

**Teaching Economic Geography in Two Contrasting Asian Contexts: Decentering
Anglo-American Economic Geography in China and Singapore**

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Abstract Teaching economic geography outside Anglo-American countries presents a particular pedagogical challenge, as theories and concepts developed in these countries might not be directly applicable outside their intellectual and national contexts. In this paper, we show how the peculiar institutional and development environments in China and Singapore have shaped the ways in which economic geography curriculum is developed and taught in institutions of higher education. We also examine how students respond to the intellectual challenges presented to them. In our views, successful pedagogy in teaching economic geography requires a significant degree of localization of the curriculum.

Keywords: Anglo-American economic geography, China, Singapore, institutional contexts, localization

Introduction

This article is about teaching economic geography in two very different contexts in Asia. Not only do the geographical contexts vary substantially (China and Singapore), the student contexts differ significantly too. The first author mostly teaches undergraduates in economic geography in a national university, whereas the second author teaches mostly graduate students in a highly prestigious national academy of sciences. A third, but highly important, contextual factor is that both of us were trained within the British geographical tradition during the mid-1990s when the “cultural turn” was already in full swing (see Coe and Yeung in this issue). In this commentary, we focus on how we have adopted similar, yet different, pedagogical approaches to teaching economic geography respectively in Singapore and China. By shedding light on our differential experiences, we aim to draw attention to two crucial aspects of teaching economic geography outside Anglo-American traditions – the powerful forces of *localization* and *institutionalization*. We do not necessarily claim the exclusiveness of these two contextual forces to our teaching experiences (see also Barnes and Murphy in this issue). However, we do believe that they pose significant

challenges to how mainstream Anglo-American economic geography might be diffused, if not decentered, in other educational contexts.

The Localization of Teaching Economic Geography

In many ways, economic geography is, by its very nature, a *localized* discipline in terms of its content and focus. Not only are teaching languages and empirical examples highly “local” in nature, but the theoretical foundations in different strands of economic geography are also highly contingent, particularly on the local contexts of the original empirical studies from which these theories emerge (Yeung and Lin, 2003; see also Ettlinger in this issue). Indeed, some of the well established academic jargon in (Anglo-American) economic geography such as “institutional thickness”, “untraded interdependencies” and the “relativization of scale” can only really be fully understood by relating them to the specific empirical examples in the original studies in the UK or the US. To make the subject more interesting to our students, we have to teach economic geography in an as locally relevant and applicable way as possible – a pedagogical pressure not entirely different from the experience in North America and Western Europe (see also Jocoy in this issue). After all, it is very hard for our students to relate to faraway examples of automobile manufacturing found in Ohio, Ontario, or Oxfordshire. Most students in China have never been to the US, Canada, or the UK, and this is compounded by the problems of understanding economic geography written in English and based on Anglo-American experiences. Chinese students can better grasp the meanings of various concepts and notions in the English literature by

relating them to examples of high-tech clusters, manufacturing belts, retail patterns, and so on in China.

In Singapore, such a lack of geographical presence abroad through tourism and social visits among undergraduate students is less a problem than the fact that most Singaporean students are too used to living in a global city-state where many geographical scales (national, urban, local) are collapsed into the same single scale – the national scale. In fact, many students have travelled to the three centres of Anglo-American economic geography (the US, Canada and the UK) and seen for themselves first hand a wide variety of economic-geographical phenomenon such as giant American shopping malls, Fordist manufacturing factories, glamorous corporate headquarters, powerful financial districts, and the like. Australia and New Zealand are also relevant here because of their important role in (re)producing Anglo-American economic geography. Quite a number of Singaporean students have visited these countries within the Asia Pacific region. Still, the above Anglo-American examples in economic geography remain fairly “remote” in an intellectual sense whereby Singaporean students find them hard to explain conceptually. Their experience of these examples is at most only superficial because they tend to focus on apparent forms rather than substantive contents. It is thus quite hard for them to understand how flexible production systems have led to vertical disintegration in Silicon Valley and how social and cultural factors can explain the continued dominance of the City of London as the nodal centre of global finance.

As a pedagogical strategy, we often start with *local* or *national* economic-geographical phenomena in our teaching and relate existing theories in economic geography to these local/national phenomena to help students understand them better. In China, we can start with the rapid economic growth in the coastal provinces and explain how transnational corporations and foreign direct investment matter in this development. We may be able to explain effectively the concept “new international division of labour”, or “China as the global factory”, to our students without incurring too much conceptual difficulty. Chinese students who come from the coastal provinces can easily relate to the experience of their friends and family members who work in foreign-owned or joint venture factories. In Singapore, however, such local/national phenomena take a special geographical twist as Singapore is both a local and a national entity squeezed into a city-state. While Singaporean students have heard a lot about the emergence of China as a global factory, few can relate directly to the experiences of their counterparts in China. However, most Singaporean students can easily understand the phenomenon of transnational corporations and foreign direct investment because of their extensive presence in Singapore. Due to Singapore’s unique global connectivity in terms of capital, information, people, and trade flows, students of economic geography can also appreciate Amin and Thrift’s (1992) conceptual idea of “Marshallian nodes in global networks”.

This aspect of localizing the teaching of economic geography is particularly important when it comes to the “cultural turn”. It must be emphasized here that the

“cultural turn”, as we understand it, has a lot to do with the growing emphasis on understanding symbolic forms of capital in advanced industrialized economies (see Thrift and Olds, 1996; Thrift, 2000). In this sense, value added can be created from economic processes and practices that produce cultural meanings and performances (e.g. cultural and creative industries, alternative economies, and so on). While this kind of economic geography has now taken the centre stage in mainstream Anglo-American economic geography, and especially in the UK context (see Coe and Yeung in this issue), its relevance for and applicability to teaching elsewhere, particularly among developing and newly industrialized economies, remains untested. In a country like China where the linchpin of economic activities is still traditional manufacturing industries and where intellectual property rights remain insufficiently protected, it is quite hard for students to grapple with the processes of value creation in cultural and creative industries. Decades of socialist state economic planning have also developed an ingrained mindset among students for understanding value creation through the production of tangible goods rather than intangible symbols and services. In Singapore, students are more familiar with these symbolic industries and economies because of the state-driven discourse of the “knowledge-based economy” (Coe and Kelly, 2002). Still, many of them have immense difficulty in grasping the strong social theoretical underpinning of most literature on this theme in Anglo-American economic geography. In this sense, the decentering of the recent “cultural turn” in Anglo-American economic geography in both China and Singapore

can be explained by the localized nature of the subject and its (ir)relevance for both national economies and thus student interests.

The Institutionalization of Economic Geography

The second contextual factor in teaching economic geography in Asia to consider is the institutional requirements that may include the assessment of a faculty member's performance, either by his/her university or department, and the allocation of resources by the university to departments based on student enrolment, as well as the nature of a course (e.g. elective or compulsive). In Singapore (and Hong Kong to a certain extent), for example, faculty members are expected to teach a certain number of students per year, no matter how many courses they teach. This national institutionalization of faculty-student ratio, as the most important criteria for public funding of universities in Singapore means that faculty members have to teach more courses if the enrolment cannot satisfy the broad university requirement on faculty-student ratio. Such a practice, combined with the flexibility of students to change between different majors, means that attracting more students can be the *primary* target in teaching economic geography. Unlike the institutional context in the UK whereby students in economic geography modules are to a certain degree "locked-in" through A-Level entry requirements, this pressure to maintain high student numbers in turn seriously shapes the syllabus and pedagogy of economic geography courses in Hong Kong and Singapore. Large student numbers and diverse student background thus necessitate a significant degree of "watering-down" course content and coverage in order to make the course widely appealing and engaging.

To get around this problem of student enrolment, one of us has attempted to transform a second year undergraduate module in economic geography into something that is both question-driven and directly relevant to the everyday experience of students. This pedagogical approach contrasts sharply with what may be considered a more conventional style of teaching economic geography of going through successive decades of theories and different schools of thought (see also Coe and Yeung in this issue). While student enrolment remains an important objective, the fundamental pedagogical concern is to demonstrate the usefulness and relevance of an economic-geographical perspective for the everyday life of our students. In doing so, we hope students will be keen to continue their engagement with the economic-geographical concepts learnt in the course and apply them in new and challenging contexts after their graduation.

Such a pedagogical approach clearly differs from traditional approaches to teaching economic geography concepts in a fairly dry and dense manner. It can also potentially interest more undergraduate students because they may more readily see the practicality of learning economic-geographical perspectives. For example, both authors are highly familiar with the global production networks literature in economic geography. We can use our own research on the Nokia cluster in Beijing, China (see Liu et al., 2004; Yeung et al. 2006), to illustrate the importance of lead firms and their global suppliers in understanding the contemporary economic landscapes of mobile phone manufacturing. Students are also encouraged to conduct their own research on the empirical examples discussed in the course, including the Nokia case, as part of

the research-led teaching experience that has been shown to be beneficial and effective (Healey, 2005). These activities include case studies of specific products/services used on a daily basis and their global economic geographies. Given the significance of Nokia's market dominance in China and Singapore, for example, this student-centric research project allows students to relate the complex economic geographies of producing Nokia handsets to their everyday lives. This pedagogical approach pays off well. In Singapore, the enrolment into the second year module increased dramatically from 27 students in 2003 to 120 in 2004 and 2005. Student feedback also indicates the positive acceptance of such pedagogical practices by a diverse range of students from arts and science backgrounds. Many students found that this question-driven approach and real-world relevance of examples helped them to understand otherwise rather "dry" and "boring" concepts.

The teaching of economic geography can also be influenced heavily by the ways in which the sub-discipline is institutionalized in particular national and sometimes local contexts. For example, although few will deny that economic geography has an interdisciplinary nature, some of us tend to emphasize its *interconnections* with economics and other social sciences while others may focus on its relationship with physical sciences. In China, many economic geographers tend to stress the relationships of their sub-discipline with physical geography, environmental sciences, and ecology because environmental issues caused by rapid industrialization and urbanization in the country are becoming significant problems and the Chinese government has called for serious academic contributions to help in solving

sustainable development issues. As a result, senior economic geographers in China often call for unifying different sub-disciplines of geography to make direct contributions to solving national and regional sustainable development problems (see Lu, 2004).

This shift of research interests among Chinese economic geographers towards unifying geography and tackling sustainable development, which has much to do with the changing interests of national funding authorities – e.g. China National Natural Sciences Foundation and the Chinese Academy of Sciences – is increasingly shaping the teaching of economic geography in China. This can be partly seen in the change of names among many geography departments throughout China to something that incorporates study of natural resources, or environmental studies. This institutional change has affected prestigious geography departments in Beijing University and the Chinese Academy of Sciences, as well as lesser departments in provincial universities. Moreover, the significant attention attached by Chinese funding authorities to the International Human Dimension Program (IHDP) of Global Change has stimulated economic geographers in the country to stress the interdisciplinary connection of economic geography with environmental studies, like in some other countries (cf. Hanson and Moser, 2003). Economic geography professors in China have begun to include concepts and theories of sustainable development in their curriculum, e.g. the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

A brief historical tour of this institutional change is instructive. During the central planning regime before China's opening and reform in 1978, the planning of national

production and construction activities required a great deal of academic knowledge on the spatial distribution of natural resources, locational factors of potential industrial sites and transport lines, and so on. During this period, economic geographers in China were intensively involved in the integrated survey of natural resources, site selections of plants, and regional planning of industrial development (Liu and Lu, 2002). The teaching of economic geography in China at that time was centrally about the allocation of agricultural resources and industrial activities. By the 1980s, the emergence of integrated territorial planning generated major demand for economic geography in China as numerous local, regional, and national state planning agencies required staff and consultants well trained in spatial planning perspectives. The teaching of the sub-discipline thus incorporated a wide range of planning theories and related knowledge. Geography professors often attached more importance to the implications of concepts and theories in economic geography for spatial/regional planning. Today, such a preference for planning-related knowledge remains because spatial planning still plays an important role in the state's regulation of economic development in China.

Moreover, as China is experiencing widening regional disparities in a rapidly growing period, regional development issues and related theories are an integral component in teaching economic geography. Indeed, regional development has been treated almost as synonymous with economic geography in a broad sense in China. It has become the linchpin of teaching economic geography in many, if not all, geography departments throughout China. Such a "regionalism" in China, however,

has nothing to do with the “new regionalism” literature in Anglo-American economic geography. The academic relevance of economic geography in China is seen institutionally in relation to its direct contributions to providing expert opinions for national and local governments. This process of growing consulting work for government authorities on regional development issues has enabled “regionalism”, a major research and teaching theme, to emerge as the mainstream of economic geography in the country.

Reprise

The twin pressures of localization and institutionalization have undoubtedly shaped the ways in which we teach economic geography in China and Singapore. The enormously important “employability agenda” in both national contexts has further contributed to our efforts in making the subject matter more relevant and applicable to students’ experiences (see also Gedye et al., 2004). Taken together, these interrelated contextual factors have significantly interrupted the diffusion of Anglo-American economic geography into Asia – a complex geographical context in which really significant economic transformations are taking place. Perhaps because of this immediate need for the direct relevance of any academic knowledge, the kind of economic geography that is infused with social and cultural theories has met, thus far at least, a relatively less receptive audience in Asia.

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