EDITORIAL

ASIAN COMMUNICATION STUDIES AT THE CROSSROADS:
A View to the Future from an Asiacentric Framework

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1. Introduction: Nkrumah’s Afrocentric Consciousness

Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972), the first President of Ghana who was called Osagyefo [victorious leader], once stated: “I am an African, not because I was born in Africa, but because Africa was born in me.” This is a profound statement about Afrocentric consciousness. Likewise, in a very real sense, Asia must be born in the hearts and minds of many Asian communicators and communication scholars. For the last decade, inspired by Molefi Kete Asante (2014, 2015) and Maulana Karenga (2000/2001, 2014), two giant scholars in Africology and founders of African American Studies, and their Afrocentric metatheory and Kawaida philosophy, I have propounded and developed an Asiacentric paradigm for Asian communication studies from indigenous perspectives (see Miike, 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2015, in press-a; Miike & Yin, 2015; Yin, 2009).

In this guest editorial, from the Asiacentric paradigmatic framework, I wish to present a view to the future of Asian communication scholarship in the globalization era. More specifically, I would like to suggest that Asian communication studies at the crossroads should (1) re-center Asian cultural traditions in theory and research, (2) learn from Asiacentric communication pioneers and their pioneering works, and (3) move beyond comparative Eurocentrism and engage in global dialogue. These suggestions correspond to the three key themes of this new journal of the Amity School of Communication from India, namely, content, community, and communication.

2. Content: Re-Centering Asian Cultural Traditions

Hamid Mowlana (1994), an eminent Iranian forerunner, pointedly opined that “[c]ommunication research, like any scientific study, depends essentially on the quality of theory or conceptualization to give it direction and focus” (p. 354). Indeed, as Wimal Dissanayake (1981), a distinguished Sri Lankan trailblazer, emphatically asserted 35 years ago, without indigenous theoretical advances would there be no breakthroughs and leaps in local communication research in the Asian milieu and no original and creative Asian contributions to communication theory on the global scene (Miike, 2012). Asiacentricity as an overarching metatheoretical framework addresses this crux of the paradigmatic issue in Asian communication scholarship and pinpoints the problematic hierarchical arrangement of “Western theories” and “non-Western texts.”

Simply put, Asiacentricity is the non-ethnocentric and non-essentialist act of placing Asian ideas and ideals at the center of any inquiry into Asian peoples and phenomena. The Asiacentric metatheory insists on revivifying and revitalizing Asian cultural traditions as theoretical resources for Asian voices and visions. The Asiacentric agenda maintains that more theories should be constructed out of Asian cultural heritage and cumulative wisdom. Theory building in an Asiacentric sense is thus the self-conscious process of actively centering diverse and distinct traditions of Asia as essential intellectual resources and developing concepts, comparisons, postulates, and principles in order to capture and envision Asian communicators as subjects and actors of their own realities rather than objects and spectators in the lived experiences of others. In the Asiacentric enterprise, therefore, Asian cultures are no longer treated as peripheral targets of data analysis and rhetorical criticism. They become central resources of theoretical insight and humanistic inspiration (Miike, 2010b).

There are four content dimensions of the Asiacentric paradigm, that is, four aspects of Asian cultures that can be proactively centered in describing, interpreting, evaluating, and envisioning the profiles of Asian communicators and the pictures of Asian communication: (1) the linguistic dimension; (2) the religious-philosophical dimension; (3) the historical
dimension; and (4) the aesthetic dimension (Miike, in press-a). All cultures use language as a common code of communication and a symbolic vehicle of indigenous epistemologies. Cultural values and communication ethics have been largely shaped by religious-philosophical underpinnings. No culture exists without its own history, from which its members learn important lessons about relational communication, environmental communication, and spiritual communication. Every culture performs communication in rituals and ceremonies that gives a sense of binding and belonging to its members and appeals to their ethos and aesthetics.

For the purpose of elucidating the psychology of Asian communicators and enunciating the dynamics of Asian communication, therefore, Asiacentrists ought to revalorize (1) Asian words as key concepts and their etymologies as cultural outlooks and instructive insights, (2) Asian religious-philosophical teachings as behavioral principles and codes of ethics, (3) Asian histories as multiple layers of contextualization and recurrent patterns of continuity and change, and (4) Asian aesthetics as analytical frameworks for space-time arrangement, nonverbal performance, and emotional pleasure. The indigenous explorations of Babbili (2008) and Jain and Matukumalli (2014), for example, are such Asiacentric attempts to theorize Asian communication in its many and varied forms.

By using these four elements of Asian cultures as theoretical resources, it is possible for Asiacentrists to theorize as Asians speak in Asian languages, as Asians are influenced by Asian religious-philosophical worldviews, as Asians struggle to live in Asian historical experiences, and as Asians feel ethically good and aesthetically beautiful. This way of relating culture as theory for knowledge reconstruction, not as text for knowledge deconstruction, allows us to rediscover and recover Asian cultural locations and cultural agency and improve the self-understanding and self-assertion of Asian communicators in global and local contexts (Miike, 2014b). India is one of the oldest civilizations in the world. India is immensely rich in her linguistic, religious, and aesthetic diversity. It goes without saying that much remains to be mined and mobilized for “an Indian concept of India” and “India’s part in the future of the world” (Schramm, 1977, p. 4).

3. Community: Learning from Asiacentric Pioneers

The Asiacentric pursuit of communication theory is not new. As a matter of fact, there are already many theoretical foundations on which Asiacentrists can base their research endeavors (see Miike, in press-b). Recently, Adhikary (2014), Adhikary and Shukla (2013), Dissanayake (2009), Kumar (2014), and Sitaram (2004) provided excellent overviews of indigenous communication theories in the cultural tradition of India. Classical Indian concepts such as rasa, sadharanikaran, and sphota exemplify the global significance of local knowledge for communication theory in human diversity.

The field of Asian communication theory emerged in the early 1980s when the discipline of communication in the West was in a state of ferment. The so-called empirical and critical schools of communication research were preoccupied with metatheoretical debates and discussions within the Western paradigm (Rogers, 1985). The groundbreaking works of Indian communication pioneers such as Binod C. Agrawal, Anantha Sudhaker Babbili, Nemi C. Jain, Keval J. Kumar, Uma Narula, Usha Vyasulu Reddi, Tulsi B. Saral, Kusum J. Singh, Kogil S. Sitaram, I. P. Tewari, and Jawant S. Yadava have contributed substantially and significantly to the establishment and development of the field of Asian communication theory.

Three landmark edited volumes of Dissanayake (1988), Kincaid (1987), and Nordstrom (1983), in particular, have been critical and central to the emergence and evolution of the Asiacentric project of communication theory. These volumes are the collections of selected papers presented at two international conventions and one international symposium. The two conventions, “Communication Theory from Eastern and Western Perspectives,” were held in Honolulu, Hawai‘i on December 15-23, 1980 and in Yokohama, Japan on July 20-23, 1982. They were coordinated by the East-West Center (EWC) in Hawai‘i. The three-day symposium, “Mass Communication Theory: The Asian Perspective,” was hosted at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand on October 15-17, 1985. It was organized by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Center (AMIC) in Singapore (see Asian Mass Communication Bulletin, 1985, Vol. 15, No. 6, p.
Another conference on “Rhetoric: East and West” was held at the EWC in Honolulu, Hawai‘i on June 12-18, 1988. Papers presented at this National Endowment for the Humanities conference and published in various outlets also yielded additional insights into communication theorizing from East-West comparative perspectives.

These well-planned meetings in the 1980s represented the unified intellectual move to search for Asiacentric theoretical models and modules of communication among four groups of scholars working in different fields in different regions: (1) U.S. and European rhetorical communication theorists who were interested in Asian classical traditions of thought and international diplomacy; (2) South and Southeast Asian development communication researchers who were dealing with issues of cultural continuity and social change; (3) Northeast Asian intercultural communication experts who were building bridges across the Pacific for international business and understanding; and (4) West Asian international communication specialists who were critical of the politics and policies of world information flows and cultural representations (Miike, in press-a).

“Learning without thinking is perplexing. Thinking without learning is perilous,” Confucius perceptively observed (Analects, 2: 15). His wise counsel tells us that our thinking is most productive and progressive when we “cherish the old to know the new” (Analects, 2: 11) and learn from a vibrant community of our own intellectual predecessors. It behooves us, therefore, to acknowledge and honor Asiacentric pioneers in communication research and expand and enrich their theoretical legacies. As I wrote elsewhere, moreover, “it is imperative for us to ‘create a community of a larger memory’ of our fields so that we know on what ground we can build and in what direction we may proceed. It is also time, and past time, to invite communal transformations through connected memories rather than isolated struggles through divided memories. Can we re-member (in the literal sense of the word) and imagine ourselves within a larger memory of common and collective struggles?” (Miike, 2013, p. 5).


Claude Alvares (2011a, 2011b), a prominent Indian historian, offered a poignant critique of Eurocentrism in social sciences and problematized the “apemanship and parrotry” knowledge structure of Eurocentric curricula at non-Western universities. No doubt, in the same vein, theoretical Eurocentrism and methodological Eurocentrism are major drawbacks in Asian communication research and education (see Miike, 2010a, 2010b; Shi-xu, 2016; Yin, 2009). Nevertheless, I want to call attention to comparative Eurocentrism here especially in relation to imposed and self-imposed communicative divides among Asian scholars and students.

A point to be made is clear and simple. Our dialogue must be truly global, multilingual, and multicultural, not just East-West or North-South conversations in English about Eurocentric intellectual traditions and the lifeworld of cultural Western Europe. There is no reason why we should always use Western Europe and European America as the privileged points of reference. Asia ought to engage more in Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe and acknowledge similarities among them. Asia should not be in constant dialogue with Western Europe and European America alone and seek only for connections and commonalities with them. The non-Western world and its intellectual universe have been fragmented by comparative Eurocentrism in a number of respects. We must overcome comparative Eurocentrism in communication theory and practice. In her thoughtful and thought-provoking review of the state of the art in intercultural dialogue scholarship, Lee (2016) critically pointed out that intercultural exchanges should serve not as hidden spaces for affirming Western hegemony and superiority but as open platforms for dignity, equity, and justice toward the common good.

Comparative Eurocentrism deters us from (1) demonstrating internal diversity and complexity within a non-Western region or nation, (2) exploring links and interconnections, and identifying collective identities and common values, among neighboring non-Western cultures, (3) examining similarities and differences from non-Eurocentric perspectives, and (4) projecting non-Western visions of the global village (Miike, 2010b; Miike & Yin, 2015). Five types of alternative non-Eurocentric comparisons can enlarge the theoretical horizons of non-Western communication research: (1) continent-diaspora comparisons (e.g., Indian culture and communication in India
and Singapore), (2) within-region comparisons (e.g., Indian and Nepali cultures), (3) between-region comparisons (e.g., Indian and South African cultures), (4) diachronic comparisons (precolonial and postcolonial Indian cultures), and (5) co-cultural domestic comparisons (e.g., North and South Indian cultures).

Mutual referencing and learning among Asiacentric communication theorists and practitioners are possible and desirable. Agrawal (2010) and Reddi (1992), for instance, formulated insightful and instructive reflections on the development of Indian communication studies (with its emphasis on agriculture, health, and marketing) and methodological issues and challenges in the sociocultural landscape of India (e.g., sampling frames, social distance, “desirable answering,” and operational definitions for measurement and data analysis). Communicologists from different Asian countries and cultures may share similar standpoints regarding the dominant U.S. influence on the birth of the discipline and the heavy reliance on quantitative survey research. Additionally, due to the different scopes and foci of research, rhetorical and intercultural communication experts in Northeast Asia and media and development communication specialists in West Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia can have fruitful conversations so as to take stock of cultural continuity and social change in the broader context of contemporary Asia.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (2012), a renowned Kenyan writer and critic, contended that “[t]he 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-Latino discourse” (p. 14). He substantiated his contention by ruminating on the presence and influence of Indian culture in Africa and urged us to “make the invisible visible in order to create a more interesting—and ultimately more creative and meaningful—free flow of ideas in the world” (p. 18). Ngũgĩ (2013) proposed a new concept of “globalectical imagination,” which calls for “a struggle against the view of literatures (languages and cultures) relating to each other in terms of a hierarchy of power” (p. 42). Asiacentrists should embrace and espouse this mindset of “globalectical imagination” and participate in global dialogue beyond comparative Eurocentrism.

5. Conclusion: The “Look East” and “Act East” Initiative

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced, the time is ripe not only to “look East” but also to “act East.” This Indian initiative in international and intercultural relations is indeed timely for Asian communication studies at the crossroads. It is my sincere hope that the Journal of Content, Community and Communication will take the “look East” and “act East” lead in Asian communication research with the spirit of celebrating human commonality in the global society and cherishing cultural particularity in the local community. We should not let the “robin baron” culture of “rugged individualism” be the global culture of our future (see Hsu, 1983; Tsurumi, 2005). The human condition impels us to set our sights on more humanistic and ethical visions for a just and sustainable world. For such visions, I daresay, there is a great deal of room for Asiacentric critiques and contributions (Miike, 2014a, 2015).

Wilbur Schramm (1907-1987), who is considered as the founder of communication studies in the United States (Rogers, 1994), chaired the advisory committee of the Indian Government on the development of information infrastructure in 1963. Based on the recommendations of this committee, the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC) was established in New Delhi in 1965. On November 21, 1976, Schramm (1977) returned to the institute and delivered a special lecture entitled “Communication and Development: A Revaluation.” He made the following remark in the lecture: “I have got to the point, I am old enough, that I do not just look for 0.5 significances; I look for changes that make some difference” (p. 4). There is no question in my mind that the Journal of Content, Community and Communication will make many changes that make a difference for human freedom, flourishing, and fulfillment.

References


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