

AASP Conference 1995: Asian Social Psychology Awakes

The Inaugural Conference of the Asian Association of Social Psychology in Hong Kong

An Asian perspective on psychology

The Inaugural Conference of the Asian Association of Social Psychology (AASP) was held at the Department of Psychology, Chung-Chi College, Chinese University of Hong Kong, from 21 to 23 June. This conference, among the first of its kind, brought together more than 70 scholars from 8 countries for the purpose of establishing an Asian perspective on psychology.

The core group of the conference came from 3 countries: Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea, but psychologists from Australia, Europe, India, New Zealand, Singapore, and the United States were represented as well. For the first time, indigenous research conducted by Asians for Asians was presented among Asians in a collegial atmosphere, with a remarkable lack of cultural division between the three major ethnic groups, Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans.

Indigenous research by Asians for Asians

Participants were treated to the experience of listening to papers in English, conversing with members of their own ethnic group in their native tongue, and then switching to English again at the dinner table or in quiet conversation.

The dominant mode of cross-cultural psychology to date has been to compare non-Western populations with Western populations, especially North Americans. This form of research sets Westerners and Americans as the standard against which all other peoples are compared, and tends to obscure subtle differences and commonalities among Asians.

If we look at Europe, the EEC has made tremendous progress in smoothing over huge cultural divides and recreating a more unified, and hopefully safer and more profitable European Community. The lack of such an overall political organization in Asia speaks for the cultural and political divisions among Asian nations, and may prove increasingly disadvantageous as Europe and the Americas form monolithic trading blocks. The use of English as the intercultural language at a conference signalling the rise of Asian social psychology was perhaps ironic, but is an accurate reflection of current political and economic realities in Asia at present.

Conference Themes

Several themes consistently emerged from the 37 oral presentations and 22 posters at the conference. Foremost among these is **the importance of collectivism in East Asian societies**, whether they are Chinese, Japanese, or Korean. Much research in psychology compares “collectivist cultures” like those in Asia versus “individualistic cultures” like the United States.

Individualism-collectivism

But this concept of individualism-collectivism does not seem adequate to capture the subtle differences among East Asian cultures that were presented at AASP. Nor does it begin to describe all the **different ways that collectivism can be carried out** in different cultures.

The common cultural threads that link China, Japan, and Korea together were emphasized over and over by different researchers at the conference.

To illustrate with just a few examples, one speaker presented research on the concept of **chemyon**, or “face”, which is used to organize society in Korea. The concept is very similar to “**mien tze**” in Chinese, and has an analogue in the Japan’s “**men tsu**” as well. Another team of researchers from Japan talked about how **seniority rules** enable short-term rules about fairness to be broken between senior and junior members of a company, because as each person in the company gets older he

expects to receive the same treatment from his juniors. Similar situations exist in mainland China and Korea.

The interdependent nature of the self in the East was also studied carefully by researchers using as varied techniques as connectionist computer models, quantitative surveys, lab experiments, and open-ended interviews. One paper mentioned history and the **construction of history** as an important area for Asians to capture in order to create their own emerging tradition in psychology.

Few of the scholars at this conference were aware of how similar the fundamental principles of society are in East Asia. We were often surprised and made more aware of the uniqueness of our own cultural heritages by the subtle differences in detail as well.

Clearly, a theme that emerged from the conference was that more work needs to be done on how Asian society is organized, and the best way to do this is not necessarily to compare Asians to the West.

Collectivist Hierarchical societies

The second theme was that China, Japan, and Korea are not only collectivist, but they are hierarchical societies. Equality never has been and is not now a basic organizing principle in Asia (though one might also question whether Western societies as the United States are truly committed to egalitarian principles when differences in wealth and income are much greater in America than in Japan, the wealthiest of Asian societies).

Clearly delineated and specialized **social roles**, which provide guidelines for harmonious behaviour are common throughout Asia. Governmental reformers would do well to recognize this as a fact of life in Asia and construct their reforms to take advantage of it rather than attempt to overturn it. **Collectivism as idealized by Communism** is not natural to the cultural traditions of East Asia, but might be more realistically applied to more egalitarian societies those indigenous to the South Pacific. Social psychology seems ideally placed at the juncture between individual, group and societal-level explanations of human behavior to have important things to say about the **emergence of Asia as a political and economically strong region**.

Conceptions of human nature

North American and European populations have served as the basic model for human behaviour since the beginning of psychology as a science. But in truth, peoples of European origin only account for about 20% of the world's population. **Most of the world's population live in societies that can be termed "collectivist"**, and yet international institutions like the World Bank and the United Nations are dominated by conceptions of human nature and solutions for society that are entirely Western, and largely individualistic.

That Asians have much to say to other Asians about **what human nature is** and how to best study and apply these studies was the third emergent theme of the conference.

Bringing social psychology to developing nations

Conference participants were sensitive to the fact that only one scholar each came from India and mainland China, and discussed various ways to bring social psychology to developing nations at the conference's general meeting to establish its charter.

Several initial steps were taken:

1. Membership fees for joining AASP were set at a very low rate overall, and a sliding fee schedule based on income was established.
2. Local representatives were designated for different geo-political areas to promote membership in these regions.
3. The location of the next conference was discussed as a tool for bringing a more diverse range of scholars to future conferences, to take place every other year. The possibility of

providing travel grants for graduate students in developing countries was seriously considered.

These first steps are small measures against the overwhelming social reality: only 5-7 universities in all of China offer undergraduate degrees in psychology at present, and they have a combined total of about 100 graduates per year. Realistically, pure research is not fundable in China at present, so to have influence on the rising dragon social psychology must make itself more accessible and more applicable. These kinds of issues were hot topics of conversation during conference meals and at the general meeting, but it cannot be said that any firm conclusions were reached.

Interdependence and harmony

While it is too early to make judgments, the hope is that AASP will serve to promote an Asian worldview in psychology, holding a central belief that interdependence and harmony are fundamental characteristics of what is best in Asian culture.

This was put into practice effectively at the first conference. The Association voted unanimously to allow membership to all scholars, regardless of race, nationality, or academic discipline. This contrasts with policies in European and Australasian psychological societies, which are restricted geographically. Conference participants were all too aware that tremendous cultural and historical divides already separate the peoples of Asia, and were unwilling to erect another barrier based on where a person lives or their ethnic origins.

Unlike at many conferences, graduate student presentations were not relegated to posters or to a minor session. The conference opened with oral presentations from "senior statesmen" at the conference, but from then on a single stream of papers was presented, with no differentiations made between professors, lecturers, or graduate students. Many graduate students from different countries and some energetic oldies went out together to savor the nightlife of Hong Kong after presentations were over. This might be atypical of traditional student-teacher relationships in Asia, but it is clear that AASP is in the position of making new trends as well as celebrating traditional culture.

Conference Outcomes

The conference produced concrete outcomes as well as goodwill.

- An English language journal, **The Asian Journal of Social Psychology**, will start in 1996, and be published twice a year initially.
- A conference will be held every two years (next one in 1997), and there is every indication that the second conference will be even better attended than the first. It is also possible that AASP and the Society of Australasian Social Psychologists will hold a joint conference in the future: several scholars attended from Australia and New Zealand, and the position of these two countries in Asia's future will be an interesting question.
- A multi-national executive committee of 10 was elected. **Sang-Chin Choi** of **Chung-An University** in Korea was elected first President, and **Kwok Leung** of the **Chinese University of Hong Kong** the President-elect. **Yoshi Kashima** of La Trobe University in Australia and **Soon Mook Lee** of **Sung Kyun Kwan University** (Korea) were elected General Secretary and Treasurer respectively. **Uichol Kim** of Chung-An and **Susumu Yamaguchi** of **Tokyo University** are the Chairs of the Publication and Research and Education and Training Committees respectively. **Shinobu Kitayama** of **Kyoto University**, **Wei Ning Chang** of **National University of Singapore**, **Jyoti Verma** of **Patna University** (India), and **James Liu** of **Victoria University of Wellington** (New Zealand) were designated as regional representatives for AASP.

This first executive committee provides a representative window into the membership of AASP as a whole. Relatively young and productive psychologists form the core of the association, with some senior people providing a hub of support. Many promising graduate students are conducting interesting research; and the infra-structure in Asia is being built to support social psychological research and training. Both North American and European perspectives are represented in Asian social psychology, but there is room to establish a place for indigenous orientations and concerns.

An Asian worldview in psychology

This conference is said to have been the brainchild of several Asian scholars bumping into each other at international conferences in Europe and the United States, looking at the individualistic and culturally monolithic research going on and wondering whether there could ever be a place to express an Asian world view.

The Inaugural Conference of the Asian Association of Social Psychology grew out of these friendly, but dissident conversations in the West. The popular response to the first conference, put together on very short notice, appears to indicate that the ground is ripe for a third, more culturally grounded wing of social psychology to emerge. That wing is in Asia, and the time is now for it to take flight.

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and
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