

Chapter 5

Unparalleled Insights into Interculturality



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Abstract This chapter closes the book, suggesting that the more-than-human can offer unparalleled insights into interculturality. Summarizing the main observations made throughout the book and especially in Chap. 4 (Chinese things for interculturality), Fred Dervin reveals the multiple positions that things offer us for interculturality. What things can ‘do’ for us in terms of research and education is also problematized and proposed as guidelines for future work on the more-than-human in intercultural communication education.

Keywords Multiple positions · Ghosts · Mirrors · Multiple voices · Interculturalizing interculturality

We are surrounded by things. *Many things*. And the economics of consumerism urges us to acquire even more of these things every day. Where does interculturality stand in this surplus to requirements?

The different ‘Chinese’ things (with different forms, sizes, colours, materialities) that were introduced in this book to illustrate the necessity to take the more-than-human into account—and to start from them when dealing with interculturality—have allowed us to identify a multitude of functions and positions held by things.

As such, the more-than-human is with us all the time, alone and/or with others... The more-than-human does *so much* for and with us, without us (always) realizing... The more-than-human tells stories about us... The more-than-human outlives us and keeps traces of our memories...

The more-than-human talks to us in their own ways... The more-than-human communicates with and via us... The more-than-human can take on layers of meanings and connotations... The more-than-human configures, expresses but also hides in-/directly our life experiences, our identities, our memories, our feelings, our relations, our thoughts...

The more-than-human reveals and reflects what we (un-)think, (un-)do, the way we identify... The more-than-human also makes us dream and hope...

The more-than-human is a story-teller, a revelation, a teacher, a guide, a mediator, a partner, a protector, a challenger, a reminder, a spokesperson... some kind of a shaman... (see Fig. 5.1).



Fig. 5.1 The multiple positions of the more-than-human

This book has argued that the more-than-human can provide us with unparalleled insights into interculturality. We must accept that things *always* shape and structure the ways we ‘do’ interculturality. The current exclusive focus on the human (and their intentions) is saturating the field of intercultural communication education, with most of us fighting an illusionary witch hunt against essentialism (which is very anthropocentric!) and spelling out all kinds of (problematic) competences for people to interact ‘successfully’ with others (see Dervin & R’boul, 2022). This often gives the impression that we are going around in circles.

Things are always there but they tend to be treated like ghosts. Most intercultural issues relate to things one way or another. When we talk about things, we talk about us. Now it is time to talk about things where it has been *just* about us.

The book was based on five (apparently) ‘simple’ things that most of us will have heard of, seen and used. A simple thing such as chopsticks (about 25 cm, 30 g) has allowed us to open so many stimulating doors for rethinking about interculturality as a phenomenon and a subject of research and education. All these things are in fact good examples of simplicity (Dervin, 2016): they are simple and complex at the same time—like interculturality!

The Chinese things have allowed us to ‘dig’ into the following topics:

- *Calligraphy*: writing, communicating, art, aesthetics, legends and myths, language, personalities;
- *Chopsticks*: eating, gifting, superstitions and beliefs, hygiene, family, language;
- *Jade*: aesthetics, history, human characteristics, virtues, Man and Nature, money;
- *Mahjong*: playing, globalization, worldviews, togetherness, senses, negotiations;
- *Resident ID card*: locality, naming, dates, seasons, beliefs and superstitions, language, origins.

You will have identified most likely many other ‘underground’ topics and I encourage you to read through the sections as often as you can to build up a habit of unearthing discussions for interculturality.

As far as interculturality as a subject of research and education is concerned, I wish to share some final thoughts:

- Working on the more-than-human represents an important way to include the other ‘seriously’ in epistemological discussions of interculturality. And in a sense, what the five Chinese things allow us to do here is to fight against *sinologism* (Gu, 2012) and to strengthen our confidence to engage with ideas beyond the ‘West’. I argue that taking the more-than-human into account in research and education can help us combat what Gu (2012: 1) describes here: “Why, since China was forced to enter the modern world after the Opium War (1839–1842), have Chinese intellectuals oscillated between exaggerated eulogies and masochistic condemnation of their own culture on the one hand, and between unhealthy fetishization and irrational dismissal of Western theories, paradigms, and approaches to scholarship and knowledge on the other?”. In order to deal with these contradictions and inconsistencies, moving to and fro between things from different parts of the world, theories, concepts, languages, ideologies, while keeping an eye open on interconnections, cannot but enrich our work on interculturality. Although many might argue that things have ‘anecdotal’ values in such discussions, I urge colleagues and students to start thinking ‘otherwise’ by getting inspiration from things. Interculturality can only be treated interculturally when 1. We shift away from an entire Westerncentric perspective and 2. The more-than-human from ‘here and there’ is given its due space in our conversations (amongst others). As a reminder, in Chinese a thing is 东西 (dōngxī), which translates as *a thing/an object* (concrete and abstract people, things and objects), but also as *east and west, from east to west* and even *near and beside*. The very word urges us to look in all directions and to not be satisfied just with e.g. ‘our’ ‘Western’ thoughts.
- As we have argued in the book, interculturality as a notion tends to be ‘mummified’, enveloped in static ideologies (‘orders’ and ‘windscreens’), concepts and notions, and beliefs, with ‘Western’ ideologists and gurus dominating global scholarship and educational decision-making in-/directly. Working on interculturality requires a constant process of ‘evolution’, shifting between stability and change, bearing in mind the importance of past, present and future exchanges (‘globalizations’). We cannot continue to deal with the notion in research and

education without placing change at its centre. Through their complexities and what they reveal of the changes that we have experienced in the past, today and in how we interact with others, things tell us to accept change. Research and education must treat the influences of the human and the more-than-human on interculturality beyond solidity and false criticality-reflexivity. This also requires change in the ways one problematizes, conceptualizes, researches, and educates.

- One very important aspect of working with the more-than-human is that things can serve as mirrors to look into ourselves—not so much to learn about the other because this other is always much more complex than what things indicate. For Canetti (1989: 69): “To be another, another, another. As another, you could see yourself again”. Confronting things for interculturality, we start ‘unmasking’ ourselves, revealing (changing) aspects of who we are, what we think (or been made to think), what we do, what we silence (or are not allowed to talk about), how we treat others (and get treated by them), how powerful/powerless we are, etc.
- Finally, the proposed focus on things asks us to pay attention to the way we talk about interculturality, the ways we engage and discourse around it with self and others. Things require examining what language says about them but also about us, others and the world. And we have seen many examples of polysemy, much needed renegotiations of meanings and connotations, inconsistencies in language use, in our discussions of Chinese things. The more-than-human also reminds us that language can be treacherous to talk about what we do with and through things. In Chap. 2 the idea of interculturality as a *kaleidophone* was introduced—a machine that allows us to be sensitive to the sounds and the *real* polysemy of language(s). The kaleidophone comes as a warning against taking words for granted and centring our engagement with the world and others only through what we think our language(s) say(s).

The book is just the beginning of what we hope will be more systematic and long-term engagement with ‘more-than-humans’ for interculturality. We also hope that the book will convince teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of the necessity to open their eyes to the richness that this world *out there*, with which we can reflect, has to offer for intercultural communication education. Taking the time to observe, interact around and problematise the more-than-human in interculturality cannot but open new vistas for a complex field that begs for renewal...

References

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