

REVIEW

Western Concepts in Asian Contexts

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Book Review of
Political Communication in Asia
Edited by Lars Wilnat and Annette Aw
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(240pp)

In recent years, the call toward de-Westernization has been increasingly taken up by scholars engaged in the various fields of communications studies (e.g., Curran & Park, 2000; Kim, 2002; Thussu, 2009). The book, ***Political Communication in Asia***, is a welcome addition to this scholarly movement because the collection's key purpose, as the editors argue in their introductory essay, is to provide a critical and contextualized assessment of the past twenty years of political communication research in nine Asian countries and territories.

The main chapters of the book present works from well-respected researchers, all of whom gave an overview of the political context within their specific country of focus and, more importantly, attempt to discuss the political communication studies that have emerged from this particular milieu. Chapter 1 looks into Hong Kong (Francis Lee & Joseph Chan), chapter 2 into China (Zhou He), chapter 3 into Taiwan (Chingching Chang), chapter 4 into Singapore (Terence Lee & Lars Wilnat), chapter 5 into Indonesia (Effendi Gazali, Dedy Nur Hidayat, & Victor Menayang), chapter 6 into Malaysia (Ezhar Tamam and Manimaran Govindasamy), chapter 7 into Japan (Toshio Takeshita & Masamichi Ida), chapter 8 into South Korea (Sung Tae Kim & Hyok Nam Kwon), and chapter 9 into India (Kavit Karan).



The book concludes with a commentary by Wilnat and Aw, which raises key lessons from the preceding essays. According to the editors Asian political communication research is, at present, disappointingly underdeveloped because of three key things: the continued predominance of Western theoretical approaches in Asian universities, the political pressures that particular governments place on the direction of scholarly research, and the limited financial and institutional support suffered by academics. Despite this though, they claim that the essays do collectively challenge the field of political communication to understand politics beyond that of Western liberal democracy, to recognize the importance of cultural concepts when doing research, and to conduct more comparative research across countries.

Discussion

The potential significance of the book lies in its focus on polities with diverse systems that, in varying degrees, differ from the Western liberal democratic framework. As such, the political dynamics present in these places do not always lend themselves easily to analyses that attempt a direct application of classic, Western-developed communication theories, such as the agenda setting function of the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), media framing (Entman, 1993), and the like. These dynamics give the individual chapters of the book an opportunity not only to put into question the universality of these approaches, but also to examine the ways these approaches can be appropriated and made to work in different settings. As Wilnat and Aw say, “What we hope to accomplish here is to point out any unique theoretical accomplishments that have been made by Asian scholars of political communication” (3). However, this promising critical agenda is hampered by the uneven quality of the contributions.

I would argue that the most informative chapters in the book are those that go beyond discussing how the contemporary political history of a country or territory has influenced the communication research agenda of its scholars. Indeed, these works also attempt to articulate how the data that have emerged from these unique contexts can contribute to the wider debates in the field of political communication. For instance, Lee and Chan (chapter 1) narrate that because of the constant flux in Hong Kong’s system of governance, most contemporary research about the territory has narrowly focused on structural and institutional concerns. Nevertheless, they claim that these are still valuable in providing concrete reminders of the importance of a power perspective in political communication. Equally insightful is chapter 4 where Terence Lee

and Lars Wilnat show how difficult it is for critical scholarship to come out from the politically repressive Singaporean state. Still, the few but significant works they reviewed reveal interesting suggestions as to how popular Western communication models—especially the spiral of silence theory—can be refashioned in order to accommodate the sociocultural matrix of such a place. The same can be said of the work of Takeshita and Ida (chapter 7) where they present how researchers in Japan adapt Western communication theories, like media priming and media framing, in order to account for what they argue are the specific cultural, social, and psychological conditions that prevail in their country. Finally, in chapter 9, Karan underscores the unique quality of Indian political communication. This he exemplifies via studies of things such as elections, and how these are characterized by an eclectic profusion of communication channels, from the beating of drums and street theater to web sites and mobile phones.

Meanwhile, the weaker chapters in the book are those that merely situate the relevant literature in its historical context. Without suggesting ways in which the reviewed works can be used to interrogate mainstream discourses on political communication, they the contributors did not really contribute to the aim of the book. This is certainly the case with the works of He on China (chapter 2), Chang on Taiwan (chapter 3), Gazali, Hidayat, and Menayang on Indonesia (chapter 5), Tamam and Govindasamy on Malaysia (chapter 6), and Kim and Kwon on South Korea (chapter 8). Although the authors (and even the editors) can and, at times, do contend that this lack of critical insights is due to the poor quality of the studies they have reviewed, I would reckon that their meta-analysis could also have been more patient in teasing out the value of the works they studied. To be fair though, it must be acknowledged that critical political communication is difficult to come by when there is tremendous political censorship. The extreme case for this seems to be China. Indeed, He can only ask, “Can Chinese scholars analyze these issues within the political confines imposed upon them?” (69). Also, some of these chapters suggest exciting future possibilities for further study. For instance, Gazali et al. say that Indonesian political communication research should be done at the community level, where religious, cultural, and ethnic divides in the country can be more adequately considered. In a similar vein, Manimaran and Govindsamy say that Malaysian political communication research should pay more attention to the country’s multiethnic population, as these tend to have a heavy influence on how votes are cast.

Implications for Philippine Scholarship

Based on the above, I reckon that the book has some key implications for political communication scholars working on the Philippines. One is that local research should go beyond merely replicating studies done in the West. As Wilnat and Aw argue, these approaches rarely consider culture a variable and, thus, cannot take into account the nuances of the local context. However, as in the case of the stronger chapters of the book, this need not mean an outright rejection of Western theoretical models. Instead, these theories could be adapted to the local context, with the conceptual and operational definitions of their key variables. Some possibilities include rethinking media frames in a context where the boundaries of news and entertainment are more blurred than ever, rethinking the notion of the fourth estate in a context where news personalities enter the political arena and political personalities enter the news arena, and rethinking political campaigns in a context where political personalities are stronger than political parties.

More than appropriating Western political communication theories to the Philippine context though, another important thing learned from the collection is the need for local academics to engage in scholarly debates with the larger political communication community. Indeed, Wilnat and Aw point out that one of the reasons why a lot of Asian political communication research has not reached a wider audience is that “many of these...have not been published in English and are only available in national or regional journals” (1). Since Filipino academics tend to be particularly adept in English, they are better positioned to be published in international journals. They should thus capitalize on this advantage and attempt to get their work read by a more global audience.

Conclusion

Although the individual contributions to the book do not always succeed in suggesting new ways of thinking about political communication concepts, their description of the diverse political experiences in Asia are convincing evidence of the need for such a rethinking. In its totality, the book is still a valuable addition to de-Westernization, the glaring misgivings of some chapters notwithstanding. At the very least, it is an important step in making Asian political communication research more available to a global audience. As Lars and Wilnat put it, it can “contribute to a more complete and comprehensive understanding of political communication by suggesting possible global implications of Asian parameters and exemplars” (227).

This book is suited for both undergraduate and graduate students who have an intermediate to advanced interest in the international perspectives of political communication, as well as for academics who are looking for an overview of the recent trends in Asian political communication.

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