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## Continuing Encounters with Hong Kong

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MICHAEL HARRIS BOND

*A foreign country is a mirror  
in which each traveller  
contemplates his own image. —ANDRE MAUROIS*

It is Christmas Eve, 1991, and I have been living in Hong Kong for over 17 years. I know that this surviving fragment of the British Empire is geographically located just south of the Tropic of Cancer at longitude 114°, but I am still charting my cultural bearings. For, within a 50 km radius of where I now sit are over 6 million Cantonese people. On a daily basis I eat, commute, conduct research, celebrate, hold meetings, bargain, commiserate, teach, exchange gifts, speak various languages, vie for promotion, and generally go about the business of living with a kaleidoscopic subset of this tiny subset of the world's Chinese population. To say that we do things differently would be an understatement. But out of these differences have emerged some discoveries about how we are similar; others still await landfall.

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**Michael Harris Bond** was born in Toronto, Canada, where he received a transplanted public school education from teachers with British accents. Subsequent travels took him to exotic cultures, like California, where he received his Ph.D. from Stanford University in 1970. He continued going West as a young man until he arrived in the Far East, where he has now reached middle age teaching psychology at the Chinese University in Hong Kong. He recently co-authored the book *Social Psychology across Cultures* (Allyn and Bacon, 1993).

I should have realized that something intriguing was afoot when my wife, one-year old daughter, and I deplaned on August 10, 1974 at Kai Tak International Airport. We had arrived in Hong Kong, pearl of the Orient, home to (then) almost five million Cantonese people, lingering outpost of the British Empire, prize of the 1842 Opium war, and charter member of the Asian economic dragons. I had accepted a job at the Chinese University to teach psychology and was wondering if my lecture notes would arrive by ship in time for my September classes. That would be the least of the challenges awaiting this very green Canadian as I began the professional quest of figuring out the psychology of Chinese people and the personal struggle of living fruitfully with them.

Puzzles announced themselves early. As we left the air-conditioned Boeing 747, we were hit by the distinctive wall of heat, humidity, noise, color, and odor that greets all new arrivals. I had just been reading that in the Chinese language "Hong Kong" translates as "fragrant harbour." Although I saw boats at anchor in the distance, the fetid stench that hung in that miasma was anything but fragrant!

So, at the verbal level my first encounter with Hong Kong appeared half correct. The other half eventually followed. For I quickly learned to dab my left wrist with a musky after-shave to help recalibrate my nostrils when the "fragrance" became especially noxious. This small accommodation on my part has enabled me to transform an apparent contradiction into a workable truth. Struggling with other puzzles has likewise yielded a few scientific truths.

*Passports to Discovery*

*Most cultural exploration begins  
with the experience of being lost. —EDWARD HALL*

My basic thesis is that I have become a better cross-cultural psychologist because I live in a foreign culture. Before reaching the age of maturity, I was raised in Anglo-Saxon Toronto. The ground rules I absorbed during those formative years helped me adapt successfully to that special milieu, but prepared me to experience a host of puzzles, irritations, and delights when exported to Hong Kong.

By stumbling around "in alien corn," as Keats called it, I encountered all sorts of weird and wonderful differences. As a citizen, I had to negotiate these differences by learning to anticipate them so that I could avoid certain situations, accommodate myself to others, and seek out the rest. As a behavioral scientist, they became grist for my intellectual mill. What did that behavior mean? Could one measure the behavior in a controlled setting? Could this setting be used to compare both Chinese people and Canadian people? If a difference was discovered, how could it be explained? Some of my most fruitful experiments emerged from these prods when applied to differences I noticed.

In this paper, I will describe some of the encounters that led to some of these experiments. This exercise may be useful for younger readers, because science often seems a remote and daunting activity when stripped of its human dimension. But, in the behavioral sciences, this human dimension is a unique resource for us to use in developing ideas.

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Our own phenomenology can be mined in the context of discovery to unearth important hypotheses. In the cross-cultural field, these hypotheses educate us about culture, the very foundation our reality.

So, the journey is not without potential disruption. Many who travel thoughtfully come to realize that a cultural system is an adaptive set of conven-

tions. These operating assumptions are unconsciously held by most people, but may be shaken loose by the confrontation with a different culture. Indeed, after 17 years of daily encounters with Chinese reality, I have come to question some of my Canadian assumptions. Perhaps in consequence I have been "Sinicized," just as some Chinese have been Westernized. Some of these changes in my personal culture may become apparent to the sensitive reader, as I recount some of my earlier surprises.

## **A FRIED RICE OF CULTURAL SURPRISES**

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### *A Case of False Modesty?*

Our psychology department was searching for a lecturer in cognitive psychology to replace a visiting appointee. Whereas most of our candidates apply from overseas, a local Chinese Ph.D. had signalled his interest, so a seminar was promptly arranged. The faculty was delighted to have the rare opportunity of assessing a candidate's lecturing skills before hiring and all teachers attended the presentation.

Our department chairman introduced the candidate in a serious manner, detailing his accomplishments since high school. The candidate sat with head lowered, leafing through a thick sheath of notes. When our Chairman finished, the presenter responded to the introduction. With his head still lowered, he allowed that, "It has been a very busy last month, so I have had little time to prepare my presentation to you. Furthermore, it addresses a complex topic that I find very difficult. So, I am afraid many of you will find my talk rather superficial and disorganized. Perhaps you would help me by offering any insights you might have."

I was flabbergasted. We knew from inquiries already made to others that our candidate was very keen to be hired. The job market was tight, our salary competitive, and our research support abundant. How could any sensible professional present himself so disparagingly on such a decisive occasion? I searched the faces of my Chinese colleagues for some social confirmation of my surprise, but saw nothing untoward. They looked rather bored, as if suffering some ritual before the main event.

And indeed the main event was excellent. The candidate was articulate, informed, and organized. His academic presentation belied the introduction

he gave it, so my confusion was further confounded by the discrepancy. What was happening here?

### *Psychological Connections*

At this time professionally, I was working in the area of attributions, exploring how Chinese persons explained their successful and unsuccessful outcomes in life. When uttered publicly, attributions like, "I got an A because I worked hard" or "I broke up with my boyfriend because we weren't fated to be together" become acts of self-presentation with social consequences. We may talk about our outcomes in an arrogant, self-serving way or in a humble, self-effacing way. Of course what the listener regards as arrogant or humble may vary from place to place, but whatever we say will have some social impact in any given context.

Our job candidate had certainly introduced his talk with modest words. From my cultural vantage point this modesty appeared excessive and, after the presentation, simply false. I was irritated at having been misled, but puzzled that my colleagues took no offense, indeed, regarded his introduction as normal.

We know from the attribution literature that departures from expectation generate cognitive activity to explain that departure, so that it then becomes predictable. Well, my Canadian expectations had been violated and I was vigorously searching for a rationale to explain what I had just observed.

I recalled a Chinese proverb I had recently encountered—"Haughtiness invites ruin, humility receives benefits." This seemed pretty strong advice to someone raised in a "know thyself" and "look out for number one" tradition, so it occurred to me that the Chinese thermostat for self-presentations might just be set lower than it was in Canada. Self-deprecating comments do after all invite social support and defuse status competition. They may then become normative in cultural systems emphasizing interpersonal harmony. So, my students and I began examining aspects of this interface between attributions and self-presentation.

### *The Modesty Bias*

Our first challenge was to establish that Chinese people did in fact prefer a self-effacing attribution style. To determine this preference, we allowed subjects to overhear contestants explaining their success or failure in an intellectual competition. A

modest attribution involved asserting that one's success arose because of luck and an easy task; one's failure, because of lack of ability and lack of effort. Self-serving attributions were exactly the opposite. Sure enough, our listeners liked the self-effacing contestants more and preferred to work with them on future tasks.

To be fair, research has occasionally shown that Western perceivers prefer modest attributors. However, these preferences for modesty occurred for group, not for individual, performances. But even with interdependent performances, I believe that the Chinese thermostat will be set to approve of relatively more modest attributions than are found in Western cultures.

### *When Modesty Fails*

But the plot thickens. The revered Chinese principle of balance might lead us to expect that modesty at the personal level should be compensated by haughtiness somewhere else. A possibility suggested itself one day when I casually remarked to a Chinese colleague that, "Canadians are awful narrow-minded sometimes!" She looked aghast and whispered to me over the lunch "You should never speak about your own country that way." I paid some attention to her admonition as it is only in extreme cases of egregious foreign behavior that my colleagues will comment.

So, it appeared that the possible balance for individual modesty was collective haughtiness. As a typical individualist, I had attempted with my remark to draw a distinction between myself and my fellow Canadians, a standard technique for claiming personal distinctiveness. Chinese, however, are more collectively socialized and regard their groups' successes and failures as more personally relevant than do Canadians.

Much subsequent research has reinforced this intuition. But at the time the individualism-collectivism contrast was in its infancy for psychologists, and I tried a simple experiment to test the hypothesis my colleague had inspired by her chiding. Basically, we turned the previous experiment upside down. That is, we asked the subject to evaluate a group member who made group-effacing as opposed to group-enhancing attributions for their group's success or failure. As expected, modesty failed. In the case of group performance, Chinese subjects preferred those who protected the group by attributing group success to ability and effort; group failure, to bad luck and task difficulty.

In hindsight, this contrast between what happens when individual and group performance is explained seems obvious. It is also obvious, however, that the preponderance of social psychology is (a) done in individualistic cultural settings, and (b) ignores group processes while focusing on individual behaviors. Living in a collectivist culture provided me with daily manifestations of this contrast. I was like the innocent fish, pulled from the water, suddenly realizing that air existed and that I had spent all my previous life in water. Our change of surroundings made what was implicit, explicit.

## INSULTING CHINESE

I had just finished writing a review of the literature on Chinese aggression (Bond and Wang, 1983). Given the available data base, especially from psychological experiments, I had concluded that levels of overt aggression were generally low.

Shortly after the article's publication, I attended a meeting of the University Library Committee. Each department had selected its representative and the Library sent the Senior Assistant Librarian plus a recording secretary. As the previous year's allocations were being discussed, the professor of accounting launched a scathing attack on the librarian present. It had something to do with alleged mismanagement of the appropriation to the Business School. The details now escape me, for my attention was riveted by the intensity of the abuse. For a good two minutes, the professor impugned the competence, the integrity, and the discipline of that librarian. She responded by lowering her head until the storm was spent. The committee quickly moved on to other business.

My ears were ringing. For my benefit, the meeting was being conducted in English and I was shaken by the reverberations of this personal invective. What had happened to my normally placid, cheerful colleagues? How could they tolerate such excessive abuse? What had I missed in my review of Chinese aggression?

### *The Veil of Language*

A glance around the table suggested to me that I was more shaken than my colleagues. A number of possible explanations for this discrepancy suggested themselves. One in particular intrigued me.

I was working in my first language; my Chinese colleagues, in their second (or third, or fourth).

Could it be then that I had been buffeted by the full emotional impact associated with these words in English, whereas my fellow committee members were buffered because English was a foreign tongue? After all, they had learned their English in classrooms and from books; I had learned mine in the rough and tumble of everyday life. A simple application of principles from classical conditioning suggested that an English word should carry more force for me than for them.

This line of reasoning suggested a simple experiment: allow bilinguals to discuss neutral and emotionally aversive topics in both their first and second languages. The buffering hypothesis would suggest that discussing the aversive topics in a second language should be relatively less upsetting. In consequence, the bilinguals should speak relatively longer on the aversive topics in their second language as opposed to their first language.

A few months later we ran just such an experiment, confirming my earlier intuition. So, it now seemed likely to me that the professor of accounting had not spoken with the same savagery that I had heard. Nor had my Chinese committee members heard the same intensity that had so disturbed me. As Alphonse Bertillon put it, "One can only see what one observes, and one observes only things that are already in the mind." Years of daily English usage had prepared my mind differently from my colleagues. Henceforth, I would certainly be careful whom I insulted in the Chinese language.

### *Juniors and Seniors Have Their Ranking*

But there was more. The language issue was only one piece to the puzzle. The downcast eyes, the shuffling of papers, the clearing of the throats, the shortness of the meeting, and the quiet rush to depart all bore testimony that a serious attack had occurred.

As we left the meeting room, my counterpart from the Sociology Department remarked,

"Well, the Assistant Librarian received quite a scolding, isn't it?"

"A scolding?!", I queried.

"Yes, that professor often treats his students like that."

The penny dropped. An insult is not always an insult. This one had been a rebuke, delivered by an

irritated father to a misbehaving daughter. An older, male professor had scolded a younger female administrator. In the Confucian hierarchy the aggressor outranked the victim on every conceivable dimension; his attack could thus be condoned, or at least tolerated, because it had not violated the social ordering.

So, I had not been witness to an exchange between individuals jealously protecting their professional integrity before the eyes and ears of other fellow professionals. This was not the House of Commons where the sweet voice of reason would be summoned to marshal the facts, select the principles, and assess the blame. Instead, this was a hierarchical family drama, legitimized by 4000 years of tradition.

This time a cross-cultural experiment seemed in order. What would happen if Americans and Chinese were privy to an insult in just such a meeting, delivered either by a superior to a subordinate, or vice versa? My guess was that there would be a bigger difference in likeability ratings of the insulter in Chinese culture than in a Western culture. Being someone's boss where I had come from was a temporary arrangement, based on limited, task-specific expertise. One had to treat one another with a professional respect that would extend to equals outside of office hours. The data from the study supported this line of reasoning—the Chinese censured a senior insulting a junior much less than a junior insulting a senior; Americans made no distinction based on the insulter's rank.

### *Provoking a Response*

The insulted librarian had not replied to the insult in any way during the meeting. Such passivity under fire set me to wondering, however. Under what conditions would Chinese human beings counter-attack, or at least defend themselves, when verbally attacked?

I had just been reading Felson's (1978) brilliant paper on "aggression as impression management." Felson had suggested that people respond to undeserved provocation from others with counterattack in order to establish that they are not the sort of person one can attack with impunity. He did allow, however, that the insulted party might "play it cool" to win the approval of any audience to the insult.

Chinese culture places a high value on the qualities of self-restraint and moderation. Sidestepping a provocative insult, then, could be a judi-

cious act of impression management, especially in front of an audience whose approval one seeks. Conversely, a spirited defense of one's family, work-group, or village could be perceived by others as indicating selfless loyalty, valued qualities in any collective culture.

The professor of accounting had insulted the librarian personally in a large meeting, and she had kept silent. What would have happened, I later wondered, if he had insulted the library staff in general? Or had insulted the librarian in private?

These musings led to another experiment where confederates gratuitously insulted a subject under a variety of circumstances. We were interested to discover whether overt resistance to an insult about one's competence was greater when one was verbally abused in private or in public. Of particular importance was the issue of whether the audience was composed of colleagues or of strangers. Given my experience at the committee meeting, I expected that resistance would be *less* when insults were passed in front of acquaintances than when alone or in front of strangers.

This impression was in fact confirmed. Of greater interest, however, was a small change we made to the content of the insult. Half the subjects were insulted personally; the other half were insulted both personally and as the member of a group (their academic department, actually). In this latter case our subjects responded with vigorous, spirited resistance—they disagreed with the abuse, offered excuses, or even challenged their insulter. It appears as if the group nature of the insult had justified our Chinese subjects in reacting with unusual assertiveness regardless of the social situation. How clever was the accounting professor not to have insulted the whole library staff, but only the librarian!

The degree of resistance was greatest not in front of colleagues or even when alone with the insulter, but rather in front of strangers. The general social mandate to respond temperately can apparently be relaxed in front of strangers, especially if one's group name is being impugned. Again, we see evidence of how important group memberships and association become in collective cultures.

### *Deeper into the Labyrinth*

Encounters like the one at the library can be endlessly construed and reconstrued; they take good measure of a social scientist's creativity. It has occurred to me, for example, that our professor of

accounting might have been engaging in the Chinese strategy of "cursing the mulberry while pointing at the ash." That is, the issue could really have been between him and the head of the library who was not present. In his stead the Senior Assistant Librarian was an available, assailable target who would dutifully pass on the implied message to her boss. Such a line of reasoning would have deflated the personalism of the invective for the Senior Assistant Librarian, making it much easier for her to suffer the attack in silence.

Experiments in social psychology are typically bounded by 45-minute time frames and involve strangers. As such it may be more difficult to test this "indirection" hypothesis in a realistic manner. But what is the advantage of traveling culturally if it does not stretch our intellectual roadmaps? So, I am currently wrestling with this latest conundrum as a way of enlarging my limits as a Western-trained social psychologist.

#### *Future Pacings*

*To know that you are ignorant  
is best;  
To know what you do not  
is a disease;  
But if you recognize the malady of mind  
for what it is,  
Then that is health. —TAO TE CHING, POEM 71*

So, it appears to me as if these early puzzles have yielded to my curiosity and persistence. The tolerance and insights of my colleagues have also helped! The premise sustaining the intellectual struggle is that all people behave reasonably from their own perspective. Unfortunately, it is all too reasonable for reasonable men to believe that another's reasonableness is folly. Or at least difficult to fathom, and hence not worth the effort.

A healthy skepticism about this all-too-universal dismissal of others is an invaluable visa for

cross-cultural explorers. It certainly makes life more interesting! Why did my Chinese host at dinner persist in loading my plate with food when I told him five times that I am full to bursting? Why did that Chinese laborer whom I blocked when he tried to jump the train queue shout non-stop at me for a good ten minutes until we reached my destination? Why did my failing student ask for a "compassionate" pass and what is a compassionate pass, anyway?

These and other intellectual charmers should fill my dance-card for the next decade or so, by which time they will have been replaced by other partners. I may take some solace at this lengthy process by recalling the Chinese proverb that it takes 10 years to grow a tree, but a 100 years to develop a scholar. While I am waiting for this scholarship, I will continue to enjoy the delights of daily encounters with a generally modest, temperate, loyal, and diligent group of my fellow human beings.

*The way you call the way  
is not the way. —TAO TE CHING, POEM 1*

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Stand with Hong Kong. Millions of Hongkongers have been protesting since June 2019 to defend our freedom and autonomy. Instead of addressing political grievances, the Hong Kong government has responded with devastating police brutality, increasingly arbitrary arrests and political prosecutions. Protesters showing gesture symbolising "Five Demands, Not One Less". Photo: Hong Kong Apple Daily. Thousands of Hong Kong protesters light up Lion Rock on Lantern Festival, 13 September 2019. Photo: Vincent Hon. In June of 2019, Hongkongers—two million in a city of seven million—marched to oppose a controversial extradition bill, which would remove the legal firewall that separates Hong Kong from the mainland China. Hong Kong's protests started in June against plans to allow extradition to mainland China. Critics feared this could undermine judicial independence and endanger dissidents. Until 1997, Hong Kong was ruled by Britain as a colony but then returned to China. Under the "one country, two systems" arrangement, it has some autonomy, and its people more rights. The bill was withdrawn in September but demonstrations continue and now demand full democracy and an inquiry into police actions. Clashes between police and activists have become increasingly violent, with police firing live bullets. Relations between people in Hong Kong and mainland China have been relatively tense since the early 2000s. Various factors have contributed, including different interpretations of the "one country, two systems" principle; policies of the Hong Kong and central governments to encourage mainland visitors to Hong Kong; and the changing economic environment. More broadly, there exists resentment toward mainland-Hong Kong convergence or assimilation, and toward perceived interference from mainland China in Hong Kong is a relatively small island with a little extra in terms of land and some other things. While at times it can seem a little overwhelming, hot, crowded and in a lot of places dirty, the right approach can reveal the sunnier side of things, at least from the perspective of the randy man. The truth is that despite everything else Hong Kong is one of the easiest places to get laid in the world. Previously using online methods like looking for partners on Craigslist's casual encounters section worked for many. In a way, Hong Kong could be viewed as the source of that. There are lots of massage parlors in Hong Kong with women just waiting to jack customers off for the right price. Some of the parlors are small and dingy. Some are nice shops that often located inside of hotels.