The discussion on geocultural theory has underscored the urgency for us to re-examine the way cultural differences are handled in academic discourse. Boundaries need to be drawn, because European universality neglects cultural and also paradigm differences. This article argues that as locking universality and particularity in a dualist paradigm is part of the problem, drawing boundaries to concepts and theories will lead to further problems. Borrowing from the Chinese yin/yang dynamic worldview and the Kuhnian notion of incommensurability, the author proposes a methodological framework in which commensurability, rather than universality, is the major concern. The commensurability model and the universality model are compared with examples to illustrate how the former may help advance theory development from a local perspective.

Keywords: Paradigm, Indigenization, Commensurability, Universality, Geocultural Theory.

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The critique of Euro–American centrism in communication theories has in recent years led to calls for Afrocentric/Asiacentric approaches to research, and the emergence of geocultural theories. The discussion has underscored the urgency for us to re-examine the way cultural differences are handled in academic discourse. “… [N]o concepts, theories and paradigms are “limitless,” Miike claimed (2002, p. 1). Therefore boundaries need to be drawn, because the problem with European universality is not merely a matter of neglecting cultural, but paradigm differences as well.

This incredulity about the applicability of imported theory is a message of the Local Self to the Global Other that it needs its “own” theory—theory to tailor to its needs, closely reflect its cultural ethos, and last but not least, to balance the badly skewed global production of knowledge. In recent years the profusion of research output from areas outside of the Western world has given the discipline a multicultural outlook. The question is, if the relevance and applicability of imported theories were a
major concern, has there been a parallel growth in theory development? More importantly perhaps, has such development responded to the “limitation” issue that Miike raised? If yes, how does this cultural map of communication theories look now, and what is the significance of it to the future of the field of study? And if not, what are the barriers and alternatives? In the answer to these questions lies the key to the one ultimate question: Where is the current direction leading us?

This article will first briefly review the literature on geocultural theories; what they are, what differences they have made, and what barriers stand in the way of further development. Special attention is paid to the expectations for these theories: that they must be rooted in the local that is “particular,” yet at the same time generalizable within the prescribed framework. As locking universality and particularity in an “either–or” model is seen as part of the problem, it is argued that attempts to find a solution within the dualist paradigm—for example, embracing particularity and drawing boundaries—will most likely lead to further problems instead of solving them.

Borrowing from the hermeneutic notion of interpretation, the Kuhnian concept of incommensurability (Kuhn, 1962; Kuhn, Conant, & Haugeland, 2000) and the Chinese yin/yang worldview, the author has proposed a methodological framework in which commensurability and incommensurability (C/I) are seen as a pair of symbiotic and interactive concepts. By way of explaining irreconcilable differences between knowledge paradigms and cultural traditions, the concepts make it possible for us to develop theoretical discussions on the basis of similarities, rather than commonality (Wang, 2011a). The article compares this methodological framework and the universality/particularity model (the U/P model), gives examples to illustrate the areas of possible applications, and discusses implications for future research. Unlike the U/P model, differences and incommensurabilities are seen as sources of inspiration when similarities and commensurabilities are examined in light of them, rather than independent of them. It is argued that, if the field as a whole is to benefit from genuine exchanges with what lies outside of its frameworks and traditions, the challenge is there not just for the Local Self, but for all members of the academic community.

**Geocultural theories**

Geocultural theory is generally understood as the product of culture-specific, or the emic, approach to indigenizing communication research, versus universal theory that is the goal of culture-general, or the etic, approach (Huang, 2010; Jahoda, 1977; Wang, 2011a). Both approaches require research to be grounded in local social and cultural context, yet the culture-specific approach expects geocultural theory to explain and predict only those phenomena that fall within a certain geographic or cultural boundary, whereas the culture-general approach does not specify such limitations. It is important to distinguish between the two approaches as the cultural and methodological issues that they encounter in terms of theory development are quite different.
Despite frequent mentions of the term, there is no widely accepted definition of “geocultural theories.” “Participatory communication for social change” is a brain-child of a group of Latin American scholars, yet unlike theories such as Chen Guo Ming’s “harmony theory of Chinese communication” (G. M. Chen, 2009; Chen & Xiao, 2008), it does not limit its application to Latin America, nor is it specifically labeled as “geocultural.” The above two examples are, however, exceptions to most of what we can find in the literature. If the entries in the Encyclopedia of Communication Theory (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009) can be of any indication of what geocultural theories are like, it would be a mistake for us to force the many themes, principles, and thoughts into the mold of “scientific theories.” As Gunaratne explained in his piece on Asian communication theory, Asian “theory” focuses primarily on Asian philosophies; it adds to the meanings of communication but “conflicts with the positivist view of theory,” and cannot be easily tested in the Western scientific manner. It is, in a word, “more akin to philosophy” (Gunaratne, 2009, p. 48).

The collection of research, mostly based in Asia, has offered readers a look into the ideas, expressions, cultural values, and traditions, and ancient wisdoms that are relevant to what we know as communication studies today. The Sadharanikaran model of communication and conflict resolution that was based on classical Hindu poetics (Adhikary, 2010; Dissanayake, 2009; Yadava, 1998), the Muslim cultural and media theory anchored in the analysis of Qur’an and Hadith (Pasha, 1993), and the metatheory of global mediatization built on the Buddhist doctrine of dependent co-arising, the Taoist yin/yang paradigm, and Miller’s living systems theory (Gunaratne, 2013) offer but a glimpse of what is available in the literature.

These studies represent a major step forward in the organized effort to indigenize communication research, an effort that began in the late 1980s (Dissanayake, 1988; Kincaid, 1987). They are valued for the insights and the prospects they bring to communication theories and the vision that is not found in modern research. But strictly speaking, they are not “theories” (Gunaratne, 2009)—whether in the positivist sense or not. In fact, some would argue that they are not “philosophies” either, as the core concepts that help define the term, for example, “truth” and “knowledge,” are seldom found in these thoughts and ideas. Most importantly, it is not likely that theories would naturally emerge from analyzing them or combing through historical records, as some had assumed (P. A. Chen, 2013; Huang, 2013). Unlike what this author and her colleague had indicated, they are not “embryos of theories” (Wang & Shen, 2000). Although theories in their early stage of development may appear as loosely organized propositions that bear some resemblance to the kind of thoughts and ideas appearing in this body of literature, they belong to a fundamentally different learning and researching tradition.

Underlying modern research is the European dialectic method that seeks to find universal and objective truth by way of argumentation—a form of rational debate that requires critical thinking, logical reasoning, and empirical evidence. Research is for the pursuit of theoretical knowledge—a process that is driven by questions and problem-oriented propositions. In contrast, the Chinese tradition, for example,
defines studying as familiarizing oneself with classical writings and the ethical teachings of the great masters, and internalizing such “knowledge” to refine and cultivate oneself. Knowledge paradigms entail specific ways of prioritizing, organizing, and navigating thoughts and ideas; they determine not just what and how questions are asked, but whether questions are asked. Identifying East–West similarities and/or differences, or pointing out potential areas of research are necessary steps for academic exchanges across knowledge paradigms. But from a dialectic point of view, unless thoughts and ideas are shown to be useful in solving research problems and formulating new propositions, their value is at best ambiguous, and they will likely remain outside of theoretical debates. Geocultural theories are no exceptions. Once labeled as “theories,” even when redefined as thoughts, principles, or themes, they are understood in the dialectic sense, and expected to function in the same way, for example, answering questions, breaking new grounds, and gaining knowledge (e.g., Gordon, 2007; Rakow, 2014; Waisbord, 2013). Judged from these criteria, geocultural theories obviously have a “last mile” to accomplish.

Although at this stage the gap between what geocultural theories have offered and what is expected of them remains open, they seem to be favored by many Asian and African communication scholars. The Local Self needs to reassert itself as the “subject,” rather than the “object” of research about itself, and placing cultural values and ideas at the center of analysis is crucial (Asante, 1998; Miike, 2006). As Obonyo (2011) said about Afrocentric studies “… there are unique peculiarities that demand that Africa isolates what is relevant and place it in Africa’s unique situations, and weave out of that mosaic a framework that reflects Africa’s reality” (p. 1). The focus here is primarily set on the different and the unique, rather than the shared and the similar.

Such a preoccupation with particularity is seen by many as the most straightforward and effective way to balance the overwhelming influence of European universality. However, in terms of developing “theories,” the approach is faced with some nagging methodological and cultural problems. From the methodological perspective, the concept of geocultural theory is paradoxical. According to the U/P model underlying scientific research, the two concepts are dichotomous and mutually exclusive, hence nothing can be particular and universal—even if this universality is somehow limited. Yet theories, either from qualitative or quantitative research, are inherently general in nature. In this sense, geocultural theories would be “conceptually impossible” unless they remain the way they are—loosely regarded as thoughts, ideas, and wisdoms from the past. As Goonasekera and Kuo (2000) put it, “[t]o be Asian it has to be particularistic; to be theoretical it has to be universalistic. Herein lies the paradox, … ” (Goonasekera & Kuo, 2000, p. xii).

A second problem with the concept of geocultural theory is its emphasis on culture-centricity. First, the significance of highlighting the particularity of a culture would be diluted if the origin of the concept “theory” is considered. In fact not only is “theory” a product of Enlightenment (G. M. Chen, 2006; Wong, Manvi, & Wong, 1995), so is everything else in the modern language of research—including the term “Asia” and the way this very argument is presented. Another cultural
issue with geocultural theory is that it assumes homogeneity within a culture. But cultures—however the boundaries are drawn—are seldom monolithic unless they are frozen in time and space (Dissanayake, 2009; M’bayo, Sunday, & Amobi, 2012; Miike, 2003, p. 249; Obonyo, 2011; Wasserman, 2011, p. 8). When the Local Selves demand “our” “own” theory, who is this “we” behind the question? Take the Chinese culture for example. Although all Chinese societies share the same cultural heritage, social scientists in Taiwan had made a point to argue against the tendency to equate indigenization/Taiwanization with Sinification when the concept was first introduced (Xiao, 1986). Not surprisingly, years later, similar arguments were made in China against equating indigenization with Taiwanization or Hongkongization (Yang, 2001). In this case, which Local Self is a Chinese theory of communication to represent? The problem obviously is not unique to the ethnic Chinese research community. Researchers advocating the culture-specific approach argue that the existence of heterogeneity within a culture does not rule out the existence of core values and shared experiences; in other words, embracing diversity does not reinforce a monolithic concept of culture (e.g., Miike, 2002, p. 2). There has not yet been, however, much discussion on how this can be manifested in research. Culture is not a remote topic of study or a variable to be accounted for; it is everything about research itself.

In addition to the above considerations, tendencies to focus on particularity in social scientific research have raised concerns over the future development in some disciplines. In psychology, for example, the extent of globalization within the discipline has reached a high point with the emergence of indigenous psychology, cultural psychology, and ethnopsychology. Yet members of the community have begun to ask if relativism will one day make it impossible for the community to have a set of commonly acceptable criteria for assessment, eventually leading to fragmentation of the field of study (Kristensen, Slife, & Yanchar, 2000, p. 282).

Underscoring the unique and the particular in communication research has succeeded in making a case for geocultural theories, but there is also the concern that such an approach may lead to cultural essentialism, parochialism, and the tendency to focus on the past and the traditional (Brock, 2006; Dissanayake, 2003, 2009, 2011; Khiabany, 2010; Obonyo, 2011, p. 7–8). Once the past and the present and the West and the indigenous are locked into a dualist dichotomy, the complex processes in which intricate interplays of cultures set the tone for change in the non-Western world are brushed aside. By leaving no room to universality, the Local Self is likely to commit the very mistake that it sets out to correct (see also G. M. Chen, 2011, p. 158), and valuable opportunities to build argument and gain theoretical grounds are lost.

In contrast to the culture-specific approach, the ultimate goal for the culture-general approach is to produce theories through integrating thoughts and ideas from different paradigms and traditions (e.g., Gunaratne, 2013; Huang, 2010; Kim, 2007; Lee, 2002; Wallerstein, 2006; Wang & Shen, 2000). By making general theories its objective, this approach seems to have evaded most of the problems that geocultural theories are faced with. However, it is not free from this other methodological barrier that also comes from the dualist paradigm: If thoughts and ideas from different
paradigms and traditions are regarded as “particular,” what this approach suggests is in fact for universal universality to be achieved through the workings of the particular. With this approach, particularity is not seen as the opposite of universality, but is given an active and vital role in theory formulation. This role not only redefines the way universality relates to particularity, but has also undermined the U/P model and the monist/dualist paradigm underlying it. With such profound methodological implications, the literature on this generalist approach has so far fallen short of providing an answer on the “how to” issue. This is a challenge that researchers must tackle to avoid producing a hodgepodge or melange of ideas and expressions.

The above analyses have pointed to the U/P model as the major barrier in developing theories involving different paradigms and cultural traditions. Those who prefer the culture-specific approach must resolve the paradox that “the universal cannot be at the same time particular.” Those who favor the culture-general approach have to face the paradigm problem—that is, “universality cannot come from particularity.” In either way, it is impossible to work around the U/P model. A brief review of the development of the U/P model, especially the twists and turns in the debate over time, helps to illuminate the issues that the Local Self faces today and reveal the “particular” nature of the U/P model and its underlying paradigm.

The paradigm challenge

According to Kuhn (1962), the term “paradigm” refers to a set of recurrent illustrations of theories in their conceptual, observational, and instrumental applications. Paradigms are not theories, rules, or models but rather reflect the worldview and the landscape that the body of knowledge as a whole reveals; they also serve as an indication of the fundamental nature of what is studied, the primary questions asked, and the method used to answer the questions (Lang, 2013).

In the history of European philosophy, the concept of universality and the monist/dualist mechanistic paradigm can be traced back to times well before Socrates, when “general principles” were used to explain the existence of the “ultimate reality.” In the following centuries, the quest for truth or ultimate reality has undergone several rounds of transformations, through debates over paired dualist concepts such as realism versus nominalism, The Beyond versus The Mundane, mind versus matter, and rationalism versus empiricism. But despite changes in the focus of attention, the way questions were asked and ideas conceptualized remained similar, if not the same; and generality and universality continued to be defining characteristics of truth and knowledge. After Enlightenment, scientific knowledge gradually replaced other knowledge systems in the world to become the only one that is recognized and accepted. When science is considered as irrevocably universal, particularity becomes little more than random error, and the same goes for those that have attained a “science” status, for example, social science.

While the influence of the dominant monist/dualist paradigm has penetrated through to this day, attempts to overthrow it were nothing new, especially in the 19th
and the 20th century. In the most recent wave of criticism launched by postmodern, poststructuralist, and historicist scholars including Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, and Heidegger, stability, universal truths, and binary oppositions that constitute structures and major values associated with the Enlightenment heritage all became incredulous. These criticisms have shaken some of the fundamental tenets of the dominant paradigm, especially the absolute nature of truth and universality, and the atomic, mechanistic worldviews that it represents. Including the reality of the world itself, what was understood in the context of reductionism is now seen as diverse, fluid, illusionary, and contested (Best & Kellner, 1991)—a faint reflection of Heraclitus’ notion of the world as an “eternal Becoming” (Capra, 2000, p. 20). Knowledge, therefore, is not something “out there to be explored”; rather, it is socially constructed and is tentative, contextual, and at times irrational and subject to human errors and biases (Best & Kellner, 1991; Lyotard, 1991). The validity of theories—including natural and social scientific theories—cannot be discussed without their postulates, conditions, or assumptions (Heidegger, 1968, 1976).

The rise of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and historicism has brought attention to the interference of the human factor in scientific research. In response to criticism from both within and outside of the positivist school, postpositivists and critical realists admitted to the influence of personal experiences, background, and values over observation and analysis; hence scientific research is subject to human biases and errors. Nonetheless it was suggested that through careful deliberation and triangulation of different points of view, objectivity and universality could still be achieved. In this sense, knowledge—representing the objective truth—remains independent of the “knowing subject,” with no room for particularity. On this account, they are “positivist revised,” but positivistic still.

Postmodernism and poststructuralism have presented a major challenge to the monist/dualist paradigm, yet by going to the particularity extreme, they have reinforced, rather than overthrown the U/P model. Just as no room was left to particularity with scientific theories, no room was left to generality and universality with postmodern theories (Goody, 2006; Lao, 2014). As Carr (1964) put it, the shape of a mountain may vary when seen from different angles, but if pluralism, differentiation, and dissemination of meaning are pushed to the extreme, either a mountain will have endless shapes, or have no shape at all.

Between extreme universality and extreme particularity, scattered in various fields of study there have also developed concepts and theories that reflect features of not a mechanistic, but an organic worldview (Wang, 2011a, p. 266). Most frequently mentioned is the system theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968); others, include the concepts of mind and mentality in cultural psychology (Shweder et al., 1998), and Ihde’s work on body and technology (Ihde, 2001) are also notable examples. A major characteristic that sets these theories apart from the dualist paradigm is their emphasis on interactions between paired concepts; open systems constantly interact with their environment; mind and mentality are mutually dependent and invigorating, whereas according to Ihde, body and technology are interactive and mutually constituted.
The Western academic tradition is, therefore, not homogeneous, and the mechanistic worldview is not the only option it offers. Yet the few exceptions do not seem to have weakened the influence of the U/P model. The world of academics remains largely divided between those for absolute particularity and those for absolute universality. We are a long way yet from going beyond the limitations of the U/P model. As Paty (1999) pointed out, today universality of science is still under the “most varied and opposed positions” (p. 17).

The brief historical account above has shown some ripple effect that the debate on universality in the West has had on scholarship in the rest of the world. The problem of Eurocentrism, for example, worsened as scientific universality became a mainstream value in the Western world; whereas the claims and criticism that the Local Self has launched against it were somehow supported and reinforced by poststructuralist and postmodern theories. But at this stage of development, the Local Self is found locked in a methodological quandary that it must find a way out if theory development is of any concern. On the one hand, the world is left with but one knowledge system; it has to use the same language and work within the same research framework that was developed by the West for the West. On the other hand, this research framework—with the U/P model as an integral part—is in itself a major barrier for theory development from a local perspective.

Rather than forcing one's feet into a pair of shoes that do not fit, as a Chinese idiom says, it is wiser to try to find a new pair of shoes. A new methodological framework is hence called for; one that allows thoughts and ideas from different cultural traditions and paradigms to freely compare and communicate.

**Bridging incommensurable differences**

As the new methodological framework must point to a way to translate a paradigmatic language into another one, the author has, as mentioned earlier in this article, borrowed ideas from hermeneutic interpretations, the Kuhnia notion of incommensurability, and the Chinese yin/yang worldview to build a C/I model (Wang, 2011a).

In Kuhn’s discussion on scientific revolution and paradigm shift, the term “incommensurability” was used to describe “irreconcilable differences” between successive paradigms (Kuhn, 1962) that involve different sets of problems, definitions, and standards. It is not possible to directly translate incommensurate concepts or theories, but it is possible to “interpret” them in the language of another paradigm when sufficient efforts are made to understand them.

This way of explaining incommensurability has three important implications to our discussion. First, the key to commensurability is similarity or equivalence, not commonality. There is no room for particularity in commonality and universality, yet with similarity and equivalence it is permitted and also understood. In other words, the C/I concepts are not dichotomous or mutually exclusive; they do not suggest absolutism.

The change from commonality to similarity may be a step backward for natural sciences, as experimentation and testing requires precision and exactness, yet similarity
leaves room for ambiguities and random variations. For the study of communication and social sciences, it is however a step forward: No two human beings or cultures and societies are “the same” at any moment, in any way. For example, all human beings communicate; yet to conceptualize human beings as “individuals” may be an erroneous first step. “Individual” is an ideal that closely reflects Enlightenment values that underscore independence, freedom, and equality. Asian men and women, however, are more inclined to be interdependent, other-oriented, and hierarchical (Kim, 2002). This is not to suggest that commonality never dictates, but it seldom comes without postulates, conditions, or underlying differences—the larger the underlying difference, the more superficial or deceptive such “commonality” looks. Studies on Chinese media’s agenda-setting function were criticized as pretentious (Huang, 2013, p. 48), because media in China were part of a propaganda machine that not only tells people “what to think about,” but also “what to think.” To those who know Chinese media, studies supporting the agenda-setting theories—if they do—would not add anything new to what they already know, yet to those who do not know Chinese media, the finding is misleading.

Secondly, to be incommensurable does not mean incomparable nor incommunicable—if sufficient efforts are made to learn the culture and the language, and to decipher and translate the intelligible and the incomprehensible. The expression of “guanxi” in Chinese, “amae” in Japanese, “Ubuntu” in African language, and the “dialectics” concept in European philosophy are all such examples. As Ricoeur (2007) argued, despite all the barriers and challenges that cultures and languages may create, there are translations and multilingual people. This is just another way of saying that, while no two human beings or societies can be the same, no two can be completely different to the extent that no communication and comparison are possible—unless particularity is pushed to the extreme.

Thirdly, commensurability can be, and is perhaps most effectively achieved through hermeneutic interpretation of the incommensurable, as the method leads us to explore the areas where deep seated differences are hidden: for example, historical background and cultural context of thoughts and ideas, different ways in presenting and organizing arguments, and underlying postulates and worldviews. Common knowledge, shared experiences, and equivalent expressions that are essential to interpreting incommensurability become the basis to reveal commensurability. In other words, commensurability unfolds itself in this process of explanation and interpretation, and it is only when corresponding incommensurability is fully accounted for can commensurability be properly understood. The paired concepts are therefore symbiotic, rather than dichotomous.

Dissanayake (2009) has warned against the problem of “double incommensurabilities”: incommensurability over space and time, as there often exist not only vast geocultural distances between what is compared, but also centuries across time. A typical example is a study that re-examined the notion that the Chinese culture is collectivist (Wang & Liu, 2010). In the study, incommensurabilities between the concept of collectivism and the way Chinese relate to one another were identified and
interacted through an examination of Confucian philosophies, Chinese social relations, and the origins of the concept in European history. Once reciprocal relations emerged as an important principle for Chinese to relate to others, the literature on social networks and social exchange became important references to pave the way for a commensurable concept of relationalism.

While interpreting incommensurable concepts and theories may seem challenging, finding where incommensurabilities may lie is equally, if not more, challenging. Unfortunately, many researchers from outside of the Western world do not seem to have developed a sensitivity for incommensurabilities, nor do they recognize their potential in developing arguments, propositions, and ultimately, theories. Rather, there is a tendency for them to avoid facing contradictions and inconsistencies between imported theories and the local social reality. Either they conclude that the theories are irrelevant and inapplicable and close the discussion, or they turn to “particularity of the local” for explanations when evidence fails to support the theories. Because local particularities are considered trivial and circumstantial, there would be little value to dwell on incommensurabilities when hypotheses are not supported or contradictions found. Yet if hypotheses are supported or no contradiction is found, there would be even less perceived need to do so. As a result of the going research practice in the non-Western world, universality of the theory is left intact when the opportunity to challenge it and the corresponding values are swept under the particularity carpet. Research efforts become futile as little difference is made to the future course of theoretical debate (Huang, 2013, p. 49; Jai, 2011, p. 175), regardless of the findings.

Research on media’s agenda-setting function in China is an example; while their findings may indeed become deceptive, to declare the theory irrelevant can prematurely close a potentially stimulating area of study. A study on crisis communicative strategy of the Red Cross Society of China showed that the NGO’s attempt at agenda building on issue salience had strong impact on media agenda, yet practically none upon public opinion (Yang, Huang, & Chan, 2013, p. 21). Other research has reported that readers tend to develop an ability to “read between the lines” when media contents are censored (Griffith, 1973; Shirk, 2007). All these findings indicate that a complex pattern of media-audience interaction is working. An important question to ask here is not whether we can conjecture the existence of “negative” or “indirect” agenda-setting functions of media under political control, but whether the commensurability framework points to new possibilities in conventional thinking.

A similar example is found with research on the “public sphere” in Taiwan. Many of the case studies have consistently failed to find support for the “public sphere” concept (Li, 2004). On issues of public concern, the “public” showed little interest in gathering together to find a solution through rational debate. The gap between what was suggested by the public sphere concept and what was empirically observed offers two possible explanations. First, and a popular one that reflects a postcolonial “waiting room” mentality (Morley, 2011), is that average people in Taiwan are not yet ready to play an active role in public policy formulation. The second posits
that incommensurabilities such as the traditional role of intellectuals in China (Wang, 2014), have undercut the validity of the concept and thus have presented opportunities to advance theoretical discussion. A researcher’s challenge, therefore, is not only interpreting incommensurabilities, but also detecting, recognizing and acting on their presence, rather than shelving the research topic.

**Commensurability and the dynamic worldview in the yin/yang paradigm**

The C/I model is therefore key to overcoming difficulties of incorporating and debating ideas across knowledge paradigms; it also makes “literature review” a challenging task with expanded scale and scope of search to include local, even “nonscientific” materials, and hermeneutic interpretations of the incommensurable. But in Kuhn’s analyses the concepts were primarily used to describe differences between successive scientific paradigms, and commensurability meant little more than “translatability”—they do not point to any particular type of theory as a result of the translation and interpretation exercise. The next questions therefore become: What does commensurable theories look for, if they are not aiming at universality? In other words, how different are they from general theories?

The way the C/I concepts relate to one another reflects more of an organic, rather than a mechanistic, model of science. As the attempt here is to develop not just a tool for comparative research, but a comprehensive methodological framework for theory development, the similarities that the C/I model share with systems theory, and especially the yin/yang paradigm that dates back to 1059 BCE in China become useful. In comparison to the mechanistic model, the organic model has the advantage of being dynamic and pluralistic. But despite the rise of postmodern and poststructuralist ideals, it has remained preliminary, sketchy, and unexplored; in comparison, the Taoist yin/yang paradigm, one of the most representative dynamic worldviews in Asia, becomes valuable source of inspiration.

The first and most important feature of the Taoist world is its fluid and changing nature. Unlike the mechanistic world, it is not stable, yet is not chaotic as the poststructuralist and postmodern world tends to be. While endless differentiation and fragmentation of meaning begin with deconstructing the ultimate truth of the metaphysics in poststructural and postmodern theories, “change” is considered as “given,” an “inborn quality” of our world according to the Taoist paradigm. Constant changes and movements, however, do not lead to fragmentation and disintegration, as underlying such changes there is unity—the Way, generally understood as “path,” “principles,” or simply, as “the way of means.” When set in such a dynamic context, the nature of C/I concepts becomes fluid and tentative; but this does not make them insignificant or illusionary. Over time, a path or pattern of development emerges through changes. These patterns of change offer us the opportunity to look into the dynamics involved in the process, to analyze the significance of similarities and differences observed, and ultimately, to discern the unifying “Way.” Rather than determining what fleeting changes have taken place in media uses and effects, therefore, the dynamic paradigm
encourages the investigation of paths and patterns and change, and the regularities that may emerge from them.

A second feature, one that is closely related to the ideal of a dynamic world, is that yin and yang are opposite, but not dichotomous nor exclusive to one another. Instead, they breed the seed of, or are manifested in light of, their antithesis. Just as incommensurability brews commensurability, the best place to observe stars is somewhere with no light, and moths die once their eggs are laid. As part of a dynamic whole, what were considered as independent, separate and/or dichotomous in an organic or mechanistic model, are not only allowed to interact, contradict, and clash; they also conceive, depend, complement, inspire, constitute, and accomplish one another. For example, message senders and receivers are traditionally conceptualized as dichotomous concepts in the classical sender-message-receiver model that all students of communication learn in their first lessons. However, the rapid growth of user-generated content in social media (e.g., Saxton & Anker, 2013; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012) indicates that an increasing percentage of information receivers are also themselves information senders. So far there has been little attention paid to these “people-in-communication,” or the significance of their participation in communication processes to theoretical discourses. Equally important perhaps, is that if there are various ways of interactions between media and audience, technology and human beings, or even the West and the East, there will be more to investigate than just linear one-way effects, influences, or consequences. All these lead us to explore areas that are traditionally neglected in communication theories.

Contrary to the U/P model that values commonality, the yin/yang paradigm also recognizes the importance and value of differences, contradictions, and uncertainties. In the Eight Trigrams, for example, spring brings life and growth to nature, yet it is also the time when the energies from above and those from below confront each other to break the frozen ground (Ji, 2008, p. 120–121). The concept of “dang” (渦), the equivalent to turbulence and insecurity, is seen in a positive light as it breeds creativity and innovativeness. It is through such interactions that new developments are brought about and a dynamic whole takes shape. From this perspective, incommensurability not only paves the way for commensurability, but can be the source of inspiration and new propositions for the development of commensurable theories.

A dynamic paradigm such as yin/yang therefore opens up a range of possibilities for the C/I model, in which two opposite concepts may freely interact, as shown in Table 1. It also helps crystalize the concept of commensurable theory. Rather than pursuing consistency, commonality, and universality that exists independent of the chaotic and fragmented reality, it is developed on commensurable similarities in light of their connecting differences. Following the C/I model, the emphasis of research is placed not on changes per se, but on interactions, processes, patterns, and the way they are formed. Instead of ruling out thoughts and ideas from different knowledge paradigms, their richness is taken full advantage of through the interpretation of incommensurable differences. While with the U/P model, differences and particularities must be explained away in order to formulate general and universal theories, with
Table 1  Comparing the Universality/Particularity (U/P) and the Commensurability/Incommensurability (C/I) Model

<table>
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the C/I framework they are indispensable in uncovering commensurable similarities and stimulating new ideas.

With few examples in practical research, it may be too early to evaluate this methodological framework against the claims it makes, yet it is still possible and also necessary to look into its potential areas of application and the directions of research it leads to. One such potential area is agenda-setting research.

The agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) became an important topic of research on communication in the late 1960s, as it clearly outlined the limit of media effect. In recent years the popularity of social media has also stimulated interests on their agenda-setting functions, especially in times of crises such as the Arab Spring movement. These studies, aiming at media featuring to-the-minute network communication activities, have revealed observations that have profound theoretical implications. As Neuman, Guggenheim, Jan, and Bae (2014, p. 211) noted, the question “who sets the media agenda” now seems “ill structured,” as agenda setting is characterized by complex and dynamic interactions between traditional and social media. Their observation reminds us that some of the key assumptions on which the theory was based, for example, the “few-to-many one-way” mass communication model, may no longer hold today. As mentioned earlier in this article, an increasing percentage of social media users also distribute information, and following this change, the line between online and offline activities is becoming blurred. Secondly, as Neuman et al. (2014) noted in their study of financial blogs, a 24-hour day as
the unit of temporal analysis was too long to capture the dynamics in the process. If changes are taking place at such a quick tempo, describing “the” agenda is more like shooting a moving target. All these issues point to the existence of temporal incommensurability; are researchers to continue asking whether, or which media set the agenda? Or perhaps it is now the time to consider, rather, the paths and patterns of change, as the C/I model indicates?

Secondly, while the wonders of media technologies are the same, the ways they work in different systems and contexts revealed the underlying geocultural incommensurability. For example, satellite television service Aljazeera uses a significantly greater percentage of social media content than other satellite television services (Wardle, Dubberley, & Brown, 2014). In addition, it was reported to be a “focuser of attention” by setting the news agenda of the entire region (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012, p. 365), a function that no other media seem to have served. In China, social media also displayed independence from traditional media in agenda-setting, but especially in topics relating to social justice (Hassid, 2012; Yang et al., 2013). The above findings, however, did not apply to Azerbaijan where networked authoritarianism triumphed (Pearce & Kendzior, 2012).

If the picture painted above appears to be complex, one may hasten to add that the agenda of the audiences has not been investigated in many of the recent studies, as researchers chose to use social media agenda to represent the agenda of the public. This leads us to yet another set of questions, for example, under what social, cultural, and political conditions and circumstances does the agenda of mass and that of social media draw closer to, or farther away from the audience agenda, and how do the two compete, complement or clash with one another in the eyes of media users? Indeed, as contested ground of powers, how do different media agendas reflect professionalism, citizen empowerment (e.g., Leung, 2009), and political influences? Findings have indicated that social media—and Facebook in particular—have increased the odds of participating in street protests (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Vanelnzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2012). The media, however, are primarily platforms for communication; their designs encourage certain types of responses and open up possibilities for new types of activities, but as indicated earlier in this article, also important are the “people-in-communication” (e.g., Kim & Lee, 2006; Neuman et al., 2014, p. 194–195). If audiences have become actors and participants of media communication, how much do we know about the workings of cultural, psychological, social, and political factors involved in the way users respond to, and at times even impact the framing of issues and the broader media agenda? In addition to “grievances” and “togetherness” (Castells, 2012), cultural values such as interdependence versus independence, social psychological factors such fear of isolation (Ho, Chen, & Sim, 2013; Noelle-Neumann, 1974), and personal aspirations and personality traits are but a few examples of the factors that also warrant closer examinations. They point to the different dimensions of research once a theory is brought out of its original temporal and geocultural context; they also indicate the areas that the C/I model may contribute—although at this stage it is difficult to imagine the theoretical
discourse that may emerge on agenda-setting after commensurability has a chance to unfold.

Conclusion

As a methodological tool, the C/I model shows that it is possible for a theory to have its roots in the local soil, yet branches reaching out to connect with its Others. Housed in a dynamic paradigm, it also points to potential areas of investigations that were overlooked or sidelined in communication research before. The model can be used to connect the Local Self with only those Others sharing greater similarities, for example, Taiwanese and Hongkongese or Japanese, or anyone of these Others, for example, Taiwanese and Americans or even Ethiopians. The decision rests in the hands of the researcher, but the implications for theoretical discourse are quite different whether this “Other” is limited to those with greater similarities.

Twenty-six years after the first call for geocultural theories, it is now time for the Local Self to come out of its role as a bystander in the global effort to advance theoretical development. Geocultural theories have taken an important step for the Local Self to reassert itself by underscoring differences and local particularities. This step is however more meaningful when it is seen as being “part of the world,” rather than standing “apart from the world.” Boundaries protect but also limit one’s development. Geocultural theories have been challenged, from a dialectic perspective, for the contributions they make: are questions answered, problems solved, discourse space expanded, and new possibilities and horizons brought in sight, given the information we now have? All these questions share a basic assumption, that is, the Local Self is “part of the world,” hence are directed to a common goal in theoretical discourse: exchanging ideas and building dialogue in pursuit of theoretical knowledge. By no coincidence, this is a goal that even researchers favoring the culture-specific approach to indigenizing communication research have supported. The task lying ahead of the Local Self is therefore clear: to build dialogue with its Other and engage itself in the global theoretical debates.

The Local Self is however not alone in facing the challenge. The so-called European universality was criticized for being “similarity disguised as universality,” with connecting differences brushed aside and forgotten. Over the past centuries Europe, as the original site of modernity, has frequently been looked up as “global” and “universal,” rather than “local” and “particular.” What is sometimes overlooked is that the rise of modernity was developed on the basis of Europe’s unprecedented and unrivaled knowledge and understanding of the rest of the world (Said, 1994) at the time. During the same period of time, the Ottoman and the Mughal empire, and the Chin Dynasty (Wang, 2011b), all mighty military and political powers dominating vast territories in the Orient, showed very little interest in the world beyond their control. Reciting this part of the history is important, because an interest to know and to communicate with the different and the unfamiliar—regardless of the underlying purpose (Hall, 1992, p. 293)—are often seen preceding significant growth and
development. Now that Western models, standards, and values have become global, the rest of the world is regarded as little more than cases, examples, and testing grounds for the application of its theories (Harootunian, 1999, p. 7; Morley, 2011, p. 124); and the West is left to communicate with itself. As Downing (1996) described, the talk of media and communication studies around the world is essentially an intellectual monologue that the mainstream West has with itself. Unfortunately the overall well-being of the discipline seems to have reflected the above observation.

Take mass communication research for example; from the bullet theory to mediatization studies, media have been, in most instances, seen as dichotomous to audience in communication theories, with “effect” as their primary concern. The social-constructivist tradition of mediatization research, for example, emphasized transaction interactions and transaction processes, yet often the focus remained fixed on the way media change, influence, shape, or transform people, institutions, and societies, or the “consequences” and differences that media processes bring (e.g., Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Lundby, 2009). In other words, media communication is, still, following a basically linear, dualist paradigm despite mentions of transaction processes. Research has so far failed to add much to what was already known, according to Lang (2013), but despite what she described as signs of paradigm failure, surprisingly few questioned the questions or the paradigm leading to it, nor has the persistent lack of substantial evidence to prove the existence of effect stimulated interests to look beyond its realm for new ideas and possibilities (Wang, 2011c, p. 2).

Groundbreaking works do not necessarily come from interests in what lies beyond one’s comfort zone, yet such interests do open up new possibilities. The C/I framework aims at facilitating exchanges and communication across paradigmatic boundaries and theory development following a dynamic paradigm, but whether there are perceived needs for such exchanges, and whether ideas and opportunities made available are recognized as such, and appreciated and taken advantage of, are entirely different matters. It is hoped that the C/I framework can be a starting point for concerted efforts in the future—if academic communities in both the Western and the non-Western world agree on the significance of dialogue and exchanges. What might be learned from history is not that it repeats itself, but that it is unwise to forget lessons learned. If communication is as important as this discipline has us believe, and if the field as a whole is to benefit from genuine exchanges between the Self and its Other, the challenge is there for all members of the academic community to face together.

Notes

1 There seems to be less discussion on geocultural theories in the African and Latin American research community. In Africa there have been concerns about the absence of Afrocentric studies in communication, and cultural ethics and principles that have the potential of developing into theories have been discussed, yet theory-building itself has yet to become a focus of attention. While Latin America, as mentioned earlier, is home to the participatory pedagogy to communication studies, and is credited for the development of the dependency theory, studies in cultural imperialism and political economy of
communication (Barranquero, 2011), but unlike Asiacentric research, the emphasis is more on its unique social situations than on its cultural traditions and heritage.

2 In view of postmodern and poststructural theorists’ criticism of universal and objective knowledge as being incredulous, many textbooks on research methods have put greater emphasis on the complex nature of science. Yet science is still considered as a reliable and effective way to acquire knowledge, hence the general nature of knowledge is still implied (e.g., Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2011; 10th edition). This general nature of theory is in fact seldom affected by what they argue for, for example, postmodern theories are seen as nothing less than “theories” by the global academic community.

3 The Eight Trigrams is constituted of different combinations of yin and yang, and in ancient times was used for purposes of divination.

References


