"Harmony without Uniformity": An Asiacentric Worldview and Its Communicative Implications

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"Harmony without Uniformity": An Asiacentric Worldview and Its Communicative Implications" continues our study of worldview but brings a different cultural perspective into consideration. Yoshitaka Miike proposes that conflict arises not from cultural difference itself but from the ignorance of that difference. Moreover, as global citizens, not only must we appreciate cultural diversity, we must learn from that diversity. According to Miike, all too often cultural difference is viewed through the lens of one’s own worldview, but to understand and learn from another culture, “we must understand the worldview of the culture and its impact on the forms and functions of communication.”

The essay contends that many intercultural studies have imposed a European worldview on other cultures, resulting in a critical examination rather than an investigation designed to gain “insight and inspiration.” To begin the process of learning from, rather than merely about, other cultures, the author suggests that you need to (1) understand your own worldview, (2) understand other cultures’ worldviews, and (3) understand how other cultures perceive your culture. This latter recommendation is particularly relevant on the stage of contemporary international relations.

In the second half of his essay, Miike discusses an “Asiacentric worldview and its communicative implications in local and global contexts.” He proposes five Asiacentric communication propositions, which reflect his interpretation of the Asian worldview. These include (1) circularity, (2) harmony, (3) other-directedness, (4) reciprocity, and (5) relationality. Awareness and understanding of these propositions offers greater insight into Asian cultures and presents an alternative to the Eurocentric worldview. The essay concludes that the processes of globalization have increased the requirement not just to learn about other cultures but also to find ways that promote and facilitate intercultural learning.

We may speak of many civilizations in human history, some dead, others living. But human civilization should also be viewed as a grand old tree with many branches, flowers, and fruits, nurtured by the same earth, water, air, and human ingenuity. There is a clear unity in diversity.

Majid Tehranian (2007, p. 46)

In response to Samuel Huntington’s (1993, 1996) proposition that the world would be divided by “the clash of civilizations,” Tu Weiming (2006) tersely states, “Civilizations do not clash. Only ignorance does” (p. 12). Indeed, ignorance of cultural diversity, not cultural diversity itself, is a source of disharmony and conflict in the global village. To be sure, as Chesebro (1996) notes, “multiculturalism is a symbolic issue, a question of how we understand ourselves, how we understand our heritages, and how we understand our futures to be” (p. 13). Hence, it does sometimes radically challenge our basic sense of identity, community, and humanity. And yet, we must learn to appreciate all cultural traditions as valuable resources for humanity because diversity is vital to human survival and flourishing (Tu, 2001a). It is counterproductive to see difference as an obstacle to “progress” in the age of intercultural encounters. Our task as global citizens is not to “liberate” different people from their “primitive” and “uncivilized” traditions, but to learn from different people with their respective traditions about alternative visions of humanity and communication.

This original essay appears here in print for the first time. All rights reserved. Permission to reprint must be obtained from the author and the publisher. Dr. Yoshitaka Miike is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo, Hawai‘i.
In this essay, I will share my thoughts on the what and the how of culture learning to achieve mutual understanding and dialogue, and discuss, as an illustrative example, how Asians and non-Asians alike may be able to benefit from an Asiacentric worldview and its implications for communication. I will re-interpret Molefi Kete Asante’s (1993) idea of “multiculturalism without hierarchy” (i.e., the co-existence of many cultures alongside) in the global context and apply the Confucian ideal of “harmony without uniformity” (i.e., the balanced integration of different elements) to the contemporary world. Wisdom is a precious gift to humanity. Every continent, every community, and every culture has accumulated indigenous wisdom, from which we can learn a great deal about how we should relate to one another, nature, and the spirits in the universe (Miike, 2004). It is my argument in the succeeding discussion, therefore, that, if we are to remain hopeful for a prosperous and peaceful world and to realize unity in diversity in the global society, we ought to reflect earnestly on the question of humanity and the way of communication from different local knowledges in different cultures.

**CULTURES IN HIERARCHY AND CULTURES ALONGSIDE**

Asante (2003b) claims that difference alone does not create a problem, and that it is the assigning of hierarchical value to difference that creates a problem. His idea of “multiculturalism without hierarchy” thus pinpoints how cultures should relate to one another in the context of diversity. He implies that, if multiculturalism is defined as the co-existence of many cultures, there are two ways of cultural co-existence: (1) cultures in hierarchy and (2) cultures alongside. Cultures in hierarchy is the form of cultural co-existence in which we see one culture above others so that we learn a frame of reference from one culture and view others through the single cultural standpoint. Cultures alongside is the form of cultural co-existence in which we see all cultures equal so that we learn different outlooks from different cultures and view all cultures through their respective cultural lenses. Asante (1993) refers to the second form of cultural co-existence as pluralism without hierarchy and hegemony. He believes that, when we bring together local knowledges from all cultures, we will have a truly global knowledge about people in the world and move toward a truly transcultural understanding of humanity, diversity, and communication. In this section, using Satoshi Ishii’s (1997) conceptualization of culture, I will envision the ideal of culture learning that enhances “multiculturalism without hierarchy.” My premise here is that, in order to appreciate any culture, we must understand the worldview of the culture and its impact on the forms and functions of communication.

**Worldview as the Mental Layer of Culture**

Ishii (1997) proposes a three-layer-structure model of culture (see Figure 1.1). According to him, culture consists of three layers—material, behavioral, and mental. The most external, overt, and visible layer of culture is the material one, which is represented by various artifacts (e.g., food and clothing) produced, operated, and controlled by the behavioral layer. The semi-overt layer of culture is the behavioral one, which is composed of verbal and nonverbal behaviors as symbols (e.g., words and gestures) and reflects the mental layer. The most internal, covert, and invisible layer of culture is the mental one, which functions in the form of values, beliefs, and attitudes. Ishii (1997) is of the opinion that “understanding the mental layer is the most
important in intercultural communication situations because it is the core of culture which operates and controls the two outer behavioral and material layers” (p. 321). The mental layer of a culture is, in a nutshell, a cultural worldview that answers ultimate questions about humanity and the universe—the tri-world of humans, nature, and the supernatural (Ishii, 2001)—and their relationships (e.g., Who are we? Where have we been before birth? Where will we go after death? For what do we live? What should we do in this secular world? How should we relate to other humans, nature, and the spirits?)

Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2010) define a worldview as “a culture’s orientation toward God, humanity, nature, the universe, life, death, sickness, and other philosophical issues concerning existence” (p. 150). A worldview should be regarded [as] neither completely static nor completely fluid. It is always evolving and transforming and yet maintains the contours of the culture. Different portions of the worldview are instilled in the minds of different members of the culture. Given that it is the deep structure of communication (i.e., the mental layer), we may or may not be aware of its profound impact on the surface structure of communication (i.e., the behavioral and material layers). Because the mental layer of a culture is the most internal and invisible, we can only guess what it is like by comprehensively interpreting the linguistic, religious, philosophical, and historical foundations of the culture. As Ishii, Klopf, and Cooke (2009) comment, a worldview is, more often than not, “implicit and symbolically implied but not explicitly expressed…. How it is formed, therefore, is a significant matter of speculation” (p. 30).

**Learning About and From Cultures**

Learning about cultures is one thing. Learning from cultures is another. We can be very arrogant and ethnocentric, but we can still learn about other cultures. Learning from cultures, on the other hand, requires us to be humble and modest to understand and appreciate other cultures (Miike, 2008a). The former approach is an attempt to describe, interpret, and evaluate a different culture through the worldview that is not derived from the culture. In other words, we use the mental layer of our own culture to analyze the material, behavioral, and mental layers of other cultures. In this approach, cultural critique, rather than culture learning, is prone to take place because we tend to treat other cultures like texts for criticism and their members like objects for analysis. I call such an approach “centrism.” For example, if we use the mental layer of European cultures to understand African cultures, our Eurocentrism (not Eurocentricity) will most likely distort the cultural realities of the African world from an outsider’s point of view (see Figure 1.2). When we consciously or unconsciously presume that independence, individualism, and freedom are better than interdependence, communalism, and obligation without reference to the African worldview, we are tempted to view African and European cultures in hierarchy, not alongside, and fail to acknowledge the ubuntu-based humanity in the African context (see Kamwangamalu, 2008). Indeed, we relate only to African cultures in a hierarchical way.

The latter approach is an attempt to describe, interpret, and evaluate a different culture through the worldview that is derived from the culture. To
put it in another way, we use the mental layer of the culture to understand its material and behavioral layers. In this approach, culture learning and cross-cultural self-reflection are likely to take place because we tend to view other cultures as resources for insight and inspiration, and their members as willful agents. I call such an approach “centricity.” For instance, if we use the mental layers of African and Asian cultures to understand the material and behavioral layers of African and Asian cultures, our Afrocentricity and Asiacentricity (not Afrocentrism and Asiacentrism) will more accurately capture the cultural realities of the African and Asian worlds from an insider’s point of view (see Figure 1.3). It goes without saying that it is often difficult but critically important for us to engage in learning from, not about, cultures if we wish to broaden and deepen the understanding of culture-specific thought and action, and to expand the notion of humanity in cultural context. This ideal form of culture learning undoubtedly helps us achieve multiculturalism without hierarchy and facilitate dialogue among civilizations (Miike, 2008a).

**HUMANITY AS AN EXPRESSION OF EUROCENTRISM**

What is problematic in many intercultural studies is that the mental layer of European cultures is frequently used to analyze the behavioral and material layers of non-European cultures, which decontextualizes them and obscures their nexus with the mental layer of non-European cultures (Miike, 2003a, 2010b). Because it is the mental layer of culture that explains why these symbolic behaviors and material artifacts are of immense value, such analyses will not result in the deeper appreciation and better understanding of behavioral and material layers of non-European cultures. Consequently, those descriptions, interpretations, and evaluations present them as exotic, irrational, and backward and, hence, ultimately create the image of “the Other.” In other words, they impose the Eurocentric vision of humanity on other versions of humanity. I contend that we should begin to rethink the role of non-Western worldviews in comprehending non-Western behaviors and in redefining and reconceptualizing humanity and communication. I reiterate that we must see all cultures as central resources for humanistic insight and inspiration, not peripheral targets for ethnocentric analysis and critique.

The nature and ideal of humanity have often been delimited by the Eurocentric worldview. The Enlightenment mentality of the modern West is undoubtedly the most powerful ideology that dominates the Eurocentric worldview. Its core values are instrumental rationality, individual liberty, calculated self-interest, material progress, and rights consciousness (Tu, 2002, 2007). Although aggressive individualism, excessive scientism, and self-destructive anthropocentrism may result in the isolated self, the fragmented community, and the over-exploited earth, these values have served as Eurocentric criteria from which to scrutinize and judge non-European versions and...
visions of humanity. They have shaped false dichotomies such as the civilized and the primitive, the modern and the traditional, the progressive and the backward, the developed and the developing, and the humane and the inhumane.

Rethinking Civilization and Development

Tehranian (2007) persuasively argues that, if civilization is defined not as modernization but as "the pursuit of peace with peaceful means," it is an "unfinished journey." All nations and regions are civilized in some ways and uncivilized in other respects. Tehranian (1990, 1999) also convincingly demonstrates that, if we rethink development not in terms of the living standard (e.g., economic growth) but in terms of the quality of life (e.g., human warmth), all societies and communities are both developed and underdeveloped. In his "communitarian" eyes, each country and every culture is struggling to achieve a sustainable balance among the contradictory themes of individual freedom, social equality, civil order, benevolent community, and sacred nature in the conflict-ridden waves of globalism, regionalism, nationalism, localism, and spiritualism (Tehranian, 1993). These themes are perennial concerns and yet intractable issues facing both the local community and the global society.

The indigenous Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka, for instance, is based on this holistic philosophy and practice of development (see Dissanayake, 1984, 1991). According to Tu (2007), China's major challenge today is "to embrace the market economy without turning the whole country into a market society. It would be disastrous if academic institutions, mass media, city organizations and even families were eventually to be totally marketized" (p. 12). The painful realization of many well-informed citizens in materially over-developed environments is that modernization can liberate us from material poverty, but it can also enslave us to spiritual poverty. Without the bonds of fellowship and community, we can be easily driven to the world of psychological alienation, status anxiety, social envy, relentless acquisition, and conspicuous consumption (Tehranian, 1990, 1993).

In spite of criticisms of the aforementioned invalid binaries, Eurocentric constructions of humanity have led to Eurocentric critiques of other non-Western views of humanity. They have also made us oblivious to ... the past and potential contributions of non-European cultures to human civilization. As Rogers (1976) cautions, therefore, it is very easy for us to "forget that India, China, Persia, and Egypt were old, old centers of civilization, that their rich cultures had in fact provided the basis for contem­porary Western cultures" (p. 216). In retrospect, Rogers (1978) goes on to say that, "even if their family life displayed a warmer intimacy and their artistic triumphs were greater, that was not development. It could not be measured in dollars" (p. 65). Looking at the non-Western world only with a Eurocentric critical eye and looking at the West only with a Eurocentric uncritical eye, nonetheless, poses a serious problem in approximating and appreciating the fullest potentials of humanity, civilization, and communication. This is especially so when the Eurocentric vision of humanity, heavily influenced by the Enlightenment in the West, is undermining the human condition (Tu, 2002).

Being a Teacher and Being a Student

Asante (1998) posits ... “Any interpretation of African culture must begin at once to dispense with the notion that, in all things, Europe is teacher and Africa is pupil” (p. 71). There is a persistent and pervasive tendency to approach European cultures from a student’s perspective and non-European cultures from a teacher’s perspective in the study of culture and communication. As discussed earlier, much cross-cultural and intercultural research deals with non-European cultures as targets for analysis and critique, but not as resources for insight and inspiration. Therefore, it promotes a teacher’s perspective on non-European cultures, which centers and dislocates non-European people. It should be kept in mind, however, that we do not appreciate cultures when we always analyze and critique them. We appreciate cultures when we learn from them. We must be diligent students of non-Western learning and abandon the role of being teachers from the West all of the time. (Miike, 2006). Tu (2008), for
example, duly insists on the value of seeing African cultures from a student's point of view:

If we consider ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity as a global asset, Africa should not be characterized by the HIV epidemic, poverty, unemployment and social disintegration alone. It should also be recognized as a rich reservoir for human spirituality and the wisdom of elders. The African Renaissance, symbolized by the geological and biological diversity of the tiny area around Capetown (said to be comparable in richness to the vast area of Canada) ought to be a source of inspiration for a changed mindset that addresses social development as a global joint venture. (p. 331)

Three Steps to Cross-Cultural Dialogue

With “a global mindset by which we try to see things through the eyes of others and add their knowledge to our personal repertoires” (Chen \& Starosta, 2000, p. 1), we can perhaps take three steps to cross-cultural dialogue. The first step is to understand the mental layer of our own culture and its impact on the behavioral and material layers. The second step is to understand the mental layer of other cultures and its impact on the behavioral and material layers. The third step is to listen to others' perspectives on our culture and share our perspectives on other cultures in order to reflect on what it means to be human in both local and global contexts and how humans should relate to one another, nature, and the spirits. In this step, we must engage in intercultural dialogue with Asante's (2006) spirit of mutual respect and learning: “As creators of our own societies, we have valuable experiences to share, not to impose, which might be examined and adapted in a spirit of sharing and dialogue. This is the real meaning of intercultural interaction” (p. 154). Tu (2008) echoes Asante's position by saying that “the celebration of cultural diversity, without falling into the trap of pernicious relativism, is profoundly meaningful for global stewardship” (p. 331).

Centricity in the first step of cross-cultural dialogue is the beginning and basis of equality and mutuality in intercultural communication (Miike, 2008a). It prevents our interactions with people from different countries and cultures from becoming a mere imposition-imitation encounter. This point should be well taken, especially by non-Westerners who wish to have sincere and serious conversations about intercultural cooperation and collaboration with Westerners on an equal footing. As Asante (2009) elucidates, centricity urges us, first and foremost, to inquire about our own identities, cultures, and histories as a way of contributing to the grand flow of the entire humanity without being imitators who blindly follow others. Paradoxically, in this soul-searching process, we may discover that the development of our own culture is, in fact, indebted to other cultures, and that the nature of human civilization is truly multicultural and synergic. In any case, imitation is not intercultural (Miike, 2008a).

ASIACENTRIC WORLDVIEW AND COMMUNICATION

In this section, I will draw on my previous writings (Miike, 2003a, 2004, 2007) based on the principle of Asiacentricity (see Miike, 2006, 2008b, 2010a, 2010b) and outline an Asiacentric worldview and its communicative implications in local and global contexts. More specifically, I will discuss five Asiacentric propositions on human communication. They are propositions, not truths, in the sense that they reflect my interpretation of the invisible mental layer of Asian cultures and my intent to tap into Asian cultural wisdom both for an Asiacentric understanding of Asian communication and for dialogue among civilizations. Hence, they do not capture the whole profile of the Asian communicator and the entire picture of Asian communication. Every scholarly investigation must "make certain simplifying assumptions about complex realities that it studies" (Rogers, 1990, p. 261). The present inquiry of Asiacentricity is no exception in this regard. My discussion here is based on the five elements of an Asiacentric worldview that I have identified from the existing literature on the psychology and practices of Asian cultures and communication (e.g., Chen \& Miike, 2003; Dissanayake, 1988; Kincaid, 1987; Miike, 2009a, 2009b; Miike \& Chen, 2006, 2007; Nordstrom, 1983): (1) circularity, (2) harmony, (3) other-directedness, (4) reciprocity, and (5) relationality. These recurring themes collectively
paint an Asiacentric picture of humanity and communication.

Communication as a Reminder of Non-Separateness

The first Asiacentric proposition is that communication is a process in which we remind ourselves of the interdependence and interrelatedness of the universe. This proposition can complement the Western dominant thinking that communication is a process in which we demonstrate our independence and express our individuality. The two Asian themes of relationality and circularity have much to do with the ontological belief that the universe is a great whole in which everyone and everything are interrelated across space and time. No one and nothing in the universe exists in isolation (Chen, 2006; Jung, 2009; Miike, 2003a). Asian religions and philosophies illuminate the interconnected nature of the self, family, community, society, nation, world, and cosmos.

Confucius (551–479 BCE) remarks in the Analects (6: 30) that “if you wish to establish yourself, you have to help others to establish themselves; if you wish to complete yourself, you have to help others to complete themselves.” Similarly, in the words of Suzuki (2006), Buddhism teaches: “So to save oneself we have to save others…. By helping others, I may be able to save myself. My salvation and others’ salvation are so intimately involved, connected together, that we can never save ourselves just by ourselves. We must always be saved together” (p. 19). More interestingly, the Hindu notion of Virat Purusha [Cosmic Person] views each individual as the manifestation of the cosmos itself. The universe is “a single body where each element lives for all and all live for one … [T]he weal and woe of one individual affect another” (Saral, 1983, p. 54). It is the teaching of Hinduism that “the world of distinct and separate objects and processes is a manifestation of a more fundamental reality that is undivided and unconditioned” (Jain, 1991, p. 80).

The Asian worldview demands that we constantly communicate with fellow humans, nature, and the world of spirits in order to escape from the illusion that we are independent individuals in a particular place at a particular time (Miike, 2007). For humans are prone to engage in a present-oriented and lifeworld-centered way of thinking. It comes as no surprise, then, that Asian patterns of small group and organizational communication correspond especially to this ideal of communication as a reminder of … non-separateness with a view to strengthening group or organizational unity, loyalty, and harmony. The Indonesian musyawarah-mufakat performance and the Japanese nemawashi practice, for instance, allow group members not only to exchange ideas but also to increase the sense of interdependence and interrelatedness (Saito, 1982).

The Asian worldview essentially defines communication as an endless process in which we continuously locate and relocate ourselves in an ever-expanding network of relationships across space and time. This ancient yet radical Eastern idea of communication must be taken seriously now that the global village has never been so divided by wealth, power, technology, and influence in world history, and [now] that we have polluted the air we breathe and poisoned the water we drink to the extent that we risk our own lives (Tu, 1998, 2002). Social disintegration is also becoming a worldwide phenomenon in modern societies. As Asante (2005) observes, “The lack of connectedness creates insensitivity to others, harshness, abrasiveness, and arrogance” (p. 135). Yum (2000) further points out that “[a]lthough individualism has its own strength as a value, individualism that is not accompanied by commitments to large entities eventually forces people into a state of isolation, where life itself becomes meaningless” (p. 71). We must learn about communication as a way to realize that our well-being is inextricably and inescapably intertwined with [the well-being] of other members of the human family, nature, and even the supernatural.

Communication as Ego-Reduction and Self-Cultivation

The second Asiacentric proposition is that communication is a process in which we reduce our selfishness and
egocentrism. This Eastern viewpoint makes a sharp contrast to the Western presumption that communication is a process in which we enhance our self-esteem and protect our self-interest (Yin, 2009; Yin & Miike, 2008). Dogen (1200–1253), the founder of the Soto Zen school in Japan, writes at the very beginning of his 13th-century book Shobogenzo (Treasury of the Eye of the True Dharma): “To study the Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by ten thousand things.” What he meant was that removing all the divisions and distinctions of self and other renders it possible to form an ultimate unity with everything. According to Dogen, intrapersonal communication, in which we reduce selfishness and egocentrism, can lead to ultimate communication with the whole universe (Saito, 1970). Likewise, the Confucian way of learning to be human is to engage in ceaseless self-cultivation and creative self-transformation by crafting the self as a center of myriad relationships, not the center of all things. The point of departure in quest of our authentic identity is, paradoxically, to overcome selfishness and egocentrism (Tu, 2002).

What is intriguing about Buddhist and Confucian epistemologies is that we need to reduce our selfishness and egocentrism through communication and then become better communicators as a result of self-discipline and self-cultivation.

It should not be misunderstood, however, that Asian traditions of thought discourage the values of autonomy and agency. Confucian thought, for example, enunciates the view that “the reciprocal interplay between self as center and self for others enables the self to become a center of relationships. As a center, personal dignity can never be marginalized and, as relationships, the spirit of consideration is never suppressed” (Tu, 2001b, p. 26). While they recognize the importance of individuality in collectivity and independence in interdependence, Asian religious-philosophers, especially Buddhist thinkers, are critically aware that humans are by nature self-centered and egocentric. Therefore, their teachings impel humans to discipline and cultivate themselves so that they can experience the oneness of the universe and harmoniously coexist with fellow humans, nature and the world of spirits. In this increasing ego-driven world, the time is right to turn our attention to the role of interpersonal communication as an ego-reduction and self-decentering practice. For, as Chen (2005) understands, in order for us to fully unfold our potential as co-creators of the whole universe with heaven and earth, our self must be “ceaselessly edified, constantly liberated, and perpetually purified” (p. 7) in intercultural encounters with the other.

Communication as Sensing and Feeling

The third Asiaticentric proposition is that communication is a process in which we feel the joy and suffering of all sentient beings. This proposition is linked particularly with the Asian theme of other-directedness. As the Chinese concept of renqing, the Japanese concept of ninja, and the Korean concept of jung imply, emotional sensitivity, not instrumental rationality, occupies a central place in being and becoming fully development, and self-realization. In such a line of thinking, the Asian way of knowing is grounded on the elimination of excessive and aggressive ego as a primary source of mental suffering and perceptual barriers (Ishii, 2004).

Asian daily experiences appear to concertedly indicate that interacting with other humans, nature, and the spirits facilitates the process of disciplining and cultivating ourselves. Asians may be truly touched and highly motivated to discipline themselves and work harder when they listen to, or simply observe, individuals who possess sophisticated skills through their years of practice or people who are struggling against all odds in their lives. Moreover, reducing selfishness and egocentrism means increasing connection and cooperation not only at the inter-personal level but also at other levels. From the perspective of Zen Buddhism, “An awareness of ‘oneness’ develops from emptying oneself and accepting the other” (Saito, 1970, p. 17). Encountering fellow humans, nature, and the spirits in a way that we reduce our selfishness and egocentrism enables us to rise above nepotism, parochialism, ethnocentrism, and anthropocentrism as well as egocentrism.

In such a sense, this second communicative proposition is, once again, in consonance with the two Asian themes of relationality and circularity. In this increasing ego-driven world, the time is right to turn our attention to the role of interpersonal communication as an ego-reduction and self-decentering practice. For, as Chen (2005) understands, in order for us to fully unfold our potential as co-creators of the whole universe with heaven and earth, our self must be "ceaselessly edified, constantly liberated, and perpetually purified" (p. 7) in intercultural encounters with the other.
human in the Asian worldview. To feel through sensitivity, rather than to analyze through rationality, is one of the “habits of the heart” in Asian communication (Chen & Starosta, 2003). Such a feature manifests in many trans-Asian premises and practices of communication. The Filipino pahiwatig-pahikiramdam dynamics (Maggay, 1999; Mansukhani, 2005; Mataragnon, 1988), the Japanese enryo-sasshi style (Ishii & Bruneau, 1994; Miike, 2003, 2010c), and the Korean saryo-nunchi anticipation (Choi & Choi, 1992; Robinson, 2003), for example, underscore and underline the importance of communicative sensitivity to the joy and suffering of fellow human beings. This preponderance toward affection instead of cognition does not mean that Asians are not rational and do not rely on reason (Chen, 2006), but feelings and emotions are equally, or even more, valued as essential qualities in the Asian version of humanity and communication.

Asian religions and philosophies also endorse this communicative proposition. Confucianism delimits the cardinal concept of ren [human-heartedness] in light of sympathy and empathy. Buddhism likewise emphasizes the development of compassion, which literally means “feelings in common.” Tu (2001a) accounts for the centrality of emotional sensitivity in Buddhist and Confucian visions of humanity:

It is important to note that the Asian worldview does not encourage speaker-centered affective communication where individuals explicitly disclose their emotions to one another. According to the Asian experience, because “[r]elational emotions that bind and bond individuals together, not the private and narcissistic emotions, are emphasized” (Kim, 2001, p. 67), emotional convergence in communication is often possible when the ego-decentered and other-directed listener attempts to sense and read the speaker’s emotional dynamics. Thus, to be communicatively active in the Asian sense is to be perceptive, receptive, and introspective to feel together with fellow humans, nature, and the spirits (Miike, 2007). The desirable profile of such a sensitive Asian communicator is close to what Gordon (2009) has in mind as an “attuned communicator”: “To develop sensitivity to the importance of ‘fine-turning’ to the other, to sensing who they are, where they’ve been, what they believe and value, and feel what they need, what their style is, what their rhythms are, this is the work of an ‘attuned’ communicator” (p. 13).

Buddhist theories postulate that the development of compassion parallels the increased degrees of the awareness of interdependent interrelatedness and egoless altruism. As the first and second Asiacentric propositions suggest, then, communication can augment such an awareness and egolessness, which, in turn, helps us develop empathic sensitivity to communicate and feel togetherness and interdependence. This Asian portrait of communication may be pressed into service so as to extend the affective and altruistic aspect of humanity in the global community.

Communication as Reciprocal Duty and Responsibility

The fourth Asiacentric proposition is that communication is a process in which we receive and return our debts to all sentient beings. Many Asian religious-philosophical teachings as well as everyday practices highlight the fact that our existence is dependent on all other beings. The Buddhist doctrine of pratitya
Sato (1959) explicates this concept as follows: it is the idea that “the existence of every being in the universe is made possible only by Buddhist engi or predetermined cooriginations and corelationships with all other beings” (Ishii, 2001, p. 7). Implicit in this Asian worldview is that we must be grateful to our fellow humans, natural environments, and ancestral spirits for our blessings and have ethical obligations to return something to them. We owe our debts of gratitude to our ancestors, parents, siblings, neighbors, teachers, friends, animals, oceans, rivers, mountains, and plants. Confucianism and Hinduism similarly accentuate the primacy of obligatory reciprocity in embodying supportive and cooperative interdependence and in nurturing loyal and long-term relationships (Chen & Chung, 2000; Saral, 1983; Yum, 2000). The Asian theme of reciprocity comes into play here.

Daisetsu Suzuki (1870-1966), perhaps the most renowned scholar of Zen Buddhism in the West, once advocated the importance of shuyo-no-on [the debt of gratitude that we owe to the universe for our existence] for humanity (Sato, 1959). In traditional Japanese culture, people ought to feel obligated to remember and repay the on [debt of gratitude] that they had received from all contacts in the course of their life. In particular, four types of on were emphasized: on from parents as life givers, on from teachers and mentors, on from lords, and shuyo-no-on. From a Buddhist viewpoint, shuyo-no-on is the ultimate on of interdependence based on our awareness and appreciation of the support of the universe with which we are living on the earth. It is age-old wisdom similar to the emerging and evolving philosophy of “ecopiety” about the self-defeating humanity and the endangered earth (see Jung, 2009). Suzuki in Sato (1959) explicates this concept as follows:

It rains and the ground becomes wet. It is the on of rain; it is the virtue of rain. The earth absorbs the rain, and sends it to the roots of trees and grasses, and then to their buds. This is the on of the great earth. They are helping each other, loving each other; it is on. I receive on from others, at the same time I extend on to others…. It is love and the action of love we feel as on for each other. To understand shuyo-no-on means to get rid of the world of power-domination, to enter into the area of loving each other and helping each other. “Okage-sama” means literally “appreciation of the protection of the tree under its shade,” but the implication can be extended to our existence on the earth in the solar system, in this Universe. Indeed, true meaning of human existence lies in realizing this relationship. (p. 244)

Other Asian concepts in Asian languages such as the Filipino concept of utang na loob and the Thai concept of bhunkun also allude to communication as the process of reciprocating love and kindness. These cultural practices ideally enhance our deep affection and thoughtful consideration toward others. It is noteworthy that this communication process of receiving and returning debts of gratitude often goes beyond here-and-now reciprocity. As Ho (1993) attests, the Asian worldview stresses an extended and circular perspective on space and time in the need to repay our debit of gratitude. That is, if we are unable to pay in our present life, the debt may be passed on to the next and future generations. Or it may also be assumed in our next life. “In a sense,” Yum (2000) writes, “a person is forever indebted to others, who in turn are constrained by other debts” (p. 66). Such an Asian perspective on communication as assuming responsibilities, not as asserting rights, may be perceived as a challenge to individual freedom, but it can project duty-centered character building and ethical intelligence in the age of global exploitation (Yin, 2009; Yin & Miike, 2008).

Communication as Moralizing and Harmonizing

The fifth Asiacentric proposition is that communication is a process in which we moralize and harmonize the universe. This proposition concerns itself with the Asian axiological emphasis on the social order and, ultimately, the order of the universe. It is also pertinent to an Asian criterion by which to evaluate communicative conduct. In Asian cultures, generally speaking, communication is positively evaluated when it attempts to actualize the moral integrity and harmony of the universe, while it is negatively evaluated when it aims to pursue our own individual self-interest. Like the African worldview, “humaneness is characterized by how well
people live in harmony with each other and nature. To be inhumane is to live poorly in relationship to your fellow human beings and nature" (Asante, 2005, p. 135). Hence, ethics and morality revolve around harmony from the intrapersonal level to the cosmological level. In the Asian worldview, harmony is the end rather than the means of communication (Chen, 2004, 2006). As Chen and Starosta (2003) clarify, harmony in Asian communication processes "represents a kind of ethical appeal that can induce a sense of duty for cooperation with the other party, not by the communicator’s strategic words but by the sincere display of whole-hearted concern with the other" (p. 6).

The Asian de-emphasis on speech has been stereotypically exaggerated in the culture and communication literature to the extent that it gives the impression that Asians traditionally have not valued the act of speaking at all. But speaking for the benefit of others, not for the sake of self-interest, “is much cherished in Asian traditions of thought. Dissanayake (2003), for instance, explores the Buddhist teaching of samma vaca [right speech] and its moral implications in human communication. There are four primary guidelines for right speech: (1) right speech should be de-linked with falsehoods of any sort; (2) right speech discourages slander and calumny leading to friction and hostility among people; (3) right speech presupposes the absence of, and refraining from, harsh language; and (4) right speech encourages speakers to desist from frivolous and idle chatter and to embrace purposeful and productive speech. There is also much to learn from Confucius’s teaching of “humble talk and moral action” (see Chang, 2008) and Gandhi’s nonviolent philosophy of Satyagraha (see Pandikattu, 2001; Starosta & Shi, 2007) about moralizing and harmonizing styles and strategies of communication.

“An exemplary person seeks harmony but not uniformity,” Confucius opines in the Analects (13:23). This ideal of “harmony without uniformity” can be an ultimate goal of communication both in Asian societies and in the global village. In Confucius’s mind, a global citizen is a person who can fully recognize diversity as the basis for harmony and take the moral responsibility to make the best out of it. To such a citizen, intercultural communication is a means of integrating differences without creating the sameness. Tu in UNESCO (2006) articulates the critical relationship between harmony and diversity:

Harmony is predicated on diversity and difference. The opposite of harmony is sameness. The “great unity” is diametrically opposed to homogenized unity. The greatness of the “great unity” lies in its convergence, confluence, integration and harmonization of different colors, sounds, tastes and experiences. Harmony embraces difference. Without difference, harmony is impossible. If we do not mix spices, we cannot make tasty soup. Without different sounds, there is no music. Without different colors, there are no paintings. Geodiversity and biodiversity are pre-conditions for human survival, and linguistic and cultural diversity is congenial to human flourishing. (p. 181)

Asiacentric Communication Ethics and Competence

Asia is diverse and dynamic. It is a region of cultural complexity, continuity, and change, although the term signifies a certain geographical location in the world, designates a common historical and political struggle against Western imperialism and colonialism, and implies shared religious-philosophical foundations and cultural heritage (Miike, 2003a). Asian nations are plural societies. They “have a dominant community and a number of minority communities divided on the basis of language, religion, caste, and ethnicity living together under a single polity” (Goonasekera, 2003, p. 368). Chen and Starosta (2003) vividly depict such a place of remarkable variety and vitality:

Indonesia is largely Muslim, yet it contains a large Hindu enclave in Bali. Indians were also imported to parts of Malaysia, and Buddhism, started in India, [but] can hardly be found there now, except [as] a political reaction to casteism. Instead, it has taken root in China, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere. Shintoism thrives in Japan, but maybe nowhere else. Asia has some massive cities, but 80% of some Asian countries are rural. India and China have 800 language varieties or dialects. (p. 1)
Obviously, therefore, all Asian communicators do not subscribe to the above-discussed five propositions. These propositions do not necessarily reflect the way Asians actually communicate in real-life situations. Nevertheless, they serve as theoretical lenses from which to see an Asian version of humanity and to view Asian thought and action. They are designed to provide much food for thought in rethinking the nature and ideal of human communication in Asia and beyond from an alternative vantage point.

For example, the advent of the global village and the crisis of the human condition have made it compelling to ruminate on communication ethics and competence in intercultural contexts (Chen, 2005; Miike, 2009b; Tehranian, 2007). There have been extensive discussions on Eurocentric biases in the definitions and components of these key concepts (e.g., Chen & Starosta, 2008; Ishii, 2009; Shuter, 2003; Xiao & Chen, 2009). We can reexamine current conceptualizations of communication ethics and competence from the five Asiacentric propositions. They suggest that an ethical communicator can (1) remind herself or himself and others of interrelatedness and interdependence through communication, (2) discipline and cultivate herself or himself without being overly self-centered through communication, (3) develop her or his altruistic sensitivity to the sufferings of others, (4) feel her or his obligation to remember the debts that she or he has received and to try to return them in one way or another, and (5) speak up for greater harmony and morality.

Just like many proponents of Asian values who are often misunderstood by Western conservative intellectuals (Mahbubani, 2002), I am not asserting that these Asiacentric viewpoints on humans communicating are superior to Eurocentric ones, but I am protesting that they are not inferior to them. They are rooted in the Asian worldview and yet may be sharable along with those rooted in, say, the African worldview toward what Tu (2006, 2007) calls "a dialogical civilization" or what Sitaram (1998) calls "a higher humanity." In Sitaram's (1998) view, such a truly human civilization "is not an extension of any one culture; rather it would be the essence of all cultures of the entire humanity" (p. 13). Hence, there is room for Asiacentric, as well as Afrocentric and other non-Western, contributions. As Asante (1993) avers, there is also "space for Eurocentricity in a multicultural enterprise so long as it does not parade as universal. No one wants to banish the Eurocentric view. It is a valid view of reality where it does not force its way" (p. 188).

"CHERISHING THE OLD TO KNOW THE NEW"

It was my intention in this essay to argue that learning from, not about, cultures for self-reflexivity is a *sine qua non* for cross-cultural dialogue and to illustrate how Asians and non-Asians can benefit from an Asiacentric worldview and its implications for communication in local and global contexts. Tu (2001a) propounds two propositions on globalization. First, globalization can be hegemonic homogenization without cultural diversity and sensitivity, but through dialogue it may lead to a genuine sense of global community. Second, the search for identity can degenerate into extreme ethnocentrism and exclusion, but through dialogue it may lead to an authentic way of intercultural communication and to a real respect for diversity. It is then up to us whether we will further risk our lifeboat by imposing the ethnocentric version of humanity on others and dividing the world with the clash of ignorance, or we will engage in mutual dialogue with the principle of "multiculturalism without hierarchy" toward "harmony without uniformity." In either case, Mahatma Gandhi's statement that "this world has enough for all of us but not enough for the greed of a single person" (Tehranian, 1999, p. 191) now sounds soberer than ever before.

Asante (2003a) asseverates that innovation and tradition are key to humanizing the world. He contends that "The generation of the new, the novel, is basic to the advancement of cultural ideas but also is
the maintenance of the traditional" (p. 78). His contention is in perfect resonance with the Confucian spirit of "cherishing the old to know the new" (Analects, 2: 11). It is indeed imperative for us to study and apply old wisdoms both locally and globally in order to respond to new situations in the changing world (Miike, 2004). Tu (1998) aptly describes where we stand in search of global ethics and humanistic values:

The problematique of the viability of the human race ... is that having transformed ourselves into the most aggressive and self-destructive animal the evolutionary process has ever witnessed, we have now added ourselves to the long list of endangered species. This is the magnitude of the human dilemma today. We are urgently in need of a new way of perceiving, a new mode of thinking, even a new form of life, which is predicated on a radically transformed attitude and worldview. Paradoxically, our determined effort to move away from militarism, materialism, aggression, conflict, and destruction may be a new discovery, but it is also a return to the spiritual roots that have provided the ground for humans to survive and flourish for centuries. In this sense, our humanity is at a crossroads. (p. 3)

References


**Concepts and Questions**

1. How does the essay describe worldview? In what ways is this different from or similar to the previous essay?

2. Differentiate between learning about other cultures and learning from other cultures.

3. What is meant by "cultures in hierarchy"? Is this considered a negative or positive perspective? Why? Is there a better way of viewing cultures?

4. Describe and provide examples of the core values underlying the Eurocentric worldview.

5. Are there any dangers to exploring other cultures from a strictly descriptive perspective? Will simply analyzing and critiquing another culture help or hinder intercultural understanding and communication?

6. Describe and discuss the three steps to cross-cultural dialogue.

7. Summarize, with examples, the five Asian-centric communication propositions.

8. According to the essay, "the Asian worldview stresses an extended, circular perspective on space and time..." How is this similar or different from the worldview structure discussed in the previous essay?

9. What are some ways that a culture's worldview could influence communication style? How could these create difficulties during an intercultural communication interaction?

10. Do you think there are any benefits that Westerners can obtain from the Asian-centric worldview? If not, why? If yes, what are they?