

BOOK REVIEW: *INTERCULTURALITY IN LEARNING MANDARIN CHINESE IN BRITISH UNIVERSITIES*. BY TINGHE JIN. LONDON AND NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE, 2021. 188 PP., £120 (HARDBACK), £33.29 (E-BOOK). ISBN: 9781138228306

Yanyi Lu

School of the Arts, University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull HU6 7RX. UK

ABSTRACT: *This account provides a critique of Tinghe Jin's recently-published book entitled *Interculturality in Learning Mandarin Chinese in British Universities*, which offers one of the first in-depth enquiries on interculturality and language learning in the context of UK higher education. A review of the book's objectives, content and key messages is given, while terminology and concepts encountered in Jin's research are discussed and problematized. Emphasis is given to evolving concepts, such as 'culture', 'Chinese culture' and 'intercultural competence', as well as to hidden problems in Chinese language learning. The need to extend insight into teachers' perspectives on interculturality is highlighted for future research.*

KEYWORDS: interculturality, language learning, teaching, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Tinghe Jin's *Interculturality in Learning Mandarin Chinese in British Universities* offers a critical perspective on concepts such as 'culture', 'Chinese culture', 'interculturality' and 'intercultural responsiveness' alongside contemporary considerations of learning and teaching a 'modern world language'. The book has three objectives: to identify the specific field of interculturality in Chinese language education; to provide a developmental and historical perspective of 'Chinese culture'; and to promote intercultural teaching and learning in Mandarin Chinese.

The book contains eight chapters that, broadly speaking, progress from historical, political and other contextual perspectives on interculturality and education to a contemporary empirical perspective with interviews from students and lecturers about learning and teaching Mandarin Chinese in British universities. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction: it provides an overview of the book and identifies key themes produced from the interview data. The term 'interculturality' is defined as 'the ever-dynamic "inter" relationship and process between the self and the other where difference and sameness are embodied and constructed' (p. 2). In the context of language learning, interculturality is recognised as a process in which students engage and exchange with each other and the wider world, 'being' and 'becoming' through their encounters. This

view develops the work of Villodre (2014), although with a slightly different emphasis. Villodre focuses on exchanges between different cultures, cultural relationships and, ultimately, cultural integration: she advocates respect among different societies living in the same country and argues that discourse is a fundamental tool for social harmony. Jin, however, is concerned with communication between people within and across cultures.

Throughout, the term ‘culture’ is regarded as a ‘fluid and evolving’ concept (p. 4), rather than a fixed social entity, construct or artefact. This description is in line with Nooshin and Bayley’s (2021) perspective of culture as a verb-based rather than noun-based concept, that is, as a process which is pluralistic and fluid. The concept of culture, however, has been challenged by Nooshin and Bayley among others, including O’ Reilly (1999) who urges precise discourse on ‘knowledge, belief, art, technology, tradition and ideology’. Jin chooses primarily to address issues of identity (p. 5), ideology (p. 21) and education about Chinese studies in the UK in the context of culture as a broad, fluid concept throughout the book.

Chapters 2 and 3 review the changing social, historical, economic, political and cultural landscape of teaching and learning Chinese language in the UK, especially for university students. Critical evaluation of courses and textbooks used in British universities and reported approaches for teaching cultural elements to students reveals increased emphasis upon interculturality in teaching and learning Chinese language in the UK. Chapter 4 further probes the terms ‘culture’ and ‘Chinese culture’ alongside the concept of interculturality. According to Jin, ‘culture’ often reflects the relationship between ‘self’ and ‘other’, and thus a sense of culture can easily shift towards ‘inter’-culturality. In reviewing selected aspects of ‘Chinese culture’ over 150 years, from the Qing dynasty to the post-Deng period of reform, Jin illustrates that the concept of ‘Chinese culture’ is not monotonous and fixed, but constantly changing. Furthermore, she underlines that there are diverse, evolving cultures and dialects, so the landscape of China is ‘multicultural and multilingual’. This observation arose during the research process as Jin identified different dialects from people across different places in China during interviews with students studying in China.

Jin argues that language students should be seen as ‘intercultural individuals’ because of their biographical characteristics, the intercultural social context in which they spend time, and through their understandings of learning processes. In evaluating data from an interview enquiry with language students, Jin reveals that language students have plural identities because of the complex situations that they encounter (Chapter 5) and that they regard themselves as ‘intercultural beings and becomings’ (Chapter 6). The notion of ‘intercultural responsiveness’ (p. 107) is proposed to account for the diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences of the language students and to show how intercultural identities could be significant factors in shaping and valuing their learning experiences. Jin argues that this concept is more appropriate than the simple notion of ‘intercultural competence’, which neglects the

‘already existing intercultural qualities of students’ lives and experiences’ (p. 120); indeed, students could be regarded as interculturally responsive individuals without the need for measuring the extent to which they are interculturally competent. The term ‘responsiveness’ suggests reactivity, to receive or to react passively, thus neglecting the potential initiative and proactivity of individuals; as Giovanangeli and Oguro (2016) indicate, the notion of responsiveness ‘presupposes’ something and suggests a ‘sense of responding’ to experience or knowledge. ‘Intercultural responsiveness’ may be more appropriately described as ‘intercultural readiness’, which embraces both intercultural reaction and pro-action.

In Chapter 7, Jin provides three practical ways to promote interculturality in language teaching: to create supportive learning environments; to build teacher–student relationships; and to incorporate awareness of international political contexts. These three ways may underpin contemporary approaches and replace rote practices that focus on memorizing cultural elements. She also suggests two approaches to encourage positive interculturality: openness and ethnography. Openness was identified by language student participants in the interview enquiry as a way to understand themselves and their studies, while ethnography was used in research terms to place emphasis upon understanding participants’ socio-cultural behaviours in their language learning.

The final chapter summarizes the changing concepts relative to understanding interculturality in Mandarin Chinese learning in British universities, providing future considerations for academics, educators as well as policy writers. Throughout, the book offers both horizontal (political, economic, social) and vertical (historical, cultural) perspectives on interculturality and, in so doing, draws upon a range of resources, including government policy documents, research reports, teaching materials, and interviews. This approach enables Jin to interpret interculturality as a fluid process of ‘being’ as well as ‘becoming’, rather than merely as a means to teach students a set of skills and knowledge to ‘make’ them exhibit ‘intercultural competence’.

There are two key messages in the book: first, to consider beliefs, values, concepts and cultures through the eyes of development and change; and second, to identify and address hidden problems in language learning. In relation to the first message, Jin provides a detailed historical review of the UK’s ‘foreign’ language policy over the past seven decades, giving an in-depth look at the development and growth of political perspectives on British language policy. In so doing, she analyses perspectives on Chinese culture, policy changes, Confucian ideologies, and compares Chinese with Western culture. She spotlights outdated beliefs, such as ‘Chinese culture is more collectivist, Western culture is more individualistic’, and demonstrates how ideas have moved forward in a constantly changing world and may no longer be appropriate. In a similar vein, Jin analyses the front cover of *Chinese Language Learning for Foreigners* (p. 53), which was a text produced in 1993 by the Editorial Committee of Chinese for Foreigners

at the Beijing Foreign Studies University. She scrutinises the background image and the Chinese girl's appearance in the foreground, then interprets this in terms of what it might signify in the context of a stereotypical China and a developing modern China. She explains that in the late twentieth century, many images in European and American publications portrayed Chinese people wearing blue clothes and looking glum, sometimes riding a bicycle. Jin re-considers the information according to a modern China. The first message of the book is particularly effective because it makes readers challenge pre-existing cultural beliefs and assumptions: indeed, as Jin states, 'a developmental perspective is certainly needed.'

In relation to the second message, Jin weighs up empirical evidence in the context of reported issues. For example, she argues that some of the content in the text provided by Hanban and used for the Confucius Institute in Europe may 'appear propagandistic' (p. 27), for it 'tries to secure influence through promoting an idealized and simplified version of a national culture through language teaching and learning'. However, there is strong emphasis in contemporary Chinese policies on providing openness (Tisdell, 2008) and promoting a harmonious (Delury, 2008) world. Indeed, Confucius classrooms (e.g. <https://ci.ioe.ac.uk/about-us/confucius-classroom/>) progress ways for foreign students to get in touch with Chinese culture and learn Chinese language. In the meantime, Jin uses examples of students' experiences (both positive and controversial) to extract theoretical and 'lived' hidden problems in teaching Mandarin in British universities. For instance, one student stated that she refused to make friends with 'very Chinese people' (one assumes that the student is referring to those that are less interculturally responsive than others) because it 'never made her happy' and she doubted that 'it ever will'. Following this, Jin analyzed potential reasons for this viewpoint and suggested that educators should attend closely to students' study-abroad experiences and how these impact upon students' learning.

To conclude, this book recognises fuzzy and constantly changing views on interculturality through emphasis upon development. The publication coincided with the emergence of the global Covid-19 pandemic and racial resistance movements across the world, both of which raised awareness of cultures, peoples and their interactions. Jin provides ideas for individuals and communities to cope with change in the world, such as by maintaining an open mind and developing vision. This perspective is advocated to researchers, educators and students of cross-cultural studies, but also to citizens across the globe. Although the book's title focuses on 'learning' Mandarin Chinese in British Universities, 'teaching and learning' are regarded throughout as complementary to one another. This perspective resonates with Hofstede's (1986) earlier recognition of the difficulty of distinguishing teaching and learning for students and teachers from different cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, in the interview data, perspectives from students are foregrounded, while there are limited views from teachers, most of which concern resource and delivery issues, such as textbooks and teaching methods. As such, the experiences and reflections of teachers are somewhat neglected in this volume, even though

they are recognised as individuals of interculturality. Future research might extend insight into teachers' perspectives, enabling a wider contribution about interculturality in the domain.

Jin's book is logically structured and persuasively written. She spares no effort in providing detailed definitions of terms and problematizing concepts, while quotes from empirical interview data make the book interesting and provoking to read. Her endeavour thus offers a vital contribution to educational and cultural fields of study. Indeed, the book is primarily targeted at researchers and teachers working in cultural and language studies, especially in the intercultural field between China and the UK, and it will undoubtedly serve as a valuable reference tool for researchers, students, educators, policy-makers and language experts among others. The interview data reveal diverse opinions from students about their perspectives on learning Chinese, some of which may assist current tutors with addressing thorny issues in their teaching, some of which I have encountered during my work on the Chinese Whispers™ Project at the University of Hull (see www.chinesewhisperproject.co.uk). Above all, the book provides a wonderful guide for intercultural teachers since it offers critical and practical suggestions, and places emphasis upon learning processes above knowledge competences.

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