Dilemmas of bilateral engagements in research:  
A reciprocal comparative perspective on collaborative knowledge production  
between Australian and Chinese scholars  

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Abstract  

The internationalisation of research and educational researchers is on the agenda in many countries. The trans-national engagement of researchers is expected lead to, and reward improvements in the positioning of its educational researchers within local/global multilingual knowledge societies. At the least efforts to deepen and extend bi-lateral engagements between researchers in Australia and other Asian countries, could counter the image of Australian universities presence in the region solely as a hawker of educational wares, forever touting for full fee-paying undergraduate students. However, the contribution that collaborative, on/off-line research between two or more countries might make to the internationalisation of research and researchers in higher education is not without challenges and complexities. This presentation explores several dimensions of these issues. To begin this presentation, we briefly explain the context that led to the writing of this paper and the approach to research that has evolved with it. We then describe some of the difficulties of engaging in bilateral research. This informs our discussion of its challenges and complexities, and alerts to some the cautions to be taken in conducting future bilateral research. We conclude with some strategies that are worth considering in furthering bilateral engagement in research.  

Keywords: research (yan jiu), bi-lateral (shuang bian), university (da xue), tensions (zhang li), benefits (hao chu), engagement (chong shi)
Introduction

The internationalisation of research and educational researchers is on the agenda of universities in Malaysia, Australia and China as well as elsewhere. The quality and impact of research is being mapped in terms of “international” collaborations, categories and benchmarks (The Commonwealth of Australia, 2005b, p. 3). Images of the global/local knowledge economy make engagement in collaborative bilateral or even multi-lateral research increasingly important. This is expected to lead to, and reward improvements in the positioning of researchers within the world’s multilingual knowledge economies. However, there are constraints on the boundary crossings necessary for such collaborative knowledge production. For instance, the rating of the “international excellence” of research quality appears to privilege English speaking countries such as the United Kingdom and the USA. However, this definition of “international” may marginalise efforts to undertake bilateral research throughout Asia. Such engagement is necessary to interrupt image of the omnipresent Australian university presence in the region solely as a hawk of educational wares for full fee-paying undergraduate students. Bilateral research engagement could make Australia’s major educational trade partners into friends (punggo?). It could make international excellence in research area moving from one centralist to post-colonialist, post-national approaches.

What might be required to make improvements in bilateral engagement in research? We explain the benefits of bilateral research and discuss three communication technologies that we have found useful for this work. This paper identifies as three dilemmas contributing to the internationalisation of nation-centred research and researchers. We then provide an account of the usual difficulties of engaging in bilateral research. Second, we explore the tensions inherent in this work. Third, we discuss the challenges and complexities of engaging in bilateral research, suggesting some points of caution. The following section deals with the discussion of thoughtful and tactful strategies. But first we begin by summarising aspects of our approach to engaging in bilateral research.

Research approach
The research reported here is based on case study methodology, an “umbrella term for a family of research methods having in common the decision to focus an enquiry around an instance” (Adelman, Jenkins and Kemmis, 1983, pp. 2-4). Thus, this case study was designed around collecting and analysing evidence that focused on a two-way comparative enquiry into an “instance” of globalisation, change in higher education and educational research in two universities, one in China and the other in Australia. This case study was designed to generate interpretations of evidence about the possibilities for bilateral on/off-line research using these two universities as the focus for data collection. In this sense, this case study was designed to explore evidence based on the researchers’ real world situation which provided the focus for an inquiry into this instance.

To confront biased comparison that lead to Eurocentrism, Anglocentrism or Sinocentrism can (Pomeranz, 2000) “be done in part by viewing both sides as identities when seen through the expectations of the other, rather then leaving one as always the norm.” Ethno-centered approaches normalise the research experiences of one country and make it the pattern one would expect in the absence of ‘blockages’ or ‘failures’ (pomeranz, 2000: 9). This reciprocal or two-way comparative method of analysis generates new questions concerning similarities and raptures, and to reconfigure old ones.

In designing this research project, a range of problems has to be engaged, if not resolved (Adelman, Jenkins and Kemmis, 1983, pp. 4-7). First, a literature review was carried out to enhance the researchers’ appreciation of the Gaps in current knowledge. Then a scoping exercise was undertaken to enhance the researchers’ knowledge of the two sites to be investigated. The research techniques chosen for the collection and analysis of the evidence were then selected to suit the research problem being studied. This case study evidence arises from the researchers’ participation, observation and reflections on the real life of the two universities chosen for the purpose of this study.

We have sought to make meaning of the evidence generated through this case study using dilemma analysis (Berlak and Berlak, 1982; Rizvi and Kemmis, 1987). This procedure enables the issue of bilateral engagement in research to be explored as a desirable practice burdened by anticipated and unexpected Dilemmas. This critical enquiry into the worth of bilateral engagement in research using dilemmas analysis has made it possible to bring to the fore the difficulties of making choices where consequences are predicted, as well as unknown and unknowable. In this paper three interdependent dilemmas are analysed. We begin the familiar array of difficulties associated with the ever-present shortage of funds and
the unevenness in technological developments. These seemingly technical difficulties are embedded in a larger set of tensions that primarily cultural in nature. The foregoing difficulties and tensions affecting engagement in bilateral research are then shown to be nested in a larger set of complex and challenging dilemmas that invite creative solutions. But first, we begin with a consideration of the benefits of bilateral engagement in research and associated tools for facilitating this work.

**Benefits of bilateral engagement in research**

Engagement in bilateral research has a range of benefits, six of which are particularly noteworthy.

First, researchers from different educational and cultural settings can critically examine and compare each other’s knowledge and experience so as to deepen their understandings of ideas and practices (Rolfe et al., 2004). Because higher education around the world is affected by and responding to global forces, images and connections, researchers from different countries explore the similarities and differences in the issues they face. Where researchers work together they supplement each other’s understandings of the complexities and challenges in the globalization of higher education.

Second, bilateral engagement in research makes possible the exchange and evaluation of new theoretical concepts, research approaches and findings around common research problems (Hew and Cheung, 2003; Rolfe et al., 2004). Yuncheng University and the University of Western Sydney are facing local challenges arising from the historical and ideological processes of globalisation that are affecting higher education in their respective countries.

Third, sharing of knowledge, resources and skills through bilateral engagements in research can contribute to achieving internationally significant research outcomes more readily than working in nation-centred isolation (Cogburn & Levison, 2003; Mason and Lefrere, 2003; Rolfe et al., 2004). A sign of contemporary globalisation is the engagement of Australian universities in exporting their education to developing countries such as China. As Australians come to know more about the education systems of their Chinese partners they find more opportunities to initiate research partnerships.

Fourth, by avoiding the duplication of effort bilateral engagement in research may contribute to the twin goals of equity and cost-effectiveness (Rolfe et al., 2004). There are many good points for Chinese and Australian academics to learn from each other. Learning
together may provide a shortcut to success. Cooperation can shrink or reduce the time and cost for engaging world trends. Researchers in both Universities face the challenges of globalization, albeit in different guises. By working together they are seeking to find ways to complement each other, draw the good points from each other, and thus avoid walking an all too winding road.

Fifth, bilateral engagement in research provides for an interactive, group-based knowledge-building process, where intellectual property is created, expertise is acquired and knowledge is advanced (Wallace, 2003; Martin, Craft and Tillema, 2002). When researchers from YU and UWS meet together, each has a different knowledge base. For example, Australian educational researchers from UWS are good at writing research reports and using statistical and/or qualitative data. Chinese scholars from YU like to write abstract theoretical accounts that draw out the possibilities presented by other people’s ideas. They are good at having insights into things and novel ideas. By working together they are learning to find ways to complement each other; generating the possibility for producing richer theoretical conceptions; developing new knowledge and adding to their expertise.

Sixth, engagement in bilateral research means that results from different international settings may strengthen the credibility of empirically grounded, theoretical informed, value-rational knowledge claims (Rolfe et al., 2004, p.141). Findings based on research in China and Australia can be used to generate and test new theoretical propositions and establish their appropriateness for both countries. Ideas about research, knowledge, and what it means to be an academic differ markedly between YU and UWS. Findings and theoretical insights generated through bilateral collaboration between researchers can test the claims to appropriateness and credibility, and push forward the educational research in each country.

We now turn to a very brief consideration of two of the more useful online tools which enable engagement in bilateral research.

**Online tools for engagement in bi-lateral research**

Bilateral research can be engaged in using information and communication technologies (ICTs) that promises flexibility in a global, borderless world. These software tools can be used to create, maintain, and manage such bilateral research (Devi, 2004). Computer-mediated communication (CMC), occurring either synchronously or asynchronously, enables the exchange of introduction among researchers by networked computers (Hew and Cheung, 2003). Asynchronous modes of text-based discussion are
available via MSN’s “My Spaces”, a web blog. It provides a platform for researchers to share ideas and resources; to think and frame their responses; to gain multiple views on a topic and to increase their knowledge (Wallace, 2003). Synchronous modes of communication include internet chat systems such as Skype and MSN Messenger. Their video-conferencing mode gives immediate audio-visual feedback which enhances communication and relationship building (Rolfe et al, 2004). Researchers need to be prepared to take on different dialogue roles in synchronous online discussion, including management, community-building and argumentation. The adoption of these roles improves the coherence, focus and depth of research discussions (Pilkington and Walker, 2003).

Skype, MSN Messenger and My Spaces are all Web-based tools which can be used to manage a geographically distributed research environment. They involve few costs as there are limited requirements for technological training, special software, or additional telephony charges. The internet connection fees are at local rates. Synchronous discussion enhances group interaction; improves the exchange of information and knowledge, and assists in building trust and social cohesion within virtual research teams (Cogburn and Levison, 2003).

Web blog is a twenty first century innovation, which can be used by researchers to record their ideas and experiences on an internet-based field diary for other colleagues to share and exchange. While anyone online can read it, if somebody wants to comment, he/she has to be the member of the blog. MSN’s “My Spaces” in offers researchers the opportunity to design their own web pages according to their interests and needs. The Home page provides general information of one’s “Spaces”, researchers can put their blogs, photos, customised lists and music in the position wherever they like to either make a certain blog, or a picture or a piece of music noticeable. Profile page enables researchers to show information about themselves to other researchers. Researchers can set up a Photo page with links to albums for each research team and its activities. This means that researchers who are geographically dispersed can recognise each other and learn about their projects. The Blog page is like a discussion board. Here researchers can share their ideas and theories; clip and paste noteworthy articles, and provide comments or feedbacks. The List page allows researchers to paste the links to useful sites such as seminal papers all team members need to read and discuss.

Skype is an internet online voice interactive communication system which operates for the cost of the local internet connection fees. Researchers in China and Australia can talk synchronously to one another just like making “real” telephone calls, or they can exchange
ideas by writing messages on the chat board. Researchers can also synchronously send and receive files such as pictures, music and articles to each other on Skype. MSN allows researchers to see each other by using webcam. Some researchers combine these two tools to get audio-visual feedback. There is also the capacity on Skype for talking or conferencing with researchers. MSN also provides similar functions for sending and receiving files; the writing of messages, but does not provide for audio talk. Likewise, a group chat by writing messages is available on MSN.

In addition, mobile phones are more commonly used than any other communication technologies in China than in Australia. People use them either for own private or work business. What is more, mobile phones are public known to anybody even to an not well-known person. Unlike in China, Australian people use them in a quite private way, only closet friends and family members know the numbers, they prefer to use fixed phones and emails to keep in touch. Therefore, it is more direct and convenient to get in touch with Chinese academics through mobile phones. When abroad, Chinese people use phone cards to keep in touch, which is very economic. Chinese researchers seldom use emails to keep communications although they sometime do. As GWSA project proceeds, quite often phone cards are used to get contact with Chinese academics when failure to contact them through emails due to time differences and different work schedules.

The usual difficulties of engaging in bilateral research

When engaging in bilateral research participants typically confront a familiar array of difficulties. These interrelated dilemmas are associated with the ever-present shortage of funds and the unevenness in technological developments. This section elaborates on the usual difficulties that hinder, if not obstruct bilateral engagement in research. Understood as a simple problem solving exercise these dilemmas invite reactive technical solutions. Finding money and using appropriate technology are of course necessary to speed up opportunities for bilateral engagement in research.

Financial stringencies

The incompatible financing structures and imbalance of economic development between developing and developed countries makes it difficult to find financial models to support bilateral engagement in research (Paulsen, 2003; 2000; Rolfe et al., 2004; Larsson et
al., 2005). The different funding sources and economic situations of universities lead to substantial differences in access to resources for research. At YU academics receive little funding to do research. Money for research is rare and not easy to get. However, they do research because at the very least they need publications in order to get a promotion or to improve their reputation. Financial stringencies cause a lack of foreign language reference journals and books (Yang, 2005; 2003). Besides under-stocked laboratories and libraries there is also a serious shortage of research funds for necessary facilities and equipment (Min, 1999). In the School of English Language at Yuncheng University, staff can access influential English books but this is not so for current journals in the field.

What is more, most do not have access to electronic books and journals in English due to the cost of buying the online services now available from multi-national publishing houses. Further, while the research funds available to the University may be reasonable, in some specific academic fields it falls short unless there are some academics of high status. At UWS much academic research is funded either by the University itself, the national research council, private enterprise, government agencies or philanthropic organisations. At Yuncheng University it is not easy to get any research funds. The limited grants available from the provincial government are awarded to a small number of academics. Usually these funded research programs are awarded to the Dean because he/she has the academic capability; an established record associated with his/her leadership position and the authority to organise a team to work together on a project. Even so the amount is still quite small.

As at the University of Western Sydney, the more external funds researchers are able to attract, the more achievements they are able to harvest, and thus the easier it to get more funds the next time they apply. This circular system of rewards perpetuates privilege. The situation for most academics is just the opposite. They have less chance to get external funds, and thus less academic achievements, which makes it more difficult to get funds. Academics at UWS have opportunities to apply for internal and external funds to support their research. External funds which come from national or international sources are not easy to get. Only those who have built a strong track record and have established their credibility with noticeable research achievements are likely to secure funding. Internal research funds are provided on a competitive basis by the University, but it is not any easier to get funds from the University, a research center, a college or a school. In this hierarchy the lower the level, the less prestigious the grants. Academics in UWS can apply to any source for research depending on funds their track record and thereby gain the experience of conducting sponsored research.
A Visiting Research Fellow from YU working at UWS secures the chance to gain new insights into different conceptions of research, and to explore ways of narrowing the gap in research and education between two universities. This is made possible by being able to access to the latest research knowledge available throughout the world by means of electronic data-base searches available through the UWS library services. A wealth of international research is literally at your finger tips; all you have to do is click into the UWS network and you can become a global academic. What is more, Australian academics are encouraged to publish in high quality international journals that are circulating throughout much of the western world. Once Australian researchers publish their work in a leading national journal they are communicating with the world. UWS researchers are developing bilateral research projects with researchers in China through the fields of cultural and educational studies.

**Technological unevenness**

The inequalities between rich and poor countries in access to and use of ICTs—the “digital divide”—is a familiar difficulty in bilateral research (Cogburn & Levison, 2003; Wende, 2003, 2002). In China, universities have campus computer networks to manage their administrative operations, but not necessarily for teaching and research purposes. At YU computers, and the internet in particular are not part of academics’ daily work. Most academics do not have a university e-mail address or ready access to the internet as they do at UWS. Research collaborations between Australia and China, necessarily require opportunities for the Chinese partners to develop knowledge of computer and internet. A visiting Research Fellowship enables them to quickly match their Australian partners. Getting access to the international internet on campus is an issue at YU. At UWS, every researcher has an internet-linked computer through the University’s network, uses e-mail to deal with their daily research work; and can undertake desk-top searches of electronic databases to keep themselves up to date with the international research. These differences in access to ICTs cause problems for bilateral research collaborations. The training of Chinese partners is necessary but not sufficient to bridge their gap, and help to push the collaboration forward smoothly.

Technological problems result from differences between China and Australia in terms of the accessibility, cost and infrastructure provisions for accessing the internet, emails and bandwidth. High-speed data networks are not readily available in Chinese universities (Singh
and Han, 2005). This makes the implementation of online/offline (blended) research across borders a substantial challenge. We discuss these issues further below.

Researchers at UWS and YU have quite different conditions of access to ICTs. Developing countries have issues of accessing the web and limited bandwidth due to restricted economic resources (Larsson et al., 2005; Rolfe et al., 2004; Paulsen, 2000). This means that technologically, the “issues of equipment, compatibility, and availability all have to be addressed prior to the beginning of online collaborative research” (Lord and Lomicka, 2004, p. 403). Additional factors include the cost and time to develop the technological skills and abilities, the cost of internet connections, and inadequacy of telecommunication services (Kenny, 2004).

The ICT campus networks at YU are largely for administration and management purposes. Academics at YU do not have their own separate offices, they prepare their lessons at home, only come when they have lessons. Offices are used for administrative purposes. A couple of computers in the office are largely used for keeping student achievement records and dealing with administrative matters. They only have access to the intranet in this workspace and even then this system works very slowly. Due to its costs, access to the international internet is not available through the campus network. Researchers typically access to the internet via high-speed bandwidth services which they use at home and pay for themselves. Although they can get access to some Chinese national e-journals, researchers have limited access to the international academic e-journals, because YU cannot afford the cost charged by the multi-international publishers. Hardcopies of journals are mostly used as information sources. Not surprisingly, researchers lack the technical skills to efficiently use computers and associated networks. Few academics at YU have heard about, let alone use electronic data bases or search engines (such as Google Scholar) and do not know how MSN or Skype might be used. Because researchers at YU are not integrated into the international research community, there is little communication through the internet.

UWS has a well-established ICT infrastructure with an efficient network that readily enables its researchers to access to international e-journals from their personal high-speed desk-top computers located in their individual offices. They are able to access the internet anytime to search for any information they need. Agencies now fund research projects that require just such desktop capacity. The UWS Library is also able to provide articles and borrow books from the other libraries, even from abroad. This is why researchers at UWS maintain good communications with colleagues in the Minority World and can keep abreast of the latest in research in that part of the world.
Tensions troubling bilateral engagement in research

The foregoing section pointed to apparently simple dilemmas evident in the cross-pulls created by financial stringencies and unevenness in technological advancements. These seemingly technical difficulties are embedded in a larger set of tensions that trouble the making of judgements about the shape and half-life of bilateral engagements in research. We have classified these into the four knotty issues discussed below. The critical reflection required to deal with these problems of judgement move outside the taken-for-granted funding framework raised above, and is primarily oriented to cultural issues, broadly understood.

Cultural and linguistic issues

Language complexities present various issues for engagement in bilateral collaborative research. When research partners do not share each other’s language, this can hinder mutual understanding (Paulsen, 2003). Typically, English is recommended as the language for international research communication largely because it is held to be the lingua franca for research, publication and international conferences globally (Martin, Craft and Tillema, 2002). Skilled interpreters and translators may be employed when necessary to enhance mutual understanding, adding to project costs as well as talking bilingual out of bilateral engagement.

Research terminology and discourse patterns are a particular cause for miscommunication. Successful collaborations benefit from researchers learning each other’s research terminology and carefully examining the discursive framing of research by their differing national histories. A commonly used term in one country may be unknown or have total different meaning in another. For example, research in Australia means production of papers with one’s own new findings based on others’ contribution in the specific area or literature review. At YU research means your reinterpretation of some seminal abstract theories with examples to illustrate the ideas, which is written in a quite abstract and mysterious way to show that an academic has a profound and wide-ranging knowledge. What is more, in YU there is no co-mentoring among research colleagues, although there are supervisors to support post-graduate or high degree research students. The terms “lectures” and “tutorials” used at UWS have no equivalent in China; at YU the terms used mean
something like “big classes” and “small classes.” However, the meaning of these terms is quite different from the apparently similar words used in Australia. However, “small classes” are not used to provide supplementary guidance for material raised in lectures, they are the lectures. “Big classes” are given because the course is not a core subject but an elective and less important, a supplementary subject for a major area of study. Lecture theatres mean classrooms with tiered desks where big classes are where academic ceremonies and reports occur.

Cultural norms are a third factor affecting collaborative online research engaged internationally. Despite the popularity of the internet, there are noticeable differences in cultural ideology arising from variations in socio-economic and political environments; communication strategies; work ethic; academic discourses, and research methodologies. For example, at UWS there appears to be a clear division between weekends and the work week, although many academics work long hours from their home. At YU academics are expected to be available anytime if and when necessary without any prior arrangements, even in non-work time or holidays. Work strategies also vary between these two worksites. Academics at UWS like to quickly engage in their research business as soon as possible without little apparent prior effort devoted to relationship building. However, at YU researchers work to establish the good relationships that are necessary for laying a firm base for the research work to be conducted afterwards; this is especially so when dealing with foreigners. That is why there is a period of socialisation, such as a party and dinner to enable the research collaborators get to know each other. Such functions provide a polite mechanism that enables the research partners to become familiar with each other and their work environment, and so needs to be include as an integral step in research process where this work is not possible in constituting cross-national collaborative research may explain difficulties experienced in establishing trust (Cogburn & Levison, 2003). Given the differences between developing and undeveloped countries, this may affect participants’ working relationship and mutual expectations (Edelson, 2003).

How issues of cultural and linguistic bias and the protection of human subjects are dealt with in the research process differs from country to country. Researchers must be cautious to be sure that the content of any data instrument is free of cultural and linguistic bias (Martin, Craft and Tillema, 2002). Chinese people are sensitive to being asked about the disadvantages of government policy or responding to questions that paint China or its government in a negative light. They do not like to expose any points that may be harmful to
the image or reputation of China to foreigners, including their international research colleagues.

In Australia, research ethics procedures required that “all human subjects must be protected from exploitation or psychological or physical risks” (Martin, Craft and Tillema, 2002, p. 368). Before engaging in field work, researchers need official approval from their university ethics committee, and may need approval from employers, government agencies or Indigenous community organisation as well as the research participants (or their parents or guardians) to conduct research, irrespective of whether it involves surveys or interviews. Research subjects must be informed in advance about the character and purpose of the project, and if they volunteer to participate they are asked to give their written permission to do so and may withdraw whenever they choose. In China, there are no such strict regulations governing research ethics. Presently at YU researchers do not need to ask for the permission of the subjects who are being investigated. Whenever there is a need for data collection, there is usually a need to get official approval for doing so. Typically, the permission of the Head of the School is required when researching university students because that person has the authority needed for getting it organised, otherwise students or staff are unlikely to participate. Without this authority to sanction research into higher education the students would dismiss as not being their business and just ignore it. Even when the Head does authorise such research, students may not take it seriously, just participating in an instrumental way in order to complete the task.

**Structural knots**

Differences between centralised and decentralised structures, as well as different convictions in academic and financial areas may lead to different cultural approaches to engagement in bilateral research (Rolfe et al 2004; Larsson et al., 2005). International researchers negotiate joint theoretical (conceptual) and methodological frameworks in critical and self-reflective ways (Larsson et al., 2005). YU and UWS operate in two different social systems, and therefore are structured and managed in different ways. In China, if one wants to conduct such a project, what is important is to get the support and approval from one’s Head, and then from the university. As noted above, at YU the funding for research is quite limited, and difficult to get from the provincial educational department. The University is “teaching-focused” institution due to its role and rank in the provincial higher educational system. Its main purpose is to serve local social needs and train or cultivate talent for its
region. Educational research at UWS is internationally focused and benchmarked, but this is not the case for Chinese universities such as YU. At best its research products are only circulated nationally.

One of the causes for this is the difference in social and educational systems. Australia has historical links to Britain, and both are now immigrant countries. Therefore, they share similar social and educational systems as well as similar problems in education such as those associated with the assessment and funding of research quality and impact. In China the quality and funding of research is also assessed, especially in the big well-established universities, even though Australian academics are integrated into leading-edge research throughout the world. Therefore, deciding and agreeing on a workable theoretical and methodological framework for the collaborative project between China and Australia is vital.

The differing ways decisions are made and the regulations governing decision-making affect bilateral collaborative research projects (Martin, Craft and Tillema, 2002; Rolfe et al., 2004; Paulsen, 2003; Larsson et al., 2005). Different national bodies and institutional bureaucracies have different regulations and structures for making decisions. YU uses a bureaucratic, centralised system for decision-making, with research gaining approval through a top-down process. In Australia, universities are increasingly micro-managed by the related government evident in increasing centralisation. The national government establishing stronger mechanisms for command and control.

Understanding each other’s needs and expectations for reward and recognition are integral to successful bilateral research projects (Rolfe et al., 2004). Issues of ownership have the power to sour collaborative endeavours. Researchers from different national origins have different values and expectations governing their participation. It is therefore necessary to learn about each other’s needs before proceeding the project (Martin, Craft and Tillema, 2002). For example, in YU considerable weight is given to the order of authorship on published papers when academic promotions are being considered. If one’s name comes second or third in the list, his/her achievement might not be countered for academic promotion. What is more, it is expected that School or University leader will be acknowledged in most publications. This means that their names usually come at the beginning of a publication even though they might have contributed little directly to the project. As in Australia such rules governing authorship serve the political economy of publishing, for instance, enabling the marketing and circulation of publications. In some fields of research in Australia, authors may be listed in alphabetical order, by their contribution to the project, in ways that privilege early career researchers, or by agreement
about turn-taking over a series of articles. Collaborators need to make an equitable
collection over to the project. The responsibility and recognition accorded to each researcher’s
authorship, grants, certificates, publicity, or letters of attestation require explicit negotiation
in bilateral research engagements.

Third, despite the universalization in their name, universities are organized
differently across countries, so agreements have to be reached among research partners that
conform to local norms and regulations (Larsson et al. 2005; Martin, Craft and Tillema,
2002).

Fourth, to bring a collaborative bi-lateral research project into reality administrative
challenges to be considered include the differing time frames for scheduling research
programs; accessing the right contact person to explain the research project and situation;
and obtaining resources whenever on-the-spot help is needed, for instance, in case of
technological glitches that typically occur during audio or videoconferencing (Lord and
Lomicha, 2004). Other administrative issues relate to the authorisation and prioritisation of
research projects, and the allocation of adequate institutional resources (human and fiscal) to
this purpose (Edelson, 2003). For example, at YU if academics do not reserve the
 technological aids in advance, they probably cannot get IT staff on the spot if there is some
 urgent problem. There are fewer IT staff at YU in contrast to the percentage of IT staff at
UWS, so it is not easy to get immediate access to them. Likewise, there is no set-up IT
systems at YU as there is at UWS. There is no handy helpdesk available to everyone in spite
of an administrative number referring to the existence of such an agency. Ordinary academic
staff cannot get them on the spot, only those in authority.

Interpersonal and professional complications

The building of mutual trust is necessary to overcome the occasional and inevitable
difficulties that emerge in collaborative bilateral research projects. Because researchers from
different cultural and academic settings have different conceptions of research, they can be
expected to have more than a few disagreements. Bilateral research can not be conducted
smoothly if they do not show the understanding and trust needed of each other to explicitly
work through these disagreements. Trust which leads to, and grows out of mutual respect, is
the foundation of successful partnerships (Martin, Craft and Tillema, 2002). High trust is
evident in confidence and optimism whereas low trust generates doubts about the project
(Cogburn & Levison, 2003).
Preferences for different research methodologies may lead to a lack of collaborative harmonisation (Paulsen, 2003). But once the differences in viewpoints are resolved, partners can complement each other (Martin, Craft and Tillema, 2002). At YU academics prefer positivistic styles of research. This doctrine claims that sensory perceptions are the only admissible basis of human knowledge and precise thought. Likewise much stress is placed on abstract theoretical writing and reporting the state of theories in the field. The more decontextualised the theory, the better. Unlike researchers at UWS, YU academics do not engage in either qualitative or quantitative data collection. There are, of course, a small number who do so. The researchers at UWS tend favour “real world” data collection and analysis procedures, acknowledging the value of mixed methods for investigating research problems.

Previous research experiences, knowledge networking and project management skills are valuable factors for bilateral research engagement (Paulsen, 2003). For research partners to supplement each other’s experiences they need to exchange their curriculum vitae (Martin, Craft and Tillema, 2002). Knowing each other’s academic background creates a basis for understanding of each other’s expertise, thereby enabling an assessment of the advantages and challenges this presents. Barrier for Sino-Australian collaboration in research include the need to impose data collection and analysis procedures, research methodology and bring theory to bear on empirical data.

Differences in respective work styles and time constraints can affect bilateral research collaborations. For example, rigid work schedules tend to conflict with flexible work styles (Martin, Craft and Tillema, 2002). Researchers at YU usually like to work with a flexible timetable, not having strict deadlines. This means that delays in research are bearable. However, researchers at UWS seem to have to follow a quite rigid schedule, one dictated by university administration procedures and the requirements of funding agencies. It takes time for researchers to adjust themselves to these different ways of scheduling work. Time differences due to geographical distances add to the complexities of bilateral collaborative research (Rolfe et al, 2004; Cogburn & Levison, 2003). For synchronous communications, researchers have to negotiate times suitable to both sides. Otherwise they may use asynchronous web tools like emails, or discussion boards to leave messages.

*Disinvestment in research culture*
A strong research culture is yet to be established at many universities in Australia and China that can respond to and engage with global challenges in ways appropriate to national interests (Yang, 2003, p. 294). Where academic policy setting lacks any requirements for communication outside the nation, the research is not conducted in ways that accord with international criteria. Academics at UWS frequently meet together to discuss their research. At YU seminars are organized for those in their academic circle to discuss their understandings of influential theories. They tend to be modest in advancing their own arguments. Researchers at UWS share their research literature, theories, methods and arguments in seminars where they exchange ideas and questions as a way of testing the accuracy, sincerity, truthfulness and adequacy of the knowledge claims being made. Research collaboration between UWS and YU is creating opportunities for Chinese and Australian scholars to learn about each other’s research disposition, methodologies, and research project management. Such bilateral engagement provides Australia important learnings about the world’s fastest developing economy, its program of modernisation, and the effects of globalisation on its cultural and educational life.

Appropriate incentive mechanisms are necessary to encourage international research and publications. For instance, promotion is based on nationally or provincially circulated journals where no extra value is given to international publications (Yang, 2005; 2003). So it is unlikely that academics would make the additional effort to do so. Leading Australian research journals circulate internationally because publishing in high quality and high impact internationally referred journals is rewarded through promotion.

The market approach to international exchange in higher education is causing an imbalance in research developments in the sciences and humanities. Because of their strong nation-centred focus, fields in the humanities such as cultural studies and education are less internationalised, moreover, they typically do not bring immediate economic benefits or short-term profits. This nation-centredness is evident in the ideologies and paradigms these fields express, and their dependency on the national language to convey their meanings (Yang, 2005). Yuncheng University has established cooperative programs in the art with a Russian university. Others in China have established joint ventures in business management due to market demands for more business elites to respond to and engage with the globalisation of business. Because of their inherent nation-centered focus, scholars in the fields of Chinese language, history and education have much less chance for such collaborations. For instance, education means quite different things in China and Australia due to their differing cultural ideologies. China pays considerable attention to educating
students in particular virtues so as to form and inform its national citizenry. Specialist departments teach the thoughts of ancient scholars alongside modern educational and political ideas. Due to the complexities of multicultural Australia, the education of its student, its rising generation of citizens gives more attention to issues of equity, identity and ethics in the work of national identity formation.

Special difficulties arise for provincial universities such as YU in undertaking bilateral research. Its research strengths and financial resources are limited within the national higher education system. Government policy and financial support adds to these difficulties (Yang, 2003). YU does not position high in the education circle of the country. Because its salaries are relatively low, it cannot attract and retain talented research staff nor encourage excellent research students to study there. The lack of financial and policy support from the nation-state reinforces its weakness in research.

The Globalization, Westernization, Sino-Australia Higher Education Reform Project is an example of bilateral research engagement. The problems this project has encountered include Australian partners not getting the timely feedback from the Chinese partners. That is, the latter could not or seldom responded to the requirements of the project on time, although Chinese team received frequent emails to keep them informed of the process, and the instructions from the Australian team about what to do. The reasons why they seemed unable to keep up the pace with the project’s agenda included them not having a clear idea about the “what and how” of the academic writing that would accord with western research practices. Research practices in YU see academics working individually around their own interests and timetable. They seldom have chances like academics at UWS to form research teams and work collaboratively on a project. Typically, they do not have seminars or forums to keep each other informed about their research projects, to offer co-mentoring to research colleagues or to test their ideas in a public forum where they can gain collegial feedback. Further they are so engaged with their own academic work they have no time to dedicate to this project despite their initial interest in doing so. They just do not have any hope or lack confidence they think western academic writing is too rigid and demanding to reach the publication criteria.

There is a substantial gap between the expectations governing Chinese and Australian academic research. YU research is not on the track of international research standards, for example the use of influential citation. The research aims deviate from the practical issues and focus on illustrations of abstract theory. In addition, big differences exist in the development of arguments and the structure of academic paper. It was also due to
technological issues. The internet and email have not become a part of Chinese academics’ life. They seldom use their emails to contact with people. In China direct calling is a major tool to make contacts. Together these factors may account for their untimely response to the project.

Challenges and complexities for bilateral engagement in research

The foregoing difficulties and tensions affecting engagement in bilateral research are embedded in an even larger set of complex and challenging dilemmas. Problems of the order of those discussed below require creative solutions. This means going beyond the mechanics of reactive thinking and freeing oneself of the fixity of reflective thought. Creative solutions come from generating qualitatively new insights, frameworks or categories. By definition there are no techniques than can predetermine or guarantee creative outcomes.

Sceptical complicity with neo-liberalism

Autonomy is a value deeply embedded in universities and defended by the academy. Engagement in bilateral research finds its basis in principles of mutuality and equality. There are occasions when such research is designed to advance local viability by pursuing strategic global connections against the neo-liberal press to conform its needs and interests (Larsson, 2005). Researchers from YU are concerned that being relatively weaker they may be dominated by the agenda of any overseas research team. Chinese education is good at retaining students in schools and universities. It cultivates their ambition for competing nationally and globally. That is why Chinese students are quite hard-working and have a solid knowledge of theory. It is Australian research methodology from which YU academics are most likely to benefit.

Due to the market-driven interest of Australian higher education in China, some academic fields find they have relatively weak state-sponsorship of their market opportunities; unlike those areas privileged for immigration purposes. Areas like education cannot bring immediate economic benefits. Researchers engaged in bilateral research benefit from a sceptical, if not critical encounter of their own complicity with hegemonic neo-liberal policies and their consequences (Yang, 2005). At YU the departments of business, management, computing and English are very well developed due to the market demands in these areas. However, the departments of history and education are less developed due to
there being little profits being made directly from these areas. In Australia, education is also ignored for the same reasons, getting less support and funding than other fields. However, ideological struggles by neo-conservatives to make education the site of its most contentious battles do provide impetus for bilateral research engagement. These are issues for researchers in both YU and UWS to need to face and deal with.

**Naming neo-colonialism**

The culture and national identity of partners are major issues for bilateral engagement in research is fear of being homogenised and McDonaldised by western research cultures (Yang, 2005). Because some of the more powerful western countries have a strong economic base, their research has become influential in shaping world trends. Even Australian researchers may contribute, even in a small but nonetheless significant way to the assimilation of their Chinese partners into the western research culture. How to build on China’s research strengths and integrate good points from Australian research is worth considering.

Bilateral research partnerships are established on the basis of mutual respect, with both parties making joint contributions to producing mutually beneficial outcomes. This is preferable to one partner being the centre and the other being a marginal appendage (Canto and Hannah, 2001). Naming neo-colonialism is a tricky issue for Australian and Chinese researchers. On one hand, the researchers in China aspire to international standards; this learning with their overseas partners. On the other hand, Chinese researchers have to display and expound the advantages they have to offer. The Australian research disposition and methodologies are of benefit to Chinese academics, while Chinese philosophical views and political theories can benefit their Australian partners. For instance, Deng’s theory of catching up with and surpassing the world first-class level, being modest enough to learn from advanced countries, and developing our own distinctive characteristics may benefit Australian researchers.

**Interrupting the hegemony of native Englishes**

*International scholarly communication* among most faculty at YU is limited due to their lack of foreign language proficiency. This constraints their capacity to establish channels for knowledge exchange or developing collaborative research projects (Yang, 2003, p. 293).
However, even if they could access English or Chinese language journals and books, most staff at these two universities do not have a good command of the respective foreign language. As a consequent most academics have to be satisfied with the nation-centered communication of academic ideas and exchange of research information.

The adoption of English for collaborative bilateral research has the potential threat of forming linguistic hegemony thereby strengthening the neo-colonialism of English-only research and researchers (Canto and Hannah, 2001). English is on the way to becoming the world language. Even at YU it is well-known that most international research activities, publishing, conferences and projects are organised in English, with researchers from this University as elsewhere around the world learning English so that they can communicate internationally. One point worth considering is that this world language has generated many varieties, Microsoft legitimises everything from Australian English through Indonesian English and Hong Kong English to Zimbabwean English. Chinese English will, no doubt, soon be added to its language menu. Each variety of English bears the culture of its specific country. Native speakers of English are finding themselves increasingly pressed to explain why they should not learn about their research partner’s language, including their particular variety of English, in order to facilitate the smooth communication. This both-ways approach to language is preferential to say Chinese-speaking researchers from YU always having to speak English, and to do so in ways that Australian researchers may understand.

**Strategies for engaging in bilateral research**

Despite these three interdependent dilemmas bilateral engagement in research is as necessary as it is complex. Here we summarise some of the basic suggestions that could provide useful starting points for those considering engagement in bilateral research. While these are petite strategies they are important, but they should be tested sceptically as they come with no guarantee of certainty.

**Make preparations**

Find exemplary models of online/offline (blended) bilateral engagements research that demonstrate win-win situations for both parties (Paulsen, 2003). Build on previous institutional contacts and their knowledge of each partner’s needs, interests and research conditions (Canto and Hannah, 2001). This is vital to successful collaboration. The research
project should be easily explained and transparent, with as few components as necessary. Be prepared to make incremental improvements in the quality of the research project as trust, experience and resources are reinvested in the project. Bilateral research is a constant learning process for all researchers. Develop knowledge of each other research cultures, traditions and norms (Martin, Craft and Tillema, 2002).

**Structural preparedness**

Not all decision-making responsibilities lie directly within each respective research team conducting the negotiations and project planning. Each party needs to ensure that between them they have obtained the authority for ‘go’ or ‘not go.’ Bilateral research engagements, typically require empowerment by senior university administrators and the governments foreign affairs office to ensure legal provisions are made for such projects (Edelson, 2003). A research project conducted within usual national-centered framework of the parties can be conducted successfully domestically but may fail internationally. This is a useful reminder that neither nations nor states have disappeared. There needs to be enough lead time to adequately plan, schedule, and address logistical issues. Addressing the inequality amongst partners can begin by recognising that local rules cannot always be transcended. The most restrictive university is likely to set the operating rules for a bilateral research project (Larsson, 2005). There is a need for an exit strategy. Both parties understand, after reviewing a range of scenarios, that the program may be cancelled, postponed or rescheduled despite careful planning and execution.

**Interpersonal and professional preparation**

To develop the expertise of the researchers’ involved for bilateral engagement in research, it is important to make necessary investments in human capital. Successful bilateral projects rely on developing the talent and motivation of the researchers who are the repository of expert knowledge and institutional memory. Bilateral research projects that include an explicit commitment to enhancing participant’s capabilities provide a basis for further advancement (Edelson, 2003). Trust and integrity can be demonstrated by partners being ready to invest resources and take manageable risks on behalf of the research project.

**Predictable benefits**
To establish a good starting point for bilateral research means making sure each partner benefits fairly from the project. Sharing rewards and credit for the accomplishments of bilateral research projects enables the collective celebration of joint achievements. This can instil lasting benefits, make for the longer-term viability of bilateral research engagements and strengthen the desire for such bilateral engagements (Rolfe et al., 2004). Seeking external funding to facilitate engagement in bilateral research is necessary to overcome economic inequality and to enhance the value of research collaborations (Martin, Craft and Tillema, 2002).

**Technology**

Establish a process for regular and frequent communication through whatever mode is appropriate (Martin, Craft and Tillema, 2002; Rolfe et al., 2004). Take advantage of the internet videoconferencing to facilitate “live” communications, using facilities like Skype or MSN. Make appropriate use of a mix of Web-enabled tools and telephony connections (Cogburn & Levison, 2003). Use a diversity of tools to multiply access points for connectivity, including the use of computers with high-speed internet connections, scanners, software for Web design and development, and easily accessible software programs (Lord and Lomicha, 2004). An online research site and discussion board is helpful (Kenny, 2004).

**Conclusion**

Engaging in bilateral research across countries and continents is a challenge for forming and informing knowledge-based economies. Researchers develop collaborative trans-national partnerships through working with international colleagues to pursue common goals. The conduct of research using ever-advancing ICTs to make links across differing research conditions is creating a pool of experienced local/global researchers. Bilateral research aggregates joint knowledge; enhances efforts to pursue shared goals and increases the chances of solving commonly faced concerns brought about by changing global forces, imaginings and connections. The engagement in bilateral research pushes and fosters local, national and international innovations. However, with access to different sources of knowledge and technology, such international collaborative research has the potential for the
advancement of knowledge the developing and managing bilateral research is a complex undertaking. While ICTs are being used increasingly in research projects, unevenness in their application presents challenges which ironically represent the seeds of advancement in such research. However, bilateral engagement in research is problematic because of the varied and complex international settings, which presents many unexpected challenges.

How to harness the aggregate capacity of disparate telecommunication systems, applications and services in the process of bilateral research is a problem. Bilateral research is not necessarily a straightforward matter of agreeing to work together toward a common goal for reasons of efficiency or expertise aggregation. It is important to leverage complementary competencies, to enhance research experience, and to position oneself and one’s organization better for technology transfer or access to markets. There is a question of where to begin. Because it involves many stakeholders and high network density, bilateral engagement in research is a complex adaptive process.

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