

Book Review

Asian Biotech: Ethics and Communities of Fate

Aihwa Ong and Nancy N. Chen (eds.)

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Asia has become a global force not only in terms of the sheer size of its economy and population, but also as an increasingly strong player in the field of production of scientific knowledge and technological capabilities. In this collection, editors Aihwa Ong and Nancy Chen attempt to delineate the rather complicated picture of this emergence of science and technology in Asia, especially in biological sciences and biotechnology. A theme that recurs throughout this volume is that science and technology do not exist in a vacuum; rather, they are intricately interwoven with social, historical and cultural contexts, or “milieus”, a word that is often used in the book. As life sciences and associated technologies deal directly with human bodies and their biological components, they have a way of entering into these social and cultural contexts, including the distinctive value systems of the cultures across the Asian continent.

The main objective of the book, then, is to chart the interplay between bioscience and biotech on the one hand and these distinctively Asian characteristics on the other. Thus the book makes a valuable contribution to science studies, not least because it focuses on a rather neglected topic of how technoscience is embedded in a non-western context which is at the same time quite economically advanced. There is also an added dimension of how the economies in Asia co-opt biotechnology in order to advance their agenda of economic development and “catching up” not only with the countries in the West but also with each other.

There are many dimensions involved in looking at the effect of biotech upon Asia. Each chapter explores a question addressing a different social or cultural dimension: how India became a hub for clinical trials by the so-called Big Pharmas from the West; how human blood is imbued with deep cultural meanings associated with the very essence of “Chineseness”; how traditional Thai hospitality is employed as an asset for medical tourism in Thailand; how DNA becomes a tool in configuring national ethnicity in the case of Taiwan and China; how genetically modified food becomes a nationalistic tool in China; how the race to produce cutting-edge findings in stem cell research is imbued with deeply different priorities and values in Singapore and South Korea; how embryo and stem cell research is viewed with ambivalence and according to cultural specificities in Japan; and how international pharmaceutical companies create demand in a way that relies on cultural attitudes in India. The major countries of the continent, namely China, India, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand, are represented here, but one wonders what the situation would be like in other Asian countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia, and

looking at the Islamic countries in the Middle East would be interesting. But that would clearly call for another volume.

In her introduction Aihwa Ong argues for a “situated” ethics in which ethical considerations and discussions are not based on universalist assumptions, as is often the case among traditional ethicists, namely those who are trained in philosophy. According to Ong, ethical considerations should pay attention to social and cultural milieus, looking at how these milieus shape and are shaped by the use of science and technology rather than comparing the practice against a universal standard. However, a philosopher might reply that what Ong does is to ask a different question from the one usually asked by philosophers. Instead of asking whether a practice is right or wrong and whether the standard by which the practice is judged is tenable or not, Ong asks how the practice is part and parcel of the situated cultural and social milieu.

For example, in her discussion of cord blood banking in Singapore, Ong, an anthropologist, understandably looks at how the practice is imbued with meanings and how it engages in an interplay with values which are distinctively Singaporean and also Chinese. She explicitly states that her intention is not to discuss the ethical value of the practice – whether depositing cord blood for use when a future need arises for cells which can be developed from the cord blood, or even having another baby so that its tissues can be used to help treat a sick sibling, is ethically right or wrong according to some universal standard – but instead investigates how cord blood banking plays a role in understanding how Singaporeans think and feel. Thus Ong’s “situated ethics” seems to be less an author making ethical judgments and more an empirical investigation of a people’s cultural inclinations. Here “ethics” takes on another meaning which is more akin to how a group of people accord a set of values to a range of practices, reflecting their beliefs and cultures.

Ong also criticises bioethics as it is commonly practised, saying that it does not pay adequate attention to the situatedness of the practice. However, bioethicists might reply that looking at the situatedness of a practice or action is not the purpose of bioethics. When it comes to devising a guideline which should be accepted globally, a guideline for conducting therapeutic stem cell research, for example, some kind of more or less universal standard seems to be in order. There are two levels of philosophical argument: the content of the guideline itself and the justification of the content. One can certainly conduct anthropological investigations into how the debates purporting to lead to contributions to the international guideline are imbued with cultural values, but that is different from investigating the cogency of the justification of certain viewpoints on a practice.

For bioethicists, perhaps the most interesting topic in the volume is that of stem cell research in Singapore and South Korea. In her chapter, Charis Thompson details how the practice of stem cell research in those countries is interlaced with cultural and social components that are distinctively Asian on the one hand and purposefully international on the other. Hwang Woo-suk’s rapid rise to scientific stardom and his equally rapid fall and disgrace is common knowledge. What is perhaps less well

known is that Hwang's research activities were cast in a distinctively Korean manner. Hwang cultivated his Buddhist belief in order to underline the way in which Buddhist, and hence traditionally Korean, values informed his research.² As a country which has undergone so much turmoil in its history, South Korea is conscious of the need to assert its national identity amidst its powerful neighbors in China and Japan. And in South Korea Buddhism is tied up with national values, with "Koreanness", so to speak. Thompson reports that Hwang's female assistants voluntarily donated their eggs "for the sake of the country", putting Hwang in the position of a national hero, and shows that it was only when his lab aspired to become a worldwide hub for therapeutic cloning research that he met with resistance from whistle-blowers who uncovered the scientific fraud which led to his downfall. For Thompson, Hwang's rapid rise and fall is symptomatic of a nation that demands recognition and acceptance from the world. The hope of the entire nation that South Korea would have the first laboratory in the world to succeed in conducting human cloning experiments rested on Hwang's shoulders. It is quite understandable that this pressure contributed to the rush to produce results that eventually led to Hwang's downfall.

Thompson gives a very different picture of practices surrounding stem cell research in Singapore. Instead of tying up the research in a university, Singapore built a large complex called 'Biopolis' to attract investors and scientists from around the world. While both Singapore and South Korea share the aspiration of using stem cell research to put themselves on the list of countries with advanced technological capabilities, Singapore tried to attract foreign scientists rather than cultivating its own, as South Korea did. Biopolis is a gleaming complex of buildings which equals the best biotech research institutions in the world. This international dimension of the Singaporean enterprise is enhanced by the fact that Singapore set up a very demanding set of ethical guidelines which are clearly intended to put the research activity in the country on a par, both ethically and scientifically, with that in the West. Similarly, the ethical standard in Singapore is intended to align perfectly with that of the international community of scholars. Thompson remarks that this is one clear difference between stem cell research in South Korea and in Singapore. While in the former ethical standards have sometimes been shunted aside in the rush to produce national glory, in Singapore national glory is achieved through aligning with the prevailing ethical standard of the global community. This attempt to align itself with the global community reflects the desire of Singaporean leaders to set the island nation up as a global hub of advanced scientific research, a position which will translate into a leading position in today's knowledge economy.

Ethics is clearly but differently involved in both the South Korean and Singaporean cases. In Hwang's case in South Korea ethics was somehow bypassed in the rush toward national pride; however, in the Singaporean case, an ethical standard was actively cultivated as a means by which Biopolis gained international acceptance. Here, one is not talking about ethics in the usual way of judging whether an action is right or wrong and for what reasons, but ethics as an instrument by which the locals attain their goals. This is a clear example of Ong's situated ethics. There is also a connection between ethics as practised by bioethicists and philosophers on the one

hand and ethics as a tool observed and analysed by anthropologists on the other. The strict observance of international ethical guidelines in the Singaporean case seems to show, at least as hinted in Thompson's paper, that ethics functions not so much as a set of principles that informs the work of those involved in stem cell research, but more as a tool by which the local site gains international recognition. One could reflect upon the very ethics of using ethics as a means to gain recognition. Furthermore, in the South Korean case, one also sees how ethics itself is embedded in a larger context. Apart from the scientific fraud, which is unforgivable, the willingness of Hwang's female assistants to donate their eggs for the cause of national glory could be a subject of ethical debate. Thus one sees how these two ways of looking at ethics can themselves be brought to bear on each other.

Bioethics and the social sciences, therefore, do not appear to be as separated from each other as it might at first seem. At any rate, what bioethicists could learn from anthropological investigations like those presented in this volume is that one should consider the social and cultural contexts in which the practice to be ethically assessed is embedded in order to understand the practice more thoroughly. And it is this more thorough understanding which will lead to a more nuanced and better refined ethical judgment. It is easy to judge Hwang's conduct as unethical, but when one considers the pressure and the weight of expectation he was under, one gains a more complete understanding of what he went through. Of course this does not exonerate his wrongdoings, but we gain a wider perspective on why he did what he did.

Another interesting paper in the volume looks at how the demand for clinical trials of newly developed drugs has spurred the development of sophisticated specialised organisations in India. Kunshik Sunder Rajan discusses the emergence of clinical research organisations (CROs) in response to the demand from multinational pharmaceutical companies for outsourced clinical trials. Here Ong's situated ethics is at work again. In order to gain international acceptance and certification and to meet global standards, these CROs need to follow closely the guidelines set up by the international community. One cannot fail to notice the similarity of this case with the Singaporean one mentioned earlier. In the Indian case, the CROs follow strictly the guidelines governing research protocols on research on human subjects. Rajan describes how the physical set-up of a typical CRO, its choice of research participants and its conduct of the trials, all follow the guidelines very closely. This is necessary because the CROs want to be on the map as viable service companies for the global pharmaceutical industry. Rajan, however, mentions (several times) that ethics here means nothing more than collecting informed consent forms. What is left unmentioned in his paper (perhaps intentionally) is the contrast one perceives between the letter of the ethical guidelines and the actual lives and subjectivities of the Indian research participants themselves. Rajan makes sure that his analysis yields a more nuanced picture than just to portray global pharmaceutical companies as exploiting the poor Indian villagers. , yet it is nothing but the strict observing of the ethical guidelines that makes the picture more nuanced. CROs try to meet international standards by following ethical guidelines, which according to Rajan are constituted by nothing more than the informed consent form. Here one senses a thinly veiled

criticism of ethics itself. Ethics is presented more as a part of the international procedure whereby the organisation meets the standard than as a principle that governs the value of the action of the CROs and the global pharmaceutical companies themselves.

By criticising ethics, or more accurately by criticising the way ethics has been co-opted by CROs, Big Pharmas, and the international research ethics community itself, we find again a possible congruence between the ethics of philosophers and bioethicists and the kind of situated ethics that Ong and Chen present in this volume. The criticism of the appropriation of international ethical guidelines as a means to gain international standard means that ethics has ceased to be the governing principle of one's own action and decision making. In an ideal world ethics should be a part of one's action, such that whenever one makes a decision or performs any action one does so with full consciousness of the rightness of what one is doing, with all the right reasons, or at least the reasons that one is fully and sincerely convinced to be right. But what we see from Rajan's and from other chapters in the book is another matter. Ethics has ceased to be the governing principle in the minds of the performer of the action, and has become a mere tool, a mere front-end, by which one presents oneself to meet whatever standards or guidelines are required by the global community. Yet by the very act of raising this point, the authors in this volume show that ethics as a normative discipline, as a tool by which the value of an action or a set of practices may be criticised, is still viable after all. The sheer description of what is taking place in these Asian countries and the description of how ethics has been appropriated, can indeed be viewed as part of an *ethical* judgment in itself, something that philosophers have been doing all along.

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² Tae-Ho Kim, "Is Religion Hostile to Biotechnology?: The Case of South-Korea," paper presented at the International Workshop on "Asian Biopoleis: Biotechnology and Biomedicine as Emergent Forms of Life and Practice, January 6 – 8, 2011, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore.