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Moving beyond 'intercultural competence': interculturality in the learning of Mandarin in UK universities

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Moving beyond 'intercultural competence': interculturality in the learning of Mandarin in UK universities

This paper reports on a study of the identity perceptions of undergraduate and postgraduate students of Mandarin at UK universities. Interviews with twenty-six students were conducted over a three-year period, most of whom were multilingual. Approximately half spoke English as an additional language. The remainder were native speakers of English. The paper shows how identities of learners of Mandarin are complex due to the varied experiences they brought into their studies. In light of the kinds of students found to be learning Mandarin, the paper advocates that approaches to teaching and learning Mandarin need to be more rooted in biographical, social and intercultural understandings of identity. To this end, the paper proposes *interculturality* in preference to the more traditional notion of *intercultural competence* as a conceptual frame for the learning of Mandarin. Perspectives based on interculturality question the limitations of traditional conceptualisations of otherness. Such perspectives attempt to locate interculturality within a more nuanced understanding of intercultural difference. The paper argues that in this way the teaching and learning of Chinese as a global language can more readily act as an effective means for learners to orient themselves to Chinese society and 'culture', and to the wider world.

Keywords: identity, interculturality, intercultural competence, Mandarin Chinese, ecology, biography

The ecological context of studying Mandarin in British universities

Discussions of intercultural communication and intercultural competence have for a long time tended to have a largely Euro- or Asia-centric orientation in relation to the participants under discussion, often in relation to the learning of English. Comparatively less has been written about these matters from the perspective of learning other languages (but see Choi, 2015; Fay & Davcheva, 2014; McNamara, 2013 for exceptions), or from the position of learners of languages other than English who are themselves located within an Anglophone context (but cf. Quist, 2013). In contrast to

these studies of intercultural competence which have gone before, the principal focus of the research on which this paper is based is the learning of Mandarin in the UK university sector, amongst learners whom some recent studies have described as 'cosmopolitan' multilinguals (Block, 2003; Brimm, 2010; Daskalaki, 2012). That is, many did not originate from the host nation – in this case, the UK – and they were already proficient in more than one language. Making up the remainder of this group were an equal number of UK nationals who could be described as English 'native speakers', but who also exhibited features of cosmopolitanism by being already conversant in more than one language, and by having previous experience of diverse cultural contexts through their family backgrounds. Twenty-six students in seven British universities were interviewed between 2012 and 2015. All were learning Mandarin Chinese,[1] or *Putonghua* 普通话**,** as part of their university undergraduate or postgraduate studies. The term Putonghua means 'common speech' and is the standardised and official national language of the People's Republic of China (PRC). It was officially adopted by the Chinese government as the name for Mandarin Chinese when the PRC was established in 1949 and may be distinguished from the Mandarin Chinese of Taiwan, which is known as *Guoyu* 国语, which refers to 'the national language' of pre-revolutionary China. In English, the term Mandarin, or Mandarin Chinese, is used in preference to 'Putonghua' or 'Guoyu' in scholarly publications and public discourse. Mandarin was the name given to the language by Europeans when they first encountered the formal, official speech, of Chinese government officers, otherwise known as Mandarins (Onions, 1976, p. 550). The issue of what to call the language reflects the political emphasis of the founders of the PRC. In addition to

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[1] References to 'Chinese' or 'the Chinese language', unless specified otherwise, are to the variety known in English as Mandarin.

Mainland China and Taiwan, the term Mandarin also encompasses the Chinese of Singapore.

Research into world language teaching and learning in Europe has identified a trend towards the inclusion of cultural dimensions and the development of intercultural competence (Borghetti, 2013; Sercu, 2006). This trend invites reconsideration of how Mandarin Chinese is taught. There is a wide range of language dialects across China, all of which have been categorised as 'Chinese'. In such circumstances, pinning down the term 'Chinese culture' can be problematic. Indeed, when researching or studying China, the country should be thought of as a cultural continent, not dissimilar to Europe, because the current geopolitical space that is the PRC is so vast and culturally varied. There are implications for teaching and learning Mandarin Chinese when taking into account the linguistic and cultural diversity of China. For example, learners of Mandarin whose purpose is to facilitate business may feel disappointed when they encounter difficulties in communication due to the dialect variations across the country. They may also need to communicate in culturally different ways in order to accommodate local customs and traditions. However, those studying the language for purely academic purposes may feel it is interesting to experience the variety of language dialects which exist. The superdiversity which may exist within a language has been discussed by Blommaert and Rampton (2011) in their ethnographic analysis of languages. They point out that language is increasingly denationalised, something that becomes evident as soon as a person enters almost any British university. In such locales, Chinese is no longer the language of a distant country: it exists in university clubs and societies, in corridors, lecture theatres, dining halls, student residences and classrooms. It is also to be found outside in the wider local community, as well as further afield within urban multicultural and multilingual contexts worldwide.

This paper adopts an ecological perspective and investigates student perceptions and experiences in relation to the varied and fluid dimensions that shape the historical, cultural, social and political environments which they inhabit. In recent years a focus on understandings of interculturality[2] from the perspective of the learning of Mandarin has acquired greater significance owing to the changing relationship between Europe and China, especially in relation to each continent's relative intercultural influence and reach. This is arguably declining for Europe and increasing for China, and is historically and economically shaped. It also arises within the changing context of modern foreign languages studies in Britain, as a response to this. For example, in recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of Chinese British residents as well as Chinese visitors including students to the UK. This has occurred alongside the development of numerous Confucius Institutes, in the UK and globally. The Confucius Institutes are sponsored by China's *Hanban*, the Chinese National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language. The purpose of the Confucius Institutes is to promote the Chinese language internationally and to support Chinese language programmes at educational institutions outside China. While visiting China during September 2015, George Osborne, then British Chancellor of the Exchequer, announced £10m in funding to support the teaching Mandarin in English schools, with a target of having 5,000 additional learners of Mandarin in schools in England by 2020 (GOV.UK, 2015). This paper is thus located within a growing public and political interest in the UK, and elsewhere, in learning Mandarin as a modern world language. It focuses on the interconnections between studying Mandarin and initiation into the wider 'Chinese culture' from which it springs. An ecological perspective on exploring Mandarin

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[2] The concept is explained below in the section *Interculturality and intercultural competence*.

teaching and learning in the UK, in this sense, refers to the complex and nuanced contexts that contribute to understanding interculturality in its educational, political, social, linguistic and cultural dimensions.

The work of scholars such as Kramsch and Uryu (2012) and Holliday (2013), who have adopted ecological thinking, were influential in establishing the methodological framework for this study. The idea of ecology is used as a metaphor to describe the range of co-existing and inter-related aspects that constitute a complex social field – the teaching and learning of Chinese in British universities. Thus, research on complex matters such as culture, language and learning allows investigation into how an individual perspective can be examined, but only in the context of the complex whole picture. In this framework growing competence in modern world language learning is viewed as a non-linear and dynamic process that emerges through interactions between cultural, historical, social and political phenomena, and personal experiences. Change, it is argued, does not occur in a simple cause and effect progression moving from point 'a' to point 'b' and thence to a recent state of point 'c'. This non-linearity leads towards more spatially conceived processes and sets of interrelationships. An ecological perspective allows for greater responsiveness towards people's individualised and changing views, which also means taking into consideration dimensions of space and time as well as political and cultural aspects. By adopting an ecological perspective, this paper advocates interculturality in preference to intercultural competence as a conceptual framework for the learning of Mandarin in UK universities.

Intercultural*ity* and intercultural competence

The paper discusses the way in which the students of this study express awareness of their intercultural identity in relation to their biographical context and the learning process. The term 'interculturality' implies a plurality of perspectives about culture and

identity, and it is this multiplicity of viewpoints and their intersections which can render the term quite difficult to define. Echoing a non-essentialist view of culture, Dervin (2010) has proposed the concept of 'interculturality' in place of 'intercultural competence' by emphasising the idea of acquiring awareness and sensibilities through life-long learning processes rather than through attempts to measure 'competence'. Intercultural competence suggests a preoccupation with measurement of things such as skills, aptitudes, and differences. In addition, intercultural competence places an emphasis on difference as it is constituted by cultural boundaries, and distance between essentialised cultures, or cultures as bounded entities. The focus of intercultural competence tends to be that individuals should acquire a range of dispositions and attitudes in order to become fully intercultural, rather than questioning power relations between social actors and agencies, as requiring a change in perspective and practice is political (Dervin & Risager, 2015; Hoskins & Sallah, 2011; MacDonald & O'Regan, 2013). Interculturality is a fluid process of being and becoming as well as describing an existing context and situation. The concept interculturality in this paper is used for referring to students' growing intercultural awareness and sensitivity through their encounters and experiences while studying another language, and to the outlook that students derive from the varied and complex influences that have shaped their own *biographical* sense of identity and their lives. In this sense, the focus is placed on students' own intercultural resources as intercultural beings and how they learn (or have learned) to 'become', as well as how they 'are' within the context of their studies. This definition views students' interculturality as fluid, dynamic and interconnected with the contexts where their studies happen, as well as being an aspect of their formative sense of self. Consequently, this quality of developmental being, and these processes of becoming and creating new social identities, are not easily measurable.

Zhu (2014/2016) defines interculturality in relation to how people exhibit their cultural identities in everyday social interaction. Bhabha (1994, p. 38, original emphasis) has laid claim to the significance not of 'cultures' but of the point of interconnection – the 'inter' – when writing how: 'we should remember that it is the "inter" – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture' (see also Dervin, 2011; Risager, 2007; Risager and Dervin, 2015). Although intercultural and intercultural*ity* are often used synchronously, Lavanchy, Gajardo and Dervin (2011) differentiate between the two, based on the idea that interculturality is focused on the processual dimension, rather than on a meeting between defined and distinct cultures. For instance, when two people are observed with each other, one from China and another from England, the processual perspective is not to examine this encounter from the position of each of the people who embody essential cultural differences; instead their encounter is examined for the social and cultural processes that are taking place when they meet. Risager and Dervin (2015) highlight the often essentialist uses of the concept of 'culture' and thus emphasise that adding the suffix '-ality' welcomes more dynamic and critical meanings. The concept of 'interculturality' in these terms implies a sensitivity and understanding towards the experiences, perceptions and viewpoints of people with whom one meets rather than merely acquiring learned ways of responding to people who are perceived as being in some senses 'other'. Additionally, the concept can describe a social reality of people and communities which are characterised by high degrees of co-existing, mixed cultural elements. As millions of individuals migrate, settle and merge in different ways with host communities, 'intercultural individuals' are becoming a new social force and presence, especially in major urban centres. This social demographic development has prompted a rethink about 'us', and models from which 'competence' approaches derive.

The concept of 'intercultural competence' does not readily apply to the participants in this research, in the sense of acquiring degrees of 'competence' through formal training or study. Their biographical pathways and experiences have contributed to their sense of interculturality. In some aspects, they are already interculturally aware, sensitive and responsive to culture, because their lives have exposed them to interculturality in one way or another. They also have interculturality by being involved in 'small cultures' (Holliday, 2013/2015) through their family and other social experiences. Thus, they can be described as 'intercultural individuals' with diverse identities and affiliations (Barrett, Byram, Lázár, Mompoint-Gaillard, & Philippou, 2014). This already-existing diversity amongst learners of Chinese has also been identified by Lo Bianco (2011, pp. xv-xvi), who notes that, '[t]he pedagogical risk of tying languages too closely to foreign places, foreign peoples and far away contexts is to misconstrue who the learners are in the classrooms of contemporary (i.e. multilingual and multicultural) societies. This is especially true for Chinese'. Therefore the idea of the intercultural individual is important to this paper. Although concepts such as 'intercultural speaker' and 'intercultural citizenship' (Byram, 1997/2012; Byram, Nichols, & Stevens, 2001) have been in circulation for some time, these terms have tended to relate to whether or not individuals display 'intercultural competence' as opposed to processual attributes on intercultural identity. It is for these reasons that interculturality is used in preference in this paper to the concept of intercultural competence.

The research approach

In the research on which this paper is based, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-six students studying Mandarin at seven universities across Britain. Students were selected to reflect different stages of their courses, varied courses at different universities, and a mixture of cultural backgrounds. The research recruited

participants who were readily available, but also were chosen from within this possible group to ensure a cross section in relation to age, nationality, first/home language, types of course, length of learning Chinese and experience in China before attending the course/site of visit, and other languages spoken. The language programmes being followed by students included those pursuing Chinese as their academic special subject degree as well as those following Chinese as part of a dual subject degree or simply a language module provided by the universities. For students specialising in Chinese, the majority of programmes were a four-year undergraduate study course, with one year taking place in China. For students not majoring in Chinese, there were different levels in the language programmes.

The interviews focused on the complex issues which surround interculturality from the perspectives of students. Excerpts from interviews and email exchanges with six participants are included in this paper. In addition to the interviews, students were invited to share images, photographs, Facebook conversations and blogs, as it was felt that students' opinions about themselves and their identities would also be reflected in these sources. A second round of interviews was conducted with the same students, including some sending responses via email, in order for the research to gain more in-depth data. Other sources of information not directly drawn on in this paper, for example documentary sources including university prospectuses and textbooks, were used to understand the context in which students' studies were being conducted.

As identified earlier, the study is located in a complex cultural and institutional ecology focussing on the social and cultural field of the teaching and learning of Chinese in British universities. This complex reality is in part knowable through experience and therefore obtaining information from students who are studying Chinese

offers one way of gaining some insight into this field. On the other hand, students' perspectives should be understood in relation to other distinct aspects in the field.

Thematic and discourse data analysis were used to arrive at findings and insights: the data was analysed for content or *what* was said (thematic analysis) as well as in relation to *how* participants spoke about their experiences and views, exploring their interpretations and how they constructed their worlds, asking *who* it was that was speaking (discourse analysis). Two of the coded themes form the basis of discussion in the following two sections. One of these relates to students' development of their cultural self-awareness through their studies of Chinese. The other highlights biographical understandings of identity and the 'intercultural individual'. Data from six research participants are presented to exemplify these themes accordingly. To protect their privacy, each participant has been given a pseudonym in this paper.

Identity and interculturality

The students interviewed maintained that the experience of studying Chinese had enabled them to develop their cultural self-awareness further, and it was evident that at the point of becoming engaged in their studies they had a wide range of experiences in relation to interculturality. Theo, who was British with English parents, and who was already proficient in French, stated his reasons for studying Chinese via email:

> Because my interest in Chinese history is an important part of my identity and personality, I feel it is important for me to pursue it to its utmost ends. Thus, by advancing my understanding of [the] language I am gaining the capability to pursue my interest to a higher level and because those interests are an important part of how I understand myself and what motivates me in life, I am, by advancing my interest, advancing my understanding of myself.

Theo was 19 years old. He was in his first year of a BA in History and Politics course

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and had not been to China when we had our interviews. He said he had been inspired by a number of books about Chinese history and had developed a personal interest in this area. By the time of the interview he was conversant with a range of different approaches to the historiography of China, and perceived a strong link between who he wanted to be as a learner – i.e. an expert user of Chinese – and his studies.

Nancy, was 24 years of old when participating the interview and was ethnically Chinese Malaysian, but was domiciled in Belgium and already spoke French, English and a little Cantonese. When I met her she was in the third year of her BA Chinese course and she had spent the second year of her study in China. She was made more conscious of her mixed identity from the way in which others responded to her when studying Mandarin in China. For instance, some men tended to view her through their own cultural lenses, initially perceiving her as Chinese because of her appearance and finding it difficult to reconcile this appearance with the fact that she was a 'Westerner' from a small country in Europe. She found the situation challenging because she did not conform to their idea of a certain kind of Chinese woman or Chinese female student. Nancy, was surprised to meet people whose perceptions of women altered depending on whether or not they were Chinese. It was not easy for an otherwise articulate and confident young woman to talk about this issue, as revealed by the following statement:

> I don't like how women are being treated in China, um, sometimes how women
> want to be treated in China. And it's like, I don't know if from, because all of my,
> um, when I was there, everyone was like, it's really scary [laughter], just so scary
> and as if, and I'm not skinny then I'm, like, fat, ugly or something. So it's, it's kind
> of like, a switch of like how they perceived women in China. It's very different
> from what I'm used to, um, like, um, and also, like, they, a lot of people, assume
> what, because they don't see me as like a, they see like Western, it's Western, um,
> and what is Chinese is Chinese.

While Nancy's ethnic characteristics and dress passed relatively unnoticed in her native

Belgium and at her university in London, in China they attracted a response that made her reflect more on her identity. As can be seen, her statement is peppered with hesitation, represented by 'um', which seems to reveal an attempt to think carefully before speaking and trying not to speak in a way that might appear to be culturally insensitive. Although her words show a tendency to generalise, she tries not to be negative about Chinese people, or to stereotype them, so that when she speaks about the reactions of some men as being 'scary', her voice is reduced to a whisper. The main point of presenting this extract is to illustrate that developing intercultural awareness is not necessarily a smooth or unproblematic process. Nancy's experience in China made her realise how different her life in Europe was and how this experience had shaped her views. In interviews, while she identified herself as having a 'co-heritage', she described her sense of being Chinese as 'vague' and more linked to certain behaviours, like eating with chopsticks, rather than having any deep-rooted identity.

In her interview Nancy spoke about being seen as partly 'Western' and partly 'Chinese'. Thus, she embodied an 'ascribed' intercultural identity in the eyes of others (Block, 2007). In addition, she also possessed an 'inhabited' intercultural identity (ibid), one which was not particularly aligned with any single nationality or language, since she was multilingual. This diversity, which up to then has constituted her taken-for-granted self-identification, suddenly becomes highly pronounced and visible to her when she is confronted by others who find it difficult to reconcile their outward perception of her with the characteristics she exhibits. Moreover, the self-presentation of her identity challenges the widely accepted idea of differences between the Occident and the Orient, which has been explored by many commentators (e.g. Buruma & Margalit, 2004; Said, 1978). Nancy also spoke of her sense of belonging:

When I go back to Belgium, you might find a really complete view of everything. Um, I did feel like when I was, um, like I was part of, like, a whole group, or like community, or like the country even, whereas here I feel more, like individual. Um, I notice that change, a lot like from becoming the individual to the part of something wider. Um, I don't know how, how that's changed [laughter]. Um, I don't know if you feel that when you are in England or when you are in China, just like the sense of the individuality and a sense of being part of a wider community. Do you feel like that?

Nancy's experience in the UK and in China, in terms of feeling isolated, like 'a fish out of water', is reflected in research on the experiences of study-abroad students (e.g. Holmes, 2004; Jackson, 2014; Welikala, 2013). The experiences of China which are related by Nancy suggest that university Mandarin courses should try to take into consideration the intercultural identity characteristics of learners, which may shape their experiences while studying abroad in China, because it would be an error to assume that all students have had the roughly the same experience – and are starting from a similar base – and that they will be able to react to new intercultural situations in the same way. To put this another way, the intercultural diversity of the learners needs to be matched by a consciousness of diversity in the Mandarin curriculum.

At least three different levels of identity association appear to exist in Nancy's account, namely, at the level of the individual self, at the level of the local community, and at the level of the nation. She became acutely conscious of these intermeshed dimensions when she was outside her day-to-day habitus, the taken-for-granted multicultural landscape that formed the social and cultural backdrop to her everyday life in Belgium and as a student in London. She experienced a tension between her perceived sense of self and the identities ascribed to her by strangers who did not come from social settings where diversity and interculturality are perceived as the norm. Nevertheless, Nancy demonstrates how well she negotiates her interactions with people

from other cultural backgrounds, even though it might be said that she implies essentialist views and values through her use of 'they' in relation to male perceptions about Chinese women. Her visits to China were accompanied by mistaken preconceptions on the part of those with whom she met, many of whom believed she was Chinese. She can be seen to embody interculturality in the sense of not possessing an identity fixed within nationally defined characteristics, and also knows what it feels like to engage with people whose understanding is challenged by such a mix of identities.

The sense of difference which Nancy experienced can assume sharp contours, as is illustrated by Lisa, who was born in Japan to British parents, and who had spent much of her childhood in Asia. She had knowledge of French, German and Latin. Lisa was 21 years old when we had our first interview. At that time she was on her year in China in the third year of her BA in Chinese. The following excerpt is from her second interview when she came back to Britain for her forth year of study. She felt it was very important to be able to speak Chinese and to understand 'Chinese culture' because of China's significance as a growing world power:

> While Chinese people can and might want to emigrate to the UK, and say, and then a generation down the line they could say they were British, but I don't think a white British person … can ever go to China and down generations later say 'I am Chinese'. Um, I think it's just a too complex a culture to be able to immerse yourself in that quickly. Um, I'm not saying this in a derogatory manner or I'm not being insulting in any way to either of the races. I'm trying not to do that. I'm just saying it's totally different, can be very difficult to feel, if you integrate into the Chinese society. Um, yes, so, in a way, in a way you always, I always felt like I'm an outsider. I think I always will do.

In the above extract, Lisa uses the words 'a white British person' for suggesting the physical characteristics that mark a person as being distinct from Chinese people, and so

reveals a more nation-based sense of culture – i.e. she sees culture in relation to wider national formations, such as China and the UK. Unlike Nancy, who has a vaguer sense of association with a defined nationality or ethnicity, Lisa demonstrates a self-defining association with a racial identity. While national identity used to be tied to a conception of intercultural communication as a dialogue existing between distinct cultures (Piller, 2011), globalisation has blurred the very notion of distinct cultures (Robertson, 1997). Despite this, it seems here that Lisa still perceives an essential cultural distinction between being 'Chinese' and being 'Western' or 'British'. With Lisa there appears to be a sense of cultural attitudes and practices creating fundamental challenges for acceptance and understanding of others. She seems to evaluate 'Chinese' and 'British' cultures as being distinct because she feels that it is easier for a Chinese person to be assimilated into the UK than for a 'white' British person to be assimilated into China. However, expressions that refer to culture are often political and ideological. Consequently, it is necessary to understand the social and historical context in which views of culture are raised. In the UK, due to a long history of colonialism and inward migration from around the world, there are for example, many people of Asian and African heritage who self-describe themselves as British, although they might qualify this by adding something else, such as Asian British, or Black British. *Examining cultural diversity in the UK today* (Osborne, Braysher, Cairns, & Eddy, 2001), a text for use with secondary school students, is an example of one of many initiatives aimed at inculcating a belief in the positive values of cultural pluralism in the UK. Importantly, such texts exemplify the officially sanctioned and promoted place of cultural pluralism in the school curriculum - an endorsement that has been present in the evolving English National Curriculum since its inception in the late 1980s and that continues to manifest itself in more recent government-sponsored publications such as *Diversity and*

Citizenship in the Curriculum: Research Review (Maylor & Read, with Mendick, Ross, & Rollock, 2007). Such initiatives can be traced back to an even longer history of central government Acts and White Papers acknowledging and welcoming the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic nature of the UK, such as the *British Nationality Act* of 1948 (UK Government, 1948) and The *White Paper on Immigration Restriction* of 1955 (UK Government, 1955), as well as a history of immigration and settlement that can be traced back to the middle of the last century and beyond. In addition to long established Jewish and Irish communities, for example, the UK has witnessed mass immigrations from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka from 1947 onwards, from the West Indies, particularly in the post-war period 1950-1960, from Uganda and Cyprus in the 1970s, and, more recently, from fellow members of the European Union such as Poland and Russia, as well as welcoming refugees from a variety of African and Asian nations. In China, by contrast, where there has historically been far more (internal) migration, mainly rural-urban, than immigration (see, e.g. Chan, 2013), it is much less usual for there to be this kind of formally recognised ethnic and cultural pluralism in relation to national identity, despite the nation's evident ethnic diversity. In contrast to the UK, in citizenship education in China there is a nationalistic/patriotic emphasis which may be said to have developed a false view of cultural *homogeneity* in China, for the purposes of creating and maintaining the sense of a unified Chinese national identity (Yu, 2014). Attention to issues of cultural diversity in China have recently emerged, in, for example, the 2014 edited collection of studies *Minority Education in China: balancing unity and diversity in an era of critical pluralism* (Leibold & Yangbin, 2014). For this reason, people who do not meet the popular expectation of what constitutes Chinese ethnicity are more likely to be assumed to be non-Chinese, and treated accordingly. When qualifying her views, Lisa reveals a growing awareness that some of her opinions might

be open to question and challenge. Elsewhere, though, Lisa exhibits her understanding of similarities between people from different societies, and thus demonstrates that her perspective of culture is not necessarily static or fixed.

Jennifer was a British female participant, whose first language was English. Prior to studying Chinese, she had learned French and German at school. She was 22 years old, had just finished her year in China and was back for her BA in Chinese in London when we had the first interview. At the time of interviews she had also started learning Cantonese. This student developed a blog when she was in China through which she shared her stories and thoughts on her experiences in Beijing and elsewhere on her travels. Jennifer became interested in learning Chinese when making friends with some visiting Hong Kong students at the school she attended. She viewed self-identity as being subject to change rather than being fixed: 'I think you become hybrid to some extent … you're taking on attitudes that you experienced'. She viewed the process of becoming hybridised (cf. Pieterse, 2009) as being one that involves awkward compromises arising from ordinary day-to-day interactions. The issue with the term 'hybrid' is that it suggests that someone who displays elements of two or more cultural traditions or heritages is somehow not authentic or recognisable; that they are somehow not 'normal'. The experience of Jennifer studying Mandarin in China sometimes assumed slightly comical dimensions, when she reflected on how an elderly Chinese man had insisted that she must be a Pamiri (i.e. a Tajik) from eastern Russia or western Xinjiang because she spoke Chinese to him and he did not expect this. When she followed this up, she was surprised by what she learned as shown in her blog.

> [W]hen I looked at photographs of Pamiri people I started to understand where
> they [i.e. others like the old man] had been coming from [i.e. what they meant] …
> Here were people whom I had never have thought were connected to me in any
> way, yet did actually look remarkably similar to me.

The above statement is evidence that Jennifer's sense of interculturality was being developed from a growing awareness of the range of cultural characteristics and features of people across the whole of China, as well as from her interaction with Chinese people from an older generation. Instead of reacting as though the elderly man had little understanding of who she was, she reflected on why and how he came to think of her in the way that he did. This response illustrates how students can acquire a sensitivity and responsiveness to the factors that shape the way in which Chinese people perceive them and learn from these in a productive way. The challenge for university Chinese language course designers and lecturers is to find ways of tapping into these aspects of intercultural awareness and using them as a resource for teaching and for students' learning. However, as revealed by many of the interviewees, cultural self-awareness can be a source of doubt, confusion and misunderstanding.

The 'intercultural individual'

This paper has identified people whose degree of subjective and processual diversity transcends simple notions of 'intercultural competence'; that is, they possess interculturality arising from their biographical pathways. Thus they may be understood as 'intercultural individuals'. A good example of such an intercultural individual is Felix, a Bosnian-born British national of Bosnian, Chinese and Welsh heritage. He was 20 years old at the time of our first interview and was in the third year of his BA in Chinese and Korean course after spending his second year in China. The following excerpts are from his second interview when he was starting his forth year of study in Britain.

> Generally, I got on fine in China. People were really pleasant. The culture wasn't a
> massive shock for me as it was for some of the others. My grandmother's from
> Taiwan, so I was just, I was used to it, like some Chinese stuff already, like I knew

the concept of face and stuff, coz she used the term, 'if you don't do right, you would lose your face'.

Felix revealed that one dimension of his home and family life was connected to China and being Chinese, and some aspects of 'Chinese culture' were part of his upbringing. His mother was Bosnian, but his father was half Chinese. Felix grew up speaking English, some Welsh, some Serbo-Croat and some Chinese. He also had knowledge of Russian, Italian, Korean, Spanish, Japanese, Thai, Hebrew and Latin. He expressed his mixed cultural identity in the following way:

> They had no idea where it is [Bosnia]. [Interviewer: Why?] That's just a personal thing to me … coz I was born there … I never identify as being British necessarily. I think like apart from me speaking English, there're a lot of things, culturally that I'm very different, coz I've been told maybe, since I was fifteen, I wasn't a very sociable person … so at home, like my grandmother used to live with us until she passed away, so I had a Chinese influence. Then my family had, I had a very Bosnian upbringing, and I went to a Welsh school, like I can't really speak Welsh anymore, but I still understand it. So I didn't have a lot of exposure outside my tiny village in Wales, and I spent most of my time at home, which would be a weird amalgamation of that Chinese Bosnian and a little bit of Welsh culture together. But I was identified as a Bosnian, because that's where I was born, and I have dual nationality. It's my first language, and my religion, perhaps it is everything probably that makes me as me. It's mostly from Bosnia. That's why I introduced myself as '*bohei ren* 波黑人 [Bosnian people]'. I am, [laughter] I'm not '*yingguo ren* 英国人 [English people]'.

This student provides an example of the phenomenon of having a plurality of 'selves' which is connected to his family background, language and religion. He shows the social diversity in his upbringing and how this affects his sense of himself. In addition, these aspects of his life also impact on the meanings he gives to his learning of Chinese. From the perspective of interculturality, it is necessary to access and understand the biographical contexts in order to be able to appreciate more fully these meanings.

> Oh yeah, I love *Denglijun* 邓丽君 [a popular Taiwanese female singer], because
> the channel I remember when being picked from the school [by car], you know
> like, I think it's *Qianqian quege* 千千阙歌 in Mandarin … I hated it so much.
> [Interviewer: Why?] I like it now. I love it. It's my favourite song, but when I was
> child, I was like, every day I heard that song. [Laughter] It's impossible to escape.

The above excerpt is evidence of Felix's Chinese identity. This Chinese aspect of his
life would not have been obvious to someone on meeting him, since he did not have a
distinctive Chinese appearance. He also spoke about facing cultural prejudices and
misunderstanding throughout his life and learning to develop coping strategies:

> I lived with her [my grandmother] for about three years, just with her, so … I was
> raised in a Chinese household … It sounds really odd. I kind of felt like that. It's
> normal for me to go home in Wales having chicken feet and stuff [laughter]. Oh,
> the kids made fun of me too in the playground as I was having a dried octopus in
> my lunchbox and like it's delicious. [Interviewer: Really, did you like it or not?]
> Oh, my god, yeah, I really liked it. I didn't care. When I was a kid, I was a real
> little freak.

This self-deprecating humour provides an entertaining example of how someone came
to terms with his complex intercultural identity. As Holliday (2012, p. 45) notes:

> [T]he imagining of Self and Other results in the substantive cultural product in the
> form of statements about culture. These are what people say or otherwise project
> consciously about their 'culture'. … They are thus the products of discourses of
> and about 'culture', and are ideologically driven by the global and [the] political …

Daily life can become a battle for 'intercultural individuals' to establish an identity in
'discourses of and about "culture"'; in other words, they need to combat the constant
attempt by others to position them in ways that are convenient to them. Intercultural
individuals often live in societies in which dominant ideas of 'culture' can produce
simplified accounts, where those who are ascribed as belonging to the dominant culture

are expected to conform to the discourses which correspond to it. Because Felix did not readily conform, there were times when others 'made fun of' him. Felix coped by laughing it off and saying that he 'didn't care'.

Bradley was another intercultural individual. He was Chinese-American and had studied Chinese for three years at a Confucius Institute in New York. He had also spent some time studying languages in Europe and was granted a scholarship to study at a high school in Beijing one month before the start of his UK undergraduate course. He was 19 years old and was in the second year of his BA in Chinese and French course when we had the interview. The following year he started his placement in China. He followed up our interview through email:

> I think a lot of cultural understanding in general arise[s] from national divisions and language divisions. I don't think I have gone through many cultural lapses due to my language ability, but definitely because of where I am from. People in China, like a lot of main world superpowers, like to separate themselves from everyone else. People would definitely label me because of how I looked and the fact that I was American in nationality, although I have lived in Europe for years. People expected me to act [in] a certain way, and when I didn't they were shocked.

The above testimony of Bradley reveals how much of his conscious life involved navigating his way through people's prejudices about the kind of person they expected him to be. He talks of the intersection between appearance, nationality, lived experience and language in relation to identity. Block (2007) and Dervin (2012) define this complexity in identities as constituted from multiple components. This student was able to speak Spanish, French and German and exhibited interculturality, both linguistically and subjectively, almost to the point where it had become his defining characteristic. When reflecting on his interview, Bradley affirmed via email that he had become critically aware of his position in relation to the many worlds he inhabits:

> I feel like I talk to foreigners when I talk to Americans, which are people from where I grew up, but I'm not European either, as they usually label me as American or Chinese. In the end, I'm influenced by a lot of cultures and philosophies, and religions. I think this is what makes language learning so enriching. In this sense, I am always in the 'third space', which can seem isolating at times, but in the end it is definitely enriching.

This excerpt raises the question of whether being intercultural entails living with a degree of alienation or whether this 'third space' can become an open social arena for intercultural communication. It is interesting that Bradley refers to the 'third space' in this way. He evidently feels that being intercultural entails living with a degree of alienation and otherness. However, he concludes on a more optimistic note with the comment that language learning and being in the third space 'is definitely enriching'. For both Felix and Bradley, then, their sense of interculturality consists more in how they perceive themselves in their diverse lives, than in how they are viewed by others. Nancy exemplified this to a high degree by, in Zhu's words, 'doing cultural identities' (Zhu, 2014, p. 208). Nancy said, 'I think I can make up my own identity'; 'I also decided that I shouldn't be like connected to other people's views, and especially with Chineseness'. She added, 'I don't really identify myself as anything, to be honest [laughter]. I don't think, oh, like, oh, I'm Western. I don't really think I'm Chinese or Dutch or Belgian, although my passport says something Dutch [laughter]'. This is a clear affirmation from a 24-year-old woman that an intercultural identity feels authentic and coherent to her. She says she can pick and choose between being Chinese, Belgian, Dutch, English, or even Malaysian. When none of these appears to satisfy the people she meets, she may eventually resort to claiming that she comes from London: 'maybe I'll just say London [laughter]'.

Conclusion

From the examples offered in this study, it appears that UK-based university courses for learning Chinese attract students who fit the description of learners of Chinese expressed by Lo Bianco (2011) earlier. At a certain level, placing Chinese as a 'foreign' language with a link to 'foreign places' and 'foreign people' may be questionable for such intercultural individuals. The diversity of learning purposes and levels also presents a challenge. Learners can be total beginners or they can have some proficiency. Some seek to learn Chinese for travel or business purposes, and others for cultural or academic reasons. However, this paper has revealed that these students bring significant prior experience and characteristics of intercultural sensitivity to their studies, and this finding is in marked contrast to the intercultural limitations identified by Guo (2007) in a study that focused on a group of British university students studying on a Chinese language course in China.

The nationality and cultural identities of many of the twenty-six students interviewed for this research were less clearly defined and the participants whose interviews are presented here each demonstrate a complex sense of belonging. Consequently, the dimension of already inherent intercultural identities in relation to the learning of a language is a significant factor that should be considered when deciding how Chinese should be taught. It is necessary to understand the varied backgrounds of students' lives, in terms of their origins, experiences, languages, and other characteristics of intercultural sensitivity, in order to be able to appreciate the meanings they give and resources they bring to the study of Chinese. UK university lecturers in Chinese need to ask questions such as why students wish to learn the language, and how their learning will affect the person they become.

In this paper, interculturality is presented as an integral aspect of students' culture and identity, largely derived from their biographical backgrounds and experiences. The reality is that students often bring intercultural identities to their learning of Chinese, and that this can be a significant factor in shaping how they learn and the value they attach to their studies. Therefore the notion that they only need to learn to be 'interculturally competent' neglects the already existing intercultural aspects of their lives and experiences: a person can be intercultural without being measured for 'competence'. There is an attempt, mainly within Europe, to systematise the assessment of intercultural competence in order to incorporate it into the measurement of workplace and training performance (Dervin, 2015; MacDonald, O'Regan, & Witana, 2009). The direction of research and development which draws on intercultural competence is of potential concern, since it involves an attempt to incorporate this idea into the framework of workplace discipline and control and reduce intercultural competence to a series of correct responses and attitudes that are reproduced within a test setting. Researchers working in the field of intercultural competence need to engage in critiquing the disturbing trends emanating from major intergovernmental organisations that seek to reduce intercultural competence to a series of measurable units of learned knowledge. In contrast, this paper advocates interculturality with its processual emphasis on the 'being' and 'becoming' of learners. Such an approach views the inclusion of cultural elements as not being limited to information and content, but involving intercultural processes where teaching and learning the language become an act of cultural engagement in the interculturality of learners, in their past, their present, and their future as speakers of Mandarin in the world.

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