Theorizing Culture and Communication in the Asian Context: An Assumptive Foundation*

Yoshitaka Miike

University of New Mexico

> Any way of seeing, of course, is a way of not seeing, as Kenneth Burke has insisted. Thus any theory of communication, any dominant paradigm, any pervasively informing metaphilosophy, will have its limits, and its limitations. No alternative to a dominant paradigm would be perfectly limitless, perfectly unlimiting. Yet the dominant contemporary perspective is especially limiting of specifically *human* possibilities and criteria.
>
> — Lee Thayer (1979, p. 12)

Abstract

This theoretical essay is an initial attempt to lay an assumptive foundation in search of an Asiacentric terrain for culture and communication studies. The essay first clarifies what is Asiacentric communication scholarship in relation to U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship. Second, touching on three central themes in Asian communicative life, it formulates three sets of philosophical assumptions for an Asiacentric paradigm of communication theory. Third, in accordance with the philosophical assumptions delineated, it sheds light on three core assumptions of human communication which suggest future directions in the study of culture and communication in the Asian context. The essay lastly addresses possibilities and challenges of Asiacentric communication scholarship in order to build and develop non-Western models of communication.

Throughout the 20th century, the field of communication studies has been one-sidedly dominated by U.S. Eurocentric anthropocentered, individualistic, efficiency-oriented, positivistic theory and research (Ishii, 2001). Conventional academic views of communication have been skewed by Western frames of reference. They have not represented a sample of all possible conceptual positions from which the knowledge of communication can be adequately constructed. The world in the 21st century, therefore, needs a plurality of

human communication theories, and not any single nation's theory preserving hegemonic rule (Gordon, 1998/1999). Now that this new multilingual and multicultural millennium has arrived, communication researchers today are more than ever before urged to generate theoretical perspectives and paradigms that can resonate with the diversity of human experiences in communication.

In order to expand and enrich current U.S. Eurocentric conceptions of humans communicating, non-Western scholars in the discipline of communication ought to rethink the nature of communication theory from indigenous and comparative perspectives. More specifically, Dissanayake (1986) pinpoints two main reasons why the study of indigenous and comparative communication theories is of great value. First, it helps to widen the field of discourse and facilitate the emergence of new insights from various cultures that make it possible to better comprehend and conceptualize the act of communication. Second, since theory has a vital link with research, it promotes more productive and relevant communication research in non-Western societies rather than encourages a blindly servile adherence to Western communication research credos.

The major purpose of the present essay is to lay an assumptive foundation from which theoretical perspectives indigenous to Asia will hopefully be designed and developed in comparison with those borrowed from the United States. Toward this end, the essay first delimits what is Asiacentric communication scholarship in relation to U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship. Second, touching on three central themes in Asian communicative life, it maps out three sets of philosophical assumptions for an Asiacentric theoretical paradigm. Third, in accordance with the philosophical assumptions outlined, it sketches out three core assumptions of human communication for an Asiacentric theoretical approach. In terms of the assumptive foundation proposed, the essay finally discusses possibilities and challenges of Asiacentric communication scholarship in order to theorize culture and communication in the Asian context.

What is Asiacentric Communication Scholarship?

In this first section, I will make clear what is Asiacentric communication scholarship in relation to U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship.[1] For the purpose of the present discussion, I would tentatively define Asiacentric communication scholarship as *a theoretical system or a school of though in communication whose concepts, postulates, and resources are rooted in, or derived from, the cumulative wisdom of diverse Asian cultural traditions*. There are three important implications of this definition for theorizing culture and communication from Asiacentric perspectives.

First, *Asiacentric communication scholarship does not simply refer to a*

body of knowledge, either theoretical or empirical, about Asian cultural systems of communication. Ho (1988), a pioneering advocate of Asian indigenous psychologies, emphatically asserts:

> An Asian psychology with an Asian identity must reflect the Asian intellectual tradition, which is distinct from the Western in its conceptions of human nature, the goal and meaning of life, relationships between the human person and other humans, the family, society, nature, the cosmos, and the divine. (p. 55)

In a similar vein, Asiacentric communication scholarship proposes and promotes non-Western approaches to codes, contexts, and complexities of communication that reflect and respond to the cultural ethos of Eastern peoples.

Asiacentric communication scholarship, therefore, differs from U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship that deals with Asian modes of communication in Western terms. Ho (1993) crisply states that there may be no particular Asianness about a psychology of Asian peoples. Likewise, a body of knowledge about Asian cultural styles of communication generated through U.S. Eurocentric theoretical perspectives and research procedures is U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship *about* Asian cultural patterns of communication. What is sought after at this juncture is a body of knowledge that accounts for Asian cultural values and communicative behaviors gained through indigenous theoretical insights drawn from the intellectual traditions of Asia.

Second, *Asiacentric communication scholarship embraces the diversity of Asia and does not purport to reinforce a monolithic concept of Asia.* Jensen (1992) notes that sharp differences in cultural traditions certainly exist throughout Asia where there are multiple strands which have evolved over time due to various religious, philosophical, political, economic, and geographical factors. Garrett (1991) echoes his view by saying that "as we move through space and time, from medieval Tibet to modern Korea, from early China to contemporary Korea, the intellectual milieux, major religions, political systems, social and family structures, economic organizations, and languages and writing systems vary tremendously" (p. 295). It is, therefore, very important to remember the diversity of Asia in all discussions of communication across national borders and cultural boundaries (Irwin, 1996).

Unlike U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship that often depicts Asia as a homogeneous entity, Asiacentric communication scholarship ought to embrace, rather than neglect, the diversity of Asia. This does not mean, however, that Asiacentric scholarship cannot have core assumptions that cut across Asian nations and cultures because the existence of the diversity of Asia does not imply the non-existence of a sufficiently identifiable core of Asian traditions. According to Wong, Manvi, and Wong (1995), Asiacentric scholarship can expound on a common core of Asian beliefs, values, and worldviews which

encompass a number of religions and philosophies (e.g., Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Taoism) and overlap in their influence on particular countries and regions. Wong, Manvi, and Wong (1995) further clarify the goal of Asiacentrism:

> Asiacentrism must thus attempt to explore the possibility of articulating a post-Orientalist Asian perspective, grounded in an awareness of the dynamics of a post-colonial world… What is being implied here is not a reiteration of a view that overestimates the unity of Asia in order to construct a monolithic concept of Asia. (p. 143)

Third, *Asiacentric communication scholarship endeavors to complement, rather than to reject, U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship.* The afore-mentioned definition does not implicitly suggest that Asiacentric communication scholarship should completely ignore and reject U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship. Rather, it should seek to understand the limitations or weaknesses of U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship and strive to complement them by providing "alternative" possibilities of viewing culture and communication. As Goonasekera and Kuo (2000) articulate, "the search for an Asian perspective therefore does not imply the outright rejection of Western theories. What is at issue is the uncritical acceptance of Western models and the neglect of the cumulative wisdom embodied in Asian literature" (p. vii).

Ishii (2001) identifies four theoretical weaknesses of U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship: (1) it has been white-centric and reluctant to study and accept Eastern thought, philosophy, and assumptions concerning communication studies; (2) it has been uncritically dominated by the Cartesian philosophy based on mind-matter dualism, mechanistic views of human beings and natural beings, and the linear progressivism of science and technology; (3) it has been based on, and supported by, the values of independence and individualism, although there can be no such thing as a completely independent and individual being in the universe; and (4) it has been speaker-centered and persuasion-oriented without paying due attention to relational aspects of communication.

Chu (1988) observes two methodological problems of U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship. First, many researchers in U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship are tempted to follow work done by the more creative pioneers because they do not want to "reinvent the wheel," but want to make sure that their empirical research is "cumulative." Unfortunately, according to Chu (1988), this "sometimes leads to a faddish tendency, abetted further by the 'publish or perish' tradition in the [U.S.] American academic world for quick publication" (p. 205). Second, the heavy reliance on quantitative methodology and statistical analysis in U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship sets a limit on what one can investigate. Chu (1988) confesses:

We tend to tackle only those research problems that can be handled by quantitative measures and statistical tests. We often let methodology determine our choice of research topics. This tendency is sometimes referred to as "the tail wagging the dog." The result is that communication research in the Western perspective tends to become repetitive and lacks a clear focus, tackling the problems that may seem to be trivial or irrelevant, although methodologically rigorous. (pp. 205-206)

In order to enlarge the intellectual horizons of culture and communication studies, it is indeed imperative for professionals in Asiacentric communication scholarship to be keenly aware of the above-discussed four theoretical weaknesses and two methodological problems of U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship.

Theoretical Assumptions for an Asiacentric Paradigm

In an attempt to propose a conceptual framework in Asian psychology, Ho (1993) looks at three Asian cultures (i.e., Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese cultures) from which more indigenous key concepts have been derived than from other Asian cultures and discovers three common themes—reciprocity, other-directedness, and harmony. Following his lead, I reread the existing literature on Eastern cultural practices of communication and reviewed Asian conceptualizations of communication theory (e.g., Dissanayake, 1988; Kincaid, 1987; Thayer, 1983). From my close rereading emerged three central themes that seemed to be particularly helpful in establishing an Asiacentric paradigm of communication theory: (1) relationality, (2) circularity, and (3) harmony.

Irwin (1996) duly writes that Asia has no absolute boundaries even though "Asia" designates a certain geographical area in the world where Asianness predominates, and that "what is included in, and thus excluded from, Asia, is often a matter of personal preference or a decision taken according to the purpose of the argument (p. 2). The reviewed literature focuses primarily on China, India, Japan, and Korea. Asia in the present essay is therefore confined to these four countries. Nonetheless, the proposed Asiacentric assumptions might be applicable to culture and communication scholarship in other Asian nations and regions.

In this second portion, touching on the above three themes in Asian communicative life, I will first stipulate three sets of philosophical assumptions—ontological, epistemological, and axiological. Second, coupled with the philosophical assumptions uncovered, I will lay out three core assumptions of human communication while making brief mention of several Eastern models of culture and communication. The following assumptions altogether will constitute the "tentative" theoretical position of an Asiacentric paradigm of communication

theory. It should be kept in mind that the Asiacentric assumptions proposed below are not cultural premises that have been internalized in the minds of *all* or *real* Asians. They are formulated for the "specific" purpose of successfully highlighting the meaningfulness of Asian cultural values and communicative behaviors.

Asiacentric Philosophical Assumptions

The ontological assumption for an Asiacentric paradigm is that everyone and everything are interrelated across space and time. This ontological assumption is comprised of the two themes of relationality and circularity. As Kincaid (1987) correctly points out, Western ontology has been traditionally dominated by the theme of individualism where the independent self is the figure, and interdependent relationships are the background.[2] The reverse figure-background ontology is more applicable in the East. Oliver (1976) aptly explicates:

> In India, the *relatedness* of everything that is or that occurs has been basic, with the result that a principal study has been the nature and consequences of relationships... In China the major concern has been societal related-ness—the nature and the means of human intercourse… (pp. 137-138)

The Asian sense of self is more deep-rooted in the web of human relation-ships than the Western sense of ego. In Eastern ways of thinking, humans exist not as independent individuals but as interdependent and interrelated beings (Ishii, 1998). Humans are also enormously influenced by their relationships with political systems, economic power, historical interpretations, religious beliefs, and natural environments. Nature beyond human control is imbricated with the human-made world under human control. It goes without saying that their inter-connectedness has far-reaching impacts on humans.

The theme of circularity here refers to transcendence in space and time. It provides a sense of relatedness of the present to the past and the future, and a sense of relatedness of the life world to the whole of nature. Humans exist between their past ancestries and their future descendants. In this regard, they have a crucial role in connecting the past to the future. In the Buddhist worldview of reincarnation, moreover, there is a chance that humans will become animals or insects in the birth-death-rebirth cycle. It can be said, then, that they might be related even with animals or insects. Any creature on the earth could be their ancestor. Space is in nature one though humans are prone to think and feel as if it was linearly divided, separated, and controlled. All continents are linked in the sea, and the earth is located in the cosmic space where other planets exist, and possibly other beings live. Any space on the earth is part of a larger circular space.

From a Zen Buddhist viewpoint, Nordstrom (1979) goes so far as to say that

"when any two beings communicate, they prove that the whole universe communicates with all aspects of itself, since any time there is communication, there is the vivid experience of the non-separateness of everything" (p. 24). His enlightening statement is perfectly in consonance with the proposed "trans-spatial, transtemporal" Asiacentric ontological assumption.

The epistemological assumption for an Asiacentric paradigm is that everyone and everything become meaningful in relation to others. The foregoing ontological assumption naturally leads to this epistemological assumption. Indian philosophers teach us that since all things, events, phenomena, and beings are united to one another at a higher ontological level, they can be meaningfully understood only in relation to one another (Dissanayake, 1983a). In Chinese epistemology, likewise, genuine knowledge is believed to result from interaction and interrelation between the individual mind and the world. It is not an isolated phenomenon totally independent of individual life and society, nor is it a construction related merely to the basic functioning of the mind (Cheng, 1983).

Dualism and dichotomy are hallmarks of Western thought despite the fact that there are a number of self-criticisms on their weaknesses within the West. In Eastern thought, "because the universe is seen as a harmonious organism, there is a corresponding lack of dualism in epistemological patterns… The ultimate purpose of knowledge is to transcend the apparent contrasts and 'see' the interconnectedness of all things" (Kim, 2000, pp. 432-433). In passing, the Chinese tendency to polarize is distinctly different from the Western propensity to dichotomize in the sense that it does not uphold one extreme at the expense of the other and advocates a balanced and complementary unity of the two so as to achieve ultimate harmony in the whole (Chen, 1993).

According to the Buddhist concept of dependent co-origination, it cannot be maintained that a cause produces some object or event. It can be only said that an object or event arises in *functional dependence* on such and such a thing (Dissanayake, 1983b). Dissanayake (1983b) further illustrates: "The relationship between the cause and effect is one of *mutual dependence*. Therefore, to refer to them as 'cause' and 'effect' would be misleading because that would presuppose the clear priority of the causes" (p. 32). This Buddhist line of thinking is definitely in tune with the suggested "non-dualistic, non-dichotomous" Asia-centric epistemological assumption.

The axiological assumption for an Asiacentric paradigm is that harmony is vital to the survival of everyone and everything. This axiological assumption springs from the theme of harmony and is intertwined with the above-described two other assumptions. In Eastern cultural and communicative life, "harmony, achieving oneness with other human beings, and indeed with nature and all of life, is a historic *summum bonum*, a central value to cherish" (Jensen, 1992, p. 155). Oliver (1971) succinctly comments that "in China the goal generally was a

harmonious society, in India a harmonious relationship of the individual with the course of nature—which was also the goal of the Chinese Taoists" (p. 261). The countries of East and South Asia embrace religious traditions that feature harmony as the ultimate good. Harmony is "The Way" for Confucianism, Hinduism, Shintoism, and Taoism (Ishii, Cooke, & Klopf, 1999).

This Eastern axiology of harmony marks a sharp contrast to the Western axiology of control. Servaes (1989, 2000) presumes that the doing orientation of Westerners and the being orientation of Asians dictate different attitudes toward nature and technology. Westerners want to command and control them, while Asians try to achieve harmonious relationships with them. Stewart, Danielian, and Foster (1998) also take notice of this obvious disparity between Eastern and Western axiological underpinnings. The world within the minds of many Westerners is material rather than spiritual and should be exploited for the benefit of humanity. On the contrary, the traditional worldview that reflects the ethos of Asian peoples holds that humanity is inseparable from the environment. It tells us that we should strive for harmony with nature and the physical world rather than attempt to control these forces.

It is philosophically and religiously prioritized in Asia to achieve harmony between humans, between humans and things, between humans and nature, between the past and the present, between the present and the future, and between one space and another. This priority in the East appears to be extremely valuable in the present age when the dominant notion of unrestrained individual freedom at the expense of the natural environment and harmony in interpersonal relationships is increasingly being challenged in the West (Cushman & Kincaid, 1987). For human beings, who have become excessively anthropocentered and materialistic as a result of the recent progress in science and technology, are now destined to coexist by interacting harmoniously with supernatural beings and natural beings as well as other human beings (Ishii, 2001).

Asiacentric Communicative Assumptions

The first core assumption of human communication for an Asiacentric paradigm is that communication takes place in contexts of multiple relationships across space and time. The Asiacentric ontological assumption places the utmost premium on communication contexts. It is commonly said that communication takes place not in a vacuum but in a context. Nevertheless, a glance at most U.S. Eurocentric models of human communication reveals that conceptualizations of communication contexts are not in-depth and clear-cut ones in spite of the fact that communicator attributes and message encoding and decoding processes are well-documented and carefully elucidated. Yum (1989) contends:

> Many communication theories that are based upon the individual as the unit of analysis have tended to account for human communication behavior in

8

term of personality characteristics or individual socioeconomic positions. Such theories imply that the individual behaves in a context-free world as if internal predispositions alone can explain one's course of action. On the other hand, other theories imply that the message itself is the most important component in creating certain communication effects…. This overemphasis on the individual [and the message] at the expense of the social context in communication theories may be due to the Western culture's emphasis on individualism… [U.S.] American approach to the world is characterized by individual-centeredness and independence in comparison to an East Asian approach of situation-centeredness and mutual dependence. The fundamental value orientation of individualism is expressed in theorizing communication phenomena as well. (p. 494)

Contexts should garner increasing attention among conceptual theorists in human communication because they make it possible for the whole communication process to function (Ishii, 1997). Kleinjans (1972) calls for the study of historical interpretations and socio-economic conditions which form the context for communicating with Asia. It is high time for Asiacentric communication experts to scrutinize political systems, religious beliefs, historical events, and philosophical thoughts that are integral to a culture and to conceptualize them as communication contexts. It is also imperative that they delve into how such various contexts influence one another.

Another important point to be made with reference to this first Asiacentric communicative assumption is that communication contexts need to be conceived as "transspatial" and "transtemporal." Transspatiality and transtemporality in ontological relatedness are not found in most U.S. Eurocentric conceptualizations of communication contexts. In this connection, Asiacentric communication professionals are particularly expected to conceptualize religious belief systems as communication contexts of spatial and temporal circularity. As Dissanayake (1983) posits, since in the East, religion and traditional culture are closely interwoven in a way that is uncommon in the West, religion serves as an excellent window through which to view postulates and presuppositions that guide and govern Asian communicative behavior.

Ishii's (1998) Japanese model of communication contexts based on the Buddhist concept of *en* (predestined connection) is one of the few Eastern communication models that captures transspatiality and transtemporality in ontological relatedness. It is in stark contrast to the typical Western model of communication in that religious belief contexts of multiple relationships across space and time are the figure, whereas the communicators who are mysteriously interrelated and interdependent are the background. Chen's (1998) Chinese model of human relationship development based on the *I Ching* is also worthy of great attention. The eight stages and the cyclic process of human relationship

development in Chinese communication delineated in his model are grounded on the *I Ching* ontological assumptions of spatial and temporal circularity.

The second core assumption of human communication for an Asiacentric paradigm is that the communicator is perceptually and behaviorally both active and passive in a variety of contexts. What the Asiacentric epistemological assumption brings into focus in human communication is that the communicator's perception and behavior are not independent of her or his relationships with her or his surroundings, namely, communication contexts. This suggests that communication specialists cannot identify and analyze human agency in communication processes without taking multiple communication contexts into full consideration. To put it in another way, they cannot specify and evaluate the activeness and passiveness of humans communicating until they clarify the contexts and complexities of communication.

This second Asiacentric communicative assumption is also intended to stress at least two levels (i.e., sense-making and behavioral levels) on which the communicator's activeness and passiveness are comprehended. The sense-making level refers to whether the communicator is intrapersonally active or passive in making sense of her or his perceptual world. The behavioral level indicates whether or not the communicator is outwardly active or passive in participating in communicative interactions verbally and/or nonverbally.

People from Asian cultures are oftentimes one-sidedly labeled by U.S. Eurocentric cross-cultural communication researchers as "passive communicators." And in most cases, the implication of this statement is that Asians are less communicatively competent and need to be trained so as to communicate internationally and interculturally. Those investigators do not usually direct any attention to political-ideological contexts of international and intercultural communication and to the sense-making and behavioral levels. Asians are, in fact, extremely active on the sense-making level when they accept or reject various communication contexts such as *en*-belief systems.

Asante and Vora (1983) argue that one of the U.S. Eurocentric theoretical perspectives in communication is "the emphasis and reliance on overt behavior to measure effectiveness of a communication effort," and that "the philosophy is that the end results are the primary measure of success" (p. 294). They (1983) poignantly question:

Isn't it possible that the behavior may have occurred despite poor communication or may not have materialized in spite of effective communication?… The emergent behavior (action or lack of it) may be affected by many variables, such as immediate issues, technological infeasibility, and resistance to change. (p. 294)

It could be speculated that whereas Westerners have a general propensity to be more outwardly and behaviorally active in communicative interactions,

10

Easterners are, by and large, predisposed to be more inwardly and perceptually active in communicative interactions. This focal point of difference possibly leads Asiacentric and U.S. Eurocentric communication experts to construct complementary models of communication. According to Dissanayake (1983a), for example, the proponents of the Indian indigenous model detect that "what is important in human communication is to find out how a receiver makes sense of verbal stimuli received and engages in a search for meaning. And this search is an inward one" (p. 29).

The third core assumption of human communication for an Asiacentric paradigm is that mutual adaptation is of central importance in harmonious communication processes. This assumption is coupled with the Asiacentric axiological assumption. There is no denying that *mutual* adaptation is the key to harmonious communication and relationships. Most communication professionals agree with Howell (1986) who maintains that communication is a joint venture where both participants adjust continually to what happens from moment to moment. Not so many theorists, nonetheless, put this adaptation postulate at the center when they theorize human communication. Howell's (1986) model of communication is probably one of the few Western models that substantially illuminates and illustrates message adjustment processes and practices.

Ishii's (1984) *enryo-sasshi* model of Japanese interpersonal communication is one of the first non-Western attempts to explore and explain the mechanism of how the communicators adjust their messages to maintain interpersonal and situational harmony. His model captures the mutually adjusting functions of *enryo* and *sasshi* as crucial abilities for successful and smooth communication. The speaker, depending on the listener and the communicative situation, simplifies and economizes messages (*enryo*) rather than elaborating on them. Messages are then usually "safe" and "vague." The listener is expected to engage in empathic guesswork so as to expand and develop the messages (*sasshi*) and decipher their intended meanings. In order to make this *enryo-sasshi* communication successful, the extent of *enryo* on the part of the speaker meshes with that of *sasshi* on the part of the listener (Miike, 1997).[3]

Another non-Western contribution in this line of theorization is Kume's (1996, 1997) *mawashi* decision-making model of Japanese group and organizational communication. *Mawashi*, which originates from the traditional village meeting in Japan, can be defined as "a way of reaching consensus by passing around views almost endlessly among members of a group" (Kume, 1996, p. 45). In *mawashi* communication processes, where intrapersonal reflection is far more important than interpersonal self-assertiveness, each group member's opinion is supposed to be mutually shared and adjusted toward unanimous agreement. This *mawashi* decision-making style, which is time-consuming and one-sidedly

criticized by Westerners for that reason, in effect reflects egalitarian values in "vertical" Japanese society.

It is quite certain that Westerners also employ *enryo-sasshi* and *mawashi* communication styles. However, similar theoretical models have not yet enjoyed much research attention among U.S. Eurocentric communication scholars. Such relational, reciprocal models of communication based on Asian cultural concepts of other-directedness may be applied cross-culturally to re-observe and/or re-evaluate human communication phenomena in Western (co-)cultures. The two Japanese models above only highlight the impact of reciprocity on communication processes within limited spatial and temporal contingencies. Asiacentric communication specialists can theorize reciprocal aspects of adaptive communication from "extended" perspectives on space and time, which are undoubtedly blind spots of U.S. Eurocentric thinking on communication. The Asian sense of indebtedness and obligation, for instance, usually goes beyond here-and-now reciprocity and greatly affects adaptation in human communication. Indebtedness is expected to be paid in Asian societies, and this obligation has no time limitation (Ho, 1982).

Incorporating this third communicative assumption into the core Asiacentric assumptions has implications for theorizing communication competence because mutual adaptation has a great deal to do with otherness or allocentrism. Bruneau (1998) avers: "Competency in the United States is often based in assessment made as to one's performance, efficiency, quality and quantity of productivity, and relating to the end-results of effort" (p. 2). He (1998) severely criticizes:

> [The] United States [communication] scholarship has initially fostered the idea of competency-based communication mainly from an individualistic, ego-centric, geo-centric, rational, goal-oriented or purposive, compliance-gaining perspective. The U.S. approach has neglected affective communication variables except for scant or token mention. (p. 4)

Bruneau (1998) continues and concludes:

> The lack of allocentric (other-directed) thinking (mainly feminine) or the use of empathic processes… is especially absent. What this means is that the current thought about ICC [intercultural communication competency] does not fit the thought patterns of not only most of the peoples of the world, it excludes a feminine perspective. (p. 11)

Possibilities and Challenges of an Asiacentric Paradigm

In the previous pages, I defined and delimited Asiacentric communication scholarship and laid out philosophical and communicative assumptions for the development of an Asiacentric paradigm. In the following pages, based on the preceding discussion, I will address possibilities and challenges that lie ahead

for Asiacentric communication researchers in their efforts to theorize culture and communication in the Asian context.

Possibilities for an Asiacentric Paradigm

Theory building is not just a matter of scholars' thought processes but also a matter of their choices of research materials and methods. It is undoubtedly swayed by the use of research materials and methods that scholars are socialized to consider as useful and helpful. Participating in alternative theorizing activities, therefore, partially means engaging in alternative research topics, materials, and methods. By the same token, modifying theoretical orientations inevitably leads to changing research orientations. With this inseparability of theorizing activities and research attitudes in mind, I will propose three lines of future inquiry for an Asiacentric paradigm of communication theory.

First, *Asiacentric communication professionals can take full advantage of indigenous literature in Asia and in Asian languages and conceptualize communication contexts of multiple relationships across space and time*. China has her own over 5000-year history of the Asian heritage. India embraces age-old, profound religions and philosophies. Histories, religions, and philosophies in Asia are "rich storehouses" for conceptualizing Asiacentric models of communication contexts such as Ishii (1998) and Chen (1998). U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship almost always ignores the relevant literature in other languages and countries. Asiacentric communication scholarship ought to fill this void by making use of academic resources in Asia and in Asian languages.

It is hoped that Asiacentric conceptualizations of communication contexts will probe into deep structures of communication. As Yum (2000) points out, most U.S. Eurocentric cross-cultural studies of communication simply discern and describe cultural patterns in other countries and then compare and contrast them to those of the United States, rarely going beneath the surface to explore the source of such differences. Saral (1983), who encourages the study of deep structures of communication, identifies its parameters including "philosophical contexts and metaphysical assumptions about the origin, purpose, and meaning of life and nature and quality of the relationship of human beings with other livings as well as non-living systems believed to be existing in the universe" (pp. 48-49).[4]

Second, *Asiacentric communication theorists can explore more and more indigenous concepts in Asian languages in order to better understand the complexities of Asian communication and properly evaluate the activeness and passiveness of the Asian communicator.* As can be seen in Chen's (2001) attempt to build a harmony theory of Chinese communication, each indigenous concept can eventually be connected with one another in a systematic way in order to paint a bigger picture of Asian communication and a more holistic

profile of the Asian communicator. Whereas U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship continues to define Asian cultural identities and modes of communication through pseudo-etic concepts in the English language, Asiacentric communication scholarship should creatively redefine them through emic concepts in Asian languages.

Dissanayake (1986) mentions that it is of vital importance for Eastern communication scholars to set out to broaden the domain of inquiry by exploring indigenous theoretical concepts that have been formulated in non-Western societies as a means of promoting a greater degree of understanding of the nature of human interaction. Ho (1982) endorses Dissanayake's vista: "Asian cultures abound with concepts that are pregnant with sociological and psychological meanings, and that they constitute a vast, yet underdeveloped asset which, when more fully exploited, hold great promise for the advancement of behavioral science" (p. 228).

Third, *Asiacentric communication researchers can turn their attention to the rich histories of Asia and obtain insights into allocentric or integrative ways of adapting mutually toward harmonious communication.* Investigations into historical events and incidents within and between Asian countries and cultures will yield insights of enormous value to Asiacentric communication professionals. Such insights will enhance their ability to envision mutual adaptation taking place within harmonious communication processes. Thoroughgoing analyses of writings or autobiographies of great Asian thinkers who ventured to synthesize the seemingly incompatible cultural traditions of the East and the West may also disclose the essence of allocentrism and the transspatial/transtemporal principle of reciprocity in harmonious communication practices.

U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship is inclined to deal only with the present-day issues of communication and culture (Ishii, 1997). Likewise, unfortunately, communication scientists in Asian nations seem to follow this U.S. present-centered focus of theorizing and researching. Chu (1986) reminds Asiacentric communication specialists of the importance of studying the past:

> Chinese civilization and Asian civilization are both characterized by their long histories. An exploration into the past will provide rich insights for theory construction and development, and will contribute to theoretical methodological breakthroughs. As most Asian communication researchers are both bilingual and bicultural, they occupy a unique position to make such contributions. (p. 19)

Challenges for an Asiacentric Paradigm

While research possibilities are immense within an Asiacentric paradigm, there are also challenges that Asiacentric communication scholars should take up. Chu (1988) specifies two of such challenges. *The first challenge for an Asia-*

14

centric communication paradigm is the dilemma between "the great traditions" and "the little traditions." Asiacentric communication theorists must think about how to bridge the gap between the philosophical wisdom of the great masters such as Confucius (the great traditions) and the values, beliefs, and ways of life of the common people (the little traditions). Chu (1988) cautions that they may devote their effort to a highly philosophical discourse about Buddhism, Confucianism, or Taoism, but forget to ask to what extent the common people understand these philosophies and in what ways they are influenced by them.

The second challenge of an Asiacentric communication paradigm is obser-vability in real life. Asiacentric communication researchers ought to consider how to test or observe their theoretical explications in real life. Chu (1988) insists:

> The term "testable" sounds Western and may imply the use of quantitative measures and statistical testing. This is not what I mean. All I am suggesting is that behavioral implications of the theoretical propositions must be observable in real life, so that we can tell whether the propositions are true or not. Otherwise, our theory will become philosophy, or polemics, and dogmatic ideology. (p. 208)

What would be the forms and functions of Asiacentric empirical communication research? In order to answer this question, it behooves Asiacentric communi-cation experts to ultimately challenge conventional U.S. Eurocentric views as to what is theory, how theory should be built, what should be the relationship between theory and research, and whether theory should be evaluated in terms of validity or utility (Miike, 2000).

The third challenge of an Asiacentric communication paradigm is the paradox of cultural specificity and universal relevance. Wang and Shen (2000) postulate that generalizations which at least imply the potential for universality are inevitable for theories, and that a theory whose relevance or validity is confined to a certain group of people or to a specific geographical region is, by this criterion, not yet a theory. Whether such a conception of theory is agreeable or not, their thesis is understandable. Certainly, Asian communication theories should bear some universal relevance beyond Asia or any particular Asian culture. Otherwise, they cannot contribute to the enlargement of theoretical boundaries of communication research elsewhere. In other words, Asian theories of culture and communication must be of distinctly Asian flavors but trans-spatial and transtemporal. Goonasekera and Kuo (2000) put this point well: "To be Asian it has to be particularistic; to be theoretical it has to be universalistic. Herein lies the paradox, and the challenge an Asian theory of communication needs to face and resolve" (p. xii).

15

Concluding Remarks

This essay has been a modest attempt to lay an assumptive foundation in order to theorize culture and communication from Asiacentric perspectives. The essay began by defining Asiacentric communication scholarship in relation to U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship and by explaining three implications of the definition. It then mapped out three philosophical assumptions and three communicative assumptions for the development of an Asiacentric paradigm of communication theory. The essay ended with some discussion on possibilities and challenges of Asiacentric communication scholarship in quest of an alternative approach to culture and communication studies. Admittedly, some of the Asiacentric assumptions are not diametrically opposed to the U.S. Eurocentric ones. Rather, they need to be re-recognized and re-emphasized because they do not appear to be vitalized and validated enough in U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship.

Most diffused models and methods in communication research today have evolved in the West and, as such, reflect the biases of Western thought and worldview. They are culture-bound expressions of the Western idea and most applicable in the context of Western philosophy and metaphysics (Saral, 1983). One of the crucial limitations of culture and communication studies has been that almost all of the known research has been carried out by Western scholars or non-Western scholars trained in the Western paradigms. "In order for research to be truly 'intercultural,'" as Saral (1979) suggests, "a way must be found for the researchers from various cultures to do independent research on the subject and contribute to the growing body of knowledge" (p. 401).

The communication discipline in the new millennium must be multilingual and multicultural in the genuine sense so as to respond to diverse human experiences in both local and global spheres of communication. The future of communication research depends in large part on how much non-Western professionals will be able to step out of the U.S. Eurocentric academic worldview to theorize culture and communication from alternative standpoints.[5] Indigenous communication theories need to be developed from within cultures around the world and should be actively exported to the United States. U.S. Eurocentric theories of communication ought to be informed by world theories of communication (Gordon, 1998/1999). Given such a scholarly milieu, "for an Asian researcher to fail to recognize, and to take advantage of, their rich cultural heritage is to throw away the most valuable assets in making a significant contribution to the field of communication study" (Wang & Shen, 2000, p. 29).

16

Notes

1. Although there are a number of diverse intellectual traditions within U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship, it can be argued that its dominant paradigm has been positivistic, and that each theoretical perspective has been more or less affected by positivistic ways of thinking. See Dissanayake (1989, p. 166) for his elaboration on this matter.
2. Ho (1995), who comparatively examines Eastern and Western conceptions of selfhood and identity, confirms Kincaid's observation: "The [individualistic] self is at center stage, and the world is perceived by and through it.… Rooted firmly in individualism, the Western self is, in short, the measure of all things" (p. 128).
3. From a similar message-adjustment viewpoint, Ishii and Bruneau (1994) characterize U.S. American interpersonal communication as "exaggeration-reduction communication." The speaker is socialized to encode ideas and send out messages in an exaggerated way. The listener is conditioned to reduce the information in receiving and decoding such exaggerated messages.
4. For the further clarification of what are surface and deep structures of communication, see Saral (1983, pp. 47-48) who believes that deep structures of communication often make a critical difference in one's ability to communicate interculturally.
5. In this connection, Dissanayake (1989) particularly stresses that the discipline of communication should learn to pay more attention to the intellectual and cultural traditions of Asia. He assures that such a course of action will secure greater insights, promote more paradigm dialogues, and widen the field of communication studies productively.

References

Asante, M. K., & Vora, E. (1983). Toward multiple philosophical approaches. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Intercultural communication theory: Current perspectives* (pp. 293-298). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Bruneau, T. (1998, July). *New directions for conceptualizing intercultural communication competency in the 21st century*. Paper presented at the Pacific and Asian Communication Association Convention, "Humans Communicating in the 21st Century: Asian, Pacific, and Western Perspectives," Sapporo, Japan.

Chen, G.-M. (1998). A Chinese model of human relationship development. In B. L. Hoffer, & J. H. Hoo (Eds.), *Cross-cultural communication East and West in the 90's* (pp. 45-53). San Antonio, TX: Institute for Cross-Cultural Research, Trinity University.

Chen, G.-M. (2001). Towards transcultural understanding: A harmony theory of Chinese communication. In V. H. Milhouse, M. K. Asante, & P. O. Nwosu (Eds.), *Transcultural realities: Interdisciplinary perspectives on cross-cultural relations* (pp. 55-70). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Chen, L. (1993). Chinese and North Americans: An epistemological exploration of intercultural communication. *Howard Journal of Communications*, *4*(4), 342-357.

Cheng, C.-Y. (1983). Chinese philosophy and recent communication theory. *Media Development*, *30*(1), 30-34.

Chu, G. C. (1988). In search of an Asian perspective of communication theory. In W. Dissanayake (Ed.), *Communication theory: The Asian perspective* (pp. 204-210). Singapore: Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Center.

Chu, L. L. (1986). Mass communication theory: A Chinese perspective. *Media Asia*, *13*(1), 14-19.

Cushman, D. P., & Kincaid, D. L. (1987). Introduction and initial insights. In D. L. Kincaid (Ed.), *Communication theory: Eastern and Western perspectives* (pp. 1-10). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Dissanayake, W. (1983a). Communication in the cultural tradition of India. *Media Development*, *30*(1), 27-30.

Dissanayake, W. (1983b). The communication significance of the Buddhist concept of dependent co-origination. *Communication*, *8*(1), 29-45.

Dissanayake, W. (1986). The need for the study of Asian approaches to communication. *Media Asia*, *13*(1), 6-13.

Dissanayake, W. (Ed.). (1988). *Communication theory: The Asian perspective*. Singapore: Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Center.

Dissanayake, W. (1989). Paradigm dialogues: A Europocentric universe of

discourse. In B. Dervin, L. Grossberg, B. J. O'Keefe, & E. Wartella (Eds.), *Rethinking communication: Vol. 1 Paradigm issues* (pp. 166-168). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Garrett, M. (1991). Asian challenge. In S. K. Foss, K. A. Foss, & R. Trapp (Eds.), *Contemporary perspectives on rhetoric* (2nd ed., pp. 295-305). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

Goonasekera, A., & Kuo, E. C. Y. (2000). Forward—Towards an Asian theory of communication? *Asian Journal of Communication*, *10*(2), vii-xii.

Gordon, R. D. (1998/1999). A spectrum of scholars: Multicultural diversity and human communication theory. *Human Communication*, *2*(1), 1-8.

Ho, D. Y. F. (1982). Asian concepts in behavioral science. *Psychologia*, *25*(4), 228-235.

Ho, D. Y. F. (1988). Asian psychology: A dialogue on indigenization and beyond. In A. C. Paranjpe, D. Y. F. Ho, & R. W. Rieber (Eds.), *Asian contributions to psychology* (pp. 53-77). New York: Praeger.

Ho, D. Y. F. (1993). Relational orientation in Asian social psychology. In U. Kim, & J. W. Berry (Eds.), *Indigenous psychologies: Research and experience in cultural context* (pp. 240-259). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Ho, D. Y. F. (1995). Selfhood and identity in Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism: Contrasts with the West. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, *25*(2), 115-139.

Howell, W. S. (1986). *The empathic communicator*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

Irwin, H. (1996). *Communicating with Asia: Understanding people and customs*. New South Wales, Australia: Allen & Unwin.

Ishii, S. (1984). *Enryo-sasshi* communication: A key to understanding Japanese interpersonal relations. *Cross Currents*, *11*(1), 49-58.

Ishii, S. (1997). Tasks for intercultural communication researchers in the Asia-Pacific region in the 21st century. *Dokkyo International Review*, *10*, 313-326.

Ishii, S. (1998). Developing a Buddhist *en*-based systems paradigm for the study of Japanese human relationships. *Japan Review*, *10*, 109-122.

Ishii, S. (2001). An emerging rationale for triworld communication studies from Buddhistic perspectives. *Human Communication*, *4*(1).

Ishii, S., & Bruneau, T. (1994). Silence and silences in cross-cultural perspective: Japan and the United States. In L. A. Samovar, & R. E. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural communication: A reader* (7th ed., pp. 246-251). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Ishii, S., Cooke, P., & Klopf, D. W. (1999). Our locus in the universe: Worldview and intercultural misunderstandings/conflicts. *Dokkyo International Review*, *12*, 299-317.

Jensen, J. V. (1992). Values and practices in Asian argumentation. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, *28*(4), 153-166.

Kim, Y. Y. (2000). Intercultural personhood: An integration of Eastern and Western perspectives. In L. A. Samovar, & R. E. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural communication: A reader* (9th ed., pp. 431-443). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Kincaid, D. L. (Ed.). (1987). *Communication theory: Eastern and Western perspectives*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Kleinjans, E. (1972). Communicating with Asia. In L. A. Samovar, & R. E. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural communication: A reader* (pp. 256-266). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Kume, T. (1996). The "*mawashi*" style in Japanese decision-making: A case study. *Japanese Society*, *1*, 41-60.

Kume, T. (1997, August). *Decision-making in Japan: Two communication styles of contemporary Japanese organizations*. Paper presented at the East-West Center Internationalization Forum, Honolulu, HI.

Miike, Y. (1997). Japanese *enryo-sasshi* communication revisited: A critical review of literature and suggestions for future research. *Dokkyo Working Papers in Communication*, *15*, 77-99.

Miike, Y. (2000, August). *Toward an Asian standpoint of communication theory: Some initial assumptions*. Paper presented at the Pacific and Asian Communication Association Convention, "Waves of Change: The Future of Scholarship in Communication and Culture," Honolulu, HI.

Nordstrom, L. (1979). Zen and the non-duality of communication: The sound of one hand clapping. *Communication*, *4*(1), 15-27.

Oliver, R. T. (1971). *Communication and culture in ancient India and China.* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Oliver, R. T. (1976). Rhetoric and the social matrix: Reflections from the Asian classics. *Communication*, *4*(2), 134-151.

Saral, T. B. (1979). Intercultural communication theory and research: An overview of challenges and opportunities. In D. Nimmo (Ed.), *Communication yearbook* (Vol. 3, pp. 395-405). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

Saral, T. B. (1983). Hindu philosophy of communication. *Communication*, *8*(1), 47-58.

Servaes, J. (1989). Cultural identity and modes of communication. In J. A. Anderson (Ed.), *Communication yearbook* (Vol. 12, pp. 383-416). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Servaes, J. (2000). Reflections on the differences in Asian and European values and communication modes. *Asian Journal of Communication*, *10*(2), 53-70.

Stewart, E. C., Danielian, J., & Foster, R. J. (1998). Cultural assumptions and values. In M. J. Bennett (Ed.), *Basic concepts of intercultural communication* (pp. 157-172). Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Thayer, L. (1979). On the limits of Western communication theory. *Communication*, *4*(1), 9-14.

Thayer, L. (Ed.). (1983). Communication—East and West. *Communication*, *8*(1), 1-132.

Wang, G., & Shen, V. (2000). East, West, communication and theory: Searching for the meaning of searching for Asian communication theories. *Asian Journal of Communication*, *10*(2), 14-32.

Wong, P., Manvi, M., & Wong, T. H. (1995). Asiacentrism and Asian American studies? *Amerasia Journal*, *21*(1/2), 137-147.

Yum, J. O. (1989). The communication network paradigm and intercultural communication. In B. Dervin, L. Grossberg, B. J. O'Keefe, & E. Wartella (Eds.), *Rethinking communication: Vol. 2 Paradigm exemplars* (pp. 486-496). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Yum, J. O. (2000). The impact of Confucianism on interpersonal relationships and communication patterns in East Asia. In L. A. Samovar, & R. E. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural communication: A reader* (9th ed., pp. 63-73). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

.

22