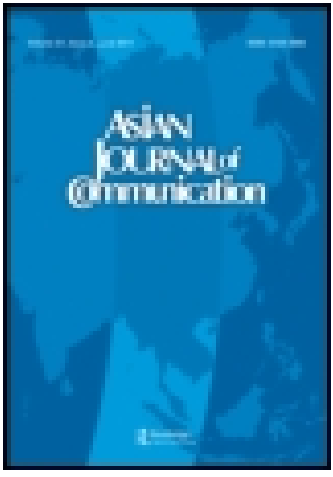

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East, west, communication, and theory: Searching for the meaning of searching for Asian communication theories

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East, West, Communication, and Theory

Searching for the Meaning of Searching for Asian Communication Theories

This paper begins with a discussion of the concept of 'Asia', the cultural differences and similarities between Asia and the West, and what constructing an 'Asian communication theory' means. It then examines the background against which the current stage is set for Asian commication research, and the intricate changes in approaching theory building in the community.

> There is a widespread feeling among communication scholars in Asia that there is a pressing need to re-examine Western communication theories in the light of Asian cultures and traditions. It is acknowledged that communications curricula in Asian universities have been greatly influenced by Western, notably by American, communication theories. One consequence of this is the uncritical acceptance of Western models and theories and the neglect of concepts inherent in the Asian traditions.
> (Menon, 1988: xi–x)

Although many communication scholars marvel at the rapid pace of change in the field today, it may be no less amazing how it has remained unchanged. Over a decade after Dissanayake's (1988) book was published, a nagging feeling of anxiety and discontent persists among Asian researchers over Asia's share of contributions to communication research. Even though there is a community of Asian communication researchers growing rapidly, with at least

three English-language journals[1] specifically devoted to Asian communications research and an institution[2] vigorously promoting academic and professional exchanges within the region, the 'mission' of Asian communication researchers seems to have remained unaccomplished.

But what exactly is this mission? Of the few points that Menon raised in the above paragraph, the failure to re-examine [Western] communication theories in the light of Asian cultures and look into Asian philosophical thinking and traditions for ideas to enrich communications research should no longer be the only causes for concern. Dissanayake's edited volume, for example, was designed to achieve these very purposes. What has not yet been accomplished seems to concern the ultimate stage in conducting research—theory construction.

Until today there have been few communication theories that can be labelled undoubtedly 'Asian'.[3] This is serious because theories have a specific role to play in social scientific research: they are not just a demonstration of original thinking, but determine the direction and the structure of inquiry. Every time 'Western' theories were shown to be inadequate in explaining changes in Asia, and every time Asian values and traditions were mentioned to suggest theoretical development, those in the Asian academic community are confronted with the question: where is 'Asian' communication theory? The inability to come up with a satisfactory answer indicates 'mission unaccomplished', thus a lack of substantial contribution to the field of communication from the part of Asian researchers.

This paper, although not intending to tackle the issue by proposing a particular Asian communication theory, does intend to approach the problem theoretically, by looking into the central concerns of such an undertaking: Are the objectives of this 'mission' clear enough? What precisely is 'Asian communication theory'? Is its construction an achievable goal, or more specifically, is it THE solution to the problem of inadequate contribution to communication research? From an academic point of view, what is the meaning of pursuing something 'different', something Asian?

The discussion will begin by looking at the concept of 'Asia',

□ 1. The three journals are: *Asian Journal of Communication*, *Keio Communication Review*, and the recently published *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*.

□ 2. The Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC).

□ 3. To the authors, the terms 'Asia' and 'Asian' are not merely geographical terms. They are, rather, used here as social and cultural terms.

the cultural difference between Asia and the West, and the meaning of constructing an Asian communication theory. An effort will be made to examine the background against which the stage is set for Asian communications research and the intricate changes in approaching theory building in the Asian community. The paper will conclude with an alternative view to searching for Asian communication theories. Our hope is that this exercise will lead to a more realistic approach to the issue.

■ Asian Communication Theory: What Does it Mean?

Communication theories in the past, with the discipline grown out of propaganda and media effect studies, have understandably placed their major emphasis on media. McQuail, for example, in his now well-known work on communication theories, discussed only 'mass communication' theories, theories that are 'generalized from evidence and observation about the nature and consequences of mass media' (McQuail, 1984: 18). Today media remain to be the focus of attention in communications research. However, the fact that they have gradually become part of an integrated, multifunctional communication and information system in an increasingly globalized world has pointed to the need for taking a more dynamic, and perhaps broader, view of communication theories.

If we accept the difficulty inherent in grasping our already-evolving understanding of communication theory, we must expect that adding the descriptor 'Asian' to 'communication theory' will (and indeed has) further cloud its definition. More specifically, by adding 'Asian', do we intend to specify the target of theory application, the origin of the theory, or the cultural perspective it takes?

According to Dissanayake, it takes almost all of the above to make a theory 'Asian':

> If Asian scholars are to come up with models of communication which bear the imprint of their own cultures and which will enable them to comprehend better and conceptualize more clearly the complexity of human communication, it is indeed imperative that they shake off the influence of the mechanistic Aristotelian model. They need to address their mind to the task of finding

> out how best they can draw upon the cumulative wisdom of Asian human sciences as a means of formulating theories and models of communication that reflect the cultural ethos of the people, and for that very reason, are more pertinent and heuristically useful.
>
> (Dissanayake, 1988: 6)

While many in the community may share Dissanayake's expectations, there exist certain contradictions in the above statement. Theories, by definition, are bodies of conceptions or propositions deduced by generalizations from facts; they may be applied universally, never limited to a particular area.[4]

For theories, generalizations are inevitable—at the very least they imply the potential for universality; at the most, absolute universality. A theory whose relevance or validity is limited to a certain people or pertinent only under certain social circumstances is, according to this criterion, not yet a theory; at best it is a loose hypothesis workable for a limited area. If we could claim to have communication theories that are more pertinent to Japan, Korea, and Taiwan than they are to other societies, then, by the same token, we could have theories more pertinent to Tokyo, Seoul, Taipei than they are to other cities, and moreover, more pertinent to a specific community in Tokyo, Seoul, and Taipei. So it seems as if we cannot limit communication theory to a specific target of theory application. Following the same logic, if a model, e.g., the mechanistic Cartesian model, is flawed in Asia, it is likely to be flawed elsewhere, hence the Asian academic community would not be the only one that needs to shake off its influence.

If Asian communication theory does not signify theory that is more pertinent to Asia/Asians, is it referring to communication theory originating from Asia? If so, we are confronted with yet another question: what does 'origination' mean? Does it imply theories constructed by Asian scholars, on the basis of development in Asia, or 'drawn upon the cumulative wisdom of Asian human sciences', as Dissanayake elegantly put it, with a distinctive Asian perspective?

Undoubtedly ideas, thinking and 'cumulative wisdom' specific to a certain culture can make important contribution to the formulation of a theory, and cultural values and world-views may also

□ 4. As defined by *Webster's Dictionary* (1988), a theory is 'A body of conception or proposition, formed by speculation or deduction by abstraction and generalization from facts'.

guide researchers to adopt a specific perspective in their endeavour. These ideas, wisdom, and world-views, however, do not readily make theories. Mario Bunge, a well-known philosopher of sciences, has said that theories are never born fully developed: '[T]hey start as [a] rather disordered set of somewhat loosely connected propositions containing more or less fuzzy concepts' which, like embryos, 'develop, if at all through addition and culling, exemplification and generalization, concept refinement and testing against empirical data' (Bunge, 1996: 114). While it can be argued that everything—with the only exception of nature—is cultural, trying to determine if, and the extent to which, a theory bears the imprint of a specific culture can be a very difficult, if not impossible, task. This is especially true when we take a closer look at cultural differences that emerge in the construction of communication theory.

■ Theories and Asian Culture

Cultures have a distinct path of development and science is culturally bound. The concept of theory, and the dominant idea of social scientific research are products of contemporary Western civilization. Asian philosophies and cultural traditions, despite their richness, have followed a quite different line of development that provide us neither with theories in the Western sense, nor the contextual framework that are necessary in formulating such theories.

Yet this observation is not meant to suggest that Asian peoples have no 'science' or 'knowledge' of their own, or ways of perceiving the world and conceiving the relations among human beings and between human beings and nature. In fact, from ancient times traceable back to three millennia ago, Asia has been an important location for the emergence of many of the philosophical, religious and living traditions of the world. To this point, some comparison between Western and Asian sciences and their different origins and epistemic structure might be useful.

First, regarding the difference in origins, modern Western science can be traced back to the Greek notion of *theoria*, the disinterested pursuit of truth and sheer intellectual curiosity (Shen, 1984). Using this conception, Asian traditional science seems to be short on theoretical interest and is instead more pragmatically motivated. Generally speaking, Western *episteme*, scientific as well

as philosophical, began with the attitude of *wonder*, which led to the theoretical construction of scientific and philosophical knowledge; Asian science and philosophy began with the attitude of *concern*, which led to the practical wisdom for guiding personal and collective destiny. According to the *Great Appendix* to the *Book of Changes*, philosophy as a serious intellectual activity began with concerns and worries in situations of *anxiety* and *calamity*. This is quite different from having *leisure* and *recreation* as the way of life, something Aristotle would suggest in *Metaphysics*, when the Egyptian priests pursued knowledge for knowledge's sake and invented geometry thereby. The difference between the two origins, therefore, was a difference between theoretical interest and pragmatic interest.

Now, regarding epistemic structure, one of the essential differences between Asian and Western culture is the meaning of knowledge and how it has been perceived and constructed. Since their early days, Western philosophies have placed knowledge and its relation with the senses and empirical data in a prominent position. Whether all knowledge could be acquired from our senses, for example, was a topic of heated debate between Plato and other Greek philosophers of his time (Russell, 1988). This debate underwent suppression during the Dark Ages, but scored a triumphant comeback during the Renaissance and, with the rise of empiricism, has formed the foundation of scientific research in Western civilization.

On its empirical side, Western modern science is characterized by its well-controlled systematic experimentation which, by elaborating on data from our senses and our perception of these data, assures itself of keeping in touch with the environment, the supposed 'Real World', although in an artificially, technically controlled way. On its rational side, Western science is an activity of constructing theories that use logical mathematically structured language to formulate knowledge of local yet 'universalizable' validity—knowledge, that is, about a particular domain of phenomenon with a universal explanatory and predictive power. To achieve a balance between these two sides, there is a conscious checking of the correspondence between the rational side and the empirical side in order to ensure that their merger serves humanity's objective in explaining and controlling the world.

Chinese and Indian traditional sciences, on the other hand, are quite different historically from Western science. On the empirical side, their data were established through very detailed but

passive observations, with or without the aid of instruments. In contrast, Asians seldom tried to systematically organize experimentation to the extent of effectuating any active artificial control over human perception of natural objects.

On its rational side, Asian traditional learning never utilized logical mathematical structure in theory formation. Mathematics, although highly developed in Asian cultures, was used only for describing and organizing data, not for formulating theories. Lacking in logical mathematical structures, Asian quasi-scientific theories were principally presented through intuition and speculative imagination. They have the advantage of being able to penetrate into the totality of life and environment and to give reasonable interpretation of them, but these 'theories' lacked somehow the rigor of structural organization and logical formulation so integral in the Western sciences[5].

Asian traditional science is also short of an interactive relation in the mode of deduction/falsification, or inductive/verification, or testing/confirmation when it comes to the connection between empirical knowledge and its intelligible ground of unity. Still there is unity in traditional Asian science. For example, in the case of Confucianism,[6] Confucius once put the question to his disciple Tzu Kung: 'You think, I believe, that my aim is to learn many things and retain them in my memory?' Tzu Kung replied, 'Is that not so?' The Master replied, 'No, there is a unity which binds it all together'.[7]

We should be clear that the mode of unity in traditional Chinese science was a kind of mental integration in referring to the Tao (Ultimate Reality) through the process of ethical praxis. Ethical praxis was not seen as a kind of technical application of theories to the control of concrete natural or social phenomena. It was understood rather as an active involvement in the process of realizing what is properly human in the life of the individual and so-

□ 5. Joseph Needham suggests 'mathematics was essential, up to a certain point, for the planning and control of the hydraulic engineering works, but those professing it were likely to remain inferior officials' (1954: v. II, 30). The latter part of this statement by Needham explains, from a social political perspective, the lack of attention to mathematical discourse in Confucianism. Another reason might be that mathematics was considered as a technique of calculation and an instrument for organizing empirical data, not as a discourse on the objective structure of reality and discourse.

□ 6. Concerning Confucianism, we agree with Schwartz's conjecture that, 'To Confucius knowledge does begin with the empirical cumulative knowledge of masses of particulars, then includes the ability to link these particulars first to one's own experiences and ultimately with the underlying unity that binds this thought together' (1935: 89).

□ 7. *Confucius Analects in the Chinese Classics* (James Leggs, trans.).

ciety. Science and technology are not to be ignored but must be reconsidered in the context of this ethical praxis.

Based on such comparisons, typologies can be developed to further distinguish the East-West differences. For example, Shen (1994) points out that Western modern science concentrates on the type of reason that is, in fact, a scientific rationality, whereas the typology of reason in Chinese science is rather a kind of hermeneutic reasonableness. However, as our interest is neither comparative epistemology nor history of science, we will not continue to dwell on the other aspects of East-West differences.

Our brief discussion on East-West differences has two implications for the search for Asian communication theories. First, there are no theories, as defined in social scientific research today, to be readily found in the Asian cultural tradition. At best we have 'embryos' of theories. These embryos of theories together with experiences and empirical data accumulated in recent years of communication development in the Asian world might serve for further generalization leading to theories in the Western sense. However embryos as such are mostly holistic visions of human communication and related speculations inside Asian traditions that need to be cultivated by communication researchers.

Dissanayake's book (1988) represented the first collective effort to introduce Asian philosophy into the building of Asian communication theories. To this end, Dissanayake outlined three dimensions of research needed for the task of Asian theory construction: research on classical treatises on philosophy, rhetoric, linguistics; research on rituals, folk dramas dealings with symbolic communication, and research on characteristics of communication behavior. Moreover, bold attempts were made in linking the Chinese *I Ching (Book of Changes)* with symbolic communication and Indian verbal communication with phenomenology.

Such comparisons and associations have the benefit of enriching and broadening our perspectives. However these are only the first steps; the remaining journey to theory construction is still long. *I Ching*, for example, permits a pragmatic study of communication in understanding. It does not, however, embody a system of information, nor is it a system of knowledge or concepts and theories like science, as Cheng (1988) warned. When thoughts and ideas are developed from significantly different backgrounds, comparisons, or directly borrowing or transplanting, concerns are triggered over the problems of commensurability.

Due to the danger of distorting and decontextualizing the orig-

inal meaning of what is borrowed, and given fundamental differences in the ways of thinking, any attempt to transplant or immediately apply Asian philosophies and cultural traditions in formulating scientific theories must be met cautiously.

Secondly, although cultural differences can effectively explain why a certain practice or treatise has, or has not, been developed, outlining these differences leads us to another risk: that of treating 'East' and 'West' as single, homogeneous entities. As Nakamura (1989: 23) pointed out, '...we have to admit that there is no single feature that is 'Eastern'; there are various ways of thinking in the East, and they exist in certain, but not all, ethnic groups'. All too frequently terms and concepts have been used with little awareness of the complexities in meaning that may be involved.

In his book on *Orientalism*, Said (1979) noted that the term 'Orient' was a European invention, created to help define 'Occident', Likewise, the word 'East' can be seen as an invention helping to define 'West', with each covering a geographical area that is so broad, diverse and ill-defined that differences within are perhaps as large as, if not larger than, those differences with the world outside.

We have, in the previous paragraphs, noted some essential differences between the East and the West. There are, however, exceptions to these differences. For example, Chinese and Japanese cultures may not have developed logical and rational thinking; but the works in Indian Logic, such as Hetuvidya-sastra, Nyaya-pravesa, or in Buddhist philosophical works such as the Abhidharma literature are rigorously logical. Likewise, conceptual analysis of logical and semantic character could also be found in the works of Hui Shih (370–318 BC), Kung-sun Long (325–250 BC), Mo Tzu (480–420 BC), and Hsun Tzu (298–238 BC). In the Western world, few would take religious beliefs as knowledge today, however in the Middle Ages, belief in Christianity was developed logically into philosophical systems and regarded as knowledge. The two examples show that cultural differences could be a function of time and social circumstances. These difficulties to label a certain trait as specifically Eastern or Western lead us to object to the notion of treating the East and West as two distinct constructs (Rosan, 1962; Nakumura, 1989: 13).

For the same reason, pinpointing 'Asianess' in theoretical discussion could be a laborious, if not impossible, task; let alone specifying which brand of 'Asianess' is of concern. Some have ar-

gued, for example, that the theory of the information society is Japanese[8] because the concept was first developed in Japan, by Japanese scholars based on developments observed in Japan and a number of other industrialized nations (Masuda, 1981; Ito, 1984). As Duff (2000) pointed out, the research findings from Japan (e.g., the Information Flow Census) has scientifically confirmed that individuals in modern societies are subjected to an increasing volume of information. This important contribution to communication research, although recognized as one made by Japanese, does not necessarily give any clues that can help us pinpoint a Japanese, or Asian perspective, or traces that reveal its roots in Japanese philosophies and cultural traditions. In fact, since the theory is built on informetrics, it is easier for us to find traces of Western, rather than Eastern, cultures. This contradiction calls into question the assumption that we can always find something culture-specific in a theory, or that we can expect a theory to be solely grounded in Asian thoughts and traditions.

The body of studies completed by Chinese researchers[9] on media imperialism may be another case in point. From *Media Imperialism Reconsidered* (C.C. Li, 1980) to *TV without Borders: Asia Speaks Out* (Goonasekera & Paul S. N. Lee, 1998), there is a consistent argument against the imperialism theme, an argument, in many ways, in agreement with the Chinese ideas of cultural syncretism.

Historically China had entered into vehement conflicts or peaceful interactions with its neighbours. However religious wars or oppression for purely ideological reasons were scarcely heard of until quite recently, e.g., the Cultural Revolution. It is perhaps only in Chinese societies that worshipping gods and saints of different religions in one temple is regarded as a common practice. According to Nakumura, the Chinese version of syncretism is different from that of the Indian (1989: 265). While the value and significance of various religions and philosophies is recognized in both the Chinese and Indian culture, the latter also recognize their uniqueness and believe that the absolute truth rises above, and

□ 8. The concept of 'information society' first appeared in Japan in the late 1960s. Although related studies in the West dated to roughly the same time, e.g., Fritz Machlup's study on knowledge economy, it is argued that none of the major studies accomplished in the Western world used the same terminology to describe new developments observed in the industrialized countries.

□ 9. See also: Wang (1993) on the future of broadcast television in Asia, and Chan (forthcoming), on media openness.

encompasses, all treaties. The Chinese, in accepting the alien and the foreign, tended to interpret their meaning from the Chinese perspective, gradually transforming the new introduction into something of their own, different schools of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism being one prominent example. But despite their differences in approaching syncretism, neither the Indian nor the Chinese tradition exhibited serious concerns over hegemony and ideological assimilation from foreign powers—concerns which led to the birth of cultural imperialism theory. One can therefore argue that the lack of vigilance or hostility toward imported cultural products was a culture-based viewpoint that was reflected in cross-national surveys in Asia and theoretical debate.

The problem here, is whether Asian researchers can claim exclusivity to such findings. Ethnographic studies of audience behaviour outside of Asia, for example, also provided important evidence pointing to the inadequacies of the imperialism theory (Morley, 1986; Ang, 1996). Although there has been little discussion on the possible links between the cultural roots of European viewers' attitude towards foreign cultural products and the notion of active audiences, the syncretic concept certainly is not unique to Chinese culture.

Despite the above-mentioned barriers, the pressure on searching for Asian theories, approaches and perspectives has been mounting for a number of reasons.

■ The International Academic Community: Orientalism, Multiculturalism, Decolonization and Globalization

In the early 1900s colonialism strengthened the West's Eurocentric view of the world. Asia, at the time, was seen as a land of rich resources. As described by Said, 'The Orient is the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other' (1979: 1). From 1800 to 1950, 60,000 books were published on the Near Orient. This eagerness to learn about the Orient, however, was nevertheless closely tied with commercial colonial interest, as material wealth from the East was converted into economic power in the West. With this perspective, many ignorant views of the East were expressed, such as the following from Buchan:

> Have you ever reflected on the case of China? There you have millions of quick brains stifled in trumpery crafts. They have no direction, no driving power, so the sum of their efforts is futile, and the world laughs at China.
> (Sadison, 1967: 158)

This Eurocentric, monoculturalist point of view prevailed from the 1800s and continued to dominate not only the European academic community but also its American counterpart in the early 1900s (Goldberg, 1994: 3–4). Things did not begin to change until colonization came to an end after World War II. Political reality in nations with multi-ethnic populations led to the birth of multiculturalism, and decolonization soon became an area of study following political independence in the former colonies.

These changes painted a picture of coexistence of peoples, although from a Marxist culturalist point of view, neither multiculturalism nor nativism had managed to completely stay clear of colonialism (Chen, 1998: 21). When standardized commodities, transnational financial operations, uniform scientific discourse, and interdependent communication systems presented us with globalization in the last stretch of the twentieth century, the search for new state-to-state relationships began. Braman (1996), after a review of globalization theories, proposed the idea of 'interpenetrated globalization', an idea that was captured in these two phrases: 'The global never exists except in the local', and that 'There is no local that is not affected by the global'.

Braman's notion of interpenetrated globalization marked a significant departure from the previous perception of the 'local' that was often seen as the opposite of the 'global'. While it is debatable whether the recognition that the world can no longer operate from one centre has destroyed the Eurocentric (or Western-centric) view, greater efforts are being made to bring actors to the world stage from their previously peripheral regions. In explaining why it chose Asia as one of its focuses, a European communication conference document[10] stated:

> We have long been aware that an exclusive focus on one continent and one historical experience risks distorting our understanding of the general issues involved, we

□ 10. Call for papers, Democratization and the Mass Media Comparative Perspectives from Europe and Asia, European Institute for Communication and Culture (Euricom) and Centre for Communication and Information Studies (CCS) of the University of Westminster.

> have been concerned to examine whether the issues with which we are familiar are narrowly European or whether they have a more general resonance.

This growing desire to step out of one's geographical confines has led to not just greater attention to, but also a new attitude towards, Asia. Instead of being looked at as a land of natural resources in the Orientalist fashion or as an isolated part of the periphery from a post-colonialist perspective, Asia, with a formidable cultural heritage and rising importance in international political and economic affairs, has increasingly been treated as a source of ideas and inspiration which may help to open up new ways of thinking (Birch, 1988; in Chen, 1998), as well as a counterpart in carrying out academic dialogues.

This new way of looking at Asia has found evidence in a changing attitude among mainstream publishers towards Asian works. Chen (1998: xvii), for example, has taken note that the publishing house which readily accepted a manuscript today refused to publish it three years prior, in both cases due to the use of one word in the title: Asia.

It is against this background that Asian communication researchers have found themselves, without much prior notice, important members of the global academic community. On the one hand, they have to take action when the stage is set and the spotlight is turned on; on the other hand, they urgently need to get reacquainted with themselves before they can redefine the role they play. Globalization has forced people to come face to face with not only 'others', but also with themselves: who they are, what 'place' they have in this community, and where they are heading. The need to answer these questions is increasingly pressing, but the answers are complex and the search for them has proved a formidable challenge.

First, there is the concern that Asian communication researchers may not necessarily have a deep enough understanding of the philosophies and traditions in their culture to know 'who they are', let alone how these philosophies may relate to the studies of communication. Courses on Asian philosophies or cultures seldom appear on university curricula, other than in philosophy or anthropology departments. As a result, students of communication are left with three options: (a) to diligently study, on their own, cultural thoughts and treatises, make the connection with communication studies and use them as 'embryos' in formulating new

concepts and theories; (b) make do with whatever is offered by the school system and outside of the classroom, and make use of it when feasible; and (c) just follow the literature accumulated in the Western world.

The third option, the one requiring least effort from the researchers, has, unfortunately, been the one adopted by the majority of Asian researchers in the past. To change the situation, action is called for in at least two areas:

1. A thorough review of curricula in communication programmes in Asia—or in all non-Western nations for that matter. Acceptance of Western models and theories becomes uncritical, as Menon warned, when one loses sight of what was inherent in one's own heritage.
2. In accordance with the above, a greater supply is needed of publications looking into Asian philosophies and treatises which are most relevant to the study of communication, so teaching communications in Asia will not be entirely dependent on imported materials.

Second, the search for 'Asian communication theories'—something that can help one find his or her 'place' in the community of scholars—has yet come to any conclusion, although there have been some delicate changes in approaching the issue. In the post-colonialist era, the urgency to come out of the periphery and be one's own master has led Dissanayake (1988) to repeatedly call for a 'shake off' of Western influences. But in light of greater recognition of things Asian, the reaction to Western influence has become less negative. As Halbfass pointed out about the Indian community of scholars,

> the attempt to eliminate all Western constructs and preconceptions and to liberate the Indian tradition from all non-Indian categories of understanding would not only be impractical, but also presumptuous in its own way.
> (Halbfass, 1991: 9)

Instead of attempting to construct theories that are distinctly Asian, today there is a call for greater effort in theorizing within the existing Western framework. Chan (2000), in an essay discussing the plight of 'local' communication studies, points out that the 'U.S. is the center of communications research, whether we like it or not'. However, he continues by recognizing that this does not mean that the rest of the community should simply follow suit.

On the contrary, Chan said, it is the responsibility of Asian researchers to demonstrate the relevance of their communications issues to the international academic community, and theorizing remains to be the most effective method to achieving that goal. It is only through theorizing, indicates Chan, that Asian researchers can overcome the value constraints imposed by their geographic and cultural 'locations', establish meaningful discourse with others, and henceforth find their 'place' in the international community of communications research. What Chan did not seem to mind was whether the theories thus formulated bear a distinct Asian mark.

When we are preoccupied with similarities and differences between cultures and how these differences manifest in theories, it is easy for us to overlook the fact that cultures are open and dynamic systems. While maintaining a certain degree of continuity, cultures respond to, and often change as a result of, influences from the outside. These responses and changes in turn pave the way for new traditions and new ways of thinking. Succinctly put, the entire human history can be seen as a process of cultural synthesis, with varying pace, scale and scope. Today, when we can no longer even be certain if Hollywood is American, trying to determine if the information society theory is authentically Japanese or to continue the search for communication theories that are uniquely 'Asian' may have lost its importance.

■ Conclusion

Many of the communication studies on Asia or Asians remain descriptive today. Those testing existing theories often reported the findings without a thorough discussion of their theoretical implications. However there have been signs for change. Since the early 1990s, a growing number of books have been published by transnational companies on Asia,[11] or by Asian researchers; more than one major publishing house released a series of titles on Asia, covering a broad range of interests including cultural studies, economics, political sciences, and social issues, each representing an important effort in establishing theoretical discourse in the field.

□ 11. Examples include the book on decolonization by Chen (1998), communication ideology and democracy by Chua (1995), cross-border television by Goonasekera and Lee (1998), and local cultural industries by Wang, Servaes and Goonasekera (2000).

To Asian researchers, it is natural, and perhaps even wise and necessary, to place their primary attention on things Asian. After all, the majority of existing communication theories (or social scientific theories for that matter) began with the observation of behavioural patterns and social phenomena in one's own socio-cultural milieu. For an Asian researcher to fail to recognize, and to take advantage of, their rich cultural heritage is to throw away the most valuable of assets in making a significant contribution to the field of communication study. However, at a time when one's counterparts in the Western world are making an effort to broaden their perspectives, limiting oneself to just Asia is not only counterproductive, but also draws further away from the goal of universalized theory formulation. If theory-building is to be successful, all human histories, experiences, philosophies, cultural traditions and values relevant to theory formulation should be given due consideration in the process.

The 'mission' of Asian communication researchers, therefore, is not much different from that of researchers from any other regions of the world: to enrich the existing body of knowledge through testing and formulating theories. While culture may be one of the richest sources of ideas and perspectives, whether the final product manages to retain any specific cultural mark is perhaps not nearly as important as whether it can stand the vigorous test of social sciences. On the other hand, it is entirely possible that in striving for significant contribution to the field, Asian researchers not only redefine Asian culture, but also redefine social sciences. What is impossible to tell, is how long this process may take.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the birth of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism was often cited as evidence for cultural syncretism. Three things are worthy of notice in this example. First, it took approximately 1000 years for Chinese Mahayana Buddhism to be developed since the introduction of Buddhism to China. Secondly, Chinese Mahayana Buddhism is in many ways different from Indian Buddhism. And thirdly, it was not developed because a Chinese version of Buddhism was purposely sought; it was developed when Chinese monks attempted to enrich Buddhism teachings by drawing upon Chinese philosophies. A poem by Hsin Ch'I-chi (1140–1207),[12] a well-known poet in the Sung Dynasty, seems to have best captured the intricate nature of the situation:

□ 12. 辛棄疾，詞牌名：青玉案。眾裡尋他千百度，驀然回首，那人卻在燈火闌珊處。

I searched through the crowds, hundreds and thousands of times.
Suddenly, when I turned, there she was, in the shadow of dim light.

Perhaps, what was not found from our painstaking search, will emerge once we stop looking. And when this happens, it may be clearer to us that the solution to our problem does not really lie in what we intended to look for.

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