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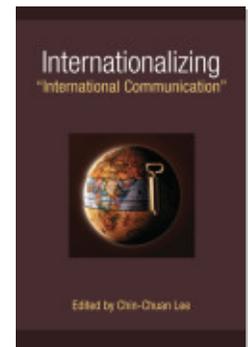
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CHAPTER TEN

Local Experiences, Cosmopolitan Theories

On Cultural Relevance in International Communication Research

Chin-Chuan Lee

Today's world is in fact a world of mixtures, of migrations, of crossings over.

—Edward W. Said (2000, p. 287)

From the particular, you may ascend to the general; but from the general theory there is no way back to the intuitive understanding of the particular.

—Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), as quoted in Ringer (1997, p. 11)

When a British colleague asked me for a take on my experience as a teacher of international communication at a midwestern U.S. university, I quipped half-jokingly, “American students tend to define their country as an opposite rather than as a part of the international system.” Hence “international” students are “foreign” students whereas “international” communication is defined, reductively and by default, as “non-U.S.” communication. Just as baseball’s pinnacle event in North America is called the “World Series,” the International Communication Association (ICA) has been “international” primarily in the sense of holding an annual conference at a Hilton or Sheraton hotel in an overseas metropolis once every four years.¹

Citing his survey of curriculum and introductory texts in major U.S. universities, Downing (2009, p. 274) observes that the trend in international media studies is “strongly in the direction of insularity rather than internationalism.” If the Western-cum-global model symbolizes “the imperialism of the universal” (Bourdieu, 2001), then this “globalized” model in fact originated from “the parochialism of the particular” (the term coined after Pierre Bourdieu) writ universal.

The need to internationalize media studies has increasingly been recognized, with the impetus coming from scholars who do not conform strictly to the U.S. mainstream orbit and especially from those who have cross-cultural or multicultural experiences. Downing (1996) questioned the representativeness of media studies based on a few affluent, stable democracies with Protestant histories and imperial entanglements with the rest of the world. Curran and Park (2000, p. 3) took the first initiative to “de-Westernize media studies,” editing a volume as “part of a growing reaction against the self-absorption and parochialism of much western media theory.” Curran (2005, p. xiii) further criticized two forms of myopia: “the inward orientation of American journalism research” and “the spurious universality of European media and cultural theory.” More recent albeit uneven attempts at de-Westernizing media studies have been made by Thussu (2009) and Wang (2011). It is fair to say that these sober voices have been murmured from a position of relative marginality; only those on the margin are more inclined to cross over and intersect various modes of knowledge.

The foreground of today’s calls for “internationalizing” international communication research is set against the larger post-Cold War background that gave the United States an added sense of political triumphalism and cultural complacency. The United States proclaimed itself “bound to lead” (Nye, 1990) in the “new world order,” oriented toward the neoliberal regime of the “Washington consensus.” Instead of broadening international or cross-cultural dialogue, the rhetoric of globalization is often honed to promote strategic policy vantage points of the United States—to the point that we can legitimately ask if globalization is a thinly veiled disguise of the “manifest destiny” ideology. Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis (Fukuyama, 1992) posits, in a self-congratulatory way, liberalism’s victory over fascism and communism as a final answer to history. Huntington (1993), a former advocate of the by-now bankrupt modernization theory, advances a bewilderingly reductive, fundamentalist, and exaggerated sce-

nario of conflicts between Western, Confucian, and Islamic civilizations. His focal concern was not so much with the resolution of civilization-based clashes as it was with the potential threats of such clashes to dominant U.S. interests and Western values. International communication studies have not made much progress despite the marching trumpet of globalization.

In this chapter, I shall first argue that the extreme form of positivistic methodology, with its bent for subsuming cultural specificity to abstract generality, has reinforced the Western-cum-universal epistemology and practices. By way of making my point, I shall take the liberty of drawing on my own intellectual biography to reflect on what I consider to be the pitfalls of the once dominant paradigm of international communication in the United States. Seeing this methodological flaw as deriving in part from cultural vacuousness, I shall plead that we give the Weberian-phenomenological methodology its due attention, and take cultural meaning more seriously instead of treating it as an antecedent, a consequence, or a residual category of sociological or psychological variables.

Several preliminary remarks are in order. First, we must reject both the dominant view and the nativistic view. As Said (1978, p. 247) argues eloquently, cultures and civilizations are hybrid, heterogeneous, and “so interrelated and interdependent as to beggar any unitary or simply delineated description of their individuality.” Such hegemonic views as Fukuyama (1992) and Huntington (1993) foreclose alternative thought and equal dialogue. On the opposite side, the nativistic reactions of Lee Kuan Yew’s “Asian values” or Beijing-defined “Confucian ethos” represent self-righteous, arrogant, and anti-liberal backlashes against democracy (Lee, 2001). Second, social sciences are an art of managing the creative tension between generality and specificity. Universality that obliterates specificity is both hegemonic and colonial, while specificity without general implications is self-defeating. Cultural interpretation gives life to rich specificity that is dialectically interactive with generality; it also enlivens the meanings of generality by giving specificity a pride of place. Third, social sciences have a relatively brief history in the West and were not introduced into China until the late nineteenth century. Media studies are not yet fully institutionalized in today’s China, where a nation of eager teachers and students have been groping for directions in the way of language, paradigms, epistemology, and methodology. Mutual borrowing is both necessary and healthy only if it is done as a critical choice and without losing one’s firm cultural grips.

Pitfalls of the (Once) Dominant Paradigm

I was attracted to the emerging field of international communication in the early 1970s by way of exposure to several seminal works in “development communication.” Daniel Lerner, Wilbur Schramm, and Everett M. Rogers were the leading proponents of this paradigm. They sought to explain the role and functions of the media in the process of national development, which was part of modernization theory, as conceived by American social scientists with the active encouragement of the U.S. government, on the assumption that economic growth held a key to democracy (Diamond, 1992). The newly emerging nations pursued national development projects with a vengeance from the 1950s to 1970s, at a time when the United States was at the peak of its global expansion and meanwhile pushing forward its Cold War agendas to prevent Communist encroachment.²

Lerner: The Passing of Traditional Society

Of the trio, both Schramm and Rogers acknowledged their intellectual debt to Lerner. Since Schramm (1964) was not based on primary research, I shall focus on the other two but start with Lerner’s (1958) pioneering *The Passing of Traditional Society*. Lerner (1958) was a work of central importance to international communication research but curiously peripheral to the sociology of modernization. My point of concern in this chapter will focus on how Lerner went about mustering “evidence” both epistemologically and methodologically to make his theoretical case.

Based on a reanalysis of survey data originally conducted to test the effectiveness of U.S. propaganda vis-à-vis Soviet propaganda in the Middle East, Lerner proposed this model of modernization:

Increasing industrialization has raised urbanization; rising urbanization has tended to raise literacy; rising literacy has tended to raise media exposure; increasing exposure has tended to increase political participation in economic and political life. (p. 46)

Lerner argues that the key to the *passing* of traditional society is to rid people of their fatalism. Individuals must collectively develop what he calls “empathy” or “psychic mobility,” a modernizing personality that enabled people to discard fatalism and, further, to imagine beyond the narrow confines of their immediate roles and contexts. Mass media were conceived

of as the “magic multiplier” of empathy and a crucial catalyst for social change. As more and more people acquire empathic capacity, the whole nation (as if it were a linear aggregate of individuals) would break off from the yoke of tradition and enter the threshold of modernization.

Various criticisms made of Lerner should be by now familiar, such as (see Lee, 1980, pp. 17–24): (a) rigidly segregating tradition from modernity instead of fostering a creative synthesis; (b) using a psychological variable (empathy) to explain the macro-societal transformation to the exclusion of acute structural constraints, global domination, imperialism, and post-colonial conditions; (c) imposing the Western pathway to modernization as a universal process, and thus contradicting the historical evidence showing a multiplicity of modernization routes in the West itself; and, also, (4) ignoring the differences in structural conditions between late development (the Third World) and early development (the European nations).

Lerner declared (1958, p. 79) that “what America is—to condense a rule more powerful than its numerous exceptions—the modernizing Middle East seeks to become.” In his view, the Middle East would have to walk through the same linear path that the United States had trodden. The American experience was not only relevant to the geographical region called “the West” but was projected as a “globally” valid model. He rejected the calls made by the emerging nations for alternative models as “ethnocentric predicament” and “a formidable obstacle to modernization” (p. ix). Lerner’s logically circular claim on a linear model of modernization, however, flies in the face of historical evidence presented by Moore (1967) and Tilly (1975). Moore showed that there were multiple pathways to modernization among the Western nations. Tilly argued that the Western model was an unintended consequence of an extractive, repressive, and coercive process; it was indeed considered a “lucky shot” that could not be reproduced.

Committed to a teleological vision, Lerner argued that the whole theoretical landscape required “some principle of unity in diversity” (p. 77). What does this mean? “By making explicit the regularities we document the process; by noting the deviations we locate each country in its proper phase” (p. 89). Generality subsumes exceptions. He thus postulated Turkey and Lebanon at the top of modernism (read: Westernization), Egypt and Syria in the middle, with Jordan and Iran at the bottom. Methodologically, Lerner set out to craft a series of six single-country narratives, which Harold D. Lasswell praised as “brilliantly arresting” (cited on the book cover). Each country narrative was a mix of historical facts, anecdotes, and second-

ary data geared toward constructing “a theory of modernization that articulates the common compulsion to which all Middle Eastern peoples are subject.” Three comments should be made. First, these country narratives, however vivid or arresting, are only “illustrative” of his committed position at best; they do not offer a strong “proof” or fair test of his theoretical model. Second, it is critical to pay close attention to the “considerable latitude” he had admittedly taken to treat “specific topics that varied from one country to another,” in order to discuss the “salient connections between communication, economic, and political behavior” (pp. 103–4). Each country story, by itself, is telling enough. But *selective* use of facts, topical emphases, and interpretations might have rendered these narratives not consistently comparable with reference to posited “salient connections” across six countries. As a whole, the theoretical edifice may thus sit on a shaky empirical ground. Third, given his penchant for pursuing “unity in diversity,” Lerner tended to cast aside “deviant” cases that did not fit into his explanatory system as countries “not yet modernized” instead of treating such counter-evidence as an invitation for rethinking his model. It did not occur to Lerner that his model might be limited, one-sided, or wrong (as many of his critics later pointed out).

Rogers: Diffusion of Innovations

The diffusion of innovation was regarded as one of the “invisible colleges” (Crane, 1972) for scholarly investigation. *Diffusion of Innovations*, a popular text that Everett M. Rogers spent his entire career updating, was reissued in five editions over a span of four decades. Rogers tried to establish a propositional inventory as a middle-range meeting ground to bridge theoretical concepts and empirical findings. The first edition of this text (Rogers, 1962) sifted through 405 studies, mostly conducted in the United States and Europe. The second edition listed 103 propositions that were digested from 1,500 studies; the sharp takeoff in the number of studies conducted in the developing world in the 1960s gave Rogers much confidence to subtitle this edition “a cross-cultural approach” (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971). Claiming to be even “less culture-bound,” Rogers (1983) distilled 91 propositions out of 3,085 studies, 30 percent of which originated from the developing nations. Rogers (1995) estimated the total number of diffusion publications at 4,000, which was rising to 5,200 articles shortly before his death (Rogers, 2003).

The structure of propositional inventory was retained in all five edi-

tions, but only the second edition (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971) offered a “scoreboard” to track the “popularity” of each proposition, for example:

- 5-29 Earlier adopters (of innovation) have a higher degree of opinion leadership than late adopters (42 studies, or 76 percent, support; 13 studies do not support).
- 5-30 Earlier adopters are more likely to belong to systems with modern rather than traditional norms than are later adopters (32 studies, or 70 percent, support; 14 studies do not support). (pp. 375-76)

In retrospect, it must have been this kind of *prima facie* scientific cogency that enticed this beginning graduate student to stake his career on the emerging field of communication. It was much later before I became well aware of the harsh criticisms made of Rogers. Downs and Mohr (1976) faulted Rogers’s propositions as empirically too inconsistent to be interpreted. Rogers (1983, p. 132) was probably legitimate in his defense that the diffusion research compared favorably with other branches of social sciences in terms of consistency, but I suspect as a synthesizer he might have (inevitably) smoothed out the rough edges of empirical findings from the disparate literature to make them seem less conflicting. More serious was McAnany’s (1984) criticism that Rogers’s propositions were too crude for theory-building. For me, it is even more pertinent to ask another question in this context: How should anomalous findings be treated? Should they be dismissed purely as “nuisances” and “exceptions” to the “general rule,” or should they prompt a critical reflection on the validity of the postulated model?

Even though many diffusion studies had originated from the developing countries, these studies were neither comparative nor “cross-cultural,” but seemed to directly replicate or reproduce the deeply embedded middle-class American assumptions, frameworks, and worldviews in overseas outposts.³ Over the life span of his text, Rogers did a few rounds of revision. He first took the “dominant paradigm” to task for displaying pro-innovation and pro-individualism biases (Rogers, 1983), then proposed a convergence model in place of the linear diffusion model (Rogers, 1995, p. xvi), and finally added new topics (the Internet, the AIDS epidemic, and world terrorism) to the diffusion process (Rogers, 2003). But none of these attempts have come close to addressing the fundamental criticisms of modernization theory that informed the diffusion research.

Methodologically, the diffusionists have skirted around, if not bypassed,

three major issues in comparative research (Smelser, 1976, p. 166): (a) Are the social units comparable with one another? (b) Are the abstract variables applicable to the dissimilar units that have been selected for study? (c) Are the indicators of the independent and dependent variables comparable from one sociocultural context to another? It goes without saying that comparative analysts must grapple with the issues of conceptual and empirical equivalences across different systems. What’s more, according to Smelser, sociocultural contexts might exert pressure on the articulation of the theory-data connections. Rogers seems to assume the diffusion process as unitary, universal, and invariant with respect to sociocultural contexts. Rogers (2003) collected many story tidbits from various cultures, as intriguing as Lerner’s individual country narratives, but these stories only served to exemplify a stated position rather than to reflect on theoretical or methodological premises.

The diffusion of knowledge has in general been flowing from center to periphery, from developed to developing countries, and from the West to the East. Academic hegemony is exercised not through coercion but via the conditioning of certain beliefs and assumptions which, if internalized or codified, may lead to an entrenched system of intellectual dependency without conscious reflection, resistance, or challenge. Despite its waning popularity in international communication, the diffusion research is still going strong in such applied fields as marketing, health, or agricultural extension. As we witness a weakening influence of this paradigm in the global center, it has continued to exert considerable authority in the world periphery. This lack of self-consciousness and self-confidence in the Third World shows the obstinacy of the underlying structure of academic hegemony. If we can take something positive from the postmodern turn, it would be the possibility of decentering and multipolar centers, such that the periphery can someday become a center. That makes maintaining scholarly vigilance and cultural self-consciousness particularly crucial. What is the value of “cross-cultural” studies if they simply serve to endorse the propositions of middle-class American worldviews?

The Weberian-Phenomenological Approach

Lerner tailored different Middle East countries to his theoretical model, and Rogers ended up with rather ad hoc and “on the one hand, on the other hand” sort of findings. Both of them were in conformity with the dominant U.S. ideology. What seems seriously absent from the established frame-

works is the much-needed sensitivity to the Weberian-phenomenological interpretations of cross-cultural meanings *by* and *of* social actors, thick description of deep motives and complex consequences, and ample allowance for multiple realities to be constructed by different cross-cultural interpretive communities (Berger & Kellner, 1981; Ringer, 1997).⁴

"Web of Significance": Causality and Meaning

Patterned after the natural sciences, positivistic social sciences aim to reduce the complex web of social phenomena to a parsimonious structure consisting of a handful of dominant variables and thus to establish causation between them—best of all, to express such causal relationships formally in mathematical terms (Luckmann, 1978). Interpretative social sciences, informed by humanistic studies, seek to elucidate and give order to layers of complex meanings in the “structure of feelings” (Williams, 1977) by means of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973). Whitehead used to say this about positivism: “Seek simplicity, and distrust it.” Carey (1992) twisted it to describe the culturalist approach: “Seek complexity, but order it.” The Weberian-phenomenological approach is the most important interpretive epistemology and methodology that tries to strike a middle ground between science and the humanities. What can we learn from it to enrich international communication research?

Weber's methodology obviously cannot be divorced from his substantive work,⁵ but I shall focus on his methodological implications in this chapter. As Shils (1949) notes, social sciences have developed a whole series of accurate, concrete techniques of observation and analysis that even optimists could not have expected in Weber's time. But he laments, “Random curiosity has caused a vast sprawl of interest over a multitude of subjects that could not be coordinated into a unified body of knowledge.” Shils calls for social scientists to heighten their consciousness of Weber's discussion of “value-relevance” that would guide the criteria of problem selection and bring order into the agenda and program of social sciences. What this means is that we should do well by starting our analysis with an account of significant “local knowledge” (Geertz, 1983), “relevance structure” (Berger & Kellner, 1981), and “lived and living experiences” (Williams, 1977) of social and cultural inhabitants. On this basis, scholars try to help social actors reinterpret (objectify or typify) their subjective interpretations of the lifeworld in larger contexts. In phenomenological terms, what we do in our scholarly investigation is attempt to transform first-order mean-

ings “within” the lifeworld of social actors to second-order meanings “outside” it. Doing so requires establishing a greater distance from existential concerns by relating local experiences to a systematic body of theoretical knowledge (Berger & Kellner, 1981).

The Weberian approach strives to balance “causal adequacy” with “meaning adequacy.” It provides empathetic understanding of social action with an explanation of its causes and consequences, while at the same time elucidating the layers of rich and complex meaning of this social action. Weberians make claims on causality in more fluid, more contingent, and less sweeping terms than do positivists; Weber did not wish to pursue abstract “general laws” but attempted to attribute concrete effects to concrete causes with general significance or historical interest (Ringer, 1997; Weber, 1978b). Two general implications can be highlighted. First, beware of “the imperialism of the universal” (Bourdieu, 2001). Let’s not accept any externally imposed universal models—be they modernization theory, the development of underdevelopment, technological determinism, or economic determinism—as preordained assumptions or conclusions. In this regard, for example, I (Lee, 2011b) have taken exception to the tendency of the Heidelberg sinologists (Wagner, 2007) to view the early Shanghai press in China through contemporary and post-hoc lenses of Jürgen Habermas instead of contextualizing the press at its historical moments, thus resulting in overinterpreting the scope of the “public sphere” thought to have existed. Second, our selection of problem is best guided by “relevance structure” emanating from *within* our culturally and historically specific yet vital experiences. I echo Mills’s plea (1959, p. 8) that our “sociological imagination” should start with reflecting on “the personal troubles of milieu,” then relating such troubles to the “public issues of social structure,” and ultimately integrating local problems into comparative and historical contexts.

By no means am I proposing an insular or parochial approach. The “local” is not synonymous with the “parochial,” for the “local” must maintain a dynamic interaction with the “global.” At a certain point we are bound to tie the specific to the general when we meet, consult, and confront a larger body of the literature, take advantage of cosmopolitan concepts, and reconstruct more cosmopolitan arguments. But as a matter of priority, we had better begin with the specific and move to the general through critical assessment, modification, and absorption of the relevant literature to reflect on our experiences. Specificity and generality exist as a dialectical pair: the more we understand ourselves, the more likely we are to understand others; on this basis, a meaningful cultural dialogue may occur, and it always

occurs within a context. Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), the dean of the nineteenth-century German historians, maintains: “From the particular you may ascend to the general; but from general theory there is no way back to the intuitive understanding of the particular” (quoted in Ringer, 1997, p. 11). International communication is a creative fusion of local perspectives and global visions, but using theories to explain our experiences should take primacy over appropriating our experiences to fit the theories. Cultural experiences are the horse and general theories the cart; we do not put the cart in front of the horse.⁶ Why should we abandon our cultural bearings, only to provide foreign if not exotic “validation” of the Western “truth,” often dressed up in the name of “scientific laws”?

Contrasting Two Dependency Perspectives

In the 1970s two major versions of dependency perspectives grew out of Latin America to rebel against modernization theory. The radical theory of the “development of underdevelopment” (Frank, 1972) was a positivistic mirror image and yet ideological antithesis of modernization theory. Frank claimed that the development of First World countries was achieved historically at the price of Third World underdevelopment through colonial exploitation, external conditioning of economies, and military conquest. Contrasting Frank’s *formal theory* of underdevelopment was a far more sophisticated perspective of “dependent development” by Cardoso and Faletto (1979) that treated dependency as a *methodology* for analyzing concrete situations of underdevelopment. While Frank (1972) takes the sweeping, general-to-specific framework, Cardoso and Faletto (1979) takes the more contingent, specific-to-general route. Cardoso (1977) criticized U.S. sociologists for interpreting dependency perspectives through Frank’s positivistic lenses.

By “dependent development,” Cardoso and Faletto (1979) maintained that some economies in Latin America were capable of experiencing industrial development amid continuing dependence. Methodologically, they take a structural-historical approach to elaborate the key concepts that related “opposing forces that drag history ahead” and “*situations* of dependency” in a global way. “History becomes understandable when interpretations propose categories strong enough to render clear the fundamental relations (of domination) that sustain those that oppose a given structural situation in its globality” (p. xiii). Instead of focusing exclusively on the dimension of external exploitation, they try to account painstakingly for

the intricate interplay between the strong state, the internal class structure, and their interaction with the international capitalist system. This line of structural-historical analysis has inspired a series of sophisticated studies on Brazil (Evans, 1979), South Korea, and Taiwan; a rare study of media “dependent development” was attempted by Salinas and Palden (1979). Dependency perspectives seem to have gone out of vogue in the past two decades, but not because they have exhausted their intellectual mileage or relevance. As the neoliberal regime and ideology prevailed in the post-Cold War era, it seems that academic hounds have moved on to hunt for newer and tastier targets in postmodernism and globalization.

Cross-Cultural Research

The trajectory of international communication research has not been fully internationalized or cross-culturalized. International research does not imply one-sided imposition of dominant Western perspectives on peripheral corners of the global frontier. In criticizing the literature on development communication and the diffusion of innovations, I do not mean to show disrespect for our intellectual forebears posthumously, but the hard and valuable lesson I learned as a young student has constantly forced me to reassess my own academic path. Equally important is that we must reject any reverse tendency toward nativistic claims on cultural exclusivity. Zhang (2004, 2010), a cultural scholar, warns against close-minded cultural nationalism as well as the East-West bipolarity, while urging sinologists to move out of their isolated cocoon and engage in a healthy dialogue with members of the larger intellectual community. Likewise, we should come out of the closed circle of “area studies” in favor of the empirically rich and theoretically sensitive “area-based studies” (to borrow a term from Prewitt, 2002, p. 8) to integrate the rich area knowledge into a theoretical framework.

Merton (1972), in a seminal essay, calls for mutual learning of the insider’s and outsider’s views. Borrowing from William James, he delineates two kinds of knowledge: “acquaintance with” and “knowledge about.”⁷ The insider may have the advantage of obtaining the “acquaintance with” type of knowledge, referring to direct familiarity and personal, firsthand experiences with the world. However, familiarity breeds inattention, and the insider cannot claim monopolistic or privileged access to other kinds of knowledge just because of his or her ascribed status (e.g., race, nation, culture). The “knowledge about”—that is, more abstract formulations of

knowledge acquired through systematic investigation—requires certain academic detachment and trained capacity to know how to ask what kind of questions, and how to assemble and assess the relevant evidence. “Knowledge about” is not exclusively owned by the insider or the outsider, but accessible to those who have engaged in long-term patient cultivation and systematic inquiry. The insider’s and outsider’s views are cross-fertilizing. Moreover, there are two implications for the distinction made between two types of knowledge. First, as social scientists we are professionally trained to be “multiple persons” who traverse between the two zones of experience, holding the insider’s intuitive insights on some topics and the outsider’s detached analysis and systematic knowledge on other topics. There is always a vibrant flow of exchange between these two overlapping modes of knowledge, such that we trust our intuition on the one hand and distrust it on the other. Also we habitually attempt to turn “acquaintance with” into “knowledge about” as part of our professional activities. Second, in relating to the Weberian-phenomenological approach, the scholar’s role is to help transform social actors’ “acquaintance with” into a more systematic body of “knowledge about.”

Newton’s Apple: In Defense of Case Study and Comparative Study

Smelser (1976) starts his sophisticated text on comparative methodology with Tocqueville’s single case-study treatise on American democracy, and proceeds to compare Weber’s phenomenological method with Durkheim’s positivistic method. He finally privileged Durkheim over Tocqueville and Weber, for he was in favor of the positivistic method capable of rigorous statistical control to tease out spurious variables. Multivariate statistical analysis requires a large number of cases—a condition that international and cross-cultural investigators often find difficult to meet, especially if the comparison is to be *contextually rich and culturally meaningful*. International communication studies, devoid of cultural meanings, tend to generate rather bland, reductive, and generally dubious conclusions.

What’s more, Smelser’s evaluative criteria could be severely challenged if our primary cognitive interest is to acquire intellectual insight through what Geertz (1973) calls “thick description” of patterns, structures, processes, motives, and interaction. Even today, any serious discourse on democracy has little recourse but to return to Alexis de Tocqueville’s classic *Democracy in America* (first published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840, re-issued in 1945) as a baseline. Closer to media studies is Lippmann’s (1922)

cogent analysis of public opinion in the United States, which can be disputed but not bypassed. I am arguing that social scientists may look up to the “scientific” tradition but do not have to model their work solely, much less blindly, on the “hard” scientific laws. We may indeed look for ways to profit from the enduring concerns, rich insights, and the interpretive methodology of various humanistic disciplines. Weber’s methodology (Weber, 1978b) is a fruitful and practical middle-way position between objectivism (causal adequacy) and subjectivism (meaning adequacy). His substantive work (Weber, 1978a) is a guiding light that shows us the way.

As a leading proponent of the culturalist approach to media studies, Carey’s profound work (Carey, 1992; Munson & Warren, 1997) was quintessentially American. Even though he did not excurse into the international terrain, many of his domestic analyses should stimulate comparative work. Silvio Waisbord argues in his otherwise eloquent chapter that “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of individual case studies primarily holds the narrow interest of “area specialists,” but not of cosmopolitan scholars. Ironically, Carey’s “thick description” of the historical, cultural, and technological formation of the U.S. media possesses far greater appeal to theoretically informed, interdisciplinary humanists and social scientists than to specific circles of area specialists. The same remark can be made of the seminal work by Cardoso and Faletto (1979), who follow a Weberian tack. The real strength of a case study (better yet, a comparative case study) lies not in *empirical* generality, but in its ability to generate *conceptual* generality. Metaphorically, a seminal case study can be likened to Newton’s apple with the ultimate aim to reveal the law of gravity. Articulation of robust concepts in relation to larger comparative, historical, or global terrains has unusual power to illuminate and open up ways of seeing the structure of the world anew—not only enabling us to understand the tree but also unlocking a side yet critical window on the wood.

To illustrate, Clifford Geertz (1963) developed the concept of “involution” to account for the social-ecological history of agricultural transformation on the Indonesian islands of Java and Bali. The superimposed demands of the Dutch rulers and rising population pressures forced the agricultural system in Java to take a self-defeating route of intensification rather than change. In other words, Java tried to absorb increased numbers of cultivators on a unit of cultivated land. This practice did not result in improving the per-capita output but, on the contrary, produced disastrous social and ecological consequences. The concept of “involution” was further extended to mean the introversive tendency toward internal

elaboration of details and the dazzling display of technical virtuosity at the expense of conceptual innovation, bold experiment, and open change. Clement So (1988) aptly invoked this concept to interpret the increasing trend of core communication journals toward self-referencing instead of cross-referencing the larger social science literature. Instead of equating the supposed “self-sufficiency” in journal citation with disciplinary maturity, I too regard it as a classic case of academic involution characterized by self-absorption and conceptual inbreeding, particularly detrimental to the development of an emerging field like ours (see more discussion in chapter 1 of this volume). Technical hair-splitting on trifling problems serves to fortify the false security of various fragmented, inward-looking interest groups and erect academic walls against fresh and bold ideas; consequently, the field is insulated from active engagement with and open contestation over big issues. What I am trying to argue is that the concept of “involution,” derived from a case study by a renowned U.S. anthropologist in the faraway islands of Indonesia, has exerted far-reaching influences that cut across, and reach beyond, disciplinary and cultural borders. Therefore, it is not case study itself that is at fault, but the real challenge is how to offer *conceptual* power in a case analysis. Given this, shouldn’t we be inspired to revisit some of the more important interpretive media concepts derived from various case studies—such as “stereotype” (Lippmann, 1922); “strategic ritual of objectivity” or “news net” (Tuchman, 1978); “sphere of legitimate controversy” (Hallin, 1986); “incorporation” (Williams, 1977)—in order to draw out their international ramifications?

Generalizing Cross-Cultural Implications

If historians quarrel over whether to generalize their analysis, most media sociologists are unquestionably inclined to generalize their findings. International communication is at once comparative and generalizing, and the comparative horizons can arise within and between cultural communities. Through arduously administered focus-group discussion, Liebes and Katz (1993) linked the multifaceted and thick-meaning interpretations of an imported U.S. cultural text (a TV series, *Dallas*) to Israeli social contexts (i.e., multiple subcultural immigrant groups, each with different interests and perspectives that made up a cultural mosaic). By tapping into how subcultural assumptions may influence different groups in their decoding of a foreign cultural product, they contribute to the continuing debate on “cultural imperialism.” They take exception to some political economists

who tend to equate capitalist ownership and control of media institutions with the presumed ideological effect of capitalism, but between these two points there is little effort to investigate how the audience interprets media genre and content (Tomlinson, 1991). By no means is this big debate settled, but Liebes and Katz have reopened it in a fruitful way by showing the “polysemy” in cultural readings of media genre.

Their cross-cultural study can be extended from intranational to international contexts, but it would be a more difficult undertaking especially if language expertise and substantive cultural knowledge are to be expected. That is why, despite the rhetoric, comparative media studies of international scope have been so rare.⁸ An exemplary project came from Hallin and Mancini (2004) who first compared the “most similar design” of media systems across 18 countries in western Europe and North America, and then fostered an interesting comparison with the “most dissimilar design” of some non-Western countries (Hallin & Mancini, 2012).

I hope to be pardoned for drawing on our work (Lee, He, & Huang, 2006, 2007) to make a further point, not because of its outstanding merits but because of my own familiarity with it. In this project, our problem selection was geared toward deciphering the mysterious myopia of China’s media system that is being cross-pressured by a mix of Communist control and quasi-capitalistic market operation. Instead of beginning with any “universal” model, we set out to listen to the voices (i.e., meaning system) of media executives, editors, and journalists we interviewed, and then interpreted their insights in relation to our own long-term grasp of the situation and also to the larger literature. We reconstructed the concept of “corporatism” from Latin Americanists, but added to it critical elements of party-market collusion and collision that were unique to what I characterized as “Communist-capitalist media” in China (Lee, 2005). Finally, we propose three prototypes of “party-market corporatism” to account for the interlocking of the state, capital, and media in China. The first, as in Shanghai, is the pattern of clientelism in which media submission is exercised through the exchange of political silence for economic reward. The second prototype, as in Guangzhou, is “marketization of political management” where media corporatism is driven by fierce market competition within the party-state ideological limits. The third, as in Beijing, is a pattern of “political absorption of marketization,” where “managed diversity” is maintained through a precarious balance of the emerging interest politics among counterbalancing power bases. It is hoped that we may contribute to comparative work on media-state-capital transition within *and* between

former European Communist states and the right-wing dictatorships of Latin America and Asia.

For me, the most inspiring example has been Edward W. Said's work on *Orientalism* (1978). He read the same body of canonical Western literary texts and yet produced, in Williams's (1977) terms, a set of "alternative" and even "oppositional" interpretations vis-à-vis the "dominant" ideology. Said adopted the methodology of "contrapuntal reading" (in musical terminology) of the literary texts and linked them to the political, economic, and cultural contexts of European and American imperialism. Subsequently Said (1993) extended this analysis to show how Third World peoples sought to resist, subvert, and contest the cultural hegemony of the imperial center. By offering a formidable challenge to the dominant Western reading, he has sharply changed the interpretative contours and enriched the whole gamut of comparative discourse in culture, politics, and ideology. The post-colonial perspective, which Said's work has inspired, should constitute a starting point of analysis for many international communication studies. His method of "contrapuntal reading" should be systematically applied, so we can revise, develop, extend, or debunk the existing pool of concepts in international and cross-cultural media research.

Exemplary Cross-Cultural Encounter

Two masters in modern Chinese humanistic and social science studies—Wang Guowei and Chen Yinque—offer examples of most profound significance in terms of how they handled the interpenetration of Chinese and Western knowledge systems (based on Yu, 1998, pp. 331–51; Yu, 2007, pp. 279–90).⁹ In his youth Wang Guowei (1877–1927) was intensively immersed in German philosophy (from Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, to Friedrich Nietzsche); as a figure so erudite in various branches of social sciences (ranging from psychology and sociology to law and logic) he also represented the highest level of understanding of Western knowledge in China. These early experiences formed part of his core intellectual nutrients that would continually provide a tacit reservoir of creative ideas for him throughout his career. When he turned to the study of medieval Chinese history and geography, he profited from a wealth of newly discovered archeological finds and also from the work of European and Japanese sinologists. But most important, he saw himself as an heir to the Qing tradition of Chinese textual research, surpassed it, and eventually established a new paradigm that exerted profound influences on the creative minds

of his and the next generations. Although he hardly made any reference to Kant and others in his mature work, as if he was ignorant of them, Yu (2007) argues that Wang would not have been able to develop a paradigmatic program of scholarship tackling a series of original questions with such rigorous analysis had he not internalized his early Western training.

Chen Yinque (1890–1969), widely acknowledged as an encyclopedic historian who wrote a tablet inscription in honor of Wang at his death, was another exemplary figure. Chen was versed in a dozen languages critical to his study of cultural encounter and the economic interactions of the Tang dynasty, which marked the peak of China’s glory, with the neighboring countries in Central Asia. In his youth Chen had studied at Tokyo, Berlin, Paris, and at Harvard, harboring the ambition to master world history with scientific methods. When Chen later returned to China and devoted himself to the study of Chinese historiography, he followed the example of Wang and went back to the classical Chinese textual tradition, raising culturally indigenous questions that were nonetheless of general implication. Owing to his broad range of Western learning in his early years, he was able to develop many key concepts that opened up new avenues to give old history renewed understanding. As Yu (1998) vividly illustrates, Chen forged a vital synthesis of Chinese and Western scholarly traditions; he preserved the best practices of Chinese historiography, modernized them, and took them to the new heights. Both Wang and Chen were the central figures whose creative transformation and integration of intellectual resources enhanced the scholarly dialogue across cultures to a level that few could match.

Coda

If international communication scholars are truly serious about achieving the goals of mutual understanding through cultural dialogue, it is imperative that we listen humbly to symphonic music whose harmonious unity has themes and variations and is made up of a cacophony of instrumental sounds. Mindful of the cultural trend toward crossings over, Said (2000, p. 583) urged conflict managers like Samuel Huntington and Henry Kissinger, of whom he was critical, to pay more attention to and “understand the meaning of the mingling of different musics, for example, in the work of Oliver Messiaen or Toru Takemitsu.”

It is fitting to quote a deliciously moving poem, “Married Love,” writ-

ten some seven centuries ago by Guan Daosheng (1262–1319) in dedication to her husband:¹⁰

You and I
Have so much love,
That it
Burns like a fire,
In which we bake a lump of clay
Molded into a figure of you
And a figure of me.
Then we take both of them,
And break them into pieces,
And mix the pieces with water,
And mold again a figure of you,
And a figure of me.
I am in your clay.
You are in my clay.
In life we share a single quilt.
In death we will share one coffin.

To give this poem's rich images and metaphors a slight twist: if international communication is remolded as a lump of clay, we stand in need of building a figure of "me" and a figure of "you," so ultimately I can be in your clay and you in mine. This means interpenetration, mutual learning, and cross-fertilization. A figure of "you" without "me" as a partner is a futile attempt at communication. However, the current state of affairs in the field of international communication research is that the figure of "me" has been overshadowed by a figure of "you." We must strengthen a figure of "me" by producing an abundance of quality case-study, comparative, or cross-cultural accounts of cultural institutions, media representation, and everyday ways of life, on which a meaningful dialogue with others is predicated. There is a very long way to go toward building such an edifice. As a modest step, we should encourage the laying down of more bricks that comprise theoretically informed, culturally enriching case studies and comparative analyses. To understand "me" in relation to "you" so we can have a conversation is, to me, the essence of international communication studies that can be aided by the Weberian-phenomenological methodology.

To close this chapter, I would like to turn specifically to Chinese media

studies. We abhor the Western-cum-universal hegemony, but we are not interested in creating any essentialized theories of Asian or Chinese media. We have nothing to do with any concept of “Chinese exceptionalism.” We study Chinese media partly but not only because we are culturally Chinese. Nor because we are culturally Chinese can we only study Chinese media. The study of Chinese media is by no means intellectually self-sufficient or isolated; it should interpenetrate with the theoretical and methodological advances in the field of international communication and, more important, in the larger currents of the humanities and social sciences. What we aspire to establish is, in sum, certain general theoretical perspectives with Chinese characteristics that arise from and highlight cultural specificity in our problematic consciousness and interpretations, but ultimately emerge from this cultural reflection to develop a broader view of how the world works. If we succeed in establishing such general perspectives that allow for internal differences, speak with a distinctive cultural accent, and yet transcend theoretical parochialism, we will be in a strengthened position to maintain an open-minded and mutually enriching dialogue on an equal footing with the Western literature.¹¹ This is the cosmopolitan spirit that I believe should be the guiding light of international communication research.

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NOTES

1. Most ICA members had been U.S. residents until recently. Now that its non-U.S. members have risen to 42 percent, it would be more interesting to observe the extent to which ICA's range of epistemological and methodological interests will change with its membership composition.
2. While modernization theory has been discredited, we witness that China has reversed its ideological course to pursue single-mindedly a program of economically driven modernization agendas in the context of globalization (Lee, 2010). Whether it is desirable to pursue modernization goals (of what kind?) is one thing, but whether different versions of modernization theory are robust enough is another. China is a dubious test case for modernization theory.
3. Rogers with Svenning (1969), for example, reported the results of a USAID-sponsored project to study the impact of communication on peasants in Brazil,

Nigeria, India, and Colombia, but the findings were based on translated versions of the same questionnaire. Rogers presented statistical correlations between such variables as empathy, literacy, innovativeness, achievement motivation, cosmopolitanism, opinion leadership, and media exposure, all pooled at the individual level regardless of national contexts.

4. I am referring to the Weber-Schultz line of methodology; see Luckmann (1978) for a sophisticated exposition. For Weber's relationship with positivism and phenomenology, see Huff (1984, pp. 1–26).

5. Weber's work on the rise of capitalism and the Protestant ethic (Weber, 1930) is a landmark achievement of lasting influence, but his extension to comparative religions of China and India has been controversial. Weber (1951) relied on translated texts to argue that Chinese religion, especially Confucianism, did not cultivate the ethos of “innerworldly asceticism” as did Calvinism, and was hence antithetical to the rise of capitalism. Yu (1987) refuted this theme; based on evidence from textual research he maintained that “innerworldly asceticism” was part of the Chinese religious ethos. Capitalism did not rise in China for a different reason: that its political and legal systems had not undergone the process of rationalization. This shows how difficult it is to do comparative research by making use of Weber's “ideal type” design.

6. Professor Zhang Longxi told a moving story about his “lived experience” of being sent to the countryside for hard labor during China's Cultural Revolution that had a real impact on his life, only to see some literary theorists abstractly romanticizing the beauty and nostalgia of that country life.

7. Chicago sociologist Robert Park (1940) also used this pair of concepts to analyze news as a form of “acquaintance with” knowledge.

8. Over the years I have been asked, or asked to recommend someone, to develop a comparative text on East Asian media systems (generally considered as the Confucian cultural area), but I really know of no one equipped with the requisite linguistic and substantive competence to do it. When East Asian scholars get together, English is the lingua franca, but English writings on these media systems are in short supply.

9. The account of Wang and Chen is based on Yu Yingshi, a distinguished historian at Princeton University, many of whose important works (for example, Yu, 1987) ask the Weberian questions.

10. Translated by Rexroth and Chung (1982, p. 53). Zhao Mengfu, a very prominent Yuan official, scholar, and calligrapher, was so moved by his wife's poem as to abandon the thought of picking up a concubine.

11. This paragraph is taken from Lee (2011a). Interestingly, Kuang-kuo Hwang expressed a similar vision for the movement of indigenous psychologies when he urged the development of a universal theoretical model to account for “one mind, many manifestations” (Evenden & Sandstrom, 2011). Instead of striving for balkanized indigenous theories, he argued, the goal should be to integrate various cultural manifestations into a higher-order theory.