# Troubling International Human Rights Advocacy

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YIH REN, OCT 28 2021

With a rising debate over refugees from Afghanistan in the U.S.; the economic wrestling between China and the U.S. becoming more pessimistically influential; Covid-19 giving birth not to solidarity but an infodemic; bourgeoning land-grabbing power furthering climate change and causing environmental activists' lives, and with people's precious identities being their detriments, we need to declare our values, voices, and positionality to abolish colonial episteme and reconstruct our social relations into a plausible future. This article will begin with analysis of some issues, such as U.S.-China-Taiwan relations, concerning international human rights framing; Then, with a connection of global citizenship education and intercultural competence with human rights advocacy, I aim to denounce the clean-cut understanding of human rights and emancipation claims limited by discourse and nationalist education agenda as well as announce an opportunity brought to fruition to a global orientation, solidarity, resistance, commonwealth, and full humanity.

**International Human Rights: Universalism vs Relativsm**

Human rights are rights with principles that every individual holds regardless of race, sex, nationality, and origins. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights composed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948, the recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world. Unfortunately, in our days, universal human rights treaties are not yet shared and understood by all countries; and the rhetoric is often interpreted and manipulated to favor one or some States' economic and political interests and ambitions. The failure to agree and enact substantive human rights practices and international laws reflects the cruel reality in our contemporary international society as the standards and commitments vary according to different national idiosyncrasies and cultures.

The central debate is whether, in a given society, local religious, cultural, and political traditions can determine civil and political rights possessed by its citizens. On the one hand, some argue that international human rights laws and treaties are created for protecting the interests of the individuals, not the governments; and the States should serve the purpose, not draw boundaries to limit their citizens' full human rights. However, many countries have contested this idea and tried to promote cultural relativism in any form to defend their authoritarian governmentality. Also, people criticize the universality of ideas and demands of human rights is highly influenced and regulated by the democratic West (see Renteln, 2013).

For example, UN policies regarding female genital mutilation, cutting, or circumcision (FGM/C) are problematic and violate human rights to mobility, self-determination, and the practice of culture. The UN and WHO illegalize FGM/C procurers and criminally prosecute people who performed or received a procedure in the Mediterranean, Africa, and South Asia, but at the same time, these procedures are quite popular in the Western societies and called *Hoodectomy* as a cosmetic surgery jargon. Similar procedures in Western medicine are acceptable and beneficial for some who need the surgery for self-identification (e.g., sex-change surgeries), but in non-Western constructed medical knowledge and practices, they are deemed unconventional, dangerous, violent, and an abuse of women's bodies. In communities where people see FGM/C as a cultural practice and necessity to conform to the need and the expectation of women, their willingness to undergo the procedure is now considered as self-disrespect and conservative, not self-definition and determination (Ball, 2018). Thus, to avoid being orientalist, essentialist, and understanding international affairs by only comparing to one's worldview, we need to adopt an intersectional

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approach that not only emphasizes historical, cultural, and textual, discursive, institutional, and other structural dimensions that counter the intersection of identities (e.g., personal identity intersecting social construction) but also help empower agency and liberate self-actualization.

Another example can be found in Christie and Roy's (2001) book, *The Politics of Human Rights in East Asia.* They claim there is no delineated history of "human rights" in Asia as understood in its Western context. Compared to the wealthy and resourceful West, Asian or other Third world countries and people have a different set of ideas in terms of values, rights, and duties. Also, the relatively high rate of crime, violence, drug abuse and homelessness has led to believe that the Western model is inappropriate and a threat to national and societal security in Asia contexts. Their resistance to universal human rights has created tension with the Western States. China has long been criticized by the West, particularly the United States, for restraining civil and political rights to its people while still outperforming the majority of countries in average income growth. In recent years, China has expressed impatience with the international human rights community for discounting the efforts they have made to improve poverty, living conditions, and illiteracy and simply focusing on first-generation human rights (civil and political) with no appreciation of the complexity of the issue (Peerenbom, 2016) .

On the contrary, with globalization dramatically changing the world dynamic, the West has also been criticized for having the wrong agenda in working with the East on human rights issues. The man-made human rights disasters in Yemen and Afghanistan were sparked and supported by the U.S. government and military force in the name of counterterrorism (Lackner, 2014); the Hong Kong crisis was also defended by the Western States in the name of freedom and liberation (Boyajian & Cook, 2019). Human rights became a tool for the West to vilify and sabotage the stability of the East in the international community, acquire geopolitical and economic advantage, and control over local natural resources. As we can conclude that hegemony can occur in the name of liberty, freedom, and advocacy of human rights (Schecter, 2010).

The United States, China, and Taiwan relations are also perfect examples in revealing the complexities of power dynamics, human rights, colonization, democratization, and foreign politics. Taiwan's frustration for its incomplete international status and growing democracy awareness have led to the disputes with mainland China's aspirations for their alliance and harmony, but at the same time, Taiwan's economic interdependence and necessary human contact with mainland China genuinely call for peace, balance, and cooperation from both sides. Externally, the U.S. plays an important role in influencing Taiwan-China-US relations. China sees the U.S. as a threat to their regime, and vice versa, the U.S. sees China as a threat to their democracy and neo-liberalist capitalism as well as economic, political, and military domination. Hereinafter, International human rights advocacy on an individual, interpersonal, and collective level, is complex and complicated (Lin & Krasner,2011).

As a critical education practitioner, I recognize the potency of education that aims to give emerging ways of thinking, acting, and being and transform our society by emphasizing humanism (not humanitarianism), agency, and action can help us see through obscured social structures and power dynamics that affect our identity and simply lives and develop a social activist persona to challenge dominant culture and narratives that unequivocally marginalize the best interests of the people. Therefore, I present Global Citizenship Education and Intercultural Competence below to criticize the existing practices on international human rights issues and  develop a prism that embraces full humanity and celebrate resistance across boundaries.

## Global Citizenship Education

Nation-states exist in isolation as bounded totalities, and this idea, developed by David Held (1999), has influenced and even regulated the nature and position of education offered within nation-states, the English only Act in the U.S., Marxist Education in China, just to name a few. The idea of nationality and citizenship, which has been strongly politically asserted for a long time, does not necessarily promote cohesion, freedom, and mutual understanding, but purity, exclusion, and otherness. Then national education in the U.S. born out of the nationalist structure in the 19th century was first created to benefit not the entire nation, but the wealthy, the rich, and the powerful and for the poor and the disposable to follow and assimilate. Their voices, home knowledge, and cultures were deemed disloyal, unnecessary, and less American (see Garcia, O., Kleifgen, J.A., & Falchi, 2008 for the critique of English Only

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movement).

In the age of globalization and internationalization, more and more people start to see nationalism, nationality and national citizenship are problematic and discriminatory, especially in the education realm. Global citizenship education (GCE), on the contrary, starts to get some attention for its emphasis on global competencies and humanistic (not humanitarian) values. However, GCE holds its criticism of being ambiguous and Eurocentric, but multiple scholars have developed different typologies to extend the conversation and the engagement for critical change. Oxley and Morris (2013)' essay, *Global Citizenship: A Typology for Distinguishing its Multiple Conceptions* , left me a greater impression as it aligns with the mission of international human rights advocacy, which is to advocate for the enjoyment of full human rights for all. In their model, political global citizenship, moral global citizenship, economic global citizenship, and cultural global citizenship are highlighted to critique power relations, politics, and economic agendas interplayed in cases like Taiwan, China and the U.S. political wrestling game. Political global citizenship focuses on changing relations between the states and individuals; moral global citizenship raises empathy and understanding of human rights; economic global citizenship responds to the nature of the modern and globalized workforce, and cultural global citizenship emphasizes solidarities and awareness of human and cultural differences, and advocates equalities and people's voices and lived experiences even you do not know them and have not met them.

GCE has been incorporated into school curriculums and outside of school programs all around the world, countries including the U.S, China, Canada, Europe, and South Korea. However, GCE is widely recognized as merely the need for global skills and knowledge in most Asian countries, while GCE's concentration on human rights in the West, is challenged by patriotism and imperialism. GCE is not merely about learning about the others, rather it suggests empathy, solidarity, and cultural sensitivity and critical thinking regarding all global issues (Ee Loh, 2013; Myers, 2008). To be sure, theoretical research and praxis will continue to mark the unfolding and expending of GCE, especially as technology ties the world even closer and more opportunities to engage in cirtical dialogues.

## (Inter)Cultural Competence

Understanding culture is substantial. Culture consists of explicit and implicit patterns, symbols, beliefs that constitute the distinctive achievements of human groups. It reflects societal experiences that have been transmitted and shared across generations and geographic boundaries. Also, culture can be self-sufficient, depending on variables like language, sexuality, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and so on. Certainly, it is a complex subject with a lot of changes and ambiguity during the current political climate. When there are so many changes in terms of diversity of the social, cultural, and political environment in our society, we de facto lack the most proper language to describe, conceptualize, and understand this phenomenon. Simultaneously, multiculturalism has been criticized for having an essentialized idea of culture and a top-down approach concerned with national identity and unity to diversify the society, but cultural competence with a series of attitudes, behaviors, and policies does recognize the value of culture, differences, and the provision of services that meet cultural needs. Further, living in a multicultural society, intercultural competence becomes a critical resource to boost transnational communication and exchange and create an integrated and cohesive social environment (Meer & Modood, 2012).

As we mentioned above, self-determination of identity is not free of outside forces, powers, and interferences, but rather culturally constructed, socially embedded, and discursively positioned. Again, using Taiwan as an example, Taiwanese Chinese identity is complex. Their ethnic identity nested within a dominant national identity can compromise one's cultural identity. Chinese and Taiwanese share common cultural roots, but they have become more politically separated. The co-ethnicities of Chinese and Taiwanese have become one of China's knots in heart of unity, and Taiwan's current dilemma of identity (Li, 2003).

A pedagogy that promotes intercultural competence allows social spheres to be places to foster self-awareness of their own cultures and awareness of other cultures, to increase acceptance, adaption, and integration when communicating with other cultural perspectives, and to facilitate the navigation of their preserving identity and understanding other cultures. These forms of understanding and knowledge should not be exclusively constructed in classrooms; for all people, not just those who are culturally, and linguistically diverse, intercultural competence

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building can help guide their exploration of identity, culture, and meaning of life, especially in this fast-changing and dynamical world.

## Final Considerations

Above all, my discussion is roughly holistic, but as I feel the urgency and significance not only to capture the forces that have given the current international human rights advocacy its shape and attempt to identify its essence but also to propose possibilities to be fully recognized and to live collectively with strong agency and power to participate in decision-making. To understand the situation, intervention, and transformation requires an awareness of objectivity and subjectivity and their dialectical relationship. International human rights advocacy does not simply fall into either verbalism or activism. Rather, its critical form develops between the praxis of annunciation and denunciation. It acknowledges that limiting elements in our objective reality that have deterministic power, but at the same time, our awareness of the situations and commitments to transform lie against the affirmation of our determination. Andre Lorde (2007) says the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. However, pedagogies like global citizenship education and intercultural competence believe in the possibility of education of all students, challenge neo-liberalist and colonial projects and ideology, and conjure a new way of seeing the world and taking actions against human suffering to resume commonwealth and full humanity. Speaking back to Audre Lorde's notion, I believe with radical and humanizing pedagogies, hope, and solidarity, I believe that one, I mean people, can dismantle the master's house with the master's tools.

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