The solidification of Chineseness in academic mobility:
Critical reviews of “intercultural” research articles on Chinese students
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[Abstract] Exchange and degree Chinese students are now familiar faces on the academic scene worldwide. As such, and according to the Chinese Ministry of Education, over one million Chinese have studied abroad since the late 1970s and more than 100,000 annually since 2002. These students are often seen as very different “others” and solidified (i.e. turned into a generic Other or often “cultural robots” who all share the same characteristics) by administrators, staff and other local and international students – but also by host societies in general. My paper is interested in how a selection of recent research articles within the field of intercultural communication deal with Chinese students. This article can be considered as belonging to the Rhetoric of Inquiry (Billig, 1988) which takes academic discourse as an object of study. Using a typology of the three approaches to otherness and interculturality that I have proposed [1] solid/culturalist; 2) liquid/hermeneutical and 3) Janusian], I will demonstrate how researchers themselves can “fetichize” and “solidify” Chinese students, and thus, contribute to creating a differentialist and often incoherent image of those they consider as “strangers” par excellence. My paper ends on a proposal for renewing approaches to researching the position of the stranger in the academia through the case of Chinese students.

[Key words] Discourse analysis, strangeness, solidification, Chinese students

A nation can hardly be seen as a collection of sequestered segments; with citizens being assigned fixed places in predetermined segments
Sen, 2006: 165

Introduction

Exchange and international students are now familiar faces on university campuses worldwide. Though they are not new in world history, as e.g., the Middle Ages were highly mobile times in educational terms, some student populations, who were quasi-absent from international education scenes before, such as the one under study here - “Chinese students” - now hold fairly prominent positions within international academic

mobility. As such, and according to the Chinese Ministry of Education, more than 100,000 Chinese have studied abroad annually since 2002, and the figure is still expected to rise in the near future. Chinese students are often considered as “curiosities”, struck by inherent differences by institutions and their representatives. Often tainted with “cultural robotness” (“the Chinese think that…”; “the Chinese behave in such or such way…” – reducing 1.3 billion people to a homogeneous entity and “sequestering segments” as Sen puts it above), these discourses are reminiscent of centuries old differentialist and essentialist discourses on China. For instance, M. Segalen in his early 20th Century Essay on Exotism (2002) wrote about China: “you are constantly straddling a central, impenetrable mystery” (p. 28). With the economic, political and cultural “reentry” of China onto the world scene, these discourses tend to spread and be used by both “Westerners” and Chinese people alike to explain the Self and the Other.

Critical voices are increasingly being heard about this essentialisation of China. In philosophy, for example, a recent book by the philosopher Billetier (2006) attacked one of the main proponents of an essentialised China, François Jullien (author of ‘Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking’, 2004), and criticized his tendency to “otherize” Chinese thought through hegemonic representations (Moscovici, 2008). Though these critical voices are either absent or unstable in education (“academic mobility”; “international education”) and applied linguistics, some scholars have recently called for a move beyond an essentialist approach to Chinese students. A.W. Feng is one of these voices who, through a “theory of thirdness” (2009), criticizes the classic opposition in living and studying abroad between “Socratic”/”Confucian” cultures of learning and teaching, the “West” vs. the Chinese, but also the individualistic vs.
collectivistic visions of these spaces… and proposes “the application of theories of third space, rather than a contrastive perspective” to research Chinese students abroad (ibid.), inspired amongst others, by H. Bhabha.

In the literature on academic mobility related to Chinese students, theories and models of acculturation/adaptation/integration are often used explicitly or not by researchers to deal with these students. As “different Others”, they are often the basis for reflecting on how one should or if one could acculturate, adapt and integrate to a “Western world”/”Western education”/”the Western way of thinking”… Very often, the students are described in ways which are reminiscent of Siu’s 1952 “stranger” par excellence: they are said to cling to “[their] own ethnic group” and “spend[s] many years of [their] lifetime in a foreign country without being assimilated by it” (p. 34). Acculturation, adaptation and integration are thus burning and problematic central issues in this context of mobility. In this article, I shall review these concepts as well as the concept of interculturality and see how, reflecting on them can help us to examine research on these students’ experiences of academic mobility.

I. Theoretical framework: Acculturation in student mobility: meanings and values?

I.1. Critiques of acculturation theories

Even though the articles to be examined in this study do not all directly or explicitly refer to the concept of acculturation, they all attempt to describe Chinese students’ views on “aspects of the local culture” (and at the same time “Western culture”) and thus they are on the verge of acculturation theories.
Such fields as political science, sociology, social and cultural anthropology, cross-cultural and acculturation psychology often use acculturation theories when they deal with the passing of geographical and national boundaries (Chirkov, 2009a). In most research on short-term and long-term stays abroad, the complex issues of acculturation, adaptation and integration are tackled either by the research participants during e.g. interviews or by the researchers themselves through their research questions. A whole field of research, named the Psychology of acculturation, has had a lot of impacts on how many studies on academic mobility conceptualize these concepts epistemologically and methodologically. Scholars working within this field include the influential J.W. Berry and his colleagues (e.g., Berry, 1997; Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987; Berry, Kim, Power, Young, & Bujaki, 1989) and M. Bennett (1993). Both Berry’s and Bennett’s models of acculturation are well-known and widely used in research on academic mobility and international education (cf. a presentation of these two models in Burnett and Gardner, 2006, pp. 67-74).

Yet, many critical voices have been raised recently about their work. Pawel Boski (2008), for instance, tells us that the “central assumptions of the field [Psychology of acculturation] are debatable on conceptual and psychometric grounds” (p. 142). Bhatia, a researcher who has done some extensive work on Indian scholars in the USA, and one of the most prominent critical voices when it comes to diasporas and acculturation, questions some of the foundations of acculturation theories in a recent article with Ram (2009) as “(...) it is not clear what the term ‘integration’ exactly means. How does one know when someone is integrated or not with the host culture? Who decides whether an immigrant is pursuing a strategy of marginalization, integration or separation?”. On the
other hand, they assert (2009) that what acculturation psychologists have developed are “universal, linear models of acculturation” and criticize them for ignoring its complexity and their limited and uncritical vision/ideal of acculturating, which merely implies moving from one culture to another.

A new critical field is currently emerging and a timely 2009 issue of the International Journal of Intercultural Relations (IJIR) introduced what is referred to as Critical Acculturation Psychology (Chrikov, 2009a). Many bases of acculturation psychology are being put into question by this new branch of acculturation theories. In the introduction to the issue, Chrikov (2009a) claims that, first of all, acculturation theories “mechanistically hold onto the premises of social psychology about the reductionistic nature of social relations within various cultures (…)”. He adds (ibid.) that this ignores the complex and “liquid” – to borrow a concept proposed by the sociologist Z. Bauman - aspects of sociocultural phenomena, which must be integrated into analyses.

These criticisms are being taken seriously by a few scholars in academic mobility (Feng, 2009; Dervin, 2009; Murphy-Lejeune, 2003) who use an interpretative paradigm to research the processes of academic mobility and its relations to acculturation, integration and adaptation.

### 1.2 Acculturation without solid and reified culture?

One of the main criticisms directed at acculturation theories is the fact that the primordial and basic concept of culture is often used in uncritical, systematic and reified ways, i.e. “presenting cultures as essential entities composed of different dimensions and components which are able to ‘influence’, ‘predict’, ‘affect’, and ‘change’ people’s
functioning as if they are some kind of physical force or natural power” (Chirkov, 2009a). This reified vision of culture is seen as a way of either allowing the Other to be fully “engulfed” into the “host culture”, i.e. becoming the Other (Dervin, 2008; Dervin & Dirba, 2008) or helping him to preserve the “home culture” and being actively involved with the “host culture” (Bhatia & Ram, 2009). In a commentary on some of the issues being raised in the issue of the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* mentioned in the previous section, Waldam (2009) reminds us that the use of culture in psychology is based on Redfield, Linton and Herscovits’ 1936 classic definition (i.e. “the artificial nature of the(ir) notion of “cultures” as distinct, bounded units harbouring identical citizens”) and “stuck with it, determined to make it fit into the psychology worldview”.

The same criticism has been directed at studies on academic mobility (Dervin, 2008; Abdallah-Pretceille, 2008).

This is why the key-word of culture needs to be reassessed when one deals with mobile fieldworks. While it has been massively rejected by e.g. anthropologists as it tends to lead to limited, restrictive and solid visions of the self and the other, the word is used more than ever in every day intercultural encounters, in transnational politics and in the media. In research worlds, applied linguists such as A. Wiebercska (2005) wishes to defend the concept as, in her view, it allows to work on immigrants, who are “in-between”. I find myself amongst those who want to put an end to this use, as a culture is on the one hand always changing (hybrid) and on the other, its perception and representations cannot but be (inter-)subjective when it is described and activated. As such, M. Abdallah-Pretceille (1986, p. 24) warns us against confusing discourses on cultures and cultures themselves. The Sorbonne Professor (1999) also tells us that
“cultures are dynamic notions which are difficult to « translate » without fossilizing or reducing them” (p. 8). So even though culture is often mentioned when researchers talk about acculturation and stays abroad, it is not always clear what they mean by it or what “culture” they refer to.

In a very interesting study on a multiethnic London suburb, Southhall, the anthropologist G. Baumann (1996) writes that “culture is not a real thing but an abstract and purely analytical notion. It does not cause behaviour, but summarizes an abstraction from it, and is this neither normative nor predictive” (p. 11). The researcher shows how residents of the suburb that he interviewed “juggle” between discourses which solidify culture and community, bounding them together (I am a Pakistani so I do it this way) and discourses on culture as a process and creation, in discursive acts which are clearly strategic and manipulatory.

The concept of Culturespeak proposed by Ulf Hannerz (1999) to point at the uncritical and systematic use of the word culture in discourse is of much use when examining visions of the Self and the Other put forward in intercultural discourses (even in scientific ones as will be done in this article). This uncritical use of the concept of culture was even noted by the anthropologist Waldam in his review of his companion articles in the 2009 IJIR issue mentioned earlier. Waldam (2009) criticises Chirkow, the editor of the critical issue on acculturation theories, when he writes: “Chirkov himself momentarily lapses into referring to ‘the immigrants’ home culture’ and immigrant movement ‘from one culture to another’ in his efforts to offer an alternative approach”. So this reified, objectivist, solid concept, which is often an empty signifier, is also haunting those critical voices.
The renewed vision of culture, as an ever-changing, negotiated and co-constructed element, which can sometimes be “solidified” and offered as an easy explanation (“in my country, you would never…”, “you can’t understand my behaviour, you’re not Japanese”…, cf. Baumann, 1996: 1), is strong in postmodern and contemporary anthropological works (cf. the works of Augé, Erikens, Maffesoli…). Deterritorialisation through new technologies, “Global localism” (“a place is open to ideas and messages, visitors, migrants, to tastes, foods, goods and experiences to a previously unprecedented extent”; McDowell, 1996, p. 38) and the multiplication of short-lived and multiple “peg-communities” (Bauman, 2004) all have an impact on the malleability of culture and thus on how acculturation should be defined and worked upon. There is consequently a need to move away from solidified, reified, polarized and objectivist visions of cultures (Bhatia & Ram, 2009) in such complex and mixed worlds of our accelerated globalisation (Pieterse, 2004). Bhatia and Ram (2009) propose to work from “a more fluid and politicized understanding of migrant identity”. Chirkov (2009b) suggests dealing with acculturation through an understanding rather than explanation paradigm. He adds (Ibid.): “Researchers could look at acculturation through the prism of the interpretative social sciences and focus on the dynamics of the changes in the intersubjective meanings of various culturally constructed realities and study individuals’ intrasubjective meanings that immigrants assign to their actions in a new country”. Bhatia and Ram (2009) also consider this method as a way of “think[ing] of acculturation and identity issues as contested and mixing and moving”.

In my study, I will be looking at how the articles, which set as their principal goal the study of the students’ perceptions of the “local culture” and their acculturation/adaptation/integration to it, deal with the concepts of culture.

1.3 Studying discourses and approaches to acculturation in the intercultural field
For the young researcher, who enters the field of intercultural communication, through any door (language didactics, intercultural education and communication, anthropology, psychology…), finding their way into researching it is a tricky task as the literature on interculturality is often disparate, scattered and contradictory in the approaches used in research (Holliday et al., 2004; Dervin, 2008). This is why it seems more and more urgent to offer ways of classifying approaches to interculturality and allow a clear(er) epistemological positioning. What follows is one such attempt, that I will use to analyse the articles on Chinese students and see what approaches and understandings of both acculturation, culture and intercultural communication are put forward by the researchers.

In 2006, I opted for a tripartite category classification, inspired by Bauman’s paradigms of solidity/liquidity (cf. Bauman, 2004) and applied them to visions of interculturality. The first category is considered “solid” and corresponds to approaches which are often termed culturalist or essentialist. These approaches ignore the complexity of individuals who are e.g. led to interact with each other and reduce them to cultural facts or give the impression of “encounters of cultures” rather than individuals. For Laplantine (1999), this approach “believes strongly that there are resolutely distinct human essences” (p. 46). In a recent criticism on culturalism or solid interculturality in the teaching of intercultural management, Gavin Jack (2009) asserts that:
“epistemologically, I believe that a ‘dimensional’ approach to culture, which allows us to plot or map representatives of national cultures onto some kind of continuum, presents students with unhelpfully fixed categories of analysis that essentialize culture and divest it of its key processual and political contingencies”. This approach to interculturality also corresponds to a vision of acculturation which consists in believing in the possibility of merely swapping cultures (as one changes clothes) or oscillating between solid cultures. The second approach to interculturality is “liquid” and takes into consideration many interaction factors when two people from different countries meet. It rejects the quasi-systematic equation between discourses and acts (i.e. what I say I do may not correspond to what I do or will say later), and internal and external descriptions of “cultures” and their “members” as truth-conditional evidence or arguments (cf. Eriksen, 2001). This approach suggests that any act of interaction is obligatorily dramatized and that it contains enunciative and dialogical aspects which make it a co-construction between interlocutors rather than an act of communication between static “senders-receivers” (Hermans, 2004). This is why, ethnic, cultural, linguistic… identity is considered by this approach as “the image they [individuals] wish to project at a particular time rather than as evidence of an essentialist [national] culture” (Holliday et al., 2004, p. 12).

Finally, and recently (Dervin, 2008), I have identified another type of discourse on interculturality which I call Janusian, in reference to the two-faced God. Through this approach, a researcher juggles with discourses that are liquid and solid at the same time. To my knowledge, this approach hasn’t been systematically studied. Let us give an example of this approach: a researcher warns us first of all that every individual is multiple and plural and that one should respect this and not reduce them to
representations and stereotypes, on the other hand, they resort to solid/solidifying elements to analyse their subjects’ behaviours and thoughts, to interpret results, etc. – the whole thing leading to contradictory discourses tainted with pseudo-objectivism and solidification.

To sum up the theoretical framework: we have attempted to review theories and approaches to both acculturation and interculturality. Critical voices on their solid versions were heard and alternative ways of working with these concepts were presented. We now turn to a corpus of research articles within intercultural communication, devoted to Chinese students in the UK and Australia, in order to examine how they are treated by researchers and the latters’ visions on acculturation and interculturality.

3. Methods

In order to see how Chinese students are treated in some research on academic mobility, I shall examine four recent articles within the field of intercultural communication that focus on them. This article can be considered as belonging to the Rhetoric of Inquiry (Billig, 1988) which takes academic discourse as an object of study. Amongst the four articles, two were published in a book edited by M. Byram and A. Feng (2006) and two in the international journal *Language and Intercultural Communication* (Routledge). The articles are presented in the tables below:
Table 1 – Basic data on the corpus

All in all, the articles are centered around the UK (3) and one is from the Australian context (PH). Three out of four articles deal with long-term mobility, while JJ examines short-term mobility of Hong Kong students in England. The choice of one article dealing with Hong Kong students may come as a surprise and be debatable to the reader as Hong Kong has a special political and economical status within China. Yet, the researcher in question often refers to the students’ cultural background in terms of Chineseness, which are very similar to the other researchers’ discourses on Chinese students. All the other articles deal with students from continental China.

Table 2 gives some background research information to the articles:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title of the paper or article</th>
<th>Date of publication</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burnett Christine &amp; John Gardner</td>
<td>The one less travelled by… the experience of Chinese students in a UK university</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>CG</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prue Holmes</td>
<td>Problematising intercultural communication competence in the pluricultural classroom: Chinese students in a New Zealand university</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>PH</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane Jackson</td>
<td>Ethnographic Pedagogy and evaluation in short-term study abroad</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>JJ</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qing Gu &amp; Alan Maley</td>
<td>Changing places: a study of Chinese students in the UK</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>GM</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Research methods</th>
<th>Research objectives</th>
<th>Acculturation?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CG</td>
<td>-40 undergraduates -4 individual students</td>
<td>-Qualitative -Interviews -Drawing session</td>
<td>-Students’ experience of moving to the UK -Critique acculturation models -Create a new model of</td>
<td>Yes -Berry -Bennett -Yoshikawa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2 – Details about the research projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PH</th>
<th>15 first-year Chinese students</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Focus groups</th>
<th>Chinese students’ Learning and communication experiences</th>
<th>Mentions Bennett Acculturation not problematised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JJ</td>
<td>15 Hong Kong students in Oxford BA English</td>
<td>Ethnography</td>
<td>-Experiences and perspectives of students in a short-term study and residence abroad programme</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GM</td>
<td>-163 Chinese students in 4 universities and colleges -13 Chinese undergraduate and postgraduate in 10 universities -10 British lecturers</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative -Questionnaires (Likert six-point scale) -Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>-Explores the intercultural experiences of Chinese students at British universities -Investigates the pedagogical, sociocultural and psychological challenges that they have encountered</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total number of Chinese students represented in all the articles is 250. The research methods are mixed but mostly qualitative and interpretative. The research objectives are very similar between the papers as they all attempt to explore the students’ intercultural experiences abroad. In terms of acculturation theories, two papers clearly and explicitly refer to them while the two others don’t – though they also deal with acculturation, adaptation and integration but in a “disguised/underground way”. CG is the article that uses, comments and criticizes the theoretical models of, amongst others, Berry and Bennett who were mentioned in section 1.1. (CG 67). Some of these criticisms are very similar to the ones underlined in the theoretical framework and include: on p. 69 “the model [Berry’s] does not make sufficient distinction between intentions and behaviour and that acculturation strategies may differ at different stages of a sojourn and be more dynamic than the model might suggest” (i.e. the discursive and action aspects related to acculturation cannot be tested) and on p. 90 (about the model they created): “it
must be recognised that any model can only offer a simplification of the individual complexities that constitute any sojourner’s path of acculturation and we accept that our model inevitably suffers from this limitation”. These two comments seem to correspond well to the criticisms addressed to acculturation theories presented in 1.1. and 1.2.

The three following sections compose the analysis: omnipresent culturespeak, discourses of unicity and differentialism and liquid but contradictory discourses.

4. Results

4.1. Omnipresent culturespeak

The first striking point in all the articles is the omnipresence of culturespeak (Hannerz, 1999) or the use of the concept of culture in a systematic and uncritical way – which leads to a reified and “objectivist” vision of culture. As it is a complex concept, one would expect researchers to attempt positioning within the various approaches to culture and interculturality before making use of the term. This is not the case in the analysed papers and both concepts are empty signifiers.

Culture - being the “host” and “home” cultures - plays several roles in the articles:

- It determines the students and turns them into “cultural robots” (cf. “scripts”):
  - CG, 87: “The students had arrived in Britain with their own cultural scripts which were no longer applicable in the new environment”.

- It needs to be understood to be experienced “properly”:
  - CG, 71: “Their pre-departure training had given them a general idea of what to expect but this was insufficient to allow them to make sense of the host culture when they were actually experiencing it”.
- CG, 81: “However, sharing a flat with two Chinese students who had been in Britain for some time had helped her to understand the local culture”.

• It is an actor, “someone” that one meets:

- CG, 65: “first-hand contact with another culture”

- CG, 71: “It seemed rather that coming in contact with a different culture forced them to become aware of their own cultural perspectives”.

- JJ, 134: “the opportunity to experience the target culture and speech community firsthand”

- CG, 68: “the sojourner may consider that maintaining relations with the host culture (…)”

• It is a place one enters and lives in:

- CG, 67: “These questions highlight the dilemma for the sojourner on entry to the host culture”.

- CG, 65: “with the intention of returning at some point to their home culture”

- GM, 226: “taking up temporary residence in another culture”

- GM, 239: “On the whole, the questionnaire respondents were fairly positive about their experiences of living in a different culture”.

What appears clearly in these excerpts is that culture is put forward as if it were a “social agent” (Eriksen, 2001, p. 132), with which one interacts, learns, lives in… This “culture” has an empty meaning in all the excerpts: What culture are we talking about? National cultures? Culturality (i.e. malleable culture)? What are its boundaries? There also seems to be some underlying idea that culture equals a country (Philipps, 2007). Let’s take examples from JJ to illustrate. When JJ talks about the “target country” for her
Hong Kong students (i.e. England), she gives a very generic and homogeneous image of it. For example, on p. 139, when she explains what the research consisted in, she emphasizes that “For five weeks, each student lived with an English family (homestay) to more fully experience the local culture”. There seems to be one problem here. When she talks about an English family, she seems to imply a “native” or “real English family”, as the objective of sending students abroad is to experience the “local culture”. JJ seems to be a victim of “boundary fetishism” here and to forget that, as in most countries, England is a very diverse country – and that many “citizens” were not born in the UK but that they do also represent this “local life”. On p. 138, she confirms this confusion when she presents the model of intercultural competences that she uses: “Skills of interaction – Draw upon the previous three areas in real time to interact successfully with English people in England”. She emphasizes that the people to be met are “English people” not just “any person” – she even uses the term “natives” to refer to them. All in all, it is hard to tell if JJ positions her discourse within façade diversity (the English as a homogeneous entity) vs. diverse diversities (any person, regardless of their nationality, in the UK).

All in all, the culturespeak that was collected in the articles is problematic as it shows that the researchers are not careful enough in the use of conceptual terms. This first look at the corpus could suggest that what the researchers attempt to do is to see how the Chinese students learn to become like the Other (i.e. the local) or how they “learn” the local culture. Besides, both the locals and the Chinese are essentialised in this use (“English culture” vs. “Chinese culture”). Eriksen’s critique (2001) of culturespeak could in this sense be taken further into account by researchers: “Since the concept of culture has become so multifarious as to obscure, rather than clarify, understandings of the social
world, it may now perhaps be allowed to return to the culture pages of the broadsheets and the world of Bildung. Instead of invoking culture, if one talks about local arts, one could simply say “local arts”; if one means language, ideology, patriarchy, children’s rights, food habits, ritual practices or local political structures, one could use those or equivalent terms instead of covering them up in the deceptively cozy blanket of culture” (p. 141). The blanket is rather disconcerting in the articles and as M. Abdallah-Pretceille suggests (2003): “intellectual asceticism is de rigueur when the Other is an object of discourse” (p. 1) – even in academic discourse.

4.2. Discourses of unicity and differentialism

As a follow-up to the first section on culturespeak, let us examine how the researchers present the Chinese students in their articles. The first impression that one gets when reading the articles is that of clear Othering. For Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1996, p. 8), othering takes place when one represents the Other in terms of what one is not – in an often ethnocentric way (Duncan, 2003, p. 150). These discourses of unicity about the Other that result from Othering (they are all the same, they are “governed” by the same culture, habits, thoughts…) have been largely put into question by many and varied fields such as psychology where unicity “begins to stand out like a relic from a bygone era” (Cooper and Rowan, 1999, p. 1).

In the articles, the Chinese students are either presented as members of a large homogeneous culture or divided into categories, such as CG who justify having chosen students from the Shenzhen area as: (CG, 67) “The immediate benefit for our research design in choosing the students from Shenzhen was that it ensured a reasonable degree of
cultural similarity and reduced the number of variables involved in, say, working with a group of students drawn from various universities in China or elsewhere in Asia”. So instead of giving an image of unicity, which can apply to 1.3 billion individuals, CG reduce this figure to nine million people (the population of Shenzhen) and yet they fail to account for the “diverse diversities” amongst this population.

The discourses on the unicity of the Chinese students revolve around these classic themes: collectivism, the notion of “Face”, the one-child Family Control Policy and Confucius. Several strategies are used to confirm unicity in the articles: the integration of authorities in discourse (other researchers, mostly Chinese ones), facts and the students’ discourses.

Let us start with an excerpt from CG who explain that the idea of having to abandon one’s cultural identity to adapt to another – a sign of acculturation or integration - is not envisionable for collectivistic individuals. They write (p. 68): “The notion of being able to set aside one’s cultural identity is one that many people, especially those from collectivistic cultures, would find difficult to embrace”. In order to justify and support this argument, the researchers quote Leung and Markus and Kitayama\(^2\) and draw the conclusion that: “If these contentions are accurate, for such people, self-identity and collective identity are very closely linked, and this may create problems for this model” and thus denigrate models of acculturation. It is interesting that CG use an essentialist idea (\textit{the Chinese are collectivistic so…}), instead of questioning the dubious idea of “abandoning” one’s cultural identity. But what is “cultural identity” (cf. criticisms of this concept in 1.2.)? In a sense, the researchers try to show some open-mindedness by

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\(^2\) The references reproduced in the quotes from the articles were not included in the references in this article.
emphasizing that the model was created by a “Western mind” and that it may not apply to
the Chinese, while they categorize them as being collectivistic – which can be perceived
as reductionist. We find here what Gillespie (2008) calls an alternative representation or
“the representation of a potentially competing representation from within a social
representation” (p. 380). The same strategy of introducing other researchers’ voices
(Authorities) to the points made are used by GM on p. 230 when they explain how
Confucianism “molds” these students: “The influence of the Confucian tradition, and its
relation to high learner motivation and respect for teachers has been widely
acknowledged (Cummings, 1996; Wing On, 1996)”.

PH also often resorts to authorities confirming unicity to explain some of her
findings. She refers to Confucianism, collectivism, respect for authority, interdependence… (p. 24). She draws the following deontic conclusion about these
elements: “These values should be maintained at all times, thereby facilitating the
development of trust, an essential component in distinguishing between in-group/out-
group relationships” – thus giving again a robot-like discourse on the students. She also
characterizes “Chinese ways of communicating” through referring back to ancient times
(p. 25): “Although Chinese rhetoric from the Chinese classical period (ca. 400 B.C.) is
constructed around argumentation and persuasion (Garrett, 1993), dialogic
communication tends not to be developed or rewarded in Chinese classrooms
(Greenholtz, 2003; Hammond & Gao, 2002; Watkins & Biggs, 1996)” (note the use of
many authorities again to defend her discourse). She even includes other spaces such as
Taiwan and Malaysia (“Confucian societies”) to affirm that these societies (p. 25) “do not
encourage critical discussion and debate”. On p. 26, quoting Gao & Ting-Toomey, she
adds that “In preserving relational harmony, Chinese communication emphasises the importance of roles and politeness where, in the transaction, speakers are accorded respect”. These discourses are interesting as one can wonder if PH considers that they do not apply to the “Western world”, though they are also basic societal behaviours in “Western” societies. The resulting picture is exaggerated, exotic and uncritical towards the Chinese but also indirectly “Westerners”.

The introduction of facts about the Chinese also serves the purpose of explaining the students’ behaviours, opinions and attitudes during the interviews. GM (p. 230) refer to the one-child Family Policy in China to explain why the students felt proud of being able to cook by themselves and “survive” without their family: “A child may grow up under the intensive care of six adults: four grandparents and two parents”.

One final strategy that seems to be used by most researchers is to use the students’ discourses to make some “points” about their adaptation. Yet, in so doing, the researchers fail to differentiate “knowledges” and “discourses” by navigating between them (Gillespie, 2008, p. 376). JJ for example, on p. 147, borrows the voice of one student to justify the idea that contacts with “English culture” led the students to put into question their “Chinese character” and especially their fear of “losing face”. In this sense, the voice of the student helped the researcher to put forward a “culture-alibi” as an explanation. The same phenomenon was identified in GM (p. 230) who decline the characteristics of the Chinese students and “the cultural and historical root of Chinese students’ lack of involvement in class discussions” through introducing the students voices, e.g.: “It is a matter of habit, psychologically. You have been quiet in class for over ten years. You are so used to the teacher naming a student to answer questions. So
when you don’t feel totally confident about the answer, you would not like to open your mouth. It is difficult to change such a long-term habit in a short period of time”.

The second aspect of this section, which identified discourses of unicity on the Chinese now examines differentialist discourses, or discourses which clearly place boundaries between the Chinese students and others (usually the researchers’ in-groups or larger imagined communities such as the “West”) through comparing them. First of all, the exaggerated (and meaningless?) discourses of the West versus the East are omnipresent to introduce the difficulties met by the students. CG on p. 66 explain that “According to Chen and Chung (1993), maximum distance exists between Western and Eastern cultures, thereby increasing the acculturative stress on the students”. On p. 69, they refer to conforming to the Western educational approach as a key “to be successful academically”. In a similar vein, GM (p. 234) quote the much-criticised culturalist researcher G. Hofstede (cf. McSweeney, 2002) to explain that: “in collective societies (such as China) students are expected to learn ‘how to do’ in contrast to individualist societies (such as UK), in which students are expected to learn ‘how to learn’”. These discourses, though they pretend to present some truth about these spaces (China/the UK), could be easily taken as “self-aggrandizing” for the host country.

The contrasts presented by the researchers between the Chinese and the “locals” are sometimes felt as “disguised” and extremely subjective criticisms and the fact that they use the voices of the students troubles the reader as one doesn’t know if the researcher criticizes these voices or takes them for granted – and presents them as evidence of truth-conditional elements. CG, on p. 88, explain that at the end of their stays, the students “no longer felt that they were ‘children’ as they had been in China but
saw themselves as independent young women, thus taking on the host culture perception of them rather than that of their home culture”. GM also use such phrases as “teacher-centred and spoon-fed education tradition in China”, “sitting in a classroom like “stuffed ducks” (about students in China) and “found themselves working harder in the UK than in China” (p. 238), which seem to be tainted with reductionism and negative differentialism. Another example, derived from JJ on p. 145, gives the impression that Chinese families repress their feelings while English families are very emotional: “Another aspect of English culture that proved disquieting for the students was the frequent and open display of emotions by their host families”.

All in all, even though the use of “facts” and “knowledges” about the Chinese for analysis sake is a laudable gesture, it is clear that there is a potential danger of “muscifying” China (Cheng, 2009) through many of the claims made. In this sense, even though the researchers attempt open-mindedness towards Chinese Otherness, they may be comforting some preconceived ideas.

4.3. Liquid but contradictory discourses

Though culturalist and differentialist discourses of unicity were found in all the articles, Janusian discourses of interculturality were also identified – which give the articles an air of contradiction. On the one hand, all the aspects of the Chinese presented in the previous section were highly emphasized as ways of interpreting the data, on the other, the researchers tend to protect themselves, either at the beginning or at the end of their papers, by opting for a “liquid” discourse on the Chinese and discourses of plurality within this group.
Let us start with CG who seem to protect their “academic discourse” by reminding us on p. 76 that they “tried] to understand the process from the perspective of the student, rather than in some objective sense, through encouraging the students to talk of their experiences of moving to a new culture”, even though they often transformed their discourses into some sort of “objectivity”. What is striking about this comment is that a few lines later, they remind us that a difficulty of working with Chinese young people is that “having been taught to have great respect for both parents and educators (Lee, 1996), are often reluctant to express anything that may reflect negatively on an authority figure or institution”. If the researchers were working from the students’ perspective, this comment does indeed reduce them to some pseudo-objective fact.

PH and GM also take some precautions at the beginning of their articles before analyzing their data. PH on p. 21 affirms that “While it is important not to essentialise communication among Chinese and to acknowledge that there may also be considerable in-group differences in every culture, these broad concepts provide a starting point to understand Chinese communication”. Discursive psychologists such as M. Billig would define this attitude as “repressed repression” (1997), i.e. the researcher denies that by saying something they are not doing something, while at the same time, expressing views which can be heard as doing it. In the rest of her article, though, PH uses these “broad concepts” on Chinese communication to propose some analyses/interpretations to her reader. She goes back to this argument at the end of the article and brings forward a clear “liquified image” of the participants to her study (pp. 28-29): “we need to acknowledge the limitations of culture-general approaches to ICC. (…) how do individual differences such as gender, age, English language ability, status, social class, education, and
geographical identity (rural/urban, north/south and metropolitan/communist cityscapes) influence Chinese students’ ICC in a new cultural context?”. GM (pp. 226-227) share the same sort of discourse when they write: “However, important though it may be, culture is not the only determinant of teaching and learning practices, preferences and experiences. All too easily we can fall into the trap of cultural stereotyping”. While later on, they confess that they will use some characteristics of the generic “Chinese learner”: “We shall therefore, take the view that, while ‘the Chinese learner’ may have certain identifiable characteristics, some of them related to culture, they may also learn and behave differently in different contexts, in ways related more to personal needs and situational demands”. Yet, the boundaries between knowledges and representations on this “Chinese entity” are not clearly exposed by the researchers.

Finally, CG remind us twice that the students are always bound to face problems that other students (even local students) will face. On p. 64, they write: “these individuals face not only the demanding transition from school to higher education common to all students, but the stress of adapting to a new country, culture and often language” and on p. 65, they introduce Dion and Dion’s reference to explain that “sojourning students must often adapt not only to the usual demands of student life but to a culture with different if not opposing values, and customs to their home culture”. In a way, she is saying that these students’ problems can be the same as other students (regardless of their “culture”?). On p. 236, GM bring in a similar argument when they refer to Coleman who “argues that as a result of the ‘huge range’ of internal and external factors, many of which are not associated with culture, the outcomes of study abroad vary considerably from one individual to another”.

All in all, these excerpts show a confusing oscillation between the Chinese student as an essentialised identical entity and the Chinese student as an individual, which nullifies some of the analyses and interpretations proposed by the researchers.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The education of good sense will thus not only consist in rescuing intelligence from ready-made ideas, but also in turning it away from excessively simple ideas, stopping it on the slippery slope of deductions and generalizations, and finally preserving it from excessive self-confidence.

H. Bergson, 1895: 345

In this paper, I was interested in examining how mobile Chinese students were treated by researchers in research articles within the field of intercultural communication. The results are in a way disconcerting as it became clear through the analysis that the researchers’ discourses are crossed by very janusian contents, which on the one hand were reminiscent of liquid interculturality but on the other were very solid. It might seem that the researchers are victims of what has been referred to as “intercultural correctness” and that the wish to keep face and sound not too “biased” in a field where open-mindedness is a key feature. Nevertheless, in the analysis, we have seen that some discourses were not always founded on “intellectual asceticism”.

The French philosopher Henri Bergson (1895), whom I quote at the beginning of this conclusion, in a text on “the education of good sense” reminds us that science and education should move beyond “ready-made ideas”, “simple ideas” but also “generalizations” and “excessive self-confidence”. Many of the comments made by the researchers – or through the use of authorities, “facts” and the students’ discourses - seem to contain some of these anti-scientific elements. This danger has been analysed by
Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) who have demonstrated how scholars themselves often make extra-scientific claims, which are more related to the doxa (‘common sense’) than scientific achievements.

In our review of criticisms on acculturation theories, we emphasized that critical voices suggested the use of qualitative methods to examine the issue of adapting to another country. Even though the articles examined in this paper have done so, it is clear that the qualitative route may not be the only answer to renewing research on acculturation and solving the problem of culturespeak and subjectivity. What seems to be lacking from the articles is a critical stance towards using the subjects’ voices as main evidence for the points made by researchers. The problems of working with such discourses are plentiful: do the students really speak their minds? How much are we influencing them through the questions we ask? How do we know if what the students provide us with is knowledge or representation? Can we base our interpretation and analysis on “culturalist statements”? For the latter, if one goes back to the overuse of Confucianism to explain the students’ ways of being, one could remind the reader of the following quote taken from Confucius’ dialogues: “All within the four seas are brothers and sisters”. None of the researchers have used this basic underlying principle of Confucianism but have instead opted for the pseudo-differentialist idea of harmony, respect, etc. (cf. Cheng, 2009).

It is now clear that working on mobile academics such as the stranger such as Chinese students deserves critical thinking. Acculturation, adaptation and integration to a new place are not as simply explained as the four research articles tried to show. Following Bhatia and Ram (2009) who suggest that “Acculturation is process that
involves continuous, contested, negotiations that will forever be in progress as an immigrant grapples with his/her place in the larger structures of the history, culture, and politics”, a new way of looking at interculturality in academic mobility could be envisaged, which should move away from culturalism and essentialism and look into the diverse diversities of the students (Dervin, 2008).

References


