Asian Journal of Communication
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rajc20

Beyond ethnocentrism in communication theory: towards a culture-centric approach
Eddie C.Y. Kuo a & Han Ei Chew b
a Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
b Department of Telecommunications, Information Studies and Media, College of Communication Arts and Sciences, Michigan State University, USA

To cite this article: Eddie C.Y. Kuo & Han Ei Chew (2009): Beyond ethnocentrism in communication theory: towards a culture-centric approach, Asian Journal of Communication, 19:4, 422-437
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01292980903293361

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Beyond ethnocentrism in communication theory: towards a culture-centric approach

Eddie C.Y. Kuoa* and Han Ei Chewb

aWee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore; bDepartment of Telecommunications, Information Studies and Media, College of Communication Arts and Sciences, Michigan State University, USA

(Received 15 March 2009; final version received 21 August 2009)

Communications scholars have been challenging the universality of Eurocentric scholarship, which they argue to be a form of intellectual imperialism imposing its provincial ideals and masquerading these as universal. As an answer to Eurocentricity, Asiacentricity proposes to place Asian values and ideals at the center of inquiry to see Asian phenomena from the standpoint of Asians as subjects and agents. This article critiques this Asiacentric agenda and critically examines the implications and premises of this paradigm. It suggests instead that a culture-centric paradigm be adopted to avoid an Asian version of the Eurocentricity crisis. The article advocates the adoption of a more harmonious perspective in light of the convergence of global cultures and calls for approaching research deficiencies as a global community of communication scholars rather than one divided along ethnic fault lines. The culture-centric approach is proposed as a meta-theory that is non-polarizing by nature through its placement of culture at the center of inquiry. To avoid the creation of polarity, culture-centricity seeks to encompass the contradictions and ambivalences as well as other diverse cultural representations. This article argues for a non-polarizing approach so that communication scholars can theorize without ideological bias or artificial boundaries created by arbitrary definitions of what constitutes East or West.

Keywords: ethnocentrism; culture-centric approach; Asian communication; communication theory

Introduction

The renewal of attention on ethnocentrism in communication theory in recent years suggests an impending tipping point in the research direction of the field. That Communication Monographs, a mainstream communication journal, has published an Issue Forum on ‘Cultural bias in communication theory’ (2007) is itself a timely testimony to the increasing concern among communication researchers on the inadequacy of the Eurocentric (read Euro-American-centric) paradigm which still dominates the field. The scholars involved in the issue forum were unanimous in their assessment that existing theories are insufficient to explain global communication phenomena, but each had different suggestions as to how the deficiency could be addressed. Through a re-examination of some of the more notable developments

*Corresponding author. Email: cykuo@ntu.edu.sg

ISSN 0129-2986 Print/ISSN 1742-0911 Online
© 2009 AMIC/SCI-NTU
DOI: 10.1080/01292980903293361
http://www.informaworld.com
of the ethnocentrism debate over the past 20 years, this article seeks to propose a culture-centric approach that transcends the clash of cultural imperatives and harmonizes the work of communication theory-building for the field. In the spirit of scientific research, this article seeks to ‘find harmony from discord’ as envisioned by Albert Einstein (Calaprice, 2005, p. 296):

Out of clutter, find simplicity. From discord, find harmony.
In the middle of difficulty, lies opportunity.

Culture in communication theory
Taking a broad perspective, communication scholars have dealt with the concept of culture in three waves over the past decades. Prior to the 1980s, the study of communication by communication scholars (in contrast to that by anthropologists and at least some psychologists) had largely been a Western enterprise. If there were non-Western communication researchers in the field, they were trained in the Western traditions and conducted research in accordance to their training in the Western paradigm. Not surprisingly, the question of culture in communication theory was not a huge concern or was simply ignored, since the theories mostly explained the Western communication phenomena from which they were derived. This was exemplified by the two most important communication theories of the time, the modernization theory by Lerner (1958), and diffusion of innovation model by Rogers (1962). Local conditions were seen to be obstacles to development and were to be changed or simply eradicated. Any cultural differences found were generally treated as ‘errors’ or individual differences. Much of the current critique of Eurocentric theories, previously labeled as cultural imperialism, is directed at this ignorance (or denial) of cultural differences.

Yet, the interest in the role of communication in development brought about a consciousness of the issues of cultures in contact. It is thus significant that a new Intercultural and Development Communication Division was set up in the International Communication Association (ICA) in 1970, signifying the efforts to integrate intercultural communication into the communication research. Years later, the National Communication Association (NCA), continuing the same trend, launched its International and Intercultural Annual in 1977.

The 1980s saw a flourishing of intercultural communication studies that coincided with rapid globalization. The movement of people, goods and ideas across national borders at a grand scale, accompanied by cross-border communication of media products, also introduced tension in scholarly research. Non-Western scholars who were trained in the Western tradition brought theories back to their native countries and observed a greater amount of ‘errors’ in the application of the Eurocentric theories to non-Western phenomena. There was growing evidence that cultural differences accounted for more than just random errors in theory-building. Much of the foundations of intercultural research were also laid in the 1980s with notable scholars like Hofstede (1983) and Markus and Kitayama (1991) developing concept and theories that still form the foci of many research programs today. This second phase of cultural research saw an exponential growth in the number of intercultural studies.
The typical research design of most cross-cultural studies was to identify groups demarcated by geographical or political boundaries and compare them on the cultural traits that are being investigated. These studies make the fundamental assumption of equating countries or territories to culture and presume that culture is contained in the groups that have been identified. The traditional intercultural research paradigm also assumes that all members of the pre-defined categories embody similar cultural traits characteristic of the group that they belong to. The within-group cultural differences tend to be treated as statistical errors.

The latest development in the study of culture appears to be moving towards a perspective that is dynamic and multi-dimensional. Nisbett (2003) noted that even though East Asians and European North Americans differ substantially on the average, individuals in a given society alternate between independent and interdependent poles on a daily basis and the demarcation between the people belonging to societies labeled independent and interdependent may not be as clear cut as it seems. This dynamic view of culture has been championed by Hong, Morris, Chiu, and Benet-Martinez (2000), and their research suggested that culture could be state-like as opposed to the trait-like view suggested by earlier intercultural studies.

Also notable is the ongoing controversy in the validity of the self-construals measures developed in the 1980s (see Markus & Kunda, 1986; Triandis, 1995). Following a meta-analysis of published cross-cultural self-construal research, Levine et al. (2003) contended that the measures lacked convergent validity and concluded that the continued use of these constructs in their present forms could have serious implications on the validity of cross-cultural research. In their meta-analysis, Levine et al. (2003, p. 247) found that the measures were ‘radically multidimensional and highly unstable’ within and across cultures. Nevertheless, these self-construals measures still have their defenders. Gudykunst and Lee (2003) as well as Kim and Raja (2003) have all advocated the validity of the measures in future research despite the criticism by Levine and his colleagues. The debate is still ongoing but is emblematic of the challenges in studying culture.

This broad sweep of the developments in intercultural research was not meant to be a review of the large body of culture research but to make the connection between the changes in the approach to culture research and the changes in the populations that they are attempting to describe. Each of the three perspectives reflected different assumptions about the populations that they describe. The monoculture view assumed a relatively homogenous population which was basically what the researchers were dealing with prior to the 1980s. The cross-cultural view recognized that cultural differences were between populations and corresponded with the beginnings of international cultural exchanges brought about by globalization. The dynamic cultural view proposes that cultural traits are active depending on situations and it corresponds to the growing bicultural and multicultural populations in the world. The main implication here is that cultural theories explain and predict best when they reflect the populations that they study. The shifts in the perspectives for intercultural studies may have occurred because the populations that they used to describe have changed over the decade, rendering an increase in ‘error’ when old theories try to describe new populations in a new environment.

The culture-centric paradigm presented in this article argues that despite the difficulty in developing theories that would explain cultural phenomena in an ever-changing world, efforts in understanding the impact of culture on communication
should still continue. The key argument is to proceed with a perspective that would
reflect the dynamism in cultural communication that we are seeing in today’s world.
But before the culture-centric paradigm is presented, this article will make the case
for moving away from the ethnocentric approaches that have been suggested in place
of the dominant Eurocentric paradigm.

Pitfalls of the ethnocentric paradigm
In the past decades since the 1980s, scholars on Asian communication (both Asians
and non-Asians) have entered the global discourse and have explored non-Western
alternatives to the Eurocentric paradigm. Earlier debates articulating an Asian
concern over the dominance of Western paradigm concentrated in two communica-
tion institutions. One was the East-West Center located in Honolulu, Hawaii, which
is a US State Department-funded organization with the mission of enhancing the
cultural exchange between the East and the West. Series of seminars and conferences
on such relevant themes organized by the East-West Communication Institute
(founded by Wilbur Schramm in 1973) took place in the 1970s and 1980s. This
cumulated to the publication of *Communication theory: Eastern and Western
perspectives* (Kincaid, 1987) as one of the early voices arguing for the recognition
of Eastern perspectives. The other organization is Asian Media Information and
Communication Centre (AMIC) located in Singapore, which has been active in
conducing workshops and seminars on issues relating to Asian communication since
the early 1970s. It is thus not surprising that AMIC was among the first to advocate
for a bigger Asian voice in its publication, *Communication theory: The Asian
perspective* (Dissanayake, 1988).

The debates and dialogues between the East and the West continued and gained
momentum in the new century. Such articulations are exemplified by the following,
among others: *Towards an Asian theory of communication?* (special issue of the *Asian
Journal of Communication*; Goonasekera & Kuo, 2000); *Non-Western perspective on
human communication: Implications for theory and practice* (Kim, 2002); *Asian
approaches to human communication* (special issue of *Intercultural Communication
Studies*; Chen & Miike, 2003); *The Dao of the press: A humanocentric theory*
(Gunaratne, 2005); *Asian contributions to communication theories* (special issue of
*China Media Research*; Miike & Chen, 2007); and *Cultural bias in communication

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 that
theorizing is taking place in this millennium. One could optimistically predict that
we are witnessing the beginning of the coming-of-age of Asian communication
research today. However, does the coming-of-age of Asian communication and the
proliferation of Asian communication scholars necessitate an Asian way of studying
communications?

The notion of Asiacentricity was conceived as one of the answers to the
dominant Eurocentrism ideology that seem to permeate every field of study and
every sphere of life. According to Miike:
Asiacentricity is the meta-theoretical notion that insists on placing Asian values and ideals at the center of inquiry in order to see Asian phenomena from the standpoint of Asians as subjects and agents. Asiacentric studies of Asian communication hence demand that Asian communication should be researched from Asian theoretical perspectives (2006, p. 5).

While the proposed paradigm addresses the pressing need to re-examine Western communication theories in light of Asian cultures and traditions, the whole-hearted acceptance of this galvanizing call among Asian communication researchers may have profound implications for the theories that are constructed within this meta-theoretical framework.

The following examination of the assumptions of the Asiacentric paradigm reveals three broad issues that have to be reconsidered before it can be adopted. First, to contend that only Asiacentric theories can shed light on Asian communication phenomena is to presume that Asians and non-Asians are fundamentally different. Stopping short of a protracted discussion of what defines ‘Asia’ or whether there is just one or many ‘Asias,’ this assumption of the non-commensurability of Asia and non-Asia would leave us with theories that have only provincial applications. That is, theories consonant to the Asiacentric paradigm can only be applied to Asian communication phenomena because the irreconcilable differences between Asia and non-Asia are a priori to the establishment of this counter-theory to Eurocentricity. The consequence of the adoption of an exclusive Asiacentric paradigm is that Asian communication researchers would eventually end up in the same hotspot that they have put ‘Eurocentric’ theorists into. At that juncture, Asian communication scholars would be in a similarly compromising position as their non-Asian counterparts are in now when the universality of their theories is challenged. Thus, to avoid repeating the Eurocentric crisis by creating an Asiacentric one, we should begin with a more inclusive paradigm so as to build theories that are more ‘universal’ and less subjected to ethnocentric criticism.

Richard Nisbett (2003) proposed that the world may be in ‘for convergence rather than continued divergence’ but the convergence is not based exclusively on Westernization but also on Easternization and other hybridized forms of social systems and values. He projected that the entry of non-Western scholars into social science research will influence the way that theories of human behavior are formulated. Specifically, from the studies of Kuhnen, Hannover, Roder, Schubert, Shah, and Zakaria (2000), Nisbett concluded that people alternate between functioning in an Eastern or Western way depending on the situation they find themselves in. People are able to adjust the cultural state that they are in based on environmental cues. This new perspective of culture and cultural orientations suggests that it may be more meaningful to consider people not as wholly and exclusively Western or Eastern but as a blend of the two, especially in a world that is rapidly multicultural.

Second, with the increasing integration of the global communication and information system, the very subjects of communication inquiries are changing and this problematizes the construction of Asiacentric theories. In his examination of globalization and cultural hybridity, Straubhaar (personal communication, August 10, 2006) highlights the phenomenon of individuals whose cultures are increasingly hybridized. Transborder migration and multidirectional flows of cultural products
globally contribute to increasing the difficulty of defining what is Asian or non-Asian and what is Western or non-Western. As noted by Wang and Shen (2000), even traditionally Western institutions like Hollywood cannot claim to be exclusively Western nowadays. More individuals are acquiring cultural traits that are multicultural and the endeavor to establish an Asiacentric paradigm by Asian communication scholars to explain Asian communication phenomenon may be anachronistic in today’s world where cultural boundaries are blurring rapidly. Wang and Shen (2000) also noted that ‘the media today are gradually becoming part of an integrated multi-functional communication and information system in an increasingly globalised world and this has pointed to the need for taking a more dynamic, and perhaps broader, view of communication theories.’ Thus, it may be more meaningful to approach the study of communication with a perspective that is ‘de-territorialised’ or ‘hybridised’ by nature.

Third, Miike (2003) proposed that following the Asiacentric paradigm entails that communication specialists call the taken-for-granted Eurocentric methodological empiricism into question and Asiacentrist asking themselves whether or not Eurocentric methodological empiricism fits the Asian worldview and if it is truly beneficial to Asiacentric communication scholarship. He also argued that the social scientific and positivistic Eurocentric scholarship is overly focused on empiricism and the role of Asian communication professionals should be to introduce ‘spirituality’ into the field. The argument made is for an approach that would contrast the Western approach and carve a place for Asiacentric theories. Yet, the epistemological assumption for an Asiacentric paradigm is that everyone and everything becomes meaningful in relation to others (Miike, 2002). If this is so, then the same approach should be equally applicable to the study of the communication patterns of the West, and it does to Asian societies.

In other words, while the approach may be Asian in origin, there is no reason it remains exclusively Asian in application. Similarly, the empiricism and emphasis on external validity that the Eurocentric paradigm is purported to emphasize on should also have a place in the study of Asian communication. This is by no means an argument for the validity of the Eurocentric paradigm but to reiterate the problematic of the establishment of an exclusively Asiacentric paradigm; this time, in terms of the methods and how it can degenerate into a tautological debate on the superiority of methods primarily used by either paradigms. The fact is that if there is truly an over-emphasis on empiricism and external validity as well as a paucity of spirituality in communication research, the challenge should be taken up by all communication researchers and not just Asian ones.

The assumption of a diametrically opposite stand from Eurocentricity is not without its advantages. Taking up a less absolute stand may have made for a moderated (meta) theory that would gain less attention from the community than if the bold expert remains resolute and firm (Levitt & Dubner, 2005). However, Bhabha (1994) gave the following example as a representation of what he deemed as the larceny and distortion of European meta-theorizing:

Is the cause of radical art or critique best served by a fulminating professor of film who announces, at a flashpoint in the argument, “We are not artists, we are political activists?” By obscuring the power of his own practice in the rhetoric of militancy, he fails to draw attention to the specific value of a politics of cultural production; because it makes the surfaces of cinematic signification the grounds of political intervention, it gives depth to
the language of social criticism and extends the domain of ‘politics’ in a direction that will not be entirely dominated by the forces of economic or social control. Forms of popular rebellion and mobilization are often most subversive and transgressive when they are created through oppositional cultural practices (Bhabha, 1994, p. 18).

Another two relevant questions asked by Bhabha were whether the interests of ‘Western’ theory were necessarily collusive with the hegemonic role of the West as a power bloc, and whether the language of theory was merely another power-play of the culturally privileged Western elite. To that extent, pushing for an Asiacentric agenda is also instrumental to an attempt at de-colonization (and hence de-Westernization) at a time when the West-dominated academic colonialism still casts its shadow in Asian communication research. Yet, as we are moving beyond the stage of de-colonization, there is also a need to go beyond the Asiacentric approach.

This article does not presume to have all the answers to Bhabha’s questions but what the preceding paragraphs have pointed out is that the establishment of the dialectical poles could very well degenerate into an esoteric shouting-match of the superiority of one over the other, leaving the more important task of theory construction unfulfilled. It is with these possible complications introduced by the polemic approaches in mind that a more inclusive paradigm is proposed. The following sections argue for a ‘culture-centric’ approach that would focus research efforts on constructing theories.

Towards a culture-centric approach

The culture-centric approach proposes to be a meta-theory that is non-polarizing by nature through the placement of culture at the center of the inquiry. This proposed approach is by no means an isolated call. Other scholars have also argued for a movement away from the East–West Polarity (see Asante, 1998; Chen, 2007; Kim, 2007; Kuo, 2007a). In avoiding the creation of polarity, the proposed culture-centricity seeks to encompass the ‘contradictions and ambivalences’ as well as the myriad of cultural representations.

This current call for a culture-centric approach can trace its intellectual origin to earlier efforts of intercultural communication scholars, searching for a framework for the study of culture. Back in 1976, Casmir suggested the study of international, intercultural and multicultural communication by attempting to find a ‘third realm’ which transcends the individual and disparate cultures being examined. He stressed that the third realm can potentially help researchers find the ‘underlying rules of the total game’ (p. 12) rather than parochial and specific insights.

Shuter (1990), meanwhile, referred to an ‘intracultural communication’ perspective and argued that it is of utmost importance because it provides ‘a conceptual framework for analyzing interaction within a society and world region’ (p. 243). It also demonstrates the connection between communication patterns and the sociocultural contexts in which the interactions take place. Finally, an intracultural communication theory can also provide a meaningful conceptual framework for comparisons between different societies. Our renewed call for a more unified paradigm to approach intercultural communication research thus stands on the shoulders of these efforts and seeks to re-energize the field with a perspective that will hopefully create theories that transcend regional applications. The field now
stands at the tipping point of an anachronistic Western-dominated paradigm being supplanted, and there is an urgency for a new meta-perspective to advance the development of theories.

The positioning of culture at the centre of the culture-centric paradigm is not arbitrary. Social scientists may be split on whether the future would be that prophesized by Fukuyama (1992) or one envisioned by Huntington (1996), but there is little debate on the central role of culture in either of these predictions. In the Fukuyama future, the Western culture (especially the American culture) would reign and other cultures would be subsumed under it. In the Huntingtonian one, future international conflicts will occur along cultural lines instead of economic or political ones exhibited in the past. Whether we are headed towards a convergent or divergent future, the centrality of culture in these two diametrically opposite predictions is evident and points to the importance of the study of culture in the world today. Stevenson (2003) noted that culture as an explanatory has been largely ignored but now that we have the data and the analytical tools to examine its influence, we ought to look at it more closely.

Tehrani (1991) wrote that the challenge lies in developing comparative theories that consciously avoids ethnocentric bias. He argues for the need to focus on elements that appear to be both universal and immanent in most human societies. The Asiacentric and Eurocentric models would be considered ethnocentric models that imply that one culture will be the mere shadow of the other and the ‘cultural integrity of the referent culture, its uniqueness, and differences are simply ignored’ (Yoshikawa, 1987). To avoid the problem of ethnocentricity, Yoshikawa proposed a ‘double-swing’ model and classified it as a dialogical mode of intercultural encounter and communication. This dialogical mode is manifested in a form similar to a Mobius strip or the infinity symbol $\infty$ such that ‘either culture does not appear in its wholeness in isolation but rather in relation to the other. While the constituent cultures are separate and independent, they are simultaneously interdependent’ (Yoshikawa, 1987).

The cultural integrity of the constituent cultures are acknowledged and the ‘emphasis is on wholeness, mutuality, and the dynamic meeting of the two cultures. Even in their union, the two cultures each maintain a separate identity.’ Yoshikawa calls this model the double-swing model which ‘pictorially emphasizes the act of meeting between two different beings without eliminating the otherness or uniqueness of each and without reducing the dynamic tension created as a result of meeting.’ The model also shows that ‘one (culture) steps out from one’s own ground to meet the other and the focus is neither on one side nor on the other but rather on the dynamic flow of dialogical interaction and a yielding of one dynamic center to another.’

In a theory that resonates with the dialogical model proposed by Yoshikawa, Gunaratne (2002) combined the yin–yang complements of Chinese philosophy and the dialectic of Western philosophy to derive a humanocentric theory of communication outlets and free expression. He contends that the ‘incorporation of established concepts and laws particularly evident in non-Western philosophy will help build a more universally applicable dynamic theory of communication outlets and free expression in comparison to the extant theories of the press.’ Gunaratne (2002) highlighted the
resemblance between the Chinese yin-yang antinomy and the classical Greek thinkers’ concept of the dialectic as it evolved in Europe after the Middle Ages, particularly in the form of Hegelian thesis-antithesis dialectic. The yin and yang traveled along parallel but separate paths acting as a control mechanism on each other at their meeting point. Similarly, in Hegelian terms, the clash of the thesis and antithesis produced a synthesis in a continuing cycle of the dialectic. Both approaches lead us to conclude that the interaction of two complements (yin-yang) or opposites (thesis-antithesis) generates a less extremist conjunction, which we may compare with the Buddhist notion of the middle path (Gunaratne, 2002, p. 6).

He argued that this universally applicable dynamic theory opens up a whole new theoretical perspective so far overlooked by mainstream communication scholars.

Extending from the principles of the double-swing model and the humanocentric model, the culture-centric paradigm places culture in a position of centrality to view intercultural communication as a confluence of not only Eastern and Western but also other perspectives that can all meet meaningfully and constructively in the absence of political or ideological biases. The various perspectives remain distinct but also share commonalities and overlapping space as illustrated by a Chinese knot (see Figure 1), which consists of distinctive elements that are plaited and connected by one common thread. What the Chinese knot illustrates is that each culture approaches communication from a different angle and manifests itself in distinctive features, but 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. Besides, all cultures are connected to one another, either explicitly or implicitly. There is thus underlying commonality and continuity.

The culture-centric approach also represents an attempt to resolve the paradox between cultural particularity and human universality in the construction of an Asian theory of communication. As expressed by Goonasekera and Kuo (2000) in their Foreword to the special issue in Asian Journal of Communication: ‘To be Asian it has to be particularistic; To be theoretical it has to be universalistic. Herein lies the paradox, and the challenge an Asian theory of communication needs to face and resolve’ (p. xii). Graphically, the Chinese knot provides the answer and illustrates that there is the underlying connection between cultural particularity and human universality. Looking at the Chinese knot (Figure 1) again, each corner of the knot represents culture-specific (either Asiacentric or Eurocentric) communication theories. Yet looking at the knot as a whole, it is obviously there is an underlying

![Figure 1. A Chinese knot as a graphic representation of the culture-centric paradigm.](image-url)
common thread connecting all culture-specific theories together, presenting the possibility of a holistic general theory of communication. Each corner section of the knot is thus an essential component of the knot without which there cannot be a knot. Yet, each section cannot exist in isolation from the others.

Concepts such as individualism and collectivism are not polar opposites such that the presence of one entails the absence of the other. People possess individualism and collectivism constructs and the degree to which each is manifested depends on the environment that they find themselves in. As Littlejohn and Foss (2005) have argued, it is perhaps wise to take advantage of multiple theoretical lenses from multiple cultures and that ‘each theory looks at the process from a different angle, and each provides insights of its own.’ Adopting the culture-centric paradigm opens up immense possibilities of convergence between seemingly disconnected theories and may provide a more satisfying explanation than the discrete use of theories. As such, the culture-centric model is not a prescriptive one with which to conduct communication research. Instead, it emphasizes the confluence and the interaction between different cultures in explaining the same phenomenon to elicit conclusions that are more holistic and satisfying than its constituent parts.

The culture-centric model also does not claim to be superior to its constituent ‘centrism’ like Eurocentricity or Asiacentricity in its bias of looking at the world through the window of culture. Just as some communication phenomena lend themselves to be best examined through a technologically deterministic or a biologically deterministic lens; some are best explained by a culture-centric view. What the following section outlines is research scopes that are best approached from the culture-centric paradigm. We believe that the use of the culture-centric paradigm is most suited for synthesizing communication theories that have been studied from the constituent ethnocentric perspectives, studying communication phenomena that occur at the confluence of cultures and studying new communication landscapes like cyberspace that may be hybridized forms of traditional contexts.

**Synthesis**

Perhaps the most functionally useful of the three research scopes, the synthesis objective of the culture-centric approach aims to take ethnocentric communication theories that are fundamentally similar in order to construct a more ‘universal’ articulation of communication phenomena. For example, social network theory as it had been studied by Western scholars has an Asian equivalent in the Chinese social networking phenomena of ‘Guanxi’ (关系). In their study of the social network theory, Hammond and Glenn (2004) noted that Western scholars seem to be excited about the new theory of a complexity-based social network theory but social networking has been long understood by Eastern intellectual traditions. The Chinese concept of Guanxi is an older form of social network theory that contextualizes individuals within a highly collectivistic society (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000). Hammond and Glenn (2004) argued that the social network theory and Guanxi share overlapping conceptualization of social systems such as information and sustainability. According to Hammond and Glenn (2004), Guanxi teaches a person to identify a competitor (outsider) from a collaborator (insider), and prescribes rules for dealing with each kind of person. ‘Zi ji ren’ (自己人) are insiders and are highly trusted, because they are required to give accurate information. ‘Wai
ren’ (仁) as outsiders are granted an entirely different status. These notions of insiders and outsiders correspond to the strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1983), respectively, that are purported by the social network theory.

The culture-centric perspective is particularly useful in research topics such as the one above as it emphasizes the overlapping theoretical elements. In this case, the contingent conditions of how social capital (Coleman, 1988) is created in a social network is similar in its location within a web of relationships but slightly nuanced in how strong and weak ties may be used in different cultures. While it may seem from writing in the business literature on Guanxi that it is a cultural remnant of a feudal society that is being washed out as the Chinese culture becomes more Westernized (Hammond & Glen, 2004), the Western popularization of social networks proves that the concept of Guanxi is not particular to the Chinese culture but is visible to many emergent social networks. In their conclusion, Hammond and Glen argued that while the advocate of the social network theory are making significant claims about the primacy of their new idea and how the theory began with the emergence of the World Wide Web; the practices of social networking, as Chinese traditions have detailed, revealed that they are actually much older than the new technologies.

Hammond and Glen’s analysis of the ‘Western’ social network theory through ‘Asian’ lenses demonstrates the possible contributions of a culture-centric approach where communication scholars focus on the convergence and resonance between different cultures to explain communicative phenomena in a way that is accessible to other scholars, regardless of their culture. Communication specialists seeking to gain further insight into the connection between established theories and observed social norms will not overlook the possible insights gleaned from, for instance, the juxtaposition of the Asian notion of ‘face-saving’ or 面子 and the ‘Western’ concepts (lenses) of social desirability and impression management, as did Goffman (1959) half a century ago. Moving away from political or ideological bias, culture-centricity enables communication specialists to concentrate on explaining phenomenon in the way that it is experienced by peoples from different cultures in the world today.

**Consolidation**

Another research scope that can be understood from the culture-centric perspective is the study of biculturalism or multiculturalism. This research program is already underway by scholars such as Hong, Morris, Chiu, and Benet-Martinez (2000) who observed that the multiculturalism is becoming an increasingly important research focus even though it is not a new phenomenon. They contended with the prevailing assumption that the influence of culture on cognition is continual and constant and introduced an alternative approach to culture using the approach of ‘frame-switching’ among bicultural individuals. Instead of looking at individuals as wholly Asian or Western, the researchers adopted a ‘conceptualization of internalised culture as a network of discrete, specific constructs that guide cognition only when they come to the fore in an individual’s mind’ (Hong et al., 2000). Hong and her colleagues argued that culture is a loose network of domain specific-knowledge structures and not highly internalized in a rigid structure. As such, instead of merely articulating the differences between two or more cultures, researchers can go beyond the basic descriptions and consolidate the contingent conditions for when cultural
notions become important. It may be that Westerners are more inclined towards individualism but in an environment where the collective is emphasized, they too might tend towards manifestation of their interdependence traits. The role of the culture-centric perspective is to articulate the conditions under which a particular cultural trait is active in the individual’s mind.

In a way, the current work on cultural frame-switching challenges the notion that cultures are monolithic and constant just like the culture-centric perspective does and instead, proposes that the ‘culture’ that an individual possesses is dynamic and constructed. While the Western and Asian perspectives remain dominant, it is becoming more and more unrealistic to view an individual or even a community as wholly Western or wholly Asian. The culture-centric approach is highly relevant in research which occurs at the boundaries of existing cultures. As these boundaries become less defined, placing culture at the center of theorization allows researchers to focus on the dynamic constructivism associated with cultural acquisition and how culture influences cognition and behavior. The study of bicultural or multicultural communities such as diasporas and migrant communities through a culture-centric approach is a beginning. Perhaps adopting a Eurocentric or the purported Asiacentric approach may suffice for now but with the rapid expansion of the multicultural or bicultural communities indicate that it would not be long before either approach becomes inadequate in reflecting the dynamism of cultures that communicative communities all around the world are experiencing now. The culture-centric approach can transcend the mere descriptions of differences between the diminishing monolithic cultures and focus research efforts on the developments and complex relations that result from this dynamism of culture. Paradoxically, what we call culture-centric has become culture-neutral.

**Exploration**

The emergence of new cultures that are not geographically bounded would create challenges for any ethnocentric approach to fully explore, and the culture-centric perspective may be best suited for understanding these emergent communities. In particular, cyber-communities which are neither Asian nor Western are growing at such a phenomenal rate that they look set to become a global culture. Cyber-communities are developing a set of norms and culture that is unique and hardly traceable to any single vernacular source. In Manuel Castells’ *The Internet galaxy* (2001), he writes that the Internet culture is characterized by ‘the techno-meritocratic culture, the hacker culture, the virtual communitarian culture and the entrepreneurial culture.’ The culturally-aware researcher would notice that these characteristics can be Western, Asian or African simultaneously in their value orientation. Other cyber-culture values such as speed, reach, openness, quick response (Anderson, 1995) also transcend any singular culture. In cyberspace, a technologically-savvy Asian middle-class worker and a European one from the same cyber-community may have more similarities between them than they have with a citizen from their own countries of another social-economic status. They have indeed come to share a common ‘imagined virtual community’ (Kuo, 2007b). And as loyalties to cyber-communities grow, a pertinent question to ask is whether the salience of virtual communities will ultimately outstrip allegiances to ethnic or national ones. Even without this futurological speculation, the growing need for a meta-theory that
would make sense of the virtual cultures and virtual communities cannot be overlooked.

The call for a culture-centric theory that transcends ethnocentricity has been echoed by Poster (2001) who argued that the Internet demands a social and cultural theory of its own. In a similar grain, Lévy (2001) noted that cyberculture expresses the rise of a new global culture because it is different from the cultural forms that preceded it and it is constructed from the indeterminateness of global meaning. The Chinese knot which this article has adopted as the visual representation of the culture-centric approach can also lend credence to Healy’s (1997) articulation that cyberspace is a middle landscape between civilization and wilderness, where new cultural directions and choices can be selected. As more and more people enter cyberspace and form their own communities which are neither Western nor Asian, the culture-centric approach promises greater relevance than any ethnocentric perspective. It serves the critical function of examining ‘cultural construction processes from inside the Net’ (Abdelnour-Nocera, 2002) and offers a perspective that is congruous with Benson and Standing’s (2000) systems theory of culture that emphasizes culture as an indivisible system rather than as a set of categories. Ultimately, it seeks to provide a theory of culture that would allow analysis of the real complexities of virtual cultures and virtual communities that has been found lacking in existing theories (Ess, 1998).

Conclusions

In 2000, Chan noted that 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 of achieving that goal. What Chan did not seem to mind was whether the theories formulated bear a distinct Asian mark (Wang & Shen, 2000) and as Wang and Shen pointed out, ‘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’ (2000, p. 29).

In the last two decades, the field has been focusing on the divergence of cultures and seem to have established a strong case for particular cultures, religions, and political principles which are philosophically different (Kincaid, 1987). The communication field can certainly proceed in this direction, but regardless of the traditional contrasts between Eastern and Western perspectives, the rapid social and economic changes will change the global culture of the world today (Cushman & Kincaid, 1987). The continual belief in artificial boundaries that might designate one part of the world as East and the other as West would be like sandbagging against a proverbial Great Flood. The culture-centric model shifts away from polarizing approaches to ethnocentric communication studies and focuses on the dynamic interplay of cultures instead of polar opposites. The objectives of synthesis, consolidation and exploration carve out domains in which the culture-centric approach is most useful to the communications field. Focusing on culture also emphasizes the converging, dynamic and evolutionary manner in which cultures are changing in the world today and allows communication scholars to theorize without
ideological bias or artificial boundaries created by arbitrary definitions of what constitutes East or West.

The proposed culture-centric model does not contradict either Asiacentric or Afrocentric approaches, but goes beyond. It recognizes and respects the diversity of various cultural representations beyond the all-encompassing labels (e.g. Asian), and draws resources from the people and its culture for an understanding of communication within its own cultural context. Indeed, moving beyond the narrowly-defined geographically-based cultural dimension (i.e. East vs. West), the proposed culture-centric approach is open and inclusive, and can be applied to cultures at various levels and dimensions, whether ethnic, linguistic, or religious-based.

**Note**

1. See Kirkman, Lowe, and Gibson (2006) for a review of empirical research that has incorporated Hofstede's framework in the last two decades.

**Notes on contributors**

Eddie C.Y. Kuo (PhD, Minnesota) is Professorial Fellow and the Founding Dean (1992–2003) of the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is also Editor of the *Asian Journal of Communication*, and Chairman d'Honneur of the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, Singapore (AMIC).

Han Ei Chew is a doctoral student of the Department of Telecommunication, Information Studies and Media at Michigan State University, United States. He received his MA in Communication Studies from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information in 2009. His current research interests include information technology for development (ICT4D) and social capital theory.

**References**


