



Some medias and the [blogosphere](#) (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) are celebrating a [new study](#) published in Current Biology, allegedly showing that recognition of facial expressions is not universal. Psychological universalists and relativists never seem to get tired of chewing that old bone of contention.

There are two aspects to the study. The first is a very nice exploration (by means of eye-tracking) of the way Asians process facial expressions, replicating [the earlier work of Masaki Yuki](#) and colleagues three years ago (read [what Karim wrote of it at the time](#)). Japanese subjects tend to focus on the eyes instead of the mouth to decode emotions - as one could have guessed from looking at Japanese Smiley faces : ( ^\_^ ) for 'happy', ( T\_T ) for 'sad', and other such ( \*\_\* ) ...

Yet the authors don't stop at that fascinating result, and go on to try and prove another point : that because of this difference in face-processing style, East Asian subjects and 'Caucasian' subjects are not equally good at recognizing some of [Paul Ekman](#)'s supposedly universal facial displays of emotions, like disgust and fear. And indeed East Asian subjects are significantly likelier than Caucasians to misinterpret happy or fearful faces.

As Neuroskeptic points out in his [excellent coverage](#) of the experiment, the difference, though, is really tiny...

and East Asians are still quite high above chance in recognizing fearful and happy faces. For two other emotions, anger and sadness, East Asians are no different than Caucasians. If anything, they are better.

According to the abstract, East Asians "use a culture-specific decoding strategy that is inadequate to reliably distinguish universal facial expressions of fear and disgust." Well, maybe their method is not the best possible one, but it does give reliable results, if "reliable" means that East Asians are always much more likely to make the correct decision, out of seven possible options, when recognizing an emotion. Their worse performance is 58 % of good guesses for Caucasian fearful faces (they are better at recognizing emotions on Asian faces, as [Karim predicted](#) three years ago).

These are beautiful, but tiny results, and I don't think the magnitude of the effects warrants the author's claims that "Our results question the universality of human facial expressions of emotion, highlighting their true complexity, with critical consequences for cross-cultural communication and globalization." [The Neuroskeptic](#) gets it right as usual :

"The differences notwithstanding, the whole task relies upon the fact that the subjects know the meaning of "happy", "fear", and so forth, and associate them with certain face expressions. The fact that the experiment worked at all shows - as Ekman would predict - that both Westerners and East Asians share an emotional understanding. There appear to be some cultural quirks, but the essential universality of facial emotion still stands." ([Neuroskeptic](#))

Amen.