

# **AASP Conference 2003: The Application of Social Psychology in Asian Cultures**

## **The third biannual conference of the Asian Association of Social Psychology in Manila**

It could be described as the AASP Conference that almost never happened... three times! But it did happen, July 29 to August 1, 2003 at the EDSA Shangri-la Hotel, Metro Manila, Philippines.

Soon after the Philippine organizing committee announced the first call for abstracts for the 2003 AASP Conference in Manila, there came a series of kidnappings by terrorist groups in some southern Islands in the Philippines. The series of kidnappings, which targeted foreign visitors, was vividly covered in the international media which caused much concern among local organizers and the AASP Executive Committee. That was the first time the Manila conference almost did not happen, but with assurance of security and safety in the city of Manila, conference planning went on and there was much enthusiasm from psychologists from all over Asia, even from Europe and North America. The organizers received well over 300 abstracts for oral and poster presentations and symposia, and the problem was how to accommodate as many as possible in the conference program.

Then came SARS. A few months before the conference, no one wanted to travel anywhere in Asia. The local organizers and the Executive Committee had to struggle with the decision of whether to cancel, postpone, or go on with the conference as scheduled. After a couple of months of varying degrees and combinations of apprehension, exasperation, and anxiety, the SARS-scare subsided, and it was decided that the conference would go on as scheduled. But the damage had been done. A significant number of delegates had already backed out of the conference.

But we the local organizers were happy to note that a good number of delegates were still coming. We were expecting some 120 delegates to attend the conference and it seemed all would be well as the conference dates approached. On the Saturday before the conference, the day the first delegates arrived in Manila, the city was thick with rumors of a military coup. Sunday, at dawn, we were all awakened by news that a small group of military men had taken over a building in the business district and had explosives planted in parts of that district. That Sunday could very well be the worst Sunday in the lives of the Philippine conference organizers as we all anxiously awaited for developments that would signal whether we should cancel, postpone, or go on as scheduled. Fortunately, the ill-timed and ill-advised incident of military adventurism ended in less than 24 hours, and the conference was going to happen after all.

### **Conference objectives**

We think that many people were happy that the conference did happen. Indeed, many of the 170 delegates expressed their appreciation to the conference organizers. We, the organizers were pleased that our two main objectives were met.

First, we wanted to increase the participation of Southeast Asian social psychologists in the AASP. With good delegations from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia, and representatives from Singapore, Cambodia, and East Timor, we realized our goal.

Second, we wanted to foster scholarly dialogue among East Asian and Southeast Asian social psychologists, particularly on topics related to the theme of applying social psychology in Asian cultures. The conference program showcased a wide range of topics on which psychologists from all over Asia presented their perspectives, data, and ideas. Five out of the ten featured plenary speakers were from Southeast Asia (and four whom are women...perhaps another first in AASP's short history!). The lively discussions during and after these sessions all point to the achievement of this second goal. We are most excited about the prospect that many of these new dialogues would continue for many years to come.

### **Thanks**

It is all too easy to forget the difficulties and hard work that we in the local organizing committee had to go through. My colleagues Cecilia Conaco, Barbara Wong-Fernandez, Josephine Cantiller, Emy Liwag, Tina Montiel, and Alma de la Cruz, including our conference executive assistant, Cheryl Carlos made a lot of personal sacrifices in this long process but found such fulfillment in doing so. Part of the fulfillment comes from the satisfaction of being able to work together in a very supportive and cooperative climate.

We are particularly thankful of the cooperation provided by our colleagues and administrators in the three universities, Ateneo de Manila University (ADMU), De La Salle University-Manila (DLSU), and the University of the Philippines, Diliman (UP). In particular, we thank the Department of Counseling and Educational Psychology, the College of Education, the Office of the Vice President for Academics and Research, the Psychology Department all of DLSU, the Psychology Department, the Wellness Center, the Center for Organizational Research and Development, and the School of Social Science all of the ADMU, and the Department of Psychology, the Human Potential Laboratory, and the College of Social Science and Philosophy, all of the UP, Diliman.

We also thank other agencies that helped us like the management of the EDSA Shangri-la Hotel, the DLSU Press, and the Ninoy Aquino International Airport.

We are also most thankful for the enthusiastic, unconditional, and consistent support of the AASP Executive Committee. Seeing how the Executive Committee worked in this past two years convinced us that there is a very bright future ahead of AASP, as it is in such capable and well-intentioned hands.

On the luncheon on the last day of the conference, there was much discussion and excitement about plans for attending the 2005 Conference in Wellington, New Zealand. No one was more excited than the Philippine organizers who are looking forward to another successful AASP conference (but without have to go through the process of organizing it). After all, this is what our efforts were all about – to contribute towards building a strong organization that we Asian social psychologists can all proud to be part of.

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