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Universities, Women and the Dialogue Among Civilizations

Introduction: The Dialogue among Civilizations

The United Nations declared 2001 the "year of dialogue among civilizations" and the purpose of this designation is elaborated on a special website as: to "emphasize that the present globalization process does not only encompass economic, financial and technological aspects, but must also focus on human cultural, spiritual dimensions and on the interdependence of mankind and its rich diversity." (<http://www.unesco.org/dialogue2001>)

UNESCO sees this dialogue as "an essential stage in the process of human development that is both sustainable and equitable. It humanizes globalization and lays the basis of an enduring peace, by nurturing conscience and a common basis for human existence, rooted in history, heritage and tradition."

This call to dialogue presents a significant challenge to universities, given the dominance of certain patterns of knowledge and approaches to epistemology in the university's traditions. This chapter will explore ways in which women scholars in the university community may contribute to overcoming the constraints of these patterns, and stimulate active participation

in dialogue. Two experiences over the past decade gave me a sense of the particular qualities women scholars could bring to such a dialogue, one related to a major project of development with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and the second to preparations for the United Nations World Congress on women held in Beijing in 1995.

Between 1989 and 2001 I was involved in two major CIDA projects supporting a number of normal universities or teachers universities in China in graduate studies and research. While the projects began as standard development projects, offering academic and professional support from Canadian universities they soon shifted from a focus on development to dialogue, as Canadian partners became aware of all that could be learned from China's rich educational traditions and experience. As more and more women scholars became involved on both sides over the years, and took up much of the leadership, it became evident that women scholars were particularly skilful in cross civilization dialogue. This in turn caused us to reflect on why women tended to be comfortable with a fairly high degree of flexibility over knowledge definitions and approaches to research collaboration across highly divergent academic cultures. Could it have something to do with women's historical experience over the past millenium in relation to the university and other institutions of higher learning?

The second experience that stimulated some probing into the comparative history of women in higher education was the lead-up to the

historic United Nations Congress on Women held in Beijing in 1995. We became involved in some of the preparatory work for the congress, particularly making it possible for North American feminist scholars and activists who were working to set the agenda to meet with Chinese women scholars visiting Canada under our project. It soon became evident that the concerns and issues were quite different in China and North America, and we realised there were many reasons for this. As scholars of higher education we wanted to reflect on whether historical differences in the relation of Chinese and Western women to the modern university might shed some light on this.

The chapter thus has two main parts. The first is a comparative historical overview of women in the academy in China and the West which identifies both commonalities in women's experience and differences over a long period. It also looks at the approaches women have brought to fundamental questions of epistemology on both sides of the globe, and how these approaches have positioned them in relation to the development of universities over the 20th century. The second part provides some illustrations of women's approach to knowledge issues in the dialogue among civilizations, through an overview of six chapters contributed by women to a conference volume that arose from our work with the CIDA development project mentioned above, demonstrating how development had quickly transformed itself into dialogue, and the approaches which women brought to this dialogue.

Women and the Academy in the West and China: A Historical Overview

One of the European women intellectuals whose reputation has enjoyed a remarkable resurgence in recent years is Hildegard of Bingen, the medieval abbess and nun, who wrote scholarly treatises on cosmology, ethics and medicine, and corresponded with popes and rulers on a wide range of subjects. (Newman, 1998) Before the founding of European universities in the 12 century, women had been active in scholarship and spiritual leadership through organisations such as nunneries, abbeys and religious schools. Once the university was founded, however, women were excluded from formal participation in the world of higher learning, resulting in what one scholar has depicted as a *World Without Women* (Noble, 1992) in European universities over a period of seven centuries. It was not until the 19th century, that women began their long and arduous struggle to be accepted in modern universities, first as students, then as professors, ultimately as deans and presidents. One woman scholar has described this process as *Storming the Tower* (Lie and O'Leary, 1990), a phrase which gives some sense of the intensity of the effort and energy called forth in this historic process.

There was little, if any, interaction between Chinese and European scholarly communities in the early medieval period yet it is fascinating to note that women became excluded from the academy in China in precisely the same century as in Europe, that is the 12th century. In the European context,

David Noble has explained how this was linked to the adoption of celibacy by the Christian clergy in Europe of the time, and to the ways in which early universities were dominated by members of the clergy, as both teachers and students. In the Chinese context, a different set of dynamics led to the exclusion of women from higher learning. During China's Tang dynasty (698-907 CE), women had been able to take an active part in religious and scholarly life, under the liberalising influence of Buddhism, which had been introduced from India. Buddhist nunneries provided a context for women's scholarship as well as religious leadership (Tsai, 1981), and the aesthetic life of the period was characterised by images of women dancing and participating freely in a range of social activities.

The decline of Buddhist influence and the emergence of neo-Confucianism in the early Song dynasty changed the context for women's education in some important ways. In the 12th century, the great neo-Confucian scholar, Zhu Xi, established a revised canon for scholarly study, the *Four Books and Five Classics*, which was to dominate both the official institutions associated with the imperial examination system and the non-formal academies for 800 years, until the abolition of the traditional examination system in 1905. (Miyazaki, 1978) This dominant pattern of scholarship laid down clearly prescribed duties and study tasks for women within the family, and strongly discouraged independent roles for women, including those within Buddhist institutions. (Birge, 1989)

This intriguing coincidence in the timing of women's exclusion from academic institutions and the world of scholarship provides a point of commonality in the historic struggle of women in China and the West. The subsequent development of scholarly knowledge in European universities, and the emergence of modern science in the 16th and 17th centuries, however, had few parallels in China. Furthermore, the standing and status of European universities in the global community in the mid to late 19th century, the period in which Western women began their long struggle for acceptance in the university, was completely different from that of China's modern universities, which were established at a time of national humiliation and defeat. These differences in historical context made for a different kind of struggle, and a different set of epistemological resources for the struggle.

Let me begin this train of thought on the Western side. Universities have tended to determine what kinds of knowledge are given high status, and set the standards as to what is valued and important. With the emergence of modern science in the 17th to the 19th centuries, the tremendous productivity and effectiveness of scientific method in solving many kinds of problems became more and more evident. Thus the idea of each of the modern disciplines constituting a value free, objective science, operating entirely in the cognitive realm of knowledge, has tended to dominate the university's culture. (Weiler, 2001) Knowledge in the social sciences and humanities has been held to the same standards of scientific objectivity and detachment, of statistical

rigour and quantitative forms of evidence and proof. In his influential essay, “Science as a Vocation,” Max Weber spoke of this as a kind of “disenchantment of the world”, which he saw as inevitable yet deeply regrettable. (Weber, 1967:155)

However, women have been particularly sensitive to other ways of knowing, recognising that only some dimensions of reality can be caught in this objectivist cognitive framework. While the West may have made enormous contributions to human civilization through the discoveries and applications of modern science, these discoveries have also brought many problems in the realm of the environment, health, family life, social cohesion, and what women probably worry most about - conflict and war. Women have been particularly open to forms of wisdom and knowledge available in other civilizations which could contribute to the solution of some of these unintended consequences of progress.

It was only after they had overcome formidable barriers to their equal participation in university life as students and professors that they were able to analyse the predominant patterns of knowledge and develop a feminist critique of the epistemological tenets that had tended to dominate university disciplines. Scholars such as Sandra Harding (1986, 1987, 1991) and Carolyn Merchant (1980) have critiqued the linear and mechanistic character of the university’s rationalism. They have questioned its espousal of a dualism of facts and values as a solution to the need for freedom of scientific inquiry. They have

challenged its commitment to objectivity and the resultant isolation of the subject from the objects under scrutiny. They have called attention to its embrace of metaphors drawn from the mining of natural resources and the subjugation of “irrational” forces in nature. They have worked to build new approaches to knowledge, that could move beyond the one dimensional approach of positivist scientific methodologies. These concerns have also been picked up by some male scholars in the academy, notably Bruce Wilshire’s identification of a “Moral Collapse” in the American university (1990) and Mark Schwehn’s depiction of university members as “Exiles from Eden” because of its inadequacy in dealing with spiritual knowledge. (1993) These challenges to the once dominant knowledge orientation of the university have been important for the emergence of genuine dialogue across civilizations.

The American sociologist, Elise Boulding, began to consider issues of global dialogue more than a decade ago. Her book, *Building a global civic culture* (1988) illustrates the possibilities of an integrative and multi-dimensional approach to knowledge. She identifies four aspects of knowledge which she considers vital to the development of a global civic culture - the cognitive, the affective, the intuitive and the aesthetic:

"...the **cognitive** faculty assists the individual in utilizing and integrating new information into existing mental frameworks and in developing criteria for evaluating new information. Proficiency in the **affective** faculty is apparent

when individuals are able to negotiate their personal wants with others in their environment, when they develop empathic identification with others or when they are able to reveal disciplined, intentional behaviour in the face of a diversity of choices. Maturation of the individual's **intuitive** capabilities finds expression in her/his ability to 'tune into signals from the natural and social environment which do not lend themselves to verification by empirical procedures.'"(Boulding, 1988:100) Finally, "the development of an individual's **aesthetic** expression ...may facilitate communication between and among global citizens from different countries, as artistic expression can be employed to supplement written communication." (Boulding, 1988:98)

Perhaps one reason for women being particularly active in pioneering these integrative forms of knowledge goes back to their centuries of exclusion from European academia. They are less bound to the views of knowledge that have dominated the university, since these were originally developed by an all-male world of scholarship. They are more easily able to balance cognitive approaches to knowledge with the affective, intuitive and aesthetic in ways that make possible greater openness to other cultures and civilizations.

Nevertheless, an immense effort was required for this "storming of the tower" that has created space for women's ways of knowing. After all, women began their long struggle to gain acceptance into the university precisely at the time when the European model of the university was viewed as an essential accoutrement to modernization around the world. It was

imposed on many societies under conditions of colonialism or imperialism, but it was also freely chosen by other societies as an essential institution in their modernizing efforts. This was true of Japan, China and Thailand, among others. (Altbach and Selvaratnam, 1989) The establishment of modern universities around the world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries took place in a time of supreme confidence in the achievements of those sciences which had been nurtured by a male world of scholarship in the European context.

Here the contrast with the historical experience of Chinese women is particularly striking. While Western women struggled to gain entry to a triumphant institution which was being emulated around the world in the late 19th century, Chinese women struggled to enter newly established universities in China, where a completely different mood prevailed. Chinese scholars and political leaders were experiencing a profound sense of humiliation in an international environment so threatening that it was not clear whether China would survive as an independent nation. There were deep regrets at the failure of classical Chinese scholarship and traditional knowledge institutions and the necessity of their abolition. Many of the progressive male scholars who led the newly developing universities were sympathetic to women, feeling that women's experience of oppression in traditional Chinese society gave them a particular capacity to understand the deep chagrin that came with the recognition of China's lowly status in the world of nations. (Chen,

1928:366-368, Hayhoe, 1999:264)

If the conditions of their entry into modern higher education were different, less a storming of the tower than the building of a wholly new type of higher education institution on Chinese soil, the patterns of knowledge which Chinese women confronted were also less alien. It is true that modern Chinese universities borrowed many of the features of the modern disciplines that had developed in the West. There was a particular emphasis on the physical sciences, engineering, agriculture and medicine, which were seen as essential to modern nation building., but considerable attention was also given to social sciences such as economics, sociology, anthropology, political science and psychology. (Hayhoe, 1993) Yet undergirding this transplanted set of modern disciplines were traditional patterns of knowledge, that were holistic and integrative. China's dominant scholarly culture of Confucianism had allowed space for cognitive, aesthetic, affective and intuitional forms of understanding, and had never become bound to a narrow positivistic epistemology. (Ding, 1995) It had been supportive of scientific innovation and indeed fostered an extremely successful traditional science, admired even in Europe, up to the 16th and 17th centuries. (Blue, 2001, Maverick, 1948)

At this point a fascinating puzzle emerges. On the one hand Confucian forms of learning were more open to women's ways of understanding, and more supportive of an integrative and holistic way of looking at human problems than were the patterns of European universities. On the other hand,

dogmatic forms of state Confucianism utilized by successive dynasties to legitimate their rule had been as absolute in the exclusion of women as the traditional universities of Europe. Chinese women had never been allowed to take part in the traditional civil service examinations, nor had they been able to study in non-formal academies. Yet once these institutions had gone, the patterns of knowledge and approaches to epistemology that continued to nurture scholarly lives in newly established universities were more supportive of women than the forms of rationalism and positivism that were so deeply rooted in the culture of European universities. The struggle of modern Chinese women has thus been a different struggle, and the cultural and intellectual resources which they are able to bring to global dialogue are rooted in a very different civilization.

The recent surge of interest in Confucianism on the part of American philosophers has highlighted the androgynous ideal of scholarship in Confucian tradition, in contrast to the privileging of male approaches to philosophy in the European tradition. (Hall and Ames, 1998:79-100) There is a suggestion that men and women in East Asia, whose approach to scholarship is rooted in Confucian traditions, are likely to embrace a multi-faceted approach to knowledge and an openness to forms of dialogue that include moral, affective and aesthetic understanding as well as cognitive.

With the development of women's studies in China, there has also been a rethinking of some aspects of Chinese history, including the roles of

women writers, teachers and poets in periods such as the late Ming, the 15th and 16th centuries. (Koh, 1995). Rather than seeing women mainly as victims who suffered exclusion from mainstream social and educational institutions, it shows women as agents of their own destiny, and explores how they managed to create their own world of scholarship and pedagogy within the broad parameters of Confucian thought. Chinese women have also developed their own critical views of the modern disciplines introduced from the West in recent years, in one case contrasting the openness of anthropology to cultural difference and in-depth inquiry with the precision and dryness of positivist sociology. (Chen Yiyun, 1994)

There may thus be historical reasons why women scholars in universities around the world are likely to be particularly active in fostering dialogue among civilizations. They are aware of the limitations of the academic discourse arising from the disciplines of knowledge established in European universities in the 19th century. These disciplines and their associated discourses were introduced to most parts of the world under the compulsion of a worldwide movement towards modernization. However women's historic struggle for equal access to these modern universities took place in different socio-cultural contexts, and women scholars have been able to draw upon differing cultural traditions and differing visions of how the university's knowledge patterns might be transformed.

Women's Voices in the Dialogue of Civilizations

In this second section of the chapter I return to the experience described earlier of collaboration with universities in China, which involved joint research, doctoral training and institutional development. As part of our move from development to dialogue we organised a major conference in 1992 under the title “Knowledge Across Cultures” and invited senior scholars from China, India and the Arabic world, as well as various Western countries, to present their views. Scientists, historians and educators shared reflections on “some of the fundamental critiques of knowledge and modernity in the Western context that have arisen from within and as a result of Eastern perspectives and critiques.” (Hayhoe et al, 1993:v) The conference volume was published in both English and Chinese in 1993, and then republished in Hong Kong in 2001, with more than half of the papers updated for this revised version in honour of the United Nation's Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. The voices of women scholars in this volume illustrate some of the qualities I have described above in women's ways of knowing.

Let me begin with Ursula Franklin, a distinguished professor emeritus of metallurgy at the University of Toronto. Her metallurgical studies led her to investigations of ancient Chinese bronzes, going back to the 16th century BCE, which were remarkably advanced from a scientific point of view. Her attention

went beyond pure scientific investigation to explore what could be known about Chinese society, and she discovered patterns of the organisation of labour and production that were remarkable for their time, and expressed a right way of moral and practical conduct, or the Confucian *li*. From this basis she then went on to do pathbreaking work on technology as a system of social instructions, and the social and cultural implications of modern technology. She thus suggests that technology must be understood in its social and cultural context, and cannot be simply transferred across social and cultural boundaries as neutral or universal sets of rules or principles. Technology as a way of working together carries with it implicit knowledge, on which the cohesion of communities and cultures depends. (Franklin, 2001: 248)

A second woman contributor, Samiha Sidhom Peterson, a sociologist from Egypt, focuses her study on processes of knowledge transfer, involving national and international aid agencies such as UNESCO, USAID and others, in the area of basic education for all. She directs attention to the four layers or levels at which knowledge transfer is negotiated - the international, national, organizational and individual, showing how, at each level, the people involved in formulating, adopting and implementing policy are deeply influenced by their own values and beliefs, and these have a kind of filtering effect on the knowledge which is transferred. She illustrates this by reference to policy debates at the international level indicating a range of different views of

development. At the national level , she explains how commitment to basic education in Egypt has moved from Education for All to Excellence for All in the forms of educational development and teacher education undertaken, reflecting the values of those leading this international initiative at the national level. She goes on to consider the cultural context of the bureaucratic organizations at the national level whose members interact with international agencies, and finally the individuals responsible for the implementation of these educational policies right down to the local level. (Peterson, 2001)

A third woman contributor, Verna Kirkness, a member of a First Nations Community in Canada and former director of the First Nations House of Learning at the University of British Columbia, focuses on the interaction between students from First Nations backgrounds in Canada and the university, distinguishing between a concept of "coming to the university" and "going to the university". The expectation that these young people will be totally assimilated to the university's culture is associated with "coming to the university" while the students themselves bring a different set of expectations in "going to the university." They hope to be able to contribute valuable insights and forms of understanding from their own oral traditions and the spiritual heritage of their people, to gain respect and engage in reciprocally beneficial dialogue with students and faculty of the mainstream. Kirkness' paper opens up vistas of the enrichment that could be brought to some of the disciplines of knowledge in the university, at both the national and

international level, if it were open to respecting and integrating into discussion and debate this wealth of understanding from a distinct community. (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 2001)

On the other side of the globe, Renuka Narang writes about her pioneering work at the University of Mumbai in developing a program of extension education for rural women, which involves university students in teaching, mentoring and literacy work. The university itself is one of India's oldest and most prestigious, with a very high national standing, and a sophisticated network of international contacts. By giving students university level credit for their work with rural women, and requiring them to keep a diary of all that they learn in this process, the university promotes awareness of indigenous roots of knowledge in rural India. This makes it possible for the university to embrace the challenges and opportunities of globalization, while at the same time strengthening its roots in India's own indigenous cultures, and exposing its students to real life opportunities for exploring those roots. (Narang, 2001)

This project in India fits closely with the call of Lu Jie, a senior woman professor at Nanjing Normal University in China for strengthening of the indigenous character of Chinese pedagogy. Lu Jie has done extensive work in rural education in China, and sees how crucial it is for Chinese educators to root their thinking in China's rich traditions of pedagogy, so that the many external theories and ideas flowing in through the open door of recent years

can be successfully integrated into China's own highly developed educational culture. Her longer term aspiration is for Chinese educational thought and achievements to contribute to world pedagogy, and she sees China's social transformation over the past two decades as a component of worldwide modernization. What makes it different from Western experience is the speed of the transformation and the fact that two types of transformation are taking place in tandem, from agricultural to industrial society, and from industrial to post-industrial, resulting in a situation where Chinese people "have to make choices in the complicated context of a situation somewhere between tradition and modernity, modernity and post-modernity." (Lu, 2001: 250)

Finally, Zahra Al Zeera, a woman scholar from Bahrain provides an incisive overview and commentary on four paradigms in Western social sciences, beginning with positivism and going on to three emergent paradigms - postpositivism, critical theory and constructivism. She points to an "invisible string" linking them all together, and rooted in the Aristotelian principle of "either or." Drawing upon the great Islamic philosophers Ibn Sina and Al Ghazzali, she develops an Islamic paradigm of social knowledge which links up body, mind and soul in one integrated self, and enables both individual and society to advance to higher stages of being. She suggests that "grounded theories at universities in Islamic countries should be based on an Islamic paradigm...which will have the capacity to encompass the wholeness of human beings as well as the wholeness of society and life in general. This will help to

overcome the fragmentation and polarization of individuals and society, which is the task of holistic, integrated knowledge." (Al Zeera, 2001:59)

These reflections by women from Canada, Egypt, China, India and Bahrain illustrate certain features of women's ways of knowing that are supportive of dialogue across civilizations, and that are contributing to a transformation of the knowledge patterns once so entrenched in Western universities. They include an openness to indigenous and local knowledge, and a recognition of the importance of strengthening local knowledge in face of globalization and the kinds of homogenisation it brings; a tendency to privilege the subject, the person as knower, and to create a balance between objective canons of knowledge and subjective understanding; a commitment to integrating different disciplinary approaches into a holistic understanding of problems and issues; and finally a profound sensitivity to spiritual knowledge and recognition of its vital place in human development and the health of the environment. These points about women's ways of knowing bring us back to the opening quotation from the United Nations website on the dialogue among civilizations: the call to focus on "human cultural, spiritual dimensions and on the interdependence of [hu]mankind and its rich diversity."

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