

## **Getting to know you: The development of intercultural competence as an essential element in learning Mandarin**

Tinghe Jin\*

*Institute of Education, University of London, UK*

The role of cultural dimensions in the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language in the UK is not as fully understood as it needs to be, especially in relation to developing students' abilities with intercultural communication. This paper adopts an ecological perspective on learning another language and seeks to contribute to the field of teaching and learning a foreign language through an investigation of the perceptions and experiences of university-based learners of Chinese. Learners' perceptions and experiences might productively be conceptualized with an ecology metaphor which provides analysts with a complex view of the learning and use of language based on a consideration of time and space.

This present study focuses on one aspect of a broader research project in which the author investigated a group of students studying Chinese at universities in London and other British cities whose construction of culture and intercultural competence while learning Chinese as a foreign language was based on their learning experiences and intercultural encounters. In what follows we consider the concept of 'language distance' in order to understand both the linguistic and social space that students of Chinese need to overcome. Drawing from the research data, the paper also considers the notion of intercultural communication and learning as arising from a seamless interaction between different layers of fluid social processes. The paper argues that Chinese as a foreign language in higher education can provide resources for developing intercultural dimensions of learning. The paper concludes by stressing that changes in approach to teaching and learning Chinese are increasingly necessary because of the rapid changes that are taking place within the social and political ecology of China and the Chinese language.

**Keywords:** culture; intercultural competence; language ecology; Chinese as a foreign language; language distance

### **Developing intercultural competence**

There is a long tradition of research on English as a foreign language that has focused on aspects of intercultural competence. Building on the knowledge developed from this tradition of research, the present paper focuses on the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese (referred to as 'Chinese' in this paper) as a foreign language in the UK in the higher education sector and examines how the targets 'culture' and 'intercultural competence' are constructed and understood by learners. I locate this analysis within a growing public and political interest in learning Chinese as a foreign language and related concerns such as the interconnection between language and culture.

Accompanying increased awareness of multiculturalism and globalization, education has come to play a crucial role in the development of students' sense of global citizenship (DfES, 2002). Foreign language education has specifically been accorded the responsibility of enhancing students' intercultural competence, something which has been emphasized in educational policy documents, such as the *Review of Modern Foreign Languages Provision in England* (Worton, 2009). The

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\* Email: [tinghejin@gmail.com](mailto:tinghejin@gmail.com)

importance of culture in the context of language teaching and learning has long been appreciated, such as through the work of Crawford-Lange and Lange (1984) who showed how issues of culture permeate language learning and teaching. Valdes (1990: 29) took this further, arguing that every teacher and learner should be aware of the influence of culture to 'make the most of it'. This was expanded by Pachler (1999), whose view was that language is a part of culture, and that it is through language that culture is described. Such a view built upon earlier works by Kramersch (1993) and Byram (1997) that have since become standard sources for reference in the field.

Following this vein, Piller (2011) is one example of a linguist who highlights the way that languages offer distinct concepts and tools through which speakers can experience the world. Baker (2011) summarizes these processes by asserting that learning a foreign language will influence learners' views of the world and thus have an impact upon learners' conceptions of self, a view echoing Lantolf's (2000) earlier work. There has been a move away from simplistic ideas of languages structuring perceptions at a deep cognitive level and we see Kramersch (2011: 364) describing processes of 'making and organising meaning through signs, symbols and conceptual metaphors that not only refer to the outside world but shape the minds of their users and receivers as well'. Her work builds upon long-held views that language learning does and should include culture, which contributes to learners' perceptions and attitudes toward otherness and different cultures (Byram *et al.*, 1991). The field of studies of intercultural communication has expanded in recent years and an accessible edited collection is that by Jackson (2012), which exemplifies recent currents of research within the field.

Holliday (2011: 5) examined language and culture from both essentialist and non-essentialist perspectives, arguing that the essentialist view 'presents people's individual behaviour as primarily defined and constrained by the cultures in which they live, so that the stereotype becomes the essence of who they are'. By contrast, a non-essentialist view of culture 'presents a more complex picture' 'with difficult to pin down characteristics' being ascribed to language. Postmodern and critical perspectives have adopted a sceptical interrogation of common perceptions of culture (essentialist views of culture) in language education. According to Holliday (2011), the non-essentialist view of culture opens the possibility of understanding culture as being individualized, emergent, and dynamic. This is the reason why this research project rests upon non-essentialist views and explores the complexity and diversity of responses and experiences.

By adopting a non-essentialist view, ideas of culture can be examined through the discourse patterns of individuals. 'We should not think in terms of encounters between different language and culture systems, but rather of encounters between individuals with their own meanings and cultural capital' (Byram, 1997: 40). Within the sphere of intercultural communications, this means not viewing people who are from different cultural backgrounds as predominantly embodying the culture of which they are a part as a commonly shared and experienced phenomenon, but as something that is experienced distinctively by the individual. Therefore, when examining 'culture' in intercultural communication, it can be considered from the perspectives of discourse: ideology, face systems, forms of discourse, and socialization (Scollon and Scollon, 1995).

Kramersch went further to explain the connection between the discourse and individual culture:

... if they understand that culture is symbolically mediated through words, sounds and images, they are more apt to agree that the discourses that surround us (from the media and popular culture to the conversations we have with others) structure our imaginations and sensibilities and are in turn structured by them. These discourses are what we call 'culture'. (Kramersch, 2011: 365)

Intercultural competence therefore becomes a process of a person learning appropriate ways of entering into discourse fields in order to be able to function within the social group that arises from that field.

Within the higher education sector, intercultural awareness, understanding, and competence have been identified as key learning outcomes for language graduates (QAA, 2007). Worton's (2009) research takes account of feedback from employers to emphasize the significance of developing graduates' intercultural competence in order to enhance their employability, a position also adopted by Arabski and Wojtaszek (2011). Based on a review of recent research, Perry and Southwell (2011: 453) summed up the concept of intercultural competence as 'the ability to effectively and appropriately interact in an intercultural situation or context'. Intercultural communication is concerned with interactive processes that occur between individuals who have experienced different ways of life, which then fundamentally influences how they interact with each other (Corder and Meyerhoff, 2007) and also how they reconfigure their own senses of identity. This means penetrating the social space of the other, which is shaped by a discourse field. While there has been an expansion of writing and research in the field of intercultural competence, such as can be found in the edited collection of papers by Deardorff (2009), too little research has considered the specific context of learning Chinese as a second or foreign language.

Throughout the UK, the profile of teaching and learning Chinese in the higher education sector has grown in recent years. The UK government now encourages universities and schools to provide Mandarin courses and soon Chinese will be included as one of the languages to be taught in schools in England.<sup>1</sup> Recent expansion in Chinese language teaching now far exceeds the provision described by Wang and Higgins as recently as 2008. Robin Hood Primary School in Birmingham, Greasby Infant School in Merseyside,<sup>2</sup> and Rosendale Primary School in West Dulwich, London are three of the schools that are already signed up to take part in the programme.<sup>3</sup> Zhang and Li (2010: 89) report on the views of a head teacher who argued that: 'it would be foolish for his students not to understand Chinese language and culture when leaving school'. Within the British higher education sector, the development of Chinese language learning is in line with the employment demands for graduates with Chinese language skills.

Although there have been some investigations into the teaching and learning of Chinese within UK settings (Wang and Higgins, 2008), there remains a gap in understanding the role of culture while learning the language and how it may shape a learner's perceptions. This paper, therefore, looks within the UK university context at how far the Chinese language mediates learners' ways of knowing the target culture while developing abilities to communicate with people from the target country. A higher education setting was chosen because of the rapid expansion of Mandarin learning currently taking place in colleges and universities.

## **Methodology**

The present research arose out of earlier doctoral studies investigating undergraduate and postgraduate Mandarin learners' construction of culture and intercultural competence. The present paper is based on data from interviews which were conducted with learners of Chinese as a foreign language in a London university. To balance this group of respondents the study also interviewed students of Mandarin from other UK universities. The language programmes being followed by respondents included those following Chinese as their academic special subject degree as well as those following Chinese as part of a dual-subject degree. For students majoring in Chinese, the programmes were a four-year undergraduate programme with one year taking place in China. For students not majoring in Chinese, there were different levels in the language programme. Among students who were not majoring in Chinese there were undergraduate and postgraduate students. Most participants in this research have been studying Mandarin for at least one year in China. There were 30 respondents who were from European Union countries,

mostly Britain. Most were native speakers of English. Participants also came from Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Belgium (French and Flemish). There was one student from the USA. The sample arose from opportunity, taking into account the need to establish some gender balance. The age profile ranged from 20 to 27 years of age. The interviews took place either within university rooms or via Skype, and followed prior discussion and contact.

An ethnographic approach has been employed, supplementing data from interviews. Additionally there were follow-up discussions with respondents designed to elicit more detailed information about their own backgrounds and personal lives. The research engaged with the respondents over a period of time, recognizing the fluidity of their perspectives and experiences while they were learning the target language. In recognition of the emergent nature of such perspectives and experiences, it has been necessary to sustain contact with respondents over a period of time, eliciting and refining data. Initially, semi-structured interviews were used to encourage participants to share their travel stories and intercultural communication experiences. In addition to verbal explanations, videos, photographs, and texts for teaching and learning were also used to investigate the cultural aspects associated with their language learning.

I used a discourse analysis approach to investigate how individuals understand themselves and their roles in their worlds and consider how speakers give language specific meanings within specific situations, which are linked to their experiences. The data revealed that the learners constructed ideas about culture and intercultural dialogues during the time they were acquiring degrees of competence in Chinese. Their responses revealed the complex patterns of linguistic and cultural landscapes surrounding 'Chinese' as a language.

### **The conceptual framework**

As the teaching of Chinese expands across the UK higher education system, attracting a growing number and diversity of students, there is value in focusing upon how students understand the intercultural dimensions of the field of study they are embarking upon. The research project has been informed by the complexity theory of Larsen-Freeman (1997), in alignment with aspects of Kramsch's (2008) ecological perspective on foreign language education. These have been used because of their close connection with thinking about the multilingual and multicultural social environment, where growing competence in learning foreign/second languages is now viewed as a non-linear process that emerges through interactions between social, cultural, historical, and political phenomena and experiences. The experience in China provided an opportunity for learners to gain access to language use in context, such as living in a family home, which helped develop learners' understanding about language in the society. As Byram (1997) suggests, while learners' intercultural competence is affected by the foreign language teaching they receive, they principally develop intercultural competence through their own experiences and reflections. An ecology metaphor suggests specific ways to investigate learners' perceptions and experiences.

Several features of the Chinese language create a challenging experience for learners, in the form of what I describe as 'language distance'. The term 'language distance' refers to the structural differences that exist between the Chinese language and the learners' native languages, which in the case of the present research are alphabetic languages (Chung, 2008). Additionally, this concept describes the social conventions that are carried through the language which cannot simply be learned by acquiring formal knowledge of the structure. It is therefore not perceived as simply the degree of mutual intelligibility as evidenced in the research of Chiswick and Miller (2004). The concept of language distance is used to examine the wider experiences of learners who are familiar with alphabetic languages when they learn Chinese. An example of how this manifests itself is when a person who has been brought up within an alphabetic

culture encounters a community in which all of the street signs are in ideographic form. They therefore cannot decipher what is written. Language distance, on the other hand, can become a motivating factor for students. The language moves beyond being a semiotic and communicative tool and becomes symbolic of a particular culture that is often imaginary, such as the exoticism of orientalism famously described by Edward Said (1995).

### **Culture, language, and individualized cultural expression**

This sense of overcoming distance in language is expressed in an interview with one of the female respondents, a second-year student, who attempts to explain her perception of the relationship between her learning of Mandarin and culture:

I want to communicate with people in Chinese, or to be able to immerse myself in Chinese culture, so I want to watch Chinese TV, understand it ... also I want to live in China or Taiwan in the future. ... And I thought like if you cannot speak a local person's language, you can never go on to a deeper level with them. I feel always there's a barrier.<sup>4</sup>

Language and culture are very well related. ... Because how could you get to know a language and not knowing about the culture. If you go to learn the language, you have to go to the country, if you're in the country you have to learn the culture, so you can't offend people, so that you can fit in.

In these statements the student is linking her learning of the language and the culture, sensing that simply learning the language is insufficient. She presents a list of things that are about culture that she wants to be able to achieve through learning the language. She has identified learning the language as a way of overcoming the barriers to communication with local people, in local settings, in the locally accepted ways, not just as a tool for communication. This implies a need to gain a deeper understanding of local culture. She has identified knowing the culture as the key to using the language properly. The interview data reveals some of her outlook but other data concerning her cultural background and identity is necessary for the interpretation of cultural and linguistic competence. In this instance the respondent comes from a British Pakistani family background and this may have influenced the way she constructs her aims for learning Chinese.

This initial exploration highlights the role played by individual understanding of culture in language learning and communication, which needs to be intercultural rather than narrowly linguistic. Language is commonly viewed as being primarily a semiotic way of representing culture (for example, Halliday, 1978), 'through what it says or what it refers to as an encoded sign (semantics), and through what it does as an action in context (pragmatics)' (Kramsch, 1998: 15). Here I interpret 'semiotic' as meaning that which is conveyed through signs and symbols that in turn encode perceptions and values operating within a culture. 'Culture' is regarded as a fundamental research concept within the field of intercultural communication (Piller, 2011) even though it is notoriously difficult to define. I use two categories to define the term culture based on the thinking of Yin (2009: 76):

- 'the so-called advanced or formal culture, which is more related to "civilization", such as geography, history, literature, art, music, politics, economy, education, philosophy, law, religion, moral concepts, inventions and accomplishments in science and technology etc. These cultural aspects usually constitute cultural knowledge and information, which often serves as cultural background knowledge.'
- 'popular culture or "deep culture", which is more related to everyday life including everyday living style, patterns of behaving, both verbal and non-verbal, thoughts, values, beliefs, social customs and habits, social norms and conventions, etc.'

The latter sense of ‘culture’ as cultural content in foreign language education is essential for intercultural communication, as these cultural aspects contain linguistic and non-linguistic behaviours in daily life (Yin, 2009). For example, some of these cultural features are lexical meanings, colloquial usage of expressions, and pragmatic rules for use in many linguistic forms, ‘which often constitute cultural barriers in learning a foreign language and using it in communication’ (Yin, 2009: 75). However, much of the teaching of Chinese presupposes it has a place within the first sense identified by Yin as a field of study connected with formal high culture and authorized forms of knowledge. There is therefore a tension inherent in the term ‘culture’.

“Culture” in language teaching and learning is usually defined pragmatically as ‘the culture associated with a language being learnt’ (Byram and Grundy, 2002: 193). This presents a distinct problem when considering Chinese because of the sheer diversity that such a categorization encompasses. As shown in the interview transcript above, one purpose of learning the language is to be able to use the language in order to conduct conversation appropriately. This respondent wanted to learn ‘a local person’s language’ so that she can ‘go on to a deeper level with them’ and to ‘fit in’. Such a student needs to appreciate that Mandarin acts as an official, public language stretching across the whole of China. It therefore does not offer a learner the ability to access the local, personal, or private cultural sensibilities of many people whose first language is different. For example the present author speaks a distinct language within the province of Zhejiang which acts as the medium for interpersonal communication between people, and within the same province there exist several other quite distinct languages and dialects.

The respondents’ statements were complex and diverse often reflecting essentialist and non-essentialist views, as can be seen from this statement from a respondent:

Japanese people are very reserved, and they do not like to ask personal questions, they do not like to talk much about issues, they find it hard to trust foreigners ...

Here she is displaying essentialist views of culture. In contrast, other respondents saw things differently. For example, one student mentioned that people as human beings are the same, and did not differ according to the country from which they originated. Culture was understood as something possessing different layers and dimensions. The complexity and diversity of culture was identified by several respondents during interviews, reflecting the view of some of Holliday’s research informants that ‘cultural realities are individually constructed around individual circumstances, and can transcend national culture description and boundaries’ (Holliday, 2011: 61). In an interview with a student of Portuguese nationality there was an extensive account concerning the pathway she had taken to her present position of pursuing a course in Mandarin. Her story was quite different from that of any of the other interviewees, as indeed were her reasons for choosing to follow such a course. Therefore, following Holliday, research into this field needs to take fully into account the individual construction of realities and reasons. This complexity has been approached from a different direction, which I consider in the next section.

### **An ecological perspective**

Ideas around language ecology have been referred to as ‘ecolinguistics’, a term initially identified and discussed by Einar Haugen (1972) who postulated that language is inextricably related to the physical, biological, psychological, and social environments in which the language and its speakers have evolved and in which they live. Haugen stresses the interconnection between language and environment, so the one is seen as influencing the other. His work stimulated a tradition of enquiry and one particularly notable researcher within this vein has been Claire Kramsch (2008) who has taken this perspective further, identifying five aspects of the ecological theory of

language acquisition and use that pay attention to the multicultural and multilingual environment and emphasize the complexity of encounters and interlocutors. Here I will focus upon three of Kramsch's aspects that I have adapted: 'interchangeability of self and other', 'multiple and contradictory timescales and social spaces', and 'ecology of multicultural spaces'.<sup>5</sup> An ecological perspective leads us to investigate respondents' views in relation to their environment, taking into consideration the dimensions of space and time. We thus draw attention to how people construct knowledge of their world, choosing aspects of the shared culture that they have acquired in common with others. Such an approach allows for a greater responsiveness to people's individualized and changing views.

### **Interchangeability of self and other: 'Foreigner bubble'**

Ideas of 'self' and the 'other' are ever changing, multiple, conflicting, and affected by the complexity of human interrelationships. When speaking in social situations people often say what they think is appropriate, expected, or required by others. There is a degree of performativity inherent in the content and structure of their discourse. Performativity implies the utilization of roles within communication and these may be drawn from models taken from people who have influenced the speaker. Performativity also implies a degree of choice and control.

An example of this phenomenon of interchangeability of self and other was exemplified in the statement by a respondent who had spent a year learning Mandarin in China. She spoke about the experience of being a 'foreigner' in the cultural setting where she was learning Chinese:

A lot of people do not integrate into Chinese culture very well in Beijing. A lot of people do bad things the Chinese do not approve of. So they're living in a foreigner bubble. For me, I had my teacher told me in Taiwan, what I should and shouldn't do ... like I asked is it OK, in China, I call old man, Laonanren – 老男人. She screamed out: 'NO'. You should say Laoxiansheng – 老先生, Laotaitai – 老太太, Laonainai – 老奶奶. ... [laughter] You do not do that.

The exchange generated interest not because there had been a lack of understanding of the meaning of words, but because there was a gap in socially acceptable language usage. The teacher was suddenly confronted by a learner of Chinese who could, in certain circumstances, have made an offensive remark by calling an elderly person an 'old man', thereby showing disrespect or creating embarrassment. A key teaching point from the above statement is how the teacher integrated the learning point into a conversational exchange rather than simply responding in terms of the statement being incorrect. The phrase 'foreigner bubble' is used immediately after alluding to some negative behaviour, thus carrying forward a negative association. Although she has sought to develop her 'Chinese' self through learning the language and becoming sensitized to Chinese customs and perspectives, the respondent remains isolated, an outsider living in the 'foreigner bubble'. The exchange she describes is characterized not solely as one between a teacher and a student but between a teacher and a foreign student where they are continually being reminded of the cultural distance that exists between them. A key issue flowing from this arises from a sense of ownership of a language. However much the learner tries to close the gap there will remain a sense that she or he is speaking the language as a foreigner. The person with whom they are speaking will feel that they have ownership of the language and thus the interaction is structured according to power relations (Bullock, 1999).

I think that's really dependent on the Chinese person that you mean. I had some really good Chinese friends, you know, but a lot of them had been very westernised, so it is still, you know, like ... for example, I am really a close friend, this guy called Luo Jian, who is in China right now, ah, he is very Chinese, he never left the country. At the same time, he also knows how to deal with westerners. He also knows how I think. He understands me. And I understand him as well.

A female respondent presented a variation upon this process when she explained how she had some very good friends in China. For her this acceptance occurred because people she met wanted to fit in with her as a westerner. So when she was learning Chinese in China she interacted with associates who, it seemed, shared certain cultural outlooks with her: 'He also knows how to deal with westerners. He also knows how I think. He understands me. And I understand him as well.' Learning Chinese was not so much a case of overcoming one's western assumptions as coming to terms with a distinctively modern Chinese social orientation whereby some people in China define themselves as being 'more western' than others. Therefore ideas such as becoming more aware of Chinese cultural values need to be treated with care as in any social setting the new learner will meet with changing and emergent outlooks that may not be too different from those of the learner.

### **Multiple and contradictory timescales and social spaces: 'Holding hands' in the 'destroyed temple'**

The next element this research has drawn from Kramsch's ecological perspective focuses upon how a person, when learning a language, will develop their sense of the connection of the language to its own history and to the places from which it comes. These connections then become important aspects of the learner's construction of a sense of self. The person's awareness will be shaped by their relationship to that history and spatiality. People carry within them their own history of language use including their history of learning the target language. Therefore when exploring questions of learning a foreign language we need to take account of such multiple and often contradictory timescales. There was a striking example of intercultural confusion from the interview conducted with a female respondent who had just graduated from the course after spending 18 months in China. At the end of the interview, she mentioned that she would not be returning to China again and the reasons for this emerged. When describing a visit with a friend to a temple she said:

She took me to see ... a ... the temple, you know the ... kind of castle, the kind of palace, [*in Beijing?*] yeah, that was destroyed by the French. She took me to see that on the Chinese national day. And then I didn't really know anything about that. I was just like walking around and she turned around and looked at me with huge innocent eyes, and she said 'do you feel guilty?' [*laughter*] Seriously, I was like ... actually not really, no, because you know, I feel French. But I don't actually: I am not even French. I don't feel like it's really me who did that. You know, I didn't do anything like that, so ... I was really shocked, it was not fun ... there was that experience, then I had some ... I had quite a few bad experiences in China. Quite a few.

From what this respondent reports we may infer that the Chinese companion would not have intended to cause offence. The companion made the link between 'French' and 'France' and the historical detail in the temple guide. We can only speculate on whether the Chinese student companion had any idea that this respondent was a Francophone Belgian or that this topic was a sensitive one both culturally and politically.

When the respondent asserts that she feels French she is referring to a linguistic cultural identity which is strongly defining within a Belgian context ('I feel French. But I don't actually: I am not even French.'). She then appears to contradict herself with a counter-assertion that 'I am not even French', referring to her legal citizenship status. When this is linked to being questioned about an association with historic guilt over the actions of French military destruction she reacts subjectively, not fully taking into account her companion's evident innocence and lack of motive to cause offence. Her expression 'with huge innocent eyes' implies that she thinks her companion was performing or pretending in some way. The tense she uses is present indicative,



which is why her statement comes across as very simple and direct. There are two adverbs in the second sentence, 'actually' and 'even', which make the implication of expectation strong – from the first sentence you expect something owing to the verb choice, so the change of mind 'I don't' has to be qualified owing to the expectation that has been created. However, to 'feel' and to 'be' French are different. She is saying you can be French but not feel French, or conversely you can feel French and not be French. The present tense in her statement reflects the context of the interview, which makes what she says immediate and instant rather than a considered opinion. This grammatical confusion reflects a breakdown in intercultural communication between the two young female students in Beijing. Their senses of history are very different and at this point their shared intercultural capabilities appear to be limited. When trying to explain her responses the respondent appears to struggle to say what she feels: '... seriously, I was like ... actually not really, no, because you know ...'

She obviously cannot reflect upon this challenge to her sense of self and lacks the intercultural competence to deal with such a situation despite having spent 18 months living in China. 'Being French' is constructed differently by the Chinese companion and the respondent. To complicate matters this respondent came from French-speaking and Maltese parentage and so carried within her complex experiences concerning the place of language in relation to her identity. She did not speak English with a pronounced Brussels or French accent typical of people from southern Belgium. This adds yet another dimension to the way that her interchangeable identities and multiple senses of self are revealed through speech. This respondent is multilingual with experiences of language use in a variety of European settings. Thus to understand how she perceives learning Chinese we need to be aware of the spatial and temporal senses that she brings to her intercultural communication.

A further instance of a breakdown in intercultural communication and understanding is evidenced from this respondent's account. In the following instance our focus lies not upon timescale but upon multiple and contradictory social spaces. She described how her Chinese female companion acted towards her:

Ah, for example, when I was, not the first time I went. Because first time I went, I see the French people. But when I went for my year abroad, I meet some Chinese friends kind of stuff. And there's one time, where, I had just met this girl. And that was like a language exchange thing. And she was really nice n' stuff, but, ah ... she ... I don't know, I just wasn't use [sic] to it ... she, for example, she was holdin' my hand, she walked holding hands. I mean it's fine like I actually know the person very well. But I barely know her, it was kind of odd, it was that experience.

The respondent related in the interview that the girl was holding her hand while she was showing her around in the temple, and that she was uncomfortable about this because she considered that she barely knew the girl. The issue of contradictory social spaces arises from the similarities between the two people. Both were 21 years of age, both were language students, both attended universities, and both had a link with the exchange programme. In a sense they shared the same social spaces at that juncture of their lives. They were away from home and parents, and both had spent time learning another language. However, because such social spaces need to be understood in terms of their multiplicity and contradictoriness, we cannot assume that these two shared experiences or outlooks. They may have been close in terms of the time they spent together or where they lived but there was social and cultural distance that separated these students.

For such a female student in China the expression of friendship and support, expressed through holding hands, is very common indeed. From the perspective of the Chinese companion it is likely that her gesture was meant as a form of acceptance and welcoming, and an indication

of belonging. Yet for the respondent it was perceived entirely in an opposite manner. Her discomfort is revealed through the pattern of her speech:

And she was really nice n' stuff, but, ah ... she ... I don't know, I just wasn't use [sic] to it ... she, for example, she was holdin' my hand, she walked holding hands.

The cultural connotations of such a gesture for the European student were very different than for the Chinese student. 'Holding hands', was likely to be intended as a gesture to bridge differences in cultures rather than to create discomfort. There was a breakdown in intercultural communication. A gesture which meant one thing to one party signified something different to the other. From the perspective of the present research this raises issues concerning what is actually being learned through following a programme of Chinese language study. It would appear from the transcript of this respondent's interview that developing intercultural sensitivity was not one of the things she learned. Despite the fact that she spoke fairly competent Chinese, her final reaction was not to return.

### **Ecology of multicultural spaces: 'Chinese culture is massive'**

One of the male respondents commented when referring to one of the pictures he used during his interview that: 'China is a culturally and linguistically diverse country, in which every language and culture's individuality is deserving of our appreciation.' Here, he and other like-minded respondents reveal their awareness of the multicultural and multilingual settings<sup>6</sup> that the research participants encountered during their periods of study. When I asked for his views of Chinese people, he said:

I think the word Chinese means *absolutely nothing*. Coz China is such a massive place. That's a bit like saying western people. That means nothing to me; I find that word completely useless. You need to be far more specific. I don't think there's such a thing as Chinese culture. You have to be more specific. Maybe you can say Northern China. OK, but then you go further south. Suddenly different places, suddenly different people, suddenly different habits, it's like saying European ... [Laughter]

This awareness arises in part from the fact that this particular student of Chinese had spent time in the borderland districts in the south-west of the country and thus experienced a culture that in part remained distinctively other than Chinese. This student revealed an awareness also of the way that Chinese itself can be used to promote certain ideas of cultural identity:

I think the idea of a unified China exists in the media and exists in books. But I don't think it exists in real life ... I think the words are used to unite and are also used to divide. Like take the word 'minzu' – 民族, you got 'zhonghuaminzu' – 中华民族, but then you also got different 'minzu' – 民族, so using the same word to unite people as well as to divide people. [He is talking about a Chinese word to mean ethnic minority to illustrate his point.]

Here he is referring to the dual meaning associated with the term 'nation' which can refer to a unified political entity as well as to a unified people linked by common language, history, and culture. This respondent's opinions reflect the view of liberal multiculturalists (Holliday, 2011) who believe in recognizing and welcoming diversity within a wider unity, as revealed through his comments on another picture which highlighted the diversity of linguistic landscapes in China. He gives less weight to the claim that modern China is a strong and relatively unified cultural and political entity eliciting more than passive acceptance from its citizenry. During the interview this respondent showed a photograph (Figure 1):

Oh, this is an interesting picture that I took in a middle school in the countryside, which I thought was absolutely awful. It is about speaking language policy. ... Because it is calling everyone else not civilised, the implication ... implying everything else is not civilised.

The photograph was of a slogan on a wall in a school encouraging people to speak Mandarin. The Mandarin words read: '请讲普通话, 请使用文明用语', which can be translated into English as 'Please speak Mandarin, please use civilized language'.



**Figure 1:** Sign placed on a wall in a school in Ngawa County, part of an autonomously governed district within Sichuan Province

How the two parts of the sentence have been put together can convey contradictory messages. One interpretation could be that Mandarin is *the* civilized language that people *ought* to use in a public space such as a school. However, 'civilized language' may not refer to the actual language but to how people use a language to speak in a civilized way or not. The sign is controversial because in the area where it was displayed there is a commonly spoken language that is distinct from Chinese and where the issue remains one that divides opinion. The respondent interpreted the slogan from the perspective of a liberal multiculturalist rather than from the perspective of a Chinese person living in the community where the slogan appeared. The sign reflects the politics of language that arise when communities become multicultural or multilingual and where the central state attempts to achieve the common use of a *lingua franca* such as happened with English in the growth of the USA.

## Conclusions

From the range of interviewees it was clear that each found their own way to navigate the difficult waters of intercultural competence while learning Mandarin. This variety was revealed in the suggestions they were able to make in response to questions about strategies for intercultural encounters and recommendations for students who are going to China. These included tolerance towards ambiguity (ability to deal with uncertainty) and respect for otherness (acceptance of the non-universality of cultural values). This reflects the findings of Perry and Southwell (2011) that interviewees' comments are subjective, emotional, and individual and these produce sensitivities that can be identified as intercultural sensitivity.

In order to move beyond merely improving the teaching techniques (pedagogy) within Mandarin teaching it will be necessary to incorporate the insights from leading theorists of complexity theory in relation to language learning such as Larsen-Freeman and Kramsch. They

offer us an opportunity for understanding a language such as Mandarin in its wider 'ecological' contexts, and for teachers this considerably enriches their appreciation of the work they do. The research has developed around the notion of 'language distance', which attempts to connect the complex processes of learning a different language with the equally complex processes of overcoming the challenges a person faces when trying to understand another culture. The conclusion is that it is probably not effective to focus upon one element only and that the best pedagogic approaches will be those which connect the two aspects.

From the perspective of the students, China was far more than a target country which they could visit in order to learn more and practise their Mandarin. Chinese became not only the language they were learning, but also the vehicle for experiencing a multicultural landscape where they could explore the cultural richness and subtleties of where they were studying. For this reason, the teaching and learning of Chinese should be thought of in terms beyond the imparting of the formal structures and forms of the language. Opportunities for embedding intercultural aspects arose naturally within the multicultural settings of the universities in London and other parts of the UK that acted as the base for these students. Chinese language learning provides a vehicle through which we can critically analyse culturalist stereotypes such as 'east', 'Asia', and 'western'. Multiple and contradictory timescales and social spaces exist and are constructed based on emotional, political, and historical imaginations and realities, which may cause tension or misunderstanding in communicative acts. An ecology of spaces identifies the emergent, shifting, multicultural characteristics of what lies under the broad umbrella of 'Chinese', something which itself is undergoing historical transformation as China modernizes and expands its global reach. Following on from this highly complex sense of how social change takes place, this paper agrees with Holliday's view that 'cultural realities are individually constructed' (Holliday, 2011: 61). The implication of this for teachers is that they need to be sensitive to the individuality that each of their students will bring to their studies.

The focus for this study is one that over the past few years has become increasingly relevant. This is because of the rapid expansion across the entire education system of the learning of Mandarin. As substantial investment is made from primary schools through to universities across the UK to support the teaching and learning of Mandarin, questions of what is actually being learned will arise. Additionally, questions about why the language is being learned need to be addressed by all educators because they will have students who come from a variety of backgrounds who bring different reasons for wanting to learn Mandarin. Their task is not simply to teach the Mandarin language but to teach in such a way as to open the door to understandings about the richness and diversity of life and culture across modern-day China.

## Notes

1. The British Government made an undertaking on a ministerial visit to the People's Republic of China in 2011. ([www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1328304/1-000-new-Chinese-language-teachers-Englands-schools.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1328304/1-000-new-Chinese-language-teachers-Englands-schools.html), accessed 3 February 2014).
2. Greasby was the first school in the UK to receive official recognition and backing from the Chinese Ministry of Education for its work in introducing Mandarin.
3. The Confucian Institute based at the Institute of Education, University of London has been facilitating such developments.
4. This transcription follows the speaker word for word. The dots signify a pause.
5. Kramsch uses the term 'relativity' which I have chosen not to use because of the multiple associations that the term carries in other fields. Interchangeability more accurately describes an identifiable social process. See Kramsch (2008: 400–402) for her discussion of the concept of 'symbolic competence'.

6. In many parts of China the local languages are variants or branches of Mandarin. In many parts of China there also exist distinct languages which are often referred to as 'dialects' rather than 'languages' such as Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province.

### Notes on contributor

Tinghe Jin comes from China where she studied Chinese language and literature for her first degree followed by three years teaching in high school in China. Tinghe studied International Education at the University of Leicester and progressed to her doctoral research as a Centenary Scholar in intercultural competence under Professor Norbert Pachler at the Institute of Education, University of London. She is currently Chairperson of the Chinese Educational Research Association and co-editor of this special issue.

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