Two top authors compared: Hossain on Bangladesh and Ang on China

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OK, so this week I’ve reviewed the two important new books on the rise of China and Bangladesh. Now for the tricky bit – the comparison.

The books are very different in their approach. Where Yuen Yuen Ang focuses on the ‘how’ in China, Naomi Hossain is more interested in the ‘why’ in Bangladesh.

Hossain traces the ‘why’ to the critical junctures that littered Bangladesh’s creation, especially the appalling famine of 1974, and its impact in shaping elite beliefs and norm. Collective trauma created a ‘moral economy’ of protecting the people from climate, shocks and hunger (an ‘anti famine contract’).

By contrast, Yuen Yuen Ang doesn’t talk much about what’s going on inside Chinese leaders/officials’ heads (other than greed). For her, the institutional process to bring about growth and development is all about incentives and rationality, while Hossain is all about ideas and norms.

So what I would dearly love to see is the two of them forming a dream team to swap countries (or methodologies), because I want to know more about the missing ‘why’ in China, and the ‘how’ in Bangladesh. The traumatic chaos, bloodletting and famine of Maoism must have had at least as profound an impact on China’s decision makers as the events of the 1970s in Bangladesh. And Ang could help Hossain more fully explain the alchemy by which a chaotic and ineffective government somehow gets officials to do good things (or at least not get in the way). I’d also like Hossain to take a look at the gender aspects of China’s rise – almost entirely missing from Ang’s book.

But what about the authors? Purrowing over these two books got me thinking.
about the role of ‘bicultural’ writers. Naomi is a British Bangladeshi, who by her own admission speaks indifferent Bengali, but that means she has a foot inside and a foot outside the Bangladeshi story, and maybe that is an asset in detecting and understanding both the subtleties of what is context specific, and how it reflects on broader debates. That might also help avoid the tendency among US and European authors to interpret the world in terms of their own country histories (eg assuming that the purpose of development is to achieve the American Dream in all countries – a la Acemoglu and Robinson).

Now I realise talking about other people’s ‘positionality’ is a minefield, so I contacted both authors. Here’s what they said:

Yuen Yuen Ang:

‘Your point about bi-culture scholars is spot-on. And I don’t see that it’s ever been raised. It would make a fabulous discussion, since much of development studies is tripped by cultural blindspots.

The difference between me and Naomi et al is that I am tri-culture or even quad-culture (Chinese, Singaporean, American, British), making me an unrooted cultural nomad. As a Singaporean Chinese, in China, I’m regarded as a foreigner and sometimes treated with suspicion, even though I’m ethnically Chinese, and in the US, I’ often annoyingly asked “Which part of China do you come from?” When doing fieldwork in China, I can pass off as Chinese because of my appearance and language, but this is distressing because I’m obliged to behave like a native and respond correctly to all social cues, or risk offending locals. Finally, in Singapore, as I’ve been away for too long, I am not local enough. In short, I am foreign everywhere I go.

But as a result of existing in the crevices of cultures, I see the Chinese context through Western eyes and the Western context through Chinese eyes. Forced to always adapt to my surroundings, I take nothing for granted. Hence, I notice things that my Chinese assistants will regard as normal/boring and not worth a thought.’

Naomi Hossain:

‘Yes I completely agree that a partial insider perspective brings some advantages. The benefits of distance with knowledge I suppose. In my case I would probably have not been quite
famine had I not had an Irish mother with a strong nationalist streak who never forgot the famine or what the British did (or didn't do!).’

Adding Hossain and Ang to my list of personal development gurus made me take another look at the longer list – and a lot of them exhibit something like biculturalism. Ha-Joon Chang (South Korea), Matt Andrews (South Africa) and Amartya Sen (India) are more rooted in their countries of origin, but have long since joined international academia; Dani Rodrik clinks firmly to his Turkishness.

Which suggests that promoting diversity in university faculties, conference panels and all the rest is not just a tokenistic response to colonial guilt, but the best way to get a greater understanding of what is going on in the world. Pretty obvious, when you think about it. As Alice Evans from Kings College, London, commented on the Hossain Review:

‘Naomi is a British Bangladeshi, with long-standing links, interactions and in-depth knowledge of Bangladesh. She has family, friends, [or, more dryly] ‘multiple data points’. She knows more than someone like me could ever know through a few one off trips. If Development Studies remains dominated by white old men from the Global North, we blinker ourselves to these brilliant insights. Building more inclusive research, funding, publishing, conferences etc. is absolutely cardinal to enhancing our understanding of development.’

Thoughts?

Bangladesh  biculturalism  China  critical junctures  norms  positionality  systems thinking

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This is a conversational blog written and maintained by Duncan Green, strategic adviser for Oxfam GB and author of ‘From Poverty to Power’. This personal reflection is not intended as a comprehensive statement of Oxfam's agreed policies.