Invited Scholarly Essay

The Long Game in Asian Communication Research

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The state of Asian communication research always gets an analysis every few years. The question invariably is why Asia, with more than half of the Earth's population, is behind the West in communication research and what can be done to catch up. As the authors were finishing this piece, the QS World University Ranking by Subjects released its annual results, and it is clear that the West dominates communication research. This article offers a perspective on why this is the case, how scholars have tried to address the concern at the conceptual level, and the obstacles in the way of moving Asian communication research up and on.

This article will use China as a backdrop. While the number of international publications authored by Asian communication scholars has increased significantly (So, 2010), it is China's contribution to this increase that has been the most marked. China has become a major contributor to the field of communication, and its scholars have published a large number of high-quality papers in communication journals. A 2021 study of four decades of social science research in China found that Chinese academics were publishing more in international (as opposed to domestic) journals, more than ever as

first authors, and more often in journals ranked in the first quartile of the discipline. Interestingly, communication research was above average in publication in the first quartile journals (Zhang et al., 2021).

How West Came to Dominate Communication and Communication Research

The rise of modern media, and research around its use, may be attributable to WWII. The pioneers in the field of communication research—Lasswell, Schramm, Lerner, and Poole—all did research that were funded by the US government either directly or through the military and the US Central Intelligence Agency (Simpson, 1996). The focus on the war, both hot and cold, gave the research focus and direction.

Closer to home, that media, communication and communication research are tied up in geo-politics may be evidenced in the history of the Asian Centre for Mass Communication Research and Information (AMIC) hitherto in Singapore. AMIC was set up in the early 1970s by the German Social Democratic political party's foundation Frederich Ebert Stiftung (FES), in the context of the Cold War. In fact, when the Berlin Wall came down, the FES gradually withdrew its funding from AMIC to be deployed in rebuilding Berlin. Slightly over 10 years after the Berlin Wall came down, AMIC suffered a peace recession as all funding from the FES to it (AMIC) ceased.

Against the geo-political backdrop, it is understandable if the early approach to having an Asian communication perspective was to "de-Westernise." The essence of the de-Westernized communication path is the subversion and reshaping of the unbalanced communication rights. To some extent, the Western world, under the banner of the "third wave" and "global citizenship" paradigms, is essentially promoting a cultural logic that is in line with Western values, behind which is a cultural convergence centred on Western values. Or, to paraphrase Miike (2022), towards what will eventually be one world and one culture. De-Westernisation is thus both a conceptual problem and "a political problem of resistance against hegemonic power" (Craig & Xiong, 2022, p. 21).

The domination of the West may also be due to its first-mover advantage of having invented modern media technologies such as the radio, television, and now the Internet. To its credit, self-reflection by Western and international institutions in the 1970s and 1980s saw an awareness of the uneven flow of information with the McBride Commission established to promote a "New World Information and Communication Order" (NWICO). It took the 1980s for the emergence of Asian communication centres. This was also a time when there was criticism and debate over the Western paradigm (Rogers, 1985). Miike (2016) credits three meetings in the 1980s with bringing together researchers and papers on the Asia-centric project. Two of the meetings in 1980 and 1982, were organised by the East-West Center in Hawaii on "Communication Theory from Eastern and Western Perspectives." The third was a three-day symposium, "Mass Communication Theory: The Asian Perspective" held at Thammasat University in Bangkok, organised by AMIC in Singapore in 1985. Until then, much of the theoretical frameworks in communication were imported directly from the West and were seen as standardised systemic constructs.

What's Different About Western Theories?

Indeed, the methods and processes in communication research have not been rejected but instead embraced by Asian scholars. Perhaps the quantitative approach conveys a sense of rigour and objectivity. Nevertheless, there have been scholars questioning the status quo with the extension to Asia as will be shown below.

Like a child asserting its independence, one of

the first steps was to explore de-Westernization at the level of conceptual thinking. In the Western paradigm, research emphasises theoretical constructs, model building and mathematical analysis. Theory in the social sciences cannot be any different from theory in science—variables under similar conditions should interact and yield identical results. This is the positivist paradigm, associated with the rationalist mindset of the Western technological revolution.

Throughout the history of Asian cultures, on the other hand, interpretivist philosophy has dominated, which has made Asian communication largely more concerned with phenomenal interpretation and ethical norms (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014). Asian communication scholars have tended to publish essays that require reflection but not data. The focus on theory has been neglected. The attention and explanatory power of communication phenomena in a particular region decreases dramatically once they are removed from the geographical culture (Chen, 2006).

A pioneering scholar of the "Asian-centric turn" is Yoshitaka Miike. He argues that the "spirit of centricity-being inwardly deep and outwardly open-holds the key to "unity in diversity" and "harmony without uniformity" in the global village (Miike, 2013). That is, Asian communication research means looking into Asia for processes, models and theories, while being open to but not slavishly emulating the West. While conceptually appealing, in practice, however, the approach has yet to yield results in Asian-centric theory or paradigm.

Another approach to de-Westernise is to use religious or philosophical concepts. Thus, Gunaratne (2002) arrives at a people-centred theory of communication channels and free expression by combining the complementary concepts of *yin* and *yang* of Chinese philosophy with the dialectic of Western philosophy. Five major agendas for an Asia-centred future are proposed: drawing theoretical insights from Asian cultures, expanding the geographical focus of research, comparing and contrasting Asian cultures, pluralising and historicising theoretical lenses, and facing metatheoretical and methodological issues (Miike, 2006). Gunaratne (2014) suggests, for example, the important role of ethical claims in Eastern cultures to complement Western journalism paradigms and improve the quality of journalism and journalists. The religious thrust lends itself well to fresh perspectives in ethics. But in quantitative research methods, it is difficult to see how deploying religious or philosophical concepts will result in different findings or perspectives. Again, while appealing at the conceptual level, deployment of this approach at the practical level is challenging.

The tendency of the above approaches is to say, in effect, that Asian communication research is unique to Asia. To take a hard line on this, however, would mean neglecting universalism and with it, theory. It is a position that is difficult to defend: to say that there is no universal theory is in itself a theory.

To overcome the logical inconsistency, Wang and Kuo (2010) suggested the notion of cultural commensurability where the idea is to focus on a culture-centred paradigm to avoid an Asian version of the "Eurocentric" crisis. This is intended to be a non-polarising approach, thus allowing communication scholars to conduct theoretical research without ideological bias (Kuo & Chew, 2009). Such an approach calls for a global cultural integration approach to address research shortcomings as a global community of communication scholars rather than one divided by ethnic fault lines.

The cultural commensurability approach has the attraction of accommodating both universalism and particularism. Take agenda-setting: it does not work in countries with censorship, because censorship interferes with the agenda-setting process, as was discovered in Singapore. In that study, the "agenda" of the media was different from that of the respondents (Kuo et al., 1993).

In China, the media's agenda-setting function exists only on issues of national importance; in contrast, the personal agenda was not related with the Chinese media agenda. That study shows a nuanced difference of agenda setting in a different political and media structure (Zhang et al., 2012). Chinese social media microblogs provide a platform for the Chinese public to express their opinions on public matters; the state, however, still sets political boundaries that allow for criticism. As a result, Chinese cyberspace is seen as partially reversing the agenda setting effect (Jiang, 2014). Appreciating the cultural context thus refines and, in fact, makes agenda-setting theory more robust.

Tentative Steps

There are other areas where it might be possible to reconcile the Asian versus Western approaches. Asian scholarship should engage with the discourse paradigm construction in the global discourse model, not just offering alternative frameworks and customised explanatory paradigms (Esteban et al., 2012). That is, research should be viewed as a discourse, or, more colloquially, a conversation, in order to build to a larger conversation. Both parties in such a conversation must share common terms with a language to match in order to move the conversation forward. The need gives hope for a better shared understanding.

The discourse metaphor points to the need for Asian communication scholars to build a community of academic networks in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Ngũgĩ (2012) (observed that "the links between Asia and Africa and South America have always been present, but in our times they have been made invisible by the fact that Europe is still the central mediator of Afro-Asian-Latin discourse" (p. 14).

But there are also likely insurmountable differences because of the structures and, in particular, political culture. In some countries, for example, journalism and communication are perceived to have such a powerful impact (the result of earlier research funded by the CIA?) that the government of the day has decided on a tight control of the media. "Sensitive topics"—which may range from race relations to outright corruption—may not be discussed domestically.

Practical Difficulties

Much of the consideration of meeting the challenge of Western domination in communication research has been at the conceptual level. Such macro-level thinking is essential so that efforts are not misdirected into intellectual wrong alleys and dead ends. Such analyses, however, are necessary but not sufficient to meet the challenge. There are also contextual and cultural factors that make it difficult in practice for Asian communication to rise to challenge Western domination in communication any time soon.

Here, the consideration of China is salient. Simply because of the scale of its one billion population, China has the potential to be a major if not dominant player in research in any field. Perhaps more important is that the Chinese government is investing resources into research. The rewards of such an investment, however, have been slower in returns.

Structural Factors

There are a set of factors within the university eco-system that in fact strengthens the dominance of the West in tertiary education. At the macro-regional level, one hurdle is the lack of a must-attend international communication conference in Asia. The USA is home to the financially self-sustaining and prestigious associations in the International Communication Association (ICA), the National Communication Association (NCA) and the Association of Educators in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC). Europe has the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA). Each of these

organisations is so well-regarded that an award from them is a proud endorsement for promotion. The closest in Asia is AMIC, which the first author was Chairman of for nine years (2004–2013) and in that capacity attempted to steer to be an academic association. AMIC, however, did not start out with an annual academic conference. Also, it was best known in South and Southeast Asia because of its use of English; the American and European meetings all use the common language of English. Not surprisingly, there are fewer attendees from East Asia.

At this time of writing, the Asia-Pacific Communication Alliance (APCA) headed by the Changfeng Chen, who is Executive Dean, Director of Center for Journalism Studies, Tsinghua University, and also Honorary President of Chinese Association for the History of Journalism and Communication (CAHJC), the most prestigious association for communication academics in China. APCA, however, is an association of associations. APCA has brought together researchers from all over the world who are keen to see the rise of Asian communication research. Its first meeting was in 2018 and its plan to hold a series of annual communication conferences in Asia in partnership with the Asian Network for Public Opinion Research (ANPOR). Unfortunately, the plan has been stymied by the pandemic. Between AMIC and APCA, a robust annual Asian communication conference should be in the making.

Another structural constraint is the concern in Asia over the ranking of universities. The desire for some form of benchmarking is understandable. Universities are expensive enterprises to run well and so governments all over Asia have invested hundreds of millions of dollars for tertiary education and research. Naturally, some form of accountability is necessary. Benchmarking therefore is a useful indicator of how well the hundreds of millions have been spent.

Unfortunately, it would appear to be human nature to only count what is counted. In this context, what often counts as currency is the citations by other researchers. It is generally true that a better researcher would have a higher citation count than a weaker one. But there are many reasons good researchers may not have a high number of citation counts. The topical and geographical areas of research are two examples. Some areas—the hard sciences and medicine—often get much higher citations than the humanities. Similarly, publishing in an English journal will more likely attract more readership and citations as there will be the larger global audience.

Some studies have shown that non-native language writing is a barrier to academic publication for Chinese scholars. One interviewee in a study said: "It is difficult to make my English paper achieve the ideal level… It [writing in English] takes a longer time to think and organise my ideas" (Jiang et al., 2017, p. 438). Notwithstanding the challenges in writing in English, many Asian scholars try to publish in English as it means the possibility of international publications with the attendant appeal to a larger audience rather than domestic journals. This tends to diminish the domestic journal. In China, leading scholars are invited to serve as guest editors of journals and are asked to contribute articles in order to improve the impact factor of the journal. Such an approach, while it may help citation, militates against the peer review process.

The initial resistance to the double-blind review—because it could lead to a senior professor's work being rejected in favour of a junior—has largely been overcome. But from the experience of the first author as the editor of *Asian Journal of Communication*, the reviews themselves have far to go. A good review informs the author what went wrong with the manuscript so that it is rejected; a good review also tells a good manuscript how it might be improved so that it is even stronger as a piece of research. Such reviews can be very detailed and go into several pages of single-space type. Alas, the first author has seen

reviews as brief as two sentences. Such reviews do not help anyone. The author whose work is rejected has no idea how to improve the work.

Asian communication scholars must help develop a culture where peer reviews are helpful and not snarky. Interestingly, in the three-odd years of the first author's editorship of the *Asian Journal of Communication*, he has yet to receive a single snarky or sarcastic review. In contrast, he has been at the receiving end of reviews so sarcastic that the editor of the journal in question has apologised. There are positive aspects of the Asian culture to build on.

In China, the peer review system is also challenged because good journals are swamped with submissions. *Modern Communication*, a journal published by the Communication University of China in Beijing, and which was founded in 1979 under the name *Journal of Beijing Broadcasting Institute (Humanities and Social Science Edition)*, receives in one month 600 to 1,000 manuscripts (Zhang, 2019). The *Asian Journal of Communication*, which the first author edits, receives about 400 manuscripts a year, less than 8% of the total number of manuscripts received by the Chinese journal. (From conversations with other editors, many of the leading communication journals in the English language do not receive more than 1,000 submissions per year.) During the panel discussion when Zhang revealed the astonishing statistic, he said that because of the volume of submissions, those that are desk-rejected and not sent out for reviews do not get any email. In contrast, the first author does try to point out reasons for desk-rejecting each of the 300-odd manuscripts.

Limitations in Practice

It is instructive to observe how in practice the attempt to raise the profile of Asian communication practice plays out. And here, the example of China is useful. In recent years,

the Chinese government has introduced a series of policies to promote a less blind following of English-language academic indexing. In what has been described as a "radical change" (Zhang et al., 2021, p. 394) the indicators of Web of Science ranking and impact were abandoned in favour of Chinese-language (viz, domestic) journals. Emphasis would be placed on the quality of articles rather than just the rank of journals in evaluations and funding. Few countries will be able to follow China; its domestic "market" for any product or service dwarfs that of other economies.

It should therefore be viewed as an experimental small step in attempting to break away from the Eurocentric global order of knowledge production. Studies have shown that researchers trained in Vietnam and the Soviet Union saw themselves as knowledge creators and critical thinkers and so understood research as knowledge production. In contrast, researchers who studied in Western countries perceived research as a rigorous process, positioning themselves as producers and disseminators of research assessed against given criteria in international peer-reviewed journals (Hoang, 2021). In the second case, knowledge is not produced by the individual alone but through a process of community review and acclaim. It is thus evident that the lack of self-identification with academic legitimacy and the standing of academic subjects has a significant impact on the degree of internationalisation of academic research.

Within China, there is the beginning of a divide between the better-resourced programs and those not as blessed. Many universities have set strict publication requirements for PhD students to graduate: the students must have a certain number of publications and in certain grades of journals. This has led PhD supervisors to offer their academic resources to their own students in order to help them graduate. For example, if a journal asks for a manuscript, they might add their own students as collaborators. Or they may publish a signed article with their student in their

own journal column. However, junior faculty members who are not similarly well-endowed will be challenged to offer their students such resources.

A related phenomenon is that of closed academic networks, the academic equivalent of the business *guanxi*, literally "closed network." Li and Lee (2014) found that these social networks have been used to collect data that is not available to the public, to increase the priority of submissions, and to improve publication rates. It might be said that these networks resemble the *citation cartels* in the West; in practice they are closer to the *old boys network* and arise out of the cultural fabric of China. They are therefore harder to root out.

The Future

What does the future portend for Asian communication research? One of the best factors to predict a future trend is demographics. Historically, aeons ago, economic might, which lent weight to political and military might, was linked to population. India and China were the economic powers in the globe even if they did not project that power globally. Against this historical backdrop therefore, the past several centuries, with western economic and military domination, are an anomaly. In today's economy, population is not necessarily destiny but is certainly a market. It should not be surprising that Chinese companies are challenging US companies in free-market competition. In line with this rise, Asian communication research, with Indian and Chinese institutions playing key if not leading roles, will arise. But it will take time. As has been shown, there are structural factors at the macro-regional level, structural factors at the national and academic level, and then cultural factors.

The rise of Asian communication research is inevitable. Not because of any inherent notion of karmic balance but simply because of the investments by Asian governments, particularly those in East Asia, at all levels of education. There is still work to be done at the conceptual level of distinguishing and identifying Asian communication. As shown above, not all the ideas are internally coherent. Nevertheless, the first steps have been taken. And with the current anti-Asian sentiment in the West, more Asian scholars are looking to return to Asia. With resources, ideas and people, the future portends well for Asian communication research.

It will be a long game. Hopefully, the winner will be communication research and, as with all research, a better world.

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