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In Search Of An Asian Perspective Of Communication Theory

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IN SEARCH OF AN ASIAN PERSPECTIVE OF
COMMUNICATION THEORY

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A quarter century ago, when communication studies began to attract a broad basis of scholarly attention in the United States, students from Asia went to American universities and eagerly absorbed what they had learned from their professors in the field of communication theory and research. The fact that we are gathered here today in the capital of an Asian country, raising critical questions and making a serious effort in search of an Asian perspective of communication theory, shows how far the studies of communication in Asia have progressed. Asian scholars have not only mastered the theories and methodology for communication research as taught in the West, particularly the United States, but also they have come to notice the weaknesses of the Western approach. Furthermore, they now feel confident enough to begin searching for an Asian perspective of communication theory of their own.

Stated in its simplest terms, a theory is a set of propositions purported to explain some aspect of human behavior, in this case our communication behavior.

We assume that the Western perspective is either inappropriate or inadequate for explaining Asian communication behavior. The Asian perspectives we are searching for presumably will correct this shortcoming.

Western Perspective

What is wrong with the Western perspective? Much has been said by scholars both in the United States and elsewhere. Here I shall briefly mention a few points.

First, the Western perspective of communication is an individually oriented perspective. This point is best represented by the well known observation made by Harold Lasswell, that is, communication research studies "who says what to whom through what channel with what effect." Much of the research effort in the West has been to specify or clarify the five Ws.

Success of such research effort has not been extraordinary. As Bernard Berelson said some years ago, we know that some kind of communicator, using some kind of message, transmitted by some kind of channel, reaching some kind of audience, achieves some kind of effect. This may be an understatement, but it is probably not too far from reality.

Research following the Western perspective of communication theory is not without its achievements. Over the years, there is an accumulative body of knowledge regarding the two step flow of communication, the scientific rhetoric of persuasion, the diffusion of innovation, the agenda

setting function of mass media, and now the user's gratification theory, to mention just a few. While there has been an enormous amount of statistical data, the field of communication research has not produced much fresh knowledge in recent years, and one can argue whether there has been a major theoretical breakthrough.

Theory, research and methodology are inseparable. The state of theoretical contributions in the Western perspective of communication studies can be understood in two related aspects.

First, because we do not want to reinvent the wheel, but want to make sure that our empirical research is cumulative, researchers in the Western perspective tend to follow up on what has been done by the more creative pioneers. When something new comes up, such as the agenda setting function, other researchers tend to follow up, to refine or to build upon the original insight. This is highly laudable. But unfortunately, it sometimes leads to a fallish tendency, abetted further by the "publish or perish" tradition in the American academic world for quick publication.

Second, our reliance on quantitative methodology and statistical analysis sets a limit on what one can do. We tend to tackle only those research problems that can be handled by quantitative measures and statistical tests. We often let methodology determine our choice of research topics. This tendency is sometimes referred to as "the tail wagging the dog."

The result is that communication research in the Western perspective tends to become repetitive and lacks a clear focus, tackling problems that may seem to be trivial or irrelevant although methodologically rigorous.

I want to mention another unintended and perhaps unforeseen consequence of relying on quantitative methods, especially the use of random sampling in survey research. Communication is a process. But in a random sample, the likelihood of interactions among the respondents included in the sample is almost nil. Thus we have done many studies of attitudes and opinions as well as their changes, but few studies on communication as a social process.

Although one of the founding fathers, Harold Lasswell, discussed communication in the context of its structure and functions, the Western perspective of communication research and theory by and large ignore the social structure and pay relatively scanty attention to the societal functions of communication.

In the Western perspective of communication theory, culture is rarely explicitly taken into consideration in the research conceptualization, because culture is usually not regarded as a variable.

What Asian Perspective (s)?

Given these limitations of the Western perspective, what should an Asian perspective strive to be? Several years ago, we at the East West Center did some soul searching. We came to the realization that Western theories and research in communication have not been highly productive

because the field of communication studies we have defined is too broad. Communication covers almost the entire spectrum of human behavior. If our Asian perspective is going to be productive, our focus has to be selective.

Here I shall mention three examples as potential candidates for research and theoretical development for Asian communication scholars. One is development communication. All countries in Asia want development. They want to improve the standards of living of their peoples. Communication in and by itself can not bring about development. Many other factors are involved. But communication, if used appropriately, can support the development efforts. We are referring to two way communication between the urban centers and the rural audience, partly to inform, partly to educate, partly to arouse motivation, and partly to mobilize and organize the development efforts of the rural people. Understanding the social structure in the villages and the cultural values and beliefs of the rural audience is essential to a successful development communication program. Asian scholars are in the best position to study the problems of development communication in their own countries.

A second example concerns the impact of communication from the West on Asian audience, a concern sometimes discussed under the concept of "cultural imperialism". This is also a major concern of most Asian countries. There has been much debate but hardly any empirical research. Asian scholars can bring their native insight and their own national perspective into the conceptualization of the research problems. A related issue is the role of mass communication, including its Western content, on cultural change in the Asian context in general.

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My third suggestion is the study of communication between Westerners and Easterners, that is, the problem of intercultural communication involving Asians and Westerners. Most of the studies of intercultural communication have been done by Western researchers. Although much insight has been gained, one wonders whether the conception of intercultural communication problems might have been biased by the Western perception. In any way, intercultural communication involves two sides, and I think it would be most useful if Asian communication researchers can bring their insight and cultural perception into the research problems.

These are merely suggestions. There are undoubtedly other research concerns that would be equally deserving of our attention. Whatever the focus of our research and theoretical orientations, when we propose our Asian perspective, we should strive to rise above what we consider to be inappropriate or inadequate in the Western perspective.

Potential Pitfalls

In our search for an Asian perspective, we need to watch out for two potential pitfalls. One is that our theoretical perspective must not be too vague or abstract. There is a tendency among some Western and Eastern scholars to fall into the trap of reification, using words and concepts with no clear and concrete meanings. When we use a concept in our theoretical perspective, we have to constantly ask ourselves what is the meaning of this concept, and how we can observe it.

The other pitfall is that our theoretical perspective must not be too esoteric or philosophical. This is the dilemma between

what Robert Redfield calls the great traditions, that is, the philosophical wisdom of the greater masters, and the little traditions, that is, the values, beliefs, and behavioral patterns of the common people. There is a common tendency to assume that the teachings of Confucius, for example, represent the culture of Chinese people. To an extent, yes, but there are differences. In any way, there is no one-to-one correspondence between the Confucian philosophy and the cultural traditions of the Chinese. The pitfall is that we may devote our effort to a highly philosophical discourse about Confucianism, or Buddhism, or Taoism, but forgot to ask two questions. (1)

Whether and to what extent do the common people understand these philosophical points about which the scholars themselves do not seem to agree? (2) To what extent and in what way are the common people influenced by these philosophical points which they may or may not understand? Understanding the Confucian philosophy, for example, will give us insight into the Chinese culture, but does not substitute for an independent study of the Chinese culture.

Criterion of Observability

The propositions we incorporate into an Asian perspective of communication theory must be testable. The term "testable" sounds Western and may imply the use of quantitative measures and statistical testing. This is not what I mean. All I suggest is that behavioral implications of the theoretical propositions must be observable in real life, so that we can tell whether the propositions are true or not. Otherwise, our theory will become philosophy, or polemics, or dogmatic ideology.

History offers insight into human behavior, and should be taken into consideration in our development of an Asian perspective. But the propositions in our theory should apply to communication behavior now.

As I have implied earlier, we should not stop at merely analyzing the teachings of the great philosophers, but must take another step forward to consider the influence of the great philosophies on current behavior, in this case, communication behavior. The former is a form of highly respected scholarship, but it is not empirical research. In traditional China, for example, we had an exalted form of confucian scholarship, but no research. When we look for an Asian perspective of communication theory, we should aim at potential research, not just scholarship in this limited sense.

Research Methods

Speaking of research, we have to consider data collection and data analysis. I am not suggesting only quantitative data collection and statistical data analysis. I have found them to be highly useful, and have used them extensively in my own work. But I recognize their limitations. If we consider quantitative methods to be either inappropriate or inadequate for a particular research problem in an Asian perspective, we must come up with what we consider to be appropriate and adequate. We must not remain at the stage of "theorizing" without testing or observing the implications of our theory in real life.

My impression is that some of us have been eloquent in criticizing the Western quantitative methods, but have not been productive in proposing alternative research methods or in demonstrating the usefulness of the alternatives. If we only criticize, but do not offer constructive alternatives, we would not be doing full justice to our field. An Asian perspective of communication theory will have only limited credibility unless it is accepted and used by other scholars in our field. Unless our perspective is backed by research, conducted by clearly understandable methods, its acceptance beyond a small circle would be difficult.

Concluding Remarks

In our search for an Asian perspective, we should be explicit as to what is it that we want to explain by our particular communication theory. We should state clearly what is inappropriate or deficient in the Western perspective. Furthermore, we should make it clear as to how our Asian perspective can correct this deficiency and explain where the Western perspective fails.

This approach does not imply the total rejection of the Western perspective. Rather it will take whatever is useful in the Western perspective, and add a creative component of our own. Needless to say, we shall approach our task of theoretical construction with an open mind. If our initial Asian perspective is found inadequate, we should not hesitate to modify or even reject it, and start all over again.

Our Asian perspective must be relevant and must address communication issues important to Asian countries. Hopefully we will not repeat the mistakes of our Western colleagues of trying to cover a spectrum of human communication behavior that is too broad, but will be selective in our research efforts. Our Asian perspective must be clearly phrased in concrete terms, not obscure terms. Our theoretical orientations should take into account the social structural contexts and the relevant cultural values and religious beliefs. The behavioral implications of our Asian perspective must be observable, and our theory must be backed up by research using methods that we consider to be appropriate and adequate, and also clearly understandable to our Western colleagues.

Our task in search of an Asian perspective of communication theory will not be easy, I am eagerly looking forward to the specific discussions of the Chinese, Thai, Indian, Islamic, Buddhist, and Catholic perspectives of communication.