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# International communication: An Asian perspective and challenges

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the Asian media culture and challenges to the western-centered international communication studies. It explores how the rising economic status, new media, and the cultural diversity of Asia constitute a dynamic changing force in the shifting landscape of globalization and how Asian media culture exerts impacts on international communication studies as a whole. The study departs from the previous researches that focused on economic issues only. It reviews Asian perspectives and challenges through an interpretive analysis of geo-demographics, transnational media, and participatory and glocalized culture, which, over time, may lead to the change of discursive power in the world. The study provides a case for communication scholars to discuss the Asian challenges to the global media and culture as well as the implications for the future international communication studies.

Key words: globalization, glocalization, transnational media, participatory culture

Ever since its inception, communication studies or communication science is a western-centered discipline. It is so evident that in today's popular communication textbooks, nearly all theoretical contributors are western scholars, and media studies are largely case studies of Euro-American media systems. Not coincidentally, Western ideologies and concerns constitute the framework of most international communication studies.

When traditional scholarly works in the West do mention the East, they tend to stress the significance of Asian philosophy and arts, such as Daoism (Taoism) and Buddism, in human history. The Asian part of international communication studies has been a long neglected territory to be reclaimed.

As time changes, the global changes in the 21st century shed a new light on the role that Asia plays in international communication. When Joshua Meyrowitz explicated the impact of electronic media on people's social behaviors in the mid-1980s, he highlighted the blurring boundaries between people's public and private behaviors (1986). Borrowing his concept to redefine the contemporary communication world, people may discover that the boundary between Asia and the rest of the world is increasingly blurring, which culminates in various challenges to international communication studies.

**An economic challenge or what?**

Most international communication works document the 1978 UN debate on NWICO. In the aftermath of the global media event, however, the status of international information flow remains almost unchanged because the global media power is still largely in the hands of the West. As Japanese scholar Youichi argued, "the problem of imbalanced flow of information and culture is basically a matter of economic conditions and policies (2007, p. ix.).

As such, British historian and Harvard professor Ferguson posited "Chimerica"as the real challenge to the world. The coined word he invented with economist Moritz Schularick describes the symbiotic relationship between China and the United States (Ferguson, 2009). In contrast, Indian politician Remash proposed "Chindia" as a future geo-political recombination of the new global powers (Ramesh, 2006). But the real concern is whether the economic issue of Asia constitutes the dominant challenge to international communication studies.

In *Globalization and culture*, Tomlinson (1999) pointed out that the globalization debates often focus on economic issues. But researches need to address the wide-ranging cultural, social, and moral aspects of globalization. The director of London School of Economics Anthony Giddens, whose 1998 work *The Third Way* spurred debate over the course of social democracy, argued that globalization's most profound effects are not economic but cultural (2002). Jameson (1998) also contended that globalization has come to represent the export and import of culture, the speed and intensity of which has increased to unprecedented levels in recent years.

In view of the relationship between Asia and the rest of the world, there are scholars regarding Asia/Pacific as space of cultural production, which ushered in an era of transnational capitalism, including transnational film genre (Wilson, et al, 1996, 1999). From an anthropological point of view, Ong (1999) highlighted the cultural logics of Chinese transnational practice, refuting claims about the end of nation-state and about "the clash of civilizations" (Huntington, 1997).

The current study examines the Asian media culture and challenges to the western-centered international communication studies. It explores how the rising economic status, new media, and the cultural diversity of Asia constitute a dynamic changing force in the shifting landscape of globalization and how the Asian media culture exerts impact on international communication studies as a whole. The study departs from the previous researches that focused on economic issues only. It raises the question that when China, India along with other Asian countries emerged as rising powers in the world economy, will Asia exert the same impact on international communication studies?

To explore this issue, the study begins with a review of three aspects of Asian perspectives and challenges—geo-demographics, transnational media, and participatory and glocalized culture.

**Geo-demographics**

Asia is the world's largest and most populous continent. With approximately four billion people, it hosts 60 percent of the world's current human population. Over the last ten years, Asian economy grew phenomenally large. China is the second largest economy in the world after the United States. Another heavily populated country, India, is now the fourth biggest economy in the world, while relatively small Japan is the third. In fact, Asia is home to three of the four biggest economies on Earth (http://www.factsmonk.com/asia_facts).

Although other Asian countries may not draw as much global media attention as that of China and India, they are nevertheless phenomenal and media-worthy. According to the *World Factbook* (2010), Indonesia is the world's fourth largest country in terms of population right after China, India and the USA. With nearly ten ethnic groups and over 86 percent of its population as Muslims, it is also the world's sixth largest telecommunication market for mobile cellular phone users.

Historically, the boundary between Asia and Europe is never clear-cut. Hence the concept of EuroAsia. When the Silk Road established the trade routes from Asia to the Middle East and finally to Europe, it already created an effective trans-continental communication network. In fact, the trade on the Silk Road was a significant factor in the development of the great civilizations of China, India, Egypt, Persia, Arabia and Rome, and in several respects helped lay the foundations for the modern world (Wood, 2002).

Today, western textbooks still recognized the exemplary Asian cases and its contributions to mass and international communication. For instance, the Chinese created extensive networks of messengers and couriers as early as the Chou dynasty (1122-221 BCE), and The Mongol ruler Genghis Khan employed pigeons in the 12$^{th}$ century for communication in his kingdom, which covered a vast area, including central Asia and the area from the Aral Sea on the west to the China Sea in the east (Palmer, 2007, p.11, Woods, 1965).

**Transnational media**

Asia's Internet users account for 42 percent of the global Internet population. The top five countries of China, Japan, India, South Korea and Indonesia have 384, 96, 81, 37.5 and 30 million Internet users respectively (www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm). The following table indicates that compared with many least developed countries (LDCs) or regions of the world, Asia is a global leader in the diffusion and adoption of the new media. In terms of Internet user growth rate in the last decade, Asia is not only above the world average, but substantially ahead of the rest of the world as well (568%).

## Internet Usage in Asia

***Internet Users & Population Statistics for 35 countries and regions in Asia***

| INTERNET USERS AND POPULATION STATISTICS FOR ASIA | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ASIA REGION | Population ( 2009 Est. ) | % Pop. of World | Internet Users, Latest Data | Penetration (% Population) | User Growth ( 2000-2009 ) | Users % of World |
| Asia Only | 3,808,070,503 | 56.3 % | **764,435,900** | 20.1 % | 568.8 % | 42.4 % |
| Rest of the World | 2,959,734,705 | 43.7 % | **1,037,894,557** | 35.1 % | 320,7 % | 57.6 % |
| WORLD TOTAL | 6,767,805,208 | 100.0 % | **1,802,330,457** | 26.6 % | 399.3 % | 100.0 % |

NOTES: (1) Asiatic Internet Usage and Population Statistics were updated for December 31, 2009. (2) Population numbers are based on data from the US Census Bureau. (3) The most recent usage comes mainly from data published by Nielsen Online , ITU , official country statistics and other trustworthy local sources. (4) Data on this site may be cited, giving due credit and establishing an active link back to Internet World Stats . (5) For definitions and help, see the site surfing guide. Copyright © 2010, Miniwatts Marketing Group. All rights reserved.

Source: http://www.internetworldstats.com/

According to the latest report by International Telecommunications Union, China's 384 million Internet users supersede the U.S.A's 240 million in 2009, and China is currently the No.1 Internet user country in the world (ITU, 2010). The fast diffusion of Internet use largely dissolves the boundaries of the nation-states between Asia and the rest of the world.

In spite of the online monitoring and intervention by the government, it is never so easy to disseminate to the public the dissident opinions regarding political reforms and official corruptions. While many people in both the East and the West expect the Internet in Asia to be used as a platform for democratization, it is indeed heading towards that direction in many ways. In the meantime, however, the Internet also witnessed the backlash of anti-Western discourse, especially in the wake of the world economic crisis triggered by the Wall-Street misdemeanor and the American war policies.

Considering that many Asian countries are the world manufacturers or part suppliers of cellular phones, iPad and other advanced digital gadgets, Asian communication has already been an indispensible part of global communication. To extend McLuhan's theory on electronic media, Asia has been helping the entire world to reinvent the meanings of media, culture and society via texting, gaming and other social media.

In broadcasting sector, Asian media is also a gigantic contributor to transnational communication, particularly in sports. The 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games drew hundreds of millions of global audiences to the global sport event, which, for the first time in Olympic history, hosted Internet live streaming for photos and videos. The high-precision opening ceremony coupled with the high-definition live cast created such spectacular media effects that, to a certain degree, are more cultural, inter-national than athletic. According to Nielsen Media Research, 211 million Americans viewed the

Beijing Olympics, which became the most-watched event in American TV history (Hiestand, 2008).

Similarly, American NBA games, various ESPN sports programs, and the recent Wimbledon Tennis Games and World Cup Soccer Games have acquired millions of loyal TV viewers in Asia. As sports communication defies national boundaries and language barriers, Asia was virtually immersed in international communication when the sport-beats covered Yao Ming of Huston Rockets, Yi Jianlian of New Jersey Nets (with Washington Wizards now), Taiwan's Lu upsetting American No. 1 tennis player Andy Roddick, and the stunning performance of South Korean, North Korean and Japanese teams in the World Cup.

Social networking is another case of transnational media in Asia. The fast diffusion, adoption and application of the broadband services overshadowed the deployment of the landline phones in most countries of the region. According to a recent Nielsenwire, social networks and blogs account for one in every four and a half minutes online now. The three of the world's most popular brands online are social-media related Facebook, YouTube and Wikipedia. (Nielsenwire, June 15, 2010).

Although the exact statistics about Asia are not available now, the social networking from and to Asia has already been part of international communication, which varies from overseas studies, international marriage, to academic information exchanges. At present, blogging is not a passing fad among people of different walks of life. It is part of the social life for Asian college students, local celebrities, and government officials alike. In fact, the use of the transnational media prompt more and more Chinese students to go to U.K, the U.S.A, Canada and Australia for further education. And more and more Chinese tourists poured into New York City, London and Paris after their online browsing, which boosted up the luxury goods consumption in the world.

**Participatory and glocalized media culture**

McQuail states that media studies "are affected by differences of culture at the level of individual, subgroup, nation, etc. The production and use of mass media are cultural practices that resist the universalizing tendencies of the technology and the mass-produced content" (2010, p. 8).

The Hollywood, for instance, incorporates many Asian elements in its film production of the last two decades. Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Chow Yun Fat and other Asian film stars brought Asian arts, wisdom and humor to American films, such as the huge blockbuster success *Rush Hour* (1998), *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998), and the Oscar award-winning *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*s (2000). Unlike the traditional Hollywood cultural products, those films spiced up the film text with intercultural communication codes, crisscrossed the cultural boundaries between the East and the West, and presented an international and intercultural discursive power, thus chalking up new box-office rates worldwide.

Noticeably, in many such films, rather than an artistic appeal, *Kongfu* is depicted as a semiotic expression of the displaced time and space, in which the character delivers a strong message of power or will of triumph. If the Hollywood film is construed as the first real example of a transnational mass medium (Olson, 1999), the Asian contributions will inextricably generate a new meaning in international media studies.

Today, it is very common for Hollywood films to be screened in Japan, China or Malaysia for the Asian market is an indispensible part of globalization. In the meantime, Indian "Bollywood" movies, Japanese *anime* (animated movies), and Chinese martial arts movies are making their presence felt globally (Downing, 2007, p. 32)

Jenkins (1992) interpreted "participatory culture" as the one that blurs the boundary between production and consumption. Asian media culture is such a challenging one in many aspects. While more and more Asian audiences are contributing to the international film revenues, the intercultural production cast, film scripts and audience makeup along with the Asian-specific cultural acts and romance deterritorialized the traditional field of American films. Those films created some new upbeat screen characters in place of the old, stereotypical images of Asian-clowns. In the eyes of western viewers, the media texts of the Asian-American type could be a timely addition to the popular culture and media literacy in their countries. To the media critic, the glocalized media texts renewed the strength of the Western media business, and Asian audiences, who contributed considerable profits to the international film revenues, are undoubtedly both interlocutors and consumers of the new transnational film genre. According to John Fiske's explication (1987), Asian audiences are also the co-producers of the meanings embedded in the media text.

*Televisual hybridization*

In the global information flow, Asian television cultures demonstrate their distinctive traits and features. In the last decade, Korean television series and serials were very popular on the television screens of many southeastern Asian countries. The trans-border craze indicates that when a representative anecdote of youth culture, urban romance or even an ancient saga struck the fancy of millions of audiences, national boundaries, ethnic differences, and language barriers would give way to cultural hybridization and art appreciation.

In the 1980s, Norway, Zambia, Syria and some other countries showed on their domestic channels some dated American popular shows like Dynasty, which they purchased at very low prices (Allen, 1992, p. 22). In Asia, the mainstream television programs are almost always the local products. Imported TV series and serials as well as some Hollywood films are often shown with a translation into local languages. Many cities in China run a special dubbing studio for those media products. In the re-production process, the interpretation becomes a technical localization project synchronized seamlessly with a actors' lips. Therefore, it is not unusual that the Western characters speak perfect Mandarin to the Chinese viewers, and the Western narratives engaged the local audiences with a re-invented meaning.

Tomlinson (1999) contends, "Globalization lies at the heart of modern culture; cultural practices lie at the heart of globalization." Compared with other cultural products, the Asian music shows are a typical simulacrum of American popular music shows. In the media extravaganzas staged in Beijing, Tokyo, Seoul and elsewhere, the popular music programs, such as the naturalized show of American Hip Hop, have become a dominant performance in the entertainment business. While the American lyrics is replaced with the passionate vernacular, the body language, the music rhythm and the stylistic features of the shows are so identical that Michael Jackson is virtually resurrected in the center of the Asian television screen.

In a similar vein, many pop songs are jazzed up with the American music style and punctuated with some cool English colloquialisms. At times, some Asian music shows appeared more American than American, gripping the hearts of millions of Asian adolescents. As Fung observed, China's MTV "thinks globally and acts locally"; it is an exemplary case of glocalization (2006). In terms of sheer audience headcounts, the current Asian popular music may challenge the dominant status of the American music in this particular trans-regional market.

Just like American morning or late night shows, Asian countries' talk shows and comedy shows demonstrate a great potential in their media culture. Zhou Libo, a popular comedian and television talk show host in Shanghai, cracked jokes about American President Obama and mimicked Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's speech, which reminds people of NBC's Jay Leno, who had teased the late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping some years ago. Judged from the enormous positive feedback from the local audiences, Zhou's talk show established another exemplar of the participatory and glocalized media culture.

**Western concerns**

At present, the western media offer an increasing coverage of what is going on in Asia, from economic, cultural, to environmental issues. There is a mixture of predictions, fears and reports on geo-political or socio-cultural uncertainties as well as the possible challenges to the rest of the world. Interestingly, Western scholars raised some challenge from their various concerns. While globalization is generally believed to be Americanization, Marling questioned the concept of how American is globalization following his observation on the glocalized communication practices in Japan's Burger King restaurant (2006).

Some other Western scholars expressed their concerns regarding the rise of China as part of the global power changes (Chomsky and Barsamian, 2007; Schmitt, 2009). In his latest book *Hopes and Prospects*, Chomsky (2010) challenged the globalization policies of the American government. Although his major critical remarks focus on issues like Latin American and Israel-Palestine conflict, he warned readers about the latest risks and challenges facing America and humankind during the early twenty-first century (Midwest Book Review, 2010).

**Challenges from Asia**

In the age of globalization, Asia adopted many Western concepts and cultural practices as almost all the postcolonial and postindustrial cultural products can be found there. But Asia often adapted, customized, and re-vented the Western culture, which is germane to a new, transnational culture. Given its own cultural complexity in the region, Asian embodies global cultural diversity, which includes the disparity between the media-rich and the media-poor during the unprecedented economic expansion. In that sense, Asian culture is not only a research source but a dynamic contributing force to international communication studies.

Among the most important challenges, Asia presents the following:

*Special communication channel*

Asia is known to have many bilingual or multilingual intellectuals. Many of them have studied in the West. Among the current officials of various governments, some received doctoral or MBA degrees from western universities. In international communication, they are the new decision-maker and communicator between the East and the West.

Asian Diaspora also has great affinity with international communication studies. Every year, India, China, Japan and Korea supplied most international students to the Great Britain, the United States and other western countries. Many of the outstanding scholars and professionals chose to work and live there with their advanced degrees. Over the years, they have created a new communication channel between their mother culture and host culture. And their strategic roles in international communication helped resolve many conflicts and promote collaborations between the East and the West (Shen, 2002).

*Cultural diversity*

The diversity of Asian histories and cultures poses a direct challenge to the Western-centered arguments, which are not infallible in explicating international communication. McQuail stated that the American-led globalization tends to synchronize world culture, undermining national, regional and local cultures (2005). Although "Western prosperity, Western legal systems, Western forms of banking, and Western communications that human initiatives now reach so easily across frontiers to affect the lives and aspirations of people all over the globe" (Scruton, p. 125), the Asian values, believes and various communication practices will constitute a backflow of information from the East to the West. In that regard, Asian challenges will help debunk the Western homogenization, giving impetus to the growth of a more diversified global media culture.

*New media influence*

New media and digital technologies dissolve the boundaries of the nation state. Asia is seen as a new agency to promote the change in international communication.

When the growing Asian economy increases its hard power for the world economic recovery, Asian culture provides a soft power to shape international communication with its cultural dynamics. Its impact on the field may not be as tangible as its expanding economy to the world economy recovery, it will generate longer effects on international communication studies given the wide-range manufacturing of digital media, fast diffusion and massive adoption of the transnational media in the most populous continent.

*Towards retribalization*

Asian culture adopts Western culture with its own selective schemata. It decentralizes the Western culture, such as film, music, and technology. It has the innate ability to immerse the best of the world into its self according to its own choices and conscience. Through hybridization and localization, it maintains the growing independence and complexity of the media, culture and society.

**Ending remark**

In view of global changes in the 21st century, particularly the changes taking place in Asia-Pacific region, the importance of Asia cannot be overemphasized. In a time full of perplexities and uncertainty during the global recession, international communication scholarship entails the expansion and adoption of Asian perspectives in a way that the dynamic Asian media and cultures will help remap the field of international communication studies. In order to meet various challenges ahead, communication scholars need a global vision that embraces Asian perspectives, values, history and cultures for a sustainable growth in academic and socio-cultural development. As such, Asian culture will help contribute to international communication studies in the shifting context of globalization.

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