

Social media, culture and identity construction: from mass communication to communication of the masses

The main paper “Language and culture”, raises the hypothesis that Asian cultures define their ingroups in relational terms while Western groups define it by shared collective identity. If true, this has serious implications to the theory of collective identity. Most of social psychological research has understood social/collective identity in the western way – as autonomous individuals having emotional attachment to a shared collective identity concept that I have called the sign of identity. Individuals in such groups while emotionally attached to the identity as a sign, are not necessarily attached to other individuals that have emotional attachment to the same identity sign.

This type collective identity has an interesting property – that individuals may keep intergroup relations and interpersonal relations relatively separate – group affiliation matters as far as people act as representatives of groups, but collective identity loses its relevance if intergroup matters are not at stake – just as SIT claims. This dynamic is perhaps the best illustrated in the case of US presidential elections where several candidates and their fractions fight each other fiercely in primaries, but after the winner is determined, former rivals quickly rearrange and become allies against the new adversary.

I have a feeling that such a group dynamic would be rare in collectivistic cultures in which collective identities are formed by individuals relationally tied into close knit networks. These networks are durable and engrained so that the loyalties of people within networks is directed to other network members rather than to the abstract concept of their identity sign. Such identity structure makes crossing the group boundaries or rearranging the groups more difficult, because this would necessarily affect one’s interpersonal relations at the deepest level.

The western type collective identities enable the formation of very large groups such as nations, because the connection is between individuals and a socially shared identity sign, and there is no limitation of how many individuals may have this connection. As the size of a person’s social networks has natural limits, the emergence of very large identity groups is difficult in collectivist cultures. It does not imply that large groups cannot emerge at all, but the mechanism is different. In collectivist cultures, national identities need to be cellular and hierarchical, so that the successive elite networks keep the nation together through the vertical ties that connect them to the networks on the lower and higher levels. The result is a pyramid like structure of the nation – consisting of layers of networks so that there is both hierarchical as well as lateral connections between the close knit smaller networks.

It seems that these two types of identities, and groups, have different level of stability, or rather, they are vulnerable to different conditions. Identities of the Eastern type are vulnerable to the loss of status of some key members in the network – which breaks the personal connections high in the hierarchy and may easily lead to fractioning of the structure into smaller antagonistic pyramids (clans).

In western type of identities, no particular individual has such a strong impact on the whole. But western type identities are vulnerable for ideological and informational disturbances. As Western identities are constructed by creating imagined bond between individuals and the sign, these bonds may be broken by competing ideologies that just attract individuals to a new sign of identity.

I have a feeling that these differences may become crucial in our era of social media, trolling and information wars. The western national identities, due to their structure have little safety mechanism preventing members from changing their group membership if competing ideology

starts to undermine their current loyalty. The polarisation in social media and active identity politics in favour of various alternative identities could wear down the emotional attachment to the national identity. In fact, the fragmentation of national identities into a large number of antagonistic sub-identities, be it sexual, ethnic, racial, age based etc. is well attested in all Western societies. In other words, western identities are vulnerable to extreme freedom of expression if technological means enable easy and cheap information dissemination and manipulation to everybody.

The Eastern type of networks may be less vulnerable for the dangers of the modern day social media, because the main loyalty is directed towards fellow members of their networks, which due to its strong ties, continuously produce identity accommodation. This means that breaking up the existing networks of trust do not happen easily, and polarisation is more difficult to emerge, because accommodating to ingroup is more important than diverging due to a new competing ideology.

Right now, it would be very interesting to study identity construction processes comparatively in Asian and Western societies to see whether and how the different ways to structure collective identities react differently to the profound technological change that had lead the world from the age of mass communication to the age of communication of the masses.