served as an orientation for the field for Indian, Chinese, French and Dutch scholars.

By Peter van der Veer

India and China are the two largest societies in the world, both with ancient civilizations. Together they weight 5% of the world’s population until 1800 and are becoming so again. India is the world’s largest democracy while China is a communist state; both have important diaspora populations. There are other many reasons and points for comparison, but European or Western modernity has to date been the largest framework for comparative research.

When Indian and Chinese scholars engage in comparative research, they invariably look to the West – previously to Europe and increasingly to the Unit- ed States. For European scholars, the effort to master a Chinese or Indian lan- guage and to gain expertise in the study of either is already a daunting task; to begin comparing these societies seems to be a two-edged sword. It is obvious that the comparison of India and China has yet to take off. Inter-Asian compar- isons still need to be developed.

Civilization, nation and culture

Patricia Uhermi pointed out some of the disciplinary reasons within the social sciences for the inadequate development of comparative work, and raised the question of what should be compared. She noted that the legacy of Chinese studies in India, Tan Chung, look for deep civilizational compar- isons, understandable from the view- point of a scholar who was brought to India by Rabindranath Tagore to set up Chinese studies. Puay- Peng Ho, from the perspective of art history, and Peter van der Veer, from the perspective of anthropology, plead- ed for a historically informed perspec- tive on questions of civilization, nation and culture. Ho looked at the revolu- tionary changes that are taking place in Chinese art and architecture as signi- ficants of Chinese national identity, while Veer emphasized the ho- listic crisis of the concepts of religion and secularity when applied to Indian and Chinese societies.

While these were larger theoretical questions, much of the conference was devoted to the presentation of empiri- cal research on comparative develop- ments. Ravini Thakur and Satish Desh- pande looked at social stratification and the role of the middle class in both countries, while A.R. Vasavi explored the crucial issue of equity in education and literacy.

India-China Comparisons: State and Society

By Margaret Sleeboom

Fourth International Conference of Bioethics: Biotechnology, Family and Community

Cheng and Taipei, Taiwan
24-26 June 2004

Chungli and Taipei, Taiwan

India-China Comparisons: State and Society

By Margaret Sleeboom

Pi T Van der Veer@ucu.uu.nl

Notes

Margaret Sleeboom is director of the IIAS/ASSR/NRO Socio-genetic Marginali- zation in Asia Programme (SMAP).

m.sleeboom@littledunums.nl