



Professor Min Jiayin of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Dr Margaret Sleebloom.

Courtesy of Margaret Sleebloom

Genomics in Asia: The Clash of Bioethical Interests

Report >
General

The IAS workshop 'Asian Genomics' aimed to generate debate and create a basis for comparative research into the relationship between the development and application of modern biotechnologies, cultural values, and local interests in Asian societies.

By Margaret Sleebloom

Solutions for bioethical problems were sought in various areas, such as education (Fujiki Norio), politics and government (Chee Khoo Chan and Mary Ann Chen Ng) medical technology and regulation (Wang Yanguang), science and technology (Min Jiayin), individual ethics (Ng and Santishree Pandit), religion (Anwar Nasim), economic distribution and development (Chan), and a global paradigmatic change of thought and behaviour (Sakamoto Hyakudai, Morioka Masahiro, and Lee Shui Chuen).

Interestingly, rather than mirroring the cultural and regional background of the speakers, which was varied enough: Sikh, Islam, Christian, Hindu, Confucian, Shinto, Theravada Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism, and secular, differences in the interpretations of bioethical problems differed according to their disciplinary background: genetics, biochemistry, medicine, philosophy, and international relations. There were especially differences of view with regards to the 'correct' representation

of commonly used concepts such as 'human rights' and 'individualism' (Sakamoto) and 'autonomy' and 'harm' (Lee). These disagreements led to doubts about the validity of arguments made about the need for a paradigmatic change in favour of so-called Asian bioethics.

Asian Values & Tailor-Made Children

The debate on 'Asian values' came to a head in the context of defining the nature of East and West. Morioka argued that dichotomies of East and West, discernable in the work of the first speaker, Sakamoto, ignore the variety of bioethical views found in both East and West. Chan, who argued that Asian and African values are suspiciously similar, agreed.

An interesting point was made by Gursatej Gandhi, who discussed the issue of prenatal sex selection in favour of baby boys by means of amniocentesis. Many participants had assumed that sex selection is related to the need for a male successor in so-called underdeveloped societies. The example of the Sikh, however, showed that the occurrence of sex selection and infanticide of baby girls in this case correlates positively with the education received by the surveyed Sikh population and its standard of wealth.

This presentation also showed that the former Sikh ideal of non-discrimination and human harmony did not seem to hinder any of the 'bad' 'neo-Sikh' ethics of gender discrimination. In this case the solution to bioethical problems was not thought to lie in religious ethics at all. On the other hand, Tanida's data on various religious attitudes towards euthanasia (Buddhism, Shinto, Christianity) indicated a correlation between religious background and its evaluation. However, Hongladarom remarked that surveys do not necessarily reflect actual behaviour. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to know if similar religious correlations are found elsewhere. The discussion on the different nature of Theravada Buddhism, as defined by Hongladarom, in Thailand suggests that different views on euthanasia can be found among Buddhists in Thailand and Japan.

Min's atheist optimism held modern technology capable of solving fertility problems by means of 'artificial wombs', indicating that the Enlightenment is still alive in China. Min's paper also falsified any notion of the existence of homogenous Asian values in the field of bioethics. Similarly, Wang's advocacy of a new Chinese concept of eugenics expressed the optimistic belief in technological solutions and government policies to correctly execute guidelines. It was remarked that the protection of patients by law was left out of the picture. A study of people's trust in politicians, as the one conducted by Ng in the Philippines, may be of great influence on whether a new concept of Chinese eugenics is endorsed or not.

The question of representation came up when Min presented his view as his own and Wang claimed hers to be rep-

resentative of China. Neither seemed accurate. Min expressed his private preference for tailor-made children by using 'artificial wombs' ignoring the fact that others would have to live with the consequences. Wang's introduction of the Chinese view, on the other hand, seemed not to be based on an opinion survey of all Chinese people. This issue also surfaced in Nasim's 'Islamic perspective', which had the pretension of representing the views of 1.2 billion Muslims.

Another discussion focused on the human interference of nature and its price in at least two areas: the allocation of financial resources and access to the new technologies and the value of human and animal life. Methods of evaluating human life were found in various sources such as the Koran (Nasim), concept of Dharma (Pandit), the Confucian notion of not doing harm (Lee), and spirituality (Morioka).

Hongladarom used the best-selling Thai novel *Amata* to reveal aspects of the interrelationship between Thai culture, Buddhism, and the application of cloning technology. Recovering from the financial crisis of 1997, Hongladarom argues, Thais and Asians should find a way to integrate science and technology into their cultural fabric without destroying the collective identity of their culture. At this point a clash of views occurred between those who regarded religion as a private matter (Pandit) and those who regarded as a collective phenomenon (Nasim and Lee). The collectivists were worried about the lack of common standards for judging the status of a foetus: To them it seemed that, left to the individual, murder could turn into an act of convenience. Questions were also raised about the private nature of the Hindu

concept of Dharma. If bioethics is left to the individual, how to decide about rules for the treatment of human life or conducting experiments?

Ronno Tramper shed a different light on the value of human life and Asian harmony with nature by redirecting the debate to bioethical criteria for conducting animal experiments. The anthropocentrism of many bioethical discussions was put into perspective his focusing on the good of experiments relative to the expense of the integrity, health and welfare of animals. Several questions were raised on how we know what is good for animals. This question was repeated in the context of Yu Kam Por's presentation on a Confucian view that regards human intelligence as a supplement to nature: man must support the realisation of nature. But how, it was asked, can we know the nature of nature?

Chan's paper was refreshing as it was the only one that proceeded from the interests of other human groups. It emphasized the neglected health priorities of the South, intellectual property rights and patents, risk management, genetically manipulated [GM-] crops, health insurance and discrimination, predictive testing, reproductive choice, and eugenics. Chan argued for the necessity of adequate, effective and credible representation of popular organizations, and transparent, publicly owned and publicly managed institutions committed to a needs-based orientation.

Of course, adequate representation is necessary also for other group interests, such as those of Islam, women, the poor, and animals. It was concluded that more empirical research has to be done to acquire a better understanding of the intertwined views of the interests of social, economic, cultural, and religious groups in Asia from a comparative perspective. <

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General

Media & Public Debate

The international conference 'Media and Public Debate', organized by the University of Amsterdam, which was convened by Peter van der Veer, University of Amsterdam, and Shoma Munshi was perhaps one of the first international post 11 September conferences bringing together participants from all over the world. All papers primarily focused on the media coverage of the events of 11 September in the US, their aftermath, and how the use of the media as an instrument of warfare forces the analyses of the construction of public opinion in electronic warfare. In that lay the timeliness of the conference.

By Shoma Munshi

The discussions that the papers generated were lively and thought provoking. The point was raised that perhaps the uniqueness of the 9/11 event had not been sufficiently emphasized, and most of the comments and criticisms post 9/11 have been linked to the electronic media, while nuances had also been present in the print media. It was not just the American media who were guilty of this but global media as well. Asu Aksoy, Goldsmith's College, London, raised the important point that when talking of media, one was also talking of national media in national contexts; and those national media systems were reporting international news. So, in this scenario, who has con-

trol over the resources of the media? When discussed that Samuel Huntington's term 'clash of civilizations' received a new lease on life post 9/11, Irfan Ahmed, University of Amsterdam, spoke of a clash within civilizations as well. Peter van der Veer raised two important issues by pointing out that rather than focus on a criticism of the media, what was required more was an analysis of the media; and that interpretations of the media are different in different places.

The participants generally agreed that the events of 9/11 have brought to the fore, perhaps with greater urgency and focus than ever before, the following questions: identity, Islam, diaspora and multicultural citizenship, how new forms of media, particularly television

and most powerfully the Internet now provide the means for new forms of identity, and how a fallout of this 'war on terrorism' has had unintended consequences, particularly for minorities who wherever they are now, are more vulnerable than ever before.

One of the most useful consequences of this conference has been a forthcoming co-edited volume (Peter van der Veer and Shoma Munshi) from the conference presentations titled *After September 11: Media and Public Debate in Asia* on the fast track with Routledge-Curzon. This will be one of the first books to deal with such a pressing and timely issue of what is literally 'news as it happens'. In that itself, perhaps its greatest purpose is served. <

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