

2015

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Link to published article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1075/japc.25.1.01cha>

APA Citation

Chang, H., & Chen, L. (2015). Commonalities as an alternative approach to analyzing Asian Pacific communication: Some notes about the Special Issue. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication, 25* (1), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1075/japc.25.1.01cha>

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Commonalities as an Alternative Approach To Analyzing Asian Pacific Communication:

Some Notes about the Special Issue

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Introduction

The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) notes that "culture is at the heart of contemporary debates about identity, social cohesion, and the development of a knowledge-based economy" and it aspires to "greater solidarity on the basis of recognition of cultural diversity, of awareness of the unity of humankind, and of the development of intercultural exchanges." This embracing outlook recognizes distinctions among cultures and hence the need to engage each other to build bridges. By prioritizing culture which each claims as its own, Bhatti articulates the notion of "dialogue" as an inseparable part of the exchange between "Own/Alien":

Dialogue requires that you had [*sic*] fixed identities: I am me, you are you, and I enter into a conversation with you. You must have your identity, however, or there is no conversation. That is how the scheme of Own/Alien gained momentum. (Kleeberg & Langenohl, 2014, p. 14)

Sharing a similar spirit, the scholarly community has long heeded the call to take cultural specificity into account in examining communicative practices. How different cultural groups practice communication, which may be demarcated by ethnicity as well as racial or other categorical labels, has meant that cultural uniqueness and differences have occupied much scholarly attention, whether through in-depth analysis of selected cultures or comparative studies. Acknowledging communication as a culturally and contextually bound activity, scholarly attention toward culture can avoid cultural—especially Eurocentric—biases and limitations, and achieve better understanding of others, such as Asian cultures, which are often cast as "collectivist."

Nevertheless, while a focus on culture allows us to dismantle some boundaries, it erects others—by highlighting cultural differences, culture paradoxically also "conceals that we can have common interests, depending on our relationship to power and interest" (Kleeberg & Langenohl, 2014, p. 16). In the past decade or so studies concerning culture and communication have centered on cross-cultural differences, so much so it appears to be developing into an "ideology of" differences, to borrow a term concerning an earlier trend in interpersonal communication studies (Parks, 1982). While there is a consensus among scholars that some degree of comparability or commonality exists among cultures, more often than not scholarly focus in the recent past has on exposing, demonstrating, and explicating differences based on a prevailing assumption of cultural uniqueness.

Although studies of cultural diversity and uniqueness have contributed a great deal to our understanding of communicative performances in comparative terms, as well as how communication help constructs cultures, this emphasis may have exacerbated the differences observed; encouraged a static view of cultures; and reinforced dichotomous thinking about them (for example, whether a culture is solely "individualistic" or "collectivistic"). With all its merits, the paradigmatic approach necessarily endorses specific assumptions, leading to a need to critically examine weaknesses in theoretical conceptualization and research findings (Miller, 2002).

To further extend the argument, the preoccupation with cultural differences prioritizes a unique place for seeing (Bakhtin, 1986), and may eventually lead to contemplation of incomparability, even incommunicability, between cultures (though not in the Bakhtin system: see Holt's essay, this issue). The discussion becomes all the more complicated when a specific language is used to describe (and hence inscribe) variability. Language itself, or to be more precise, linguistic labels, bipolarizes and dichotomizes. Similarities and differences, according to the cultural critical perspective of, for example, Mikhail Bakhtin, or philosophical Taoism, are merely matters of perspective by the observer, as each name/entity/phenomenon relies upon its contrast to gain meaning. Thus, the positioning between "commonalities" and "differences" is not absolute, but rather should be treated as epistemological issues subject to idiosyncratic viewpoints. By problematizing conceptions of "differences" and "similarities," we can articulate anew the perspective on analyzing cultural differences.

It is now time for us to take an alternative route by setting our eyes on commonalities to gain further insight, a route that makes imperative reconsideration of interconnected questions concerning how "culture" may be conceived, as well as how and if cultural boundaries may be drawn and commonalities explored. Critiquing the overarching yet narrowly conceived "culture" in explaining social phenomena, Bhatti contends, "Similarity opens up a deculturalizing perspective. This, in turn, frees other potentials of conflict, of connection, of solidarity, which had been overshadowed by the Culture concept" (Kleeberg & Langenohl, 2014, p. 19). Through exploring the ways in which Asian Pacific communication may be similar to others, or the common foundations it has shared with others we can better see how such commonality should be conceived and even challenge the very foundation upon which cultural differences are made between Asians and others, gaining a refreshed perspective on culture and communication. The goal of this special issue, then, is to focus on cultural similarity or commonality as an alternate route toward better understanding of culture and communication, especially Asian Pacific communication.

Reconsidering "differences" in intercultural communication research

One effective entry point to understand Asian Pacific communication, or that of any culture, is to compare it against other cultures, all often grounded in the individualism-collectivism framework. Publication of *Culture's Consequences* (Hofstede, 1980) stimulated considerable work in cross-cultural comparative studies; as Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier (2002) note, "Hofstede's model was important because it organized cultural differences into overarching patterns, which facilitated comparative research and launched a rapidly expanding body of cultural and cross-cultural research in the ensuing twenty years" (p. 3).

Among the four, now six, dimensions, individualism-collectivism, a facet of culture introduced previously by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) and others, has claimed the lion's share of research attention, particularly after the dimension's expansion by Triandis (1995). While the core of individualism sees individuals as independent of one another, hence promoting a decontextualized reasoning style detaching social information from social contexts, collectivism treats groups as binding and obligating individuals with its social connectivity likely to encompass a wider spectrum of values and behaviors (Miller, 2002; Oyserman et al., 2002). "More than two-thirds of all existing instruments for measuring cultural values include measures analogous to Hofstede's IND-COL...cross-cultural research of the past decades has been, to a large degree, research on IND-COL" (Taras et al., 2014, p. 214; see also Miller, 2002; Oyserman et al., 2002).

Pitfalls of contrastive frameworks that mark differences

Beyond individualism-collectivism, there is also an array of other popular bipolar constructs—at times called cultural syndrome, dimension, orientation, and so on—used by communication scholars to explain cultural differences, such as high-/low-context communication (Hall, 1976); independent/interdependent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991); restricted/elaborated codes (Bernstein, 1971); and so on, whether as antecedent or intervening variables. With individualism-collectivism continuing to be the most utilized framework (Oyserman et al. 2002; Taras et al., 2014), these constructs have either been subsumed or taken as manifestations of the framework. Researchers in culture and communication link their respective cultural values with specific performances, highlighting cultural idiosyncrasies by comparing East Asians (collectivistic) with US Americans (individualistic) (Oyserman et al., 2002). The result is an oppositional discourse: Asian communication is said to be collectivistic, high-context, and likely to employ restricted code, all interconnected with an interdependent self-construal that prioritizes collectivity. US American communication, on the other hand, is seen as individualistic, low-context, and likely to employ elaborated code, all interconnected with an independent self-construal that privileges the self (Chang, Holt, & Luo, 2006).

Such lines of research are heavily influenced by studies in cross-cultural psychology, which tend to treat culture as an overarching independent variable that shapes behavior, or as a dependent variable. Epistemologically, this perspective is grounded in a view that treats culture as a reifiable and measurable entity. Such approaches based on "difference," we will argue, have encountered several major challenges that could be addressed through an alternative approach such as the commonality framework we propose.

One major challenge is the ambiguity and uncertainty in using the individualism-collectivism construct to measure and compare cultures, at times rendering cultural differences argumentative "straw men" and generating more stereotypes than insight. Researchers have noted the numerous and heterogeneous definitions of more than a hundred instruments measuring IND-COL used by different scholars (Miller, 2002; Oyserman et al., 2002; Taras et al., 2014). After conducting a comprehensive analysis of more than 295 previous studies on cultural comparisons, Taras et al. (2014) contend that there is no common definition shared by scholars, with the dimension's most controversial aspect resting in the relationship between individualism and collectivism. While some view the dimension as describing opposites on a single continuum (as in Hofstede; see Oyserman et al., 2002), others see it as two independent constructs whose correlation could be zero (completely unrelated dimensions), or positive/negative (somewhat interconnected dimensions in different directions). While individual desires and social requirements are often seen as opposites, in fact role expectations and agency are not necessarily incompatible. Moreover, even among scholars who view individualism-collectivism as two independent constructs, definitions used by some still highlight the fact that one is the reverse of the other or that they are contrasting pairs of attributes, thus endorsing the view of the dimension as opposites on a single continuum (Taras et al., 2014).

Individualism and collectivism have managed to be sustained as a unifying force and become discursive fields with specific practices (West, 1993), continuing to pose challenges in understanding Asian Pacific communication. Especially for those studies that simply follow Hofstede's original research to classify cultures, observed cultural differences may even be viewed as self-fulfilling hypotheses, as the differences have been presumed and demonstrated with data that support the presumption. In such correlational studies, if the measuring instrument that measures the independent variable individualism-collectivism bears directly on the outcome measure (Miller, 2002; Oyserman et al., 2002), the observed cultural differences can be said to have been constructed and even manufactured, given the circularity involved in their conception. There has been considerable criticism of these contrastive accounts, charging that they oversimplify cultural idiosyncrasies embraced by the dualistic research paradigm, as well as legitimizing the hegemonic power of Eurocentrism in marginalizing non-White groups (such as Asians) (Cardon, 2008; Chen, 2006; Chuang & Hale, 2002; Collier, Hedge, Lee, Nakayama, & Yep, 2002; Dissanayake, 1989; Nakayama, 1995; Rajah, 1999). Oyserman et al.'s (2002) meta-analysis of cross-national and within-United States studies since the publication of Hofstede's (1980) work concludes that the research does support differences in individualism and collectivism between European-Americans and others, but also that the evidence is not as firm as previously thought and that it is difficult to attribute cultural differences to the dimension:

Our main criticisms of the extant IND-COL literature are the overly broad and diffuse ways researchers define and assess these constructs and their apparent willingness to accept any cross-national difference as evidence of IND-COL processes...It is difficult to believe that findings using a particular measure in a particular country at a particular time constitute sufficient evidence of wide-ranging cultural differences in a domain. (p. 44)

Putting highly diverse Asians into a totalizing and all-encompassing category standing in contrast to the dominant US American perspective glosses over the complexities of Asian Pacific communication practices and leads to inappropriately broad generalizations. From dichotomizing East and West, to homogenizing Asians, "Dualism reduces both 'sides' (West, individualistic,

East, collectivistic) to simplified, reified entities and complicates coexistence...Constructs like these provide a way out of the difficulties of describing complex cultures in detail by transforming culture into categories for quick comparison" (Chang & Holt, 2010, p. 140). As Liu (1996) puts it, "[O]nce these generalizations were accepted as the received view on the subject, the adequacy of that representation was recognized retrospectively" (p. 332). We should add, aside from problems in conceptualization, measurement and scale equivalence, the situation is further complicated by the different linguistic systems used to compare cultures.

Taras et al. (2014) have gone so far as to claim that low precision and reliability may make the dimension "the proverbial 'naked emperor'" (p. 235). If the relation between individualism-collectivism remains uncertain, might it not be the case that the differences observed were exaggerated or constructed, and further, that similarity could have played a more important role? An additional weakness

...is the tendency to draw contrasts solely at a highly global level that links together a wide range of cultures in terms of an individualistic-collectivistic, interdependent-independent, or East-West cultural contrast. As numerous critics have noted, such positions fail to take into account the heterogeneity that distinguishes different individualistic and collectivistic cultural populations. (Miller, 2002, p. 103)

In an analysis concerning conception of Southeast Asia as a "region," while acknowledging its diversity within, Rajah (1999) views the "conceptual framework which in essence allows for diversity while claiming unity in this diversity" as a contradiction that must be confronted. The problem is not that Southeast Asia cannot be conceived as a "region," but that we need a conceptual framework of "regions as human constructs" (p. 44). Demonstrating diversity in this region, Rajah (1999) claims, faults unity-in-diversity paradigms as reflecting "comparatist errors" (p. 48), since the diversity within is greater than the identified category, or "region," constructed out of arbitrarily assigned characteristics. Rajah quotes Leach: "[C]omparative methods imply systems of classification and that a conscious examination of classificatory system—'their' and 'our'—must lie at the heart of comparative methods" (p. 49). Simply put, to compare cultures there must be cultures to be compared and hence the need to provide arbitrarily assigned characteristics to mark cultural boundaries. Scholars may avoid over-generalization in accounting for cultural differences by rethinking what differences mean and how such distinctions have been drawn.

Value judgment in explaining differences

In cultural difference discourse, there is the confounding issue of dominance and power that often gets entangled, resulting in unbalanced, if not distorted, representations of the cultural other (or "alien," to use Bhatti's term). Often there is a hidden bias resulting from the researcher's own value judgments attached to the distinction, such as a more elevated appraisal of individualism as against a more downgraded evaluation of collectivism. For example, "collectivism" is often seen as a subordination of the self to the group. This stance implies that "a greater sense of agency and of self-fulfillment is linked to individualism than to collectivism" (Miller, 2002, p. 101).

Conversely, compared with that of Westerners, Asian communication is seen as more constrained, less sophisticated, and inarticulate (Chang, 1997). For example, Ng, Loong, He, Liu,

and Weatherall (2000) contend that collectivism leads to "self-censoring, and even compromised talk, for the sake of maintaining social harmony, respecting the existing status hierarchy, and so forth" (p. 27). Thus, Asian Pacific communication studies are often cast in terms of the cultural other, an "otherness" that becomes an appropriate target of analysis when scholars venture outside American boundaries (Chang & Holt, 2010).

More recently, there have been calls for an Asiatic renaissance with the goal of achieving an in-depth understanding of Asian cultures on their own terms (Miike, 2006, 2010; see also Chen & Starosta, 2003). However, while stimulating, critiques about dichotomous conceptions and attempts to move Asian perspectives from the shadow of Western views still cannot avoid falling into the trap of oppositional discourse, or of presenting dichotomies in other guises. In an effort to elucidate the merits of such an approach, the underlying premise is that Asians are different from Westerners as well as unequal in status, a perspective that actually further reifies the contrast between the two and precipitates a reversal that leads to the same predicament (Chang et al., 2006), as "the act of contesting dominant meanings itself implies a recognition of its centrality...Even when they attempt to overcome or undermine each other, they are mutually shaped by their dialectical dance" (pp. 56-57).

As Leonard (2013) puts it, the effort to empower the marginalized group and restore lost voices has not departed from the essentialist position but actually reinforces the division between "the West and the rest"—by situating the West as the target of resistance and without acknowledging its complex cultural systems and voices, such effort "fails to rediscover and emancipate the West from its conception as the dominant oppressor" (p. 3). Again, is Asian Pacific communication that different from that practiced by Americans/Westerners? Would it not be beneficial if we were to switch the focus to similarity?

Accounting for the link between culture and behavior

Even if the validity and utility of these contrastive frameworks were established and their judgments rendered comparatively neutral, the link between cultural values/norms and behaviors could not be taken for granted, whether one adopts a traditional, functionalist perspective; a presumption of structural order; or a view that focuses on performances and practices.

Adopting a functionalist perspective, while treating individualism-collectivism as two transecting independent constructs rather than opposite poles of a single construct, can provide a more sophisticated view, revealing how a set of strongly endorsed cultural values intersects with/manifests in actual behavior, though this is an area of inquiry that remains to be articulated, since any behavior can be impacted upon or reflective of multiple values (Oyserman et al., 2002). Oyserman et al. (2002) note, "To contemporary Americans, being an individualist is not only a good thing; it is a quintessentially American thing" (p. 3). Although there is a seeming consensus in viewing European Americans as the prototype defining individualism, there has been "no systematic test of the underlying assumptions that European Americans value or behave more individualistically than others" (p. 4). Moreover, even if we were to be certain of a linear causal link between values and behavior, we still could not be certain about the existence of such values, as these values are often narrated—there is a difference between what people think they should like, and what they actually do like.

Taras et al. (2014) note, "[T]here is a clear disconnect between how IND-COL is defined and hypothesized to affect attitudes, behaviors, and organizational processes and how it is measured"

(p. 235). To explain any culture's communicative activity requires more than just knowing its dominant values. Indeed, "no society is or can be completely individualistic...what we have in this contrast of customs, is, by and large, a contrast of emphasis" (Wiredu, 2005, p. 123).

Measuring, classifying, and demarcating culture

Perhaps the most fundamental issue confronting the cultural differences approach is how culture can be conceived and analyzed, an issue of profound philosophical and epistemological significance. Adopting the view that culture can be concretely measured, how a given culture can be successfully measured according to contrastive frameworks depends on many factors, such as the specific instrument used to measure the differences; the sample characteristics and the cultural regions explored; level of analysis (personal, group, or national, etc.); whether subjects assign similar meanings to scales utilized; and whether there is convergence about questions used to measure underlying dimensions; as well as divergent response sets exhibited by specific subjects (Oyserman et al., 2002; Taras et al., 2014).

More specifically, researchers have measured "culture" at levels that are often deficient in distinctions, rendering conclusions about cultural differences problematic. Much quantitative comparative research is measured at the individual (college student) level taken to represent an entire nation. Especially for studies comparing individualistic and collectivistic cultures, the comparisons are mostly between US Americans and a biased overrepresentation of East Asians (Miller, 2002). Thus, our understanding of how culture A compares to culture B is, more often than not, a comparison between two groups of self-reported responses to sets of questions. Simply put, if "scale equivalence" or "conceptual equivalence" is suspected when comparing cultures, and if the ground is not leveled, cultures thus compared are likely to become stereotypical images, as their results are likely to be tautologically interpreted from preconceived assumptions about cultural differences.

The divergent levels of analysis on which studies have focused further contributes to problems in conceiving cultural boundaries, as we must inquire into what levels of differences we are referring to. Are we, for example, comparing countries or regions? The problem of using a single cross-group comparison to cross-societal differences (Oyserman et al., 2002)—a statement we might extend to "cultural differences"—points directly toward the fundamental issue in conception of culture: how can "culture" be analyzed and how should we make sense of cultural boundaries to allow for meaningful comparisons?

To engage in comparison, one must first decide on the boundaries. This is also an issue of language. Bipolar constructs such as individualism-collectivism are not necessarily bipolar—in fact, they may be construed as a continuum. However, the language used to describe them makes them dichotomous. Even a word representing a place necessarily makes of the place an independent identity implying clear boundaries.

Discussing "regionness," Rajah (1999) points out the inconsistency between the endogenous and exogenous views regarding the Southeast Asian region. Depictions of Southeast Asia are often imposed from outside and hence constructed, and a reconceptualization "needs to take into account what endogenous perspectives might have been, were and are...there has to be inter-subjectivity over geographical space and time. It is a matter of *interactions* rather than of identity" (p. 50). As interpenetrated systems, regions can be seen as interpenetrated sub-regions defined by local-level interaction; rather than being static and permanent entities, regions tend to

"[consist] of variables, synchronically and diachronically disjunctured hierarchies of political, economic, social, and cultural linkages over geographical space and time..." (p. 51), and it is "a *concentration* of structures of interest dialectically meshed with the possibilities and constraints of variable physical geographical conditions" (p. 51) that makes regionness.

Although Rajah does not speak to conceptions of culture in particular, the focus on interaction is at variance with the traditional, functionalist approach that assumes a cultural frame being preconfigured and known to the individual. Miller's (2002) suggestion for psychological functioning is to the point: "[There is a] need to adopt more nuanced and process-oriented conceptions of culture and more contextually grounded views of its impact" (p. 79). In other words, rather than a simple, linear impact from value to behavior, cultural influences should be treated as contextually mediated and realized in social practices and processes, with "individuals' participation in contrasting behavioral settings with their varied normative requirements" (p. 100).

The question of how "culture" should be conceived is hardly new, of course, with many scholars taking positions in the transition from a semiotic, structural approach to one that focuses on practices and situated interaction (Spiegel, 2005). Sewell (1999), for example, distinguishes between culture in its abstract sense and culture as distinct worlds of meanings. For the former conception, he views the development from conceiving culture as a system of symbols and meanings to a system of practices as complementary and dialectical to each other, as factors such as preexisting physical characteristics, spatial relations among interactants and the power relations in which they are invested, and different attributions to symbolic meanings subject cultural meanings to transformation during practice.

...social science's once virtually unquestioned model of societies as clearly bounded entities undergoing endogenous development is as perverse for the study of culture as for the study of economic history or political sociology. Systems of meaning do not correspond in any neat way with national or societal boundaries—which themselves are not as nearly as neat as we sometimes imagine. Anything we might designate as a "society" or a "nation" will contain, or fail to contain, a multitude of overlapping and interpenetrating cultural systems, most of them subsocietal, transsocietal, or both. (p. 55)

This is not to say that there is no coherence. Rather, "coherence is variable, contested, ever-changing, and incomplete" (Sewell, 1999, p. 57) and the more important task is to explain how such coherences are sustained and dissolved since, "It is no longer possible to assume that the world is divided up into discrete 'societies,' each with its corresponding and well-integrated 'culture'" (p. 57). Similarly, Kane (2000) views meaning construction as the nexus of culture, as cultural systems; agency and action; and social structure are recursive and mutually transforming.

Summary

Taken together, conceptions of "cultural variability" or "differences" are fraught with methodological and epistemological, as well as linguistic, concerns. Fixation on differences also makes us miss opportunities to build linkages (Kleeberg & Langenohl, 2014). Limitations come not only from the measurement itself, but also the underlying conception of culture. Think about the reason why some scholars advocate an "etic" approach—in what ways and on what grounds

can "cultures" be compared? What principles must be held to legitimize an "etic" approach? What differences are we talking about—values, cognitions, styles of expression, or behavioral performances, and in what ways are there inter-connections? Is it possible that we are different on one level but the same on another, depending on the aspects we are observing? Even more complicated, is it possible that we may be different in values and yet perform similar behaviors, which in another context may be the reverse: though we have different behavioral performances, might we share the same fundamental values? Alternatively, do values and performances embed each other, depending on the perspective taken to analyze them?

These and other related issues need to be more widely discussed and debated to further our understanding. As self-evident as it may seem from what we know as Asians' and Westerners' communicative performances on the individualism-collectivism dimension, the idea of "differences" becomes problematic. Answers to these questions depend not only on viewpoint or perspective, but also how we conceive and define culture, as well as the language we choose to mark cultural boundaries and describe their differences. If "culture" is seen as dynamic, always evolving, having multiple layers and conflicts, and grounded within specific sociohistorical contexts laden with power implications, our understanding of cultural differences would be of a very different kind. This does not mean that we should therefore not consider comparing cultures for differences, but it does point out a range of uncertain possibilities about cultural difference. Among all these possibilities, focusing upon commonalities offers a fruitful alternative that complements other approaches and provides an important point of entry to probe the link between culture and communication.

Three proposed positions to examine cultural similarities

Research on universals across cultural boundaries is not new. In fact, one major reason for some scholars' interest in comparing cultural variability is to test universal claims. Since cultural dimensions as variables are causing behavioral variation, "the goal of cultural research is seen as that of developing a universal theory to predict behavior on a worldwide scale" (Miller, 2002, p. 98). In other words, "commonality" is something to be extracted out of variation—when differences cannot be found or proved, commonality can be assumed.

But commonality can also be approached via routes other than an inability to identify differences. Focusing on commonalities is simultaneously an epistemological, theoretical, and methodological project. There are at least three possible positions from which commonalities may be examined and from which Asian Pacific communication can benefit—they can (among others) be examined alongside cultural differences; underlying such differences; or as an inherent part of observed differences from a dialectical perspective. Each of these perspectives challenges our fundamental assumptions about the interconnection among language, values, and culture. In the past, while there has been scattered work on cultural similarities and commonalities—either challenging specific lines of thought (Matsumoto, 1999; McOmie, 1990; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003; Spiro, 1993; Schwanenflugel & Martin, 1999); articulating universal qualities (Kruger, 1996; Norenzayan & Heine, 2005; Stasio, 1998; Wiredu, 2005); or raising concerns about similarity as an issue to be explored (Kleeberg & Langenohl, 2014; Levine, Park, & Kim, 2007; Martin & Nakayama, 2007)—none has yet undertaken the needed, more comprehensive and systematic analysis.

Similarity alongside differences

Taking the first perspective, researchers may explore similarities/commonalities long ignored by the scholarly community, and re-examine how Asian cultures, as with any other cultures, while unique, also embrace universal qualities (social or biological, such as those identified by early scholars including Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck [1961], or Hall [1959], and later analysis on cultural universals), or further develop as in the process of cultural globalization (Wiredu, 2005). This perspective does not refute the paradigm (whether cultural value model or cognitive perspectives) that emphasizes cultures as different from each other, though they also share, or in the process of sharing, commonalities; both are equally important in explaining the link between culture and communication.

Wiredu (2005), while acknowledging great diversity in human cultures, describes cognitive and moral universality: one, basic to culture and common to all, is the pursuit of survival and well-being based on perception and inference, and the other comprises morality rules used to harmonize potential conflicts of interest. While morality is universal, custom is often contingent and hence variable. Moreover, even with different customs that divide cultures, many customs can be imported or exported easily—some have been shared conventionally while others have been increasingly shared via the advancement of new media—thus creating "cultural globalization" (Wiredu, 2005).

Given that much research has focused on differences, it is time to turn to similarities or common foundation to gain further insight. A focus on commonality will help mediate the dichotomous thinking prevalent in cross-cultural communication studies, changing the often taken-for-granted "either-or" into a "both-and" choice. This is in line with, and yet one step further beyond, the view that treats individualism-collectivism not as a dimension embracing opposite attributes but two independent dimensions (Taras et al., 2014). For example, one may open up Asian Pacific communication to embrace aspects of what has long been inscribed as American communicative behavior, such as exploring assertiveness, self-focused expressions, and so on. Such an approach would allow Asian Pacific communication to be understood not only in terms of how Asians engage in other-oriented communication, but also how they choose to assert themselves. No cultural characteristic can be monopolized by a single culture, and to refocus on similarity would allow us to free various cultural characteristics to become associated with cultures that often exclude them under various dichotomous frameworks.

Similarity underlying differences

Opening up alternative perspectives on "differences" leads us to the second argument that cultures differ not so much in their values as such, but on how some common values may be expressed and what resources are available for such expression. That is, observed differences may reveal very distinct styles of expression rather than fundamental differences in cultural assumptions and/or values. Commonalities may be seen as a source or foundation upon which surface differences are expressed.

Intercultural communication scholars often explain differences observed in performances/behaviors in reified cultural terms—that is, they are caused by, or are reflective of, underlying differences in values. Central to this viewpoint is also an acontextual position in

conceiving "culture"—scholars holding this view are often too eager to explain observed differences in cultural terms when such differences may in fact be due to differing contextual factors. In the neglect of contexts, Miller (2002) contends, "This type of perspective fails to anticipate or to account either for situationally related variation in behavioral responses within cultural populations or for the considerable overlap or cross-cultural commonality that occurs in behavioral patterns" (pp. 102-103). Bhatti also critiques culture as an overcharged concept, as "differences" are often explained with culture instead of linking them to factors such as power, class, and oppression grounded in socioeconomic and historical contexts. Moreover, "as soon as the world began to be explained with Culture, virtually that happened could be explained culturally...Culture was the dominating formula to explain everything that was perceived as a problem" (Kleeberg & Langenohl, 2014, p. 13).

Instead of focusing on differences, Bhatti wants to focus on the "as-well-as" to avoid the culturalistic hermeneutic of the division between "Own" and "Alien." The point is that a focus on similarity directs our attention to such matters as solidarity, power, regime and ethics so as "to not content ourselves with a hard hermeneutics of difference, even if it has its purpose" (Kleeberg & Langenohl, 2014, p. 21). Similarities should prevail, since any boundary of culture is likely to be vague and overlap with the "Alien/Other," which is a reason why *translation*—a countermovement that helps overcome dichotomy—can bring cultures together through integration rather than through tolerance and dialogue. Differences need not be referenced to culture, but to other factors related to struggles encountered in functioning as a social being. "[T]he world was never split up; there was always movement, always overlap" (p. 18). Moreover, "Similarity allows us to introduce the uncertainty principle into our analysis. Uncertainty means that every category of thought has blurred borders, not a sharp edge...We are not exactly the same, but neither totally different...Appearance was the difference; being is Similarity" (p. 18).

Thus, what appear to be cultural differences in values and norms between Asians and others may be more fruitfully conceived as differences in performances or diverse expressions responding to variant demands that grow out of similar foundations. This position is in line with a sociocultural perspective that views culture as grounded in specific sociohistorical contexts and cultural meanings constituted and enacted through people's nuanced interaction, rather than having culture as an overarching independent factor that shapes behavioral outcomes (Miller, 2002). Accordingly, observed differences are not so much caused by preconfigured differences in values and norms, but practices that individuals engage in as they respond to divergent normative requirements of situations. What remains different is those demands and routine practices embedded within specific power relationships—what Sewell (1999) calls "sites of concentrated cultural practice" and "dispersed sites of resistance" (p. 56)—rather than preconfigured cultural values.

As an example, we may have to jettison the collectivism metaphor that suggests Asians are constrained by the demands of their in-groups, as contrasted with Americans' independent self articulated by individualistic cultural values. When we view the observed other-orientedness in Asian communicative activities and self-assertiveness in American communication as coming from a common core, we must reconsider what Asian Pacific communication is about, and how it can best be explored. By attending to commonalities from some fundamental, common core, perhaps we can reposition the observed differences as different *styles* of cultural performance — similar to a traditional Chinese belief that men's "natures are much the same; their habits become widely different" (Wang, 1900, p. 3). This position challenges the value models prevalent in

much of cross-cultural comparative studies, as people who share common cultural values may well express such values in alternative ways.

Similarity as an inherent part of observed differences

As a third possibility, a dialectic approach could highlight how similarities and differences are embedded within each other and it is from such embeddedness that claims about cultural difference may be reconsidered. The positioning of "commonalities" and "differences" can be examined through an alternative philosophical and epistemological lens (e.g., Chen, 1993; Gebser, 1984). Here similarities embrace differences, and vice versa, and they mutually define each other, with diversity viewed as presenting a coherent front, and the seemingly harmonious front containing differences within.

This position also highlights the flexibility of cultural boundaries—i.e., a given boundary is always drawn under specific contexts, and thus always subject to change. Given the artificial or constructed nature of boundary-drawing, culture examined from different viewpoints will necessarily embrace multiple manifestations. In other words, what aspects scholars choose to analyze as targets of differences may, in a different situation, become targets of similarity.

By seeing name/entity/phenomenon as relying upon its contrast to gain meaning, this form of philosophical contemplation leads to a conception of culture that challenges established value models dominating accounts of cultural differences. Instead, it confers a keen awareness of the inseparable presence of the difference and the commonality and calls for better understanding of ways they coexist, manifest and interact in cultures and cultural communication.

Articles included in the issue

The five papers in this issue tackle the above three positions to varying degrees; they explore similarities/commonalities from both conceptual and applied perspectives and also present a good mixture of theoretical and empirical investigations, or a combination thereof. They examine relevant issues on personal interaction, including as well the media perspective. These articles also address how new technology, especially social media, continues to build and bring commonality, or cultural globalization, among their users.

The first two articles analyze specific instances that exemplify commonality in action from very different standpoints, the first from a social scientific perspective, the other from an ethnographic, qualitative perspective. Feng's paper discusses theoretical and practical implications of cultural similarities found in social support research. Some support forms are found more effective in relieving distress across cultural boundaries not because these are *conventionally* approved responses but rather because they influence similar cognitions underlying emotional experiences. With researchers finding broad similarities across cultures regarding evaluations of support provision goals, messages, behaviors, and ratings of support provision beliefs, among others, Feng contends that instead of simply highlighting cultural differences in exploring support communication, researchers may need to change their focus to attend to *both* cultural similarities and differences, and contemplate again the question of *why* we are similar to certain degrees and whether we are not more similar than different.

Shiau's paper analyzes the use of Multimedia Message Service (MMS) among international sojourners on Line (the most popular MMS application for smartphones in Taiwan) to communicate with their parents while abroad. Shiau focuses on interviews with seven Taiwanese exchange students to the United States and five American students studying in Taiwan, focusing particularly at a vernacular level to understand whether sojourners of different cultures present their lives and an appropriate self abroad differently to their families (in this sample, mostly mothers) through various choices (text, animated figure, audio-visual, hyperlink). Taiwanese students were found to talk more to their parents about their personal lives to maintain cross-generational bonds. American students tried to exhibit their competence and bonds by keeping each other updated through talking about the places they had visited. Shiau identified three themes to better explain the observed differences: there are differential economic bases, conversational repertoires, and constructed media images—contextual factors—that lead to very different expectations and degrees of engagement. Setting aside individualism/collectivism as the explanatory mechanism, Shiau's study shows how commonality may be revised to respond to situational demands.

The next two papers problematize conceptions of "differences" and "similarities," interrogating the very base upon which cultural comparisons, such as between Asians and others, are made possible. Lim takes issue with prevalent dichotomous frameworks used in accounting for cultural differences, and advocates the need to treat "opposites" as co-existing and evolving dialectically. Fixation upon Cartesian dualism and absolutism is evident in the discourse of readers and trained researchers alike; particularly, the individualism/collectivism dichotomy results in disjointed approaches that fail to recognize the complementary relationship between the whole and its parts, characteristic of all societies. Analyzing Asian cultures, then, could be better served by embracing a Taoist approach that sees opposites as mutually interdependent and inter-reliant. By paying more attention to the dynamic processes in which two seemingly opposite forces such as collectivism and individualism interact with each other to maintain homeostasis in society, scholars will be able to embrace both differences and similarities.

Holt's paper discusses the cultural critical perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin, showing how similarities and differences are merely matters of perspective by the observer, as each name/entity/phenomenon relies upon its contrast to gain meaning. Holt problematizes the conception of "differences" and articulates five portals—*specificity*; *ownership*; *tension*; *open and closed perception*; and *uncompletedness*—as entry points to appreciate commonalities in linguistic description of cultures. The positioning between "commonalities" and "differences" is not absolute, but rather should be treated as a matter of epistemology and thus subject to idiosyncratic viewpoints. Among examples he uses to illustrate, Holt also examines how social media facilitate social movements and protests, whether Asian or otherwise, thus providing another link of commonality under the unifying force of social media.

The final paper confronts the issue of cultural similarities/commonalities and attempts to bridge seemingly divergent cultures through discussion of linguistic universals. Manakin discusses the philosophical conception of the noosphere, the sphere of human thought that gives rise to different languages and cultures, and illustrates it by comparing proverbs across different similar and dissimilar languages. He also addresses the issue of the inner form of the words and semantic similarities in unrelated languages; though originating in very different linguistic systems, these can share the same semantic background. Since Asian communication is often compared to so-called "Western (American) communication," Manakin's philosophical treatment, with illustrative examples from the Slavic language, provides a unique perspective.

Conclusions

Focusing on commonalities is simultaneously an epistemological, theoretical, and methodological project whose examination should provide deeper understanding of Asian Pacific communication. It demands a re-conceptualization of "culture," as it touches on the issue of how cultural boundaries may be drawn, and whether such demarcation is theoretically meaningful or even sustainable. It will also compel us to probe the conception of "differences" as well as "uniqueness." In the case of Asian Pacific communication studies, questions such as what is unique about Asians and in what ways they are considered unique; what makes certain observations transcend Asian cultural boundaries and why; how shared communicative practices realize Asian cultures; and so on, are explored in articles included in this special issue. Through discussing theoretical implications as well as context-specific applications, from both macro- and micro-perspectives, our discussion of "similarity/commonality" should prove informative and insightful.

To complicate such conceptual thinking does not, however, mean that differences between cultures cannot, or should not, be observed or described. We have made no attempt to come to general conclusions, but believe that opening up a dialogue about cultural similarities will actually help us learn more about culture and cultural differences. Nor is there an attempt to integrate the authors' perspectives, since each are likely to address cultural similarities/commonalities from different entry points. Rather, scholars should not overlook the problems of how differences are defined, conceived, and addressed, as each shapes our understanding of how culture and communication are interconnected. This collection of articles probes similarity from many directions. Our goal is not to argue that paradigms based on cultural comparisons are useless or harmful but to inspire further discussions of, and problematize, how cultural differences are accounted for. Such an understanding is necessary, even as scholars continue investigations of cultural comparison.

In a way, this special issue reflects the three levels of understanding Chinese philosophy has articulated—seeing a mountain, there is a mountain; seeing a mountain, there is no mountain; and seeing a mountain, there is a mountain again. Initially, scholars focus on cultural differences and take such differences for granted, hence the need for "dialogue" and being "tolerant" of each other, to use Bhatti's words. Critical contemplation allows us to question the validity of such differences, so that what appear to be differences in behavioral performances require further analysis: while they may represent fundamental differences in cultural values and norms, they may also be seen as emerging from divergent demands of specific contexts, or differences in performances rather than cultural values. This is the second level—differences are no longer simply differences, but could very well be similarities in another guise. Upon further contemplation, differences become differences again, and so does commonality become commonality, but with the elevated understanding that differences and similarities mutually define each other and their boundaries depend upon one's scholarly perspective. It is through such a realization that we come to apprehend how conceptions and boundaries of cultures, and descriptions thereof, are always subject to perspectives and positions. We hope that, by focusing on similarity as an alternative route, this special issue will further stimulate thinking about how "Asian Pacific communication" can and should be defined and studied.

Acknowledgments

We thank the journal's editors and reviewers for their invaluable assistance with this special issue.

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