University-Community Engagement in Taiwan: A Case Study of the University-Community Engagement Projects Implemented on the Wulai Area

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Abstract

Members in the Taiwanese academia are now working in an age of university social responsibility. In recent years, Taiwan's Ministry of Education and Ministry of Science and Technology have provided luxurious funding to promote university-community engagement projects. These projects typically mandate the formation of teams of university faculty whose purpose is to cooperate with communities and local organizations. Among the various goals of these projects, achieving "industry-academia cooperation/collaboration"—to socialize traditional patterns of collaboration between university and industry by social economy—is deemed especially important. Despite the desirability of normative expectations such as industry-academic cooperation/collaboration, however, the actual practices of university-community engagement projects have not been systematically explored. Specifically, we have yet to examine critical issues such as the characteristic on-the-ground features of these projects, and their social impacts on local communities. This article aims to answer these questions based on investigating the university-community engagement projects as implemented in the Wulai area, an indigenous township located in the vicinity of Taipei City.

What follows are the research findings of this study. To begin with, although practicing social economy is the public stated goal, the university-community engagement projects this study scrutinizes still consider creating profitable industries as their primary target. Social economy, therefore, merely plays a marginal role. The second finding is that most of the efforts the teams from universities devolve aim to apply knowledge to deal with local "problems" defined by common sense rather than empirically investigate the local situation. Without producing and accumulating knowledge by conducting sound research, those so-called "problems" are quite superficial. Third, when universities cooperate with communities and local organizations, they tend to work with local elites and avoid contesting issues. As a result, university-community engagement projects are likely to proceed in a de-politics manner that rules out the possibility of local citizens' participation.

Key Words: university-community engagement, university social responsibility, social economy

Introduction

Higher education's recent turn towards the emphasis on university's social responsibility and community engagement is a global phenomenon. Alan Bourke (2013) points out that conducting community engagement research projects by universities have been a popular global agenda which represents an emergent knowledge democracy movement. For example, the administration of universities and the organizations representing universities show their interests in community engagement. Moreover, the protocol of Global Alliance for Community-Engaged Research, a university network whose base is Canada, now has been integrated into the mission of other networks of higher education institutes.

Community engagement is different from community service although the former may include the latter. Community service means one-way knowledge dissemination from universities to communities. Instead, community engagement implies that universities collaborate with industries, government, and communities to build up a strategic and reciprocal partnership (Bourke 2013; Peacock 2012). Moreover, according to Peter Hall and his coauthors (Hall et al. 2009), community engagement means not only work with community members but must negotiate with them; not only carrying out project missions within the existing institutional framework but must be action-orientated and having transformative agenda. The discussion above implies that university-community engagement research projects point toward a change regarding knowledge production. It puts emphasis on community-based research, which aims at enhancing citizens' participation in the process of knowledge production and redirects the research projects toward a direction to respond to the communities' needs.

University-community engagement research projects, moreover, are sponsored by the state to promote social economy since it may provide a possibility for alternative community development other than the development triggered by capitalist accumulation. For example, the Australian Federal Government provided funding to the Australian University Community Alliance, encouraging it to conduct projects capable to enhance social inclusion and public participation (Peacock 2012: 313-4). In Canada, the government sponsored the formation of university-community engagement research alliances among universities, community organizations, and civil groups, facilitating them to seek community development based on social economy (Kishchuk 2003; MacPherson et al. 2009).

The recent change of Taiwanese higher education follows this trend as a way to respond to traditional industry-academia cooperation/collaboration pattern in Taiwan. The main focus of Taiwan's existing industry-academia cooperation/collaboration is to pursue domestic industries' global competitiveness

(Huang & Chang 2007). This pattern has been criticized in recent years since it only focuses on industries' productivity and capability to generate profits but sidelined the needs of local communities and ordinary citizens. One of the purposes of university-community engagement research projects, thus, is to socialize the traditional patterns of collaboration between university and industry by social economy and collaborate with local communities to cope with their social, political, economic, and environmental problems.

Pioneered by the Humanity Innovation and Social Practice Project sponsored by Taiwan's Ministry of Science and Technology in 2013, university-community engagement research projects have widespread. A large scale project, the University Social Responsibility Project funded by the Ministry of Education, was launched in 2017. During the first eight months, this project provided 330 million NT dollars (11 million US dollars) to support 170 community engagement research projects conducted by 116 universities (Wu 2018). It indicates that members in the Taiwanese academia, especially junior scholars, are now working in an age of university social responsibility and are required to carry out university-community engagement research projects.

To be a popular global agenda, however, does not necessary means that university-community engagement research projects do not encounter reflexive critiques. To begin with, David Peacock (2012) argues that in the context of neoliberalism, the projects' economic functions such as applying for intellectual property rights, enhancing market competitiveness, and increasing profits still captures most stakeholders' attention. The primary research initiatives are triggered by national or global economy. Comparing to social, cultural and environmental knowledge exchanges, moreover, the commodification of knowledge transfer gains a higher status regarding epistemic modality. Therefore, while university-community engagement research projects prioritize the industries and the government as the foremost benefiters, their accomplishment of social goals enjoy no guarantee.

Second, the term of "community" has been abstracted so that neglects the heterogeneity, inequality, and social exclusion within communities (Dempsey 2010: 365-6). At the same time, while those projects adopt a broad and vague meaning of "community" which includes industries, schools, governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations, civil associations, ethnic groups, and so far and so for, they assume all of the different organizations and groups of people can benefit equally by collaborating with universities. This assumption does not disclose the issues regarding power relations and conflict agendas and values within communities and between universities and their community partners (Peacock 2012).

Third, regarding the mode of knowledge production, Bourke (2013: 506-8)

argues that while conducting community-based research seems to be a mandate for university-community engagement research projects, those projects tend to confuse participatory action research with action research. Although both two methods consider the collaboration between researchers and non-academic participants as an essential part in research process, they have different focuses. The latter is "either client-user or consultant driven" which is "conducted in the sprint of a decidedly problem-solving utilitarianism." Instead, the former is an approach putting emphasis on "the pedagogical principle of co-inquiry and co-learning" by which community members "acquire skills of critical consciousness," and recognize and assume their role in "effecting community and social change." While most university-community engagement research projects claim to follow the principle of participatory action research, they are actually much closer to action research. As a result, the community-based research is conceptualized in terms of a de-politicalized way when it is institutionalized as an established part of the academia. It is possible that a potential outcome is the pacification of grassroots organizations, leading their actions away from the debates on economic policies and the issues of social justice but towards the direction of providing community services.

In contrast to the discussions above, there is little or no critical inquiry on the actual practices of university-community engagement research projects in Taiwan. Specifically, we have yet to examine critical issues such as the characteristic on-the-ground features of these projects, and their social impacts on local communities. This paper aims to answer these questions based on investigating the Wulai Lokah Project (WLP) as implemented in the Wulai area, an indigenous village located in the southern mountainous area of Taipei Basin. WLP was conducted by the National Chengchi University, one of the elite universities in Taiwan. This project was supported by the Humanity Innovation and Social Practice Project launched in 2013, and funded by the Ministry of Science and Technology, the peak administration and founder regarding scientific research. The following section provides a brief introduction of the Wulai area and WLP, as well the research method of this study.

The Case and Research Methods

Wulai is a mountainous village located in the vicinity of Taipei City. As an official indigenous area, the indigenous people, however, are still the minority. Their population were 2,817 in 2016 while the number of the Han people were 3,395. Based on natural resources including waterfalls and hot spring, Wulai's tourist industry developed very early, which dated back to the Japanese colonial era. Under the Kuomintang's administration after the Second World War, Wulai began to run the business of indigenous singing and dancing shows in 1952. Its tourist industry was

quite popular, to an extent that was able to attract foreign tourists.

To be a tourist spot, unfortunately, does not mean most indigenous people benefit from the industry. Although some indigenous people do gain economic fruits from the development of the tourist industry, most tourist properties are owned by the Han people or capitalist corporations. The jobs they offer to indigenous people tend to be low-paid, dead-end, and degraded (Kuo 2005). Moreover, the land use of indigenous land, just like other indigenous area in Taiwan, is highly restricted due to the regulations of forest and wildlife conservations. What make the situation worst is that the strictest regulation regarding land use has been implemented in this area since the mid-1980s because it functions as the main water supply for the Taipei metropolitan. These regulations have been enforced by the government without negotiating and consulting with indigenous people, so that exclude the traditional knowledge of indigenous people, marginalizing their land rights, limiting their economic activities, and causing their economic difficulties.

From July 2013 to June 2016, WLP tried to work with some local people to tackle the challenging situation just mentioned. A key solution purposed by the project was developing an alternative economic practices other than the existing capitalist economy. Pursuing community development based on social economy, thus, became a public stated goal of WLP.

Although the author of this paper did work as a post-doctoral research fellow for WLP between September 2014 and June 2015, the case selection is based on academic consideration rather than personal experiences. First, WLP was one of the four pioneer projects supported by the Humanity Innovation and Social Practice Project. As a first runner of university-community engagement research projects, its experiences are worth for investigation and shed light on latecomers. Second, WLP was the only terminated project among the four pioneer projects when this study proceeded data collecting. Studying a terminated project can prevent the effects of power relations. While principal investigators of the projects are performed by senior full professors with high hierarchical position within academic institutes, they also contain personnel including junior faculty members, adjunct post-doctoral research fellow, and assistants. Power relations may disturb outside researchers when principal investigators do not wish other members to reveal covert information, take decision making process for example, of their projects to outsiders. Studying a terminated project provides a possibility to avoid such a disturbance.

This paper's research is conceived as a case study that utilizes WLP. The research methods are fieldwork and document analysis. First, fieldwork was conducted between January 2018 and February 2019, which included informal conversations as well as several in-depth interviews with local community members and the

personnel of WLP. Moreover, this study sees the official final report of WLP as raw data which have to be examined closely. By conducting fieldwork and document analysis, this paper tries to explore the characteristic on-the-ground features of contemporary Taiwanese university-community engagement projects and their social impacts on local communities.

The Practices and Features of Wulai Lokah Project

Since the beginning of WLP a key strategy implemented by the project, according to Ching-Ping Tang (2017: 35-6), the principal investigator of WLP, was "craft renaissance" which targeted "the hand-weaving business as the top priority for development." To be more precisely, WLP tried to seek the collaboration from local hand-weaving association to promote handcraft business and attract the younger indigenous generations to learn traditional weaving skill. On one hand, this is a strategy to achieve the public stated goal of the project, developing social economy by collaborating with local organizations. On the other hand, the increase of handcraft business' revenues was identified as the best way for cultural conservation because it had potential to attract younger indigenous generations to learn traditional weaving skills when indigenous have faded away and valuable skills dissipated.

The hand-weaving association became WLP's major local partner for two reasons. First, WLP saw 12 major local hand-weaving workshops whose owners were key members of the hand-weaving association "constituted a solid base for mobilizing collective actions." Second, the hand-weaving association was considered to have potential to transit to a coop that demonstrates an alternative development model (Tang 2017: 35).

According to WLP, there were, however, some limitations constrained the potential for mobilizing collective actions and to transit to a coop to be carried out. First, the hand-weaving business had not yet commercialized successfully. Even though the quality of products were good, they lacked market competitiveness because the workshops and association did not have the knowledge of marketing, business opportunities, and financial resources. The result was that the hand-weaving business was not able to create sufficient profits which was possible to trigger workshop owners to run the hand-weaving business collectively and attract the younger generations to learn their traditional skills. The assumption here was that enough revenues were the precondition for profits sharing and redistribution as well as cultural conservation. Thus, the efforts that WLP had to put on was developing marketing strategies and business opportunities, and creating financial resources for the hand-weaving business.

Following the above consideration, the major programs launched by WLP were hand-weaving art exhibitions and skill exchange. WLP collaborated with the hand-weaving association to held two domestic exhibitions in 2015 and 2016. The exhibitions were saw as a strategy for handcraft marketing and developing new business opportunities. WLP also organized a tour that brought some members of the hand-weaving association to visit Lake Akan Ainu Kotan, a village inhabited by the indigenous people in Japan in 2016. During their visit, the weavers exhibited their works, performing their techniques and exchange skills with local indigenous artists. WLP saw this visit as an opportunity for the hand-weaving business to break into the international market of indigenous art and for weavers to learn and incorporate advanced skills. Moreover, WLP tried to apply for sponsorship other than the funding from the Ministry of Science and Technology, financial resources provided by corporate social responsibility projects of enterprises for example, to support the commercialization of hand-weaving business although it did not succeed.

Regarding the achievement of "craft renaissance," WLP's self-evaluation shows an optimist picture. The principal investigator claims that the outcome of the project was an interim success toward just development" (Tang 2017: 39). The key performance indicators for demonstrating the "interim success" are the following. First, the hand-weaving association began to internalize "craft renaissance" as its own mission after some members visited Lake Akan Ainu Kotan, and tried to propose a long-term plan for accomplishing this goal (Tang et al. 2017: 2). Second, the embryo of social economy was in a good shape. The hand-weaving business was operated by a more collective way under the leadership of the hand-weaving association (Tang 2017: 39).

The alleged "interim success," however, is quite vague which never proves the effects of the programs of exhibitions and skill exchange on the hand-weaving association and individual weavers. It does not demonstrate what was the long-term plan the hand-weaving association proposed. Neither how "a more collective way" that was divergent from the previous norm operated is discussed. We do not know if it means that the association made decisions collectively, redistributed revenues created by their members' workshop, or something else. More important, it does not reflect the fact that WLP did not change the hand-weaving business, the association, and the situation that the lack of younger generations interested in learning traditional weaving art. Rather than a university-community engagement research project that reach "an interim success," WLP in fact failed if its goal was really pursuing community development based on social economy.

The failure originated from the fact that WLP's imagination of alternative economy and development model was too limit. Although building up social

economy was the project's public stated goal, it was still an auxiliary to mainstream capitalist economy in terms of producing profits is the priority of economic activities. The sharing or redistribution of profits, collective actions, and transition to a coop do not base on reciprocity, equality, and solidarity but the creation of sufficient revenues. From this viewpoint, it is possible that the reason why the hand-weaving association was selected to be the project's local partner was the hand-weaving business was the only local business controlled by indigenous people which had potential to attract venture capital. Not only the reasons stated by the project's principal investigator, the hand-weaving association constituting a solid base for mobilizing collective actions and having potential to transit to a coop, might not be primary reasons. Neither were they the reality. 12 major hand-weaving workshops in fact competed with each other. The association were led by four elite and elderly weavers whose interests were not necessary identical to the rest of members. For example, leading weavers insisted to ask for exhibit fees when the association was invited to exhibit its members' works, younger weavers thought it may decrease their chance to attend exhibitions.

Although the promotion of indigenous hand-weaving business was the service what the core members of the hand-weaving association and some hand-weaving workshop owners expected WLP to provide, answering what they expected raised the following issues. To begin with, WLP did not put indispensable efforts to understand the real situation of the hand-weaving business and difficulties of cultural conservation. Its programs, as a result, were launched on the basis of unsound intuition and common before rigor research had yet been conducted. The fact that 12 major hand-weaving workshops competed rather than cooperated with each other was just one example. Another example was that the younger generations had low intention to learn traditional weaving art because they tended to perceive performing the art as a way of making off a living, which was a career they did not have to choose. In other words, it was the commodification of indigenous cultural industry rather than insufficient revenues created by the business pushed the younger generations away from their traditional weaving art, a phenomenon similar to what anthropologists observes in another Taiwanese indigenous tribe (Wu & Yeh 2014).

Another issue related to the characteristic on-the-ground features of Taiwanese university-community engagement research projects in general and WLP in particular. Although we cannot assure whether WLP was a typical case of Taiwanese university-community engagement research projects, as an important pioneer project, it may provide some essential observations. The following are those features.

First, although pursuing community development based on social economy was a public stated goal, it was marginalized by the programs aiming at creating revenues, market opportunities, and extra financial resources. Building up social economy based on reciprocity, equality, and solidarity required the reconstruction of social relations. However, WLP did not really put efforts to rebuild these social relations while they had crumbled gradually due to market competition among the hand-weaving workshops and the leadership of the hand-weaving association. Just like the critique Peacock (2012) raises against university-community engagement research projects, the economic goal of WLP was more important comparing to other social missions.

Second, the heterogeneity, inequality, and social exclusion was within communities was beyond WLP's concern. When working with the hand-weaving association, WLP downplayed its internal heterogeneity and inequality and did not deal with the issue of the decision making structure. In addition, it did not pay attention to the heterogeneity, inequality, and social exclusion among the local indigenous community, just like Dempsey (2010) points it out. While using an abstract language of "community," the project actually only worked with a specific group of local elites who were more often than not better off than ordinary people. Hand-weaving workshop owners, especially four elite and elderly weavers themselves and their husbands were usually retired public school teachers and civil public servants enjoying stable employment and a luxury social security plan compared to the general public. Some of them were politicians at that time. Thus they possessed more financial resources and occupied higher political and social hierarchy. Compared to the people running indigenous hand-weaving business, there were still other much more grassroots and radical organizations with lesser resources, a network constituted by some young indigenous school teachers and artists for example. Their concerns were much more action-orientated and having transformative agenda. Unfortunately, they were sidelined when WLP was put into practice.

The marginalization of action-orientated and transformative agenda also made WLP look more close to a community service rather than an engagement project. A related point was that WLP, with the concurrence of Bourke's (2013) observation, confused participatory action research with action research. The programs of hand-weaving art exhibitions and skill exchange were aiming at solving the problem that the leadership of the hand-weaving association defined rather than solutions formulated by co-inquiry and co-learning between community members and the research teams from university. While WLP served as a consultant for its client, the possibility for community members to acquire skills of critical consciousness and

recognize and assume their role in effecting community and social change may be ruled out.

Conclusion

While there is little or no critical inquiry on the actual practices of university-community engagement research projects in Taiwan, this paper intends to understand their characteristic on-the-ground features and social impacts on local communities by focusing on WPL. We find that although practicing social economy is the public stated goal, WLP considered creating profitable industries as their primary target. Social economy, therefore, merely plays a marginal role. The second finding is that most of the efforts the research team conducting WLP devolved aimed to apply knowledge to deal with local "problems" defined by common sense rather than empirically investigate the local situation. Without producing and accumulating knowledge by conducting sound research, those so-called "problems" were quite superficial. Third, the research team tended to work with local elites and avoided contesting issues. As a result, it seems that WLP proceeded in a de-politics manner that rules out the possibility of local citizens' participation.

Although whether WLP was a typical case of Taiwanese university-community engagement research projects is a question have yet been figured out, its practices seem to have little differences from the criticism we have discussed. While university-community engagement has been a popular global agenda and the projects enjoy luxury funding from the Taiwanese administrative institutions, the case of WLP in fact calls more critical examinations on the characteristic features and the social impacts on local communities of this kind of projects.

Reference