Is Communication Theory Relevant in an e-Asia?

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ABSTRACT

Communication is an interdisciplinary field of study that is constantly changing due to the fast development of globally networked communication technology. The evolution of technology, from letters to emails, from cheap phone calls to free Skype calls, from print media to satellite television and Internet, is altering the nature of human and social relationships, the ways in which people communicate with each other and negotiate meanings of what is going on in the world. Since the 1960s, many theories, definitions and models of communication have been developed in Western communication studies, however, many Asian scholars argue that Western approaches to communication are not appropriate to fully understand communication and culture in most Asia. While communication scholars both in Western countries and in Asia make use of Western models and paradigms, very few attempt to understand communication from an Asian perspective. *Look around the shelves of your University's library –how many books or eBooks on Communication Theory were published in the West (USA and Europe), and how many were published in Asian countries?* In this paper, the author will conduct a comparative analysis of Western and Asian Theories of Communication and explain how different cultures conceptualize rhetoric differently. The paper will also reflect on how the rapid changes in communication technology influence communication theories and whether Western and Asian Communication Theories are still valid in an e-Asia, and more broadly in a world that has gone from being connected to hyper-connected; where individuals are meeting with each other in mediated cultural spaces and imagined communities that are neither Western nor Eastern.

If we are to understand how contemporary society and our communication media have taken on the shapes and roles that they have today, or if we are to conceptualize and explain the role of communication in people's every day lives, its impact on culture and societies, an understanding of history and philosophy are vital. This paper makes three important arguments in light of Communication Theory and its capacity to explain or make sense of communication phenomena in increasingly mediated online communities. First, different cultures conceptualize rhetoric differently. This is shown not only in Asian and Western people's attitudes, values and communicative behavior, but also in advertising styles and in the products of media culture. Second, both Western and Asiacentric communication paradigms are highly criticized by scholars, the first for being too white and ego centric and disregarding Eastern thought, the latter for lacking universal relevance outside of Asia. Third, the convergence in communication and culture of the global and the local, the national and the transnational, the collective and the individual, the Asian and "Others", bring into question the relevance of traditional communication theories and open up new deterritorialized spaces for theorizing communication in mainstream, digital and social media-rich contexts.

Communication is one of those human activities that everyone engages in, but that few can define satisfactorily – it is talking to one or more people, it

is watching television, listening to radio, using social media, singing a song, it is your hair style, the way you present yourself to the world, among others. The everyday view of communication, however, is quite different from the view of communication taken by communication scholars. In the business world, for example, communication is synonymous with information. Thus, the communication process is the flow of information from one person to another (Axley, 1984). Communication is viewed as simply one activity among many others, such as planning, controlling, and managing (Deetz, 1994). Communication scholars on the other hand, define communication as "the process by which people interactively create, sustain, and manage meaning" (Conrad & Poole, 1998). As such, communication both reflects the world and simultaneously helps create it.

All human beings communicate through sounds, speech, gestures and language. How people communicate is based on cultural conventions that shape the ways in which people interact with one another, create, produce, interpret and share messages. Culture and communication are intimately bound, or as Edward T. Hall (1975) puts it, *culture is communication and communication is culture*. In other words, when we look at communication and culture, it is difficult to separate one from the other – you learn culture via communication, while at the same time communication is a reflection of culture.

Since the 1960s, many theories, definitions and models of communication have been developed in Western communication studies, however, Asian scholars such as Yoshitaka Miike (2002, 2003), Guo-Ming Chen (1998, 2001), Wimal Disssanayake (1982, 1983, 1986, 1988, 1989), Garrett (1991), Ishii (1984, 1998), Servaes (2000), Thayer (1979) have argued that Western approaches to communication are not appropriate to understand communication and culture in most Asia. The body of theory that underpins the study of communication draws on the work of linguists, mathematicians, sociologists, psychologists, economists and literary theorists. Communication is in fact, not a discipline, rather an interdisciplinary field of study. While communication scholars both in Western countries and in Asia make use of Western models and paradigms, very few scholars attempt to understand communication from an Asian perspective.

In most Asian countries, media and communication research programs started between 1940's to the early 1970's, immediately after countries gained their own independence from their former colonizers. Only few universities offered the program within the departments of English, political science and sociology. There was uncertainty and skepticism on the nature of communication studies; this may be attributed on one hand to the lack of an independent media industry in most countries in Asia, on the other hand, to the fact that most of the literature, theoretical discourses and approaches to

communication derived from Western models that were not suitable for Asian societies. Furthermore, prior to the 1980s, the question of *culture* in communication theory was simply ignored. Most Asian communication scholars have been trained in USA and Europe and conducted research following the Western paradigm. As a consequence, indigenous intellectual roots, situated knowledges and local modes of thinking were seen to be obstacles to development and were to be changed or eradicated. Any cultural differences found were generally treated as 'errors' (C.Y. Kuo & Chew, 2009). It was only in the 1980s, when intercultural communication studies began to flourish that scholars on Asian communication began to explore alternatives to the Eurocentric paradigm and advocate for an Asian culture and context sensitive approach to the study of communication.

Many theorists would agree that the history of communication could be divided into three main epochs – *oral communication, written communication* and *electronic media*; and that communication styles of different world regions originated from the philosophies of *Aristotle*, the *Buddha* and *Confucius*. People often claim that rhetorical theory was born in ancient Greece, and many scholars view the development of rhetorical theory as a product of Europe. While some make minor mention of non-Western rhetoric, others ignore or exclude its existence. For example, Murphy and Katula (1995)

maintain the study of human discourse is an entirely Western phenomenon. On the other hand, it must be said that since rhetoric is actualized through its practice, it varies in each cultural context. This means, the practice of rhetoric within a culture may look like something other than rhetoric to another culture. It would be more appropriate then, to say that different cultures conceptualize rhetoric differently.

While highly significant, in the past, Greece and Italy were not the sole sites for rhetoric. In Asia, scholars have become increasingly interested in classical China, in particular in Daoist texts as a site for rhetoric because these provide rich insights on Asian culture and communication. Classical Chinese rhetoric is particularly important in understanding human communication because it is developed without any significant influence from the West. Consequently, studies of classical Chinese rhetoric offer the potential for clear comparisons between Western and Chinese rhetorical traditions and the opportunity to challenge questionable Eurocentric assumptions about communication and culture. According to scholar Dr. Antonio S. Cua (1985), who attempted to formulate a Confucian rhetoric on the lines of the Aristotelian model, a society that values *harmony* and *tolerance* could not be expected to embrace the values of *debate* and *persuasion* preached by Aristotle. This is also valid for Indian rhetoric, where the Hindu rhetorician seeks those virtues by which the individual may fully

represent the traditions of *family, community*, and *caste.* Similarly, the Aristotelian model will vary from the Buddhist rhetorician who seeks those values of *truthfulness*, *compassion* and *conciliation.*

Different rhetoric models can also be identified in advertising styles. In the Western description, rhetoric is the art or study of effective and persuasive use of language when addressing a public; it has to accomplish an intended goal or objective and influence human choices to take action on specific matters. The rules of Western rhetoric are known as the five canons of rhetoric:

1) *Invention* (discovering the best available means of persuasion);

2) *Arrangement* (creating a coherent argument to reach maximum impact);

3) *Style* (determining how to best present your argument to stir emotions);

4) *Memory* (memorizing a speech);

5) *Delivery* (making effective use of voice, gestures, symbols, to deliver a successful speech).

Case study from Brazil: **Dove Men + Care Shampoo**

Click here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-K29F3WU5Q

The rhetorically competent communicator consciously uses symbols to create understanding and to form, strengthen, or change an attitude in his or her audience. This advertisement created by Dove and Ogilvy & Mather Brazil features a man with luscious, soft, flowing "womanly" hair. His hair is so attractive that it captures the attention of a male co-worker: *"Did you do something to your hair? ... It looks like those slow-motion effects from women's shampoo ads."* As the man realizes that he accidently washed his hair with women's shampoo (pink bottle), he sprints to buy Dove Men + Care Shampoo (black bottle) and washes his hair again. Towards the end of the ad, the man knocks off of the shelf the women's shampoo. As the tagline states, *"Women's shampoo is not made for you; Dove men + Care is."* In this example, the communicator follows the five canons of rhetoric. Sexist discourses are used

to persuade men, stir their emotions and change their behavior to buy "men shampoo" in societies (in Brazil, as in many other countries in the West) where "real men" cannot be feminine or embody womanly virtues.

The second model that is presented in this paper is the Buddhist rhetoric model, which follows these five steps:

1) *Theme glorification*;

2) *Explanation of the main idea;*

3) *Allegory*;

4) *Karma and proving the truthfulness of a theme;*

5) *Summarizing and concluding by giving peace of mind.*

***Case Study from Thailand:* "Unsung Hero" TVC Thai Life Insurance**

Click here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaWA2GbcnJU

This advertisement for Thai Life Insurance created by Ogilvy & Mather Bangkok, encourages people to "Believe in Good"; it teaches the lessons of Karma and follows all the steps of the Buddhist rhetoric model, concluding with a message that brings peace of mind. An unnamed character takes each day a small amount of his time to help those around him. A plant gets little extra water, a woman is helped in the middle of the street, a poor child receives some money and an older woman some fruit. The ad asks: "*What does he get in return for doing this everyday? He won't be richer and he won't appear on TV. What he receives are emotions; he witnesses happiness, reaches deeper understanding, feels love, receives what money can't buy – a world made more beautiful".* Towards the end, the ad asks: *"And in your life? What is it that you desire the most?"* The ad concludes with the tagline "*Believe in Good".*

The third model is the Hindu rhetoric, which follows these three steps:

1) *Simplification;*

2) *Aesthetic delight* (virtue, fame, longevity, beauty, pleasure for all should

   be the purpose);

3) *Reach commonness of experience.*

Case Study from India: **Incredible India**

Click here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qBE_Z8JbzY

This advertisement follows the Hindu rhetoric model and was produced by

Nirvana Films and directed by Prakash Varma for the Ministry of Tourism. It

features celebrity Patricia Malone travelling alone across India, from up north

in Kashmir and Leh to down south to Andaman and Nicobar Islands and

Kerala. Aesthetic delight is pursued as the camera captures India's enchanting landscapes and colors, and the generosity, kindness and friendliness of its people. The actress, the Indian people and the music, gradually create an emotional atmosphere that can be experienced and relished by all, reaching commonness of experience.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, communication in its most general sense refers to a process in which two or more people share information. In classic Western communication theory, communication includes all the procedures by which one mind may affect another. All communication is viewed as persuasive and information based. Western models of communication are often linear and sender-oriented, and they do not include empathy between the sender and the receiver before or while sending the message. Many have argued that this model of communication is too simplistic to capture the complexity of human communication and relations.

While the sender orientation of western communication models is like a monologue (one-way process); in Asian communication, the emphasis is more on dialogue and empathy with the receiver of the message. In collectivistic cultures, communication varies with roles and relationships, with concerns for belonging to the community and fitting in. In this context, the need for harmony in interpersonal relationships is also very important. In Asian

communication, sender and receiver are both responsible for effective communication to take place. Verbal and non-verbal cues are also carefully interpreted and evaluated over a period of time.

Communication scholars have criticized Western communication scholarship for being greatly white-centric, discarding Eastern thought, philosophy and assumptions concerning communication studies; for being widely dominated by the Cartesian dualism of mind and matter, positivism and mechanistic views of human beings and the natural world; and for being based on individualism and egocentrism, while discarding the relational aspects of communication. This criticism called for a new paradigm of communication that could re-examine western communication models and theories in light of diverse Asian cultures and traditions.

Asiacentric communication proposes non-western approaches to communication that account for Asian cultural values and communicative behaviors gained through the intellectual traditions of Asia. As opposed to Western models of communication, one ontological assumption for the Asiacentric paradigm is that everyone and everything is interrelated across space and time. While Western ontology has been traditionally dominated by the theme of individualism, where the independent self is the figure and the interdependent relationships are the background, Eastern ontology is based on the themes of relationality and circularity; in other words, the relatedness of

the present to the past and the future, and the material, human and natural worlds. Eastern ontology is rooted in the web of human relationships rather than the Western sense of ego. In Eastern ways of thinking, humans exist not as independent individuals but as interdependent and interrelated beings (Ishii, 1998). Everyone and everything becomes meaningful in relation to others. The second core assumption of the Asiacentric paradigm is that the communicator is perceptually and behaviorally both active and passive depending on the context in which communication occurs. Often, Eurocentric and Western communication scholars label Asian people as being passive communicators or lacking communication competencies and skills. This misconception is due to the fact that Western scholars and people in general, do not pay attention to the socio-cultural, political and ideological contexts in which Asian people live.

The Asiacentric paradigm is also highly criticized by scholars and communication researchers who posit that it is faulty to contend that only Asiacentric theories can explain communication phenomena in Asia. First of all, this would presume on one hand, that Asian people are different from Western people and that all Asians communicate in the same way; secondly, the paradigm homogenizes "Asians" into one broad category, without taking into account axes of difference such as gender, sex, age, ethnicity, class, culture, history, traditions, languages in Asia. Thirdly, if according to the

Asiacentric paradigm communication is understood best in its interrelation with multiple contexts and others, the paradigm should be valid and applicable also when studying communication in other parts of the world.

Another way of thinking about Western and Asiacentric models of communication is by engaging with James Carey's *transmission and ritual* views of communication. In his essay *A Cultural Approach to Communication* (1989), Carey defines the transmission view of communication as that which dominates contemporary dictionary entries and is defined by terms such as "imparting", "sending", "transmitting", or "giving information to others". The center of this idea of communication is the transmission of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control. Most linear models of communication reflect this view. The ritual view on the other hand, sees communication as linked to terms such as "sharing", "participation", "association", "fellowship", and "the possession of a common faith". This definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms "commonness", "communion", "community", and "communication". A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time, not the act of imparting information and changing minds, but the representation of shared beliefs. Through the study of Western and Asian communication paradigms one may trace the following recurrent habits of thought (Nisbett, 2003) that also fall

under the transmission and ritual views of communication:

Table 1: Western and Asian Habits of Thoughts

WESTERN/ TRANSMISSION	ASIAN/ RITUAL
Mechanistic thinking and logics	Indigenous knowledge and wisdom
Individuality	Community and relationships
Object	Environment
Stability	Change
Personal success	Maintaining harmonious social relations
Universal	Local and particular
Independence	Interdependence
Individual action	Collective action
Debate and argument	Dialogue

The transmission and ritual views of communication may also be used to analyze the nature of today's different forms of media and their use and diffusion among Western and Asian audiences. In Table 2 some of the

characteristics of mainstream mass media and those of social media are

listed:

Table 2: Characteristics of Mass media and Social Media

MASS MEDIA/ TRANSMISSION	SOCIAL MEDIA/ RITUAL
Passive consumer participation	Active consumer participation
One-to many communication	Two-way/ many to many communication
Message-driven	Conversation-driven
Censored	More transparent
Paid platform	Free platform (in many cases)
Economic decision-making	Community decision-making
Controlled communication	Unstructured communication
Pre-produced and scheduled	Real time communication and multi-tasking
Top-down strategy	Bottom-up strategy
Formal language	Informal language and hypertextuality
Slow	Fast

No immediate feedback	Active and interactive involvement
Reporting	Engaging, sharing and creating
In the hands of a few	In the hands of many

There is no doubt that it is of utmost importance to understand the history, philosophy and rhetoric of different regions of the world; however, one may argue that today, in an e-Asia characterized by increased global communication networks, cross-cultural dialogues, and migratory and transnational flows, it would be anachronistic to theorize communication from both Asiacentric and Western perspectives. In other words, communication researchers and scholars must necessarily put dichotomous thinking aside and avoid framing communication theories and paradigms as originating from polar oppositions (Western VS Asiacentric / Asiacentric VS Western).

The convergence in communication and culture of the global and the local, the national and the transnational, the collective and the individual, the Asian and the "non-Asian", bring into question the relevance of traditional communication theories and open up new deterritorialized spaces for theorizing communication, culture and social interactions in mainstream, digital and social media-rich contexts. In these spaces, or "multiple geographies of identity" (Lavie and Swedenburg, 1996), people's sense of belonging is

continuously negotiated; knowledge, values, aesthetics, lifestyles, languages are exchanged, and new cultural identities are created and proliferated. The following example displays this mashup of cultural styles and identities – Asian and Western.

Case study: **American Boy Parody – "First Asian Boy"**

Click here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CqbZNHaf1o

This video called "*Your First Asian Boy"* was produced and shared on YouTube by Thai American Tommy DeLaGhetto and it is a parody of Estelle

and Kanye West's *American Boy* song. By playing with stereotypes, the singer

showcases the shared cultural belief of what it means to be an "Asian male"

and why girls (probably Western) should choose to date Asian boys:

Get with an Asian dude.
We're nice and compact
We're clean, we don't a mess
We got aunties that can do you hair, your nails
We can do you math homework for you...

The lyrics of the song[1] also refer to Asian food, Thailand, the singer's

homeland, China, Korea and the Philippines. Through the appropriation of

American rappers' styles, poses, body language, and beats, the singer

displays his multiple affiliations, positioning and crosscutting belongingness to

both Asia and the West while trespassing the boundaries of his resident

nation-states.

In an e-Asia, as in other imagined online communities with increased

possibilities for the production and consumption of different media, it has

become difficult to create a clear equation between culture, community and

geography (Gillespie, 1995). Traditional communication theories may not have

the analytical capacity to explain or make sense of the communication

phenomena that is developing from these new mediated spaces;

nevertheless, theories should not be discarded. Hybrid communication

theories should be created, that, although rooted in the intellectual traditions

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[1] First Asian Boy Lyrics: http://www.elyrics.net/read/t/traphik-lyrics/first-asian-boy-lyrics.html

of Asia, also foreground the importance of the social interactions and bonding

forged out of local and global networks that are neither fully Asian nor

Western.

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