Asian Approaches to Human Communication:
Retrospect and Prospect*

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Abstract

Communication, it is said, is the lifeblood of society. It is vital to the functioning of human social order. Communication is constitutive of culture. No culture can breathe without communication. If so, why have we, as communication scholars, so far focused our attention and energies solely on exploring Western theories of communication? A deep understanding of Asian approaches to communication will serve to widen the field of communication and extend its discursive boundaries. It will also help communication research to be contextualized more productively. Unearthing and redescribing Asian approaches to communication is as fascinating as it is complex. We have to proceed cautiously and operate on a number of fronts simultaneously. In this proposed paper, I wish to address five important questions related to Asian approaches of communication. First, why is it important to focus on Asian approaches to communication? Second, how will the uncovering of Asian theories change the intellectual cartography of communication studies? Third, what is the nature of the progress we have made so far? Fourth, what are some of the dominant problems we are likely to encounter in our endeavors? Fifth, how can we usefully overcome them?

The objective of this paper is to look backward and forward to the growth of the study of Asian approaches to communication. Although during the last two or three decades significant progress has been made in winning recognition for the importance of this field of study and opening up interesting and productive lines of inquiry, much more work needs to be done. Hence, it should come as no surprise that I have chosen to focus more on the challenges ahead for scholars of Asian communication than the actual accomplishments.

Communication is the lifeblood of society. It is vital to the maintenance of social order. Even the most primitive societies associated with their beginnings of humankind, communication played a significant role. It is always useful to remind ourselves that words like *communication*, *community*, *communion* are etymological cousins. With the evolution of human society and the growth of technology, the media of communication became more and more sophisticated. Today, in the more industrially advanced countries, thanks to the staggering

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developments in satellite communication and computer technology, the modes of communication have become incredibly efficacious and far-reaching. The developing countries too are making progress in communication according to different velocities and trajectories of growth. The inescapable fact is that communication is a central fact of social life anywhere in the planet, and the way in which we conceptualize, examine and understand communication has profound and far-reaching consequences.

During the past five decades or so, one can witness the steady growth of communication studies and communication research. As a consequence of the work of the communication scholars in the West, much useful ground has been opened up and new knowledge produced. While one should applaud the efforts of these scholars, one should also draw attention to a glaring omission, namely, that so far we have examined communication largely in terms of Western optics, approaches, and visions. There is a real need to expand the field by studying communication from various non-Western viewpoints. It is here that Asian approaches to communication become extremely important. Asian countries like China, India, Japan, Korea and so on have produced rich and complex civilizations that have grown over the centuries. No civilization is possible without a vigorous system of communication. Hence, it is of the utmost importance that we seek to explore Asian theories, concepts, perspectives and presuppositions of communication. A number of scholars like G.-M. Chen (1998, 2001), L. Chen (1993), Cheng (1983), G. C. Chu (1986), L. L. Chu (1986), Dissanayake (1982, 1983ab, 1986, 1988, 1989b), Garrett (1991), Goonasekera and Kuo (2000), Ho (1988, 1995), Ishii (1984, 1998), Jensen (1992), Kincaid (1987), Kume (1996), Miike (2002, 2003), Nordstrom (1979, 1983), Oliver (1971, 1976), Servaes (2000), Thayer (1979), Wang and Dissanayake (1984), and Wang and Shen (2000) have opened up valuable theoretical spaces and modes of inquiry.

While communication scholars both in Western countries and in Asia make use of Western models and paradigms of communication, very little effort is made, except by a handful of scholars, to understand communication from an Asian perspective. This is primarily because there are not in academic circulation any Asian theories and models that communication teachers and students can readily use. Moreover, communication scholars in Asia have been, by and large, trained in the West and make use of books and journals and research papers published under a Western scholarly dispensation. If communication is to become a more meaningful mode of inquiry in Asia, and indeed in the rest of the world, it has to connect with indigenous intellectual roots, situated knowledges and local modes of thinking. Hence the need to move along the path of constructing Asian approaches, concepts, theories and models of communication is most urgent. I must make it very clear that this is no exercise

in jingoism; nor am I seeking to reify the West and Asia. I am fully aware of the internal divisions, culturally and otherwise, not only in the West, but also in each of the Asian countries. However, recognition of this fact should not deter us from investigating into the concepts of culture that were produced by Asian countries.

If the formulation of Asian theories of communication is a compellingly important academic undertaking, how do we go about the task of fashioning such Asian theories of communication? This is, of course, a demanding task that requires action on a number of different fronts. Let us, to begin with, identify four areas that could be productively explored in coming up with Asian approaches to communication. The first is the investigation into classical texts, which would contain valuable concepts of communication. These are texts of a philosophical nature. In countries like China and India and Japan, with very rich and complex traditions of thought that have grown over centuries, there are several classical texts that could be mined for this purpose. Ancient texts such as the *Natyasastra* in India, the Analects of Confucius in China and the writings of Dogen and Zeami in Japan are full of useful and provocative insights into communication. These texts have yet to be examined comprehensively in terms of communication concepts that could be extracted for further exploration. Some years ago, I sought to examine some of the communication concepts inscribed in Bhartrahari's the *Vakyapadiya* (Dissanayake, 1982).

A second area for exploration is the vast storehouse of concept that could be recuperated from classical traditions as well as current cultural practices. This is an area in which much useful work has already been done. I shall dwell on this aspect later in this paper. For example, in classical Indian cultural traditions there are concepts such as *dhvani* (suggestion), *rasa* (aesthetic flavor), *prakarana* (context) that can be harnessed to further our understanding of Indian approaches to communication. Similar attempts can be made in relation to traditions of China, Japan, Korea and so on. In order not to fall into a kind of self-defeating essentialism, we need to explore such concepts in their historical movements and contextual life. This will enable us to avoid the peril of investing them with a timeless aura.

Third, the whole arena of rituals and performances (folk-plays, folk-dances, ballads, rituals, and ceremonies) could provide us with a valuable cultural space in which to examine traditional concepts of communication and communication practices. These can be religious, social communal activities. For example, the paper on *paritta* by Tamotsu Aoki (1991) is a good example of this. It produces a semiotic analysis of the Buddhist ritual of *paritta* common in countries like Sri Lanka and Thailand to draw out its communicational significance.

Fourth, it is important that we pay close attention to the day-to-day communication behaviors and see how they have been understood and

discursively enframed by traditional cultures. This is not a simple undertaking as it might appear on the surface. It is useful to remind ourselves that theory is not detached from practice, but is a critical reflection of it. For eminent and innovative philosophers like Martin Heidegger, the everyday life was the starting point for the most profound reflections on being-in-the-world. As students of communication, we need to focus more on everyday behaviors, practices and understandings—the ethnography of communication—as a way of understanding what is distinctive about Asian cultures, and if possible to enframe our maps of understanding in terms of concepts and descriptions contained in the classical tradition.

These are just four areas that merit closer study. One can, of course, add more to this list. I have chosen to focus on the classical culture and the philosophical underpinnings, because, it seems to me, this is the logical point of entry into this many-sided investigation. However, as we progress in our efforts, it is imperative that we pay more and more attention to the phenomena of contemporary social life. After all, our efforts at uncovering Asian theories of communication, while valuable in their own right, should promote a deeper understanding of modern life in terms of communication behaviors and philosophies.

As I stated earlier, an important area in which substantial progress has been made has to do with the exploration of cultural concepts, and the kind of insights they offer into the dynamics of communication. Here, the work of scholars such as Hui-Ching Chang, Guo-Ming Chen, Mary M. Garrett, Satoshi Ishii, William G. Kirkwood, Yoshitaka Miike, and June Ock Yum are extremely important. They have opened up theoretical spaces that should be explored further. Let me take four examples representing China, India, Korea and Japan. Chang (1991) has interpreted the concept of *yuan* that had its genesis in Buddhism to shed light on the distinctiveness of Chinese interpersonal communication and conflict resolution. Kirkwood (1990) has pressed into service the classical concept of *rasa* as a way of illuminating Indian ways of poetic and dramatic communication and their contemporary import. Yum (1987) has demonstrated the importance of *uye-ri* in understanding Korean interpersonal communication. Finally, I would like to focus attention in some detail on an essay by Miike (2003). Here the author has chosen to focus on the theoretical importance of the concept of *amae* for Japanese communication research. The concept of *amae* was put into academic circulation by Takeo Doi (1973). In his *The Anatomy of Dependence*, he thematizes the notion of *amae*, and makes use of it as a heuristic device for comprehending certain distinctive features of Japanese selfhood. Grounding his analysis in linguistic investigations and clinical data, he argues that the desire of the infant to reintegrate with its mother and secure the comfort of the womb is a widespread phenomenon in Japan and that it could be

productively used to reunderstand the relationships between self and society in Japan. In Miike's (2003) essay, he is seeking to draw out the communication significance of this concept.

At the beginning of the essay, Miike examines the intersections of *amae* and *enryo-sasshi*. Then he proceeds to call attention to the two-fold needs inscribed in *amae*, namely, message-expanding and message-accepting needs. These both reinforce and subvert the *enryo-sasshi* mode of interaction. Grounding his analysis in a re-formulation of the concept of *amae*, the author goes on to outline a new concept of meta-*sasshi* and delineate a conceptual topography of *amae*-based communication. What is important about Miike's attempt is that he takes a concept that is vitally linked to Japanese communal life and subjects it to a critical scrutiny in the light of communication thinking. Analyses of this type could open up interesting conceptual spaces for our investigations into Asian theories of communication.

Another pair of Japanese concepts that would enable us to understand the nature and structures of Japanese communication behavior is *uchi* (inside) and *soto* (outside). These two concepts have a number of extended meanings such as internal and external, private and public, intimate and formal, attached and detached, firsthand and secondhand, individuated and de-individuated, closed and open, hidden and revealed, bounded and unbounded, us and them, familiar and unfamiliar etc. Hence, by exploring the concept of *uchi* and *soto* one can purposefully examine a cluster of adjacent concepts that would open up interesting pathways to the understanding of Japanese communication. Moreover, this pair of concepts is related to a number of other important concepts such as *omote* and *ura*, *tatemae* and *honne*, *giri* and *ninjo*, all these concepts have an important bearing on the dynamics of Japanese communication.

The pair of concepts, *uchi* and *soto*, relates to communication at different levels: verbal, proxemic, cultural, philosophical and so on. They offer us useful insights into matters ranging from the social space between two interlocutors in a communicative event to the kind of verbs used to recognize the social station of the other. Furthermore, these two concepts should not be regarded as closed and immutable. As a matter of fact, they change over time and can therefore be used as useful indices of communication behavior. They also can become the sight for the negotiation and contestation of meaning as some anthropologists of Japan have amply demonstrated. Therefore, the whole arena of the exploration of cultural concepts in relation to their communicative value is one that is full of productive tension. This is a feature that would be warmly welcomed by modern communication theorists with a post-structuralist or cultural studies orientation.

Culturally grounded concepts, such as the ones I have alluded to above, which are imbricated with cultural values, cultural epistemologies, cultural logics, can prove to be very useful in exploring the inter-animations between

self and society and how communication environments, events are shaped and given depth of meaning. However, we can most productively press these concepts into service only if we avoid totalizing them and absolutizing them. In other words, it is of the utmost importance that we recognize the complex and the manifold ways in which they are inscribed by diverse forces of power and ideology. To phrase it differently, we need to historicize, pluralize, and politicize these concepts, paying close attention to the interactions between these concepts and the environments that they inhabit. It is of the greatest importance that we attain a more complex understanding of concepts such as *amae*, *uchi*, *soto*, *giri*, *ninjo*, situating them in their specific historical locations and trajectories of semantic growth. This way, these culturally grounded concepts will open the way to attaining a deeper understanding of the pluralities, complexities, inner tensions, ambivalences that characterize them as well as the process of communication. I have sought to focus on this aspect because this is an area in which some of the best work in formulating Asian theories of communication has already been done and there is more work to be done in the future.

Culturally grounded Asian concepts can prove to be useful not only in focusing on theoretical issues but also in communication research. Let us, for example, consider the concept of dependent co-origination (*pratitya samutpada*), which is central to Buddhism. The term, dependent co-origination, according to K. N. Jayatilleke (1963), is employed in four important senses. First, it is used to denote what can be referred to as the two principles of dependent co-origination, which are stated in the following way: "This being so, that is so and this not being so, that is not so." To put it differently, "whenever A then B, and whenever not A, then not B." Secondly, this term is used to signify the above-mentioned two principles in a more dynamic form as it applies to the phenomenal world: "This arising, that arises; this not arising, that does not rise." Thirdly, it is employed to signify the causal laws, which operate in the main spheres of existence. According to the Buddha, they are the physical or biological world, the world of thought and ideas, the socio-moral world and the spiritual world. Fourthly, it is used in a special sense to denote the causal laws, which serve to perpetuate the continued existence of the individual across different births. Very often, it is the last sense that has engaged the interests of the majority of the Buddhists. From the point of view of communication, however, all four senses are equally important.

The concept of dependent co-origination presents, in a nutshell, the Buddhist theory of causality. It underlines the fact that every point-instant of reality arises in dependence, which emphasizes that every point-instant of reality arises in dependence on a constellation of point-instance, which it necessarily succeeds. It emerges in functional dependence on a totality of causes and

conditions that are its immediate antecedents. Hence, what this concept of dependent co-origination points to is that existence is fundamentally dynamic, processual and consists of a chain of point-instance that are interdependent. According to this concept, then, we cannot meaningfully say that a cause produces some object or event. All what we can say is that an object or event arises in functional dependence upon such and such a thing. As Stcherbatsky points out, the very existence of this cause constitutes its functioning. If we are to ask what is it that is called the dependence of the effect upon its cause and what is called the operation of a cause producing its effect, according to this concept, we will have to say that we call dependence of the effect upon the cause the fact that it always follows upon the presence of that cause, and we call the operation of that cause the fact that the cause always precedes its effect.

Another aspect of this concept is tied to the idea that an object or event arises as a combination or multiplicity of causes. They are generally referred to as cofactors. As Edward Conze (1967) commenting on this concept remarked, no event has one single cause, but invariably the cooperation of a multitude of conditions is involved. What is necessary for an event to occur is that the full compliment of the condition must be present. The effect itself, indeed, is nothing but the presence of the totality of causes. These ideas have deep implications for the construction of communication research models. Another important aspect of the notion of dependent co-origination is that the relationship between cause and effect should be regarded as one of reciprocal dependence. Hence, to designate them as cause and effect would be to misdescribe them because that presupposes the clear priority and antecedent of causes. For example, as the Buddha has remarked, the relationship that subsists between the psycho-physical individual and consciousness is one of reciprocal dependence—that is, the psycho-physical individual is dependent on consciousness, and consciousness is dependent on the psycho-physical individual. There are no prior causes. Clearly, this concept has great implications for constructing models and paradigms of communication research in that it abandons mono-causality and calls attention to the salience of multicausality. What this discussion establishes, I believe, is that various concepts embedded in Asian classical traditions of thought can be productively employed to reshape our models of communication research as well.

As I mentioned earlier, some of the most significant work on Asian approaches to communication have been done in the arena of uncovering and reapplying traditional concepts in Asian cultures and demonstrating their communication importance and contemporary relevance. We can push this a little further by focusing attention on the idea of tropology and its centrality to the structuring imagination. The German thinker Hans Blumenberg has done some pioneering work in this area, which he refers to as metaphorology. According to him, the Western tradition of thinking has been dominated by

Cartesianism that emphasizes the possibility of a clear, unambiguous and systematized comprehension of the world through the use of concepts. As opposed to this, Blumenberg points out that there is a vast storehouse of historically determined philosophy that relies on various kinds of sources and testimony but lacks the formalized clarity of concepts. In other words here we have a dualism that focuses on models of the world based on concepts and the lived historical world within which concepts take shape and are made use of. He feels that by focusing on metaphorology this gap can be closed. Blumenberg's (1996) book, *Shipwreck with Spectator* demonstrates this admirably. The publisher's note to the first German edition observes, "in every culture, what escapes the exertion of the concept—the percepective on the whole of reality, the world, life and history—is handed over to long-term work on images. The imaginative orientation achieved is condensed, transformed and elaborated in great metaphors and comparisons" (p. 4). This is an interesting pathway of enquiry that should hold great promise to scholars of Asian approaches and theories of communication.

Let us, for example, consider for a moment the tropology inscribed in Buddhism. There are certain foundational tropes that guide and structure Buddhist thinking. We as students of Asian communication could learn a great deal by focusing on these systems of tropology. To illustrate my point, let me allude to a dominant trope in Buddhism, namely, that of the house. Stephen Collins (1989) has discussed this exhaustively. This trope is used to signify the nature of the human body, how individuals fall victims to desire, the need for renunciation, selflessness and so on. For example, the Buddha says that he observes men and women reborn in heaven in the way one notices a man or a woman moving towards a palatial house and entering it. It is also said that the desire is the house builder who is instrumental in perpetuating the wheel of birth and death. In the commentarial literature, it is glossed as not making a dwelling in the five modes of sense pleasure. The ideal of leaving home is found frequently in Buddhist literature. For example, a well-known verse says:

Leaving home, wandering homeless,
A sage makes no ties with the village.
Empty of sense-desire, putting nothing before him,
He has no quarrel to make with anyone.

Therefore, by focusing on the trope of the house in Buddhist literature we can get at the fundamental principles structuring Buddhist imagination and consciousness. Such a move, which needs hardly to be emphasized, could prove to be of immense value to scholars seeking to uncover and explain Asian visions of communication.

At the beginning of the essay, I said that I hoped to focus more on the future than in the achievements we have to our credit so far. In talking about the future

challenges we have to keep in mind the fact that the contemporary intellectual landscape is heavily influenced by modern cultural theory emanating largely from Europe. Names such as those of Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan fill the pages of modern humanistic and interpretive social scientific writing. It is counterproductive and shortsighted to dismiss these theorists and their formulations as basically Eurocentric. Instead, we need to engage with these writings vigorously pointing out their numerous deficiencies, unwarranted assumptions, and fantastic leaps of thought while recognizing, wherever possible, their relevance to our work as students of Asian approaches to communication. Therefore, in the rest of the essay, I would like to focus on some of the criticisms that scholars of a post-modernist or cultural studies orientation have leveled against the writings of those interested in fashioning Asian theories of communication.

It might be useful to explain further what I mean by creative and critical engagements with Western theories. The idea is not to emulate them, but to examine them in relation to Asian approaches that would lead to a profitable dialogue. Let us consider a dominant form of cultural analysis widespread in the West—phenomenology. Phenomenology is a philosophical movement that had its origins in Germany. The work of Edmnd Husserl, Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger played a very significant role in gaining academic recognition for this mode of philosophical inquiry. The work of Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre in France gave additional momentum to this movement. Until very recent times, it was perceived as an essentially European movement, which stood in sharp contrast to the mainstream of Anglo-American philosophy. However, during the last three decades or so, phenomenology has become increasingly attractive to philosophers in England and in North America, fertilizing a number of diverse disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.

Phenomenology, to be sure, has many faces. This is hardly surprising in view of the fact that it represents the repository of thinking of some of the most fertile and audacious minds of the twentieth century. Hence, any attempt to come up with a comprehensive definition of phenomenology is foredoomed to failure. However, for the purposes of the present essay, I wish to characterize phenomenology as a philosophical movement that is centrally concerned with the investigation and description of phenomena as consciously experienced without any preconceptions and presuppositions. The notion of intuition plays a vital role in phenomenology. It is evident from this description that pheno-menology has much in common with Asian traditions of thought.

Phenomenology asserts that consciousness is intentional. This means that consciousness is directed towards an object. There cannot be perception without something being perceived; there cannot be hatred without someone being hated. As the object of consciousness can be attained only in consciousness, the one

way in which we can know things is by exploring consciousness. The intentionality of consciousness, therefore, points to the futility of dichotomizing reality into mutually exclusive entities as minds and bodies, subjects and objects. Another important consequence of the intentionality of consciousness is that it directs attention away from considerations of the reality of the world to the meaning of that which appears to consciousness. These ideas connect very nicely with some of the traditions of thought that evolved in China, India and Japan.

The notion of inter-subjectivity, which flows from these considerations, is central to the phenomenological mode of thinking. This notion holds a deep relevance to the understanding of human communication. At its most elementary level, inter-subjectivity calls attention to the sense of reciprocity established between two interlocutors in communication. However, inter-subjectivity implies much more. It focuses on such salient concepts as corporeal reality, embodied subjectivity, otherness and situated communication. Husserl describes inter-subjectivity as the perception of the others lived body as well as the motivations radiating from it. Along with inter-subjectivity language enters centrally into the philosophy of communication inscribed in the writings of phenomenologists. Heidegger observed that language should never be considered as a mere tool of communication. It is, on the contrary, the prepotent force that brings the world into existence. According to him, language is prior to the individual; it has an existence of its own, and it is only by interacting with and through language that human beings become human. The implication of this line of thinking for communication, where language is deemed the house of being, is enormous and multifaceted. It is evident that Western theorists of communication, until very recent times, paid scant attention to thinkers like Heidegger and propagated their notions of language as a mere instrument of communication. If one pauses to reflect on Asian traditions of thought dealing with language and communication, one would perceive a great affinity between these traditions and the approach of Heidegger.

In terms of social communication, a theorist with a phenomenological orientation who has much to offer communication scholars is Alfred Schutz. The concept of inter-subjectivity is one that is pivotal to his thinking. He makes a useful distinction face-to-face relationships and non face-to-face relationships. In the first place, the persons involved with the interaction share a commonness of theme, time and place, while, in the second place, the actors are separated by time and place. Non face-to-face or indirect social relationships cannot depend upon the normal processes of inter-subjective understanding by means of gesture, facial expression, body language, nonverbal cues and so forth. Instead, the persons involved in direct social relationships seek to understand each other by means of what he refers to as ideal types. We try to understand people living in

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modern society of whom we have no personal knowledge in terms of typification—that is to say, in terms of the roles and functions they perform in society. For example, I do not know personally the driver of the bus who takes me from home to office. I only know him as a type. He is, for me, socially constructed. According to Schutz, an examination of types is vital to a proper understanding of the nature of the social world. The importance of inter-subjective understanding and the ways in which we seek to overcome its absence engaged his academic interests very profoundly. These distinctions that he makes have deep implications for the study of communication. Interestingly, some of the Asian approaches to communication seem to point in this direction.

I have sought to present a description of phenomenology and its implica-tions for communication, because there are vital links to be made between Western phenomenology and Asian approaches to communication. The idea here is not to impose Western structures of thought and paradigms on Asian thinking. Rather the intention is to promote a dialogue between these modes of inquiry so that each would benefit from the cumulative wisdom of the other and thereby open up more interesting avenues of enquiry into human communication. However, we must not rush into easy comparisons and analogies. The problematic of incommensurability looms large in the background. The idea of incommensurability calls attention to the fact that two conceptual schemes that have grown in different locations or, even in the same location, may display an incompatibility, a refusal to allow translatability and comparison. Thinkers as diverse as Gaston Bachelard, Karl Polanyi, Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, Michel Foucault and Giles Deleuze have described the importance of this notion in various ways. However, as the philosopher Alasdair Macintyre has pointed out, there are ways of effecting comparisons of seemingly incompatible schemes of thought. Putnam (1981) has remarked, "Synonymy exists only as a relation, or better, as a family of relations, each of them somewhat vague, which we employ to equate different expressions for the purpose of interpretation. The idea that there is something as real synonymy apart from all workable practices of mutual interpretation has been discarded as a myth" (p. 116). However, daunting the task may be effecting a comparison, say, between the conceptual schemes of the ancient Indian thinker Bhartrhari and phenomenological thinking. The problems associated with this undertaking are not inseparable. It is indeed true that there is no Archimedian point from which we could explore neutrally these two traditions. However, as Macintyre has rightly pointed out, useful comparisons can be made between seemingly incommensurable conceptual schemes. In his case, he has usefully compared Aristotelian and Confucian moral visions.

I stated earlier that as students of Asian theories of communication should not only engage contemporary Western theories but also must be alert to the

kinds of criticisms that are leveled against our efforts. It is only by taking these charges seriously and confronting them that we will be able to clarify our ambitions and projects more persuasively. For example, it has been asserted that the attempt to come up with Asian theories of communication is to give into a kind of cultural essentialism. Essentialism refers to the tendency to regard objects, events and concepts as timeless and unchanging. They are regarded as being unaffected by the movement of history. When we examine the way we focus on concepts such as *rasa*, *dvani*, *uchi*, *soto* and so on, one might be left with the impression that we are projecting ahistorical concepts. We need to be aware of a possible peril here. In other words, there is a very real need to historicize these concepts within their respective and evolving traditions. Here I am using essentialism strategically, as a tactical move, knowing full well that once we had begun to take some initial steps towards the construction of Asian theories of communication, we need to historicize and politicize the notion of Asian culture.

Another perceived deficiency—and one which is in many ways tied to the question of essentialism—is the pervasive presence of a binarism, namely, that of East and West. We tend to talk of East and West as if they are two monoliths that stand in absolute contradiction to each other. China or India or Korea is no more unitary than the West. Moreover, these Asian countries and the West have been in constant contact with each other influencing each other's ways of thinking, behaving, and imagining. Let us take India for example. India is multi-racial, multi-religious, multilingual society that was once a colony of Britain. Hence, we need to bear two important realities in mind. First, we cannot talk of India as if it is a unitary entity, disregarding the racial, ethnic, linguistic differences that characterize the country. Second, we cannot talk of India as if it is unconnected to and uninfluenced by the West. Clearly, there has been a two-way traffic, taking place over many centuries. The very fact that we discuss classical Indian texts and theories of communication in English is proof of the inescapability of this phenomenon. Once again, this binarism is only a tactical maneouvre. Once the lay of the land has been identified, we need to move as quickly as possible from this binaristic mode of thinking. Cultural essentialism results in separating India, China, Japan or Thailand from the rest of the world, and all things associated with the country is superior to those of others. This is the outcome of a strong reaction to the West, but ultimately it can become self-defeating. We need to guard ourselves against these dangers.

Another deficiency that some scholars point to is that our effort to formulate, recuperate Asian theories of communication is a deeply humanistic undertaking. Some might find this charge bewildering. After all, humanism has been regarded for a long time as a highly valuable mode of thinking. However, in recent times, with the upsurge of newer cultural theories such as post-structuralism and post-

modernism, humanism has come under fire. Indeed, in some circles, it has attained the unfortunate status of a smear word. The writings of thinkers such as Althusser, Foucault and Derrida have contributed significantly to the de-valorization of humanism. I am myself not persuaded by these criticisms. In any case, it is important to think of humanism in the plural; that is to say we should recognize the fact that there are different humanisms prevalent in Asia and the West. For example, Western humanism is constructed around the notion of the individual as the originator and final arbiter of meaning. However, in countries such as Japan, China and India, the focus is very much on the collectivity, on the individual as a part of the group. Asian concepts of communication repeatedly underline this fact. Hence, it is my conviction that we should talk in terms of humanisms and not a unitary humanism that originated in Europe. Our attempts to uncover and fashion Asian theories of communication will only serve to emphasize this fact. Hence, the charge of humanism is not one that is compelling. As I stated earlier the consequence of this trend of newer cultural theories such as post-structuralism has been the devaluing of humanism. Some of the modern communication theorists, taking their cue from the above-mentioned thinkers, have sought to move away from humanism. It is evident that humanism is at the center of current intellectual debate. It is usually described as an anthropocentric vision of the world that aims to stress the existence of a universal human nature that guides all actions and imaginings. Post-structuralists and post-modernists, who are fiercely anti-humanist, maintain that the supposed universality of human nature is an attempt to globalize Eurocentric modes of thinking. And that humanism is a covert apology for individualism. They urge the historicization and the politicization and con-textuallization of concepts such as humanism. Humanism is generally seen as a form of ideology that serves to de-contexualize some of the ideals and values associated with the renaissance in Europe and freeze them into universality. It is thought of as a way of dissolving heterogeneity and reducing differences to subservient otherness. What is interesting is that some of these desired objectives such as de-Eurocentering are very much close to the heart of communication scholars. For example, Miike (2002) has pointed out the very real need for communication scholars interested in non-Western cultures to abandon the Eurocentric models of communication. Therefore, regarding the question of humanism, it is important that we study the issues very carefully and see whether some of the criticisms are not very compatible with our interests and concerns

Another important area that needs attention is empirical explorations of Asian concepts in specific historical and cultural locations. Rather than discuss these issues at a purely abstract level—this is, of course, important—we need to examine the ways in which they function in specific contexts and how they

inflect different modes of communicative behavior. For example, Yum (1987) investigates into the practice of *uye-ri* in interpersonal relationships in Korea. What is interesting about this essay is the way in which it illuminates the distinctiveness of interpersonal communication patterns in Korea. Here, we observe the attempt to examine culturally grounded concepts in terms of current communication behavior. Similarly, Yang and Ho (1988) subject the polysemous word *yuan* to a rigorous empirical analysis so as to bring out its communication significance. These are just two essays that represent a growing body of writing that seeks to subject traditional Asian concepts of communication to sophisticated empirical analysis. Such a move is important on two counts: first, it enables us to move out of the abstract sphere of thought to more down-to-earth experiences. Second, this will enable scholars of Asian communication to connect more productively with mainstream communication scholars both in the West and the East.

Communication is a fast-expanding field and nowhere is this more apparent than in the area of mass communication studies. If Asian theories of communication are to attract greater and greater attention of communication scholars, it is of the utmost importance that we relate Asian concepts and approaches to the realities of mass communication. For example, I sought to make use of a Japanese concept to make sense of three modern Japanese films (Dissanayake, 1996). The concept that I utilized for this purpose is *seishin* (spirituality). I used it as a way of illustrating and illuminating the discursive production of the Japanese self in the three films *Harp of Burma* by Kon Ichikawa, *Ikiru* by Akira Kurosawa and *Woman in the Dunes* by Hiroshi Teshigahara. One way of demonstrating the relevance, heuristic significance and functionality of Asian concepts of communication is to make use of them to shed light on various aspects of mass communication.

In most of our discussions of Asian theories, approaches, concepts of communication, the immediate starting point is a contrast between Asian and Western approaches. While recognizing the indubitable significance of this move in view of the fact that Western models hold such a powerful sway over communication studies in general, we also need to pursue the links and interconnections between Asian traditions of thought. Garrett (1997) discusses how from about the fourth to the tenth century Buddhist monks in China were involved in religious disputations of a formal and semi-public nature. What is interesting about her essay is that it highlights the Indian origins of these disputations and their implications for what was happening in China. Although her focus of interest is not communication, there is much in this essay that scholars of Asian communication would find interesting and relevant. Let me take another example. Kirkwood (1989) discusses the way truthfulness is imbricated with spiritual emancipation in India, and how truthfulness constituted

the norm for interaction through speech in India. His focus is on the Hindu traditions; he discusses both Vedic and post-Vedic texts. One can usefully compare the Hindu attitude to speech and truthfulness with the Buddhist approach.

One of the cardinal tenets guiding the moral life of a Buddhist is right speech (*samma vaca*). This is also linked to the concept of verbal communication enunciated in Buddhism. The notion of right speech is vitally connected to four desiderata. Firstly, right speech should be de-linked with falsehoods of any sort. The pursuit of truth is inseparably linked to speech. Secondly, right speech discourages slander and calumny, leading to friction and hostility among people. The objective of right speech is to promote harmony in society and eliminate hostilities and antipathies. Thirdly, right speech presupposes the absence of, and refraining from, harsh language. Harsh language refers to different forms of insult, invective, abuse and sarcasm. On the other hand, right speech encourages the utterance of pleasant and amicable speech. Fourthly, right speech encourages speakers to desist from frivolous and idle chatter and encourages speakers to embrace purposeful and productive speech. Moreover, the Buddha admonished that in speaking out what is taken to be the truth, one must be sensitive to the time appropriate for that utterance (*kalavadi*). The Buddha was fully aware of the power of words to ignite social conflicts and personal animosities. Hence, he insisted on the need to be ever vigilant about the use of words in daily life. What we see here is how the Buddha's attitude to speech is indissolubly linked to ethical and moral considerations. As we explore the relationship between truthfulness and speech and their implications for communicative behavior in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, we see many similarities and some differences as well. A comparison of this sort between Hindu and Buddhist traditions can prove to be most productive. We can go further and compare how, say, the eighth century Japanese Buddhist thinker Kukai conceptualized speech and truthfulness. He pointed out the need to bring into the discussion both the microcosmic and macrocosmic levels of a speech act. According to him, a theory of speech should pave the way towards a recognition of the microcosmic and macrocosmic facets of reality. Moreover, he expressed the view that the truth of a speech does not depend on the status of the signified but rather on the way it affects the receivers. We can go even beyond this and compare how the Hindu and Buddhist approaches relate to the inclinations of a contemporary theorist like Jurgen Habermas. Here, his concept of consensual speech is most interesting. It relates to the notions of speech and truthfulness. According to Habermas, consensual speech resides in a context of consensus that is constituted by the reciprocal recognition of four types of validity claims. They are (1) that what is uttered be linguistically comprehendible; (2) that the prepositional content of what is uttered be true; (3) that the speaker be honest

and sincere; and (4) that what the speaker utters is appropriate according to accepted norms.

The need for the construction of Asian theories of communication is self-evident. The task before us is to address the question how we should go about achieving this aim. Here we should be aware of the numerous pitfalls before us. For example, we must not allow our enterprise to fall into the much-reviled ambit of area studies. Scholars, who promoted area studies in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in the United States, established an unproblematic linkage between geography, nation, language and culture. To study China or India was to study a unified entity. As recent research and theorizations have amply demonstrated, rather than pursuing the chimera of an imaginary unity, it is important to recognize the inner divisions that traverse the national topography. By doing so, we will be able to come up with more solid and useful approaches to communication found in Asian countries. In addition to recognizing the internal dissonances within each country, it is also important to explore the inter-connections and flows of thoughts and ideas among Asian countries. Hence, when we talk of Asian theories of communication, we must not reify the ontological realities of each country such a China, Japan, India, Korea, Vietnam and so on. We must also come to terms with the fact that there are many variations within a single cultural area as indeed there are many commonalities among them. Moreover we need to be constantly sensitive to the fact that we cannot discuss Asian theories of communication from an Archimedian point of view, and that we must constantly recognize the fact that we are embedded in those traditions and therefore our prejudices, interests, power play inevitably enter into our interpretations. As students of communication, we need to promote a fruitful conversation among these cultural areas. As we proceed along this path, we need to be mindful of the fact that there are several epistemological, methodological, theoretical questions that we need to engage. How do we examine Asian theories of communication in their historical evolution rather than seeing them as frozen in time? How do we get away from the Eurocentric models of communication that have dominated the field of communication studies while recognizing the fact that we are all, in one way or another, products of those Eurocentric models and that our vocabularies of analysis have been inflected by them? How do we avoid cultural essentialism and cultural exoticism while uncovering and re-describing Asian approaches to communication? These and related questions should be uppermost in our minds as we set about our chosen task.

Modern communication studies consist of a number of sub-fields such as interpersonal communication, mass communication, political communication, and health communication. Intercultural communication is one such important field (Dissanayake, 1989a), and here the work of scholars engaged in the study

of Asian theories of communication can prove to be of great significance. Already much valuable work has been done in this area. Intercultural communication takes place when the producer of a message belongs to one culture and the receiver to another. Here, the central problem is how a message encoded in one cultural discourse can be decoded in terms of the cultural discourse of another. This is a very important sub-field, and with the rapid shrinkage of the world due to the impact of mass media and the ensuing interplay of localism and globalism, this sub-field becomes even more important. For intercultural communication to gain in depth, two things must happen. First, the notion of meta-message should be foregrounded. In communication the content of the message, its referential meaning is only one aspect; the meta-message, that is to say, the implicit comment on the relationship between the communicator and the receiver is equally important. Very often, in our studies of communication, we focus largely on the first and ignore or downplay the second, much to the detriment of productive inquiries into communication. What the study of Asian approaches to communication does is to focus on this aspect. Second, intercultural communication studies are still largely synchronic in character. In order to invest them with a deeper diachronic relevance and vitality, the work of scholars of Asian theories of communication can prove to be of immense value.

The whole question of translation merits closer study. Asian concepts cannot be translated into English directly while retaining their full plenitude of meaning. On the other hand, we must be careful not to impose a too Eurocentric worldview onto Asia concepts as we translate them into English. For example, D. T. Suzuki translated the Chinese term *wuxin* (Japanese *mushin* which literally means no-mid or no-thought) as "Unconscious" and brought it under Western psychoanalytic thinking and set in motion a line of research that contravened the meaning and significance of the original term. This is an exceedingly difficult task, and there are no easy solutions to this problem. The issue of conceptual relativism casts a long shadow. When we talk of the Chinese or Japanese or Indian self, are we sure that we are translating the meaning of the original, or are we imposing a Western worldview? One way to guard against imprisoning those terms within Western worldviews and conceptualities is to contextualize them as far as possible, and delineate the diverse narratives in which they are enunciated. At the same time, we must not labor, under the delusion that we can recover pristine Asian cultures and intellectual traditions, to use a popular phrase of post-structuralist thinkers that is not "always already" contaminated with the West. The interactions between Asia and the West have been going on for centuries, and hence it is unwise to look for pure Asian or Western traditions of thought. What we can usefully undertake is the exploration of distinctiveness of Asian thought while accepting at the same time that our thinking is inescapably

embossed with Western thought. The translation of terms should be seen as provisional and ongoing. Let us take the concept of Chinese self or Japanese self. When we use these terms, are we saying the same thing as the English word self implies, or are we signifying something different, or are we seeking to put into a Western straitjacket Asian concepts that are culture-specific? This is always a problem that we students of Asian communication should be mindful of. All what we can realistically do is to use the English term, in this case the term self, provisionally so that we can initiate a dialogue between the Asian and Western discourses and hope that eventually we would be able to arrive at a term or cluster of terms that would capture much of the conceptual force of the original Asian terms.

Finding appropriate English words to convey the meaning of original Asian concepts is fraught with difficulty. While recognizing that this is a problem that is not likely to go away any time soon, we must make tentative attempts that could be improved upon with subsequent work and collective effort. The one thing we need to avoid is to translate these terms uncritically into the language of Western metaphysics within which they would acquire a derivative life. This, of course, would undermine the very effort that students of Asian communication are engaged in.

In this paper, then, I have sought to call attention to some of the significant advances we have made so far, and the kinds of formidable challenges that we are likely to confront in the future. As we progress in our endeavors, the central questions that we will continue to address, namely, what are Asian approaches to communication? and how do we formulate them? will take on added significances of meaning.

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