

CHINESE COMPARISONS AND QUESTIONABLE ACTS

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Andreas Roepstorff’s description of cultural neuroscience, taken together with Geoffrey Lloyd’s coincidentally related comment here, reminded me of a visit I made to China in 1983 with a group of American scholars of comparative literature. Since the discipline of comparative literature as such did not exist at the time in Chinese universities, I was repeatedly asked by the Chinese scholars we met to explain the sort of research we did. I usually began by saying something like, “Well, someone who specializes in English and Chinese literature might compare the themes or plots of Elizabethan drama and Peking opera.” The response I almost invariably received was, “And which is better?” I was, of course, amused but also puzzled by this. Were these scholars, I wondered, attempting—teasingly or otherwise—to elicit a betrayal of my presumed Western snobbery? Or did their experience of the recently ended Cultural Revolution make them sensitive about the status of traditional Chinese culture? Or perhaps the only Chinese term available to translate *comparative* involved ideas of ranking or preference, so that, for my interlocutors, comparing things just meant seeing or saying which was better.

I never arrived at a satisfactory resolution to my puzzlement, either from my respectfully posed but language- and custom-tangled questions at the time or from subsequent conversations, some of them rather awkward, with the

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1 Chinese-American scholars in our group. In their very inevitability, however,
 2 these old perplexities are relevant here. For they illustrate vividly the conceptual
 3 and methodological—and, I would add, sometimes ethical—hazards of intercultural
 4 comparison to which Lloyd alerts us; and, accordingly, they suggest why the
 5 technologically and otherwise inventive studies described by Roepstorff must be
 6 approached with some wariness.

7 Here as elsewhere in his work, Lloyd is especially attentive to the complex
 8 play of difference and sameness in cultures and cognition. Indeed, complexity—
 9 as distinct from simple contrast or binarism of any kind—is his signature theme
 10 as a classicist and comparatist.¹ Thus he notes similarities as well as differences
 11 in ancient Chinese and ancient Greek responses to cultural difference and also
 12 the significantly different views of these matters among the Greek philosophers
 13 themselves. In the same vein, discussing studies of cultural/linguistic variability
 14 or counterclaimed universality among humans in color perception, he stresses
 15 the complexity of such cognitive activities themselves, including the ongoing
 16 interactions among the multiple variables presumably involved. Noting the chal-
 17 lenge that such intrinsic complexity and inevitable interactivity present to stan-
 18 dard dichotomies of universality and cultural relativity, Lloyd observes that these
 19 and other familiar dualisms have been made obsolete by a century of research in
 20 genetics, ethnography, psychology, and related empirical disciplines.

21 Traditional dichotomies and related dualisms can, however, be extremely
 22 resilient, even among practitioners of the empirical disciplines themselves. Thus
 23 Lloyd's cautions appear especially apt with regard to the contrasts drawn or
 24 assumed in some of the studies described by Roepstorff. Among other troubling
 25 features of those studies is the casually shifting nomenclature used by research-
 26 ers to frame questions and conclusions. Can it be proper, one wonders, to move
 27 without comment from “Chinese” to “Asians” and from “White [sic] American
 28 students” to “Westerners”? And, if the rather obviously different *cultures* of, say,
 29 Norwegian fishermen, Spanish flamenco dancers, and the college-age children of
 30 middle-class Americans are judged insignificant in regard to the cognitive traits
 31 at issue, then one must wonder what explains the exclusion, as it appears, of black
 32 Americans from the pool of experimental subjects. Conflations and exclusions of
 33 these kinds lead one to suspect that the terms “Asian/s” and “Western/ers” are
 34 operating in these studies not (or not only) to describe persons distinguished by
 35 the particular *cultures* they inhabit but (or to some extent also) as biological-racial
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37 1. See, e.g., G. E. R. Lloyd, *Demystifying Mentalities* (New
 38 York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); *Ancient Worlds,
 39 Modern Reflections: Philosophical Perspectives on Greek and
 40 Chinese Science and Culture* (New York: Oxford University
 41 Press, 2004); *Cognitive Variations: Reflections on the Unity
 and Diversity of the Human Mind* (New York: Oxford Uni-
 versity Press, 2007).

categories. To the extent such suspicions are warranted, claims made by cultural psychologists regarding the putatively contrasting cognitive traits of “Asians” and “Westerners” (as, for example, having “interdependent” versus “independent” views of the self or being “collectivist” versus “individualistic” in regard to other people) appear problematic, both conceptually and methodologically dubious and, in some contexts, at least potentially invidious (“And which is better?”).²

A number of the problems noted here are evident in a foundational cross-cultural study that Roepstorff cites, “Culture and the Self,” by psychologists Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama.³ Its authors’ stated objectives suggest a corrective intention directed at the provincialism of much psychological research, similar to the disciplinary self-disciplining efforts of the historians and anthropologists that I describe in “The Chimera of Relativism.” Thus, commenting on psychologists’ tendency to overgeneralize from findings on particular local populations, Markus and Kitayama write:

[M]ost of what psychologists currently know about human nature is based on one particular view—the so-called Western view of the individual as an independent, self-contained, autonomous entity. . . . As a result of this monocultural approach to the self[,] . . . psychologists’ understanding of those phenomena that are linked in one way or another to the self may be unnecessarily restricted.⁴

Their central aim, however, is to establish the psychological significance of what they assume from the beginning are two specific, sharply contrasted ways in which people “view the self.”⁵

Some basic difficulties of conceptualization in the article—and, thereby, in the tradition of cross-cultural research that it continues to generate, including recent neuroscience studies cited by Roepstorff—can be seen in the authors’ introductory statement:

In this article, we suggest that construals of the self, of others, and of the relationship between the self and others may be even more powerful than previously suggested and that their influence is clearly reflected in differences among cultures.⁶ In particular, we compare an *independent*

2. See Richard E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently . . . and Why* (New York: Free Press, 2003), for extended contrasts of these kinds based on such studies.

3. Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, “Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 98.2 (1991): 224–53

4. Markus and Kitayama, “Culture and the Self,” 224.

5. The assumption is based largely on earlier studies by H. C. Triandis and others that are comparably problematic.

For discussion of the lineage and some of the problems, see Douglas L. Medin, Sara J. Unsworth, and Lawrence Hirschfeld “Culture, Categorization, and Reasoning,” in Shinobu Kitayama and Dov Cohen, *Handbook of Cultural Psychology* (New York: Guilford, 2007), 615–44.

6. The direction of the causality or influence claimed by cultural psychologists—whether from culture to cognition or vice versa—varies from one study to another or is essentially ambiguous. In this passage, a cognitive trait (“construals of the self”) is said to be “reflected in” cultural differences. But that is the reverse of the claim made in

1 view of the self with one other, very different view, an *interdependent*
 2 view. The independent view is most clearly exemplified in some sizable
 3 segment of American culture, as well as in many Western European
 4 cultures. The interdependent view is exemplified in Japanese culture
 5 as well as in other Asian cultures. But it is also characteristic of Afri-
 6 can cultures, Latin-American cultures, and many southern European
 7 cultures.⁷

8 As the latter part of this statement makes clear, Markus and Kitayama seek to
 9 be scrupulous in indicating the specificity of the groups whose presumptively
 10 sharply different “views of the self” concern them. Indeed, additional caveats and
 11 further qualifications are added immediately and pile up over the course of the
 12 lengthy article: “The distinctions that we make . . . must be regarded [only] as
 13 general tendencies . . . The prototypical American view of the self . . . may prove
 14 to be most characteristic of White, middle-class men with a Western European
 15 ethnic background.”⁸ A footnote here adds: “The prototypical American view
 16 may also be further restricted to a particular point in history. It may be primarily
 17 a product of late, industrial capitalism.” Indeed it may be, but the authors do not
 18 consider the sizeable implications of that possibility for their research. A cascade
 19 of further qualifications appears at the conclusion of the article:

20 [T]here may well be important distinctions among those views [of the
 21 self] we discuss as similar and . . . there may be views of the self and
 22 others that cannot easily be classified as either independent or inter-
 23 dependent. Another thorny issue centers on the assessment of cultural
 24 differences. . . . Another persistent issue is that of translation and equat-
 25 ing stimuli and questionnaires.⁹

26 And so forth: the final paragraph continues in this way for several more sen-
 27 tences. The acknowledgment of such problems is, of course, admirable as such.
 28 But, as the authors’ caveats cut more deeply into their claims and as the issues
 29 they identify become thornier and more fundamental, it becomes increasingly
 30 difficult to say exactly what their studies reveal about “Asian” versus “Western”
 31 “views of the self” and what, if anything, they demonstrate about the influence
 32 of culture on cognition (or vice versa).
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34 Evidently recognizing the possibility of such a skeptical reaction, Markus

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 other studies cited by Roepstorff that cognitive traits (and correlated brain activities) differ as influenced by—or as a reflection of—cultural difference (see, e.g., J. Y. Chiao, ed., *Cultural Neuroscience: Cultural Influence on Brain Function* [Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2009]). Only claims of the latter kind, of course, would make the new field of cultural neuroscience a site of “cultural relativism” as the term is commonly understood.

7. Markus and Kitayama, “Culture and the Self,” 224.

8. Markus and Kitayama, “Culture and the Self,” 225.

9. Markus and Kitayama, “Culture and the Self,” 247.

and Kitayama make a final point of interest here. “A failure to replicate certain findings in different cultural contexts,” they write, “should not lead to immediate despair over the lack of generality of various psychological principles *or to the conclusion of some anthropologists that culturally divergent individuals inhabit incomparably different worlds.*”¹⁰ The otherwise gratuitous-seeming disavowal of this latter rather extravagant idea, a disavowal repeated, as Roepstorff notes, in other studies he cites, appears to have become something of a ritual in crosscultural research. Allusion to and rejection of just that idea also appears, we recall, in a passage I discuss by Scott Atran, who explicitly identifies the rejected idea with “cultural relativism.” In each case, rejection of the vaguely attributed idea that culturally divergent humans “inhabit incomparably different worlds” is attached to a strong affirmation of the existence of general psychological principles and/or universals of human nature. And, in each case, that affirmation is offered in the face of, and in order to *discount*, evidence of significant cultural variability in a cognitive trait said to be crucial in human behavior.

Roepstorff is eager to represent cultural cognitive neuroscience as a site of contemporary cultural relativist energy. Perhaps it will, in time, become such. At the moment, however, a good bit of research in the field seems to be otherwise motivated and directed.

After a professional lifetime of being hooted for “extreme,” “radical,” “all-the-way-down” relativism, it is bracing to be charged with not being relativistic enough, especially by so artful a challenger as Martin Holbraad. But the hooters had it right all along, at least under definitions of relativism that I have taken care to spell out. Most of the supposedly radicalizing moves that Holbraad urges have been evident in my work from the beginning,¹¹ and the other moves he urges either are not especially radical from my perspective or would be at odds otherwise with my tastes or purposes. No one engaged by literary and linguistic theory over the past half century needs to be told that the meaning of the term *relative* is itself relative or that the scope of an assertion of relativity can include itself. And, while reveling in semantic and conceptual proliferation is certainly an available activity, I would not myself forego other intellectual pursuits to indulge in it overmuch. Similarly, while I would, like Holbraad, stress the intellectual *productivity* of intellectual controversy (the point is central to *Belief and Resistance*),¹² I have been no less interested in exploring the rhetorical, psychological, and social-institutional operations and effects of such controversies. Moreover, while I have certainly partaken of what he celebrates as the pleasures of “oppositional differ-

10. Markus and Kitayama, “Culture and the Self,” 247, emphasis added.

11. See, e.g., Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “Contingencies of Value,” *Critical Inquiry* 10.1 (1983): 1–35: “All value is radically contingent . . .”

12. See, e.g., Smith, *Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Intellectual Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 122–23: “it is out of the endless dance and clash of skepticism and belief that all knowledge emerges.”

1 entiation” (though he interprets it, in my case, as “macho” combativeness), I have
2 also pursued, and found happiness in, more irenic ventures.

3 Holbraad is not obliged to be familiar with the complete works of B. H.
4 Smith, but, had he looked more carefully at the texts he did consult, he would not
5 have needed to guess at so many of my presumptive “positions” and “arguments.”
6 As it is, his guesses are generally quite wide of the mark. For example, I do not
7 claim, as he supposes, “that appeals to relativity are founded on good and solidly
8 empirical grounds.” I do observe that the relativistic views of anthropologists and
9 historians commonly arise from their experiences in the field or in the archives.
10 But to remark a likely source is not to claim an ultimate grounding, and it takes
11 quite a bit of inventive glossing to extract a beefy empiricist foundationalism of
12 that kind from my stated views.

13 In the passage from *Negotiations* that Holbraad evokes at the end of his
14 comment, Gilles Deleuze writes of his youthful impatience with the history of
15 philosophy (he mentions Kant and Hegel) and of seeing his own early philo-
16 sophical efforts as “taking an author” rudely (to use Holbraad’s term) “and giv-
17 ing him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous.” “It was really
18 important,” Deleuze adds, “for it to be his own child, because the author had
19 to actually say all I had been saying.” Holbraad, evidently modeling his efforts
20 here on Deleuze’s creative overcoming of venerable philosophers, seeks accord-
21 ingly to give my arguments a more fruitful turn. The attempt picks up steam
22 with his apparent demonstration of my alleged mirror duplication of the form
23 of the familiar charge of self-refutation (“When Smith asserts that the truth
24 of the claim that all truth claims are relative is itself relative . . . ,” and so forth)
25 and moves from there to his would-be *überrelativist* endgame. Less diligent than
26 Deleuze, however, in ascertaining that the authors thus “taken” had “actually
27 sa[id]” what was attributed them, Holbraad generates this assertion by Smith out
28 of a crucially improper paraphrase of the text he cites plus a good bit of thin air.
29 Thus himself duplicating the definitive ploy of the antirelativists of yore, Hol-
30 braad delivers here a litter of baby chimeras.

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