Cultural Heritage and Power:
In Search of an Interpretation from the
Intercultural Communication Perspective

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Abstract
Research about cultural heritage in the social sciences almost always involves the issue of power. Power, together with culture, communication, and context, has been appropriated by Intercultural Communication as one of its four main pillars of research. However, the field has no explicit theory about power. At the same time, it has so far only been minimally concerned with cultural heritage. This paper offers a look at problems in studies concerned with cultural heritage and power, existing theories on power in Intercultural Communication, the links between heritage and power, and, finally, discusses case studies that merge these topics, with the view to stimulate much-needed theoretical work on the power theme in cultural heritage and Intercultural Communication studies.
1. Cultural Heritage and Power: In Search of an Interpretation from the Intercultural Communication Perspective

Much attention has been paid in recent years to the issue of a people’s rights to its patrimony, whether this be in the form of antiquities and artifacts housed in foreign museums, exploitation of native flora and fauna, or copyrights to indigenous music and art, among others. The debates that rage on in many forms of media have made us aware of the numerous groups that are currently in conflict over claims to heritage that are considered neglected, threatened, irreversibly transformed, or lost. The networks among the groups show the extent to which the world has shrunk; at the same time, their overwhelming number indicates the teeming diversity that is humankind.

2. Definitions and Approaches

The United Nations, through its cultural arm, UNESCO, has been at the forefront of cultural heritage preservation. Its intent to preserve vestiges of the past was lofty, as such intentions initially are, but it may also have been naïve. Its World Heritage list has brought attention to places, objects and practices that are in grave danger, but it has also created a host of global problems. Presently, many ask whether the honor of being designated heritage can do as much harm as good (Kugel, 2006).

The term heritage has so far not produced as many mind-boggling varieties of definitions as the term culture, but it approaches the latter’s propensity for vagueness. In 1963, the National Heritage Conference in the United Kingdom defined heritage “as that which a past generation has preserved and handed on to the present and which a significant group of the population wishes to hand on to the future” (Harrison & Hitchcock, 2005, p. 5). It was not much of an improvement over the UNESCO’s 1972 definition, which identified heritage as composed of monuments, groups of building or sites “which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science [or] from the historical aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view” (UNESCO, 1972).

These two definitions settle and unsettle many controversies that surround the issue of cultural heritage preservation. Harrison and Hitchcock (2005) points out some doubts that inevitably rise from the National Heritage Conference’s definition: Why
is something worth handing on? Who or what is a significant group? Who selects? The UNESCO declaration prompts similar questioning: Who has the authority to determine "outstanding universal value?" How is the authority created, accepted, legitimized, and enforced?

UNESCO's category of "intangible cultural heritage" created a good 30 years later in 2003, drew further attention to other heritage deemed worthy of preservation. It includes "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills — as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces...that communities, groups and individuals...recognize as part of their heritage...transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups...and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity" (UNESCO, 2003). This new category separates tangible, visible objects and abstract cultural products, but the distinction is superficial. For one, intangibles include "instruments, objects, artifacts" that are no doubt tangible. There are also tangible cultural heritage sites like the Uluru (otherwise Ayers Rock), a natural formation that is the target of preservation more because of its intangible spiritual value than its tangible worth. The distinctions are not always clear.

Nonetheless, heritage is difficult to define because it "looks backward...[it is] something received from one's forebears [whose] core difficulty lies in the tension between the retrospective dimension...and the need to redefine tradition in response to new conditions," as Brown (2003, p.183) concluded. He studied native American peoples who sought to protect/prevent their heritage from use by outsiders, and to redefine its proprietary conditions. Cultural texts like music that were appropriated by researchers and subsequently stored elsewhere were — and are being — reclaimed by native American communities, resulting in power struggles that involved a large swath of political actors moving in and around a messy system. Consequently, Brown (2003) posed questions similar to Harrison and Hitchcock's (2005): "On what grounds should one group's claim to an element of culture be considered more compelling than another's? Although it is relatively easy to determine whether an individual qualifies for membership in a particular group, how does one decide whether that person 'belongs to' a particular culture?" (p. 219).

Working on similar questions, but on a different subject — cultural heritage tourism in Vietnam — Lask and Herold (2005) stressed the need for intercultural commu-
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In the creation of sustainable policies for preserving cultural heritage. They might have meant the necessity for efficient communication among cultural groups involved in preservation work, rather than the need for academic research within the territory of Intercultural Communication studies. However, intercultural interaction is a constant in the cultural heritage field, whether one speaks of preservation, designation, protection, or other related issues, and whether as social phenomenon or academic field. "Ownership" issues concerning heritage involves groups that have specific though frequently contested ideas of what belongs to whom. When preservation groups (international, national or private), local and foreign communities (including visitors), and other concerned organizations claim cultural heritage, they wield and communicate some form of power that may or may not be utilized. How such power is communicated, used or suppressed among these cultural entities is a topic that is frequently discussed in Intercultural Communication studies involving popular culture, particularly in media research, but, as Martin and Nakayama (2000) point out, although "the study of popular culture has become increasingly important in the [intercultural] communication field ... the study of folk culture is developing far more slowly" (p. 305). In Intercultural Communication, which has risen to become a legitimate, interdisciplinary field that delves particularly into interaction among cultures, the oversight on studies about cultural heritage begs correction.

3. The Power Perspective in Intercultural Communication: Two Departure Points

Within the boundaries of Intercultural Communication research, Martin and Nakayama (2000) have consistently stressed the "four interrelated components or building blocks in understanding intercultural communication: culture, communication, context, and power," of which "culture and communication are the foreground, and context and power form the backdrop against which we can understand intercultural communication" (p. 74). However, the issue of power has not been discussed and organized into at least an adequate theory within Intercultural Communication. The absence of a power theory has not gone unnoticed, and is lamented over by many established scholars in the field (e.g., Gudykunst, Lee, Nishida & Ogawa, 2005; Martin and Nakayama, 2000).
Surprisingly, it has only been in the last two decades when theories in Intercultural Communication have been clearly formulated. In a comprehensive compilation by Gudykunst and his colleagues (2005), the need for more theoretical work on the theme of power was specifically stressed. They identified particularly two earlier studies that could spur research on the topic, however: Berger (1994), who wrote about “Power, Dominance, and Social Interaction,” and whose article was considered as a starting point for developing the power theme; and Reid and Ng (1999), social psychology scholars who were concerned with "Language, Power, and Intergroup Relations."

Berger (1994), referring to Russell (1938), at the outset makes an emphatic statement: that power is the basic concept in social science, in the same sense as energy is the basic concept in physics. He identifies power’s link to communication, stating that communication is both an antecedent and a consequence of power. This strong relationship, as well as the cultural and social contexts wherein power appears, leads to a definition which Berger only implied, but which could be useful for Intercultural Communication studies: Power is the ability of the wielder of influence to produce changes in the behavior and/or affect of his/her relational partners. This definition begs some questions, but perhaps to assuage some doubts, Berger in his well-thought and -organized thesis identifies the process that led to this particular understanding of power. His discussion is too comprehensive to be fairly digested here, but the significant points can be outlined as follows.

Although power primarily refers to the ability of the influence-wielder to produce changes in another’s behavior, there is the opposing ability of the targets of power to resist influence or to affect the outcomes. Power, Berger (1994) stresses, is better considered when it is thought of as an attribute of a relationship between people rather than an attribute of a single individual. In other words, power is the product of interactions between people, not a singular ability or the result of an individual’s desire to wield influence over others; people may vary in the extent of their desire to influence the other, however.

Berger (1994) also discusses the taxonomy on power offered by Collins and Raven (1969) (in Berger, 1994): (1) informational, (2) coercive, (3) reward, (4) legitimate, (5) referent, and (6) expert. This taxonomy, old as it is, still appears prominently in current works that discuss the role of power in communication (e.g., Hartley, 1997; Hofst-
ede, 1980). Yet the identification of power categories by itself has not spawned much research, because, as Berger points out, although categorization may aid in understanding the concept of power and its complexities, these categories do not make up an explanatory theory on power, and consequently, they do not generate many hypotheses that could create the bedrock of empirical research. Theoretical elaboration beyond the taxonomy is necessary before such categorizations can become a significant impetus for research.

The “notable and lamentable paucity of research on social power,” especially research that is concerned with the intersection of intergroup relations and power, is strongly expressed by Reid and Ng (1999). They mention that processes resulting in social maintenance and change are very rarely discussed or analyzed. Like Berger (1994) above, they also criticize research on power that is too descriptive and focused on types and categories. Research that considers only the methods and processes through which those in power establish and maintain control over others does not go very far; there is both a greater and more critical need to identify and elaborate the processes of power in relation to social change.

Social change could be understood through the “metatheoretical underpinnings” of social scientific research. One caveat is that the implicit assumptions made in the social sciences could, ironically, function as obstacles to social change, and in the (deplorable) extreme, even become barriers themselves. If these assumptions are put into action, the result could be a situation where social change is impossible even when — and perhaps because — the theory is explicit. If realized, a theory of power in Intercultural Communication, as well as in the other social sciences, could be in a delicate position.

Reid and Ng (1999) were primarily concerned with language and power, and they discussed at length land issues that divided Australian Aborigines and the Australian national government. They described the conflict among the Aborigines in their search for an appropriate social categorization — the language — that would give them more leverage in their negotiations with the government. If they described themselves as an “ingroup” like the rest of the Australian population, they would subject themselves to the same treatment as other ethnic groups, and also emphasize their miserable plight. In the end, they decided on a seemingly optimal category that iden-
tified them as a distinctive subgroup with special needs, encompassing both mainstream Australian identity and Aboriginal identity. That way, they could cast themselves as an important "ingroup" with access to the government, while simultaneously appealing for reparation. If Aborigines insisted on separation from mainstream society, their need for reparation would have been highlighted; but if this was the sole categorization strategy, the government could have categorized them as un-Australian, an undeserving "outgroup." Finally, the Australian government categorized Aborigines as "mainstream" Australians, undermining their attempts to gain power and succeed in their land claims.

The above discussion, while a clear foray into the field of cultural heritage research, is also right within the confines of Intercultural Communication studies. Although no conclusive claims were made about the power dynamics between the Aborigines and the government, much less any theory outlined on power, the need and significance of theory and research on the theme are clear. Power is the "sine qua non of intergroup relationships". Within the topic of cultural heritage preservation, where several groups — indeed different cultures — interact as they define and assume their various roles, a clearer understanding of power is imperative.


In the search for the power topic in Intercultural Communication studies, one is very likely to encounter Hofstede (1980, 1991) and his famous concept of "power distance." Hofstede had interestingly conceived of culture as the "collective programming of the mind" (1980) that results in distinct national categories of people. Among his core and widely accepted concepts is that of "culture dimensions," which initially comprised four main "dimensions" — power distance, individualism / collectivism, masculinity/femininity, and uncertainty avoidance — with a fifth one — long-term orientation — added later. These "culture dimensions" are said to describe the values of a national — as opposed to individual — "culture". The first dimension, power distance, was defined as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede and Bond, 1984). It is, simply, a measurement of a person’s acceptance of control and inequality. Although power is central to his research, it would
be unfair, however, to expect Hofstede’s theories to be applicable to heritage studies, as it may not have been his intention.

The notion of national cultures, and of the nation as a unit of analysis, is inappropriate, either. Although examples abound of cultural heritage that may be identified closely with the nation to which it belongs, the groups related and involved with it do not all have a common “national” culture that constitutes the standard model of behavior or attitude, notwithstanding their common nationality. Hofstede and other researchers seem to agree that people of one country generally share the same values and norms; this is indeed highly debatable.

Still, the idea that cultures are national is implied in many international agreements, whether or not they concern cultural heritage. This point was stressed by cultural studies scholar Bhabha (Huddart, 2006), who explained that since international agreements are made between nations, they turn a blind eye to cultures that are not “national.” In other words, inasmuch as international agreements are important, the very fact that they are necessarily agreements between nations means they neglect the rights of cultures that are not national. There is thus a necessity for re-conceptualizing cultures that do not fit the national mold, and for creating critical forms.

The idea of non-national cultures is central to the work of another Intercultural Communications theorist, Orbe. In his theory of co-existing cultures or “co-cultures,” Orbe (1998) uses a phenomenological approach that is rooted in “muted group” theory — about social rank and corresponding privileges — and “standpoint” theory — that is concerned with subjective worldviews based on social position.

Orbe is primarily concerned with the so-called “underrepresented” members of society and their interactions among themselves and other, more dominant members. His study focuses on the ways dominated co-cultures negotiate and resist attempts by others to render their voices mute. His main premises are that (1) co-cultures are marginalized in the dominant societal structures, and that (2) co-cultures utilize specific communication styles in confronting the dominant cultures. Orbe (1998) further identifies three goals of co-cultures: (1) assimilation, (2) accommodation, and (3) separation, of which one is reached when the co-cultural group member interacts with the dominant culture. The “co-cultural” theory also explains several factors that affect co-cultural communication, which include “field of experience,” “abilities,” “situ-
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ational context,” “perceived costs and rewards,” and the “communication approach.” Initially, Orbe’s subjects were fellow researchers and colleagues who identified themselves as homosexual, women, ethnic, or one or more other “underrepresented” categories.

There is no doubt about the domination of certain cultures over others in society, even if we look beyond the territory covered by Orbe(1998) and into that of cultural heritage preservation. But again, inasmuch as he focused on the interaction and communication among the dominant and the dominated and adequately discussed agency, we have little more than taxonomies to work on. Besides, the topic of power in this particular theory is more implied than explained.

Orbe(1998), however, brought attention to the fact that communication between social and cultural groups is rarely one between equals. He emphasized the existence of a social hierarchy in every society, whose members that occupy the top tiers are said to determine the communication system. His research explained how people in power create and maintain communication systems to their advantage, whether or not they do it intentionally. They impede the less powerful, and in the process reinforce and promote their own positions and their hold on power. Orbe’s take on society’s hierarchies of power could be used to form part of the context from which to undertake cultural heritage research, a cursory discussion of which follows.

5. National Governments and Cultural Heritage:
The Case of Matsuri [Festivals] in Japan

In Japan, as in many other countries, the government often has the last say on cultural heritage. Most often, heritage’s status and prestige are conferred through the powerful tool of legislation. The Japanese government’s instrument in this case is the Cultural Property Preservation Act, originally enacted in August 1950 and amended through the years, in line with developments in the world concerning cultural heritage issues, in particular those that pertain to UNESCO policies.

The original intention of the Cultural Property Preservation Act was to “preserve such important Japanese heritage that, without government protection, will decline and fall to ruin” (Watanabe, 1999). It also states that “intangible cultural property, such as theatre, music, crafts, etc., which to our country is of high historical and/or artistic

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value,” will be deemed “intangible cultural property” and will be “eligible for protection” (Watanabe, 1999).

Japan’s long history and flourishing art traditions make it a country with a very long list of cultural objects with “high historical and/or artistic value,” and making selections for appropriate designation is doubtless a difficult task. Perhaps to make its work easier, the government amended the 1950 Cultural Property Preservation Act in 1954 by adding the word “important” to “intangible cultural property,” and also further distinguished between cultural property, such as gagaku music, and folk-cultural property, such as local matsuri.

The designation is officially made by the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. Its decision is based on the proposals given by the Committee for Cultural Property Preservation, comprised of academics and members of the Agency for Cultural Affairs. It is this Committee which debates, discovers and researches potential candidates for the designation. All the information they have on hand is presumably gathered from smaller regional committees — lobbyists — throughout Japan.

On previous ethnographic fieldwork, the author studied one local, though huge, matsuri, the Gujo Odori of Gujo Hachiman in Gifu Prefecture. Gujo Odori is of old — and in parts recreated — provenance, but it has continued thus far thanks to preservation and promotion efforts mainly by many groups. Throughout Japan, matsuri have been tirelessly promoted by local and national governments as a quintessentially Japanese tradition, one that creates a community with ties to the old ways, so even if these practices have been newly minted, they are given traditional Shinto forms and attached to historical, local, political and social/religious organizations. The Japanese government’s activities to create a nostalgic Japan through the furusato-zukuri [hometown creation] movement has been seen as a “political project through which popular memory is shaped and socially reproduced.” It is “infused with nostalgia, a dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of a remembered or imagined past plenitude” (Robertson, 1994; p.14). That was seen in the case of Gujo Odori and Gujo Hachiman, through the conflicts and collaboration of local and national governments, and the local community. As a matsuri, Gujo Odori also unified and created an identity for Gujo Hachiman, a town not too prominent in Japan’s consciousness.
6. *Matsuri* and Power Play

*Matsuri* has become an effective political tool in reinforcing community solidarity and unity. The leaders of Meiji Japan clearly saw this potential, and used *matsuri* in their attempts to build and ascertain loyalty in towns and villages far from the capital. The leaders of today have not changed at all, and on many occasions have used *matsuri* to display themselves to their constituents. During Gujo Odori’s *Hasshosai*, the opening ceremony in July, the public officials outnumber the shrine priests ten to one. In Japan, election stumpig most takes on a *matsuri* air, too. Political uses aside, though, several authors have suggested that *matsuri* do in fact establish and strengthen community unity (e.g., Ashkenazi, 1993) and helps preserve the connection with the hometown (Gonick, 2002). During festival season in Gujo Hachiman, the local residents use the occasion to display community spirit.

The solidarity is extended further: *matsuri* has been noted to also help introduce newcomers into the established community. In her study of Namahage in Akita, Yamamoto (1978) maintained that the festival and the customs associated with it have lasted this long because Namahage had been useful in socializing newcomers to the ways of the community. Brides and bridegrooms, children, and visitors alike are subject to the Namahage “harassment.” This can be threatening to new residents — not to mention scary for the children — but participation in the practice facilitates membership in the community.

Of course, *matsuri* can work the opposite way — that is, make newcomers feel unwelcome. Robertson (1994) mentions that the *shimin matsuri* [citizen’s festival] of Kodaira highlighted the tension between the new residents and the “natives” who claimed descent from the village founders. The former were prevented from participating in the performance of the most important and dramatic parts of the festival, effectively creating a hierarchy based on one’s length of stay in the community. Like Gujo Odori, which was said to have begun when clan leaders in the 16th century mandated dancing festivities as a form of thanksgiving rites, the festival in Kodaira had its beginnings as an event sanctioned by the local authorities. It was also the local government, the *bakufu*, however, which forbade the holding of many festivals in the area in the 18th century, seeing *matsuri* as potential instruments of dissent. Kodaira’s present festi-
val is administered by the local government, while festival committees are composed of long-term residents. It is the "linchpin" in enforcing *furusato-*building, and for centuries, the power to control it has granted, subtly, the power to control the community at large.

Roth (2002) mentions the Hamamatsu Kite Festival, which the newcomer Brazilian-Japanese immigrants saw distinctly Japanese and local, and thus likely to exclude them, but which was transformed into an "enthusiastic syncretic cultural form" (p.20) that allowed the incorporation of these Nikkeijin into the larger community. The attempt to include is similar to the Namahage situation, and is a stark contrast to the exclusivity of Kodaira. Nonetheless, Roth observed that although role reversals occurred during festivals, these only served "to highlight and to reinforce social distinctions…rather than lead to a more tangible reorganization of social and economic power" (p. 137). The festival does not promote social change, but as a potential — and utilized — symbol of power, it becomes an instrument for maintaining and even strengthening the power system.

Although Kodaira’s and Hamamatsu’s festivals are not officially designated as cultural property, Gujo Odori and Namahage have been named Important Intangible Folk-Cultural Properties, two of 246 for the whole country, in the prestigious list of Japan’s Agency for Cultural Affairs (2006). There are 671 other intangible properties in two other categories, all in all a very long list of intangible cultural heritage that is officially in the hands of the national government. All that power, as well as all the potential for research.

Cultural heritage is constantly interpreted, claimed, and negotiated. Most, if not all, of the time its fate is determined by power, a power that is communicated, that includes and excludes, and that imposes a certain worldview on others who may or may not wish it on themselves. Much is at stake; the time to seek a better understanding of the dynamics between cultural heritage and power is now.

References