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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Asian communication debate: culture-specificity, culture-generality, and beyond

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Critical discussion of Asian communication theory began in the 1980s, fermented in the 1990s, and in recent years was enriched by the criticism of Eurocentrism. Significant progress has been made in the pursuit of theory construction, especially in areas that closely deal with culture and communication issues, e.g., intercultural communication, postcolonial or cultural studies. While greater attention was paid to the cultural contexts of communication research in Asia, a number of crucial issues seem to have remained unsettled, among them the need and possibility of de-Westernization, and the pros and cons of culture-specific and culture-general approaches. In this article we make an attempt to tease through layers of arguments and sift proposals and possibilities, with the hope that a more viable future direction could emerge to reconcile the tension between culture-specificity and culture-generality. Our discussion focuses on the concept of cultural commensurability, which stresses similarity and equivalence, and not commonality and uniformity. Taking note of the inherent openness of culture, language and meaning, it is argued that the concept of cultural commensurability will open the indigenization issue to a broader horizon for future discourse.

Keywords: Asian communication research; Asian communication theory; culture-generality; culture-specificity; Eurocentrism; indigenization

Introduction

The size of the communication research community has scored unprecedented growth in Asia, especially East Asia, in the past decade. In China alone, the number of tertiary institutions with communication programs jumped from over 600 in 2006 to 800 in 2008, with the number of faculty members reaching a staggering 10,000 in total.¹ In addition to the growth of the community, there has been greater effort made in internationalization. According to Chen (2006), by the mid-2000s at least seven English-language communication journals had their focus on Asia or Asian nations. What is the significance of this growth? Are we witnessing another phase in Asian communication research?²

It has been nearly half a century since communication research was introduced to Asia, and over 20 years since scholars entered the global discourse and explored non-Western alternatives to the Eurocentric paradigm. Earlier debates articulating an Asian concern over the dominance of Western paradigm concentrated in two communication institutions. One was the East-West Communication Institute

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(EWCI), founded by Wilbur Schramm in 1973, under the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. The Institute organized series of seminars and conferences on such relevant themes in the 1970s and 1980s. This cumulated to the publication of *Communication theory: Eastern and Western perspectives* (Kincaid, 1987), arguing for the recognition of Eastern perspectives. The other is the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC), founded in 1971 in Singapore. As a research centre based in Asia, AMIC has also been active in conducting workshops and seminars on issues relating to Asian communication since the early 1970s. It is thus not surprising AMIC was among the first to advocate for a bigger Asian voice in its publication, *Communication theory: The Asian perspective* (Dissanayake, 1988).

Both of these pioneer books aimed at expanding and enriching the knowledge basis in studying communication. Kincaid explored systematic differences in communication across the so-called Eastern and Western cultures. The emphasis was placed on discovering fundamental principles underlying different cultural orientations (Kincaid, 1987, p. 4), as contact, communication and mutual influences across cultures were rapidly growing. Dissanayake (1988), on the other hand, was focused on the construction of *Asian* communication theories in order to challenge and enrich existing theories. According to Dissanayake, the pursuit was justified not so much by the increasing importance of the East–West contact, but because of Asia’s rich cultural heritage. Asian approaches to communication deserved a closer look because ‘Asian nations could not have possibly created such *magnificent cultures* if they had not also subscribed to and nurtured certain distinct approaches to communication’ (Dissanayake, 1988, p. xii).

The dialogue between the East and the West continued and gained momentum in the new century, marked by a special issue in this Journal entitled ‘Towards an Asian Theory of Communication?’ (vol. 10, no. 2). In this special issue, new topics of discussion on indigenizing communication research have emerged. Ito, for example, challenged the need to distinguish between East Asian and Western communication theories from either a cultural or ideological perspective. There existed differences but ‘there are far more research and many more theories similar to the West’, he argued on the basis of what he has observed in Japan (Ito, 2000, p. 116). McQuail (2000), to the contrary, warned of Eurocentrism in media theories, although he did not use the term to describe the problem. Media theories, originated in Europe and US, were marked by their cultural context and circumstances of time and place despite their aim of universality and claim to generality. According to him, ‘unbiased theory’ is not humanly possible, but we need theory that is ‘not vitiated by its cultural and value bias’ (McQuail, 2000, p. 13). Wang and Shen (2000) also endorsed the idea of universal universality as the goal for indigenizing communication research. Thoughts and ideas from all cultural traditions can be seeds of theories, yet the idea of ‘culture-specific theory’ is paradoxical, they pointed out, as theories are by definition aimed at establishing generality and universality, while culture dictates particularity.

If the 1980s marked the beginning of the epic mission and the 1990s saw fermenting in the field (Curran & Park, 2000; Starosta, 1993; van Dijk, 1993), the first decade of the new millennium brought significant progress in the pursuit of theory construction, especially in areas that closely deal with culture and communication issues, e.g., intercultural communication, postcolonial or cultural studies. In particular, the influence of Eurocentrism, a set of doctrines and ethical views derived from a European context but presented as universal values (Wallerstein, 2006), on

media, culture and communication research was more closely examined (Chuang, 2003; Kim, 2007; Miike, 2003; Starosta, 1993). Greater attention was paid to the cultural contexts of Asia (or a significant number of cultures in Asia) and culture-based-centricity (either Asiaticity or Afrocentricity) was suggested to be the solution to the problem of Eurocentrism (Asante, 1998; Miike, 2006). In addition, continued efforts were made to either prepare for, or venture at, theorizing communication research from an Asian perspective: East–West differences and similarities underlying Asian cultures in communicative discourse were carefully and systematically documented (Chen & Starosta, 2003; Jia, 2000; Kim, 2002; Miike, 2007), and core philosophical assumptions, new theories and paradigms were proposed (Gunaratne, 2005; Miike, 2007). At this stage, the effort to bring Asianness to communication research was no longer limited to exploring the possibilities of theory construction using traditional tenets or philosophies; efforts were made also to develop these tenets and theorems in establishing at least ‘limited generality’, if not ‘generality’, within the Asian framework, e.g., the use of the Chinese *yin–yang* dynamic as a spiral continuum signifying freedom of expression at the global, national or individual levels (Gunaratne, 2005, 2007).

All of the above, and others, reflect the rapid development in communication scholarship and the emergence of Asian scholars (who need not be Asia-based) as a community. This growing community is making an impact on the way theorizing in communication is taking place in this millennium. As suggested by Kuo and Chew (2009), we ‘could optimistically predict that we are witnessing the beginning of the coming of age of Asian communication research today’ (p. 425).

The culture-specific and culture-general divide

While there are grounds to be optimistic, some questions remain unanswered; whether de-Westernization solves the problem of Eurocentrism being one of them. The arguments for de-Westernization are based on a common understanding that communication is culture-specific and, as such, communication process and phenomena in Asia should be approached with special sensitivity and attention, since knowledge is socially constructed and communication phenomena culturally-based and socially contextualized. As a result, argued by Miike (2006), ‘Asiatic studies of Asian communication hence demand that Asian communication should be researched from Asian theoretical perspective’ (p. 5).

The emphasis on Asiaticity is in line with the so-called culture-specific, or the emic, approach to indigenize social scientific research. The culture-specific approach suggests that research should not only reflect foremost the social and cultural context within which it is conducted and the needs and concerns of the people involved, theories should be derived on the basis of, and also applied to, specific cultures. To some researchers outside of the mainstream West, the approach is an effective way to respond to the problems of Eurocentrism. It denies outright what Hall (1992, p. 277) described as the legitimacy of ‘Western’ standards or criteria in classifying, comparing and ranking societies. By its yardstick, the normal man is clearly not ‘the European man’ (Abdel-Malek, 1981; Wallerstein, 2006, p. 35), but also, and more correctly, ‘the Asian person’, ‘the African person’ or the ‘Latin American person’.

While the culture-specific approach has its obvious advantages, the culture-general approach has also been adopted by some who strive for universal universality. Also

known as the etic or universalist approach, it proposes to focus on the underlying unity or commonality across cultures. It also sees the necessity to put communication and social scientific research within its proper historical, cultural and social context, yet does not see culture-specific theories as the ultimate goal (Goonasekera & Kuo, 2000; Kuo & Chew, 2009; Wang & Shen, 2000). Through critical examination of existing theories that may lead to either their rejection, revision or expansion, the culture-general approach aspires for universality on the basis of particularity, and sees culture-specific theories as a paradox.

The culture-specific and culture-general cleavage deserves close scrutiny as they point to different goals and methods of indigenization. Those who adopt a culture-specific approach usually aim at exploring particularities that are context-specific; while those opting for a culture-general approach are more inclined to search for universality, or contingent/conditional universality. Method-wise, the interpretive paradigm, by opting for meaning of action rather than generalizations in quest of knowledge, allows researchers to pay greater attention to cultural particularities and therefore may be more suited for a culture-specific approach to indigenization. The positivist perspective, on the other hand, is designed to search for general laws and constructing universal theories; therefore, it seems to be a better choice for the culture-general approach. Yet the positivist perspective is often deemed as inseparable from scientism and European universality, and criticized as flawed and ill-equipped to studying communication process and phenomena found in the Asian settings. As the dominant paradigm in communication is based on the positivist perspective, de-Westernization is sometimes equated to its rejection. In this context, de-Westernization means both the challenge and abandonment of the dominant positivist paradigm represented by communication research in the USA.

While this approach of de-Westernization is shared among many critics of the dominant paradigm, it is yet to be justified why a challenge of the Western-based positivist orientation (as against the European orientation of historical, holistic and critical traditions) can be equated simply with 'de-Westernization'. The fact is, the positivist perspective has long been challenged both by the advocates for the interpretive perspective³ from the US and the critical traditions of continental Europe. Many criticisms that were directed at the positivist paradigm in the de-Westernization context have in fact been applied to a critical review of the mainstream communication research in the West in general. There may be different causes for concern from an indigenization point of view, yet it does not seem justifiable to label the views against the positivist paradigm as 'de-Westernization', especially when the same scholars are often in support of the interpretive perspective or the historical holistic perspective following a critical European intellectual tradition.

This preference for a certain approach seems to suggest that there is reason *a priori* for a particular paradigm and methodology to be more suitable for Asian communication research, and not relevant to communication research in other parts of the world. Such a proposition is also debatable. Despite its attention to cultural particularities, the interpretive paradigm is nonetheless a product of the European intellectual tradition and is not entirely free from Eurocentric biases. As Lindolf (1995, p. 51) noted, '... cultural studies is nearly synonymous with British cultural studies ... mostly identified itself with the Birmingham school', and its entrepreneurial response is mostly directed at the changes taking place in the UK in the post-World War II context.

The crucial issue is therefore not so much ‘which’ paradigm is used as an analytical framework but ‘how’ it is used, and not just about ‘de-Westernization’ but also about the meaning of the term ‘Western’ when we use it to qualify a paradigm or a perspective. If cultural origin is the major determinant factor, then we do not only have a ‘Western positivist paradigm’, but also a ‘Western interpretive paradigm’ and a ‘Western critical paradigm’. In this case, de-Westernization would be impossible as this is an empirical question and not a simple value judgment. A more common use of the adjective ‘Western’ is to highlight the Euro–American-centric elements in concepts and theories, i.e., the ‘bias’ McQuail (2000) referred to. Unfortunately this way of using the term can also be problematic, as it seems to imply that, for example, a ‘Western positivist perspective’ may become a ‘positivist perspective’ when it no longer bears its distinct ‘birth marks’; it may even become an ‘Asian positivist perspective’ once localized. Likewise, a ‘Western interpretive paradigm’ may become an ‘Asian interpretive paradigm’. What is unclear about this usage of the term is how to distinguish Western from Asian or non-Western without being cultural essentialist, and bias from non-bias without being arbitrary and subjective and, above all, how to remove them if such distinctions were made.

In response to the above questions, a recent *Asian Journal of Communication* special issue (‘Asian Communication Research in Ferment: Moving beyond Eurocentricism’, vol. 19, no. 4, 2009) and an edited volume (Wang, forthcoming) were compiled based on papers presented at a conference on indigenizing and de-Westernizing communication research.⁴ Despite different interests, concerns and theoretical orientations of authors, the messages that the papers in these two publications convey are difficult to ignore. In addition to the need to go beyond criticizing Eurocentrism, there are calls to also go beyond de-Westernization for a number of reasons. Among the factors raised are first, the growing tendency of transcultural adaptation as a result of modernization and globalization, and second, the lack of a ‘live’ alternative intellectual tradition to choose from (Chakrabarty, 2000; Hall, 1992; Kanth, 2005; Kristensen, Slife, & Yanchar, 2000; Wallerstein, 2006). Removing ‘Western’ elements becomes a challenge when even the concept of ‘Asia’ itself is European.

Among alternative models and solutions proposed in the two publications mentioned above, a cleavage between the culture-specific vs. the culture-general approach begins to crystalize. The debate reflects what Dirlik (2006, p. 5) describes as the conflict between epistemological universalism and epistemological multiculturalism, a fundamental expression of ‘the conflicting forces that structure global modernity’. Even if these different emphases do not lock the indigenization effort into another ideological dead-end, attempts to go beyond such dichotomy will bring further questions: how do we develop universality on the basis of particularity that will require the incorporation of possibly incommensurate paradigms and world views? Without a clearer picture of the viable ways to tackle these issues, it is likely that fragmentation will linger on and the future prospect of indigenization will remain wide open.

So, where do we go from here? For the rest of this article, we will make an attempt to tease through layers of arguments and sift proposals and possibilities, with the hope that a more viable future direction could emerge to reconcile the tension between culture-specific and culture-general. As the issue involves interpreting and translating concepts and theories of different paradigms and intellectual and cultural origins to

search for generality and universality, the literature on philosophy of science in relation to interpretation and translation is reviewed, aiming to pave the way to reconceptualize the universal vs. the particular. Our discussion focuses on the concept of cultural commensurability, which stresses similarity and equivalence, and not commonality and uniformity. Taking note of the inherent openness of culture, language and meaning, it is argued that the concept of cultural commensurability will open the indigenization issue to a broader horizon for future discourse.

Incommensurability and commonality

The term 'incommensurability' was used by Thomas Kuhn (1962) to describe irreconcilable differences between successive scientific paradigms. Simply put, commensurable languages are translatable, while incommensurable languages are not (Conant & Haugeland, 2000, p. 4). According to Kuhn (1996, p. 92), successive paradigms are incommensurable because paradigm differences are more than substance (p. 103). A new paradigm calls for a redefinition of the corresponding science and, as the problems change, so does the standard used to differentiate between a scientific solution and other propositions, e.g., a metaphysical speculation. Consequently, the normal-scientific tradition that emerges from a scientific revolution is not only incompatible but often *incommensurable* with the one before it.

The idea of incommensurability was central to Kuhn's argument on the structure of scientific revolution. Yet it was also widely criticized for its failure to explicate why scientists working under different paradigms across a revolution divide were able to communicate with one another. Kuhn claims that it is not possible to translate old theories into a modern language, but he proceeds to do just that, according to some critiques (Eckensberger, 2002; Putnam, 1982).

In response to these criticisms, Kuhn, in his later work (2000, p. 38), made distinctions between 'translation' and 'interpretation'. Although translation involves an interpretive component, it requires a person who knows both languages to 'systematically substitute words or strings of words in the other language for words or strings of words in the text', and it needs to be done 'in such a way as to produce an equivalent text in the other language'.

The task of interpretation, in contrast, initially requires the knowledge of a single language, but it involves more than just the 'substitution of words or strings of words'. As the text consists of unintelligible materials or inscriptions and present different ways in structuring the world or organizing ideas, the interpreter will need to develop hypotheses and make sense of the writing by learning about the circumstances surrounding the production of the text.

Kuhn (2000) argued that an interpreter can still learn to use a term even if his/her language supplies no equivalent terminology to it. A language, theory or concept that is not translatable can be learned with sufficient effort; this is because the terms that are not translatable between any two languages, theories or concepts, constitute only a subgroup of terms. A term that is not translatable and commensurable, therefore, is not necessarily 'uninterpretable'. To the contrary, Kuhn's intention was to compare the profound (incommensurable) differences between paradigms (Bernstein, 1983; Slife, 2000). 'Incommensurable' is neither 'uncomparable', nor 'uncommunicable' (Eckensberger, 2002; Kuhn, 1970, 2000). This clarification of the

meaning of incommensurability has pointed to an important venue for us to develop commensurability from incommensurability.

Unlike paradigm incommensurabilities in natural science, in communication research, cultural and conceptual incommensurabilities are not always visible. For example, the concept of argumentativeness has much to do with rational reasoning as a way to truth and other core values of Enlightenment. Studying argumentativeness in North American cultures vs. in Confucian cultures built on a worldview of harmony is therefore not impossible, but the basis for comparison is questionable. Often it was not until the problem of Eurocentrism began to attract attention that such incommensurability was accounted for and dealt with.

There are a few important implications for discussing commensurability in relation to the culture-specific vs. culture-general approach to indigenizing communication research. According to Kuhn (2000), to be commensurate, paradigms, theories or concepts are not assumed to be 'common', but have 'similar' or 'equivalent' terms that can be measured or compared using the same measurement instrument or described and analyzed by using the same language. In social sciences and communication studies, what needs to be replaced is not only 'commonality'; moreover, the criteria and instrument for measurement and comparison, and the language for description also need to be negotiated and worked out. Indeed, the assumption of a standard or model readily available for comparison reminds us of the function of the 'West' (Hall, 1992), scientism: the origin of Eurocentric universality, and the meta-discourse that is associated with it. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Mignolo, 2007, p. 375) pointed out, scientific rationality is both a global and a totalitarian model, denying rationality to all forms of knowledge that fail its epistemological principles and methodological rules. At the same time it claims universal applicability of models and theories formulated according to such rules and principles. Today the traditional way of defining rationality and knowledge is no longer accepted as neutral, as they themselves are seen as artifacts of a paradigm, reflecting the values and epistemological and ontological commitments of the community or context from which they emerged (Kristensen et al., 2000, p. 274).

Universality and commonality as defined and conceptualized according to scientific rationality was criticized, therefore, not because human beings have nothing to share, but because particularities and uniqueness were denied under such a model. In hermeneutic discourse, some form of knowledge base or *common* ground, either in the form of 'pre-understanding' or 'fore-understanding of the material or situation' (Gadamer, 1975; Heidegger, 1985, p. 225; Palmer, 1969, p. 26), knowledge and competence of the language of the text (Schleiermacher, 1985, p. 75), common culture or meaning (Taylor, 1985, p. 24), is deemed necessary to understand, interpret or translate. Kuhn (2000, p. 50) also noted that even people speaking the same language use different criteria in reference determination; ultimately it is the *common* culture they share that determines the adequacy in selecting the *same* referents. In the phenomenological tradition of Alfred Shultz (1967), such commonsense knowledge is taken for granted or unquestioned. It refers to routine knowledge we have of our everyday world from which we derive implicit rules and a sense of organization and coherence. This conceptualization forms the basis of the general theory of society by Berger and Luckmann (1967), and later the theory of structuralism by Giddens (1984). Similarly, Taylor (1985, p. 39), in distinguishing between inter-subjective meaning and consensus, noted that the basis of community is *common* meaning; meaning that

makes a common reference world with common actions, celebrations and feelings possible.

Contrary to its dictionary definition, the term 'common' in the above contexts usually does not preclude a certain degree of openness. Taylor (1985, p. 39), for example, warned that common meanings such as 'the American Way' is articulated differently by different groups. As language, meaning and culture are by nature fluid and open, what is shared is rarely 100% nor stays permanently. To be more precise, what is required of commensurability is 'similarity' or 'equivalence', as is the case with translation.

Commensurability and incommensurability as symbiotic forces

To reconcile the culture-general and the culture-specific, it is essential to understand the way commensurability works with incommensurability as symbiotic forces. While it may not be worthwhile to go through all the criticisms against universalism and relativism, it is necessary to point out a growing tendency to go beyond the dualistic quandary that has limited this paired concept. The diversity of truth claims in psychology, according to Kristensen et al. (2000, p. 278), means that they apply only to local community from which they emerge, and can be judged only according to the standards of that particular community. They are thus incommensurable and incomparable to the point that we would 'have no ability to understand ones other than our own' (Kristensen et al., 2000, p. 281). What relativists have failed to do was to postulate a larger 'community' from which the existence and identity of the local communities are taken, and thus are unable to offer a tenable way to understand the diversity and incompatibility within the field of study (Kristensen et al., 2000, p. 282). On the basis of philosophical hermeneutics, Kristensen and his colleagues argued that to unify psychology, a general, universal 'nonlocal order' must emerge from a local moral perspective that is sensitive to the incommensurable differences between discourse communities. In cultural psychology, similar ways of conceptualizing the general vs. the specific were proposed by a few others: Girndt (Poortinga & Soudijin, 2002, p. 325) on cultural system or syndrome as general vs. cultural conventions and rules as situation-specific; Berry et al. (1992; Poortinga & Soudijin, 2002, p. 321) on psychological processes as universal vs. cultural practices as specific; and Shweder and his colleagues (1998, p. 871) on universal mind vs. particular mentalities. Rather than having the paired concept as dichotomous extremes, these researchers regarded the general as the basis of the particular, with an interacting relationship between the two. It is therefore impossible to study difference without presupposing commonalities or universalities, or to communicate across differences without implying similarities, and vice versa (Chen & Starosta, 2003, p. 4; Shweder et al., 1998). In other words, the relativist and the universalist perspectives are no longer locked in an 'either-or' model as mutually exclusive dichotomies. As Shweder et al. (1998, p. 871) pointed out, for at least 200 years, cultural psychology has maintained the claim that the formal universals of mind and the content-rich particulars of mentality or way of life are 'interdependent, interactive and give each other life'.

This way of conceptualizing the general vs. the specific, and the universal and the particular, highlights the second important feature of the commensurability concept; commensurability and incommensurability are not, and cannot be, conceptualized as mutually exclusive, opposite extremes in a dualistic model. Rather, as *yin* and *yang*

forces, they are a symbiotic pair in contrast to one another; they may be contradictory, but also complementary and mutually constitutive. Through clashes and interactions, convergence and divergence, they define and transform one another. Studies focusing on incommensurability without consideration of the possibility to establish commensurability therefore fall in the trap of nativism and essentialism, as warned about by Dissanayake (2003) and Khiabany (2010). On the other hand, those rushing to achieve commensurability without incommensurability in mind tend to result in easy comparisons and analogies (Dissanayake, 2003, p. 27), what Wallerstein (2006) described as 'avatars of Orientalism'.

As indigenizing communication and social scientific research often begins with the awareness to Eurocentric biases and problems with applying universal laws, the first step to move out of this universality in disguise would be to establish incommensurability between Eurocentric concepts and theories and thoughts and ideas of the indigenous and the local. A culture-specific approach allows a researcher the depth in looking into the relevant context, including the historical, social, cultural and sub-cultural, to expose and account for deep-seated differences that were previously unaccounted for.

It is therefore necessary to begin the task of indigenization with the recognition of the particular and the contextual, to understand that no two worldviews, paradigms, concepts or structures are entirely the same, and that it is necessary to establish their uniqueness and particularity by visiting and revisiting the historical, social and cultural context. Incommensurability between concepts and theories of different origins, e.g., Asian concepts of communication,⁵ must be fully explored and revealed when studying interpersonal communication in respective cultures.

To have a comprehensive understanding of the incommensurability involved in concepts and theories is not, however, the purpose, but the first step to achieving the final goal of indigenizing research, if one is not to be locked into the relativist quandary of non-communication and non-interaction with the rest of the global academic community. Dissanayake (2003, p. 27), in underscoring the linkage between phenomenology and Asian approaches to communication, pointed out that the purpose of such an endeavor is to promote a dialogue between different modes of inquiry so that 'each can benefit from the cumulative wisdom of the other', and more avenues for inquiry can be opened. It is important to understand oneself, as Kristensen et al. suggested (2000, p. 284), but it is the depth of understanding of the *other* that is necessary for true understanding of oneself.

The second step of the indigenization endeavor is therefore to take advantage of the culture-general approach to develop commensurability through incommensurability. Commensurability is essential as it allows different discourse communities to engage in intellectual exchange, develop new ideas and, ultimately, universality. As pointed out by Kuhn (2000) and MacIntyre (1988, p. 387), incommensurability does not mean incommunicability nor incomparability. Whereas direct translation is not possible, through learning the history, the philosophy, the language and/or the culture, it is both possible to understand and interpret the unintelligible and the incommensurable. Kuhn (2000) has resorted to the 'speaking of another language' as the only way to achieve such understanding of the foreign. It is important to note that 'speaking the native language' is merely the means to achieve the end of understanding. Once understanding is achieved, how to turn the formerly unintelligible and incommensurable into ideas, knowledge and experiences that can be shared will amount to the same

task as that of a teacher, tourist guide or popular scientist, making known from the unknown, and expanding the knowledge base of the readers, students and tourists. As Kanth (2005, p. 28) has noted, truth in social matters is both 'knowable and realizable', because the human condition is not entirely dissimilar; language can be learnt, and cultures decoded.

Overcoming incommensurability thus becomes the primary means to achieve commensurability. Without incommensurability, there will be no basis to build commensurability; without commensurability, there will be no way to discover incommensurability. Likewise, without the uses of the culture-specific approach it will be difficult to achieve the depth that is called for in a fruitful attempt at indigenization; yet without culture-general approach it will be difficult to achieve the breadth that is necessary for communication and comparison across discourse communities.

Concluding remarks: from de-Westernization to universal universality

Following the criticism of the Eurocentric biases in scientism, there comes the nagging question of universality: are we witnessing the end of European universality, or universality itself? Universal universality, or any form of universality for that matter, is not possible according to postmodernist theories. With the celebration of diversity and plurality, values that are part of the Enlightenment world view, e.g., reason, rationality and objectivity and their critical importance in social scientific research, have been questioned. As what people think and do are all but products of social construction, no single rationality, morality or theoretical framework can explain the universal, and the celebration of difference and plurality of the world must require the abandonment of universalism (Lawson, Graham, & Baker, 2007, pp. 13–14). There is, therefore, no compromise between difference and sameness, or diversity and universalism.

Yet many of those who ruled out Eurocentric universality did not rule out a 'universal universality', despite the uncertain prospect. As Wallerstein put it, following a long era of European universalism is possibly a network of universalism, 'although there is no guarantee that we shall get there' (Wallerstein, 2006, p. 84). Similar to the idea of multiple universality, Mignolo (2007, p. 125) proposed the idea of 'pluri-universality'. But if the values that were considered to be the basis of universalism are themselves re-examined, are 'pluri-universality' and 'universal universality' less problematic and more desirable? What will serve as the basis of these new genres of 'limited universalities'?

The above questions aside, the concept of multi-universality echoes the call for multiple truths by postmodernism theories, yet it does not respond to the need for a set of shared criteria to evaluate the knowledge claims made by various discourse communities. Such criteria are important, as Kristensen et al. (2000, pp. 274–278) pointed out, because for a discipline to remain viable, members of the community must reach consensus on what should be valued, appropriate and viable with a certain degree of epistemological and ontological coherence. While no single community should apply its criteria to others, the absence of agreement on criteria would mean that nothing is comparable and that little can be said of competing claims.

Either for the unity of a discipline or for its development, the need for an agreed-upon basis for comparison, evaluation and communication (Kristensen et al., 2000) explains to a large extent the incessant call for universality in this postmodern era. The solution, it is argued, should not be one that confines universality to limitations that

would only produce another paradox, but a universality that is built on the symbiotic forces of commensurability and incommensurability.

When commensurability is established between two concepts, theories, frameworks, paradigms or worldviews, it can be compared to yet other concepts, theories, frameworks, paradigms and worldviews to explore and establish incommensurability. Through a similar process of hermeneutic analyses, the basis for commensurability will become broader, eventually permitting us to conceive of a commensurate universality.

It is important to note that the conflict between what Dirlik (2006, p. 5) described as epistemological multiculturalism and epistemological universalism no longer exists with the commensurability approach, as the former is but a step in the process of building the latter. The commensurability approach cuts across the empirical and the interpretive paradigm as no paradigm can exist without universal concepts and/or theories, including those promoting the investigation of particularities, and no concepts and/or theories can be so perfectly universal that there is no room for further exploration. An example of the uses of culture-commensurability approach can be found in a study by Wang and Liu (2010) on collectivism and relationalism. By going back to the historical origin of collectivism and philosophical and sociological studies of Chinese interpersonal relations, the authors established incommensurability between the two by challenging the popular assumption of Chinese culture being collectivistic. What was found to be the most important aspect to the way the Chinese Self relates to its Other (relation) was then found to have actually been examined extensively in psychological and sociological studies, only from a somewhat different perspective. On the basis of these studies, commensurability was established and relationalism was proposed as the third important dimension to add to the collectivism and individualism paired concept in analyzing the way individuals relate to others.

The culture-commensurable approach, by treating thoughts, ideas and approaches to knowledge production of all locations as potential resources for research, does not advocate de-Westernization. But like the concept of pluri-universality (Mignolo, 2007) it denies the sole legitimacy of Eurocentric paradigms and goes beyond essentialism with a broader, and more holistic, view of research. It recognizes diversity but at the same time strives for intellectual dialogue, thereby avoiding paying the heavy price of complete fragmentation of the field. More importantly, it offers what is most needed of universality today, not just a place for encounter and exchange, but also a basis for comparison and evaluation.

In a recent article, Kuo and Chew (2009, pp. 430–431) suggest the use of the Chinese knot as a metaphor to reconcile the seeming incommensurability between cultural particularity and human universality. The Chinese knot, consisting of distinctive elements that are plaited and connected by one common thread, signifies that while each culture approaches communication from a different angle, the holistic effect of culture is best understood as a coherent whole rather than from a single perspective. The effects of culture are also overlapping such that there is no single point where the effects of one perspective ends and another begins. Ten years ago, Goonasekera and Kuo (2000, p. xii) raised the issue that, 'to be Asian it has to be particularistic; to be theoretical it has to be universalistic', and this is the paradox and the challenge that a concept such as 'Asian theory of communication' needs to face and resolve. Metaphorically, the Chinese knot shows the underlying connection between cultural particularity and human universality, hence bridging incommensurability and commensurability.

Although in comparison to Eurocentric universality, the process of establishing commensurability and commensurate universality promises to take a longer time and a greater effort from all, and while the pace of development seems slow and the scope of change still limited, inroads in gaining ownership of communication research for those researchers outside of the mainstream West have been made. While there may be no solution to totally do away with biases and prejudices, further and more in-depth knowledge is perhaps the only effective means in exposing the flaws and inadequacies of such biases and prejudices. When more incommensurabilities are revealed, greater effort will be devoted to establish broader-based commensurabilities. This is an on-going continuous process to aim at a 'higher' level of commensurability and universality. It is a never-ending process, as the goal is by nature a *moving goal*, which is to be aimed at, but never fully reached. Hence, we are really talking about imperfect commensurability and partial universalism. Differences or diversity cannot, and will not, stop understanding and communication, but the negligence of them will. The pursuit shall continue.

Notes

1. Jiang Fei, speech on 'Communication Research in China,' December 15, 2009, Taipei, Taiwan.
2. The term 'Asian communication research' has been used loosely in the literature to indicate communication research with a focus on Asia or Asians.
3. The interpretive paradigm is represented by the symbolic interaction school, as well as hermeneutic theories.
4. The conference, titled 'De-Westernizing communication research: What is the next step?' was organized by the College of Communication, National Chengchi University, and held in Taipei, Taiwan, in December 2008.
5. They include the concept of *uye-ri* in Korean (Yum, 1987), *amae* in Japanese (Miike, 2003), and *guanxi* in Chinese (Wang & Liu, 2010).

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