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Editorial

Georgette Wang [a]

[a] Department of Journalism, National Chengchi University, Taipei,
Taiwan
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Editorial[1]

> The search for an Asian perspective . . . does not imply the outright rejection of Western theories. What is at issue is the uncritical acceptance of Western models and the neglect of the cumulative wisdom embodied in Asian literature. Theories and models of communication should reflect the cultural ethos of Asian people (Goonasekera & Kuo, 2000, p. vii).

In 2000 the *Asian Journal of Communication* published a special issue on Asian communication theories (edited by Goonasekera and Kuo). A decade later, we are back to revisit many of the crucial issues, and more. A great deal has taken place during the crucial 10 years. Of these, two major developments are especially pertinent to the main theme of this volume: first, a proliferation of research output from outside of the mainstream West,[2] and second, an increasing awareness of Eurocentric[3] biases in methods, theories and paradigms, and a greater recognition of the importance of cultural context for studying communication issues.

The two trends are closely related. The first signifies a rapid expansion of the body of literature in the periphery of the international academic community, especially in this part of the world. According to Guo-Ming Chen (2006), in the mid-2000s at least seven English-language communication journals had their focus on Asia or Asian nations. This number does not include those published in indigenous languages.

The growing importance of communication media and activities in this era of global network society may have accounted for this exponential growth in communication research output, but the rise of postmodern and postcolonial theories and pluralist thinking also paved the way to studying media and communication with a multiculturalist approach which, by nature, runs against the idea of *European* universalism. These changes in the background were reflected in the shifting focus of major works on theorizing Asian communication research over the past three decades. The first two books with explicit aim in exploring the Asian perspective in communication research, Kincaid (1987) and Dissanayake (1988), were published a year apart in the late 1980s. Both volumes aimed at expanding and enriching the knowledge basis in studying communication, despite their differences in focus and motivation. The Kincaid book represented an early attempt to contrast 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 were rapidly growing (Kincaid, 1987, p. 9). The purpose outlined in the Dissanayake (1988) book was, however, more succinctly the construction of 'Asian' communication theories; here the aspiration was to 'rediscover a terrain' (p. xii), to challenge and enrich communication theories. The

pursuit was justified not so much by the increasing importance of the East–West contact, but because of Asia's rich cultural heritage. 'Culture is communication,' Dissanayake quoted Hall, 'and 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). These approaches, therefore, have the potential of theoretical development when interpreted in light of Western concepts.

The message from the works of Kincaid, Dissanayake and their colleagues in expanding the knowledge base for communication research was clear, but their slight differences in goals and perspectives also led to a number of crucial questions that were taken up by articles in the *Asian Journal of Communication* special issue published over 10 years later. McQuail (2000), for example, warned of the problems of Western ethnocentrism in media theories and the need to rectify it. Wang and Shen (2000) pointed at the paradox for theories to be *cultural-specific,* as theories are by definition aimed at establishing generality and universality while culture dictates particularity. Ito, on the other hand, challenged the need to distinguish between East Asian and Western communication theories from either a cultural or ideological perspective, as there existed differences but more similarities (Ito, 2000).

If the 1980s marked the beginning of the epic mission and the 1990s saw fermenting in the field (Curran and Park, 2000; Starosta, 1993; van Dijik, 1993), the first decade of the new millennium brought significant progress in the pursuit of theory construction: mostly in areas that closely deal with culture and communication issues, e.g., intercultural communication, postcolonial or cultural studies. 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). 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). Gunaratne (2005), for example, critiqued the philosophical bias of the *Four theories of the press* (Seibert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956) and its subsequent revisions, and developed an alternative theory on media communication outlets and free expression, by incorporating both Asian and Western philosophy.

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; actual efforts were made 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). Greater attention was paid to the cultural contexts of Asia, or a significant number of cultures in Asia, making it possible to better explain and analyze the particularities of media and communication issues in the region. The picture of an Asian communication paradigm is emerging, Chen (2006) proclaimed. Yet this exciting news has also brought with it still more questions and problems that need to be addressed. For example, what should, can and will be accomplished with

the now recognized cross-cultural differences in epistemology, ontology and methodology? Where is the current endeavor leading to? While it may not be possible to cover all of the issues raised in the literature, they can be generally categorized into the following four dimensions:

(1) The final objective. As Miike (Chen & Miike, 2006) pointed out, although a growing number of Asian researchers have recognized the incompatibility of Western models and theories, there does not seem to be a clear vision of the future of Asian communication studies; is the final objective of our collective endeavor the construction of mid-range theories with limited applications (Chen, 2006), or universal universality (Wallerstein, 2006)?

(2) The lack of academic dialogue. As extensive as it may be, until now the sometimes heated debate on Eurocentrism and Asiacentricity is primarily limited to certain sub-areas of the field; the significance of the issues has scarcely been communicated across disciplinary boundaries. Without effective exchange of views, there can be no joining forces in undertaking the mission;

(3) The lack of motivation of Asian communication researchers. Despite greater attention paid to the issues surrounding Eurocentrism, there is still a significant number of Asian scholars who have remained apathetic, due to either their personal aspirations or institutional constraints (Chen & Miike, 2006, p. 3); in empirical, quantitative studies for example, borrowing imported theoretical frameworks to analyze indigenous data continues to be a common practice;

(4) The 'how-to' challenge. Dissanayake (2003) raised three important questions regarding the future of Asian communication studies. With no exception all concerned the issue 'how'; an indication of the urgent need to go beyond criticizing Western approaches and exploring useful approaches that can help realize the objectives that have been put forth.

At the moment there may be little consensus nor clear-cut answers to the above questions; however, there is one common, underlying concern that cuts across all of the above issues and concerns: *what's next*? This special issue represents the first attempt to bring together researchers from different sub-areas of the broadly defined communication discipline, e.g., film and mass media studies, and speech and intercultural communication to respond to the 'how-to' issue in moving beyond Eurocentrism. The purpose here is to answer and respond to the critical issues we find ourselves faced with today by providing an opportunity to exchange but also to challenge viewpoints, to share but also to inspire new ideas, and to look into the future but also to carefully revisit the past. Due to the unique nature of research works in different areas of communication studies, there were, necessarily, differences in perspective, and the level of sensitivity and familiarity with the issues involved. Such dialogue and exchanges are, however, the only way to move forward with greater effectiveness in searching for the solution to their common problem.

The first article by Shelton A. Gunaratne uses the theoretical framework of world-system analysis and complexity science to argue that the global academic/scholarship structure, along with the modern world-system, is heading toward evolutionary bifurcation and self-organization into a more complex structure. The non-Western reactions to European universalism, which 'masquerades' as scientific

universalism, have created global divides engendering turbulence in the communication field. The article also explicates the fundamental philosophical East–West differences that have given rise to these contemporary divides in terms of the principle of the dialectical completion of relative polarities (i.e., the *yin–yang* principle of diversity within unity) and responds to the critics of non-Western communication theories and models. Finally, Gunaratne speculates on how these differences, which cannot be resolved within the structural constraints of the current world-system, might evolve into a more universal universalism during its self-organization into a more complex system.

The next article by Shi-xu represents efforts in uncovering the problems of Eurocentrism in discourse analyses that restrict and mislead the understanding of Asian discourse. Shi points out three of the distinct features of the dominant Critical Discourse Analysis that are in conflict with its pan-cultural or universal claims: its worldview in binary terms, a functionalist view of language and communication, and written or spoken texts as the locus of, path to, and matrix for meaning. In contrast, Asian cultures see man and nature as a unified whole, with greater emphasis placed on interdependence, interpenetration and dynamic changes. Versed in both Western and Asian cultures and languages, Shi sees the comparative advantage for Asian researchers in taking up the challenge to learn from Asian scholarships, study Asian discourses, establish dialog with the mainstream, and reclaim their identities.

Echoing Shi's critique on binarism in the European world view, Guo–Ming Chen points out the conceptual problems in treating East and West differences in ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions as dichotomies. The tendencies to polarize these differences in an either–or fashion often lead to indiscriminant treatment of cultural values, insider's privileges, and blind acceptance or rejection of foreign elements. Chen argues that the dissolution of the boundary should, and could, be pursued if the distance between East–West paradigmatic assumptions are perceived as a continuum. Cultures, in this perspective, are seen as orienting towards a point on this continuum as all value orientations do exist in the same society; it is essentially a matter of degree. With this reconceptualization of cultures it will be possible to sustain local identities while seeking the interpenetration and interfusion between the culture-specific and culture-general approaches of communication studies.

Min-Sun Kim also sees cultural biases in communication theories, but she is essentially concerned over the added difficulties in finding a solution: difficulties that came from a lack of consensus over critical issues among Asian researchers. In between radical rejections of Western knowledge while building theories that were 'exclusively Asian' and arguments against Asiacentric theories for the modification and adaptations of existing theories, Kim proposes 'culture-relative theorizing' as a more viable solution. Developed from studies of intercultural encounters, cultural relativity in theories saw the possibility of developing open and multicultural perspectives and the loosening from cultural bind. It is, she argues, the way to facilitate paradigm shift, and also an 'extension of the familiar into the unknown.'

Also in view of the weak points of culture-specific approaches, Eddie Kuo and Han Ei Chew propose the alternative of a culture-centric approach: a non-polarizing meta-theory that puts culture at the center of an inquiry. Based on the double-swing model and the humancentric model, this approach allows cultural perspectives to remain distinct while sharing commonalities and overlapping space. Meaningful and

constructive meetings of Eastern and Western perspectives are therefore possible without either political or ideological biases. This model of Chinese knot does not contradict Asiacentric approaches, but goes beyond it, Kuo and Chew argue, and it is especially useful in three areas: synthesizing communication theories studied from ethnocentric perspectives, studying phenomena that occur at the confluence of cultures, and investigating new communication landscapes.

While communication researchers are laboring over a solution to move beyond Eurocentrism, for those in film studies the 20-year debate on cross-cultural reading was a *fait accompli*. As Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh points out, in the past decade there has been a significant adjustment in re-constituting the East–West relationship to reverse the order of object–subject position. In parallel to young Western scholars' effort in re-orienting, re-turning and assimilating themselves with the native enunciation, the hostilities toward 'Western theories' were marginalized, and charges against the systematic exclusion of the East as text and history, and the West as decipher and theory subsided. With the popularization of 'multiculturalism,' 'postmodernity,' and 'postcolonialism,' theories in the West might have appeared to be stalling, Yeh argues, but in cross-cultural studies it has 'embedded itself into creation of an engrossing historiography . . . to eclipse earlier polemics.' *Wenyi* [letters-and-arts pictures] as a suitable genre to clarify, map and discuss key issues in Chinese film history and criticism makes a vivid example of how this process may unfold.

Given disciplinary differences, the solution to problems in one area of study does not necessarily answer to similar problems in another. However, if there is anything to be learned from the experiences of film researchers, it should be *the way* they responded to some of the most crucial issues surrounding cultural biases and particularities: how they have come to terms with Asian subjectivity as methodological given, retooled cross-cultural reading as a project of exchange, and eventually succeeded in extending the ownership of the field to the ethnic 'Other.' To many Asian scholars in media and communication research, the most effective means to assert ownership of the field would be the formulation of Asian theories of communication. After a review of works made available in the past decades, Wimal Dissanayake suggests that two types of theories are important to the production of Asian communication theories: Type A theories that deal with traditional Asian thoughts and understandings of human communication, and Type B, such as Orientalism and postcolonialism theories, that critically engage Western conceptualities with a focus on contemporary experiences and structures of feeling. While both promise immense potentials for future development, Dissanayake calls for the adoption of a self-critical stance in guarding against essentialism, ahistoricism, reductionism, elitism and gender biases in making the effort to formulate Asian theories of communication. Dialogue with the West is both possible and important, as seen in the parallels between poststructuralists theories and the ideas and concepts of Buddhist thinker Nagarjuna, in widening the discursive boundaries of communication studies.

The articles in this special issue have taken an important step in response to some of the greatest challenges faced by Asian communication researchers today. They have made new attempts to map out the root of the problems in theorizing communication research in Asia, pointed out major conceptual and methodological flaws in the way to further accomplishment, and proposed alternative models and

paradigms to tackle these problems. There may be greater consensus on the need for action than the action to take, but the message is not possible to overlook.

If Eurocentrism refers to ethnocentrism in knowledge production, then cultural issues in communication and social scientific research must be reconceptualized to pave the way for closer collaboration between Asia and the West. Traditions, values, social formations, media industries, audiences and texts need to be more carefully considered. Whereas various readings and theoretical propositions must be shared and appreciated, they also need to be challenged and contested. Such may not be the only, but certainly one of the most effective ways to deal with the most difficult problems in theorizing on Asian ground: the need to remove Eurocentric biases but not everything European, and the need to be culture-specific but not at the expense of generality (at least limited generality). What is involved here is not merely 'research' in its narrow sense, but a long process of mutual learning and transformation. What Wallerstein (2006, p. 84) saw as the struggle towards a multiplicity of universalism or a network of universal universalism may amount to be no more than the kind of learning process we describe here.

Moving beyond Eurocentrism, as several authors pointed out in their articles, does not require the removal of all 'Western' elements as a precondition, for even the idea of theory itself is a product of the Renaissance and the /Enlightenment (Wong, Manvi, & Wong, 1995). What is needed is effort from researchers in both the West and the non-West to reflect, assimilate, 're-search' and re-orient the Self vs. the Other. It is only through this dialectic process that the goal to produce research reflecting 'the cultural ethos of Asian people,' as Goonasekera and Kuo pointed out 10 years ago, can be accomplished.

Georgette Wang
Department of Journalism, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan

Notes

1. All except the articles by Gunaratne and Dissanayake were presented at the international conference on 'De-Westernizing Communication Research: What Is the Next Step?' The conference was held in Taipei, Taiwan, December 13–14. It was organized by the College of Communication, National Chengchi University (NCCU), Taipei, Taiwan, and funded by Taiwan's National Science Council, Ministry of Education, Central News Agency, and the Project for Excellence in Communication, College of Communication, NCCU.
2. The term 'mainstream West' is used here rather than 'West' because most of the communication models, theories and paradigms in the literature were originated from a few (but not all) of the nations in Europe and North America.
3. 'Eurocentrism' is often used in place of 'Westerncentrism' as the biases implied in these terms were rooted in the seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe. Shohat and Stam (1994, p. 1), however, suggested that Americancentrism should be incorporated as the USA is home to most communication theories.

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