

“Let the ‘like’ one in”

Five portals to invite similarity into conversations about “differences” in Asian Pacific communication

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This article addresses an ongoing and persistent problem of imbalance between similarity and difference in cultural description by proposing a way to simultaneously explore both similarity and difference, relying on the principles of Russian literary and cultural critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Five principles, employed as sensitizing concepts, are described as portals to allow consideration of cultural similarity into linguistic descriptions of culture: *specificity*; *ownership*; *tension*; *open and closed perception*; and *uncompletedness*. These portals are applied to various forms of cultural description to be found in East Asia, including transnational political depictions; cyberactivist protest; and touristic literature. It is concluded that the Bakhtinian ideas offer a convenient and useful means to bring together similarity and difference, with the result that each quality enhances the other.

Keywords: Bakhtin, dialogism, individualism-collectivism, cultural difference, cultural similarity

I know there is strength in the differences between us.

I know there is comfort where we overlap.

Ani DiFranco

Introduction — Cultural similarity as the “like” one

As my colleagues demonstrate in this special issue, the study of Asian Pacific communication, as well as that informed by other traditions, is overwhelmingly grounded in notions of difference, primarily to answer the question, “What is it about a particular culture and its communication that makes it distinct from that of others?” As it happens, both the answer to that question and the question itself, are somewhat beside the point. As has been repeatedly demonstrated by the well-known literary

and cultural critic Mikhail Bakhtin (Morson, 1986; Morson & Emerson, 1989), the perception of difference, or uniqueness, or just the qualities that make something seem unlike something else, are, (a) largely a matter of figure and ground; and (b) inescapably linked in *every* act of human communication, *without exception*. The separation of similarity and difference, compelled by the limiting nature of language (most prominently found in scholarly discourse), has traditionally tended us to treat cultural similarity as if it were divorced from cultural difference, and vice versa. Yet all language that exists in specific sociohistorical circumstances possesses two qualities, at any and all times. In earlier work (Holt, 2004), I described these as, "...monologism (as an adjective, monological, as a mode of communication, monologue), which in discourse and thought suggests order and predictability; and dialogism (as an adjective, dialogical, as a mode of communication, dialogue), which suggests uniqueness and unpredictability" (p. 21).

The *monologic* and the *dialogic* each encompass arrays of views on culture and communication, but as many have noted, this seeming bifurcation is largely an illusion based on the way we tend to conceive language and culture, with perceptual limitations making it appear as if they go in opposite directions.

...the perceptual horizon of the self must remain eternally open and unfinished (Holquist, 1990, p. 22). As it encounters the world, the self perceives itself to be the center and all else arrayed in such a way as to conform to the perceiver's perceptual configuration (architectonics). This view of the horizon of potential is, for the self that sees it, infused with infinite possibilities — it is forever and completely open. However, to see one's own potential as open automatically means one must see the perceptual horizons of others as closed and finished: the "selves" of others are consigned to being neutral and homogenized with the world as one sees it. (Holt, 2004, p. 67)

What this implied for Bakhtin, and is particularly relevant to this discussion, is that every time we encounter any specific act of cultural and/or linguistic expression, we are simultaneously *liberated by our own inner dialogistic tendencies* (to acknowledge the differences) yet inescapably *bound by monologic tendencies* (to recognize the similarities) necessary for there to be enough regularity or predictability to achieve any kind of coherent communication about our cultural reality, communication that tends to rely on cultural similarities that arise based on what we see as the closed, finished, completed perceptual horizons of described cultural Others. To know what is "different" (singular, different), we must know what we think is "the same" (multiple, similar), and vice versa.

The Bakhtin circle's work offers considerable resources for approaching discussion of cultural similarities. Bakhtin presents us with a provocative vocabulary that helps us conceptualize the complexities of the debate; we've already met the

terms *dialogism* and *monologism*, but there are a host of others, terms such as *architectonics*; *exotopy*; and the ever-popular *heteroglossia*; among many others. The rich elaboration of such ideas among Bakhtin's circle help us understand issues in the debate about the place of cultural similarity in studies of Asian Pacific communication. This could be of significant value in the current discussion, where we wish to move beyond the bifurcation between similarity and difference, toward perspectives that embrace both "sides."

Much earlier (Holt, 1994), I derived five dimensions of Bakhtinian thought that could profitably enrich and expand thought concerning cultural representation. These dimensions — *specificity*; *ownership*; *tension*; *open and closed perception*; and *uncompletedness* — will be shown as equally useful in exploring the inescapable linkage between cultural similarity and difference, using examples from Asian international politics, touristic literature for Japan, and cyber-activism in Taiwan. To understand our seeming tendency to be overly concerned with difference, we must throw our five portals open wide and "let the 'like' one in."

The Bakhtin circle

Before we preview the five dimensions of analysis, or "portals," based on Bakhtin's work, we should look at an overview of the philosophy of the Bakhtin circle, and discuss as well how this work was analyzed to derive these dimensions. Bakhtin's work challenges most scholarly work (or, for that matter, non-scholarly work) in the area of cultural description.

All cultural description depends on the perceiver and his/her identity, and the perceiver's relationship to the endless landscape of sociohistorical circumstance. Despite the fact that we are compelled to use language to express our knowledge of culture, neither the knowledge nor the language are stable or context-independent. Every utterance arises from choices about form of expression, and the utterer's unique configuration of perceptions "guarantees that no one else will understand, even approximately, what the utterance means (because those who encounter the utterance also have unique perspectives of their own)" (Holt, 2004, p. 24). This situation goes by the well-known name "heteroglossia" ("other voicedness"), encompassing the idea that the act of ushering an utterance into sociohistorically specific circumstances means that the utterer "must choose, out of an infinite number of ways to express thought...only one way, created and understood primarily according to conventional categories of language such as grammar, sentence structure, understanding of conversation conventions, and so on..." (Holt, 2004, p. 24).

Bakhtin held that the vast majority of cultural description relies on abstract theoretical constructs, so that those who discuss such descriptions frequently

end up disputing over categories, rather than the living discourse the categories are intended to illuminate. (This of course speaks directly to the essence of our project in this special issue: we want to avoid getting bogged down in discussions of categories such as "individualism" and "collectivism," as these *labels* can come to keep us from understanding what they were intended to help us understand.) Over time, through elaboration, discussion, and research on the labels/categories we become more distant from the sociohistorical reality of linguistic description of culture, and clear thought about, and discussion of, both the categories and that which they encompass, so that the apprehended reality of cultural description is increasingly obscured. Eventually we arrive at a point where the reality of such descriptions suffers from encroaching opacity, with the result that we appear to be imprisoned by the labels.

Nevertheless, Bakhtin's group did not intend to do away with theory and the categories thereby generated. Instead, they wanted to redress the imbalance between the abstraction and the sociohistorical circumstances it was intended to describe. It is perhaps a natural consequence of academic discussions that we favor theory inordinately and in debating theory, we may concentrate too much on the finer points of theory-generated categories, to the point where we lose sight of the connection between abstraction and the reality. As I noted earlier,

There are far too many theories about the language used in cultural description, and far too few in which there is theoretical discussion counterposed with discussion of the sociohistorically specific character of language. By the same token, however, sociohistorical circumstances are infinitely rich and complex, making it equally impossible for the analyst of culturally descriptive discourse to rely solely on elements of specific sociohistorical circumstances to adequately explain or analyze cultural description. In other words, given the infinite variety of sociohistorical specificity, abstraction is essential to summarize details which resist the ability of the analyst to exhaustively catalog specific elements of context. (Holt, 1994, pp. 50–51)

Looking at the process this way, the tension between Bakhtin and standard analysis of culture becomes quite clear, especially in terms of the model implied:

The describer renders culture into categories accepted by both the describer and his/her communicants. These descriptions are advanced in venues which are expected by both the describer and his/her audience. However, the Bakhtin group argued that the understanding of cultural description which stops at this straightforward explanation misses a good deal of what is going on. To advance beyond the linear view espoused by this perspective, they said, it would be necessary to develop a conceptual vocabulary which would be able to elaborate the specific sociohistorical circumstances of communication context (Holt, 1994, p. 51).

Thus, the purpose of applying Bakhtinian principles to invite both similarity and difference into our discussions of culture and communication is best realized through seeing these principles as sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954), which I will designate as portals, passageways to a richer, fuller understanding of cultural difference, by allowing similarity into our thoughts, when we let the “like” one in.

Culture similarity through five portals

First portal: Specificity

The *specificity* dimension states, “all communication is always specific, performed by specific people in specific circumstances; it can never be truly described by abstraction, theory, or generality” (Holt, 1994, p. iii). Here one confronts a problem found in all scholarship about culture and communication, or indeed any other type of human discourse: how does one describe in necessarily limited language what may very well be limitless? It is a problem most memorably rendered in paradox form millennia ago by the half-mythical Chinese sage Lao-Tzu in the famous opening words of *Tao Te Ching*: “The Tao that can be told of is not the eternal Tao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name” (Chan, 1963, chapter one). While Master Li-Er may have thought such paradox illuminating, we are obliged to function within the limitations of our specified rules of expression.

However, delving deeper into Bakhtinian thought underlying the dimension of specificity, one finds a key whereby we can open this portal to let the “like” one in. At first, it might seem as if such a comprehensive declaration about the uniqueness of each communicative act precludes any consideration of similarity with utterances of a similar type. Any description of the cultural Other is therefore necessarily demarcated by specific observers under specific circumstances; hence, differences observed from situating this “specific” view with other “specific” views can only be seen as contrived, and should be neither reified nor taken for granted. Instead, this array represents a joining of various monologic accounts, whose similarity may be glossed over, especially if we fail to grasp the holographic nature of Bakhtin’s thought. Remember, Bakhtin “wants it all,” so to speak, in having his dialogic declaration about specificity joined inescapably to the monologic side of the account.

In light of the specificity dimension, to note similarities among cultures is necessary in order to make sense of what are noted as differences. As an example, let us look at the following quotation from an early edition (though it’s repeated in three subsequent editions [1969, 1976, and 1982]) of a Fodor’s travel guide to Japan (Fodor & Fisher, 1962):

Of course, the Orient is different from our world and the usual label we pin on it is “mysterious.” But this mystery can be pierced if we are prepared to give some thought to the differences separating us and if we are willing to junk many of our preconceived notions. (p. 4)

Observe the overall “advertising pitch” underlying the above quotation. In representing the target culture in service to the touristic enterprise, the tour guidebook must make, simultaneously, two points, one about difference and one about similarity: first, that the target locale is sufficiently *different* to warrant our attention (hence investment in the cost and trouble of visiting); but second, that it not be *too* different, that is, so unfamiliar as to be frightening or repellent, if people are willing, paradoxically, to think more deeply about differences. Hence, “the Orient” (as all-encompassing a term as has ever been uttered in discourse about culture [Said, 1979]) becomes the ground, against which the figure (“us,” the “West”) is to be evaluated. As one could probably guess, the Fodor’s guide then proceeds to offer many, many examples of “differences,” all the while urging readers to “junk” their “preconceived notions.”

But notice how these numerous subsequent examples (“differences,” if ever there were any, constituting the very substance of salable products in the touristic transaction) are thereby “set up” to be evaluated against the standards in “our” lives, presumed to be the norm. One could hardly make sense of the differences between “us” and “them” were it not for the inescapable linkage of similarity and difference. But when we modify our analytical stance, when we are willing to position the figure and the ground alternatively — to add to our repertoire the reversal of their positions, or to return to their undivided states, we will make room for similarity among the precisely delineated cultural differences. It is much the same with more elevated discussions of differences in culture — wherever one sees the figure of difference (specificity), there is in the background its shadow, the complementary double, functioning quite in “where’s Waldo?” fashion (Levy, 2000), somewhere in our awareness, yet for all intents and purposes, hidden, at least until we consciously open the portal to let the “like” one in.

Second portal: Ownership

The *ownership* dimension states, “all communication is jointly owned by all social actors; it can never be held privately or limited to a subunit of society” (Holt, 1994, p. iii). As Bakhtin (1981), in an oft-quoted aphorism, puts it, “Language lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s” (p. 293). This dimension points toward what some take to be a Marxist bent in the Bakhtin circle (though others have vehemently opposed this interpretation),

and in our current discussion relates to the joint ownership of any cultural description that is uttered in specific sociohistorical circumstances.

What this means with respect to letting the “like” one in is that the moment any utterance that describes any culture is placed into social discourse, it is immediately engaged by all discourse, including that which supports it; challenges it; or is neutral or noncommittal toward it; among all other possible orientations. These multiple discourses necessarily destabilize boundaries between cultures, rendering claims of cultural differences as engendered only through a specific point of view that may well embed cultural similarities. Furthermore, we can take what has been previously said in a domain of cultural description to be the centripetal element (that which is already known) and the target utterance (the new one) to be the centrifugal element (that which is — presumably — unknown). As scholars, we are trained nearly automatically to give more attention to the latter than to the former. However, what one scholar claims to be a centrifugal element may well, in other accounts, be a centripetal element.

To take just one commonly encountered instance, if an utterance so introduced concerns collectivism and how it is supposedly a quality of “Asian” cultures, but not “Western,” this immediately engages opposing representations that assert (as several now do) that Eastern “collectivism,” and its purportedly clear differences from “the West,” may be overdrawn, if not outright invalid (Chang, Holt, & Luo, 2006; Fiske, 2002; Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002; Taras et al., 2014). Thus, an overt declaration of difference in cultural representations is immediately tied to declarations that (seemingly) oppose it. It is necessary to introduce that cautionary “seemingly,” because of course engaged discourse serves, and always has served, both supportive and disputative functions. It is only the limitations of language that seemingly compels us to regard them as different or distinct.

A good example from Asia occurred just last year. On March 18, 2014, in Taipei, Taiwan’s capital, students and members of several NGOs occupied the buildings housing the Legislative Yuan (Taiwan’s chief lawmaking institution), to protest what they saw as President Ma Ying-jeou’s capitulation to China’s interests in pushing through, largely out of public view and with no citizen input, the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA). The protest was triggered, many say, by the “black box” tactics of the KMT (*Kuomintang*, the legislative majority party), which tried to pass the legislation in an extraordinarily brief time frame and without a line-by-line examination of the agreement’s contents (Cole, 2014b; Fuchs, 2014; Laskai, 2014).

In response, protesters (primarily students) occupied areas inside and outside the legislature’s buildings, eventually garnering support from more than a dozen civic groups outside those buildings. On March 23 and 24, protesters also broke into the Executive Yuan, leading to forceful eviction by police. Upon having their

demands rejected by the president and key government negotiators, protesters organized a massive public demonstration (the so-called “330 protest”) on March 30, 2014, drawing an enormous crowd of more than 350,000 participants (Cole, 2014a). That unprecedented demonstration concluded peacefully, with protesters eventually vacating the Legislative Yuan on April 10. Because the “live” protest, as well as its impressive presence through promotion on social media (Chao, 2014) (not to mention numerous acts of follow-up political activism “seeded” by the original protest) used the sunflower as its central symbol, this array of activities has been labeled the “Sunflower Movement” (or sometimes, the “Sunflower Revolution”) (Chang, 2015).

The principle of ownership is a highly appropriate lens through which to view the culture of the Sunflower Movement, as well as discourse that describes it. That the Movement was founded in difference is inarguable: according to the Hofstede dimensions (“The Hofstede Centre, Taiwan”), Taiwanese score very low on *individualism*; “slightly feminine” on *masculinity*; high on *uncertainty avoidance*; very high on *pragmatism*; and neither high nor low on *indulgence*. Taken together, these would seem to describe a culture where massive political protests like the Sunflower Movement would be difficult, if not impossible, to conceive. In other words, it would be a society where what was similar (in terms of placement on the dimensions, reflecting contentment and unwillingness to engage in conflict) would trump what was different (in terms of the perceived unavoidable need to publicly challenge this particular trade agreement).

One of the more fascinating spinoffs of the Sunflower Movement has been the expression of citizen frustration via what is perhaps the ultimate “bare knuckle” political game, the formal recall of an elected official (Liu, 2014). At present, several recall attempts, growing out of the April 2014 rally, have succeeded to various stages, though ultimately failing for various reasons (one made it to the final vote on February 14, 2015, but foundered because of low voter turnout), reflecting their perilous path through Taiwan’s recall process, viewed by many as among the toughest, if not *the* toughest, in the world.

Here again, though, the point to note is how the cultural description of what appeared to be unique (culturally different) about the Sunflower Movement automatically entails consideration of what makes it culturally similar to other such movements. In addition to seemingly countering its cultural description according to Hofstedian dimensions, these political protests are hardly unique to Taiwan. Facilitated by social media, similar protests have erupted in Hong Kong (Hsu, n.d.; Lim, 2014); Egypt (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012); Iran (Solow-Niederman, 2010); and Nigeria (Ifukor, 2010), to name only a few.

Engaging in this process, one moves from what perhaps cannot be replicated about the movement (being unique to Taiwan), into realms where it shares

qualities or traits with processes engaged in by participants in other places. Indeed, it has become a truism to point out that the exuberant, difference-based political idealism that drives young people to go into politics more often than not is frustrated, once what really goes on in the creation, sustenance, and alteration of formal legislation — the grinding work of government process, mind-numbingly similar no matter where encountered — is unfortunately revealed. Yet because one cannot consider a given strain of political discourse without also considering the other strains whose automatic ownership is posited by this dimension, one is also compelled to note the effect of these — and many, many other — discursive trajectories. Letting the “like” one in, one achieves a far more textured and informative picture of the process than would have been possible by working from only a cultural differences standpoint.

In academic discussions, we become accustomed to “staking out our territory,” making assertions (the frequent academic use of the word, “claim,” a word used to describe literal ownership of physical territory, is hardly accidental) held to be as distinct as possible from others. We need reminding that every “claim” we make engenders its opposite, and indeed, every other claim, no matter its orientation, thus challenging the boundaries we have drawn. To accurately reveal the illusion of sole possession, the illusion of control (often in the form of satisfaction that “our” cultural rules are distinct from “theirs”), is to exploit another portal to let the “like” one in.

Third portal: Tension

The *tension* dimension states, “all communication simultaneously exhibits two tendencies: one which impels communication toward predictability and standardization, and another which impels it toward unpredictability and uniqueness” (Holt, 1994, p. iii). This gives rise to perhaps the best-known Bakhtinian contribution to discussing cultural/linguistic description, *heteroglossia*. As Bakhtin (1981) noted, “Every utterance participates in the ‘unitary language’ (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces)” (p. 272). Simply by being in social discourse, one must fashion utterances in the awareness that they depend on some features of language and culture seemingly shared in common (i.e., driven by *similarities*, representing centripetal forces), yet unable to escape being unique unto themselves (i.e., driven by *differences*, representing centrifugal forces, also known as *heteroglossia*, literally, “other-voicedness”). More briefly, one cannot speak of difference without referring to similarity, or of similarity without referencing difference.

For an example, let us return to a source of a previous instance, the *Fodor* series of travel guides (Fodor & Fisher, 1962) to Japan “and East Asia.” Note the

implied claim to ownership in assuming that one can make assertions about Japan and *other East Asian nations* in the same, or proximate, utterances.

The Japanese are obsessed with the idea of being Asians, but they cannot escape the knowledge that their culture is a deviant one, a pattern all its own. Onto a basically tribal-*dan* social organization and a temperament with a deep streak of Puritanism and taste for militaristic discipline, they have grafted Chinese religion, architecture and writing. And over this, in the last hundred years, a violent and often garish layer of Western technology and politics. The result is a curious mixture indeed, and it is no small tribute to the Japanese spirit that it has kept its integrity, its own stubborn ways of thinking and, more important, ways of feeling, throughout its successive vicissitudes. (Fodor, Fisher, & Moore, 1976, p. 10 [note: identical statements can be found on p. ix of the 1982 edition])

Here, again, one senses the need in touristic promotional discourse to manage the excitement of introducing the unfamiliar (difference) into discourse that also points out the comfort and safety of the familiar (similarity). Particularly to a reticent potential tourist who is currently only considering spending time in the target locale, this is vitally important and is achieved by manipulating the tension between “like” and “unlike.” In attempting to situate Japan’s culture (through breathtakingly broad generalizations) vis-à-vis configurations of other cultures (both other Asian nations *and* the United States), we see again that there can be no exploration of the figures of culture and linguistic differences without describing the ground of similarity.

The quoted passage begins with a broadside — “the Japanese are obsessed with the idea of being Asians” — encapsulating a view the author(s) cannot possibly prove, yet one that must be proffered as a basis upon which to describe Japanese culture as “deviant,” compared to other “Asian” cultures. This establishes similarity, by centripetal, unifying means, a composite, all-encompassing view of “Asia.” Hence, “being Asian” (purportedly a Japanese “obsession”) unifies and homogenizes not just Asia, *but Japan as well*. The proffered worldview assumes, tacitly, that these insights about Japan and Asia will be accepted, even when minimal reflection exposes them as preposterous. However, in touristic writing, the goal of cultural description is seldom to “open” the discussion to alternative positions, but rather to imprint into readers’ consciousness a view that the author (presumably based on lived experience in the culture) has already taken. Therefore, to make a judgment about Japan’s culture as “deviant” (extreme difference), the authors have to provide a ground for that figure, namely the similarity implied in a persuasive, albeit erroneous, homogenized cultural background (extreme similarity).

This passage could hardly present a more apt example of the centripetal side of the bifurcation implied in the principle of tension. Not only are the images of

“Asia” and “Japan” (actually, “Asia *and* Japan,” together) presented in smoothed-over fashion (an overwhelmingly large number of distinguishing details are ignored in favor of a laboriously monotonic narrative, in which similarity is emphasized at the expense of diversity within Asia), but that narrative is played out by enlisting some common, often negative, stereotypes about Japanese — “obsessed,” “deviant,” “militaristic,” unoriginal people who “borrow” and “graft” — and so on.

However, this description owes an equal debt to centrifugal underpinnings, shown by text markers, some in more or less colorful language, like “tribal-*dan*,” “Chinese religion, architecture and writing,” “curious mixture,” and so on. The formula’s components are in place: against the overwhelmingly nuance-deficient, centripetally grounded assertions about what the cultures of Japan and Asia “really are” come their inevitable companions to call to us, “Wait, wait, some of it really isn’t like *that*...here are some examples.” This is the basis of all description that purports to introduce communicants to “new information” about culture.

In the principle of tension, the Bakhtin circle establishes another link between similarity and difference, establishing a point about language (the use of which in cultural description is unavoidable) and the descriptions and implications resulting from it. The mutual embeddedness of similarities and differences, which become clear based only on choices and standpoints, remind us that similarities are not to be purposefully introduced, but are intrinsic aspects of any cultural description. Because we must use language, imperfect as it is, we are bound by both its centripetality and its centrifugality; it is a gift to know that, simply by realizing that we are bound in such a fashion, we obtain a third portal to let the “like” one in.

Fourth portal: Open and closed perception

The *open and closed perception* dimension states, “all communication is based on the belief of the communicator that his/her own system of perception is open and unfinished, but that the system of perception of those s/he describes is closed and finished” (Holt, 1994, p. iii). This may be at the same time Bakhtinians’ most provocative observation and one of the most useful for inviting similarity into discussions of cultural difference. Here, Bakhtin scholars establish that the union between similarity and difference begins *prior to* the formulation and dissemination of linguistic descriptions of cultural knowledge, resting in the very internal cognitive mechanisms that govern how we perceive and enact culture.

Touristic transactions such as those we explored earlier provide fertile cultural ground for the discussion of *open and closed perception*. Every touristic transaction (and by extension every transaction involving anthropological fieldwork [Errington & Gewertz, 1989]) involves the act of conceptualizing the “cultural Other” according to the observer’s previous training (reading, classroom learning,

field experience, and so on). It is only from within the limits of our individual perceptual horizons that we can see anything and since, in writing about culture, we must see the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, what we learn is shaped *only* by what we already know. Yet, here too, we have an opportunity to look past inherent limitations to other elements of our perceptual horizons, the ones that permit us to grow. In analyzing any cultural description, we should always remember: every limited previous view of a cultural configuration is a foundation for subsequent views, and once we realize our perceptual horizons regarding culture are unfinished (a source of infinite difference), but also that we are judging phenomena presented to us as if closed and finished (a source, as it were, of infinite similarity), we become empowered to see cultures in more expansive terms.

Numerous apt examples of this practice can be discovered in the language used by the Taiwanese government to frame China over more than half a century (Chang & Holt, 2014). These examples show how the government of Taiwan has framed itself, and thus its precarious identity, vis-à-vis its neighbor on the mainland.

The Taiwanese government has used five names since Chiang Kai-shek moved from China to Taiwan in 1949 — *gongfei* (“bandits”); *zhonggong* (“Chinese communists”); *dalu* (“the mainland”); *duian* and *liangan* (“opposite shore” and “both shores”); and *zhongguo* and *zhonghuarenmingongheguo* (“China” and “the People’s Republic of China”). These five trace the introduction, modification and eventual replacement of the changing views of the mainland by Chiang and his successors (from an enemy to be eradicated by military action; to a position of irrelevancy; to a joint existence involving mutual recognition, each of the other; to recognizing contributions to an uneasy and fragile partnership).

Each name also serves as an example of how the principle of open and closed perception functions in cultural description, especially how the formulator(s) (the Taiwanese government) see their own horizons (open and unfinished) versus how they see the horizons of the described cultural Other (China) as closed and finished. Although this occurs with all five names, it is most dramatically illustrated in the unrestrained, often grimly humorous language of Chiang-Kai Shek’s Cold-War-era propaganda. The following is from Chiang’s 1966 National Day Speech:

Loyalty, piety, human-heartedness, love, faithfulness, righteousness, amiability, and peace, are the ever-growing, excellent cultural foundation for our Chinese people. The Boxer Rebellion of 1900 and the bandit Mao’s tyrannical cruelty, the disobedient revolt of animal nature and evil behavior, are just boils with vermin inside. (Chang & Holt, 2014, p.30)

Chiang’s Nationalist government (in 1966 and for a long time afterward) used *gongfei* to facilitate a well-worn hero-villain script highlighting the evil of the “bandit” mainlanders and the virtue of Taiwanese (Chang & Holt, 2014). Such

examples of closed perception of the communist government on the mainland were part of the Cold War strategy to contain communism.

Viewed in that context, this process can be seen as a master strategy portraying “communists” (whether supporters of Mao Tse-Tung or some other leader) in severely closed or finished fashion, while simultaneously portraying the “Free World” as open and unfinished, even though of course envisioning half the world as free is itself a form of closure. Were the view presented by the “communists,” doubtless these orientations would be reversed. However, for Chiang Kai-Shek and other United States allies, there was no subtlety of cultural description when it came to countries under communist rule, nor of any possibility of seeing communist countries as other than enemies.

Yet Chiang not only associates Taiwan’s government with positive descriptors — “human-heartedness,” “amiability,” “love,” and so on — but he speaks of these qualities as an “*ever-growing, excellent cultural foundation* for our Chinese people” (emphasis mine) thus strongly suggesting that — again, in contrast to the restraining *gongfei*, the mainland bandits, unable to escape their linguistic imprisonment as harbingers of tyranny, cruelty, and evil (closed, finished, similar [to the entire communist world]) — those in Taiwan are to view themselves as growing, developing, evolving into a future state (open, unfinished, different). Here, too, though, the view presented by the mainland would portray these roles as reversed.

Nearly every political leader summarizes opponents in such declaratory terms (and these are acts of *cultural description*), devoid of subtlety and brooking no argument about their deficiencies, while offering promises of a favorable future (more cultural description) to potential supporters. However, when such activity becomes trans-national, referring to “our” national cultures versus “theirs,” we can place it under the lens of open and closed perception, revealing the two “forms” of discourse creating a consensual meaning implying superiority for one side and inferiority for the other. This would not be possible without the codependency of perceptual horizons that are both finished and unfinished, since no difference has meaning without bidirectional, permeable passage (similarity to difference, difference to similarity) that lets the “like” one in.

Fifth portal: Uncompletedness

The *uncompletedness* dimension states, “all communication is fashioned in the awareness of a potential response from those for whom it is fashioned, and in the awareness of previous and subsequent communication on the same subject — hence, no communication can ever be said to be the ‘last word’ on a subject” (Holt, 1994, p. iii–iv). This principle places specific acts of cognition and communication as points in an endless succession of such acts, each declaration building

upon what went before and in light of the communicator’s constant awareness that her/his communication inevitably engenders responses. It is by contemplating this principle that we become aware of the temporality and fragility of declarations about culture derived from the excessive reification of terms used in the comparison, such as the inappropriate derivation of cultural “principles” that result from too great a credence being placed on bipolar constructs such as “individualism” and “collectivism.”

Rather, the uncompletedness principle reminds us that the declaration seemingly made from the safety of an overarching system of thought (as most scholarly examinations of cultural difference are) merely places in the endless stream of human discourse a *provisional* avowal that not only *might* be challenged, but certainly *will be*, over and over again, by interactants from a variety of different cultural backgrounds. This is a common feature of all conclusions about cultural comparison: each one, immediately upon gaining entry into the domain of social discourse, is inextricably “hooked” to all other assertions about that subject, particularly in that domain.

For an example, let us turn to a more recent edition of Fodor’s Japan guidebooks, an online edition describing the *onsen* thermal spa (hot springs resorts) (“*Onsen* and bathing,” n.d.). This activity, identified on the website as a “top experience,” points to Japan’s unusual geothermal substructure, which gives rise to numerous hot springs. As I have noted, and any tourist can confirm from personal experience, hyperbole is an inescapable aspect of touristic promotion. Consider, then, this rather colorful promotion of the “hot springs experience”:

The Japanese have a special term for that blissful state of total immersion: *yude-dako* — literally “boiled octopus” — and Japanese people of all ages and both sexes will journey for miles to attain it. Getting boiled is a step on the road to sound health, good digestion, clear skin, marital harmony — to whatever it is that gives you a general sense of being at one with the universe.

While a bit of the above might seem fairly uncontroversial (a gesture toward similarity), some portions — most specifically the attributed benefits — stake claims to representations whose antecedents have their history in the distant past and simultaneously bear implications for future cultural descriptions (a nod to difference). Absent supporting evidence, why would anyone assume that “getting boiled” (surely a painful and uncomfortable experience) would result in improved “digestion,” “skin,” and (most puzzling) “marital harmony”? Claims to such beneficial results (the epitome of the discourse of cultural difference), along with the use of shocking comparison terms like “boiled octopus,” establish positions on radically different aspects of Japanese culture. This, all while enlisting the safety net of similarity in asserting that *onsen* is common cultural practice for Japanese of “all

ages and both sexes” who “journey miles” for it, relying on a discursive suggestion implying *onsen* is deep in Japanese culture, and *has been for some time*, making it the epitome of foundational utterances that precede a given description, as predicated in the principle of uncompletedness.

On the other side of this discursive trajectory lie future challenging utterances, such as those of (to name only a few) physicians who might doubt the salutary effect of hot springs bathing (especially when it “boils” you); lawyers for the travel guide publishers who might be bothered about the results when an unsuspecting and too-literal consumer of the guidebook’s words perhaps suffers injury and sues the publisher; those Japanese who object to this activity being so blandly (and possibly mistakenly) promoted as “being at one with the universe”; and so on. The point is that every utterance enters into interaction with what comes before and what comes after, if, much like Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson’s (1967) contention that there is no beginning and no ending in communication, the idea of uncompletedness reminds us to contemplate any cultural description as only a configuration chosen at a particular moment in time, subject to continuous revision/challenges. In other words, differences can no longer be reified.

Absent the hyperbole, the same point can be made about the more “legitimate” cultural descriptions to be found in scholarly literature. There, though tempered through layers of editorial and peer review, scholars who are credited with having something original to say end up making declarations that are designed specifically to contest other domains of discourse, and thus of course in turn become targets for dispute themselves. However, for every assertion made according to, say, Hofstede’s dimensions model, there are other assertions that a cultural characteristic that supposedly can be assigned to the culture of a given nation is disputable. For every declaration of how one culture is different from another culture, there are literally a limitless number of assertions that contest that declaration, asserting in essence that the declaration of difference evaporates when confronted by challenges that work to establish how the supposed distinction verifies, not difference, but sameness.

As scholars of Asian Pacific communication, we would do well to apply this simple test to every assertion about cultural difference, asking, “Can this ever be considered the ‘last word’ on this subject, and further, what are the cognitive and linguistic progenitors and descendants of this contention and how do they affect the implied stability of this assertion and the certainty of the ground on which it appears to rest?” Application of this commonsensical analytical tool will quickly reveal the shakiness of most assertions (remember, it is not that they are false, merely that they are *not as stable as they seem*) about cultural difference and throw open the portal of uncompletedness to let the “like” one in.

Summary: The five portals as tools to analyze cultural similarity

In summary, the five tools depicted in the above discussion as features of the work of the Bakhtin circle — *specificity, ownership, tension, open and closed perception, and uncompletedness* — can be viewed as sensitizing concepts whose application to cultural descriptions based on a preoccupation with cultural differences reveal the inevitable linkage between the two chief qualities of language identified by the Bakhtin circle: *centripetal* qualities, or those which tend language in the social sphere toward sameness or uniformity (the *monological* inclination); and *centrifugal* qualities, or those which tend language toward uniqueness and lack of uniformity (the *dialogical* inclination). Bakhtin’s circle asserted that every act of communication must have centripetal/monologic, as well as centrifugal/dialogic, qualities. It is on this basis that we should regard every description emphasizing cultural difference as containing within itself the qualities of similarity and vice versa.

However, while Bakhtinian thought may appear intuitively obvious, it is more useful to us, as analysts of discourse about Asian Pacific culture, to have in hand a set of tools to aid us in our quest to unite, or at least accommodate, similarity in difference, and difference in similarity. This is where the five dimensions, and the portals they permit us to conceptually engage, come in. They can do the work that sensitizing concepts are intended to do, to stimulate insight by unfamiliar, and hence provocative, comparisons.

Conclusion

Despite clear evidence that cultures are designed to address a set of needs common to all humanity, regardless of culture (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961), and could clearly benefit from a refocus on similarities (e.g., Kleeberg & Langenohl, 2014), the scholarly community has proven reluctant to invite similarity into studies comparing cultures. As I have shown, such disproportionate emphasis is seemingly compelled by the nature of academic discourse, which favors assertions based on claims implying uniqueness, as well as by a problematic feature of language elaborated by Mikhail Bakhtin: that each utterance about culture (and everything else) features an uneasy alliance/competition between qualities that impel it toward the monologic and those which impel it toward the dialogic. Far from being a factor that condemns cultural description to remaining forever impenetrable, the interaction of these two qualities permits us to see how every act of communication in describing culture must inevitably include information (either explicit or implied) about *both* difference *and* similarity. Of the many ways one can bring these two

kinds of communication to light to reveal the underlying dynamics of cultural description, I have offered five Bakhtinian dimensions — *specificity*; *ownership*; *tension*; *open and closed perception*; and *uncompletedness* — as portals whose application as sensitizing concepts provide a concise, creative, and appealing way of “opening” discussion to invite similarity into deliberations about culture, we can redress the imbalance in a tradition thus far dominated by considerations of cultural difference.

If we inspect the findings in the current essay, as well as the others in this special issue, it is hard to escape the conclusion that, despite what has been an overwhelming preponderance of emphasis on difference in cultural description, there exist several vital, innovative, stimulating perspectives to bring similarity into these discussions, beneficial not just on their own terms, but in how they change, mostly for the better, the valuable, voluminous findings we have about cultural differences. It is not just the “five portals” approach presented here, but numerous other inventive ways through which we can let the “like” one in. It is a growing chorus of celebration of heteroglossia, based on what we *have found*, but more, what we *can find*.

How Mikhail Bakhtin would have loved that!

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