

Whither Economics in China? A Comment on Professor Jia Genliang's "Reflections on Economics Education in China and Suggestions for Its Reform"

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Abstract

In socialist China today, neoliberal economics has actually come to wield institutionalized hegemonic power in academic evaluations of economic studies, while in neoliberal America, there is ironically considerably more pluralism in the practice of academic evaluations of economic studies. The origins of this state of affairs lie not in just a simple matter of ideology or policy choices, but rather in different tendencies in the operative practices of two different systems of governance. While China leans strongly toward centralized bureaucratism, along with scientism and numericism, the United States leans more toward multicentered pluralistic practices. Regardless, what scholarship needs is pluralistic contention for sustained long-term development.

Keywords

academic hegemony, pluralistic practices, numericism, centralized bureaucratism, indigenous colonialism

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To begin with, I have learned from the text and supporting materials in Professor Jia's article that, to my surprise, neoliberal economics has in fact already come to occupy an institutionalized hegemonic position in the Chinese world of economic studies. After all, China considers itself a socialist country and, to a considerable extent, still upholds Marxism as its official ideology. How can neoliberal economics come to occupy the hegemonic position in what is a critically important field of study for China?

By contrast, the United States, in my own direct experience, has come since around the turn of the century to a kind of de facto pluralistic academic practice. In the most critical sphere of evaluation for tenure and academic advancement, an unspoken but widely observed principle is that leftist scholars should be evaluated by leftists, rightists by rightists, and postmodernists by postmodernists. Its basic operative principle has been a kind of pluralism in practice (distinguished from pluralism as a political ideal). For Chinese scholars, this American reality might come as something of a surprise.¹

How is that possible? One important reason is that precisely because of the emphasis in liberal ideology on near-absolute individual liberty, it is widely believed that, in a situation in which there are several different contending perspectives, all should be given due respect. There should be no ideologically motivated academic evaluations, and everyone should be evaluated by scholars of a similar political persuasion. That, in effect, amounts to a kind of pluralistic "division of power" in actual scholarly practice. What it recognizes is that each of the three major theoretical persuasions of the time, along with the major journals of those persuasions, has its own reliable standards of excellence. Related to this is the overall ideal of "liberal education," which believes that different schools of thought should contend with one another in a kind of practical pluralism.

To be sure, we often witness power struggles among different factions in American academic departments, but those contenders could generally only manage to attain limited power and control. For example, at the UCLA Department of History (a large department with about 100 members) where I worked for thirty-eight years, a neoliberal group was able very deliberately to gain control over the graduate admissions committee beginning in the late 1990s, overturning the longstanding older practice that each professor should pretty much get to decide whether or not to take on a particular student. But even then, that kind of power was relatively limited, because the ad hoc committees for evaluating scholarly achievements, regardless of departments, still continued to operate by pluralistic principles, and the "progressive" "leftist" faculty still had plenty of alternative avenues for publishing their articles and monographs. The basic operative reality was thus not so much neoliberal hegemony but rather a kind of pluralism in practice.

It is rather in China today that the practices of scholarly evaluations within the discipline of economics show the surprising (especially to Americans) degree of neoliberal hegemonic power that Professor Jia discusses. As his article tells us, since the national policy to “link up with the international,” economists who obtained degrees in the United States and were thoroughly imbued with neoliberal ideology have attained prominent academic positions and have been steadily joined by their own students and/or others who followed them to study in the United States. A majority of them have adopted mainstream neoliberal economics as representing the best and most advanced and “scientific” economic learning. They have gradually attained nearly complete hegemony over many major economics journals as well as over the teaching of economics (on which more below). These are people who are particularly proud of the “scientific” nature of their work, emphasize neoliberal either/or dualistic modes of thinking (e.g., state vs. society), and advocate quantitative methods of research.

This phenomenon is surprising, but still not too difficult to understand. These economists have given themselves over to the mainstream economics view of itself as scientific and true, and once adopting that kind of view, they see themselves as the very best of all economists, even though, as we can readily see, many of them, while claiming to be creative and individualistic, are in fact rather doctrinaire. And, while claiming to be seekers of truth, they are in fact lacking in originality, merely following the tide and method of the “mainstream.”

However, even if we grasp the points outlined above, we are still not able to really understand why it is that today, in an ostensibly socialist China, neoliberal economics should have come to wield hegemonic control over virtually all the supposedly top journals and most of the key positions in the universities, attain virtual monopoly control over economics textbooks, and dominate the academic evaluations of virtually all economics scholars.

It is also difficult to understand why neoliberal academic economics in its major base and primary example, the United States, would turn out in practice to be operating under a kind of three-way division of power (albeit with neoliberalism being the strongest within the discipline), while in at least semi-socialist and semi-Marxist China, it has come to wield nearly complete hegemonic power over the academic discipline of economics. How has all that come about?

To answer this question, we need to look not just at the character of the academic discipline or its academic content, nor just the ideology of the host country or its main academic figures, and other such isolated factors, but rather at some fundamental characteristics of the academic system of China that are very different from that of the United States. The crucial differences

lie not in the academic content of the discipline, nor in its discursive system or ideological formation, but rather in the organization and model of its governance.

In this respect, the United States is fundamentally a pluralistic entity with multiple divided powers, whether at the top of its government or in the organization of its university systems. That is the other side of hegemonic liberal ideology. And, the American system of governance, though a fairly highly numericized and concentrated system, remains a large distance away from China in those respects. China in reality demands a far higher degree of supposed “scientificization” in its administration of the country, which in turn shapes its academic bureaucracies to an extent far greater in penetrative power and far more unidimensional than anything in the United States.

The main manifestation of this consists in the degree of belief in numericism, combined with bureaucratism. The document “Graded Rankings of Journals and the Point Counts to be Assigned to Articles Published in Those Journals” (that I happened to see), used by a leading and exemplary university’s economics department, divides for promotion purposes academic journals into six grades, each assigned a numerical score for each article published. The highest are seven principally neoliberal journals, six American and one English. Each article in one of those A-rated journals is assigned a numerical value of 20 points.

Then comes twenty B-rated journals, also almost entirely neoliberal, of which fifteen are American, four English, and one of the EU. Each article in one of those receives 8 points.

That is followed by a list of sixty C-rated journals, still almost all American, with three English ones and one from the EU. Each article in one of those counts for 4 points, followed by a note explaining that an article in China’s top two journals, *Social Sciences in China* 中国社会科学 and *Economic Research* 经济研究 would be assigned the same number of points. Thus, it would take five such articles to equal one in the top-rated A journals.

Then comes D-rated journals, including all those that have been accepted by the SSCI (that includes *Modern China*), worth 3 points each, which means it takes seven such articles to equal one in the seven A-rated journals.

Then comes the E category of journals, which includes a special list of sixteen journals that have been determined by the department/school to be worthy of the rank. Each article in those journals is good for 2 points, which means ten such articles are required to equal in score just one article in the top seven journals.

Finally comes the F category of journals, which includes all those approved by China’s equivalent to the SSCI, the CSSCI. Each of those is assigned just 1 point, requiring twenty to equal a single article in the top-rated seven.

Journals that are indexed by Scopus, the European equivalent to the SSCI, are not recognized,² nor are “yearbook journals” 辑刊.³ They do not count at all.

Readers will perhaps notice, first of all, how this evaluation system from a leading university in China evinces almost a kind of “colonialized” academic ranking system. Even American readers would find it very surprising that China would actually adopt such a ranked order system, giving the nation’s own top two journals just the equivalent of one-fifth of the point value of top-rated American journals.

I should note here that, in the United States, such a detailed, numericized rank order would be simply unthinkable. This kind of numericized rankings and computations of academic quality would be seen as simply absurd, confusing appearances with real substance. The main operational American academic evaluation principle is in fact “peer review,” done by colleagues in the field, mainly through department- or university-level ad hoc committees that read and discuss the substantive works of the scholar being reviewed and produce a detailed report on them, not by means of any such bureaucratized, formalistic, and numericized bureaucratic system.⁴ But in China, it now reigns supreme as a strict, precise, and supposedly “scientific” system. Personnel action meetings, such as they are, are provided only numericized data sheets according to the model outlined above.

How did all this come about? At the bottom, its source lies not in the decision of any individual or group, certainly not the decision of the Party or the central government, but rather a particular institutional characteristic. First is the emphasis of the system on centralization, not so much a matter of deliberate choice as of historical background. It stemmed from the Chinese Communist Party and the state’s basic approach of allowing widespread discussion until a matter has been decided. Once decided, then it needs to be followed by all in a unified and consistent way. That was a tradition that stemmed from the Party’s experience in revolution and is certainly readily understandable. In addition, there is also a strong bureaucratic tendency toward falsely trusting supposedly scientific data and absolutist measures. It has been the combination of the tendency toward centralization plus “scientistic” inclinations that have resulted in what might be called a strong propensity toward a pseudo-scientific centralized bureaucratism.

Given that kind of broad background, if some people, even if just a small number, manage to grab hold of the control of a certain department’s or school’s administrative power, they would be able to exercise institutionalized control of the workings of that entity and establish their own hegemony. That applies not only to evaluations of academic achievement but also to admissions of students, content of teaching, and degrees granted. I myself personally had such experiences during the years I taught in the law school of

Renmin University. I have particularly vivid memories of how, compared to earlier practices in both American and Chinese institutions in which there is/was an unwritten rule of colleagues honoring one another's largely autonomous judgment as the advisor of the student when it comes to degree examinations of PhD candidates, that unwritten principle came to be set aside, under the cover of institutionalized, supposedly "collective" practices that include anonymous opinions from other faculty outside the school—arrangements that actually permitted the group in charge to exercise hegemonic authority in the school.

The above example is a concrete illustration of how "mainstream" neoliberal economics has come to wield hegemonic power over that field of study in China today. Because of the strong systemic orientation of China toward a kind of formalized, centralized bureaucratism, those who control administrative power are able to attain a degree of hegemonic power that is relatively rare in the United States. In the latter, even "mainstream" academic orientations are usually subject to the checks of the strong institutional tendencies toward pluralistic practices; it is quite difficult to attain hegemonic power. That is precisely the dual nature of "mainstream liberalism" in the United States: there is, on the one hand, its strongly self-righteous and hegemonic tendencies that had made for imperialism and colonialism, as well as the later pursuit of global hegemonic supremacy; on the other hand, there are the constraints that come from pluralistic practices, leading to the tripartite (or more) division of powers in its operative system of governance that impedes hegemonism.⁵ But China is different; its governing practice carries strong tendencies toward centralization and bureaucratism, thereby actually allowing for greater likelihood of a higher degree of monistic hegemonic tendencies in scholarship.

What is very surprising is that the discipline of economics in China (and also of law to a similar extent and to some degree in other disciplines as well), after the country had undergone the experiences of imperialism-colonialism (including from the United States), should witness a degree of hegemony of neoliberalism that exceeds even that in the United States. Its motive force is not so much American neoliberal economists, but rather Chinese neoliberal economists who have studied in the United States (or those economists in China who model themselves after mainstream US economics), in ways that might even be considered "comprador-like" scholarship. That is what lies behind the very paradoxical reality of the rise of neoliberal economics in present-day postrevolutionary China, in the very strange phenomenon of what might be called "indigenous colonialism" (or "indigenous Orientalism"). It is a paradoxical phenomenon that has somehow emerged from multiple crosscurrents of history.

What we need is a direction of development that is without such ideologized monistic liberalism, especially because of the latter's very close connections with imperialism and colonialism. What we need is a kind of substantive autonomy in and through pluralism in academic practice. Genuine and high-quality scholarship cannot come without substantive autonomy and pluralistic contention. What we do not want are pretensions to phony science that come with self-righteous liberal ideology, including its imperialistic and colonial heritage of the past as well as its contemporary pursuit of hegemonism. What we need is substantive academic pluralism without ideologized liberalism.

The key to all of this consists not just in a simple matter of neoliberal ideology. On the ideological level, China clearly already evinces a considerable measure of pluralism, in the traditions of Marxism and revolution, in neoliberalism and market economy, and in combinations of those with "special Chinese characteristics." Regardless, what we know for certain is that academic research requires sustained contention from multiple schools of thought and pluralistic practices to generate genuine long-term vitality. These are some thoughts that Professor Jia's article has evoked for me, summarized into this brief comment for publication along with his article.

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Notes

1. To be sure, the economics department of UCLA at the time was pretty much purely neoliberal, known by many as "Chicago West," placing it alongside the University of Chicago's economics department as the two most purely neoliberal departments in the country. At the same time, there were four well-known departments of economics that were self-avowedly Marxist, including the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and the New School for Social Research. But the great majority of economics departments in fact included multiple varieties of economists.
2. That includes the journal *Rural China: An International Journal of History and Social Science* that I founded ten years ago.
3. That includes the journal *Zhongguo xiangcun yanjiu* 中国乡村研究 that I founded twenty years ago.

4. At the same time, most American institutions of higher learning (excepting some private universities and colleges) have adopted the basic system of “faculty self-governance.” The hiring of new faculty, promotion to tenure (usually associate professors), and advancement to full professor rank are usually voted upon by the entire department (associate professors and above for tenure, full professors for advancements to professor). It is not a system of bureaucratic governance, but rather of “democracy,” which parallels but is separate from the system of evaluation of scholarship. By comparison, the latter is perhaps the more important—the evaluation committee’s substantive report is generally the crucial determinant of the vote.
5. To be sure, the United States has recently evinced strong tendencies toward polarized dualistic oppositions and, in academic life, has even witnessed challenges to the age-old tenure system (already abolished in the state of Georgia). However, it still seems most unlikely that academic tenure, and the long-term tendencies toward pluralism in scholarly practices, will actually be completely abolished.

Reference

JIA GENLIANG 贾根良 (2024) “Reflections on economics education in China and suggestions for its reform.” *Modern China* 50, 1 (Jan.).

Author Biography

Philip C. C. Huang’s thirteen-volume “Collected Works” are being published by the Guangxi shida chubanshe. Seven volumes have appeared, with the remaining six expected to come out before the end of 2024.