

Social psychologists grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic: How are we in Asia distinctive?

Michael Harris Bond 

Faculty of Business, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR, China

And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth. New Testament, Revelation, Chapter 6, verse 8, King James Version

We are social psychologists, variously enmeshed in the havoc occasioned by the last year and beyond that Covid-19 has wrought to the world we each had come to know, to understand, and manage. Malignant, stealthy, elusive, invisible, and highly infectious, this disease rides on the back of normal human sociality, impacting the lives of all humanity, whether directly or indirectly. We each have adapted and continue to adapt to whatever requirements for change we confront in our local and national communities and do so with widely varying psychological effects—personal, interpersonal, and occupational.

Societal changes slowly evolve as local containment strategies show variable and sometimes conflicting results, leading public health planners and political authorities to deliver inconsistent guidance over time, confusing and unsettling citizens. Uncertainty about the likely course of the pandemic and its impact on our lives frustrates us, the public, sometimes immobilizing, puzzling, and depressing us. What does our and humanity's future hold? We might well wonder along with Yeats in his poem, *Sailing to Byzantium*, “What rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

The pandemic that the SARS-COV-2 virus has unleashed in its wake has impacted all our lives, disrupting long established habits and reorganizing our work routines and priorities professionally. As practicing social psychologists, how shall we respond, particularly those of us in Asia? Does our geographical-cultural positioning provide us with distinctive perspectives and emic conceptualizations that we can usefully exploit and share with our colleagues locked into their social realities elsewhere?

Correspondence: Michael Harris Bond, Department of Management and Marketing, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Hong Kong SAR, China. E-mail: smhb@polyu.edu.hk

Received 20 December 2020; accepted 10 January 2021.

A tectonic societal shift

In the face of a pandemic's enormity, we ask ourselves how best to adapt professionally to the new responsibilities foisted upon us—we now teach, advise, and grade our students online and help escort them into an unknown future; we coordinate our workplace activities of staffing, planning, administering, and executing with our workmates in mixed online/face-to-face mode; we delay our normal research activities and move onto the web more and more to collect data; we wonder how the common assault of Covid-19 will affect our research questions, designs, data collection strategies and, ultimately, our participants' responses.

This is our professional version of the adaptive challenges faced by so many of our fellow citizens who encounter disruption to their working lives. Unemployment and underemployment increase everywhere; the nature of the work done by those who remain employed changes, as new skills are slowly learned, and workplace relationships become fewer, more task-oriented, and less supportive.

For every occupational disruption experienced by every working person, ripple effects extend into public social life, interpersonal relationships in leisure time networks, and family relationships in all their intricate variations across our world's cultures. Educational provisions for children shift online for unknown extensions into the future, leaving poorer families unable to provide children with the necessary electronic access and working space to join the educational race. With school age children at home more, families assume a greater caretaking role than ever before, resulting in shifts to parenting roles, disproportionately requiring women to adapt, more so in some cultural systems than others. Access to regular sports, entertainment, and recreational activities is eroded, increasing the demands upon families to provide sources of engagement and support for one another. At the same time, millions have died prematurely, devastating those who knew and loved them with a sense of cosmic injustice. However will we cope? Yeats' poem continues: “Things fall apart, the center cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.” Is this terror a vision of our future?

Who copes how and where?

The enormity of Covid-19, its range of impact on all aspects of life, its existential threat, and its uncertain

course across the world unsettle everyone. Emotional, cognitive, and behavioural shifts follow, as humans everywhere struggle to adapt to the morphing spectre of Yeats' "rough beast." This is the shifting reality we all confront, and as researchers of social life, we strive to understand. It brings to my mind the classic work of Rahe (1968) on life changes and susceptibility to illness. This line of work resulted in an efflorescence of research designed to expand the range of life circumstances assessed that required adaptive responses—what forms of adaptation emerged in persons with different personality dispositions and resources available for coping (see Bonanno, 2004; Hobfoll, 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)? This academic initiative has been extended into many specific domains of living, most notably in the job demand and resources model of burnout and engagement at work (see Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). As usual in our discipline, this theorizing and data collection was confined to what we loosely term "Western" cultures, actually Western and Northern, North American and European nations; Australia and New Zealand occasionally joined the colloquy.

With the arrival of Covid-19, we are faced with an opportunity to revitalize our understanding of how we humans cope, but in this case to an unprecedented pan-national assault on the personal and cultural adaptations already made to 21st century living across many life domains. How will we in Asia adapt, and how will those adaptations be shaped by our already-established cultural systems? I will propose two lines of inquiry to this research challenge where we Asian social psychologists can make a distinctive and useful contribution.

Examining how different national cultures adapt

During the Covid-19 pandemic, all nations have been impacted to varying degrees depending on their ecological circumstances and the cultural systems previously developed to deal with such existential threats. National systems of healthcare, education, and social welfare will already have been instituted against the backdrop of each nation's wealth and political ideology apportioning its available wealth among its citizens in light of national priorities. These pre-existing conditions may be measured using many widely and freely available indices, then compared across nations so as to chart each nation's initial responses and subsequent adaptation over time to the course of Covid-19's impact on these national systems and their citizen's responses. If the social scientist wishes to work within a nation, e.g., with states/provinces, districts, cities, neighbourhoods, the same responses and adaptations may be assessed where local-level indices are available or can be crafted.

Recently, public intellectuals have been discussing the concept of national resilience to focus the attention of social scientists upon this adaptive process. So, Friedman (2020) defines "resilient power" as "a country's capacity to absorb systemic shocks, adapt to these disruptions, and quickly bounce back from them." (para. 1; see also Norris et al., 2008). This definition could be operationalized in ways that reflect Asian-distinctive processes. Then, cross-national comparisons could be made that reflect what social scientists in Asia consider to be a more inclusive characterization of societal resilience here. This definition could be applied to localities within a given nation, and comparisons could be drawn in ways that enable national planners to target their interventions for improvement. Future pandemics and other types of disaster will arise, so institutional resilience-building constitutes a wise investment and Asian social scientists can help in guiding that process.

What cultural variation within Asia and beyond?

Cross-national comparisons by social psychologists in Asia have typically relied upon the workhorse concept of individualism-collectivism or its closely overlapping concept of power distance (Triandis, 1995). Those broad concepts can always be applied in Asian-Western comparisons but tend to "over-group" nations along a single dimension. Is now the moment to move beyond the thrall of the individualism and collectivism to begin distinguishing Asian national cultures from one another and from the rest of the world? If so, what dimensions of culture should we use?

Minkov (2018) has recently updated and refined Hofstede's 5-dimensional model of cultural variation with a data set of values involving more representative samples from 56 nations representing all continents. In doing so, Minkov identifies and validates two dimensions, IND-COLL, which he shows to mirror Hofstede's original IDV-COL dimension, and FLX-MON, a new dimension of national cultural variation. He defines FLX-MON as "national differences in high vs low self-regard and self-confidence, being always the same person vs being flexible and adaptable, and liking to help people vs being reluctant to do that" (p. 238). Together, these two dimensions adequately describe this 56-nation value space. A mapping of these constituent nations using these two dimensions allows researchers to distinguish nations from one another on a dimension in addition to IDV-COL. Using these two dimensions of national value will enable Asian social scientists to differentiate Asian nations from one another and from many other nations of the world. Doing so will liberate our thinking about national culture in more complex and

promising directions, moving beyond the cumbersome Asian-Western divide of 20th century thinking and into a 21st century world of finer distinctions.

Care in collecting data

The general challenge in doing Covid-19 research is to ensure data quality and comparability across nations or across localities within a nation. This is no easy matter, given widespread variations in the accuracy of, or even access to, the targeted data. Considering accuracy, we Asian researchers must pay close attention to the operational definitions we use for collecting our results and avoid invalid comparisons. For a simple example, the apparently simple measure of number or rate of death by Covid-19 is made differently in different areas within and across nations. Competent epidemiologists claim that the most accurate way to measure deaths due to the pandemic is not to use a simplistic counting of death certificates stating that Covid-19 is the cause of death; instead, the best measure is the increase in number or rates of deaths comparing any fixed period of time pre-pandemic against those occurring during the same time period the pandemic has been raging (Cristakos, 2020). Appreciating this sort of distinction in our measures requires background knowledge and professional competence. So, researchers need to examine metrics they use closely to ask how well they can trust the data they are gathering and avoid contributing to the “false news” cycle. Are we researchers in Asia ready to assume this daunting challenge?

Considering access to data, some national administrations are smaller in area, centralized, and tightly controlled like Singapore's and Sri Lanka's; others are more diffused and loosely spread across island nations like Indonesia and the Philippines; some national communities are more ethnically, linguistically, and religiously homogeneous, like Thailand and Cambodia; others are more divided and varied, like Malaysia's and India's. Under these circumstances, close attentiveness to the characteristics of the populations studied is critical for researchers to notice and report; we must avoid over-generalizing our results across Asian societies. Of course, Asian social psychologists have always had to address this consideration, and some have done so with great sensitivity (Hewstone & Ward, 1985; Montiel & Shah, 2008); more is now needed in building a viable Asian social psychology.

Finally, national and local handling of the Covid-19 assault is a matter of some sensitivity, since political reputations rise or fall based on the success or failure of regional responses. We in Asia may wish to exercise caution in which outcomes we choose to explore, particularly in a comparative context.

What outcomes to measure?

Of course, medical outcomes for the population are only one of many outcomes that might be assessed. We are social not physical scientists, and at the level of cultural units, there are other societal-level responses that can arise from the destabilizing effects of existential threat, such as an increase in crimes like homicide, robbery and looting, or changes in the size and frequency of political protests and industrial strikes. These responses will be met with system adjustments in the delivery of resources to the medical, social welfare, economic, and enforcement sectors of the cultural system, whatever its size. Societal responses are wide-ranging; the possibilities for their monitoring by researchers are legion. Again, caution is advised.

Responses to Covid-19 are also social psychological, and here social psychologists are on safer ground with our individual-level measures. Members of a given cultural unit respond emotionally, cognitively, attitudinally, and behaviourally to the powerful and pervasive mortality-salience induced by a pandemic. These responses vary within a given cultural unit and will be of local interest to understand and to contain. Intervention studies can be designed accordingly and would be welcome. Individual responses may be charted individually or group-wise across time during the course of the pandemic, so that panel studies would be valuable to initiate or join with other discipline's professionals to leverage the yield possible from longitudinal data. Multi-level modelling and associated statistical methodologies can then be used to make fuller sense of the data, what Smith and Bond (2019) termed “nuancing” of the results for greater cultural sensitivity.

Multinational sources of data, whether medical, economic, political, social, interpersonal, or psychological, would enable Asian researchers to answer the question, “What is Asian about this mode of responding?” Asia, after all, is a loosely applied geographic term; countries within the compass of this term are of unknown and to-be-discovered cultural similarity in any of these respects. Social psychologically, we have only just begun to chart the unions and disjunctions between Asian and non-Asian cultures (see Bond et al., 2004; Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Welzel, 2013), let alone the cultural distinctions among Asian nations. Given the stark differences across Asian countries in colonial experience, wealth, and religious heritage, we should expect many surprises and much difference, as Minkov's (2018) multinational mapping reveals. These differences may moderate country responses, such as immigration restraints, protest frequency, intensity of lockdown measures, wearing of face masks, willingness to be

vaccinated, etc., to comparable levels of assault by the pandemic.

Developing and using culturally sensitive measures

The development and use of emic measures are other potential lines of research crying out for greater deployment by Asian social psychologists. As a group, we have been inclined to import our measures of social psychological responding directly from the Mainstream without first asking if these already established measures need local elaboration or indeed whether we need to develop our own measures so that we sufficiently represent the phenomena we want to understand.

There are a few examples of such a culturally enterprising program of research in Asia: The Chinese Culture Connection (1987) developed a culturally based measure of Chinese values, then demonstrated the supplementary contribution of Chinese values to an established value measure from America (Bond, 1988)—this work inspired Schwartz (1992) to enlarge the range of values measured in his many subsequent cross-national comparisons using the Schwartz Value Survey in its various lengths and formats; Yik and Bond (1993) added Chinese terms of person perception to the established lexical measure of the Big Five framework, producing an eight-factor, more culturally sensitive measure for use in Chinese heritage societies; Yang (1996) developed Chinese culture-anchored measures of responses to modernization, discovering not a bipolar measure of modernity, but rather a two-dimensional structure of both modernity and traditionality.

A few Asian researchers have gone a step further with their locally developed measures of basic psychological constructs—they have extended their measures into other cultural groups to assess their applicability there and to discover unique additions to the usual repertoire of measures available in our discipline. Cheung et al. (2001) administered the Chinese Personality Assessment Inventory into American culture, discovering a sixth dimension untapped by the standard Big Five and providing incremental variance for various outcomes, e.g., vocational as in Cheung et al. (2012); Leung et al. (2002) developed a comprehensive measure of worldview, the Social Axioms Survey, deriving their items from Hong Kong respondents and media sources in order to include distinctively Chinese beliefs in their survey. Before extending their measure to different national groups, however, Leung and Bond invited researchers in their other five foundational cultures to consult their own cultural traditions in producing the first and second scales, the SAS I and SAS II (Leung et al., 2012). The inclusion of other cultural traditions in the initial scale

development and subsequent administration have made it easier for this scale to gain international credibility. More such “exports from Asia” could be undertaken by enterprising researchers.

So, there are numerous examples in our social psychological literature of measures developed or enhanced by Asian social psychologists. These may be particularly useful in tracking responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, we may also take advantage of this opportunity to bring other, perhaps more appropriate measures into play. Harkening back to the earlier research on stressors, stress, and adaptation, we could be developing and using, respectively, more Asian-sensitive taxonomies of stressors, more Asian-sensitive measures of resilience (see e.g., the work of Ting et al., 2019, on indigenous styles of coping), and more Asian-sensitive measures of adaptation in values, worldviews, and psychological outcomes, e.g., Wong and Bower’s (2018) mature happiness. Other possibilities abound.

How will we Asian social psychologists respond?

"There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:

There gloom the dark, broad seas." *Ulysses*, Tennyson

Conflict of interest

I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

References

- Bonanno, G. (2004). Loss, trauma, and human resilience: Have we underestimated the human capacity to thrive after extremely aversive events? *American Psychologist*, 59, 20–28. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.59.1.20>
- Bond, M. H. (1988). Finding universal dimensions of individual variation in multicultural studies of values: The Rokeach and Chinese value surveys. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 55, 1009–1015. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.55.6.1009>
- Bond, M. H., Leung, K., Au, A., Tong, K.-K., de Carrasquel, S. R., Murakami, F., Yamaguchi, S., Bierbrauer, G., Singelis, T. M., Broer, M., Boen, F., Lambert, S. M., Ferreira, M. C., Noels, K. A., van Bavel, J., Safdar, S., Zhang, J., Chen, L., Solcova, I., & Lewis, J. R. (2004). Culture-level dimensions of social axioms and their correlates across 41 cultures. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 35, 548–570. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022104268388>
- Cheung, F. M., Fan, W., & Yao, D. J. (2012). Chinese personality and vocational behavior. In X. Huang & M. H. Bond (Eds.), *The handbook of Chinese organizational behavior: Integrating theory, research, and practice* (pp. 359–379). Edward Elgar.

- Cheung, F. M., Leung, K., Zhang, J.-X., Sun, H.-F., Gan, Y.-Q., Song, W.-Z., & Xie, D. (2001). Indigenous Chinese personality constructs: Is the five factor model complete? *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 32, 407–433. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022101032004003>
- Chinese Culture Connection. (1987). Chinese values and the search for culture-free dimensions of culture. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 18, 143–164. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002187018002002>
- Cristakas, N. A. (2020). *Apollo's arrow: The profound and enduring impact of coronavirus on the way we live*. Little, Brown and Company.
- Friedman, U. (2020, November 15). The pandemic is revealing a new form of national power. *The Atlantic*, November 15. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/11/pandemic-revealing-new-form-national-power/616944/>
- Hewstone, M., & Ward, C. (1985). Ethnocentrism and causal attribution in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 48, 614–623. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.48.3.614>
- Hobfoll, S. E. (1989). Conservation of resources. A new attempt at conceptualizing stress. *American Psychologist*, 44, 513–524. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.44.3.513>
- Inglehart, R., & Baker, W. E. (2000). Modernization, cultural change, and the persistence of traditional values. *American Sociological Review*, 65, 19–51. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657288>
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal and coping*. Springer.
- Leung, K., Bond, M. H., de Carrasquel, S. R., Muñoz, C., Hernández, M., Murakami, F., Yamaguchi, S., Bierbrauer, G., & Singelis, T. M. (2002). Social axioms: The search for universal dimensions of general beliefs about how the world functions. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 33, 286–302. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022102033003005>
- Leung, K., Lam, B. C. P., Bond, M. H., Conway, L. G., Gornick, L. J., Amponsah, B., Boehnke, K., Dragolov, G., Burgess, S. M., Golestaneh, M., Busch, H., Hofer, J., Espinosa, A. d. C. D., Fardis, M., Ismail, R., Kurman, J., Lebedeva, N., Tatarako, A. N., Sam, D. L., ... Zhou, F. (2012). Developing and evaluating the Social Axioms Survey in eleven countries: Its relationship with the five-factor model of personality. *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology*, 43, 833–857. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022111416361>
- Minkov, M. (2018). A revision of Hofstede's model of national culture: Old evidence and new data from 56 countries. *Cross Cultural & Strategic Management*, 25, 231–256. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CCSM-03-2017-0033>
- Montiel, C. J., & Shah, A. A. (2008). Effects of political framing and perceiver's social position on trait attributions of a terrorist/freedom fighter. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 27(3), 266–275. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X08317951>
- Norris, F. H., Stevens, S. P., Pfefferbaum, B., Wyche, K. F., & Pfefferbaum, R. L. (2008). Community resilience as a metaphor, theory, set of capacities, and strategy for disaster readiness. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 41, 127–150. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-007-9156-6>
- Rahe, R. H. (1968). Life-change measurement as a predictor of illness. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 61, 1124–1126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003591576806111P129>
- Schaufeli, W. B., & Bakker, A. B. (2004). Job demands, job resources, and their relationship with burnout and engagement: A multi-sample study. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 25, 293–315. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.248>
- Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the content and structure of values: Theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 25, pp. 1–65). Academic Press.
- Smith, P. B., & Bond, M. H. (2019). Cultures and persons: Characterizing national and other types of cultural difference can also aid our understanding and prediction of individual variability. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 2689. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02689>
- Ting, R.-S.-K., Zhang, K., & Huang, Q. (2019). An inclusive indigenous psychology for all Chinese: Heeding the mind and spirit of ethnic minorities in China. In K.-H. Yeh (Ed.), *Asian indigenous psychologies in the global context* (pp. 249–275). Palgrave.
- Triandis, H. C. (1995). *Individualism and collectivism*. Westview Press.
- Welzel, C. (2013). *Freedom rising: Human empowerment and the quest for emancipation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wong, P. T. P., & Bowers, V. (2018). Mature happiness and global wellbeing in difficult times. In N. R. Siltan (Ed.), *Scientific concepts behind happiness, kindness, and empathy in contemporary society* (pp. 112–134). IGI Global.
- Yang, K. S. (1996). Psychological transformation of the Chinese people as a result of societal modernization. In M. H. Bond (Ed.), *The handbook of Chinese psychology* (pp. 479–498). Oxford University Press.
- Yik, M. S. M., & Bond, M. H. (1993). Exploring the dimensions of Chinese person perception with indigenous and imported constructs: Creating a culturally balanced scale. *International Journal of Psychology*, 28, 75–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207599308246919>