



# Culturing the Mind: China as a Glocal Site of Epistemological Innovation

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Accepted: 1 May 2022 / Published online: 15 May 2022

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## Abstract

Modern scientific psychology came into being with a pursuit of universalistic knowledge. As an analytic category, culture was a latecomer and it presents a new set of questions for psychological research. This special issue addresses questions surrounding cultural psychology using interdisciplinary insights based in China and the Chinese diaspora. Contributions to this special issue are organized around the central idea that China is a glocal site, namely one that simultaneously displays both global and local characteristics. This is the case in the historical formation of Chinese psychology through its distinction from, as well as interaction with, Western psychology. Colonialism, another source of glocality, has left an enduring impact on China's nationhood as well as on how Chinese individuals maintain their mental health. Meanwhile, colonialism also gives rise to the question of how scholars should address Chinese psychological phenomena without making orientalist assumptions. Glocal China as a diverse phenomenon could be conceptualized in terms of a spectrum, in which both creative inter-cultural belonging and racist exclusion are to be found. The diversity of glocal China further requires deconstructive reflection on how the unitary concept of China/Chinese might be misleading. To move forward, Chinese cultural psychology could use existing interdisciplinary resources to further explore how culture and power relations intertwine.

**Keywords** China · Culture · Diaspora · Epistemology · Psychology · Theory

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This is the editorial introduction to the special issue “Contemporary Innovations in Theory: Contributions from China and the Chinese Diaspora”, Guest edited by Zhipeng Gao.

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## Universalism in Psychological Research

Modern scientific psychology came into being with a pursuit of universal knowledge (Danziger, 2006, 2009; Valsiner, 2017). According to the ideal of universalism, psychologists should isolate the mind from its sociocultural context in order to produce generalizable knowledge. This line of thinking is most vividly captured in early historian Boring's (1961) popular account of the concept of the "personal equation". In the nineteenth century, it was discovered that various astronomical observers making simultaneous recordings produced different results. Subsequently, the notion of a "personal equation" was proposed to identify individual variations in the measurement of celestial transit time. The study of the personal equation not only aided astronomy but also heralded the new discipline of psychology, according to Boring. Although Boring's is a flawed account, it continues to circulate in textbooks as one of the origins of modern psychology (Schaffer, 1988).

In Kuhn's (1962) words, the study of the personal equation effectively functions as an "exemplar" in the development of psychological science. This exemplar defines a problem – individual variation in the measurement of celestial movement – and then offers a solution by means of quantifying techniques and apparatuses. By demonstrating this problem solving, the study of the personal equation provides a natural-scientific model for subsequent psychological research. This model exemplifies the ontological assumption that the human mind can be positioned as a natural entity, one whose function is measurable against a disenchanting physical world. Nowhere is culture to be found in this picture.

While the Kuhnian perspective helps explain the role of the personal equation in the development of psychology as a natural science, I suggest that the same story is open to a liberal philosophical interpretation that complicates the status of psychology. When astronomical observers gaze into the universe in attempts to establish intelligible celestial patterns, their practices epitomize Protagoras's claim that "of all things the measure is man", which is open to multiple interpretations. It is realized that in the process of fathoming the universe, the knowing subject does not arrive at entirely reliable measurements. The split-second discrepancy between the physical world and its mental representation revealed the fallibility of the subject, who was now forced to take an introspective turn. Seen in this light, psychological science partly originated from a fundamental self-doubt. The mind requires scholarly attention not only as an object to be investigated, but also as something that dubiously constitutes the knowing subject. This gives psychology, in Valsiner's (2017) words, a liminal status between natural and social sciences.

## Culturing the Mind

To understand the disciplinary identity of psychology, it is helpful to examine the naturalistic ontology of the personal equation exemplar, in which a *natural* subject attempts to make sense of the physical world. But what if the subject is *cultured*? And what if the subject finds himself or herself immersed in a cultural world? Culture as an analytic category enables us to approach psychological research from new angles.

Concerning the ontological status of the mind, the category of culture provokes reconceptualizations of human diversity, agency, meaning-making, and normativity (Valsiner, 2014). Over decades, progress made along the cultural line of inquiry has unsettled the universalistic epistemology previously dominating the discipline of psychology. It is now a common practice to use the label “Western psychology” and to acknowledge the “WEIRD” bias in psychological research (Henrich et al., 2010). Mainstream psychology has now become, to borrow from Chakrabarty (2008), “provincialized” to a certain degree.

Meanwhile, to embrace culture as an analytic category also brings with it challenges (Valsiner, 2009). What is culture? How does culture reproduce itself while ever evolving into something new? What are culture’s relations with geography, nation, and race? How do we incorporate the analysis of social structure and power relations within a cultural framework? This special issue explores the cultured mind in the cultural world drawing on inspirations from “psychological humanities” (Teo, 2017, 2020), which call for the incorporation of interdisciplinary insights to inform psychological research. This special issue thus includes contributions from psychologists who are well-versed in interdisciplinary perspectives as well as from scholars from several other disciplines including history, sociology, anthropology, communication, and public health. Thanks to the contributors’ diverse expertise, the special issue investigates meaning-making activities performed at various locations of the cultural world, whether in debating the roles of the heart and brain in medical circles, overcoming addiction in a therapeutic community, making sense of village life during the communist movement, maintaining *guanxi* and trust in the workplace, making residential choices, building a sense of home in the diaspora, simultaneously addressing cultural and sexual identities, adhering to public health mandates during the Covid-19 pandemic, or carrying out racial profiling in a time of international conflict.

## China as a Glocal Site

This special issue is comprised of two sections. The first section is concerned with the central Chinese cultural regions, whereas the second section is set in the Chinese diaspora. While there are self-evident reasons behind this division (Minas, 2021), we should also recognize the many ways in which the central regions and the diaspora are connected. In this regard, I use the concept of “glocality” to elucidate the entanglement of the two (Carr, 2006; Meyrowitz, 2005). A combination of the terms “global” and “local”, glocality indicates the inseparable co-existence of the two in cultural and social lives in the wake of globalization.

China, to begin with, refers to a geographical locale in which psychological phenomena display distinctive cultural and social characteristics, such as the Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist traditions, traditional Chinese medicine, and the socialist movement (Gao, 2020; Hwang, 2011; Zhang, 2012). Thus, studying China permits us to explore one mentality among the many potentials of the universal mind (Shweder, 2020). For this reason, the Chinese cultural regions (mainland China, Hong Kong,

Taiwan, etc.) have been the prize specimens for the development of cultural psychology and indigenous psychology (Bedford & Hwang, 2003; Sundararajan et al., 2020).

China as a local site requires a particular situated epistemology. This epistemology finds clear expression in Chengyang Jiang's (2021) article titled "*Peasants' Fatalistic Thinking in Chinese Communism: an Analysis of a Rural Family's Oral History*". Jiang localizes his study in a peasant family in a small village of Shandong province. Under the impact of China's communist movement, this family experienced many tumultuous life transformations: war, confiscation of property, loss of educational opportunities, labor reform, and death. Against this background, Jiang's oral history research is concerned with how four siblings attempt to make sense of their seemingly incomprehensible circumstances. While each sibling approaches their family history through distinctive memories and narratives, all actively engage with fatalistic thinking, a belief system that the Chinese community party sought to replace with class analysis. Jiang's study was localized partly through his choice of the research site and partly through taking the first-person perspective of the oral history informants. Most importantly, the peasant family's heavy reliance on fatalistic thinking resulted from their severely limited, locally-based awareness of their circumstances. They made little connection between village life and the communist movement, even though in reality the latter was reshaping the whole country and world order.

China is further global in the sense that, over the past two centuries, it has been an integral component of the global circulation of people, goods and ideas. On the one hand, China went through industrialization, socialist revolution and capitalism under Western influences. The very rise of the psy disciplines, which loom large in contemporary China, would not have been possible without input from the West (Gao, 2013, 2019; Huang, 2015; Zhang, 2020). On the other hand, since World War II, China began to play a more active role in global affairs as a major political and economic power. Currently, China is one of the main suppliers of international migrants, leading to the proliferation of the Chinese diaspora in many countries (Ma & Cartier, 2003; Shen, 2010; Tan, 2013).

As Hermans & Kempen (1998) have discussed, the process of globalization has led to the phenomenon of "moving cultures". Cultures are moving beyond the traditional geographical, national and ethnic boundaries, leading to more complex and fluid cultural systems in which hybrid identities are created. As part of the moving cultures phenomenon, the sprawling Chinese diaspora enables us to investigate the intellectual and political implications of glocality. The Chinese diaspora displays the characteristics of double marginality: its members are not part of the mainstream of the host society, even as they are displaced from their home country. This double marginality does not always lead to vulnerability; it can also be a source of creativity for immigrants and scholars alike (Bar On, 1993; Bhopal & Deuchar, 2016).

## Chinese Psychology as a Glocal Field

The concept of glocality indicates that China is often global and local at once. This is clearly reflected in the formation of the field of Chinese psychology. On the one hand, Chinese psychology found itself a niche in global psychology because of its

indigenous characteristics. On the other, in light of Bakhtin's (1990) discussion of the role of the boundary in identity formation, it was through encountering Western psychology that Chinese psychology began to acquire a sense of self-consciousness. In other words, glocality means the mutual constitution of the global and the local.

The very emergence of cultural psychology out of the previous universalist tradition required the presence of cultural alterity (Gergen & Gergen, 1997). The rise of cultural psychology and cross-cultural psychology heavily relied on comparative thinking, such as reflected in the individualism-collectivism contrast (Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Triandis, 2001). In a similar vein, in this special issue, Louise Sundararajan and Kuang-Hui Yeh (2021) introduce the theory of strong ties versus weak ties reasoning. In this theory, strong ties refer to networking with closely related others such as family and friends, while weak ties refer to networking with un-related others, such as acquaintances and strangers. Although this theory had initially been proposed by sociologist Granovetter (1973), Sundararajan & Yeh (2021) make illuminating interpretations from a psychological perspective that focuses on cultural differences in reasoning about the world. Their theoretical reconstruction demonstrates how Chinese psychology enables comparative thinking about localized psychological phenomenon in a global context.

Meanwhile, as shown in Emily Baum's (2021) study in this issue, the cultural alterity of Chinese psychology was constituted through the impact of Western psychology. Baum examines the debates among Chinese medical professionals in the 1920s regarding the respective roles of the heart and brain in mental functions. According to Baum, this debate was spurred by "the increasingly global circulation of psychiatric ideas" enabled by the translation and dissemination of Western neuropsychiatric texts, the arrival of American and German physicians in China, and the establishment of neurological clinics and psychopathic hospitals in China. The Western biomedical centralization of the role of the brain not only clashed with the Chinese view of the heart as the primary mental organ, but also raised questions about the compatibility of the two theoretical systems. In an impressive move, Chinese medical professionals reconciled the theoretical conflict by merging the two organs into one holistic mind-body system. Here, we see a clear instance in which the global and the local meet.

## Addressing Colonialism

The mutual constitution of the global and the local has not merely been observed in scholarly work at the conceptual level as discussed in the above section. It also has had major political repercussions. Many of the encounters between China and the West have taken place as part of colonialism, which fundamentally transformed Chinese society. Sandra Hyde's (2022) article most adeptly addresses the legacy of Western colonialism in China. Hyde positions her ethnographic research in a Chinese therapeutic community within the history of China-West encounters over the past two centuries. Against this backdrop, she unpacks the multiple meanings held by "harm" and "harm reduction", first discussing how the Qing government officials initially brought up the notion of harm in their protests against the British opium trade. Subsequent events – the two opium wars and the collapse of the Qing Dynasty – appeared to

validate the notion of harm and accord addressing it the same significance as national survival. In any case, in light of these historical events, the modern Chinese regime – in both its socialist and post-socialist forms – has eagerly reproduced the notion of harm in various campaigns against drug use. Thus, harm reduction in contemporary China is freighted with not only therapeutic, but also political, legal, and moral significance. The therapeutic community performs translation among these spheres as well as between the Chinese and the Western contexts. China’s latest psycho-boom has been fueled by the adaptation of Western therapeutic knowledge according to the Chinese context.

Another challenge posed by colonialism is orientalism, a style of thinking that, by constructing the East as a backward region, accords the West authority over it (Said, 1978). Orientalism might penetrate scholarly disciplines, such as early anthropology, which facilitated the colonial agenda (Lewis, 1973). As pointed out by postcolonial scholars, the very ideal of universalism in knowledge production serves colonialist thinking: it privileges the Western mode of thinking by erasing its local origin, while viewing other knowledge systems as pre-scientific, if not outright problematic (Bell, 2008; Seth, 2009). The associated objectivist-positivist perspective effectively treats culture as a source of bias that undermines the ideal of universalism. Olwen Bedford’s (2021) study of *guanxi* and trust in the workplace deftly counters this colonialist epistemology. In her article, Bedford is critical of scholars’ over-reliance on Western notions of interpersonal trust in studies of China. According to her, although Western theories successfully identify certain universal elements of trust, they give too much emphasis to the values of individualistic culture. In order to fully appreciate the Chinese phenomenon in its own right, Bedford proposes an ontological shift from an entity perspective to a process-relational perspective. In alignment with the Chinese metaphysical process orientation, Bedford develops a model that dynamically situates *guanxi* and trust in Chinese indigenous culture.

## Glocal China as a Spectrum

We now turn to the second section of this special issue on the Chinese diaspora. Glocality implies that China is a geographically fluid concept, not necessarily fixed in a single locale. This is manifest in Liu and Gallois’s (2021) study of how older Chinese immigrants build a sense of home in Australia. Liu and Gallois’s analysis disrupts a geographically based notion of culture and belonging. According to Liu and Gallois, home is not merely a physical space that provides shelter and protection, but also a social space whose inhabitants develop social relations, identities and sense of belonging. Thus, in their words, “home is where the heart is”. This sociocultural definition of home is particularly helpful in elucidating the bi-cultural experiences of immigrants: although a person cannot simultaneously inhabit two physical locations, it is possible to simultaneously inhabit two cultural spaces. According to Liu and Gallois, Chinese immigrants build their homes through practices such as using culturally meaningful objects in decorating their houses, growing culturally reminiscent plants, and maintaining intergenerational relations and social networks. In so doing, Chinese immigrants effectively extend the old cultural identity represented by “where you’re

from” into the new place, which is “where you are at”. The capacity of Chinese immigrants to inhabit in-between cultures rejects the conceptualization of culture as a unitary, exclusive phenomenon. Further, the research findings highlight that culture is not simply a system of symbolic representation. The reproduction and growth of culture require its members to carry out concrete practices by drawing on existing material and social resources.

Transnational migration, however, does not always lead to successful integration such as captured in Liu and Gallois’s article. Structural barriers, most notably racism, continue to render migration a daunting journey. Gao (2021a) addresses the latter scenario by focusing on the latest wave of Sinophobia during the Covid pandemic. According to Gao, this wave of Sinophobia involves a “triple conflation”, intermingling the health, racial, and political/national statuses of Chinese people. This triple conflation resulted partly from containment measures that use Chinese individuals’ racial and national statuses as identity markers. Meanwhile, given the concurrent international political tensions surrounding China, the pandemic has come to be used as a resource for making political claims unfavourable to China. These hybrid claims hold the potential to provoke mass sentiments through Covid-based metaphors and imaginaries that depict Chinese as suspicious bio-political subjects.

These two studies form stark contrast with one another. In Liu and Gallois’s (2021) study, Chinese immigrants take the initiative to bridge cultural distance and cultivate a sense of home. In Gao’s (2021a) study, however, Chinese immigrants become the butt of discrimination, exclusion, and even physical assaults due to historically-rooted racial and international tensions. Here, the Chinese identity is not claimed by the subjects themselves, so much as it is forcefully imposed by hostile others. Such a contrast need not require reconciliation. Both research findings can be valid; they simply reveal different dimensions of migrant life. In other words, the two studies complement one another to present the diversity of Chinese immigrants’ situations, another prominent feature of glocality.

## Deconstructing China/Chineseness

The issue of diversity has the potential to rupture the very concept of China/Chineseness. Earlier, Chun (1996) has suggested that the use of Chineseness as a distinctive, unitary concept fails to do justice to the ethnic, regional and political heterogeneity of the population being designated. The last two articles of this special issue continue this line of thinking that deconstructs essentialist definition of China/Chineseness (Bischoping, 2022).

According to Liangni Sally Liu and colleagues (Liu et al., 2022), the broad concept of China/Chinese belies the vast diversity of Chinese immigrants in New Zealand. Liu and colleagues make this argument by interlinking two phenomena, those of sub-ethnicity and of the ethnoburb. Sub-ethnicity refers to finer boundaries drawn within the general ethnic group by nationality, language, region of origin, class, or other distinctions, while an ethnoburb is comprised of suburban residential areas and business districts densely populated by a particular ethnic group. Methodologically, Liu and colleagues apply innovative data techniques to map the patterns in



which various groups of Chinese immigrants concentrate in Albany, New Zealand. The findings shed light on how Chinese immigrant of different subethnicities make residential choices in light of the local infrastructure development, public services, and accessibility to commerce. In so doing, Liu and colleagues delineate how waves of Chinese immigrants carve out different migrant trajectories and settle in different neighborhoods.

A similar concern with treating China/Chineseness as a homogenous concept is pronounced in Wen Liu's (2021) article, which situates its discussion within queer psychology. According to Liu (2021), although queer psychology was conceived of as a progressive paradigm that critically challenges hegemonic heterosexuality, it unfortunately reproduces certain stereotypes when it is Chinese queers who are its objects of study. Thus, Liu cautions against the use of China/Chinese as a "boundless" concept for its risk of three mistakes. First, the "Chinese" adjective has been applied to designate populations from a wide range of geographical locations, encompassing not only mainland China, but also Hong Kong, Taiwan, parts of Singapore and Malaysia, as well as diasporic communities in Western countries. The "Chinese" category derived its distinctive, unitary identity because China was treated as the opposite of the West. However, this category does a dismal job of reflecting the vast cultural, ethnic and political differences among different regions. Second, the dominant focus on culture as the basis of "Chinese identity" might lead to relative neglect of structural inequalities. For example, racism and language barriers have not received enough scholarly recognition in explanations of Chinese immigrants' reluctance to disclose their sexuality. Third, scholars frequently theorize Chinese culture as a burden to queer sexuality. This culture-centric perspective tends to reduce Chinese queer experiences to a cultural struggle between Western liberal ideals and a backward, repressive Chinese culture.

## Moving Forward with Culture

The rise of cultural psychology does not mean the dissolution of the ideal of universalism. Instead, psychological research appears to be caught in a persistent tension between the universal and the particular (Danziger, 2009; Valsiner, 2014). It is helpful to join this conversation by conceptualizing China as a glocal site of epistemological innovation. China is a glocal site in multiple ways: the mutual constitution of China and the West through cultural alterity, the colonial encounters that transformed China's nationhood, the lingering orientalist assumptions, the moving of Chinese culture beyond geographical/national boundary, the cultivation of bi-cultural belonging, and rising racist tensions amid international conflicts.

When examining the glocalization of Chinese psychology, authors of the special issue are forward-looking. For example, Louise Sundararajan and Kuang-Hui Yeh (2021) elaborate the theory of strong-ties and weak-tie rationalities to make sense of the pressing public health concern during the Covid pandemic. Emily Baum's (2021) research, while situated in the 1920s China, touches on the latest neurological findings about the gut-brain axis. Liangni Sally Liu and colleagues (Liu et al., 2022)



capture the new trend of diversification among immigrants that is likely to increase in the near future.

Looking forward also means critically assessing challenges to globalization. This is most pronounced in Zhipeng Gao's (2021a) study of Sinophobia within the context of international tensions surrounding China. Over the past century, Western perceptions of China and Chinese have gone through drastic changes. A cursory review of Western-produced films and documentaries provides a glimpse into the changing sentiments. Back in the 1970s, Roman Polanski used "Chinatown" as the title of his famous film to symbolically designate a lawless, treacherous zone. In recent years, however, in light of China's economic expansion and authoritarian turn, Western film industry started producing works such as *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Are Our Kids Tough Enough: Chinese School*, and *American Factory*, reflecting concerns about economic and political competition with China. Meanwhile, China has been experiencing waves of antipathy toward the Western world.

The latest chapter of China's glocalization requires us to revisit the issue of power, which has always accompanied culture in various forms: in the domination of nature over culture, in the construction of the cultural other, in the anti-colonial appreciation of culture, in the capitalization on cultural competency, and in the politicization of cultural value and identity. Wen Liu (2021) makes compelling warnings about the danger of narrowly focusing on culture while ignoring structural problems. Liu and colleagues (Liu et al., 2022) suggest that Chinese immigrants' class status plays a greater role than cultural/ethnic identity in shaping their residential choices. Given that the entwining of culture and power can be traced to the very origins of cultural psychology and indigenous psychology, it perhaps still deserves careful attention as we move cultural psychology forward in a tumultuous time (Gao, 2021b).

Finally, the special issue provides a range of intellectual resources for us to move forward with culture. Thanks to their interdisciplinary background, the contributors situate the glocalization of Chinese cultural psychology within historical, social and political contexts. The interdisciplinary panel not only expands the empirical ground but also raises new questions. For example, how may we use history as a "foreign country" to overcome the shortcomings of a familiar worldview (Chiang, 2022)? How might we use sociology to conceptualize culture to be fluid and moving in tandem with other social forces (Bischoping, 2022)? How can we use anthropology to unpack the multiple meanings of psychopathology (Hyde, 2022)? The special issue also showcases a spectrum of methods, such as the development of questionnaire, geographical mapping and visualization, oral history, and ethnography. These methods tap into various mechanisms in the reproduction and evolution of culture: remembrance, story-telling, identity work, therapeutic practices, emotional bonds, arrangements of domestic space, and material culture. If we follow Giddens' (1991) discussion of the role of academic knowledge in reflexively shaping the world, then among all these mechanisms, scholarship is perhaps the strangest contributor to the life of culture. It is perhaps a good thing to move forward with this reflexive attitude, as we are working within a discipline that is deeply rooted in self-examination.

**Acknowledgements** I appreciate Katherine Bischoping's helpful suggestions.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** This study did not receive funding and does not involve any conflict of interest.

**Data sharing** Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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