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Asian Approaches to Human Communication: A Dialogue

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Guo-Ming Chen: Tell me what's your reaction when you see the title, "Asian Approaches to Human Communication."

William J. Starosta: 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. When I see the term "Asian" used in communication literature, I wonder what risks are found in such generalization. And, yet, many similarities exist across the region, alongside evident differences. It is a daunting task for me to discuss "Asian Communication."

Chen: It is indeed troublesome to use such a general term like "Asian Communication" to describe such a diverse group of people who are so different culturally, socially, religiously and economically. The question is, especially for the purpose of discussion or study, whether it is possible to draw a common thread that penetrates all these differences to demonstrate the unique characteristics of the area when comparing or contrasting the other similar concepts, such as "European Communication" or "African Communication."

When Asante (1980) proposed "Afrocentric," "Eurocentric," and "Asiancentric" as the three broad views of reality existing in the world, I guess he indirectly assumed that commonality can be generated from each reality, even if diversity is a norm rather than an exception in each continental center of culture. Thus, in order to continue our dialogue on "Asian Communication," I think we first need to recognize the existence of heterogeneity and homogeneity in Asia and treat the differences and similarities among Asian people as equally important.

Starosta: I see your point, that Asia has been viewed, often from the west, often from a great distance, and has been hypothesized as somehow different from places that are geographically closer to the west.

Westerners placed the west in the center of the world, just as a Mercator projection of the world places Europe at the center of the map. (Similarly, China's name styles it as the central land.) It does not matter how old were the

non-European civilizations: each awaited “discovery” by westerners, as though the natives did not count as discoverers. Early Peruvian and Chinese and Egyptian civilizations were of little interest to early explorers and colonizers except as possible sources of gold, spices, converts, trade routes or slaves. I think that the tendency of western mapmakers to center the world on Europe, and of USAmericans to center the communication world on the United States, calls for review and critique.

For some time, Africa shared the periphery with Asia and South America. Then black scholars including Molefi K. Asante, Ali Mazrui and Janheinz Jahn painted a communication portrait of Sub-Saharan, Bantu Africa as an archetype for all of the African continent. The African-American ancestral affinity for the African continent led to the development and articulation of what is “African” about Africa. In this way a second point of reference arose to maintain that the things that much of Africa had in common in their patterns and forms and values of communication were more significant than possible differences from tribe to tribe, and region to region.

Offering this perspective, even if it may have overgeneralized commonalities among peoples on the African continent, and may have drawn too-sharp discontinuities from the west, played the important role of offering another starting point, another point of vantage, on the varieties of ways that humans communicate. A new center was offered to allow communication maps of the world to focus on something besides Europe.

Asante and other Afrocentric writers were more familiar with the west than with the east. They deserve credit for affirming that alternative perspectives could be articulated on communication besides the European and the African ones, though I doubt they were well equipped to do for Asia what Afrocentrists did for the black Diaspora.

It is time to pick up the task of defining what is quintessentially “Asian” about the communication of Asians. This is a task that cannot be left to orientalists, who pose Asia as an exotic, mirror image of things western, but must be picked up by persons who turn to the content of various Asian societies in the terms of those who live in those societies. Mendoza (2002), for one, tends to elaborate on what is unique about a single nation within Asia, whereas Miike (2002, 2003a) looks for patterns of communication in the Asian region that transcend particular nations. Both research programs have their importance, and doing one of these should not deter pursuit of the other.

Stressing the heterogeneity in Asia helps to catalogue, to understand, to preserve human diversity. It articulates centrism (Starosta & Chen, 2003) that help to heal the human psyche that may have been depleted by colonization and by wars. Stressing homogeneity, which I take to be our chief task, also does something of value. It proposes that some influences have diffused broadly

across the vastness of Asia to a degree that it becomes meaningful to speak at the level of commonalities.

Speaking at this level offers one more chance for western researchers in communication to realize the cultural limitations of their thinking; and it opens new possibilities for researchers to look for values and beliefs about communication that cross cultural boundaries such as those you itemize above.

Chen: I think it is understandable and acceptable for a culture to place itself as the “center” of the world. It is a way for a culture to develop ethnocentrism and that, in turn, gives its members a safe mentality to develop a cohesive group identity. Without going through this process a culture won’t be able to survive.

The question is the degree of, and the way to check, ethnocentrism based on this “center” mentality, especially under the impact of cultural diversity or the globalizing trend in the modern human societies. Living in this multiple “culture centers” situation if we are unable to nourish a new personality through which to develop multiple identities and maintain a multicultural coexistence, human society is doomed to repeat its past, and is going nowhere (Chen & Starosta, 1996).

Culture center or ethnocentrism seems to give us a wrong impression that heterogeneity is the norm among different centers. In reality, in addition to the differences that distinguish cultures from each other, similarities exist among different cultural groups. For example, Gebser (1985) indicated that, except for integral consciousness structure, archaic, magical, mythical, and rational structures exist in all human societies. These consciousness structures might be hidden in one culture, but manifest in another through the form of cultural values that can be observed on the behavioral level. In my opinion, knowing the differences tends to intensify our distinctness and glorify our identity, and knowing the similarities lays down the foundation of connectedness.

Through a variety of factors, such as geographical proximity and racial resemblance, neighboring cultures tend to display a higher degree of commonality through interaction, because interaction provides an opportunity for members in neighboring cultures to surface the common structure of hidden consciousness. This gives us the basis for rationalizing the labels of “Afrocentric,” “Eurocentric,” or “Asiacentric” categorization.

Let’s talk about Asia. As you mentioned, the concept refers to a vast area with quite diverse cultures. From this perspective, the term “Asian communication” seems not to make sense or draw any meaningful value in understanding those people in various cultures in the continent. However, when we are talking about, for example, the communication patterns in “Asian Five Dragons,” we do find that it is possible to draw a common thread, woven by Confucianism, that penetrates into communication behaviors in these five areas. We also find that Buddhist thought, originated from India and spread over

southeast and East Asia, forms a major part of Asian communication behaviors. South and West Asian areas adopted Islam, but due to the constant interaction with the other parts of Asia, we as well find that common cultural values were developed. Thus, comparing among people in Asia will disclose more similarities than comparing Asians with other parts of the world. Here we see the potential practicality and value of using Asian, European, or African communication patterns in reaching basic understanding of people in different but only a few “big chunks” of human societies. Using this as a starting point, we can move forward to the direction of exploring the characteristics of a specific culture whenever necessary.

The method will inevitably run into a great risk of oversimplifying or overgeneralizing the distinct cultural characteristics, or mixing the differences into a hodge-podge of cultural indistinctness. Nevertheless, as a gateway of being aware of a culture, this “from ‘a big one’ to ‘small many’ approach” to me is acceptable to serve as a bridge for people to go over the running river of mistrust and misunderstanding, especially in the learning process. Of course, the ultimate goal of human interaction is to reach the understanding of each specific culture. After all, being stuck in the hodge-podge trap might just do more harm than help in the process of intercultural communication.

Starosta: We seem to start this common task with complementary, but differing, purposes. I would hope to articulate an alternative center to that of Asia and Africa in order to test the limits of communication theorizing; and you express a concern that humankind can sacrifice possible continuities in its cataloguing of distinctness. That gives both of us reason to look at this region of the world in search of similarities.

I see your point, also, that concentrating on the distinctness of nations and cultures that have existed side by side, and served as partners in commerce, and lived under a common umbrella of Islam or Confucianism or Hinduism, paints a false picture of their cultural independence. An example that I am familiar with is that of India and Pakistan. When they were given their independence from Great Britain, Lord Mountbatten basically drew a line across South Asia that separated jute producers from cloth makers, and divided villages that both spoke Urdu or Punjabi. Mountbatten’s arbitrary line now has become a nuclear wall dividing persons who still speak the same languages and enjoy the same foods. The price of asserting differences could one day be the erasing of civilizations; as the price of colonization under a single foreign definition was potentially the same.

To communicate across differences implies similarities, and similarities suggest the existence of differences. The social construction of similarity and difference may differ for insiders to the culture, who start from their native (emic) view, versus for the analyst from the academy, who brings a comparative

(etic) view. One person may renounce action in the world as a Buddhist, another as a Hindu, a third as a Daoist. Their emic explanations for their renunciation vary, but they all conceptually give up attachment to things of the world. They paradoxically construct a single conceptual reality while they pursue their various paths.

I think that renunciation is a major theme in much of Asia. Finding one's personal relationship with philosophical ideals seems another recurrent theme. There is the defining of the self as a part of determining relationships. These and other such themes ironically unite just as they divide. A view of Asian communication will necessarily place greater emphasis on conceptual parallels than on some of the emic particularisms, I think. At the level of metatheory, individual interpretations subordinate themselves to broader patterns of continuity across regions.

Chen: "Difference" vs. "similarity" can be a very arbitrary judgment that subjects itself to personal interpretation. I remember Chuang Tzu indicated that seeing from the different part, neighbors become far distant; but seeing from the similar part, all myriad are to be a unity. It is the choice of human beings to develop the kind of attitude or interpretation they intend to hold, but how to foster the ability of knowing the nature and relationship of difference and similarity and cultivate the ability of negotiating the differences to reach a harmonious state of interaction is critical in the globalizing society. In other words, the key to an effective human communication, in my opinion, is to understand that differences exist in the similarity, and to pursue the unity from the differences.

In order to mirror the potential unity of Asian communication, let's see what are those similar elements that can be inferred from the diversity of Asian cultures. To more effectively organize my thoughts, I think I should delineate this problem from four aspects of a paradigm, including ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. These similarities can be easily found in the writings of Chai and Chai (1969), Chen (1994, 2001), Cheng (1987), Dissanayake (1983), Ishii (2001), Miike (2002, 2003a), and Yum (1987).

Ontologically, Asian cultures tend to assume a holistic view of the universe, especially in those areas influenced by Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Shintoism. In other words, Asians tend to believe that the universe is a great whole in which all is but a transitional process, with no fixed substance of its substratum. Human communication is then a holistically interconnected network and ever in a state of change and transformation. This ontological assumption provides the foundation of Asian assumptions on epistemology, axiology and methodology.

Epistemologically, the meaningful understanding of the holistic structure of the universe is embedded in the relational connection of all things. Thus, human

communication is a relational process in which interactants constantly adapt and relocate each other in the network of interdependence. Isolation based on polarization and dichotomization tends to lose its meaning of mutual dependence that dominates Asian existence.

Axiologically, harmony pervades the interdependent connectedness of the great whole of the universe. As the core Asian cultural value, harmony is treated as the end rather than the means of human communication. Thus, human communication is not a process in which interactants exert power to direct the interaction in their own favor, but they rather communicate with dignity and influence in a mutual and interdependent network on the basis of cooperation. In other words, harmony in the process of communications represents a kind of ethical appeal that can induce a sense of duty for cooperation with the other party, not by the communicator's strategic words but by the sincere display of whole-hearted concern with the other. Harmony is then the ultimate goal of Asian communication, and Asians use it as the guidance of regulating the transforming and never-ending process of human communication.

Finally and methodologically, Asians consider that the transforming process of the universe does not proceed onward in a linear way, but revolves in an endless nonlinear cycle. Human communication is changing according to this cycle of the universe like the succession of day and night and the periodic ebb and flow of the tide, and the development of human relationships through communication is then never absolutely completed or finished. This nonlinear cyclic approach of reasoning is manifested in the tendency of favoring a more intuitive, subtle, sensitive and indirect way of communication among Asian people.

Of course, as I emphasized previously, these abstract or philosophical similarities of Asian cultures won't guarantee that Asian people will be similar when applied to the daily life practice or the behavioral level. It is on the daily life or behavioral level where we can more clearly observe "differences exist in the similarity" that reflects the dynamics and diversity of Asian cultures and further preserves the identity of each culture.

Starosta: To your list of four perspectives, I would add teleology: how "what is" unfolds. Does the universe have some intent, that it plays out in the lives of individual persons? Does it have a direction that can be discerned or intuited? I think the idea of Asian "idealism" suggests that there is a need for individuals to learn what is expected of them in order to reach some higher state of being, or else in order to avoid the pains and sorrows and disharmonies that could accompany faulty knowledge and practice. I think Buddhism and Hinduism, for two examples, point to a higher and more ideal end of reconciling individual ways with some greater intent or lawfulness. Then, too, living in defined relationships in the name of some higher order of good seems a part of Confucianism, as well. The use of ancient teachings to define and regulate

everyday life, the defining of current relationships according to oral or written texts, the giving up of the fruits of actions in the belief in a cosmic law of *karma*, all fit the pattern of changing one's everyday life to align oneself with some greater intent or cosmic purpose.

Here, I do not necessarily mean the idea of a divinity who governs one's life. That can be the case for some Buddhists, I guess, if not for others. More broadly, many Asians have a common notion of "the way things are" to which they must adjust their daily living and their relationships. (The woman in China should subordinate herself to her father, to her husband, to her son. The man should maintain harmony. The Emperor who does not maintain harmony invites the wrath of Heaven.) The notion of "the way things are" is a matter of more perfect understanding, leading to the revering of persons who seem to possess a more total comprehension of the True Nature of Things.

Let's return from my tangent to your four perspectives. I believe very strongly in Chuang Tzu's position that we have the choice of whether to see similarity or difference. Similarly, multiculturalism stresses a viewpoint that acknowledges both of these at once. For me, that is a position of axiology, to see the same in the different and the different in the same. I think much western communication theorizing starts with a view of systemic differences, and can therefore only serve the end of division. (I bracket my own value orientation so that, if need be, it can be discounted later.)

To your observations on Asian ontology, I can add some views on Hinduism. Difference and differentiation appear in everyday life, but they serve to move people toward a common, cosmic end. In laying out our understanding of Mahatma Gandhi's rhetorical orientation, Chaudhary and I (1992) came to see a "systems ecological" basis for Gandhi's rhetoric that acknowledged the interconnectedness of all things. To make a change in any one thing invited change in all other parts. To change the self was to change others. This would seem to me to be consistent with a "holistic" outlook.

Basic to the Hindu view is that what is taken as material reality rests on delusion. Truth is unitary, though difference appears everywhere. Deeper understanding steers people toward a level where things and difference do not apply, ironically doing so through a maze of intense social stratifications and casteism. Gandhi fought against untouchability all his adult life, and he hoped to be freed from rebirth. But, if he had to be reborn, he asked that it be as a *Harijan* (untouchable) (in Jack, 1956).

Such paradox seems to run through many teachings of Asian idealism: at times a thing can be two different things at once; and at others it can be *neti neti*, neither this, neither that. I would have to return to the study of more Hindu texts to see if I find change and transformation, or if change and transformation come in appearance, only. Maybe I would need to separate the social and the cosmic

levels: the cosmic is unchanging, but the appearance changes endlessly. I think that Hindus allow that the One acts upon the Many, but I don't recall speculation about why it does so, and about why it promotes a belief in the Many, except as a form of "play."

Just as mutual dependence or station, the acting out assigned expectations to promote a greater harmony, is important to Confucianism, casteism (like the *jajmani* system) was originally meant as a means to practice complementarity, to play interlocking roles in attaining a common good. What is taught and what is intended can diverge, I guess, and it is likely to change in the direction of giving one group power over some other.

Epistemologically, how does one come to understand The Way Things Are? The answers could be found in a more informed teaching by some exemplar of a given Path. They could be found in a good-faith effort at right living, with the hope that this effort will advance one's personal understanding of Things Bigger. They could be found by stepping aside from distractions and by contemplating how things are. Understanding may be within anyone's grasp, and it may be written into social rules of obligation and stratification towards others that serve a state of equifinality: an ultimate condition. For most persons, the search for knowledge is based in the experience that comes through interdependence. Daily experience offers the tools to achieve a more complete understanding.

Axiologically, harmony is a very central tenet of Asian life. This harmony is fostered, in many cases, by seeking right relationships with others. Complementarity and definition of interreliant roles seem common to many Asian teachings. Ideally, as you say, human communication is not a process in which interactants exert power to direct the interaction in their own favor. Cooperation (or complementarity) is central to Hindu teachings, as it is to East and Southeast Asian practice. I can see your view that harmony "represents a kind of ethical appeal that can induce a sense of duty for cooperation with the other party, not by the communicator's strategic words but by the sincere display of whole-hearted concern with the other." I would qualify your "concern for others" observation with the "purification of self" in the case of Hindu idealism, though. I take as another paradox how the Hindu concern for personal release can manifest itself in a social network of close interreliance.

The nonlinearity of the unfolding of cosmic intent and understanding is apparent, also, in Hinduism. There may be many paths to a single place, and no one path differs really from any other. Parallel lines do not meet, so that I can't call these paths parallel. But they are seen as distinct ways to a single understanding. One path should be taken as far as it will allow one to travel. Some paths may be more socially-engaged or less than others, more interactive or less, but all paths lead away from the grounding in things to the grounding in ideals. The "nonlinear cycle" is called a *yuga* among Hindus. The only end to

the cycle is freedom from rebirth; along the way, people must engage each other in mutually-defining, complementary relationships. What is knowledge is based on intuition, the approaching of deeper knowers, and from the lessons about The Nature of Things that are learned from intensely following one path, and from treating that path as the *only* path for so long as one travels it. Indirection may not be as central in South Asia, or among Muslims, as it is further East.

Dynamic diversity that answers to a central notion of common reality seems central to many Asian traditions. Communication, then, would articulate or regulate the pursuit of some more general, or idealized, knowledge.

Chen: Nice inputs from the perspective of Hinduism! It seems obvious that Asian cultures hold a holistic view of the universe in which no individual component can be determined or understood without reference to another component, and it is this relational network that endows the unique quality to each individual. Thus, one cannot understand the whole unless the individual is understood first. In addition, this mutually dependent network is woven by the common notion of “the way things are” that dictates a harmonious coexistence of individual components in the process of cyclic transformation of the universe.

Using the analogy of Chinese philosophy, the whole is the Tai Chi (the One, the Great Ultimate) which produces *yin* and *yang*, the two opposite but complementary modes or forces. *Yin* represents the amiable, yielding or submissive attributes, and *yang* represents unyielding or dominant attributes. The dialectical interaction of the two forces produces more opposite but interdependent pairs of change, such as emptiness vs. tangibility, brightness vs. darkness, motion vs. tranquility, distance vs. closeness. Here we see the unitary One is the reality and *yin* and *yang* the differences that lead to more unique differences everywhere within the One. As you said, consistent with Hinduism, the reality or “the cosmic is unchanging, but the appearance constantly changes” and “at times a thing can be two different things at once; and at others it can be *neti neti*, neither this, neither that.” In all, it is oneness of opposites.

But how could we observe the influence of this Asian idealism or philosophical assumptions on communication behaviors of Asian people on the daily life basis? Let me try to tackle this question first and let you comment on my views later.

I think Asian philosophical assumptions lead most Asian cultures to emphasize three ethical features that characterize their communication behaviors: mutuality, respect, and honesty. Mutuality and respect are reflected in the harmonious interrelationship by honoring rather than denigrating oneself and one’s counterparts through speech in the process of communication. In other words, human interaction is to show a spirit of enlightenment in which interactants communicate with dignity and influence in a mutual and interdependent network. The process forms a continuous chain of natural sequences

without consciously devaluing the communicator and communicatee. As to honesty, it is embedded in the effort of speech that aims toward consistency among one's thought and actions through the practice of truthfulness, or in other words, the effort to reach the internal consistency of oneself by holding a sincere mind towards him/herself and others. The Asian philosophical assumptions, as I observe, as well lead to several common communication styles: intuitive, empathic, silent, reserved, and subtle.

First, the Asian intuitive communication style is originated from the emphasis on the inner liberation through a direct and spontaneous understanding of life that tends to demand Asians "to feel" rather than "to analyze" or "think about" the situation in the process of interaction.

Second, Asians seem to emphasize empathic communication that refers to the intention of accepting things and the affective detachment from the self which is based on the recognition that all things change and everything is interconnected, and therefore develops a compassion for accepting others' existence. In other words, empathic communication fosters a fellow-feeling by expanding the self consciousness to the consciousness of one's counterparts. This deep concern for others' feelings and reactions and the demonstration of reciprocity of affective displays make it easier to establish an interactional rapport.

Third, silence as a form of speech in Asian communication might be based on the belief in tranquility that integrates creative intuition and ontological experience. Asian communication seems more to focus on the mind sounding internally, rather than on the tongue exercising externally. I suspect that Asians believe that, through minimizing the occurrence of verbal messages and words, a greater space for imagination and creativity from the message receiver's perspective is created. This can be supported by the common perception that Asian people are generally more able to read nonverbal cues.

Fourth, the principle of harmonious relationship prevents Asians from going to extremes in communication, but instead encourages them to practice the "middle way," which in turn leads to a more reserved communication style. This Asian communication style is manifested through the control of emotion and avoidance of aggressive behaviors in the process of interaction.

Finally, the de-emphasis on verbal language or the highlighting of the importance of silence and the reserved communication style might lead Asians to express themselves in a subtle or indirect way when verbal or nonverbal expressions are required for the purpose of understanding and to avoid unnecessary embarrassment or confrontation. This is especially true when Asians feel a need to reject their counterparts' request or action that holds the potential to bring damage to harmony.

My observation might oversimplify or overgeneralize Asian communication,

but these characteristics can distinguish Asians from people in other continents. Of course, from this level we can also see Asians begin to demonstrate internal diversity when these communication styles are applied to the daily life in different cultures or geographical areas within the Asia.

In addition to your comment on my views, would you please indicate, if any, other critical issues of inquiry on Asian communication?

Starosta: That's a lot for me to digest.

I see, running through much of the Asian communication that I have known an element of contingency. A thing may happen when projected, but, then, it may not. It may be good to let it happen, or maybe it will not be good. Plans are made, with the honest intention to see them through. But there is an openness to the unforeseen, to unexpected contingencies. I see how this tendency could be derived from the propositions you offer.

You doubtless know the story of the man who found a fine horse, and was told he was lucky. He said, maybe so, maybe not. The horse ran away, and he was called unlucky. He said, maybe not, maybe so. The horse returned with others; his son rode the horse and broke his leg; conscription for a war did not touch his son because of the broken leg...and on and on. He neither admitted to being lucky nor to being unlucky, because not all contingencies were visible to him. When one has a holistic outlook, when the system is open to possibilities that are not apparent at the start, the Asian communicator must, I think, allow for the unforeseen contingency. It may be hard to reach a final business deal, in part, due to the belief that one cannot ever account for all of the possibilities, because one's knowledge is less than total. A prediction would follow from this, for which I have no personal knowledge, that such deals would be subjected to periodic review and renegotiation, for the same reasons.

I've already mentioned the open-endedness of the system. Anything can move into and out of the field of interaction, with unpredictable results. This may be another reason why respect, honesty and mutuality are present through much of the continent: if one acknowledges that the other has the best intent, it is easier to manage misunderstandings, and to credit them as unintended occurrences, not as affronts.

Your stress on empathy seems consistent with the literature I have encountered on *enryo-sasshi* communication (Starosta, 2003) and with the communication model we offered in our intercultural communication text (Chen & Starosta, 1998). If one must anticipate how the message will be taken in order to avoid giving hurt to the other, and if one must cultivate subtle skills in decoding messages that have been placed in a circumspect, indirect format, it would seem to me that the silence you mention could be attributed, in part, to the extra layers of empathic coding and decoding that are discussed by Ishii and Bruneau (1994) and Miike (2003b).

This is probably the flip side of your observation on the importance of developing a strong rapport. It may be the Confucian elements in East Asia that place the stress on the person, sometimes, as much as on the task. A landlord will lend money for weddings. Relatives and neighbors will let members of a wedding party stay in their homes. The organization will try to assist when workers experience difficulties. Organizations and institutions place workers and members into a position of reliance onto not only one another, but also on institutional leaders. They raise expectations that persons of character are expected to satisfy. Those who “know” someone can place themselves into a position of reliance on the other, safe in the knowledge that the other will feel an obligation to try to work out the difficulty.

Part of this mutuality bred of rapport is that the person who is given something will owe something back to those who have assisted him or her. Different parts of Asia have local names for this relationship of powerful mutual dependency and respect. There may have been a time when such complementary obligation was traceable to the tenets of Hinduism or Confucianism, to name two possibilities. Somewhere along the way, though, I think it became second nature to many Asian interactants to form relationships of mutual dependency that relied on the intuiting of the dynamics, not on their articulation verbally, at great length.

I am not ready, at this time, to say more about Asian mass communication styles, nor can I say enough about Asian organizations to offer much to this discussion. I would suggest that group leaders in South Asian businesses tend to give more advice than their western counterparts; and that they must make their workers look good to make themselves look good. I won't try to generalize this to other parts of Asia, though these could, in principle, be derived from your earlier characterizations.

Chen: I like your “contingency” view on Asian communication which corresponds with my argument that Asian communication styles allow a greater space for the interactants to exercise imagination and creativity in the dynamic process of message exchange. However, this view is also double-edged. From the positive perspective, it helps outsiders to better understand Asian communication behaviors, but, from the negative perspective, it might also enhance outsiders' stereotypes on Asian people. For instance, the space created for imagination and creativity in the process of encoding and decoding messages might be interpreted as the lack of clarity and assertiveness. Honestly, it is not uncommon to see descriptions in intercultural communication literature about the ambiguous, uncertain and unpredictable nature of Asian communication, and the timid or unassertive attitude of Asian people while interacting with Westerners, especially in an organizational context (Chung, 2000; Sue, Ino, & Sue, 1983). How to improve this kind of inaccurate perception towards Asian

communication remains a dire task for intercultural communication researchers, educators and practitioners to face.

Yes, the field deserves some more in-depth discussions on Asian mass and organizational communication styles. I hope we can get another chance to focus on that direction.

As we approach the end of this dialogue, I want to repeat my cautions about the possible over-simplification and over-generalization of Asian communication in this dialogue. Although the discussion can help us see the uniqueness of Asian communication behaviors that are distinct from those in other continents, it is important to remember that Asia is a vast and diverse area in terms of geography, religion, culture, and other aspects, thus internal diversity within Asia is inevitable and should be addressed. And of course, despite all the differences among people in the same or different corners of the world, the similarity for human beings exists. This universal aspect of human beings or societies should also be a light constantly flashing in process of dealing with intercultural communication.

Starosta: We are doing our thinking and clarifying in a fishbowl, with a ring of outsiders listening in on our conversation. Who will those observers be, and what will be their motivation?

Some may be empiricists, looking for ways that we have essentialized Asian communication so that they may turn it into new instruments to measure the Asian-ness of communication. Others may look through postmodern eyes, and object that we have not given play to voices of women, of differing generations, of refugee populations throughout the continent, of village-dwellers or those from the cities. I feel many sets of eyes resting on our conversation, as we try to find a golden mean.

Yes, I can see that some listeners will take our characterizations more rigidly than we intended, and will fashion them into stereotypes. Some will wish to silence our conversation, because it appears to be overgeneralized. And others will want to hear more Asian terms from specific locales, and would want us to focus on things particular to given cultural communities. I remember Everett M. Rogers and some others talking of middle-level theory, which is too broad to test empirically without further breaking it down, but which is too narrow to leave it without empirical grounding. I see this as the level we are enjoying during our conversation.

It seems healthy to me that we engage in such discussions, at many different levels, and that we not try to bring premature closure of ideology to such inquiry. The ferment that springs from proposing, critiquing, refining, and again proposing ideas is the wellspring of our profession.

Our answers are not the first, and they will not be the last, on what makes Asian communication Asian.

Chen: Yes, this is just a beginning, let's keep the river running. Thanks for joining this thought-provoking dialogue.

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