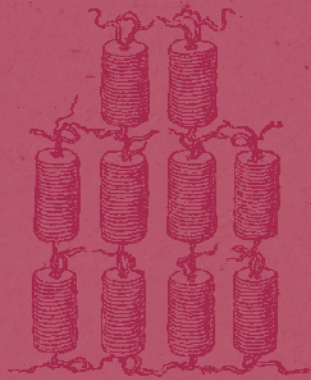




PALGRAVE STUDIES ON CHINESE EDUCATION
IN A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Change and Exchange in Global Education

Learning with Chinese Stories
of Interculturality



Mei Yuan
Fred Dervin
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Palgrave Studies on Chinese Education in a Global Perspective

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This book is dedicated to J.P.D. and Eddy.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Why ‘*Chinese*’ Stories of Interculturality?

Fred Dervin

This book is the result of three years of intense cooperation between the authors in China and Finland. Several articles, chapters and books have preceded the publication of this book, on which it is built (e.g. Yuan et al., 2020; Dervin & Yuan, 2021; Dervin et al., 2022). What we tried to achieve together was to open up global discussions around the ‘right to speak’ about interculturality, to offer new opportunities to listen to other voices and ‘revitalize’ interculturality in global education. Up to a point, we have been successful at doing so. However, we always felt that there is more to do to enrich our own ways of unthinking and rethinking interculturality and to share them with our readers. This book represents another stepping stone, digging deeper into what will be referred to as ‘Chinese stories of interculturality’. After having identified problems and short-term solutions to interculturality in communication and education, we now offer to explore real complements to what has already been proposed in the field worldwide.

As the principal initiator and ‘engineer’ of this important project, and as a scholar from the ‘West’¹ working with colleagues and friends from Mainland China, in what follows, I reflect on why this book was needed and what it aims for. In my engagement with Chinese colleagues and students, I have often noted specific ways of talking about interculturality in English as a global language. While comparing words, phrases and utterances not only in Chinese, English but also Finnish, French, German and Swedish, I realized that there were many more layers of connotations and meanings than I expected. *My interculturality is not always your interculturality...* How could we thus communicate around interculturality without looking into this important aspect of interculturality? This book is provided as one answer to this question.

INTERCULTURALITY ‘OCTOPUSIED’

A few days ago, a friend sent me beautiful images of bright star clusters and distant galaxies that her partner, an amateur ‘astrophographer’, had taken. Although, like everyone else, I am aware that there is a world ‘out there’—composed of stars, constellations, milky ways, and so on, in all my naivety, I was speechless (and jealous!): my friend’s partner had access to such beautiful and complex-looking elements that my untrained eyes never even paid attention to when I have stared at the sky at night. All these deep-space objects on the pictures that she shared made me think of the topic of this book that we have put together with my teams at the University of Helsinki and Minzu University of China. If I could summarize what this book is about in a few words, I would say that it deals with having access to knowledge about interculturality that is invisible to our eyes but that is out there. Our book is like *a telescope*, forming magnified images of far-off objects, and as we shall see, objects that have been brushed aside, ignored and disregarded, while privileging forms of common sense about the notion, imposed on the world by powerful voices.

In order to explain the importance of using investigative tools like a telescope for interculturality, I will start by using another metaphor to reflect on the complexity of interculturality as an object of scholarship and education—that of an octopus. Let us start with a quote from the French writer Victor Hugo (1866: 213) about the octopus:

¹The word *the ‘West’* will be systematically surrounded by inverted commas in the book to indicate that this notion represents a complex representation of powerful voices and ideologies in today’s world. The ‘West’ is not located in specific parts of the world. It symbolizes omnipresent and dominant forces in most economic-political-academic-discursive spheres globally.

If terror were the object of... creation, nothing could be imagined more perfect than the devil-fish... This irregular mass advances slowly towards you. Suddenly it opens, and eight radii issue abruptly from around a face with two eyes. These radii are alive: their undulation is like lambent flames... A terrible expansion!... Its folds strangle, its contact paralyses. It has an aspect like gangrened or scabrous flesh. It is a monstrous embodiment of disease... Underneath each of [its] feelers range two rows of pustules, decreasing in size... They are cartilaginous substances, cylindrical, horny and livid... A glutinous mass, endowed with a malignant will, what can be more horrible?

This terrifying quote gives us a sense of how this creature has been (mis-)perceived in certain parts of the world: “like gangrened or scabrous flesh. It is a monstrous embodiment of disease”; “[it is] endowed with a malignant will, what can be more horrible?”. In my comparison to interculturality, I am interested in two elements—leaving aside these subjective and sensationalist observations. The octopus is described as ‘irregular mass’, ‘glutinous’ (sticky, glue-like), with ‘radii’ (plural form of *radius*, a line extending from a circle) that are alive and rising and falling. I argue that the octopus metaphor can help us problematize how to deal with interculturality in a more global way, enabling us to look at it in its complexity and diversity. I have proposed elsewhere to *interculturalise interculturality* (e.g. Dervin & Jacobsson, 2021; see also Ferri, 2018) and I believe that the octopus metaphor can explain how we could (re)consider the position of interculturality and (maybe) how to deal with it in many and varied ways. This is the main objective of this book, taking into account Chinese perspectives.

Some words about the octopus, based on a summary of Mather (2019) and Smith (2021). The octopus is identified as a cephalopod and has been referred to as *singulare monstrum* (a unique monster) by Swedish naturalist and explorer Linnaeus who framed principles for defining species of organisms back in the eighteenth century. Most readers will have seen (pictures of) octopuses, however, as a reminder: an octopus is an eight-armed, soft-bodied mollusk. Octopuses can range in size from several metres arm span (e.g. the *Giant Pacific*) to the 2.5-centimetre long *octopus wolfi*. The arms of octopuses are covered in suckers, each with ten thousand neurons, which means that they can taste and smell, as well as demonstrate short-term memory. Their lifespan is short, from 1 to 4 years.

What are the specificities of the octopus? This will help us start reflect on interculturality. First and foremost, the octopus has ‘intelligence’ dispersed throughout its body, going beyond the ‘human’ body/brain division. As such an octopus brain contains around 500 million neurons—similar to a three-year old child; its eight arms have almost twice as many nerve

cells as in its brain; its arms are partly self-directed, each representing somehow a ‘thinking thing’, different arms can thus execute different actions harmoniously—not as fixed movement; finally, its arms are partly *self*, partly *other*. Second, the octopus is an inquisitive, observant and friendly creature. As a sophisticated problem solver, it can learn and use tools and is able to, for example, negotiate mazes and unscrew jars containing food, manipulate half-coconut shells in ways that imply they are probing their shapes as much as using them, learn to turn off lights by squirting water at the bulbs. The octopus is also cunning and has a capacity for imitation but also deception. As a protean sea creature, it has the ability to colour-camouflage to match their surroundings by means of its layered screen of pixel-like skin cells. In other words, the octopus can ‘see’ with its skin. Norman et al. (2001) show for example that its biological plasticity can allow the ‘mimic octopus’ to imitate more than 15 animals by changing its colour and shape. Finally, since its boneless mass of soft tissue has no fixed shape, an octopus can for example, escape through small holes.

Back to interculturality now, another ‘unique monster’. *Monster* here is not meant to be a derogatory word. The label is used ironically, bearing in mind that the word in English is from the Latin derivative *monere* which means *to remind*, *to admonish*, but also *to advise*, *to instruct* and *to teach*. Like the octopus, one could say that interculturality has involved sophisticated problem-solving over the decades that it has been researched and used in global education (amongst others). At first sight, the notion appears ‘diverse’ in the way it is constructed, discussed and expressed. Multiple solutions/strategies have been developed around it, in many and varied economic-political contexts. Often influenced by different, similar and overlapping ideologies (e.g. through supranational institutions like the UNESCO, OECD, see e.g. Ingoglia et al., 2021), solutions/strategies can be borrowed and/or mixed from/with other contexts. Figure 1.1 is a projection of interculturality as an octopus.

Globally, interculturality has different arms, different ‘thinking things’. One notices similar shared goals (symbolized by the head of the octopus) with for example, *diversity*, *inclusion*, *tolerance*, *unity*, *social justice* and *human rights* at its core. However, the way these are conceptualized, defined and understood globally, as well as the different beliefs and actions that go with them, will differ politically, economically and ideologically (see *partly self*, *partly other* for the octopus radii). I have included seven different perspectives in the figure (see Dervin & Jacobsson, 2021; Ibelema, 2021; Kulich et al., 2020; Dervin & Yuan, 2021; Aman, 2017;

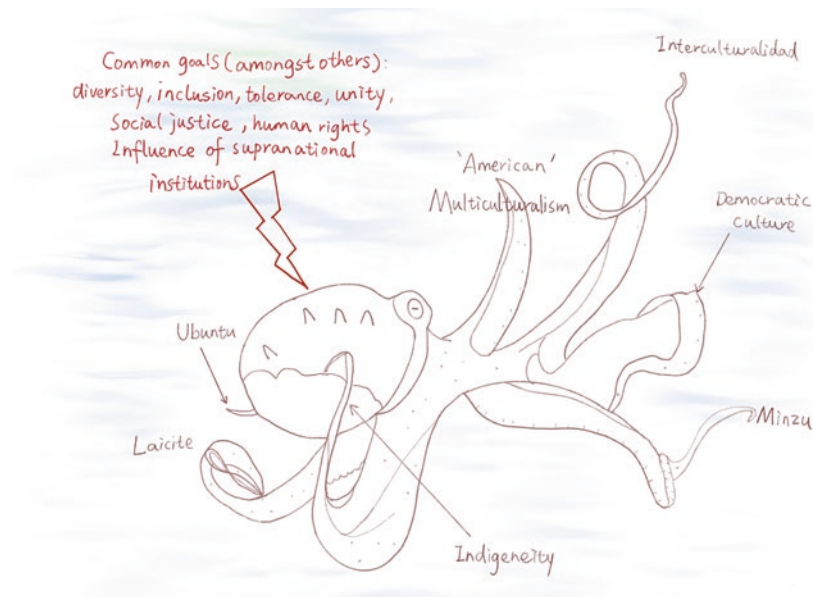


Fig. 1.1 Interculturality as an octopus

Ferri, 2018): (in alphabetical order) ‘American’ multiculturalism, democratic culture, indigeneity, interculturalidad, laïcité, Minzu, Ubuntu.² We must bear in mind that many more such perspectives on interculturality are available.

²In an article published just as we were putting the last touch to this book, Baker (2021) ‘introduced’ the notion of *the transcultural* as an ‘alternative’ for *the intercultural* in research. The author (2021) claims that “the traditional metaphor of ‘inter’ for intercultural communication is no longer adequate and such communication is better approached as transcultural communication where borders are transcended, transgressed and in the process transformed”. In a typical ‘Western-centric’ fashion (i.e. a ‘Western’ critique of ‘Western’ ideologies), with references only in English, the article represents a good example of ‘epistemocentric myopia’. Replacing a word (*intercultural*) with another (*transcultural*) does not make a difference if the ideological foundations (and the critiques that go with them) remain the same. As much as the intercultural is not a single entity worldwide, the transcultural, in all its multilingual, geo-economic-political complexities, cannot be ‘kidnapped’ and turned into a doxic, simplified notion. Instead of rushing to dictate that *the intercultural* is this or that (as I did in the past) and *the transcultural* this or that, it is important to listen to how multiple voices from around the world (from students to people on the streets) problematize them. This applies to all the different ‘arms’ of the proposed octopus.

It is important to note that the use of different languages within and between these radii contributes to the complexity of interculturality. As such, language-thought might differ when one uses such concepts as ethnicity, exotic or tolerance in English and other languages—and this applies to the so-called West and to other parts of the world. Figure 1.2 shows an example for Chinese, where the idea of 民族 (Minzu) is translated as ‘ethnic’ in English. Although most dictionaries will indicate this word as a synonym (or ‘nation’, marginally ‘race’), 民族 (Minzu) is much more than these ‘equivalents’, actually it refers to something else in the Chinese context: 56 groups of people, united and diverse in (at times) languages, cultures, and worldviews, with a common history—that of the Chinese nation. One’s Minzu is often asked for when filling in a form in China. It is also indicated in one’s identity papers.

As aforementioned, in the West, many and varied ideologies are attached to interculturality, which are not necessarily understood and used the same way—or even not used at all in some parts of the ‘West’:



Fig. 1.2 ‘Ethnic culture’ in a Chinese bookstore

- Canada: for example, *indigeneity*
- Finland: for example, *linguistic diversity* (*it is illegal to ask for people's ethnicity/race officially*)
- France: for example, *secularism* (*no 'difference'*)
- Sweden: for example, *ethnic and linguistic diversity*
- UK: for example, *ethnic group*
- US: for example, *race*.

On a US form one might find the following categories (concerning race): *White; Black, African Am.; American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian Indian; Chinese; Filipino; Japanese; Korean; Vietnamese; Other Asian; Native Hawaiian; Guamanian or Chamorro; Samoan; Other Pacific Islander; Some other race*. In Britain, one might see the following categories being included when asking about someone's ethnic group: *White; English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British; Irish; Gypsy or Irish Traveller; Any other White background; Mixed/multiple ethnic groups; White and Black Caribbean; White and Black African; White and Asian; Any other Mixed/multiple ethnic background*.

So, interculturality, like the octopus, represents, at first sight, paradigmatic, political, ideological, linguistic and conceptual plasticity. Yet, one can easily notice that in research and education some 'arms' dominate and reshape others, leading to 'mimicry'. As such, some arms have stronger suckers than others have; some arms are more cunning than others are, better at camouflaging and imposing their power, such as 'American' multiculturalism, 'European' intercultural competence. In their article *Visualizing the knowledge domain of intercultural competence: A bibliometric analysis*, Peng et al. (2020) confirm the dominance of such voices in a particular sub-branch of intercultural scholarship. In recent years, I have noted that ideologies such as *intercultural mediation*, *citizenship*, but also *critical cultural awareness*, and *intercultural responsibility*, all from the 'West', have gained force in global scholarship and become at times mere 'speech acts' (Ahmed, 2006). Many other perspectives, their concepts, notions and methods are unheard of outside their context. For example, as we shall see the centrality of for example, 'economic development' in Chinese discourses of interculturality and the idea of 'cultural confidence' are 'alien' outside the Middle Kingdom.

To conclude about the *octopus* metaphor, I argue that it helps us become aware of the real complexity of the notion of interculturality while asking us to bear in mind our common global goals, whose meanings need to be

renegotiated again and again. The metaphor can also support us in noticing genuinely global (i.e. diverse) ways of problematizing and offering solutions to issues of interculturality. By doing so, interculturality as an octopus can offer more knowledge about interculturality from around the world and thus contribute a little to ‘epistemic justice’, a way of tackling silent discrimination (Fricker, 2007; R’boul, 2020). The metaphor can also urge us to be motivated to be interested in other ‘arms’ and to look out for other solutions and ideas.

The detour via the metaphor of the octopus suggests that we focus more systematically on the following questions:

- How to give a voice to different ‘arms’ of interculturality as an octopus and enjoy more *plasticity*?
- How to gain ‘discursive rights’, the right to speak beyond intercultural ‘common sense’ pushed forward by the ‘West’?
- How to learn *with* each other between and amongst the ‘arms’?
- How to prepare to evaluate the characteristics of each ‘arm’ in terms of *ideology, language-thought, economic-political aspects*?

This all comes down to the aforementioned idea of *interculturalizing interculturality*. This book on Chinese stories of interculturality presents some answers to these questions while contributing more questions and answers—*ad infinitum*. Following the German physicist and satirist G. C. Lichtenberg (2012: 35): “One’s first step in wisdom is to question everything—and one’s last is to come to terms with everything.”

ON THE OBLIGATION TO LISTEN TO OTHER STORIES OF INTERCULTURALITY

The previous section highlights an important component of working on interculturality globally: we need to listen to others and to ourselves. The composer Igor Stravinsky (in Walsh, 2007: 339) helps us make an important distinction between *to listen* and *to hear*: “To listen is an effort, and just to hear is no merit. A duck hears also.” In his music, Stravinsky tried to disrupt the way we listen to music by creating polytonality, combining different types of notes of a specific chord. He actually organized rhythm and melody in his famous piece called the *Rite of Spring* (1913) following

a principle named *tolchok*, from Russian толчок which means *to push* and *hit*. By doing so, the composer asked his listeners to accept some form of dissonance, that is, the combination/superposition of tones that are ‘pushing’ their listening to his music in different directions.

I argue that working on interculturality requires employing a *tolchok* (толчок) technique, to be pushed and hit in all directions, to experience ‘shock’ while accepting exchange and change when acquainting oneself with and listening to other ways of ‘doing’ interculturality. Until now, Westernized ideologies have been upheld as the yardstick for ‘anything intercultural’ on the academic and education markets. Proposing to listen to ‘Chinese stories of interculturality’ represents толчок. Of course, like the circulating and dominating Western ideologies (‘orders’), what China has to say about interculturality can also be labelled as *ideology*, since any assertion, positioning about the notion cannot but be ideological, embedded in economic-political perspectives. What we are asking is for our readers to listen to these stories before comparing, judging, fetishizing and condemning. There is a need to go beyond what Gu (2015) calls *sinologism*, an “alienated” Western-centric way of engaging and producing knowledge about China that distorts and presents negative, inferior, unbalanced images of the Middle Kingdom, its people and stories.

Two first Chinese elements, which we shall refer to as *discourse instruments* in the book, can help us problematize these issues further:

1. 邯郸学步 (Hándānxuébù) translates as *Handan Toddler; learning to walk in Handan; learning a style of walking* and is explicated by one of our students as follows: “This is an idiom that comes from an ancient anecdote. Once upon a time, in a place called Shouling (寿陵), there was a young man who heard that the people in another place named Handan (邯郸) can walk with great grace. He was so fascinated by it that he went to Handan to learn how to walk like them. In order to learn better, he forced himself to forget his original way of walking. When he finally arrived at Handan, he was excited, he sometimes learnt from the elders, sometimes from children and sometimes from women. But with such a method, he failed to grasp any of these walking postures. Since he had forgotten his original way of walking, he had to crawl back to his hometown. Now we use this idiom to describe a person who failed to copy others’