

Book Review

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Study on Chinese Communication Behaviors, by Guo-Ming Chen, Hong Kong, China Review Academic Publishers, 2010, 313 pp. [China Media Research, 2011; 7(4): 104-106]

Since the end of the 20th century, the field of communication has reached a critical period of development in which an increasing number of scholars all over the world have devoted effort to the study of communication, including an abundance of Asian researchers. These non-Western communication scholars found out that the existent communication theories and research were primarily developed based on a Eurocentric worldview and most participants recruited for those communication studies were Americans (Kim, 2002). It is thus believed that unfortunately the most frequently applied communication theories can solely reflect communication behaviors of particular Western societies. Nonetheless, plentiful Eurocentric theories and research have been adopted to explicate the communication process of non-Western cultures for the past decades (Kim, 2002; Yum, 1988).

Frankly, previous research done in North America has neglected the fact that communication is a process closely bond to the social and cultural systems of a society (Gordon, 1998/1999; Kim, 1999; Kim & Leung, 2000; Kincaid, 1987). In other words, culture plays a critical role in guiding and shaping individuals' interactions in the process of communication. Furthermore, the goal of theory development is to authentically reflect the life of human beings (Goonasekera & Kuo, 2000). Hence, a theory developed under a particular cultural context should not be considered universally applicable for all cultural contexts in the world. It is this "anti-one-fits-all" belief which encourages scholars to look into the influential cultural values and philosophies of their respective cultures from a communication perspective.

Chen's book, *Study on Chinese Communication Behaviors*, is one of the few works (e.g., Gao & Ting-Toomey's *Communicating Effectively with the Chinese*, Lu, Jia, & Heisey's *Chinese Communication Studies* and Jia, Lu, & Heisey's *Chinese Communication Theory and Research*), focusing on Chinese communication. The purpose of this book is to help readers better understand Chinese communication behaviors, given the impact of the rise of China in global society. In this book, Chen collects twenty-one of his former publications and organizes them into four sections.

The first section (chapters 1 to 7) provides readers with tremendous knowledge about key cultural

paradigms which deeply influence daily interactions of Chinese people, such as harmony, power, equilibrium, Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and the I Ching. Although these cultural themes dominate the life of the Chinese in many ways, Chen stresses that we should be cautious and not overgeneralize a particular cultural group by viewing them with only a handful of cultural factors.

Having built the perceptual foundation, in the second section (chapters 8 to 14), seven empirical studies are included which examine several concepts introduced in section one. Rather than solely adopting Western theoretical frameworks, these seven cases display the importance of studying participants' communication interactions of certain cultures by closely looking at their social and cultural patterns.

Following this, Chen delineates his efforts in developing theories of Chinese communication concerning harmony, relationship development, and the I Ching in the third section (chapters 15-17). Among these chapters, the author discusses the substances which constitute the harmony theory (i.e., its ontological foundations, four propositions, twenty-three axioms, and twenty-three theorems), generates eight stages of human relationship development symbolized in the I Ching (i.e., arousing, penetrating, clinging, receptive, joyful, creative, abysmal, and still), and stipulates five characteristics of the I Ching model of communication (i.e., holistic, hierarchical, interconnected, creative, and harmonious) and four categories of change (i.e., change on substance, change on velocity, change toward unification, and change toward opposition). The third section shows that the harmony and I Ching models of human communication better reflect Chinese behaviors from an internal perspective.

The final section (chapter 18-21) deals with the questions that scholars in Chinese communication would be most interested in: Where will Asian and Chinese communication studies head to? And, what challenges are facing Chinese communication? The author indicates four problems: incomplete landscape, skill orientation, lack of collaboration, and westernization, and suggests strategies to cope with them. Balancing the two forces of globalization - localization and globalization - is considered the key to success for future Chinese communication research. Compared to earlier books on the same subject, Chen's

work creates a more holistic picture of Chinese communication behaviors with systematic discussions on unique models of Chinese communication.

Overall, the strengths of this text can be observed at least in two fold. First, as mentioned above, this book explicates the primary cultural roots that shape Chinese communication behaviors in an in-depth fashion. The first few chapters familiarize readers, especially the non-Asian ones, with the cultural worldview that Chinese people hold true and therefore guides their daily interactions. The book enables its readers to have a better sense of where Chinese communication behaviors come from and it makes clear the communication differences between Chinese and Westerners.

Second, this book realistically presents the way Chinese people communicate without only mentioning the positive sides. Even though “harmony” is emphasized throughout the entire book as having great impact on Chinese communication behaviors, it is helpful for the author to clarify the misunderstandings and identify the dark sides of Chinese communication style in many chapters. To illustrate, before Chen wraps up chapter 4, he points out that:

[T]he Confucianism-influenced organizational communication also displays certain weak spots. The in-group/out-group distinctions, for example, may make the organization clannish and may reduce the possibility of communicating with the external environments and in turn reinforces the homogeneity and hurts the creativity. (p. 61)

Other examples can also be located on pages 6 and 27 where the author explicates the strategic communication approach, “power game,” that Chinese people also utilize so that readers would not get a wrong impression that because Chinese people value relational harmony, conflict is an uncommon phenomenon in their society.

While Chen’s book certainly contributes to the study of intercultural communication in various aspects, a few concerns should be addressed. First of all, using plentiful pinyin¹ words to inform readers of specific cultural terms, though with explanations following after, may create confusion. Readers who are familiar with Chinese culture may not be able to fully understand exactly which concepts the author refers to by only reading those terms in pinyin. It would have been more interculturally sensitive and made more sense if specific Chinese characters were shown in the text.

Also, whereas having concepts (e.g., harmony, guanxi, face, I Ching) appear repeatedly in the book helps readers better grasp these important cultural philosophies, the book seems to lack diversity in introducing a variety of Chinese cultural values. People who are eager to learn about Chinese communication behaviors may expect to read about additional cultural

foundations that shape Chinese communication styles.

Finally, after reading this book, two groups of questions emerged which may be worth considering for future exploration by communication scholars: (1) How do globalization, technology, and Western values influence Chinese communication? To what degree do the Chinese follow their ancient values, given a very different living context today? How do Chinese cultural principles have impact on Chinese youngsters and those residing outside of regions often studied, such as China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan? (2) Is Confucianism a religion? Why or why not? As Chen notes in the book, “[Confucius’] teachings are mainly concerned with practical ethics of daily life without any addition of religion elements” (p. 19). It is obvious that for readers acquainted with Chinese culture, the answer is “no”. However, Confucianism in intercultural communication texts is constantly compared with Buddhism and Taoism, hence misleading some non-Asian scholars to consider Confucianism a religion (e.g., Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2009). Perhaps, as Chen suggests, the differences and similarities among Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and even Shintoism should be emphasized so that the nature of these schools of thoughts can be more clearly revealed.

In essence, the recent rise of China elicits international interests in Chinese culture. For example, in the US, Mandarin has become many people’s first choice when it comes to learning a second language (The Editors, 2010). Individuals around the world make efforts in refining their knowledge of Chinese language and culture for the purpose of preparing future contacts with the Chinese. It is this inevitable trend that makes understanding Chinese communication behaviors a significant area of current communication research. *Study on Chinese Communication Behaviors* is a remarkable book for scholars and students who are interested in Chinese communication or human communication in non-Western cultural contexts. Chen’s work invites additional empirical studies to test and hopefully support Chinese communication theories. This book sets up a great model for future research which intends to examine non-Western communication behaviors and theory development.

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¹ Pinyin is the Roman alphabet system transcribed from Chinese characters.