

# Expectations and Personal Cultural Knowledge: Redefining Asian Scholars' Research Efforts

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This study critically analyzes race-related research with an Asian focus in selected major communication publications with the results showing that these lines of research suffer from four major problems. First, how Asians are portrayed must, for the most part, stay in line with a dominant White, dichotomous paradigm that serves to highlight the superiority of Western communication. Second, Asians tend to be studied more as a means to illustrate cultural collectivism than as members of distinct cultures. Third, Asian scholars must struggle between positioning their studies as about Asians or about specific cultural groups, and whether to avoid possible oppositional discourse. Fourth, Asian scholars writing about Asian patterns of communication must cope with the perception that they are opportunistic.

## Introduction

Sensitivity to culture (as often defined by one's race and ethnicity) and identity have come to be taken for granted as factors in communication (Giri, 2006). Because communication is culturally and contextually bound, scholars must treat issues of race, culture, and ethnicity as central, to avoid cultural—especially Eurocentric—biases and limitations. While multiculturalism demands respect and understanding of cultural others, in the struggle among different groups, noncultural issues like power and ideology have come to claim important academic discursive space. Acknowledgment of these forces sheds new light on communication theory building.

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Beneath such grand goals, however, practical questions surface. Who should conduct what research and how should it be evaluated and presented? Writing about culture enjoins identities of researcher(s); participants=co-researchers; reviewers=editors; and readers, collectively defining the culture-writing enterprise and determining its legitimacy.

Researchers have for some time pointed out biases in mainstream communication theories and scholarship, in that they neglect or do not give sufficient accounts of culture (e.g., Fitch, 1994) and/or race (e.g., Ashcraft & Allen, 2003; Allen, 2007; R. Jackson, 2000; Parker, 2003). Although these problems still persist, Western assumptions have become less likely to be taken for granted. But even if such a situation has been to some extent corrected, we still have to address the issue of how such writing about cultural others may be legitimized, particularly when it is often done by minority scholars. While several researchers have critically evaluated power relations involved in studies concerning cultural others (Conquergood, 1991; West, 1993), comparatively few (e.g., Hendrix, 2002, 2005) address unique problems and obstacles encountered by non-White scholars as they conduct race-related research.

This article extends these contributions (e.g., Ashcraft & Allen, 2003; Allen, 2007; Fitch, 1994; Hendrix, 2002, 2005; R. Jackson, 2000; Parker, 2003) by addressing problems from an Asian perspective. Specifically, we examine how Asians are presented in "acceptable terms" in mainstream communication journals, and, in light of such standards, how Asian scholars must negotiate their race-related research in order to publish their work.

#### Four Major Problems

Ironically, because of intercultural communication's role in centralizing issues of culture, Asian communication studies are often cast in terms of the cultural other, becoming appropriate for scholars when they venture outside their cultural (i.e., American) boundaries. "Otherness" compels specific perspectives, within which Asian scholars' research efforts are assessed, so that publication of race-related research in journals with an Asian focus suffers from four problems.

##### Dichotomizing East-West Comparison

The pervasiveness of bipolar constructs like individualism=collectivism (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995); high=low-context communication (Hall, 1976); independent=interdependent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991); restricted=elaborated codes (Bernstein, 1971); and so on vivifies an oppositional East-West discourse (Chang, Holt, & Luo, 2006), treating Western modes as "the norm" against which Asians are measured. Pye (1985) contends that feature differentiating Asian from Western civilizations is "the Asian tendency to place more value on the collectivity and to be less sensitive than the West to the values of individualism" (p. 26).

The "collective" Asians with extensive relational structures are often seen as antithetical to Westerners' emphasis on autonomy and freedom. Different relational

structures across cultures supposedly explain communicative behaviors (Chang, 1997), so many believe that, given their relational positioning, Asians must orient themselves toward the collective, and their language use indirect, restrained and proscribed. In contrast, Westerners, focusing on self, are thought to be free, expressive, and direct in communication. "The Asian mode of communication (high-context) is often vague, indirect, and implicit, whereas Western communication (low-context) tends to be direct and explicit" (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2007, p. 160).

Oliver (1971) illustrates this deep-rooted Western conception of Asian communication: "[T]he primary function of discourse [of Asian rhetoric] is not to enhance the welfare of the individual speaker or listener but to promote harmony" (p. 261). Even after a quarter century, this notion remains pervasive, as illustrated in one source:

[I]n Chinese culture, communication is not primarily utilized to affirm self-identity or to achieve individual needs and goals. . . . The primary functions of communication in Chinese culture are to maintain existing relationships among individuals, to reinforce role and status differences, and to preserve harmony within the group. (Gao, Ting-Toomey, & Gudykunst, 1996, p. 283)

A more serious problem is the value judgment that "collectivistic" Asians communication is often viewed as more constrained, less sophisticated, and inarticulate (Chang, 1997), compared with that of Westerners. Kim, Shin, and Cai (1998) write, "The interdependent view . . . of the self and of the collective requires adjusting and fitting to important relationships, occupying one's proper place in the group, engaging in collectively appropriate actions, and promoting the goals of others" (p. 49). Similarly, Ng, Loong, He, Liu, and Weatherall (2000) contend that collectivism leads to "self-censoring, and even compromised talk, for the sake of maintaining social harmony, respecting the existing status hierarchy, and so forth" (p. 27). Restrictions on free will render Asians as having little volition; it is difficult, if not impossible, to speak one's mind.

Rather than provide a sophisticated analysis of why Asians are more indirect, many simply cite the power of the collectivity. Observations are then interpreted and explained according to these categories: "Once these generalizations were accepted as the received view on the subject, the adequacy of that representation was recognized retrospectively" (Liu, 1996, p. 332). Individualism and collectivism have become discursive fields with specific practices that sustain a unifying force (West, 1993) privileging individualism as normal and collectivism as not.

The belief that individuals exist only to serve the collectivity and are unimportant in Asian culture, and hence that they are not articulate, expressive, and direct, has roots in the Western tendency to treat individual and group as opposite one another, a remnant of the Cartesian dualistic separation of mind and world. When Asians choose to emphasize the collectivity, they must let go of their individual volition, and since verbal articulation comes with self-expression, it follows they are more likely to be inarticulate and restricted in their language.

Work in line with this paradigm endorses the West as legitimate while rendering Asians as anomalous, strange, or even inadequate and is therefore done more to

highlight the superiority of Western communication than to understand Asian patterns. Since major communication research publication venues are controlled mostly by White scholars, "they tend to reflect Eurocentric, white supremacist biases, however unwittingly" (Allen, 2007, p. 260).

Increasingly, Eurocentric theoretical=methodological orientations and dualistic research paradigms have been criticized (e.g., Chen, 2006; Dissanayake, 1989; Miike, 2006, 2007). Dualism reduces both "sides" (West, individualistic, East, collectivistic) to simplified, reified entities and complicates coexistence. Some have suggested that, given the disparity between the Asian worldview and the functionalist paradigm prevalent in intercultural communication studies, Asians should abandon the positivistic orientation because it cannot provide a frame within which Asian communication can be understood (Dissanayake, 1989; Miike, 2006).

Despite criticisms, such thoughts remain mainstream, with many continuing to employ them to explore cultural, particularly East-West, differences. Constructs like these provide a way out of the difficulties of describing complex cultures in detail by transforming culture into categories for quick comparison. This tendency is connected to the field's preoccupation with quantitative research and the marginalizing of qualitative methods (Hendrix, 2005; West, 1993), especially given the link between intercultural communication and cross-cultural psychology.

Review of Communication Monographs clearly shows how entrenched are these ideas in quantitative cross-cultural comparative studies. Except for a few that do not utilize such constructs (Miller, Reynolds, & Cambra, 1987) or find them problematic (Cai & Fink, 2002), these studies invoke one or more dichotomous constructs—individualism=collectivism most prevalent—to explain differences in communication between Americans and Asians. Exemplars can be found in studies in the earlier research of Gudykunst and his associates (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984a; Gudykunst, Yoon, & Nishida, 1987) explaining cultural influences on uncertainty reduction and the process of communication; in Ting-Toomey's (1988; see also Oetzel et al., 2001) face negotiation theory; in Yum's (1988) analysis of relational orientation; and in the recent work of Kim and her associates (Kim et al., 1996; Kim et al., 2000; Kim et al., 1998), who have analyzed interactional constraints, implicit theories of requesting, and patient-doctor interaction.

The support for such dichotomous conceptions, even with their limitations, is a powerful force with which researchers are all too familiar. West (1993) notes that ethnographies are judged within academia's ideological practices, as enforced through their normalizing power, "[learning] how to 'sample' . . . other people's research into their own" (p. 216). Judging by published work in mainstream communication journals, the majority of "other people's research" invokes a discourse that both assumes and reinforces the individualism=collectivism dichotomy.

Since they must abide by conventional theoretical frameworks, Asian scholars must subordinate their insights and stay silent in proposing alternatives. Even were they to challenge such a paradigm, they must situate themselves against preconceived views and paradoxically perpetuate such constructs as dominant.

### Homogenizing Asian Cultural Collectivism

A second problem is that studies focusing on countries=areas are often treated as elements in an overarching "Asian" category endorsing collectivist values. Since a goal of cross-cultural comparison is to show the utility of these constructs, studies focusing on cultures' idiosyncrasies, particularly those in "less prominent" areas, tend to be dismissed as "ethnic studies" less related to central issues of communication research. This categorization helps sustain communication activities of Whites as the norm; the standard against which other cultures can be measured.

In several major, particularly quantitatively oriented, communication journals this is done by grouping "Asians" as a totalizing category contrasting with the dominant White perspective; seldom are intact nations=ethnic groups discussed by themselves.<sup>1</sup> A 1984 *Communication Monographs* article (Wheeless, Erickson, & Behrens, 1984), for example, divides subjects into "Western (American)" and "non-Western" categories; 226 subjects were "U.S. citizens" and the remaining 134 students from 30 countries were "classified as citizens of countries subscribing predominantly to non-Western values" (p. 39). Although the "non-Western" subjects are not designated as "Asian," the tendency to put "non-Westerners" into one interchangeable category shows the journal's tendency to centralize "the West" as the norm. Nor is this simply an early phenomenon. Publications by Kim et al. (2000) use the term "non-Western" to refer to Asians.

*Communication Monographs* has published a few Asian-related, mainly comparative, studies: Gudykunst and associates' (1984a, 1987) work on uncertainty reduction and in=out-group distinction; Yum's (1988) discussion of Confucianism's impact on East Asians; and Kim and associates' (1996, 1998, 2000) work with cultural-level individualism=collectivism or individual-level independent=interdependent self-construal. There are also comparative studies (Oetzel et al., 2001; Park & LeVine, 1999; Suzuki & Ranger, 1994), only three of which are labeled as being about Chinese (Walsh, 1986; Zhang, Harwood, & Hummert, 2005) or Japanese (Stewart, Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Nishida, 1986). On those occasions when extant Asian cultures are discussed, they are by researchers who are members of comparative studies teams.

*Communication Yearbook* shows a similar pattern. Since 1978, Asians appear in comparative studies between Asians and Americans (in the framework of dichotomous constructs—Kim, 1999; Kim & Leung, 2000), and between Japan and America (Boyd, 1986; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984b; Wiseman & Abe, 1986). Culture-specific studies are exceptions: one article discussing empowerment in India and Bangladesh (Rogers & Singhal, 2003) and two articles on Japan (Ito, 1990; Ito & Ito, 1987). No article addresses any other Asian ethnic group.<sup>2</sup>

In such mainstream communication journals=annuals, the category "Asians" seldom appears on its own but often exists side-by-side with Americans. Interest is clearly in how Asian cultures illustrate collectivistic cultural values perhaps differing from "normal," White culture, rather than on elaborating findings concerning the other focal racial=ethnic groups themselves.

This framework assumes cultures that endorse collectivistic values are interchangeable. Putting highly diverse Asians into an all-encompassing category glosses over the complexities of Asian communication practices and leads to inappropriately broad generalizations concerning them. The terms “the East” and “Asia” are highly abstract and ambiguous:

Asia is a place of such remarkable variety. Indonesia is largely Muslim, yet it contains a large Hindu enclave in Bali. Indians were also imported to parts of Malaysia, and Buddhism, started in India, can hardly be found there now, except as a political reaction to casteism. Instead, it has taken root in China, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere. Shintoism thrives in Japan, but maybe nowhere else. Asia has some massive cities, but 80% of some Asian countries are rural. India and China have 800 language varieties or dialects. . . . And, yet, many similarities exist across the region, alongside evident differences. It is a daunting task for me to discuss “Asian Communication.” (Chen & Starosta, 2003, p. 1)

### Double-Binding Self-Representation

The orientation dichotomizing East and West, then homogenizing Asians while elevating “Western” perspectives, legitimizes inadequate conceptual and methodological reasoning (Chang et al., 2006). Since they must write from within such limits, Asians confront questions of whether to position themselves as writing about Asians or, given Asian culture=ethnic groups, whether this perpetuates “Asian”=“Western” opposition, and how power enters such discourse.

Very recently, some journals have turned to a perspective centralizing the Asian view; *Communication Monographs*, in a forum on cultural bias in communication theory, published Miike’s (2007) article challenging what studies should be done, how they should be conducted, and whether and why certain cultures should be studied. Earlier, *Review of Communication* (Volume 6, Nos. 1 & 2, and No. 4) published articles (i.e., Chen, 2006; Miike, 2006) calling for studies of Asian communication:

Asian communication studies cannot revolutionize the discipline only by incorporating Asian participants into the research process. The key to the Asiatic renaissance is to shift radically theoretical lenses around which the very research process—research design, data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation—centers. (Miike, p. 13)

Such a call begins with claims for the uniqueness of Asian voices muted in the West. It moves the Asian perspective from the shadow of Western views and offers a culturally sensitive account that should have begun long ago; the emerging Asian paradigm lays “a critical moment for Asian communication scholars to stop, think, and then move a step forward through the process of self-examination” (Chen, 2006, p. 296). However, this highlights Asians’ double-bind position: To gain legitimacy, they cannot not point out the uniqueness of Asian communication, but by doing so they are trapped in an oppositional discourse perpetuating a power imbalance.

Such a claim also reinforces the dichotomy between Asian and Eurocentric perspectives that the Asiatic perspective aims to deconstruct. It reifies Asians as contrasting with Whites and is complicit with respect to such discourse (McPhail,

1997). The reversal leads to the same predicament (Chang et al., 2006): "[I]ts radical force will be coopted by yet another either=or binary construction that ultimately reproduces modernist thinking" (Conquergood, 1991, p. 191).

First, Asian scholars struggle against representing "Asians" or only specific ethnic groups. Despite sensitivity to cultural intricacies and perhaps to grant the category more power in the face of dominant discourse, articles under the Asiacentric perspective group various entities under the "Asian" umbrella. By calling for Asiacentricity, each nation=ethnic group's right of representation is foregone and the inclusive label "Asians" becomes even more firmly entrenched.

Second, Asiacentricity as a new center for communication studies (e.g., Chen, 2006; Chen & Starosta, 2003) and the call for "Asiacentric renaissance" (Miike, 2006, p. 13) point to the view's marginalized status. These perspectives show what is considered the center (not Asiacentric) and seem compelled, reluctantly, to see that "the marginalized" is acknowledged.

If such a call for an alternative—i.e., Asian—perspective is "granted," that decision is made in the American academic context and remains under the auspices of another, "Western," power. Calls for an Asiacentric perspective are possible because a dominant Western discourse exists. At a deeper level, such a call is deemed legitimate to support the dominant discourse's claim for its not-so-dominant status, and the dominant discourse—such as *Communication Monographs*—is willing to entertain alternative ideas. Acceptance of the Asiacentric perspective can thus be said to inadvertently solidify rather than weaken the dominant discourse. It remains to be seen if, after such a call, articles addressing extent "Asian" groups in these mainstream journals increase.

Asian scholars are in a double-bind in positioning their research. Fundamentally, they need to question whether they need to do more than just use "Asian perspectives" as a counterbalance to build communication theory (Chang et al., 2006). To make it into selected mainstream journals, Asian scholars often must claim to present "Asians" and not a specific ethnic group. As noted, studies concentrating on single Asian nations=groups or "less prominent" areas tend to be dismissed as "ethnic studies" more likely to appear only in non-mainstream journals or journals with the explicit goal of publishing work on cultural others (such as *The Howard Journal of Communication*). This means that work on race-related research tends to be submitted to, and published in, journals outside the mainstream of the discipline (Hendrix, 2005).

### Negotiating Balance Between Writing One's Own Knowledge and "Writing Scholarly"

Asian scholars trying to publish work about Asian communication face a multi-layered task. They must be concerned with staying in line with White discourse (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995), while struggling between representing "Asians" as a general category and as specific nation=ethnic groups, and what position they take toward such representation.

Lastly, as cultural insiders, Asians must position themselves between understanding in their own right and examining their cultures to prove cultural values, compelling a constant switch back and forth between what they know in depth and what

they must selectively choose to present to show their academic competence. This is not only a theoretical issue but a very practical concern. As ethnographic writing has recognized the importance of allowing into descriptions researcher voices, the question of who should write, or who should be given the power to write, has become ever more intriguing (Hendrix, 2002).

When writing about Asian patterns of communication, Asians often must cope with the perception that they are opportunistic, simply exploiting their "insider" status to write about a culture they already know, something to which cultural outsiders cannot be privy. Asians may be seen as not needing to follow rigorous standards, since whatever they write is guaranteed to "count." Reviewers knowing little about target cultures may find it hard to apply standards of rigor to such research yet continue to judge its quality, with editors allowing them to proceed. An added twist is that, given treatment of all Asians in a unitary category, an Asian scholar can speak for more than simply his=her nationality (or at whatever level culture is defined) and thus can appear even more opportunistic (see the case of Japan in many comparative studies).

The criticism that Asian scholars write about what they know is mystifying, since that standard is seldom applied to Whites writing about themselves. White descriptions, being transparent and immune to researchers' cultural understanding, are often judged by presumably universal standards of rigor. Asian researchers must explain and justify concern with "their" cultures and to prove competence beyond their "privileged" cultural knowledge.

The research efforts of people of color are more likely to be discounted and the quality of their work suspect. While we cannot claim that researchers who share cultural background with those they study will be more sensitive to the intricacies of multilayered cultural life (cf. Miike, 2006), it is equally wrong to assume that their ethnic identities will prevent them from engaging in and expanding efforts to understand the targets of their research. Such scholars are no more opportunistic than any other researchers, since all researchers write of what they personally are familiar with, and most write something about their own cultures, including "White" culture.

Everyone is opportunistic but not everyone is equally judged for their opportunism. To assume an Asian (or any other) background leads to an "easier" or "more biased" perspective misses the point. The focus should be on whether one has the reflexivity to capture the intricacies of the cultural fabric and how people's voices (including that of the researcher) can be made known, rather than on appropriateness (and problematic) of the researcher's ethnic background.

Perhaps to avoid seeming opportunism and prove their research theoretically grounded, some Asian scholars object to cultural-specific research. Kim (2002) criticizes such research as failing to achieve appropriate abstraction and hindering the building of pancultural theories (see also Miike, 2006). This is interesting, as any study, Western or non-Western, can only be culturally specific. If cultural-specific research is rejected, then all noncomparative studies—whether about Asians or otherwise, including Whites—must be rejected. Kim, however,



only counts Asian studies as cultural specific while accepting Western studies as appropriately abstract for theory building. This differential treatment reinforces Asian cultural exoticism.<sup>3</sup>

Kim (2002) also states that cultural-specific research fails to focus on empirical concerns. This construction of "empirical" is problematic, referring to quantitative but not other forms of empiricism, such as qualitative studies delving deep into culture. Like M. Jackson's (1989) radical empiricism advocating involvement and engagement with people and cultures, we argue there is nothing more "empirical" than ethnography.

Kim's perspectives put race-related researchers in a difficult position, as they must combat the charge of lacking theoretical rigor and not being empirically grounded. The researcher's ethnicity is an advantage in "empirical" research, providing opportunities for full engagement and an impressive amount of knowledge. In studies about culture, the author's ethnicity, whether Asian or otherwise, should be viewed as a plus in securing the cooperation of collaborators and not a contaminating factor negatively biasing or invalidating results.

Any researcher's background must be an element in reflexivity, an issue addressed in ethnographic research (Conquergood, 1991; M. Jackson, 1989). It should be as much an issue for Asian scholars writing about Asians as for scholars of other ethnicities, including White scholars, whose ethnicity is taken as hidden and invisible. Until this is realized in communication research, Asian scholars must work under a unique, and for the most part unfair, position.

## Conclusion

Issues of race and ethnicity complicate research and outcomes of attempts to publish come about through the interplay of alternate elements—researcher(s), subjects=co-researchers, reviewers=editors, and so on. This is the case with mainstream publications in Asian communication studies. Our analysis is primarily based on titles and abstracts of published articles in selected mainstream communication journals, together with our research on Chinese communication, but the emerging picture still shows problems with studies about and by Asians.

First, the problems we outline are connected parts of an interactional cultural description performance in the American communication discipline. Even if Asian scholars transcend dichotomous, homogenizing thought, they must face the challenge of whether to position themselves as a group, and, if so, how to deal with oppositional discourse. Their race continues to shape others' evaluations of their credibility in writing about something "they already know."

Over time, Asians writing about themselves (especially if they use qualitative methods) convince themselves that mainstream channels will not be receptive to their work. It is not that action does not accomplish goals—no action is undertaken since failure is anticipated. That editors tend not to consider such research important means researchers submit less of their work to these journals and editors come to reconfirm that the work is less important.

Second, such problems manifest according to the unique racial backgrounds of the researcher and the studied. Asian scholars' histories with Whites and other groups in the United States lead to unique academic discourse different from other racial groups, such as African Americans (e.g., Allen, 2007; R. Jackson, 2000; McPhail, 1997) and Hispanic Americans. Studies by scholars of color in communication journals, while facing similar challenges posed by unquestioned White superiority, nevertheless must deal with their own unique situations.

Race-related research in major communication journals will continue to confront researchers for both theoretical and practical reasons. As Omi and Winant (2000) explain:

The longevity of the race concept, and the enormous number of effects race-thinking (and race-acting) have produced, guarantee that race will remain a feature of social reality across the globe, and a fortiori in our own country, despite its lack of intrinsic or scientific merit (in the biological sense). (p. 202)

A sign of growth in the field is that we can express our concerns about race-related research. A measure of our diversity of opinion is that, even with the dominance of certain methodological discourse, we can challenge and examine what is unconsciously assumed. It is in the service of such growth that we add to that development in Asian communication studies.

### Notes

- [1] Not all communication journals follow the same pattern; those with a more qualitative focus are more likely to publish work on specific ethnic=racial groups. The *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, with its focus on rhetoric and specific nations=groups, since 1988 has published nine articles on aspects of Asian rhetoric, of which seven are about Chinese.
- [2] Similarly, *Communication Theory*, true to its name (suggesting concern with theory building), seldom publishes any article that addresses specific Asian countries=cultures. Other than several articles on intercultural communication, this journal has since 1988 published only two articles on South Asians (Durham, 2001; Dutta-Bergman, 2004) and one article that touches on issues of construction of Asian images (Parameswaran, 2002).
- [3] Kim's paradoxical position may explain why even in the act of criticizing the problematic aspects of dichotomous conceptions, she consistently adds another set of dichotomous constructs (independent and interdependent self-construal) to explain differences between East and West (Kim, 1999; Kim et al., 1996).

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