

## **Overcoming Adversity, Embracing Change: Addressing Challenges in Language and Culture in Asia**

HAJAR ABDUL RAHIM

\*NURUL FARHANA LOW

English Language Studies, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia,  
Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

\*Corresponding author: [nflow@usm.my](mailto:nflow@usm.my)

**Published online:** 8 December 2023

**To cite this article:** Hajar Abdul Rahim and Nurul Farhana Low. 2023. Overcoming adversity, embracing change: Addressing challenges in language and culture in Asia. *KEMANUSIAAN the Asian Journal of Humanities* 30(Supp. 1): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.21315/kajh2023.30.s1.1>

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.21315/kajh2023.30.s1.1>

**Abstract.** The notion of adversity is inherently negative, yet it can be a positive force for change. Inspired by this and in relation to the recent pandemic which saw the lives of the global community disrupted and challenged, the 6th International Conference on Linguistics, Literature and Culture (ICLLIC 2022) chose “Overcoming Adversity, Embracing Change” as the main conference theme. This article is an overview of selected articles from the conference that address issues in language and culture in the Asian context, emerging from the pandemic and contemporary social factors such as globalisation, diaspora and modernity. They include examination of innovations, adaptations and new practices in language, literature and culture that demonstrates Asian linguistic and literary dynamism and resilience in embracing change in the face of adversity.

**Keywords and phrases:** Asian language and culture, linguistics, literary theory, adversity and change

### **Introduction**

Adversity by definition is a negative state or situation, associated with calamity and hardship. Yet quotes on adversity such as “adversity leads us to think properly of our state and so is most beneficial to us” (Johnson n.d.) and the quote by the famous Roman poet, Horace (65 BC–8 BC), “prosperity conceals genius, adversity reveals it”, bring to light how something negative can be a force of positivity and human resilience in the face of life difficult challenges. The notion of adversity, both its commonly understood meaning and its link to the spirit of human positivity is central to the main theme of the 6th International Conference on Linguistics, Literature and Culture (ICLLIC 2022), held in December 2022 at Universiti

Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia. In keeping with the ICLLIC tradition of focusing on themes related to contemporary issues in language and culture in the Asian context, the 6th ICLLIC theme was inspired by the most contemporary global adversity, that is the COVID-19 pandemic and also very importantly, by the issue of human resilience in responding, addressing and overcoming the global level adversity. The theme of the conference “Overcoming Adversity, Embracing Change: Addressing Challenges in Language and Culture in Asia” therefore essentially sought to stimulate discussions on issues emerging from the pandemic which are related to the Asian diverse linguistic and cultural community and humanity’s response to the issues. While the main theme is ostensibly the pandemic, many studies that were discussed also addressed adversity brought about by other contemporary social factors such as modernity, diaspora and globalisation.

This article is an overview of seven articles that were selected from an array of papers presented at the ICLLIC 2022. Consistent with the theme of “Overcoming Adversity, Embracing Change”, therefore, the articles in this special issue cover matters in language, literature and culture in the Asian context beyond the issues of adversity. They also importantly, discuss how the challenges in language and culture are met and addressed in the fast-paced reality that we live in, demonstrating humanity’s resilience in the face of difficult challenges. People have to interact appropriately with the onslaught of new cultures and knowledge that are different from their own and have to continuously adapt and re-adapt to the incessant changes that take place. Individuals and communities who manage adversity in a way that can be characterised as growth and improvement are resilient (Manning and Bouchard 2020).

### **Overcoming Adversity and Embracing Change**

The year 2020 witnessed the COVID-19 pandemic that brought the world to its knees as countries across the globe grappled with the unprecedented challenges in all spheres of everyday life. The chain of tragedies that took place from March 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) announced COVID-19 as a pandemic, underlined the inevitability of adversity that humans constantly have to face. Besides the tragic loss of millions of lives in countries around the world, the pandemic brought about socio-economic difficulties for communities from every corner of the globe and caused enormous disruptions to the lives of billions. The chaos brought to the fore weaknesses in the preparedness of political machineries around the world in facing severe medical emergencies such as the one caused by the pandemic (WHO 2021). Health scares, medical supply shortages, movement restrictions, social distancing, financial hardship, educational difficulties among

others, posed considerable challenges to the mental and physical well-being of countless individuals.

The pandemic also forced communities and individuals from every corner of the globe to embrace abrupt changes for which many were ill-prepared. Most of the everyday activities that were taken for granted became the unusual as directives, to stay at home, work from home, engage through online meetings and digital classrooms quickly became the norm. Adapting to the changes was Hobson's choice and in many situations, despite the lack of basic necessities such as space and facilities like computers and access to the internet. Yet, amid such harsh realities, humanity's resilience triumphed as the global community came together with one goal and one mind, to stop the threat of the virus. This goal became the impetus for the acceleration in developing vaccines by various research and medical organisations, for flexibility in the workplace culture and most evidently in the drastic rise in the use of digital methods of communication for commercial solutions and non-commercial purposes such as work and education. The shifts in workplace culture that organisations had to adopt and changes in lifestyle that individuals from every social sphere had to embrace during the pandemic were lessons for survival and a wake-up call for the global community to the fragility of life.

The period during which the world was faced with the pandemic, from the time the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a global threat in early 2020 by WHO, until it was declared endemic in 2022 is a tragic, yet significant capsule of time in modern history. The dramatic socio-economic, political and cultural realities that humanity faced during that period captured the curiosity of practitioners, researchers and scholars not only with regard to the causes and ways of beating the disease but also with the management and communication of information on the disease, the environment and environmental issues related to COVID-19, inadequacies of socio-economic policies, problems of social and political polarisation, challenges in teaching and learning, and cultural and language adaptations. Among the pandemic related studies that took precedence include research into the positive effects of the challenging circumstances and human resilience in facing the global level adversity. Findings from such studies are significant in helping the global community to predict and mitigate future global adversities. Wisdom is necessary in adverse situations. Overcoming challenges that emerge from adversity call for serious thought, creativity and positivity. It is in the spirit of positivity that many academic conferences and meetings in various fields of inquiry since the beginning of the pandemic focused their themes, not only around the issue of addressing and overcoming the global adversity but also to emphasise the significance of learning from it and embracing change.

The changes in lifestyle and communication and paradigmatic shifts in work and educational methods, particularly those that advocate a move from conventional physical face-to-face contexts to more flexible, digital and hybridised ones, have received much research interest in many areas of the world including Asia, where many countries were hard hit by the pandemic. Given its expansive geographical area, with diverse languages, beliefs, ways of life and cultures, Asia provides a rich context for research related to adversities of the pandemic as well as those that have emerged due to other forms of modern-day challenges, particularly in relation to adaptations and changes to language and culture. One of the imminent concerns of the impact of adversities such as the pandemic is the loss of traditional identities, roles and relationships. It is therefore fitting that we turn to culture, language and literature to investigate how identities, values and other related discourses are defined, negotiated, or articulated in the face of adversity. This is particularly important in the context of Asia where global level adversities may be more challenging given the values, understandings and beliefs held by eastern cultures.

### **Addressing Challenges in Language and Culture in Asia**

The issues addressed by the authors of the seven articles in the current special issue relate to Asian languages, literatures and cultures. The first three articles involve the examination of Asian vernaculars, with two of them focusing on how local vernaculars are affected by digital technologies and social media. The changes that these languages are experiencing reflect the communicative realities of the communities who are using them and the ongoing local-global linguistic negotiations. Some argue that these are evidence of the domination of global languages at the expense of the marginalisation of local languages. On the other hand, others insist that these adaptations are natural and embraced by minority languages as strategy for survival.

The next four articles in this collection address various issues related to literature and culture in Asia. The authors applied various methods in how they approach the notion of adversity, ranging from the literal sense (“Adverse fortune, condition, or circumstance; A state opposed to well-being or prosperity; Misfortune, distress, difficulty, hardship” as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*) to the metaphorical, in which fictional characters face emotional distress or challenges to personal growth and identity development. The various forms of adversity in the subsequent four articles pose challenges for the subject of each article, of whom each displays a different degree of resilience in accepting change and overcoming adversities. The articles are therefore arranged to demonstrate the range of adversities beginning with those experienced by real, live Asian “characters” in a

time of the COVID-19 pandemic, to fictional characters of Asian descent as they overcome personal challenges and tragedies to prevail over adversity.

The next article in this collection, titled “Digital Technologies, Social Media, Global and Local Languages in Southeast Asia” is an interesting and timely assessment of the issues surrounding digital technologies, including social media in multilingual societies, particularly in the Asian context. The author argues that digital technologies are not in themselves language-specific and therefore not biased towards any particular language. In relation to this, the discussion centres around the issue of mixing local vernacular and global languages in communication, arguing that this trend does not signal language shift but rather a language maintenance issue. According to the author, hybrid discursal practices in social media platforms should perhaps be viewed as a minority language maintenance and survival strategy.

The issue of language in the social media is continued in the following article titled “The Use and Features of Malaysian English Lexemes as Social Media Hashtags”. Motivated by research in social media which suggests that hashtags (#) have a higher means of attraction compared to emojis, slangs and dialects, the article discusses how features of new English varieties, such as Malaysian English (ME), are used as social media hashtags. The findings essentially confirm that hashtags are actively used by Malaysians in social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, with hashtags such as “on”, “best”, “boss” and “roger” with the highest number of posts in both Instagram and Facebook. The study also found the Malaysian English particle *-lah* used as hashtag which highlights users’ creativity in meaning-making processes in keeping with digital technological changes.

The next article in this special issue titled “A Corpus-Based Cognitive Linguistic Analysis of Taste Words: The Case of English *Bitter* and Chinese *Ku*” is an interesting examination of the semantics of the words based on an examination of their similarities and differences as well as the cognitive mechanisms that motivate their meaning extension. The findings of the study bring to light the significance of cultural schema not only in analysing the meanings of a word in one language but also in examining cross-culture communication.

The fifth article titled “Belletristic to the Rescue: Transforming Crisis into Creativity in the Himalayan Foothills” elegantly narrates the experience of the literature department of Shoolini University, India at embracing changes to the “landscape of education, curriculum and pedagogy” brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors recounted the existential crisis faced by the faculty as they tried to justify the teaching of literature in the face of the “real”

problems facing mankind at that point in time. To address this, drastic changes in pedagogical approach that embraced technology as a bridge to bring “the basics” of literary texts were implemented through the organisation of webinars, symposia and online play readings which provided platforms for some form of human contact to appease the need for social and intellectual interaction “during a period of desperation and diminished hope”. They also successfully compiled an anthology of COVID-19 themed narrations to “foster a sense of shared grief and sorrow”, among other endeavours. The response to their call for stories was overwhelming and the final selection of stories was subsequently published via Kindle and were therefore available to a global audience. This article thus teaches valuable lessons in embracing change to overcome adversity, during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

The next article, titled “Overcoming Adversity and Challenging Ethnocentric Perceptions: An Ethnographic Case Study of Traditional Malay Boat Making in Terengganu” relates adversity to the extinction of a traditional local Malay craft, namely boat making. The adversity in this case goes deeper than an accumulation of “adverse fortunes, conditions or circumstance” inflicted by the pandemic, as it addresses a more fundamental problem faced by the craft: the unwitting decimation of Malay culture and identity borne by the philosophical basis of Malay artisans, (ironically) by those seeking to document and preserve its heritage. Through a case study that documents the thoughts of (arguably) the last remaining Malay master boat maker in Kuala Terengganu, the authors discovered that factors such as ethnocentric perceptions, especially western-centric perception exacerbated existing challenges brought about by modernisation, globalisation and changing lifestyles that would subsequently lead to the marginalisation, loss or diminishing of traditional boat making practices. Ultimately, to overcome these challenges the authors suggest that future research and documentation should acknowledge the Malay worldview, belief systems and local knowledge or wisdom that form the basis of the traditional craft.

The seventh article takes the reader through the memoir of an Asian-American female protagonist who is eventually able to come to terms with grief and loss through a return to the food of her cultural Korean roots. In this article titled “The ‘Edible Identity’ in Michelle Zauner’s *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir*”, food serves as a cultural marker for Michelle Zauner in her journey of self-discovery and construction of self-identity following her grief at the loss of her mother. This analysis is premised upon Herman’s dialogical self-theory, which examines how the I-narrator in the memoir negotiates her multiple conflicting and dialogical positions thereby allowing an examination of “the dialogical relationship between Zauner’s cultural identity and her personal experiences with food” within the

context of the memoir. The narrator faces challenges from being a marginalised, mixed-race kid at school due to her unusual (exotic) appearance. This childhood experience has no doubt affected her psyche and forms the basis of the adversities that she faced. With the loss of her mother, adult Michelle faces a paradigm shift as the food from her Korean heritage plays a pivotal role in helping her to cope with the loss of her mother and subsequently re-discover her sense of identity. It is therefore a return to her cultural roots that plays an enabling role for Michelle Zauner to overcome adversity in this memoir.

The final article titled “Reimagining Chinese American Identity: Postcolonial Perspectives on Cultural Negotiation and Transformation in Laurence Yep’s *Dragonwings*” examines a Chinese-American child protagonist’s challenging of passive Chinese stereotypes and deeply ingrained adversities within the Asian American diaspora by “offering an active anti-Oriental perspective” that transcends imagined geographical boundaries. Leveraging on Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial theory of the Third Space, the authors argue that the concept of the liminal space characterised by cultural differences subverts “established signifiers rooted in an originary past” (the protagonist’s childhood) through the acknowledging of hybrid subjectivity and subsequent production of a complex figure of difference and identity. Within this third space, the child protagonist Moon Shadow “challenges and disentangles himself from the dominant rhetoric that portrays him as a threatening invader”; as an adult, seeking refuge in a tent with other survivors of an earthquake, Moon Shadow comes into his own as a cultural translator who helps bridge cultural negotiations between different racial communities caught up in the calamity of the adversity, which eventually leads to “harmonious coexistence between white Americans and Chinese individuals” – through embracing change.

## Conclusion

In addressing the main theme of overcoming adversity and embracing change, the articles in this collection do not only identify issues in language and culture arising from adversity but also demonstrate how difficult and challenging events can be opportunities to better understand others, for improvement of knowledge and for individual and communal growth.

As discussed earlier, some of the articles involve linguistic analyses of the features of languages used by Asian speakers amid major communicative transformations spurred on by digitisation and globalisation, and more recently by the readjustments that global communities had to make in facing challenges that emerged during the pandemic. These studies among others highlight adaptations and creative use of language by Asian speakers as they manage their communication. Other articles,

especially those which focus on literature and cultural issues take the liberty to revisit literary texts and cultural practices in the attempt to demonstrate Asian resilience in the face of challenges and threats to identity, tradition and life as they know it. Asian literary and cultural resilience as demonstrated through the examination of literary works and cultural practice are explored in this collection from textual and theoretical perspectives.

In sum, the articles that are included in this special issue bring to the fore contemporary issues in Asian languages, literature and culture that are of interest, not only to researchers who study Asian languages from a sociolinguistic perspective, but also to those who are keen on understanding Asian identity and culture, particularly changes and adaptations that take place in the face of adversity.

## References

- Manning, L.K. and Bouchard, L. 2020. Encounters with adversity: A framework for understanding resilience in later life. *Aging Mental Health* 24(7):1108–1115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2019.1594162>
- Johnson, S. n.d. Forbes quotes. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/quotes/8458/> (accessed 28 August 2023).
- Oxford English Dictionary*. 2023. Adversity. Retrieved from <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=adversity> (accessed 28 August 2023).
- WHO (World Health Organization). 2021. Lessons learned from COVID-19 pandemic: Virtual regional consultation with informal expert group. 19 October. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/sea-whe-6> (accessed 28 August 2023).