Students’ intercultural experiences in an internationalizing university in Shanghai: A critical discursive perspective

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Internationalization of higher education in China

• Total number of inbound international students in China reached 489,200 in 2018 (1st in Asia, 3rd in the world) (Institute of International Education 2018)

• Why internationalization?
  • Neoliberalism? Marketization of higher education?
  • The diplomatic mission of cultivating “international personnel who are well-versed in Chinese and friendly towards China” (Tian & Lu 2018, 59)
  • The national project of building ‘World-class Universities’ (WCU) (Huang 2015)
English-Medium-Instruction Master’s degree programmes

• A major way to attract international students

• Scholarships
Intercultural communication in IHE

• Institutional structure
  • Structural diversity of the student body composition alone is not enough (Brown & Denson 2011; Yu & Moskal 2018).
  • Textbooks on intercultural communication (Zhu, Handford & Young 2018)
  • Extracurricular activities, tutoring services, and other social resources (informal curriculum) are highly relevant to foster students’ intercultural communication (Aurthur 2017; Hendrickson 2018; Leask 2009, 2015)
Intercultural experiences in the context of internationalization of higher education (IHE)

• Three strands of research
  1. Social psychology: cultural shock/cultural contact, western context, deficit view
     1. How (well/badly) Asian students adapt to the Englo-European higher education norms?
  2. Essentialist view on nation/region-bound culture: the individuals are identified as belonging to a particular cultural group based on prescribed features extracted from a diverse range of possible candidates for inclusion (Tian & Low 2014, 284)
  3. Critiques (Machart, Dervin & Gao)
Intercultural experiences in the context of internationalization of higher education (IHE)

• Three strands of research
  • 2. Social constructionist paradigm: investigate students’ intercultural self-(trans)-formation in the IHE context (Marginson 2014; Wang 2012)
    • Intercultural identity: “an open-ended, adaptive and transformative self-other orientation” (Kim 2008: 364)
    • Multi-factors involved in affecting students’ intercultural communication
      • Sociocultural, politico-economic, personality, intercultural strategic resources (Heng 2018; Wu 2015)
      • Chinese students studying in Anglophone universities
Intercultural experiences in the context of internationalization of higher education (IHE)

• Three strands of research
  
  • 3. Ecological paradigm: The interplay in between the macro-, meso- and micro-dimensions of IHE as relevant to students’ intercultural (Burdett 2014; Elliot, Baumfield, Reid & Makara 2016)
    • Collins (2018): a case study in the UK
    • Kudo, Volet & Whitsed (2018: 101):
      • “a vague or loose operationalization of key concepts (e.g., intercultural interactions, contact, relations, relationship, friendship)”
      • “the dominance of studies with a narrow focus on the individual”
      • Lack of attention to “intercultural relationship development…located in a particular environment”
Students' intercultural experiences in the IHE context in China

- Studies on the historical evolution of policies and rationales concerning the reception of international students
- Survey-based studies (Akhtar, Pratt & Bo 2015; Wu, HU & Hao 2017)
- Qualitative studies
  - Kim's stress-adaptation-growth cycle (Tian & Lowe 2014)
  - Li (2015): language proficiency, varied proximity between home and host cultures as perceived and negotiated by the students
Research objectives

• To position policy as a fluid, networked and multi-layered process
  • To address “the temporally and spatially fluctuating networked contacts between different actors (human or institutional), and the dynamics between those contacts” (Saarinen 2017: 556)

• To understand the discursive construction of ‘culture’ and ‘intercultural communication’ by multiple actors in multiple sites in the Chinese IHE context

• To understand how these discourses are involved in structuring and shaping students’ intercultural experiences in EMI Master’s degree programmes
Conceptual tools

• (Neo-)essentialist cultural dichotomies
  • Binary oppositions based on stereotypical attributes
  • Establish moral hierarchies between different cultural groups

• Othering
  • “the process of representing an individual or a social group TO RENDER THEM distant, alien or deviant” (Coupland 1999, 5)
  • Othering can be multi-/inter-sectional across multiple axes of differentiation (Dhamoon 2009, 61).
Conceptual tools

  • A critical cosmopolitan mindset
    • Openness towards and care about global others
    • Critical, self-reflexive inquiry about one's own epistemic assumptions and the development of epistemic virtues that help understand and appreciate divergent cultural experiences
    • Constant exploration and imagination about alternative discourses when articulating those experiences
Research context

- One of the top-rate universities among one of the earliest universities in Mainland China to receive international students
- Over 7,000 international students on campus
- Around 2,100 of them are full-time degree students
- 25 EMI programmes (4 in political sciences and international relations)
Research methodology

• Data collection
  • Ethnography as a research perspective
    • Classroom observations and fieldnotes (4 disciplinary courses in two consecutive semesters)
    • 18 students in the first-round interview
    • Jin, Larry, & Ram in the second-round interview + 3 Chinese students + 3 international students (India, Italy & the UK)
  • Document collection
    • promotional video for international student recruitment
    • linguistic landscapes on campus (English/bilingual/multilingual signage)
    • WeChat public accounts for international student affairs and student associations
    • course syllabi, assignments & feedback
    • national/municipal/institutional policies on international student affairs and EMI degree programmes
## Overview of student informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Previous degrees and exchange/working experiences</th>
<th>Programme type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jin</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>BA (Korea), MA (the US), internship in Canada (1 year)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>BA (China), exchange in Japan (0.5 year) and Korea (0.5 year)</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Lin</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>BA (China), exchange in the US (1 year)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Yue</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>BA (China), exchange in Taiwan (0.5 year)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ram</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>BA (Thailand), exchange in the US (0.5 year)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Flora</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Philippine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>BA (Philippine), MA (Philippine)</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Summer program in Mainland China (1 month), BA (the UK)</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>BA (Brazil), English language learning in New Zealand (3 months), journalist in Brazil (1 year) and China (3 years)</td>
<td>2-year EMI Master</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>David</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>BA (the US), exchange in China (1 year)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>BA (the US)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Joanna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>BA (Britain), internship in Kenya (1 year), Chinese language learning programme in China (1 year)</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Celina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>BA (Canada), civil engineer in Canada (2 years)</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Roman</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>BA (Costa Rica), research assistant in Costa Rica (1 year)</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Ying</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
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<td>BA (China), exchange in the UK (0.5 year)</td>
<td>2-year double-degree with France</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Emilie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>BA (France)</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>BA (Germany); internship in the US (1 year); exchange in the UK (0.5 year)</td>
<td>2-year joint-degree with Sweden</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Luxemburg</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>BA (the US)</td>
<td>Exchange student from the University of Luxemburg</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Cecelia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>BA (Italy), English language learning in the UK (4 months)</td>
<td>Exchange student from the University of Bocconi, Italy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research methodology

• Data analysis
  • Multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996)
  • Intertextual analysis
  • Content analysis
Promotional discursive construction of cultural dichotomies (west vs. east, modern vs. tradition)

• S1: I was so surprised that a city can be so western [visual cue: the Bund], and at the same time hold so much of the Chinese heritage [visual cue: Yuyuan Garden and Jing’an Temple]. Shanghai works cashless, so everyone pays on Wechat or on Alipay [visual cue: the student talking to the camera].

• S2: When I first came up here, I heard about the four inventions of China [visual cue: the student talking to the camera]. But these like the four new inventions. Just the other day I was riding my Ofo bike, which is a public used bike. And I was using my headphones that I got from Taobao. [visual cue: acutuality footage of S2 bicycle riding on campus] And when I got to *** [a shopping center], I used my phone to pay for some hotpot. I love hotpot. [visual cue: the student talking to the camera]

• S3: When my girlfriend here, I’m gonna spoil here with all those presents to decorate her into a proper Chinese lady, like umbrella, with the fan, and silk scarf on her neck. [visual cue: the student talking to the camera]
Promotional discursive construction of cultural dichotomies (English vs. Chinese)

Snapshot of the promotional banner of the ‘Language Buddy’ Association (photo taken on September 15, 2018)
Promotional discursive construction of cultural dichotomies (west vs. east, foreign vs. domestic)

In the next two months, you will have the chance to see:
- Korean boys performing cool Hip-pop
- Blonde girls singing affectionately
- Handsome black boys rapping
...

Feel passionate atmosphere just like a foreign talent show

Enjoy performances from all over the world

Listen to beautiful singing of different types.
Cultural dichotomies embedded in the curricula

• cross-cultural comparison based on essentialist views of Asian vs. Western political cultures in the course content

• pictograph by Yang Liu

• Cross-cultural communication for business Settings (Zhu 2017)
Dichotomies reinforced by student management and recruitment policies

• The admission requires English language proficiency equal to IELTS 6.5 or above for those who have never been living or studying for more than half a year in English-speaking countries

• Separate arrangements for teaching areas and course selection requirements
Dichotomies reinforced by student management and recruitment policies

• International student residences

• 第二十八条 对留学生的物质生活要适当照顾，但不同于对外宾和专家的招待。《外国留学生管理办法》（国发 [1985] 121号）

• 第二十四条 高等学校应当为国际学生提供食宿等必要的生活服务设施，建立健全并公布服务设施使用管理制度。国际学生在学校宿舍外居住的，应当及时到居住地公安部门办理登记手续。（教育部 2017）
• Article 28 Take proper care of international students regarding their material necessities though the relevant standards vary from those for foreign delegates and experts...Cars and housing facilities should be arranged with funding support in order to cater to the needs of international students. (Management Regulation for Foreign Students approved by General Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China in 1985)

• Article 24 Higher education institutions need to provide international students with necessary dining and dormitory facilities and to establish, refine and publicize relevant management regulations. International students who do not reside in student dormitories need to complete residential registration in time at the local police office. (Regulation on the Reception and Education of International Students by Higher Education Institutions, Regulation No. 24 co-issued by Ministry of Education, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Public Security of the People’s Republic of China on March 20th, 2017, in effect since July 1st, 2017)


Feel & Know China（感知中国）— Cultural activities

• dumpling making
• dragon-boat races
• knowledge contests on Chinese ancient civilization
• traditional Chinese craftsman workshop on paper cutting and pottery
• historical heritage tourism excursions in and around Shanghai

• Self-imposed othering as if the only way for Chinese to exert a legitimate cultural identity is “to trace way to the time of a hypothetical virginity” without being able to “tolerate at all the evidence of foreignness” (Qu 2013, 151)
"China Discourse" is a political term that came into being after the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCCPC) in 2013. In Decision of the CCCPC on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening the Reform, an influential governmental document issued after that Plenary Session, under a section entitled “improving cultural opening” it states that China needs to “expand international cultural exchanges, strengthen the international communication capacity and the international discourse system, and promote Chinese culture around the world [扩大对外文化交流，加强国际传播能力和对外话语体系建设，推动中华文化走向世界]” (CCCPC, 2014).

China Practices, China Paths, China Stories, Chinese Voices, China Discourse [中国实践、中国道路、中国故事、中国声音、中国话语]
Researcher: Do you think the national or international policy helped with fostering interaction among international and home students?

Lucy: I think that interactions that happen tend to happen from the bottom up. Or certainly like, I don’t feel any kind of national or institutional policy has ever helped me to interact with Chinese students. Their activities are more like organized fun whereas like most foreign students who will get together, we just set up time and place, like hang out...Maybe more stuff like WeChat groups as we had among both Chinese and international students in our department.
Multi-sectional interpersonal othering

- Policio-economic othering
- Linguistic/academic othering
- Experiential othering
Politico-economic othering

• Almost never. To be frank, Chinese students directly admitted into the EMI Master’s programmes are outstanding on average. They [The international students] went through simple procedures of application and got admitted without meeting up similar high academic standards. I understand that’s because our university wants to increase its level of internationalization…But when they came here, they made me feel that “we arrived at China, a developing country, a place where access to the Internet is restricted. We who came from the free world will show you how we live, what our world looks like, you know?” That’s the impression they gave me…Such a sense of privilege is ingrained. (Dan, 21, China)
Linguistic/Economic othering

• Even though my English is fluent, I think I can talk more with Asians. I feel more comfortable with Asians. When I talk in Thai, I’m really sarcastic and funny. When I talk in English, I don’t have that kind of skills...Some of my international friends are really academic, but I couldn’t talk that much academically. When I talk to my Thai friends, some of them can talk about politics, too. Even though I might have a hard time finding the words, it’s my mother tongue, so it’s like easier to express how I think about the issue.
Experiential othering

• International students have their own ‘bubble’. It happens everywhere. If you share more cultural commonality, you will naturally form a clique very quickly...And the structure does not encourage such interaction [between international and local Chinese students]. It’s not organic. You have to pursue it yourself. We differ in terms of lifestyle and teaching style.
Self-cultivated orientation towards critical cosmopolitanism

• I think a lot of issues here are just people applying their own country’s or their hometown’s set of rules onto a completely new place. They think these rules are the right rules because these are the rules they’ve ever experienced. I think the very simple example is the traffic rules. It’s very different here from where I came from in the US. Maybe I would have expected people to stop and let people go before turning right, but now I would just stop and let them turn right. It’s just adjusting to a new set of rules...It's not wrong but it's just different. (David, 23, the US)
Self-cultivated orientation towards critical cosmopolitanism

• They [International students] brought us some new visions of life. Like in China, most of people need to complete certain missions at certain ages, such as when to find a job, to buy an apartment, to get married and have children. To enter the university and successfully graduate is to pave your way for those missions. If you do not follow the expected trajectory, your life seems to be a disaster. With my Chinese classmates, they often talk about doing internship in leading enterprises or getting job offers with high payment. I’m not interested in that. International students showed me alternative ways of life and eased my anxiety of being ‘different’. (Qiping, 22, China)
Conclusion

- Distinct from the neoliberal concerns towards institutional discourses on intercultural communication in previous studies situated in universities of English-speaking countries (Collins 2018), the institutional discourses on culture and intercultural communication resonate intertextually with a range of national and municipal discourses specific to IHE in China.

- The national agenda of strengthening China’s soft power together with institution-level centralized model of international student management have partly supported the adoption of cultural dichotomous discourses to structure students' intercultural experiences in the present case (Huang 2015; Ma and Zhao 2017; Yang 2014).
Policy Implications

• Educational policies which take into account equality between home and international students in terms of management and resources allocation.

• Campus space for ‘natural’ encounters, when combined with critical pedagogy, can facilitate the emergence of innovative and grounded discourse on ‘interculturality’.
References


