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Conceptualising a Liquid Interculturality for Foreign Language Teaching: A Case Study of Higher Education Teachers in China

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Abstract. Recent researchers and educators have suggested a renewed understanding for "culture" in order to transcend the essentialist perceptions that are deeply entrenched in intercultural education. This study adopted a critical, realistic liquid framework of interculturality to investigate how a group of foreign language teachers perceive and practise the content of culture and interculturality in a Chinese university. The study was conducted in a narrative inquiry style, in which interviews and journal entries were employed to collect data, and thematic and discourse analysis were combined to examine them. The data show that teachers' understandings of cultures can be contradictory and manipulative, oscillating between simple and complex stances; despite some shortcomings, teachers are able to build a reflexivity in intercultural education classrooms, reflecting on issues related to diversity, equality and justice and taking actions in a socially responsible way. These results affirm the value of liquid interculturality as a framework for researchers to better examine teachers' understandings in intercultural classrooms, and offer some feasible suggestions for educators to develop a critical awareness of cultural diversity and promote reflexive practices in the future.

Keywords: Foreign Language Teaching; Higher Education; Intercultural Education; Interculturality; Narrative Case Study

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, the accelerating trend of globalisation has engendered various forms of internationalisation in universities, such as abroad and distance education. As a result, higher education is becoming a highly mobile site that regards teaching and practising intercultural communication as a necessity (Tan et al., 2021). Some European countries have incorporated intercultural communication as a course and programme into tertiary education and consider including them officially on the political agenda; for example, Tournebise (2012) and Leeman and Ledoux (2010) have examined the implementation of intercultural education programmes in universities in Finland and the

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Netherlands, which were part of the national policy and project. Their results show that such forms of intercultural education often raise concerns about the content related to inequality, discrimination, ethnic/cultural diversity and citizenship. However, owing to the varying educational policies and complex ideologies in teaching environments, the practical designs of intercultural education – such as educational objectives, curricula and pedagogies – may follow distinct paths (Portera, 2008). Therefore, it is important to investigate intercultural education in specific contexts.

Like many European countries, the context of this study – China – also faces the need to teach "interculturality" in higher education institutes. In 2013, the Chinese government proposed the "Belt and Road Initiative" and officially incorporated the programme into the national constitution in 2017. This global development strategy and long-term investment programme, which involves nearly 70 countries worldwide, aims to increase mutual understanding and trust between member nations through economic cooperation and cultural exchange. Such an innovative national policy led to further adjustments in higher education policies, which began to emphasise the need for training "international talents" and enhancing university students' "intercultural competence" (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2016). Universities were required to design more courses and programmes to fit the labels of "intercultural" or "multicultural" teaching and learning and embed more cultural content in the curriculum for foreign language majors. However, the introduction of intercultural education in China is controversial. Some researchers offered critiques, noting that under such policy changes, Chinese teachers lacked proper professional training and preparation to teach intercultural communication, resulting in tension and difficulties amongst teachers (Tan et al., 2021). As part of the foreign language curricula, many teachers who do not specialise in intercultural communication were asked to "improvise" its instruction and deliver courses in unfamiliar fields. Little attention has been paid to the question how these Chinese university teachers adapt their beliefs and agencies to the intercultural teaching experiences, thus leaving a blank in this research field.

Another focus of this paper is the renewed framework of "interculturality", which generally refers to the emergent and co-constructed interactions in intercultural communication and involves individuals' ability to understand and appraise specific cultural values and practices. Previous theoretical concepts and methodological approaches regarding intercultural education often resort to the solid assumptions that different cultures exist as the correlatives of distinct geographical spaces and see intercultural communication as the encounters between such solid cultures (Lavanchy et al., 2011). However, recent intercultural studies show that our cultural perceptions and practices are often individually varied, since our values and understanding of the world are often influenced by politics, ideologies, and power relations in social spaces (Ferri, 2018). Therefore, researchers and educators now call for a renewed approach to understand cultures. An example is the "liquid" framework of interculturality proposed by Dervin (2011), which is also what this study seeks to apply in the current context.

This approach has been a nascent stance rarely adopted by researchers in recent years, thus leaving a research gap to which this current research contributes.

This study adopts Dervin's theory of critical liquid interculturality (2011) to move beyond a solid stance to perceive cultures, addressing the research gap in the current field concerning intercultural higher education. Based on the above research contexts, this study attempts to investigate a group of foreign language educators in a Chinese university who tried to conceptualise their own liquid understandings and teaching practices of culture and intercultural communication through the reflection on their previous experiences. Since "scholars' and educators' own education and training, beliefs, life experiences and worldviews will impact how they define, understand, examine, negotiate and teach the notion" (Simpson et al., 2020, p. 2042), it is valuable to research the process by which these Chinese teachers prepare themselves for teaching and being intercultural. Two research questions are proposed as follows:
1) How do these language teachers cultivate a "liquid" interculturality from their own intercultural experiences?
2) How does such a liquid interculturality facilitate teachers' beliefs, values and practice towards social justice and equality in classroom contexts?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Interculturality: A Renewed Notion

The notion of "interculturality" is polysemic in literature, as its definition varies with researchers' different viewpoints (Jin, 2016). For example, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has generalised interculturality as "the existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect" (UNESCO, 2005, p. 8), while Dietz (2018) defined the term as the relations existing between culturally diverse human groups in a given society. Although it differs based on individual interpretation, interculturality generally involves the way people interact with "others" they perceive as having a different culture. Therefore, the centre of discussions about interculturality is understanding the concept of "culture", which is not only etymologically and epistemologically linked to "intercultural" (Lavanchy et al., 2011), but also used and shaped by social groups "to construct ideological imaginations both of themselves and others...in everyday life and in the academy" (Holliday, 2011, p.1).

The growing need to research a renewed interculturality is situated in a historic and globalised background. Owing to an increase in overseas education and the evolution of digital technologies, people today have more opportunities to interact with "others", either directly or indirectly, which may lead to changes in positioning and self-identification (Dervin, 2014a). Therefore, the increasing interconnectivity of the world has led to the oscillation and critiques of the traditional views which associated people's unchangeable images with their nation and inherited culture (Sen, 2006), and has provided researchers with the opportunity to revisit and extend the notion of culture and interculturality in relation to the times of changes.

2.2 Solid Understandings of Cultures

The sociologist Bauman (2013) established the "solid" and "liquid" paradigms to differentiate between the modern views in the 20th century and the post-modern views in the 21st century; the former described a solid, systemic world of nation-states, while the latter implied a more dynamic and fragmented nature of individuals and our world (Ferri, 2018). Appropriating Bauman's (2013) idea into intercultural research, Dervin (2011) also differentiated the solid and critical, and liquid stances of perceiving cultures.

As its name suggests, the "solid" understanding regards culture as a solid and unchangeable heritage of communities with objectified and identifiable characteristics, such as languages, clothing styles, nationalities and religions. Since the culture is "solid", it can naturally form solid boundaries between distinct entities and be independent of social interactions (Lavanchy et al., 2011). The solid view gives little attention to the internal diversity within a group (Virkama, 2010). Instead, this viewpoint perceives intercultural encounters as vast interactions between two national cultures. Such a framework emphasises the mutually exclusive and homogeneous "cultural territories" or "cultural areas" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 93), in which the spheres of cultural influence are delineated in a manner similar to how national territories are measured. The cultural solidity is also commonly associated with "essentialism" and "culturalism", believing that "people's behaviour is defined or constrained by the culture in which they live", and stereotypes can somehow represent their essence (Holliday et al., 2021, p. 5). Hofstede (2011)'s model of national culture is the typical solid framework which has been adopted by many educators for a functionalist aim to help learners overcome possible difficulties of entering other national cultures (Virkama, 2010).

Despite the extensive use in intercultural learning and teaching, the solid understanding of cultures has been criticised for its self-evident weaknesses. For instance, Sen (2006) argued that this essentialist typology might lead to "the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity" (p. xv), regardless of an individual's gender, age, and social class. According to Sen (2006), the consequence of this type of choiceless identity can be discrimination, hatred, and violence. Holliday's study (2013) denoted the negative influence of this solidity in international education, as it may result in a tendency towards colonialism and Eurocentrism. This occurrence would reduce students' willingness to participate in the classroom, where non-Western students would be perceived as the "reduced Other" compared to native Westerners being the "enlightened Self" (p. 82). Kumaravadivelu (2008) also argued that the overemphasis on national cultures in teaching could result in ideological stereotypes relegating others to inferior positions. Therefore, teachers have been encouraged to develop a critical ability (Breidenbach & Nyíri, 2011) to question explicit and implicit assumptions and combat the ideas behind cultural claims when teaching the word "culture" in classrooms. Recent researchers and educators have therefore called for a non-essentialist framework to reconceptualise interculturality.

2.3 A Critical Liquid Interculturality Framework

The current post-modern era has contributed to a fluid and egalitarian relationship between languages and discourses, and culture has become a liquid

and ideologically constructed concept which is not only differently shaped by societal structures, material conditions, and power relations, but is also open to the emergence of new social practices and identities (Martin & Nakayama, 2021). As Holliday and MacDonald (2019) argued, "in intercultural communication studies, the positivist preoccupation with objectivist, essentialist, solid large cultures has been replaced by a post-modern recognition that the intercultural is liquid and ideologically constructed" (p. 1).

Based on the post-modern views introduced above, Dervin (2011) proposed the "liquid" framework as a critical and constructivist paradigm that primarily concentrated on the discourses. This framework defined interculturality as "the positioning and negotiation of individuals who come from different spaces-times" (Devin, 2011, p. 38), and recognised cultures as non-definable variables that are constantly negotiated and represented by interactants. Therefore, the concept of "cultures" is weakened to contextualised individuals who are not restricted to one eternal, homogeneous form but instead oscillate between a myriad of identities throughout interactions which entail mutual influences between the interlocutors (R'boul, 2020).

Since the liquid framework also considers the structural constraints represented by modalities, which influence the agency of interlocutors to understand cultures in a traverse across time/space, it also emphasises the "simplexity" from a realistic perspective, acknowledging the politics in intercultural phenomena that can impact individuals' actions. Two core components constitute the concept of "simplexity": "simplicity" and "complexity", implying that individuals "need to navigate between simple and complex ideas and opinions when [they] interact with others" (Dervin, 2016, p. 66). In this case, possible consequences of this simplexity nature of interactants are that they will contradict themselves, feel unsure about their thoughts, or adapt their discourses in favour of specific situations and interlocutors. As Dervin (2016) argued,

> *"Sometimes what we say shows some level of complexity (e.g. 'I believe that everybody has multiple identities'/ 'I don't believe in stereotypes'), which can quickly dive back into the simple ('but I think that Finnish people are this or that'). Neither simplicity nor complexity can thus be fully reached and what might appear simple can become complex and vice versa."* (Dervin, 2016, p. 81).

Dervin and Jacobsson (2021) suggested that realistic liquid adopters should observe how people position themselves and interactional others in their discourses, since even the simplest questions and answers can reflect a hidden agenda or ideological outlook. In such a realistic liquid paradigm, although the participants may demonstrate a solid understanding of intercultural communication, the analysts are aware that the subjects are influenced by the structural forces in dynamic contexts, thereby shifting between their simple and complex opinions. Since this critical liquid framework of interculturality provides a holistic lens to examine teachers' multiple, complex and possibly contradictory attitudes of cultures and intercultural education, it is also the position taken in the current research paper.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design: Narrative Case Study

Since Dervin (2011) identified the liquid framework of interculturality as a critical, constructivist paradigm, the current study requires researchers to be responsible for their participants, aware of their own preconceived ideas and biased claims (Dervin, 2011). Qualitative case study thus became the most suitable approach, which can effectively uncover the meanings involved in specific research contexts while paying attention to the subjectivity of researchers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

As a typical qualitative approach exploring "the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (Clandinin, 2013, p.18), narrative inquiry was specifically chosen in this study to investigate teachers' intercultural experiences and teaching practices. In this study, narrative inquiry allowed me to not only sustain the position of a respectful and curious inquirer while probing the stories of teacher groups, but also reflexively consider the dilemmas, imbalances, and contradictions reflected from their experiences (Trahar, 2009). By exploring these diverse narratives of learning and teaching, I could understand how the diversity of culture was "narratively composed, embodied in people and expressed in practice" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.124).

3.2 Participant Recruitment

Four participants were recruited from the foreign languages department of a comprehensive university in northern China, where "Intercultural Communication" has been incorporated as a compulsory course for the foreign languages department and a selective course for the whole university. All the participants were language teachers who instructed this course. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling approach: Two of the participants were my acquaintances at this university and directly recruited for this research, while the other two teachers were introduced by the initial contacts. Since narrative inquiry only focuses on the rich, in-depth description of individuals' life stories, this study tended to be a small-scale qualitative research which deeply explored the unique living and teaching experiences of four respondents. All the participants were informed of the research procedures and potential risks of participating in this study and signed the participant information sheet and consent form before the research started. Owing to the identifiable information in participants' narratives, pseudonyms were used throughout the study to ensure confidentiality. Other identifiable characteristics, such as school and city names, were withheld to protect personal privacy.

3.3 Data Collection

As Pavlenko (2007) suggested, materials of narrative research can be oral, written, and visual. To prepare for a holistic and thorough analysis of the teachers' experiences, the narrative data of this study were collected from multiple sources – including interviews and journal entries – to ensure triangulation. Four rounds of audio-recorded interviews were individually conducted with each participant on WeCom, a Chinese online conference platform. The first two rounds of

interviews were a 30–60 minute semi-structured interview. These interviews were guided by a list of questions around particular themes but without fixed questions, such as respondents' personal understandings of cultures, their beliefs and values in intercultural communication, and how they thought the concepts of culture and interculturality should be taught. The next two narrative interviews were around 60 minutes each, inviting participants to talk about how their experiential stories related to their answers in first two interviews. Follow-up questions were used to solicit additional examples, clarifications, and descriptions, in order to give participants the freedom to construct a rich and well-developed narrative. These actual expressed thoughts and sentiments gathered through narratives and open-ended responses counted as the indicators of qualitative data changes to measure the liquidity of teachers' intercultural understandings.

After the interviews, participants were required to write three 500-word journal entries, which expanded on the stories in their narratives. According to Cohen et al. (2007), journals are an effective way to obtain personal feelings. Some participants also provided access to their online teaching blogs, kept previously, to supplement the interviews and journal entries above. Although these data were not collected for analysis, they increased the authenticity of the shared stories by mutual corroboration.

3.4 Data Analysis

After completing the data collection, audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and, along with the journal entries, translated into English. Thematic and discourse analysis were combined as methods for further data processing. While thematic analysis subjects stories to specific themes and analyses them through repetitive coding, the discourse analysis in narrative inquiry primarily focuses on the linguistic markers or contexts of narrators' utterances, aiming to explore the explicit and implicit expressions of their emotions, values and relationships (Benson, 2014).

The analytical procedure consisted of the following stages. First, interview recordings and journal texts were examined to check the accuracy of transcriptions and translations. Second, texts were carefully coded to generate the initial categories, which were developed based on the focuses of participants' narratives. After the initial coding, I examined each category in depth and constantly refined the codes while re-reading the data, then the remaining categories were defined and explained as themes. After the themes had been recognised, discourse analysis was employed to examine more deeply the discursive features of each coded content, in order to find out a multiplicity of voices in the teachers' discourses which could expose their implicit or explicit attitudes to "culture" and "interculturality". These thematic and discursive results are addressed in the discussion below.

4. Findings

The thematic and discourse analysis eventually resulted in four themes: persistent solid preconceptions; embracing the individual diversity in a homogeneous

group; reconceptualising the unusual to usual, and confrontation against biases and hegemonic voices. The findings show that when describing their previous life stories and perceptions of teaching the content of cultures and intercultural communication in classroom contexts, the teachers constructed a realistic liquid interculturality.

4.1 Persistent Solid Preconceptions

While describing their life stories and teaching values in the intercultural communication course, most participants resorted to a solid explanation of the concept of culture. One common strategy adopted by teachers is to reduce culture to a national custom, such as dressing codes, food habits, and living patterns and draw explicit boundaries between geographical communities.

> *"Culture" is a broad concept. Let's take food habits for example: in the West, people prefer individual serving, but for us, we love to sit around, share dishes and eat hotpot together. This falls into the category of culture.* (Jay)

In the interviews, Jay interpreted the food habits into a derivation of regional culture. Instead of attributing these different preferences to individual habits, family customs or hygiene practices, he simply ascribed them to the cultural differences. The geographical-based categorisation he adopted is also problematic, as it simply rests on a final verdict of essentialism which may impose choiceless identities onto people from different regions.

The tendency of this cultural solidity is not uncommon in other teachers' narratives. While soliciting more detailed explanations of "cultural differences" from teachers, two participants described them as follows:

> *In China there are a lot of surprises: if we are free today, we can arrange a dinner together and hang out casually. But British people are not like that: they usually have a to-do list, they need to book a slot at least a month or so beforehand, to decide where they will go on this day and what they will do on that day. Of course it's not bad to make everything planned, but it would be tedious and rigid sometimes. This is what I think a typical cultural difference.* (Jane)

> *Some cultures are unique to certain nationalities. [...]For example, in Europe, people nearly speak and talk loudly, no matter where they are. I think this is one of the better things about them. They also love reading: they seemed to hold a book everywhere. This can also be considered a unique feature that is rare to find elsewhere.* (Anna)

In the transcriptions, the two teachers appeared to equate certain behaviour to habits and customs that people in a certain country have, thus simplifying such behaviour patterns as "fragmented cultural tidbits" (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 93). The discourses of Jane and Anna create stereotypes of British and European "others", respectively, which lead to two different tendencies of cultural solidity: While Jane depicted a "tedious and rigid" image of British people, Anna emphasised the "good" cultures of European nationalities. The negative stereotypes proposed by Jane appeared to indicate that she has succumbed to an

ethnocentrism which may bias her teaching attitudes (Shi-xu, 2015). It is similarly noteworthy in Anna's utterance that she used the word "better" when commenting on the "quietness" of Europeans, which may lead to an implicit superior/inferior comparison between the non-European self and the European other.

4.2 Embracing the Individual Diversity in a Homogeneous Group

Despite the recurrent solid perceptions in the narratives, some participants were able to renew their understandings of culture through their interactive experiences with others, such as recognising the diversity of an individual's habits, preferences and personalities in a social group which may be considered "homogeneous". One example is extracted from one of the participant's journal entries. In the journal, Anna narrated a conversation between her and a colleague from the US in which she was surprised by how different "real" Americans could be from her perceptions:

> *The common sense of "independent adulthood" we have learned does not seem to be what we thought it would be: as soon as Americans turn 18, they will leave home to attend college or live independently. Many young people depend on their families for financial support while they attend university (unless their families are unable to do so). It does not appear that children have to repay their parents for tuition fees upon graduation, and some university graduates even go back home and live off their parents. It is also possible for some people to set up their own families and still want to live around and look after their parents and brothers. This is a far cry compared to what I had learnt in books and films, and really shattered my old perceptions.* (Anna)

The interactions with the different other (i.e., her colleague) enabled Anna to overturn the stereotypes of US people who celebrate a value of self-independence and individualism. However, considering the diversity of individuals' financial conditions, family environments and personalities that can contribute to a diversity of people's choices, Anna started to question the solid, disparate boundaries between "cultures" which allocate certain characteristics to people with certain nationalities. She then realised that what had been inculcated and she had initially believed to be cultural characteristics could be fluid and universal.

> *Over the past ten years or so, we have always been concerned with cultural conflicts and differences. The so-called "individualism" and "collectivism", the "straightforward" and "subtle" seem to be what we expect from the East and the West. It seems that we have forgotten how cultures can be shared, integrated and mutually influenced.* (Anna)

The focus on comparing between "individualism" and "collectivism" is omnipresent in essentialism (Holliday, 2011). These two labels are commonly proposed as "prototypes" of national culture located in specific geographical locations (Triandis, 1995). For example, "people from individualist cultures" are perceived as North Americans, North and West Europeans, and Australians, who are autonomous and open to new experiences, while "people from collectivist cultures" are presented as Latin American, Southern European, Asian and African people who strongly recognise their group member identities and prioritise

stability. Such comparisons have been critiqued for being Western-centric, since individualism is normally associated with imagined positive characteristics, whereas collectivism is associated with the negative ones (Kim, 2005). In this extract, Anna sought to problematise this dichotomy. Although the discourse "cultures can be [...] mutually influenced" falls under the suspicion of a neo-essentialist tune still implying that the Eastern and Western cultures are two distinct entities awaiting union, Anna presented a potential to develop a critical, liquid reflection on cultural stereotypes and conflicts that contradicted her previous solid assumptions.

Another foreign language teacher, Kate, also reported on how she identified individual diversity while discussing religious issues with others. In her accounts, she mentioned a story: in an exchange programme organised by the foreign language department, she instructed a group of exchange students from other countries. Kate described how her interlocutors reacted differently to her questions during the conversation, even though they had the same nationalities and religious beliefs and were asked the same questions:

> *There was a young man from Turkey in my class. I asked him, "Would you mind if I ask you some questions about your religion?" He said he didn't mind. So I asked something about his food taboos. [...] Maybe he was one of those open-minded people. But the other guy – I thought I could ask him too, so I didn't ask him [for permission] in advance. Surprisingly, he seemed to mind it very much.* (Kate)

Kate' s discourse implied that she originally believed these two students were the "same" Turkish people that she could go to for answers. Whether this preconception was derived from her interlocutors having the same nationality, religion, or ethnicity, it suggested a relatively essentialist viewpoint. However, the interactions with two students overturned this viewpoint. Impressed by the huge differences between the two reactions, she began reconsidering people as "open-minded" and "not open-minded". Although this binary classification still implies an essentialist view, she realised that even people with the same religious background and social membership might react differently in intercultural interactions based on their own dispositions. She then self-critiqued her imprudent and disrespectful behaviour.

> *This is nothing else but about sincerity and respect. You should ask him in advance, "Would this question offend you?" If he says yes, you should stop. Even if he's of the same race/ethnicity as you, you should be careful sometimes. What if he is not the particularly open-minded type? (Interview 2)* (Kate)

Although the speech "even if he's of the same race/ethnicity as you, you should be careful" implies a neo-essentialist self-other dichotomy in which people from one's own race/ethnicity are treated differently than those from other races/ethnicities (Dervin, 2014b), Kate extended the application of her knowledge from cross-border interactions to a broader range, arguing that the values of respect and sincerity should be universally applicable.

However, Kate also admitted that her understanding might be prejudiced because she would never ask religious questions of females.

> *I would only ask [questions about religions] if he was a male, but I never dare to ask a female student. Perhaps I have a prejudice in my bones, thinking that girls are not suitable to be asked these questions, and that girls may be more protective of their doctrines, and not be allowed to do things against their religions, while men are more likely to be open-minded. It's a stereotype, isn't it? You should not judge people by their genders, even it's part of their cultural customs. Actually, I don't think I'm right. Technically, men and women should be the same.* (Kate)

Although Kate gave a relative solid description which uses "cultural customs" as an alibi for yielding to the gender stereotype, her reasons for not questioning women about this topic indicate that she has noticed the unequal gender structure in some religions and recognised that females might be more constrained by religious beliefs and practices than men are. In addition, although the extract exhibits a prejudice towards gender which may result in negative stereotypes related to religions, Kate herself acknowledged this bias and made a self-commitment to equality ("men and women should be the same").

As a result of Kate's concern for gender equality in intercultural education, she later realised that such issues should be incorporated into her teaching of culture. She attempted to find a way to resonate the curricular contents with her students:

> *If [the lesson] is about the Middle East, I'll also talk about this. I think every girl is involved in this situation, more or less, that you will face inequality everywhere and feel angry about it. Taking our foreign language department for example, we have more female students than males, but you'll find that actually people are still esteeming male students. You may find that girls are just as competent as boys, but boys will be the class leaders or members of student council, while girls are left behind. [...] Indeed there are some women who are gentler and will accept it. But if you don't want to reconcile to this situation, you should at least learn how to speak for yourself.* (Kate)

Gender inequality appears to be a worldwide issue and challenge that can be observed in many contexts, including on campus. In the story, Kate clearly noticed the gender unfairness in her classroom and expressed discomfort regarding this seemingly accepted, male-biased ideology. Therefore, she decided to teach the knowledge above to combat the tacit ideology and raise her students' awareness of this imbalanced power structure. Although the story of "Middle East" was neither nationally nor racially related to her students, she determined it might resonate with them in terms of their female identities. However, Kate's teaching practices are not completely unproblematic, as they may raise another worry: whether she tended to associate the Middle Eastern society with specific gender oppression phenomena (e.g., religious issues), since she reported that she would mention the gender issue when the lesson was related to the Middle East. Such a subtle allusion might project an othered, marginalised image of Islamic society (Holliday, 2011), yet she was unaware of it.

4.3 Reconceptualising the Unusual to Usual

A few teachers also explored their own experiences of reconceptualising "unusual" traditions, thus approaching an understanding of liquid interculturality. One of the participants, Jane, is an experienced intercultural researcher and in-service university teacher who has at least five years of experience visiting overseas and has participated in many academic conferences in different countries and regions. During these enriched intercultural experiences, she witnessed many differences in the fairly simple and small interactions and started to question the customs and habits that she previously believed to be norms. She then gave an example of a one-year study tour she spent in the UK, where she developed a friendship with a local. However, Jane's first interaction with this friend was not so smooth:

> *[...] He's that kind of very typical British gentleman. To express his thanks, he tried to hug and kiss me. It's actually like an embrace, followed by a facially expressed politeness. [...] As soon as he began the hugging action, I quickly stepped back a long distance. You knew he meant no harm – he just came to express his gratitude – but I just came here three months ago, I was not accustomed to their culture. Besides, you know, it was our first time meeting. So I instinctively rejected him, and he was clearly aware of it too. He suddenly blushed and I was also a bit embarrassed.* (Jane)

To Jane, the custom of hugging and kissing other people was unusual because according to Jane's perception, it is inappropriate to act that way when meeting someone for the first time, especially when the two persons are of different genders. Although Jane understood the intention of this man and the meaning of the behaviour, she could not accept the custom and tried to interpret it as a derivation of a collective national culture (i.e., "their culture"). However, as Jane continued, she explained that she started to accept this unusual habit as time passed.

> *But later on, hugs became a default manner that we all liked, whether it was when we needed to part with the families, or when we expressed friendships. I like this way afterwards. I think it makes you feel much warmer than the handshake that we do in China.* (Jane)

This discourse indicates a process in which Jane gradually changed her attitude from rejecting to accepting new customs, as well as reconceptualised her understandings of "usual" and "unusual". When earlier discussing the definition of "culture", Jane mostly employed solid and essentialist descriptions such as "British people are all.../British culture...". However, in this transcription, Jane seemed to learn from the different stories above and tried to reflect that culture is an individual manner that can be adapted or transferred over time and with changes in the environment (Dervin, 2017). While describing her internalisation of the "unusual" customs, she seemed to believe hugs and kisses were derivations of British etiquette because she said a "handshake" was done instead in China. Nonetheless, she saw the process of adopting new cultural traits from a non-essentialist perspective that someone with a non-Western cultural background can behave in a seemingly Western way "because there are underlying universal cultural processes which underpin such behaviour" (Holliday, 2011, p. 106).

Jay similarly proposed another story of his observation of traffic rules in the Netherlands.

> *[...] The belt seemed unnecessary to me since I was going to answer it casually. But the driver was very serious. He said it was mandatory, if we didn't wear the safety belts, he wouldn't start the coach. It impressed me a lot. [...] Well, this happened five years ago, for now, you can tell that most people have this safety awareness: whether you are driving or taking someone else's car, they will wear their belts after getting into the vehicle.* (Jay)

Despite the initial impression, Jay was able to recognise such an unfamiliar rule is driven by people's safety awareness. Reflecting on this experience, he then commented as follows:

> *Sometimes I think our knowledge and theories are already outdated ...You know, they still use the arguments decades ago. Even myself, I went to some places ten years ago and I know things has [sic] been totally different. [...] It's your responsible [sic] to tell your students these misrepresentations.* (Jay)

Through the process of reconceptualising the unusual phenomena to the omnipresence, Jay reconsidered the possibility of sailing away from the essentialism: the distinctive, seemingly unmovable cultural entities, such as customs and rules, can be destabilised with mindset and systemic change. Jay thus sought to critique the obsolete solid paradigms in previous intercultural education areas and facilitate a sense of responsibility to help students transcend the accompanied stereotypes.

4.4 Confrontations against Biases and Hegemonic Voices

In exploring the participants' narratives, a theme that repeatedly appeared was their efforts to combat the voices of discrimination and hegemony surrounding them and their students. As some skilled teachers' stories transcended a long temporal length, they had witnessed many implausible images imposed on Chinese people and the country due to unfamiliarity. Although some stereotypes and biases are gradually diminishing with globalisation, they have deeply influenced teachers' intercultural stories and individual understandings of cultures. In the narratives, Jane shared an anecdote of what happened on a trip to Europe while she and her colleagues were having a buffet in a cafeteria.

> *[...] Then I found there were no fruits, so I asked the waiter. He was very annoyed and started to yell, "No, we don't have fruits!" But we saw him put all the fruits at the bottom of the cabinet. So I and my partners told him we just saw them. Then he was like, "You Chinese people always take them all away!" And [expressed] something like discontent with Chinese. I was angry: How could you say that? This was a generalisation, just because one or two persons did it, how could you say that "we Chinese people" were always like this?* (Jane)

The waiter's words undoubtedly illustrated an oversimplified image of Chinese guests. Although there might be reasonable motives hidden behind his behaviour

("one or two" Chinese guests might violate the rules in the cafeteria), the waiter has generated a stigmatising opinion of the Chinese nationality that presumed all Chinese guests were undisciplined. Nevertheless, Jane was able to resist this discriminating stereotype and point out this was a "generalisation" behaviour by recognising the individual differences in her social group. She later reported this event to the front desk of the cafeteria and accepted the manager's apology.

At the end of the narration, Jane integrated her story into the teaching principles as follows:

> *Students should know the same thing: don't be biased about cultures, don't generalise people by one example, judging that the people of this country are less moral, or the people of that country have a stronger sense of democracy. You should not define a culture by a single individual example, differentiating which one is superior or inferior. It's incorrect.* (Jane)

Jane clearly extended her experiences of stigma to a more ethical, socially responsible dimension including the judgement of the morality and democratic sense of people. In this extract, her definition of "cultures" is no longer understood as food habits, dressing codes or greeting traditions which are located within "a grammar of culture where cultural practices are but a small part of a more complex rubric" (Collins & Delgado, 2019, p. 544), but rather are associated with a wider political consideration of people's positionings and rights.

Another teacher with study-abroad experiences, Jay, also provided a valuable teaching story about him and his students questioning the prevailing western hegemonic ideology in the education system. Once during a class, he introduced students to a lecture about the different educational modes of China and western countries. After comparing the textbook content and exam systems, some students started to talk about the "freedom" students have in the classroom. This sparked a discussion that then turned to the question of whether a "freer" educational system was better than that of China. Jay then commented on the discussion:

> *[Some students said] the people from western educational systems were more adept at discussing and arguing, while our Chinese system had more respect for the authority. This might be right. But you can't say this one is democratic, while the other one is despotic. There are many reasons behind [the educational systems]; besides, not all Chinese classrooms are alike. Students were aware of that in the classroom.* (Jay)

The bias against East Asian students and educational modes has become commonplace, particularly in western countries, as has been thoroughly discussed in previous studies (Moosavi, 2020). A number of research studies emphasised Chinese students' conformity, passivity, and obedience, asserting that they lack the ability to think critically and challenge their teachers (Gu, 2008; Turner, 2006). This claim was similarly implied by the students' opinion that "western students were better at discussing and arguing". Some scholars attributed these passive characteristics to the rigid Chinese educational system and teaching style, which largely rely on the hierarchy in the classroom and the authority of teachers (Cross & Hitchcock, 2007). However, Jay tried to justify the

legitimacy of the system as a product of certain ideologies, socio-economic contexts or historical backgrounds. In addition, Jay was also sceptical about the homogeneous presumption of Chinese education modes. Although Jay did not give details on how he led the students to explore further the underpinning ideology and influential environments, or how to defend themselves in such an academic environment, his teaching beliefs demonstrate an initial attempt which challenges the normative, dominant discourse of westerners.

5. Discussion

The thematic and discursive results above show that the solid, essentialist understandings of cultures seem to be an unavoidable tendency for teachers. The first theme reveals the essentialist and neo-essentialist opinions, for example, in Anna's and Kate's judgement on cultural differences, where they tended to categorise people by their nationalities, gender, and religious beliefs. Such opinions are likely to be solid and lack reflection on cultural complexity; in Jane's anecdote, her description, "typical British gentleman", likely implies a stereotype of the Western Other. However, teachers' conclusions in the other three themes are potential evidence of liquid and critical interculturality, proving that they were able to pull their positions towards the complex side of mind (Dervin, 2016). For example, in the later narratives, Jane recognised the misrepresented images of self and consciously resisted them by claiming their individual uniqueness and diversity, whereas Jay was able to recognise the obsolete paradigms in previous intercultural education through the process from "unusual" to "usual". Their intercultural discourses are multi-faceted and contradictory, since these perceptions emerged in various contexts related to misunderstandings and conflicts (Shi-xu, 2001). The salient commonality to be found in these four themes is that all teachers presented a "simplexity" in intercultural voices regarding the realistic liquid stance of interculturality (Dervin, 2011), despite different manners of expression. As previously discussed in the literature review, individuals' understanding of the concept of cultures and interculturality can constantly navigate between solid or liquid discourses, depending on contexts, interlocutors, and even merely their own uncertainty.

One noteworthy result is that some participants used metaphors such as "in my bones" and "instinctively" to suggest a biologized understanding of traditions and customs, which was likely to be a common phenomenon in intercultural encounters (Hannerz, 1999). Although this phenomenon implies that the solid understanding of culture may be ingrained, what should be emphasised here is that these informants have the agency to change their stances, regardless of the difficulty.

Furthermore, the outcomes of teachers' liquid interculturality demonstrate the possibility for educators to learn a reflexivity and teach social justice from the liquid interculturality. For example, in Kate's case, she apparently moved beyond the superficial, monotonous understanding of the represented inequality in curricular contents and entered into critical classroom interactions with students that discussed the wider structural forces, including sexism. As a teacher who aimed to move students from disengagement with classroom activities to active,

equal participation, she successfully recognised the transformative tensions and internal struggles in the institutional environment and everyday teaching practices, which exactly corresponded to the characteristics of teachers' reflexivity (Pérez-Milans & Soto, 2014). Some teachers also critically analysed the impact of power differentials from a more multi-faceted perspective and individualised their understandings of social justice in educational contexts. For instance, Jay and Jane's teaching values and practices identified the hegemonic ideology in the academic field for their students, endeavouring to raise students' awareness of unbalanced power relations, tensions and conflicts in their daily life, thus making a commitment to social justice and political engagement for students. In addition, although Jay himself did not realise it, he had already opened a creative, discussion-welcoming learning space that resists the stereotypes of the Chinese classroom.

However, it is questionable whether the teachers were imposing their unintentional politicised discourse and acts of resistance on students, especially when many of their understandings were personal and experiential. As Freire (2018) argued, such a teaching exercise often indoctrinates ideological intent unperceived by educators and may stimulate the credulity and submission of students.

6. Conclusion

The current study uses a critical and liquid framework to explore teachers' interculturality and examine how their individual understandings around this concept can contribute to their ethical, socially responsible actions in the classroom context. The results of this study confirm the possibility of researching the notion of interculturality from a realistic liquid perspective, suggesting that researchers appraise the complexity and power structures of intercultural interactions instead of reducing data and people to stereotypes from a solid and essentialist perspective (Dervin, 2011). Since the data provide a vivid illustration of various social interactions, this study also proves that interculturality is a negotiation process that must be situated in specific environments and intricate social relationships. The finding of "simplexity" indicates that it is reasonable for people to have contradictory and unstable attitudes in intercultural interactions; they may simultaneously appreciate the diversity of individuals and cultures while also oversimplifying them. Reflecting on such an instability of discourse can help us to accept the inconsistency and unpredictability of our world and human lives. Moreover, this study verifies the significant impact of teachers' intercultural experiences on their consequent behaviour, such as teaching practices. Although these teaching practices were inspired by specific cross-border interactions, they are not restricted to races and nationalities but, rather, are applicable to a variety of situations regarding religion, gender and politics. Teachers can recognise the power differences inside and outside the classroom, thus implementing their values of social justice and equality related to their own intercultural backgrounds and life stories.

All the findings above provide some valuable implications for the field of intercultural teaching in higher education environments. First, overseas training

and exchange programmes can be valuable experiences for in-service teachers. As affirmed many times in previous studies, these experiences offer teachers opportunities to develop a critical understanding of cultural diversity and promote reflexive practices around issues of self and other. Learning from even the smallest differences and conflicts, teachers will start to question certainties or pinpoint injustice. However, institutions and programme organisers should prepare their teachers for plenty of opportunities (e.g. reflective journals, regular sessions for opinion exchange) to engage in guided reflexivity and criticality; otherwise, teachers may not reflect enough on their journeys. Teachers themselves should also be careful not to succumb to the essentialist or neo-essentialist pitfalls while appraising their experiences and, instead, observe their daily interactions with a "trained eye".

Second, this study demonstrates the effectiveness of embedding teachers' personal experiences while teaching the content of cultures. Prior findings and discussions have shown that such experiences can be useful resources in which teachers can look for elements to inform their own teaching. However, teachers should be cautious about making presumptions about cultures or implying stereotypes to their students. This requires teachers to reflect on the factors affecting their perceptions and consider what consequences these perceptions could have on their classroom practices. It is also necessary to hear the diverse voices of students so that teachers can avoid elevating themselves to a more "expert" position and passing on their culturalist viewpoints to students.

However, there are some limitations to be considered in this research. Although I have triangulated the data source in this study to ensure the authenticity of participants' narratives, it would be better to listen additionally to the stories from their students' points of view. If time permitted, classroom observation could also be an effective method of examining teachers' genuine teaching practices. This study also faces the challenge of presenting the researcher's own reflexivity in the study, as it is difficult to maintain vigilance of an interlocutory positions all the time. For example, it is undeniable that researchers may inject their biases into the data analysis or distort participants' original intentions of expression, as the meaning of the discourse captured is highly contextual and transitory. To cultivate reflexivity, the future studies may need a continuous or external approach to achieve self-reflection, such as reflexive journals or peer-auditing. Overall, these recommendations indicate a direction to more trustworthy engagements in future research on intercultural education.

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Appendix 1: Semi-Structured Questions List

A. Background Introduction
1. Please briefly introduce your education experience, profession, language proficiency and cultural background.
2. When did you start to be exposed to the concept of intercultural?
3. Did you have any intercultural experiences before teaching the course? If so, please give some information about your experiences.
4. How long did you teach intercultural courses in the university? Please give some information about this course (e.g. course aim, objectives, content)
5. Did you have any intercultural teaching experience before? If so, please give some information about this course.

B. Understanding Interculturality
1. How do you define the concept intercultural? What kind of interactions do you believe are intercultural?
2. What do you believe are cultures? Please give some examples.
3. What did you learn from your intercultural experience?
4. What do you think is the aim of intercultural education?
5. Do you think your intercultural history changed the way you understand the concepts of cultures and intercultural education? If so, how much your understanding was changed?

C. Implementing Interculturality
1. How do you implement intercultural content in your classrooms? Please share the approaches you use with us.
2. What outcomes do you want to achieve in this organisation?
3. How do you teach your students to think in a complex way about interculturality?
4. Did you reflect on your teaching experience? What do you think are your advantages and drawbacks of your teaching?
5. How would you improve your intercultural practice in the future?