Latent Collaboration in Bioethics: Human embryonic stem cell research and new biocultures in Mainland China

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Introduction:
Collaboration

- Exploitation, development and collaboration
- Collaboration is animated by

  a) complementarity of strengths and weaknesses of the collaborative partners and the benefits generated by their joint efforts;

  b) differences and inequalities in the structural, material relations of knowledge production.
- The apparent benefit-sharing in international collaboration hides the potential for the creation of value over and above the alignment of joint efforts expended by the collaboration

Introduction

Lopsided collaboration

Lopsided collaboration: apparently proceeds from shared aims, teamwork, alliance, group efforts, mutual benefit and co-operation, but systematically underexposes underlying tensions and contradictions of the joint undertaking

Introduction:
Latent collaboration

Latent collaboration: even before concrete steps towards collaboration with a partner are undertaken, entrepreneurial researchers in Mainland China put efforts into building up collaborative capacity.

Background: Science orientation PRC closely linked to international policy-making

- 1949 - Science influenced by ideology of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, Lysenkoism
- 1977/8 Opening up: Four Modernizations; Rehabilitation Genetics; Seeking Truth from Facts (shishi qiushi);
- Government investment over 1.5 billion Yuan ($180m) in biotechnology (1996 and 2000);
- Additional $ 350 million funding for genomics and biotechnology through its priority ‘863’ R&D projects over the period 2000-2005

Background: Adaptation of regulation to the PRC

- Bioethical Vacuum;
- Regulation as political interference:

- To benefit Socialism with Chinese Characteristics;

- Re-evaluation of social aspects of the life science under the influence of Confucianism and other rehabilitated beliefs;

- To serve policy-making of China as a global life science power.

Background: Adaptation of regulation to the PRC

The Ethical Guiding Principles for Research on Human Embryonic Stem Cell (hereinafter referred to as the Guiding Principle) are formulated for the purpose of bringing human embryonic stem cell research in biomedical domains conducted in the People's Republic of China to accord with bioethical norms, to ensure internationally recognized bioethical guidelines and domestic related regulations to be respected and complied with, and to promote a healthy development of human embryonic stem cell research.[1]

[1]Ethical Guiding Principles on Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research of the PRC (2003))

Latent collaboration in China's hESR

- Collaborative capacity: promise of scientific discovery, the possible investments by pharmaceutical companies, potential collaboration with foreign researchers, publishing in internationally peer-reviewed journals, or having foreign scientists in lab or IRB
- Collaboration regarded as necessary on the way of earning recognition by colleagues, and thus a career in science.
- Complex international relationships exists between famous hospitals and universities and their overseas' historical originators, predecessors, and sources of knowledge.

Latent collaboration in China's hESR

- Returnees and adaptation of bioethical institutions
- Esp. younger researchers/students: respect embryo, laboratory animals, beginning of life (*mo-ai*)
- Old generation scientists show skepticism about the bioethicality of scientists abroad regarding human cloning, oocyte trade, and respect embryos.
- Older scientists express cynicism about the sincerity of Chinese and other researchers.

Latent collaboration in China's hESR

Discussing the Hwang case: absence of official views and bioethical regulation in the thinking of scientists

- *The Korean case does not discourage SCR in China. In fact, it shows that there is a knowledge gap to be filled in by China*
- *The Korean case shows that too many eggs are needed*
- *After the Korean case Eastern people in particular need to apply international standards*
- *The Korean case was not of great influence on science in China*
- *After the Korean case, many Chinese scientists refrained from applying for funding for hESR, as reviewers may question its use.*

Latent collaboration in China's hESR

Bioethical regulation: more of strategic then of ethical relevance to research when international competition is at stake

In latent collaboration bioethical capacity is important.

Older scientists and new generation have different bioethical attitudes.

Latent Collaboration and bioethical capacity-building

- Institutionalization bioethics in China: analytic philosophy and traditions of Chinese and Asian values
- Scientists not willing to participate in international or national debates set up by bioethicists
- But need for bioethics regulation

Latent Collaboration

Self-understanding as latent collaborator

Foreign interest in collaboration with us:

- *First, policy (rules about patents and IP), second, human capital, third market.*
- *China is not far behind. It provides many patients, advanced instruments and technology* (for sequencing, proteomics), *high quality research, and cheap scientific labour.*

Latent Collaboration

Self-understanding as latent collaborator

Foreign interest in collaboration with us:

- Bioethical provisions (guidelines)
- Permissive bioethical guidelines and scanty supervision
- Access to many samples and case-histories concentrated in a few hospitals in big cities
- Easy access to oocytes and embryo
- Government support for collaboration
- Regulation of advertising for medicine sloppy
- It is possible to do more clinical research in China
- Licensed monkey facilities and disease models

Latent Collaboration
Contending framings of bioethics

Contradictions in the way that scientists emphasise the existence of bioethical provision and point out their slackness at the same time.

Differences between international regulatory standards and their implementation facilitate the exploitation of bioethical differences.

Need for bioethics versus need for science in China as a developing country

- Difference in the quality of institutes
- Brain drain
- Acceptance of less high bioethical standards
- Less robust institutional infrastructure
- Bad bioethical image abroad (collaboration; publication)
- Women can be exploited for eggs/embryos
- Room for unethical experimentation

Conclusion

- In latent collaboration Chinese scientists regard themselves as potentially valuable research partners by framing China as source of biomaterials, scientific and technological expertise: as dependent developing nation-state.
- 'The West' framed as source of science, education, cell lines, wealth, journals, work (and salary), scarce resources.
- In latent collaboration exploitation and collaboration as two sides of the same coin.