

# 'I don't Think This Can Be Done Overnight, Nor Can It Be Done in a Hurry': Multi-ideological Perspectives on Interculturality in Chinese Minzu Education



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**Abstract** This chapter examines how Chinese students at an institution of higher education focusing on Chinese minzu ('ethnic minorities'), express, construct and discuss diversity and encounters during a course dedicated to the multi-ideological notion of interculturality. Texts written by 37 students as answers to the question '*can we be good at interculturality?*' were analysed against a model of interculturality that relies on the identification of multiple ideologies, alternative perspectives and multilingual aspects of discourses on the notion. The results show that the students were able to identify some factors contributing to 'being good' at interculturality, including: increasing one's scientific knowledge of intercultural encounters; observing the central role of the Structure at local and global levels; adopting benevolent attitudes towards intercultural encounters (tolerance, respect, acceptance) and revising the multifaceted use of the concept of *culture*. The study shows some success in helping the students unthink and rethink the notion of interculturality. However, there was a lack of deep engagement with minzu and Chinese ideologies about diversity and interculturality. Critical considerations of 'Western' ideologies in the students' texts would also need to be further systematized. The chapter ends with recommendations as to how to improve these aspects of interculturality work in education.

**Keywords** Minzu education · Interculturality · Higher education · Ideologies · Critical discourses of culture

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## Introduction

In his ceiling painting entitled *Divine Wisdom Giving the Laws to the Kings and Legislators* (1827), which was made especially for the French State Council rooms at the Louvre, French artist Jean-Baptiste Mauzaisse (1784–1844) depicted the Prophet Moses, Louis XVIII and other kings, as well as ‘diverse’ legislators receiving the law from Divine Wisdom, Prudence, Equity and Clemency. Among the legislators, one can identify: the first king of Rome Romulus, the first president of the United States George Washington, and the lawgiver of Sparta Lycurgus. In the lower right corner of this ‘multicultural patchwork’ sits the only Asian figure of the painting: the Chinese philosopher Confucius. Although China was (still) popular in Europe at the time, figures like Confucius were rarely represented in European art, especially in such an important piece looking over the activities of the State Council. The lack of consideration for anything related to Chinese thought has been somewhat of a constant in Europe, even today.

The authors of this paper all specialize in what could be labelled generically as ‘diversity education’. While some of us position their work within *multicultural/intercultural education*, others categorise theirs as *minzu* (民族) *education*. But our interests are the same: our societies are diverse in terms of ‘culture’, ‘ethnicity’, ‘race’, ‘worldview’<sup>1</sup> (amongst others), and through our research and teaching we wish to develop a form of education that can help people deal with diversities. It is important to say here that there are both overlaps and differences between the labels of *intercultural*, *multicultural* and *minzu education*. What is more these are all slippery and polyvalent notions that deserve to be reinterpreted and discussed again and again (Abdallah-Preteceille, 2004; Dervin, 2016).

Minzu is probably the least well-known notion out of the three and, through, our collaborative work we wish to propose it as an addition and a potential counter-narrative to current discussions of ‘diversity education’, which tend to be Western-centric (R’boul, 2020). Loaned from the Japanese neologism ‘minzoku’ in the late nineteenth century, the Chinese word is composed of *min* (民) for ‘folk or common people’ and *zu* (族) for ‘consanguinity or lineage’ (Zhang, 1997). What the notion refers to is complex. For Zhao (2014), when we try to express the idea of minzu in English, ‘irrespective of which concept of minzu we employ or which standpoint we take, we are only exchanging one Western model for another, without ever finding a way of identifying and expressing our own Chinese uniqueness’. Epistemologically, methodologically, societally, individually and politically, the word can mean different things. In English, it is translated as ‘ethnic groups’, ‘minority groups’, ‘cultural groups’, or ‘nationalities’ (amongst others). In our work, we prefer to keep the Chinese term minzu since the English words tend to connote extra layers of (politico-economic) meanings that do not seem to fit the Chinese context. In general,

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<sup>1</sup> We use inverted commas at this stage for these English words and will discuss some of them later in the paper. The inverted commas indicate that we do not take these words for granted, nor do we consider them as synonyms to the words we use in Chinese, Finnish and/or Swedish, French, German (the languages of our contexts).

minzu refers to the plurality of the Chinese or the 56 officially recognized nationalities, which were officialized from the 1950s to the 1990s. The largest minzu group is the Han which represents about 94% of the Chinese population, while the rest comprises the other 55 minzu groups such as Hui, Mongols, Tibetans, Uyghur. Specific policies relate to minzu issues (for example, the 2009 *Chinese Ethnic Policies on Developing All Ethnic Groups*) and aim to strengthen the idea of 多元一体 (*duoyuan yiti*, diversity in unity). In education, specific policies and practices also aim to contribute to diversity in unity. The context of our study, Minzu University of China (MUC, Beijing), is meant to support minzu diversity by offering higher education access as well as research and training on issues of minzu culture, language and history (amongst others). In this institution, about 60% of the students come from different minzus beyond the Han. Preferential policies (优惠政策, *youhui zhengce*) represent important steps in ensuring educational access for all Chinese minzus.

In Yuan et al. (2020) we suggested exploring various aspects of minzu education to enrich the way we see diversity and interculturality in other parts of the world. The influence of European and American research and education policies on diversity education is immense and somewhat damaging to the world. Although the core of diversity education is diversity itself, the way it is discussed and 'done' in different parts of the world is rarely diverse and/or intercultural in itself. Often, publications in English about minzu education tend to present negative evaluations (and judgments) about the situation of diversity in China. We argue that this is a bias that deserves to be revised. As such, Western diversity ideologies such as intercultural and multicultural education have not always been very successful. For instance, Coulby (2019) argues that intercultural education has failed in many parts of the Western world.

In the past, minzu education, through the figure of the former Institute of National Minorities (MUC today), was often discussed by visitors to China. The Institute was often included in foreign officials' tour of China. For instance, in his diary about his China trip with a small delegation of French intellectuals in 1974, French semiotician Roland Barthes, had the opportunity to visit MUC. He wrote (2012, 161):

Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> April 1974 Institute of National Minorities (...)

Uighur. The women, rather gypsy-like, have big combs on their Chinese-style plaits. (...)

The library

Newspapers in loads of different languages and characters (...)

Grouped questions: (...) 2) Since Confucius was Han, what are the implications for minorities? 3) Non-written literatures? 4) Current tentative progress: details?

Former Canadian premier Pierre Trudeau (1919–2000) is even said to have been impressed by his visit to the institution, which seems to have influenced him in proposing multiculturalism as an official government policy in Canada in 1971 (Qian, 2013, 54).

In this chapter, using interculturality as a central and multi-ideological notion for dealing with diversity in education, we examine a group of students' discourses on the notion within the context of minzu higher education. In a course on minzu and interculturality in education, the students were asked to reflect critically and reflexively on the meaning of 'being good at interculturality'. Based on essays that

they have written about this issue our chapter provides some answers to the following questions:

- How do the students construct their answers to the issue of ‘being good at interculturality’?
- What words do they use in English to formulate their answers? What ideologies seem to be contained in their arguments?
- Because our study is taking place within the specific context of minzu higher education, how much of this specific context of diversity education seems to influence the students in the way they see the issue of ‘being good at interculturality’?

## Interculturality as a Complex Figure in a Carpet

“I wanted my own words. But the ones I use have been dragged through I don’t know how many consciences”.

Sartre (1948: 49)

In Henry James’s, 1896 novella called *The Figure in the Carpet*, the narrator prides himself in having discovered the true meaning of an author’s book in a review that he had just published. However, he overhears the author commenting negatively on his review at a party, arguing that nobody has been able to identify the idea present in all his novels, which he compares to the complex woven figure in a Persian carpet. In the rest of the novella, in vain, the narrator tries to find this secret. To us, interculturality is like the writer’s key idea that the novella’s narrator wishes to identify. When we think we have put our finger on it, its meaning and connotation disappear in front of our eyes. Interculturality is like a complex figure in a carpet, a multi-dimensional space of encounters between different policies, practices, philosophies and ideologies. However, it is rarely dealt with in such complex ways.

Since we use the notion in our work with minzu students as a central term to discuss issues of diversity within the Chinese context and beyond, what follows serves as a way of problematizing it. It is important to reiterate first that the notion is kaleidoscopic and polyvalent. It means either too much or too little. However, we are somewhat seduced by the complexity of the notion, which is indicated by both its prefix *inter-* and suffix *-ality*, hinting at (never-ending) processes, relations, co-constructions. Used in different socio-political contexts, a smörgåsbord of perspectives on interculturality is available around the world. Sometimes it is even confused and mixed with other terms such as *multicultural*, *transcultural* and even *global* (as in *global competence*), meaning the same or something different, and having the same or different politico-economic connotations. We note, however, that some specific Western-centric ideologies seem to dominate the way the world thinks about interculturality, especially in education. In this chapter we understand *ideology* as follows:

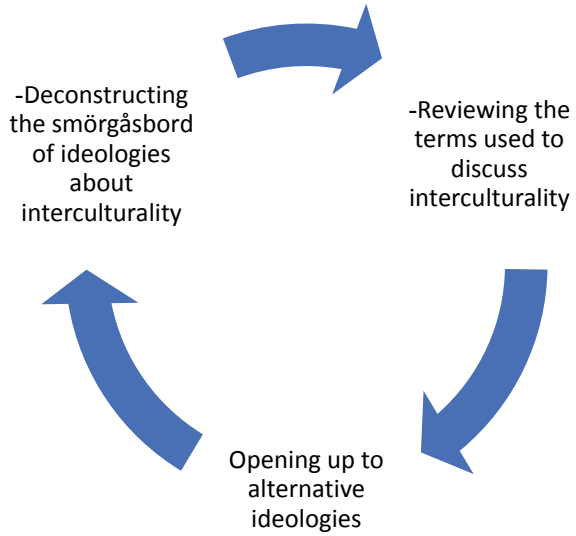
"Ideology" means strictly a system of ideas elaborated in the light of certain conceptions of what "ought to be." It designates a theory of social life which approaches the facts from the point of view of an ideal, and interprets them, consciously or unconsciously, to prove the correctness of its analysis and to justify that ideal. The starting-point is essentially extra-scientific—the ideal. Thus every ideological construction involves the projection of a certain ideal into the future, into the evaluation of the present, and into the past. (Roucek, 1944: 479)

As a societal project that is coloured by the political, philosophico-social arguments, power relations (e.g. host–guest) and corporate supremacy, interculturality cannot but be discussed, constructed, taught and researched within the realm of ideologies, of the 'ought to be' (versus the 'ought not'). Research and teaching about interculturality are systematically influenced by assumptions in, e.g. the words used to deal with the notion ('tolerance', 'democracy'), its premises are taken for granted ('contact with different others opens our mind') and become the 'truth' with the 'right values'. These often hide behind illusions of scientificity. In global education, it is important to bear in mind that dominating ideologies are promoted by Western scholars who have some symbolic power such as prestigious institutional affiliations (US/UK universities), publications in top international journals, editorships of book series with top publishers. What is more these ideologies are passed onto people through different Euro-/Americano-centric ideological apparatuses such as the Council of Europe, the European Union and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which 'dictate' the way interculturality should be defined, practiced and evaluated. Locally ideologies of interculturality may also have a specific 'flavour' influenced by decision-making and governance. France, for example, is famous for its politically driven ideology of *laïcité* (translated poorly in English as 'secularism') which is omnipresent in intercultural education (see, e.g. Abdallah-Preteille, 2004). When *laïcité* is combined with ideologies for e.g. an ideological apparatus like the OECD or with those of a British scholar of language and intercultural education, the end result might be very contradictory, confusing and even 'unfair' for some scholars, teachers and students alike.

In the context of MUC, bearing in mind the multiplicity of discourses about diversity in the ways minzu students think about interculturality (see Yuan et al., 2020), we have negotiated and taken three steps to make sure that the students have the possibility to use interculturality as a critical and reflexive tool to deal with issues of diversity. During the lectures the students are trained to unthink and rethink what they claim about diversity and interculturality—and what scholars, educators and decision-makers make of these notions too. Borrowing the words of Musil (1978/2017 269), our main interest is for them to learn to see how 'the unsettled holds more of the future than the settled' when it comes to diversity and interculturality. Figure 1 presents the three steps:

These three steps go hand in hand and entail consistent discussions of the use of terms in Chinese and English to refer to intercultural 'realities'; noticing how the way one thinks about interculturality and diversity is influenced by many (and often contradictory) ideologies; opening up to alternative ideologies. The steps are described in more detail below:

**Fig. 1** The three steps in using interculturality as a critical and reflexive tool



Deconstructing the smörgåsbord of ideologies about interculturality.

- Identifying the sources of global dominating ideologies, supported by global systems of politico-economic institutions;
- Identifying their orders, imposed (inter-)subjectivities and ideological intimidation: what they tell us to believe in; ‘ought tos’.

Reviewing the terms used to discuss interculturality.

- Multilingual and ‘archaeological’ analyses of concepts and notions used in Chinese and English (etymology);
- Critical translation of words (e.g. *tolerance* in Chinese and English, which can have different meanings and connotations).

Opening up to alternative ideologies.

- Identifying alternative ideologies which are localized/silenced in global research/educational worlds;
- Looking at intercultural issues from multiple perspectives, and, possibly, have more opportunities for (re-)negotiation and choices;
- Reimagining interculturality while being aware of re-ideologization.

In what follows we provide some examples of how we educate the students to systematize their application of the steps. For the step of deconstructing the smörgåsbord of ideologies about interculturality, we review with the students what they know about learning/teaching objectives of interculturality—what they think one should do to become ‘intercultural’. Two points continually emerge: interculturality is about ‘cultures meeting and/or clashing’ and ‘stereotypes should be eradicated’. We review these assertions with the students to make them aware of the ideological

beliefs hiding behind them. For 'cultures meeting and/or clashing', we explore the history and archaeology of the concept of *culture* and how it has been an overused and abused episteme since the eighteenth century to create, e.g. hierarchies between different cultures, even and especially in research ('more civilized', 'politer', 'more punctual', 'more hardworking', 'quieter', see e.g. Chemla & Fox Keller, 2017). The step of reviewing the terms in discussions of interculturality is used here too. Fang's (2019) book *Modern Notions of Culture and Civilisation in China* is introduced to examine how the word *culture* and *civilisation* have come to mean what they mean in China today. Fang explains that the two concepts of 文化 *wenhua* (culture) and 文明 *wenming* (Civilisation) are not stable in China today (Fang, 2019, 113), although their current meanings are borrowed from the West. Fang also shows that when we start surveying the historical use of the two words, we realise that the words 文化 *wenhua* (culture) and 文明 *wenming* (Civilisation) have foreign origins in their meanings, although they have been identified in classic Chinese but with different meanings from today. The semantic changes occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century, influenced by the 'West', but imported via Japan (Fang, 2019 62). While 文 (*wen*) in classic Chinese used to refer to component elements being mixed together (Fang, 2019 10), 化 (*hua*) originally indicated *change, formation* or *making*. 文 + 化 used to refer to a situation wherein a change takes place for one side or both sides concerned, as a result of their contact with each other (Fang, 2019 9). Before it took on its 'western' meaning, 文明 (*wenming*) used to refer to a progressive state of being, thriving development of culture and education (Fang, 2019 2). Since the two words are somewhat ambiguous in Chinese today, the students learn that they should never assume, when they speak to foreigners in English that they refer to the same realities when we say *culture* and *civilisation*.

The ideas of 'cultural difference', 'knowledge about other cultures', 'culture shock', 'the clash of cultures' are also problematized. The students explore how these could potentially serve as caricatures and simplifications. In order for them to become aware of the instability of the use of these concepts around the world, we show them how the concept of culture can be used as a mere substitute for other concepts in some contexts (Eriksen, 2001). For instance, in some European countries, the concept of *race* cannot be 'voiced', instead decision-makers, scholars and educators refer to *ethnicity* and/or *culture*, while promoting, e.g. anti-racism. As far as stereotyping is concerned the idea that the awareness and knowledge of other cultures can help either reduce or remove stereotypes is strong amongst the students. We spend time deepening their critical and reflexive engagement with the concept by, e.g. making them aware of the fact that stereotypes are unstable elements that can re-emerge at any moment even when they have been 'suppressed' or that they can easily be substituted by another stereotype.

As a way of summarizing the unthinking and rethinking of both culture and stereotypes—as components of dominating ideologies—the students are made to reflect with us on the types of questions that are asked in intercultural encounters. For instance, the questions 'where are you from?' (and for some people, the systematic follow-up question, 'where are you *really* from?'), 'what is your culture?', 'what

is your mother tongue?', are all based on the modern ideologies of the nation-state, national identity and national language, and can easily lead to hierarchies rather than encounters. Since the students are from minzu contexts, they know that answering these questions (for example when meeting a foreigner) often requires to make choices in terms of what to answer. Depending on the interlocutor, and the context of interaction, this might lead them to have to make choices between various identities or even to refrain from telling the 'truth' about their origins for fear of discrimination and/or stereotyping. In order to reinforce this awareness, in Autumn 2020, we used excerpts from *What would you say I am?* by British-Chinese playwright Eric Mok which was broadcasted online as part of the Digital Reading Festival (2020) ('From the Rooftops—A showcase of East Asian Talent'). In the piece, as a British-Chinese, Mok puts it nicely when he reflects on people playing what he calls the 'where are you from game': "Oh, that's where you are from?" Like they have won some quiz or something'. The awareness of this 'game of validation' is important for the students to reflect on the kinds of problematic and ideological questions asked about diversity and interculturality. The step of *Opening up to alternative ideologies* is then explored with the students, whereby new ways of thinking about, e.g. what to ask when meeting someone for the first time are envisaged.

Bearing in mind the specific context of our study, we have written earlier about the extra complexities in the different layers of discourses, ideologies and multilingual aspects of discussing interculturality, as experienced by minzu students (Yuan et al., 2020). Through these three steps the students are supported in building up awareness of their own intercultural ecosystem, where complex discourses are enmeshed: so-called 'Western' ideologies (*tolerance, respect, open-mindedness*) with references to American and British scholars such as Byram and Deardorff, but also, and most importantly, MUC's ideological position towards intercultural dialogue ('Knowledge corresponds with actions'; 'Diversity in Unity'), Chinese political discourses about Minzus ('Harmony without uniformity'), as well as more localized Minzu discourses ('we Hui<sup>2</sup> learn the language of others to facilitate understanding') (see Yuan et al., 2020).

Reviewing this smögårdsbord with the students, they can realise how they have been influenced by different voices, but also how incompatible some of these ideologies are. What the students do with these critiques, is, in a sense, their problem, however we believe that they need to be aware of this range of ideologies, their origins, how they relate to systems of domination, their polysemy and potential compatibility. In our teaching, we do not support or put forward any of these ideologies as being the 'right ones' when we teach—although, of course, we have preferred ideologies of interculturality—but support them in unthinking and rethinking the notion.

In his work on intercultural philosophy Nelson (2020, 6) summarizes well what we attempt to achieve with our students: his wish is to reveal 'the multiperspectivity and multi-directionality of thinking' of interculturality. By learning to systematically ask questions such as *What concepts and notions do we use to 'do' and talk about interculturality? What is the archeology of these terms around the world? Who*

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<sup>2</sup> The Hui people mainly come from Northwestern China and the Zhongyuan region.



*proposed them/introduced them to discuss interculturality? What political motivations are behind them?* we argue that the students can start revising and adding to unproblematized ideologies of interculturality and thus enrich their worldviews.

## **‘Can We Be Good at Interculturality?’**

The data used in this chapter consist of analysing 37 short essays (maximum number of words: 300) written by third-year bachelor's students in education at MUC. The essays were written in English, one of the languages used in the course. Our main motivation for asking them to use this international language was to see if the students attempted criticality and reflexivity in the way they discussed interculturality in a another (global) language. Collected as part of a 16-week course on intercultural and minzu education, the essays were written 6 weeks after the beginning of the course, so as to examine how the students took on board the ideas that were shared and discussed around the three steps that form the backbone of the course. The essay title was: ‘Can we be good at interculturality?’. This broad and somewhat provocative question was meant to evaluate how the students invested the three steps to provide answers to the question. Since the essays were meant to be short, we do not claim that their contents reveal their full perceptions and ideological construction of the notion of interculturality. Further studies are already in the pipeline with the same students to explore long-term engagement with critical perspectives on interculturality. However, we argue that there is a lot we can learn from the essays since they can allow us to observe change as it happens.

The course was taught by the authors in both Chinese and English (3 h per week). The group of students was composed of male and female students (approximately half-half) and 60% of the students were from minzus other than the Han. During the first 6 weeks of the course, the following topics were dealt with: 1. *What is interculturality?* 2. *Is culture still a relevant concept?* 3. *Identity and interculturality*, 4. *Imaginariness of interculturality*, 5. *Othering*, 6. *Pre-modernity, Modernity and Postmodernity*.

The data was analysed by means of a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which allows us to identify and report patterns (themes) within the data. The following analytical elements were used for each essay: *What is the main argument of the essay? Are there contradictions between some of the arguments and assumptions? What concepts are introduced by the students? Are they explained and problematized? Do they use examples and illustrations to support their arguments? Are there any elements of Chineseness and/or Chinese minzus used?*

## Analysis

Based on the thematic analysis of the 37 texts written by the students the analysis is composed of two main sections: 1. *Factors contributing to 'being good (or not) at interculturality'* and 2. *How to develop interculturality?* Each section contains the following subsections: 1. a. *On the need to develop knowledge about interculturality*, b. *Role of the Structure*; 2. a. *Discourses of benevolence*, b. *Multifaceted use of the concept culture*.

Let us share some general comments about the texts we have analysed: *First*, amongst all the texts that we analysed, the vast majority answered 'yes' to the set question of 'Can we be good at interculturality?'. Although some of the students started by stating that it is a difficult question, they often were able to provide a (more or less convincing) answer. Student 31's answer was the most 'open' answer. He used a Chinese phrase to explain why he thinks that 'we can be good at interculturality':

### Excerpt 1 (student 31)

I think that everyone can be good at it if he/she holds the belief of love, the idea of understanding and the expectation of a better world. So do we. There is a Chinese proverb that goes: Attitude decides everything. With this attitude, I am sure we have accomplished the half, as for the rest, just leave it to diligence and creativity. I don't think this can be done overnight, nor can it be done in a hurry.

For this student, interculturality relates to some sort of philosophy of life based on the values of 'love' and 'hope'. Introducing the Chinese phrase 态度决定一切 (*Attitude decides everything*), he insists first and foremost on the centrality of one's stance and mindset, and then on the role of chance, 'accident'. What the student argues throughout his essay is that one cannot program being 'good' at interculturality, and that interculturality takes time (see: 'I don't think this can be done overnight, nor can it be done in a hurry').

Only one student answered a clear 'no' to the question:

### Excerpt 2 (student 32)

My answer is 'no'. Because everyone has a different identity, and it is a dynamic process of change at different times. With identity comes identity politics.

The student's argument relies on a discussion of the concept of identity which he uses as a way of questioning what he claims to be general assumptions about interculturality as a 'solid' process. We'll come back to this aspect in the next sections.

*Second*, very few students used examples or illustrations to justify their views about 'being good at interculturality'. Among the four students who did, three linked their answers to their own life experiences (e.g. someone they met) and one student to the scientific literature about expressing emotions.

*Third*, while analysing the data we had to negotiate the meaning of what the students were trying to say at times. Words such as *objective*, *development* and *cross-cultural* often appeared in English in the texts but seemed to have unstable signifiers. They had to be discussed so that we would not misinterpret the data. Let us provide an example from student 35:

**Excerpt 3 (student 35)**

Eliminating the inherent prejudice and actively conducting cultural self-examination through others are more conducive to promoting development.

The word *development* is used with different meanings in the students' texts to describe, e.g. the process in which something becomes more advanced (economically), an event representing a new stage in a situation, but also—as is the case in this excerpt—an experienced process of change in someone. The use of the first meaning by the students is the most common to discuss interculturality, probably due to the fact that many discussions around minzu issues relate to, e.g. economic development (see Sude et al., 2020). In Chinese, the word for development, 发展, translates as 'becoming different', and contains the characters for 'hair' and 'to spread out' (发) as well as 'show'/exhibition (展). It is also noteworthy that many students seem to use the English words 'cross-cultural' and 'intercultural' interchangeably in their texts. After checking the Chinese for both words, we realized that there is only one word in this language to refer to these two notions: 跨文化. Although in English there might be differences between *cross-cultural* and *intercultural*, they can also refer to the same realities in some contexts and for some decision-makers, educators and scholars (see Zilliacus & Holm, 2009 about *multicultural* and *intercultural*).

Finally, some students used what we refer to as *interculturalspeak* (Dervin, 2016) in their answers, i.e. a somewhat automatic 'robot-like' way of talking about interculturality by using phrases, mottos/slogans and words that are not critically or reflexively evaluated. In some of the texts, we also noted gentle clashes of ideologies which will be discussed in the following sections.

## Factors Contributing to 'being Good' (Or Not) at Interculturality

### *On the Need to Develop Knowledge About Interculturality*

One of the first common themes that appears in the essays is that of the need felt by the students to be knowledgeable about interculturality to be able to be 'good' at it. This aspect might relate to the fact that the data was collected as part of a theoretical course on the notion. Student 1 shares the view in this first excerpt:

**Excerpt 4 (student 1)**

In the face of more and more diverse areas of cultural contact, we need to improve our theoretical level of interculturality, that is, in terms of guiding principles, we should know how to communicate and connect with people from different cultural backgrounds. (student 1)

Using an argument revolving around the concept of *culture* ('diverse areas of cultural contact', 'people from different cultural backgrounds'), the student insists

on the need to acquire ‘guiding principles’ (a synonym for theories?) about interculturality. Student 8 in excerpt 5 goes deeper into what needs to be learnt by listing concepts that also derive from the concept of culture:

**Excerpt 5 (student 8).**

we inevitably need to be familiar with various related concepts, such as cultural identity, cultural discrimination, cultural infiltration and so on. These are the major obstacles for us to learn cross-cultural well. Only when we can fully understand and understand the connotation of cross-cultural and related concepts and form our own theoretical system, can we be conducive to cross-cultural learning. (student 8)

Amongst the three listed concepts only cultural identity was discussed during the lectures, the other two concepts of cultural discrimination and cultural infiltration, which are often used in relation to minzu, are introduced by the student herself. While cultural discrimination might be self-explanatory, cultural infiltration (or penetration, 文化渗透), is a concept used in Chinese to refer to a ‘strong culture’ influencing a ‘less powerful one’, which could be translated as ‘cultural invasion’ although the word invasion is too strong compared to what the Chinese version connotes (see, e.g. Liang, 2016). What is interesting about what the student affirms here is that she considers that these concepts can be counter-productive if one does not learn to ‘fully understand’ them and what they connote—or even act upon the phenomena they describe. As mentioned in the first part of this chapter, we had spent time with the students discussing this important aspect of interculturality. About theoretical learning, student 19 argues that having access to knowledge produced in other parts of the world (‘overseas’ in the excerpt) can help to decentre in relation to interculturality:

**Excerpt 6 (student 19).**

I need to take a more distant view of learning, to learn overseas empirical theories, or even to visit other countries to learn. (student 19)

While increasing one’s theoretical knowledge about interculturality is argued for by many students, others consider the development of technology and fast movement of humans and goods from one place to another to be beneficial to developing interculturality. In what follows, students 5 and 11 discuss the importance of information technology (the Internet):

**Excerpt 7 (student 5)**

In today’s highly developed information technology, the Internet has broken through the limitation of time and space and greatly narrowed the distance between people, especially between different cultural groups. This kind of condition gives us more opportunities to understand other cultures and greatly reduces the possibility of stereotyping.

**Excerpt 8 (student 11)**

with the development of Internet technology and the improvement of people’s general education level, we have more opportunities for more and more people to open up their horizons and to have a more objective and comprehensive understanding of cultural differences and similarities, thus avoiding for example, the negative impact of a single story.

In these excerpts both students seem to define what interculturality entails and thus the ways technology can support ‘being good at it’: (student 5) ‘understand

other cultures and greatly reduces the possibility of stereotyping'; (student 11) 'open up their horizons and to have a more objective and comprehensive understanding of cultural differences and similarities, thus avoiding, for example, the negative impact of a single story'. For them, interculturality should lead to having a more objective and comprehensive understanding of 'cultures' and reducing stereotyping ('single story'). Technology seems to be leading us to achieve these aspects according to the students. A note on the use of the adjective 'objective' is needed at this stage. Many students use it in their texts when they describe what 'good at interculturality' means to them. In the Chinese word for *objective*, 客观, the first character refers to a customer (*subjective* contains the character for the Lord (主)). What the students seem to mean here is that by providing access to and showing different realities, technologies can transform people's perceptions from the 主 Lord view (self) to the 客 customer perspective (the Other). Therefore, for the students in this section, knowledge about interculturality consists in decentering oneself from what one (thinks one) knows by experiencing theoretical knowledge and examining other realities.

In a similar vein, for student 29 direct contact established by transport (travel?) improves 'being good at interculturality':

**Excerpt 9 (student 29)**

The development of transportation technology promotes cross regional cultural exchange, and the emergence of information technology even turns the earth into a village in the network. These technologies give us the opportunity and ability to learn more about other cultures.

Although these excerpts emphasize the importance of reflecting on knowledge and different realities, somewhat blinded by our misperceptions, we note that the students are sometimes too idealistic (e.g. use of the cliché of 'information technology even turns the earth into a village') or lack criticality for example in relation to the use of the concept of culture or to the kind of knowledge that one could acquire from other countries. What is more the argument about information technology and the somewhat illusionary argument of the 'contact hypothesis' (Allport, 1954)—i.e. contact between people, face-to-face or online is enough to trigger interculturality—would need to be unthought and rethought with the students.

***Role of the Structure***

This section is based on the students' inclusion of what we refer to as the Structure in how they determine the possibility of 'being good at interculturality'. The Structure here corresponds to what Althusser calls Ideological State Apparatuses (2001), which determine a system of production relations in which people live. For the philosopher, these include two kinds of apparatuses: 1. the ones which function by violence (e.g. courts, the police, prisons, the army), 2. Ideological state apparatuses such as religion, education, politics, trade unions, the media, the arts. These function by ideology and tell us to think and act in the interests of the economic dominance of the ruling class. In addition to these apparatuses, Global Ideological Apparatuses also have an influence on, e.g. the way we think about 'us' and 'them'. People have no choice but to submit freely to all these apparatuses in the interests of the economy. In the students' texts,

the following components of the Structure are included: the economy, supranational political institutions, and the generic Apparatus of 'countries'. It is important to note that the students never mention concrete 'actors'.

The first excerpt from student 4 is the most comprehensive in terms of the role of the Structure in promoting interculturality. In fact, the whole text oscillates between discourses around the following apparatuses: 'countries', the economy, and supranational political institutions. The excerpt starts with a comment on countries, then moves to the economy, diplomacy and 'people-to-people exchanges', to conclude with the economy (and a direct reference to 'economic theory'):

**Excerpt 10 (student 4)**

one country that is good at cross-cultural communication is dynamic and active, rather than complacent and backward.

The interaction and innovation brought by communication can improve the development space and comprehensive competitiveness of a country.

Cross-cultural communication will also have a greater impact on economic and trade, and play a more significant positive role in diplomatic development, international status, international tourism and people-to-people exchanges.

Cross-regional, cross-national, cross-polity and cross-national communication is associated with certain risks. However, it is pointed out in economic theory that risks and benefits coexist.

For the student, countries must be 'dynamic', 'active', 'competitive', 'international' and 'risk-taking' in order to create interculturality. The position of people is limited in this excerpt as the contexts introduced by the student remain at a macro-level.

Student 36 focuses mostly on the personal level in her essay but comments on the responsibility of one Apparatus:

**Excerpt 11 (student 36)**

First of all, this is a personal issue as well as an international issue, as it involves all regions and everyone. The relevant political institutions should also establish an exchange strategy for the peaceful coexistence of various ethnic cultures.

The Apparatus, 'the relevant political institutions', is deemed in charge of making sure that interculturality takes place 'peacefully'. For the student interculturality, from this macro-perspective, translates as 'the peaceful coexistence of various ethnic cultures'. All the words in this 'definition' hint at the influence of a certain understanding of minzu communication. The use of the concept of 'ethnic cultures' (which would not be used in many contexts around the world) is a strong indicator of this influence. We note that this student does not refer to any economic aspects in his text.

The last excerpt of this section contains a critique of certain 'countries and nations'. The critique relates to their roles in 1. Creating a sense of ethnocentrism amongst their people while 2. Looking down upon others by creating what the student labels 'stereotypical images of other cultures' as well as 'mutual incomprehension and non-acceptance':

**Excerpt 12 (student 10)**

In my opinion, there are two factors that make us not very good at interculturality: firstly, there are objective political factors, where countries or nations may try to strengthen their internal unity and cohesiveness by making their own nation or nationality more visible and slightly less visible to other nations or nations, or by giving more negative information about other cultures to their own people. This, coupled with the fact that exchanges between cultural groups are not as close as those within one's own nation, is likely to lead to stereotypical images of other cultures, thus deepening mutual incomprehension and non-acceptance.

For the student, such Apparatuses need to contribute to making interculturality inclusive, critical of limited images of Self and Other, and provide objective information about the Other.

This section focused on how some students construct discourses about the role of the Structure on the possibility of 'being good at interculturality'—shifting the focus from the individual to the forces of political, economic and ideological Apparatuses. Together with the first analytical subsection about the need to develop knowledge about interculturality, this section demonstrates that some students are able to identify what factors could contribute (or not) to being 'good' at interculturality. We have noted some definitions of the notion in the excerpts, and a somewhat overreliance on the concept of culture. In what follows, we examine how the students suggest developing 'being good at interculturality'.

## How to Develop Interculturality?

### *Discourses of Benevolence*

In the vast majority of the students' texts, many keys to 'being good at interculturality' fall within a category that we label *benevolence*, the quality of being well-intentioned, kindness. The phrases used by the students are often found in the international literature on interculturality: *avoid conflict, end discrimination, break down stereotypes, put an end to ethnocentrism*. We also identified references to the verbs *to respect* and *to tolerate* in many sentences that appeared to read like mottos or slogans—without being problematized: 'First, we must learn to respect and tolerate' (student 18). 'Second, respect and tolerate others' (student 23). The use of the verb *to accept* seems to serve the same purpose and to also be used in a fluid way: 'we must accept cultural differences' (student 33); 'we should sincerely and tolerantly recognize and accept each other's similarities and differences' (student 25). In these two excerpts, we note a slight 'clash' of ideologies since student 33 suggests 'accepting cultural differences' while student 25 'each other's similarities and differences', without the word *culture* and within the continuum of differences and similarities—instead of what Dervin (2016) has referred to as the 'differentialist bias'.

In excerpt 13, student 2 focuses on stereotypes and explains what 'breaking them down' means:

**Excerpt 13 (student 2)**

we should break down stereotypes, look at people without colored glasses, tear off the labels and define a person by his own characteristics rather than his own cultural characteristics.

Metaphors ('colored glasses', 'labels') are used to introduce the idea that one should move away from 'culture' to focus on the individual. Although this excerpt contains a modal verb ('should') other assertions made by the students about benevolence are formulated in peremptory sentences, like orders. Excerpt 14 introduces critical discourses about the concept of *culture* (see next section) to lead to the conclusion of avoiding 'evils' of intercultural encounters such as discrimination and racism:

**Excerpt 14 (student 12)**

I agree with this view: culture is neither bounded nor closed; it is not homogeneous; it is the result of human being's generation, acquired postnatally (through education, etc.), meeting and integrating with other cultures in the long history.

Therefore, we need to avoid similar situations and avoid discrimination, racism and stereotype in intercultural communication.

Student 34, who shares very similar views, even provides a personal narrative to describe how she has herself experienced being prejudiced against certain representatives of other nations, showing a good level of reflexivity and self-criticality:

**Excerpt 15 (student 34)**

When I was a child, my mom has dinner with a Japanese gentleman and I expressed my hate after knowing his nationality. Every time I record this with a strong sense of shame. He is really a gentleman, but I tag him 'bad guy' because of his nationality.

In the final excerpt, student 17 illustrates his reflections on similarities and differences between himself and another Chinese of Tibetan background and one of us who was teaching on the course—a Caucasian:

**Excerpt 16 (student 17)**

whether it is to associate with Professor Fred, who is far away in Finland, or with the Mongolian student sitting next to me, it belongs to cross-cultural communication for me. Perhaps someone will immediately refute me, arguing that Fred and I come from totally different cultural backgrounds, but my Mongolian classmates are at least Chinese.

I would like to ask a question: when I associate with Fred, am I dealing with people from all over Finland? Of course not. I'm just associate with him. It has nothing to do with other Finns. In this case, why should I use the cultural label 'Finland' to define Fred in advance and think that our communication will be more difficult?

If we need to divide them according to some standards, it is obvious that Fred and I are humorous people (although sometimes we may accidentally tell some frost jokes), but the Tibetan student around me is serious. If we want to identify ourselves according to some kind of identity, can Fred and I enter a "humor circle" and exclude this Tibetan student?

What the student shows here is his awareness that interculturality does not necessarily refer to cross-border encounters but that it also applies to locality. He gives examples of Mongolian classmates and a Tibetan student, whom he compares to the foreign professor. In the second paragraph of the excerpt, the student shows a good



level of reflexivity by asking questions to himself about how to treat these different individuals, especially the Caucasian professor—hinting at the fact that he wishes to avoid generalizing and stereotyping representatives of the professor's country. The third paragraph contains the identification of a similarity with the foreign professor ('humour') which is opposed to the seriousness of the Tibetan student. So, intercultural comparison thus moves beyond the 'international-based' understanding of interculturality to be applied to locality.

In this section, we have demonstrated that there are signs of the students wishing to show benevolence to the Other through respecting, tolerating, and avoiding stereotyping. Some of the students were also able to go in a more active direction by reflecting within the continuum of difference-similarity with the Other. Maybe the aspect that seems to be missing here is the expectation of reciprocity in terms of how one treats the Other. If one tolerates them, avoids using stereotypes against them (if that's possible), should we not expect the Other to do the same? Can these acts of benevolence just be a one-way phenomenon?

### *Multifaceted Use of the Concept Culture*

In this last analytical version, we focus on the concept of culture, which is commented upon systematically in all the 37 texts that we collected. Some of the students were very critical of the concept, emphasizing its fluid characteristic and commenting upon issues of identity, while a minority of students used culturalist discourses—culture as the only explanatory force to encounters, see Chemla & Fox Keller, 2017—to determine how to 'be good at interculturality'. Two students' texts were clearly culturalist:

#### **Excerpt 17 (student 25)**

But I'm aware of the importance of the interculturality research, cultural differences and the cultural collision is fundamentally caused by cultural differences, so respect is different from the native culture of foreign culture is the basis of interculturality communication, respect and open mind is a start, because do not understand each other national cultural taboos and breaking lamella and misunderstanding.

#### **Excerpt 18 (student 34)**

I think everyone can be good at interculturality. In interculturality, we often have conflict because we are not familiar with other's culture background.

In excerpt 18, student 25 uses the word culture and its companion terms throughout: 'cultural differences' (twice), 'cultural collision', 'foreign culture', and 'national cultural taboos'. Culture is clearly seen as a problem and as something that leads to misunderstandings (amongst others). Student 34 also emphasizes the negative side of culture by referring to it leading to 'conflict'.

Other students are very critical of the concept. The three following students use metaphors to describe what they see as problems in the use of the concept: (Excerpt 20) 'imprisoned in the "straitjackets" of culture'; (student 27) 'confine ourselves in

a certain cultural shackles' (sic); (student 32) blindfolded 'cultural label'. For them, removing these problematic aspects of culture in the way interculturality is done represents potential paths towards being 'good at' it.

**Excerpt 19 (student 26)**

As culture has always been at the center of discussions in intercultural education and people remain imprisoned in the 'straitjackets' of culture.

**Excerpt 20 (student 27)**

We live in a global village, rather than confine ourselves in a certain cultural shackles, overestimate or underestimate ourselves or others from a cultural perspective, but take an equal attitude towards each person's cultural background.

**Excerpt 21 (student 32)**

If we can tear off the blindfolded "cultural label" and treat every communication as a complete "risk equality" attempt, we can conduct cross-cultural communication more objectively and sincerely.

In a similar vein, student 9—in a somewhat imperious manner however—asserts that the concept cannot be used because it 'isolates' and creates 'many prejudices and ideologies':

**Excerpt 22 (student 9)**

Trying to flout a culture or its boundaries often leads to isolation from a world with which it interacts and influences it. when we use the concept of culture, we are often influenced by many prejudices and ideologies, so we can't use the concept of culture correctly.

The use of the first-person pronoun of the plural (we) adds to the student's strong conviction about the concept. Student 30 also takes a position against culture, suggesting to 'ignore' it although she still seems to give it some importance as 'one of the possible factors':

**Excerpt 23 (student 30)**

But this is obviously not an easy thing, because the best way of interculturality communication is to ignore culture. Culture is not the result or the main factor, but one of the possible factors.

The fluid characteristic of culture is noted many a time by the students. In excerpt 22, the student is categorical about the fact that culture is a construction, taking place through encounters with 'other cultures'—thus personifying culture, giving it an agency:

**Excerpt 24 (student 21)**

Interculturality expresses a simple truth: culture constructs itself through its relationships. It also constitutes itself through the relationship with other cultures.

The constructivist perspective on culture is also commented upon by a student who comments on what can be learnt from the Chinese word *wenhua* (文化, culture):

**Excerpt 25 (student 28)**

Because the original meaning of "Hua" is to change, generate and create.

The idea that culture is 'open' was also identified in student 7's text, where he comments on the performative characteristic of the concept:

**Excerpt 26 (student 7)**

Culture is not the attribution of certain behavior, but the performance of behavior. Trying to define culture or its boundaries often leads to its closure and isolation from the world.

It makes you think that you belong to a single nation, but the reality is that your body has more resonance with the world. Not only can a person's mind be diverse, but a person's body is also diverse. An open world begins with an open mind.

The excerpt starts with a critique of the tendency to delimit culture and thus to close it down and isolate it. The student continues with a metaphor about body/mind in relation to culture to discuss the openness and resonance of people with the world, rather than with a single (national) culture.

For many students, discourses of culture and especially cultural difference are substituted with discussions of identity as change:

**Excerpt 27 (student 13)**

Culture is the laziest excuse to explain differences. In order to achieve smooth cross-cultural communication, each individual in cross-cultural communication should look at each other from the perspective of development, instead of defining each other rudely with simple stereotypes. The identity of an individual is diversified and constantly formed, rather than fixed and limited by culture.

This excerpt starts with a provocative statement about culture (it is 'the laziest excuse to explain differences'), and moves towards discussing interculturality as a process (the student uses the word 'development') and opposes identity as 'diversified and constantly formed' to culture which is said to be 'fixed and limited'.

For some of the students, the idea that the Self is constructed by the presence and in interaction with the Other (and vice versa) is amply discussed. For example, student 9 asserts that.

**Excerpt 28 (student 9)**

Because it is through the eyes of the other that the self is constructed that our identity becomes alive.

Finally, student 14—like many other students—insists on the need to consider both similarities and differences between people from different countries. Using research from the field of communication, the student explains that many similarities had been identified in terms of facial expressions for basic emotions:

**Excerpt 29 (student 14)**

For example, studies of cross-cultural categories of facial expressions show that in American, European, South American and Asian cultures, people perceive in the same way eight different basic emotions -- excitement, joy, surprise, sadness and pain, disgust, contempt, anger, shame and fear (Dickey & Knower, 1941; Ekman & Friesen, 1972; Izard, 1968). Later, Eckman et al. (Ekman, 1971; In 1969, cited in Izard, 1980, the experimental subjects were extended to non-written cultural groups).

This section examined the presence of discourses of culture in the students' essays. Since a lot of discussions around the concept took place during the first six weeks of the course, it is not perhaps surprising that most students commented upon it. Although a couple of students seemed to share very strong culturalist positions what the other students seem to reveal is a good critical and reflexive stance towards the concept when discussing interculturality. Their discussions of identity as a fluid phenomenon complemented their critiques of culture and showed some awareness of, e.g. the continuum of similarity-difference and the importance of change in interculturality.

## Discussion and Conclusions

In this chapter we used the notion of interculturality as an entry point into how Chinese students at an institution of higher education focusing on minzu issues express, construct and discuss diversity when they answered the question 'can we be good at interculturality?'. Several research questions were asked, and our analytical sections provided the following answers: 1. The students were able to identify some factors contributing to 'being good at interculturality', including increasing one's knowledge of intercultural encounters and learning through today's intercultural facilitators such as digital technologies. Some students also emphasized the central role of the Structure ('ideological apparatuses') at the local and global levels. 2. Suggestions—which often sounded like 'orders'—were also provided by the students. These included: somewhat typical 'global' discourses of benevolence relating to tolerance, respect, acceptance and putting an end to stereotyping. Although these are of importance the fact that they were rarely problematized by the students (what does *tolerating* mean?) and not considered from the perspective of reciprocity made them rather empty proposals. Finally, the last analytical section reviewed the multifaceted use of the concept of *culture* by the students to answer the question of 'being good at interculturality'. While there were hints of culturalism (culture as a solid and static 'thing' used to explain Self and Other, see Abdallah-Preteceille, 2004), the vast majority were critical of the concept and pushed for a more fluid and constructivist understanding.

In the course that the students were taking, we had introduced a three-step model of interculturality: 1. *Deconstructing the smörgåsbord of ideologies about interculturality*, 2. *Reviewing the terms used to discuss interculturality* and 3. *Opening up to alternative ideologies*. While the students were only in their sixth week of the course (reminder: this was a 16-week course) there were signs that the students were already able to demonstrate that they possessed some of these subcompetencies. As far as *Deconstructing the smörgåsbord of ideologies about interculturality* is concerned, some students were able to identify the influence of global/local systems of politico-economic institutions and of global dominating ideologies. A few students also discussed some of the 'ought tos' and 'orders' from these institutions (e.g. the imposition of discourses of culture leading to prejudice and stereotypes). The objectives of *Reviewing the terms used to discuss interculturality* and *Opening*

up to *alternative ideologies* were marginally found in the data. As such very few students proposed multilingual and 'archaeological' analyses of concepts and notions (one student mentioned the word *culture* in Chinese and its original connotation of change, see Fang, 2019). Finally, although many of the proposed ideas represented alternative ideologies about interculturality, they were still somewhat grounded in Western-centric worldviews (e.g. discourses around identity).

What seems to be missing in the students' texts—which would require further work with them in the future—comprises:

- A lack of deep engagement with *minzu* and Chinese ideologies about diversity and interculturality. This could be explained by the fact that the texts were produced in English, requiring the students to think (maybe) in a specific mind-world. Although we identified some traces and signs (some 'slogans' and the use of some particular terms), there would be a need for them to be further considered and problematized against other ideologies.
- Many of the proposed answers to the question 'can we be good at interculturality?' resemble slogans and mottos in the sense that they are not discussed but just 'thrown in' the students' texts. They would need to be more explicitly discussed and critiqued.
- The essay instructions did not ask the students to illustrate their arguments by use of examples. Yet it would be important for them to be able to systematically use some to make their arguments more convincing and concrete at times.
- During the course the students are urged to look at the words they use in Chinese and English to talk about interculturality reflexively and critically. Very few scholars have suggested that such multilingual perspectives be systematically included in intercultural education but we do believe, based on our own co-operation as a multilingual team, that such work is necessary and rewarding to unthink and rethink interculturality.

All in all, while reading and analysing the students' data, we felt that the students were experiencing some changes—more or less consciously—in the way they perceive, construct and discuss interculturality. More explicit and metacognitive work about the form and content of discourses about interculturality is needed. However, we note, with one of the students from this research, that a multi-ideological notion like interculturality, which looks like Henry James's complex figure in a Persian carpet, requires lifelong engagement: 'I don't think this can be done overnight, nor can it be done in a hurry'...

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