

Contributors

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Preface

The idea for this book first arose in 2007 at a workshop on Chinese communication research, when a small group of communication scholars from Hong Kong, China, Singapore and Taiwan gathered to discuss how to move forward. After the first round of proposal presentations, my colleague Tsang Kuo-jen, who was assigned the task of acting as 'discussant', posed ten questions to the audience in lieu of commenting on individual papers. Most of the questions were rather basic. What is 'Chinese' communication research? How do we define 'our research' – what is 'ours' and what is not? What needs to be 'indigenized' – concepts, methods, or paradigms? Are traditional thoughts and teachings the only way to get started?

These questions seemed to be so elementary that none of us had thought about them before we decided to 'do something'. But after a heated debate it became clear that despite all that we had read and done, we were unable to give Tsang Kuo-jen the answers he sought. Worse yet, without such answers, we would not really know where to begin, what goals to reach, and how to proceed. In other words, if this were the time to de-Westernize and go 'our way', were we ready for it?

Moreover, the ten questions were cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary in nature. They are challenging not only to those interested in 'Chinese' or 'communication' research, but to anyone who is interested in doing any type of research that involves theories and paradigms in any 'non-Western' societies. In the end the series of fundamental issues confronts everyone in the community who has the slightest doubt about 'European universality' and who cares about the future of communication research and social scientific research as a whole. Little progress could come about unless the importance of the issues were widely recognized, the myths surrounding de-Westernization, Eurocentrism and indigenization were clarified, and the implications of such endeavours were fully explicated.

In response to the above challenges, the following year saw a conference in Taipei titled 'De-Westernizing Communication Research: What Is the Next Step?'¹ Organized with an edited volume in mind, the conference recognized that the scope and scale of the topic would not allow for a quick solution. Rather than attempting to reach conclusions, it afforded an opportunity to debate, communicate and reflect on the most critical issues involved.

Seventeen scholars from Europe, Asia and North America took part in the event. While the two-day conference proved to be too short to serve as a platform for

thorough discussions, it nevertheless helped ideas to mature, core issues to surface, and to bring into sight the structure of a book. It became clear that urgent focus was needed on the epistemological and methodological issues involved in adopting a culture-centric approach to move beyond Eurocentrism.

This book² represents an effort to map out the critical issues involved in de-Westernization and indigenization. Not all the questions could be answered in one shot, yet a clearer picture of the situation could help locate the problem areas and settle some key issues to pave the way for the next level of discussion. The book is meant to provoke thoughts and ideas and to stimulate further debate as well as settling issues and offering solutions. The purpose is to advance the discourse, not to close the issue; we offer alternatives, but not conclusions.

The greatest reward for undertaking the task of organizing the conference and editing this manuscript is the response we have received in the process. Enquiries about the papers have come from Africa, Europe, the Middle East and South Asia; new ideas have emerged; projects have been proposed, and interest groups have taken shape. Not all of these will come to fruition immediately, but some, such as the publication of textbooks that present thoughts and ideas about communication from European but also from non-European traditions, will be crucial in broadening the perspective of future theoretical discourse.

In the 1980s, calls to indigenize communication research at the theory level were sounded. On the basis of past efforts, this volume carried the torch on another leg of that long and adventurous journey.

Notes

- 1 The conference was organized by the College of Communication, National Chengchi University (NCCU), Taiwan with funding from the National Science Council, the Ministry of Education, the Central News Agency, and the College of Communication, NCCU.
- 2 The preparation of this edited volume is funded by the Project of Excellence in Communication, College of Communication, NCCU.

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Last but not least, I thank the contributors – this edited volume is as much theirs as it is mine – and my family, for their understanding and support as always.

1 Beyond de-Westernizing communication research

An introduction

Georgette Wang

In the past few years many parts of the world have witnessed a significant growth in media and communication research. With the benefits of new media technologies, research output from areas and in languages that had not had the chance of global exposure before have been made accessible. In 2009, the list of e-journals in media and communication on the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) website numbered over 60, and almost half of those were in a language other than English. According to Chen Guo-Ming (2006), by the mid-2000s at least seven English-language communication journals had their focus on Asia or Asian nations. This number does not include those published in indigenous languages.

While the increase in global research output – especially from outside the mainstream West – is good news for the field of study as a whole, until now, there has been little evidence supporting the claim for a parallel growth in diversity and heterogeneity. Downing (1996, p. xi), in explicating the need to develop communication theory on a comparative basis, noted that there was a tendency to extrapolate theoretically from such “relatively unrepresentative nations as Britain and the United States.”

This predominance of British/American influences on media and communication research across the world, and the indiscriminate acceptance of imported models and theories in the academic periphery have stimulated sporadic discussion in the past. Dissanayake (1988), Chen (2006), and Goonaraseka and Kuo (2000), for example, have warned of Asian researchers’ tendency to academic dependency, lack of theorizing and the need to broaden their knowledge base. According to Syed Farid Alatas (2006, p. 64) there are several dimensions of academic dependency, with dependency of ideas being the most fundamental.

In recent years the growing recognition of Eurocentrism in communication theories has fueled discontent among some Asian researchers; Asian cultures are becoming “testing grounds” for American theories, Miike charged (2003, p. 244). As a set of views and principles developed on the basis of European experience yet aspiring and presented as universal, Eurocentrism has come to be seen as one of the primary factors leading to a serious imbalance in knowledge production. By setting the standard for comparison and the criteria for assessment, all other knowledge systems and ways of knowing were rendered subordinate and often irrelevant.