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Constructing interculturality through intercultural dialogues and autoethnography: Building relations, nurturing preparedness and rejecting boundaries

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This paper explores the role of a series of intercultural dialogues deployed as an intercultural intervention in scaffolding the development of interculturality of Chinese international students and Belgian undergraduates. The data highlight the fundamentally dynamic dialogic nature and process of intercultural engagement whereby the individuals actively seek to relate and construct meanings collaboratively. Drawing on a constructivist approach to interculturality and employing ethnographic methods, we contend that the efforts to connect play a pivotal role in mediating the process of developing the knowledge of cultural practices and that of becoming willing and prepared to challenge the self and familiar tropes.

Keywords: intercultural intervention; interculturality; relation building; reflexivity; study abroad experiences of Chinese students

本文探讨了一系列跨文化对话作为跨文化干预培养中国留学生和比利时中文辅修本科生跨文化交融意识的辅助作用。尽管研究数据基于特定的环境，但它突出了跨文化接触中根本的动态对话性质和过程，在这个过程中，各个体主动寻求联系并协作构建对话的意义。我们认为，在寻求

发展跨文化交融的过程中，这种个体之间的相互关联起着关键的作用，它不仅激励个体拓展文化信息，而且培养他们挑战自我及惯常的本质主义文化观点。我们因此建议研究者积极开展采用该类跨文化干预手段，尤其是要鼓励援助学生反思，逐步培养跨文化交融意识。

Introduction

In keeping with internationalisation, universities around the globe are experiencing unprecedented cultural diversity. This phenomenon has brought about considerable challenges in terms of “forging inclusive multicultural spaces” for all members of the academic communities (Komisarof and Zhu, 2016, p. 1). Critical voices in academic mobility research have signalled, among others, two focal points for attention when it comes to enhancing intercultural learning and engagement for the success of international education. First, there is a persistent tendency to equate cultural diversity with diversity of different nations, which stems from the essentialist idea of culture linked to national territories and boundaries (e.g., Jackson, 2018; Montalbán et al., 2020). The danger of relying on such frameworks of cultural variation based on national categories is that stereotypes and prejudices will only ensue and exacerbate, which is the very opposite of the goal of accommodating diversity with an open attitude. In contrast, greater recognition of diversity and variation *within* groups or ‘small cultures’ (Holliday, 1999) is better attuned to the aim of fostering intercultural understanding. Second, many members of the academic community still hold a naïve assumption that [END OF PAGE 567] mobility or study abroad experience itself will result in an increase in intercultural competence and global-mindedness (e.g., Aba, 2016; Guilherme, 2012). In fact, without an awareness of the importance of a “reflective, exploratory, dialogic and active stance towards cultural knowledge and life”, and without any form of intercultural mediation, the mobility experience is less likely to produce the desired outcome in intercultural learning (Guilherme 2002, p. 219).

Endorsing these critical perspectives to intercultural education, a growing number of study abroad scholars have made a case for the necessity of implementing research-based and theory-driven intercultural interventions as pedagogy to provide guidance and support in promoting meaningful intercultural dialogues between different groups of students on international campuses (e.g., Jackson & Oguro, 2018; Vande Berg, 2009). This paper presents a case of such interventions, involving two Chinese international students and five Belgian undergraduates minoring in Chinese in a key university in Brussels. We draw on a constructivist approach to intercultural communication and interculturality and employ ethnographic methods, including autoethnography and semi-structured interviews, to discuss some emergent, albeit contextualised, characteristics of the intercultural encounter through a series of intercultural dialogues held between the students over ten weeks. We will suggest that those dialogues serve as the site at which and the medium through which the individuals fundamentally seek to connect and construct meanings collaboratively. The sense of relation building plays a pivotal role in mediating the process of developing the knowledge of cultural practices and that of becoming willing and prepared to challenge the self and familiar tropes; it thus attests to the dynamic dialogic nature and process of intercultural engagement. We will also cast light on the role of reflexivity that is afforded by the method of autoethnography in assisting the Chinese students particularly to develop critical cultural awareness, a process formulated by them as being transformative. In this paper, we will first provide a theoretical background to the notion of interculturality in intercultural communication (IC) research and review recent advances in intercultural pedagogy in student mobility research. Then we will introduce the research questions, followed by a detailed description of the context, the rationale and the procedures of our intercultural intervention. In the next section we present the findings before discussing the implications

and drawing some conclusions.

Interculturality in IC

Researchers in the field of IC have increasingly problematised the uncritical application of terms such as cultural differences, boundaries, divide, and clashes that are typically identified based on monolithic entities, including nations and ethnicities. These concepts continue to have wide currency in competence-oriented literature and have largely reduced earlier intercultural training and education to pursuing the primary goal of increasing the individual's ability to understand and overcome the differences or bridge the divide (cf. Deardorff, 2009). As many scholars have contested, the attribution of misunderstandings to the mismatches between separate *a priori* sets of cultural behaviours, values and attitudes is detrimental and only reinforces the dichotomy of self/other; it will lead to further separating individuals and groups whose subjectivity and interactions are, in fact, the driving forces in constructing the meanings of our social lives and fabricating our knowledge (e.g., Burr, 1996; Shi-Xu, 2001).

The problem associated with treating cultural meanings as relatively stable and fixed variables emanates from the underlying ontological and epistemological stances referred to as structural-functionalism and positivism, which, when translated into IC research, are coterminous with cultural essentialism (e.g., Holliday, 2012; Zhu, 2016). It represents a normative thinking to explain and predict cultural behaviour and values on the principle of the natural sciences that suggest a society as a solid subject existing separately from the researcher (Holliday, 2012). Instead, in social action theory and interpretative and constructivist paradigms, scholars try to understand the world as enacted through meaningful social activity in taking account of the larger social and historical [END OF PAGE 568] forces as well as the power relations, with the individual as the knowing mind and as the agent contributing to the constitution of knowledge (e.g.,

Hall, 1992; Martin et al., 2012; Weber, 1968 as cited in Zhu, 2020). In following this line of thought, culture is neither fixed nor static and is socially constructed and operated at global and local levels, from and within smaller communities and groups to larger entities and whole nations (Holliday, 2012; Martin & Nakayama, 1999). This conception is a direct critique of cultural essentialism that overemphasises the representation of individuals through national or ethnic cultural characteristics, ignoring the subjectivity and complexity of the individual.

In IC research, radical shifts have taken place over the past two decades regarding the understanding of interactions between people. Culture is no longer taken as people ‘being’ and is inextricably bound up with people ‘doing’ it, which posits that the interaction is context- and discourse-dependent, as the interactants draw upon their senses of self and negotiating all symbolic resources surrounding them (Zhu, 2020). Consequently, people’s abilities to participate in interactions can hardly be represented by and equated to lists of attributes and a set of behavioural skills or patterns that are touted and accordingly measured. According to the constructivist view, IC is the site of social construction and action at which understanding of culture cannot be prescribed nor specifically located, but discursively constructed and negotiated with an ineluctable relational perspective between the participants in interactions (Zhu, 2016). IC, thus, ultimately becomes intercultural engagement embedded in a dialogic and dynamic process where the cultural constellation is flexible and is symbolised within ‘small culture’ diversity (cf. Holliday, 1999). This intrinsic quality of fluidity and complexity is further complicated when transnational mobility and cosmopolitan and multicultural existences have forced geographical boundaries to be less relevant (MacDonald & O’Regan, 2012; Warren, 2012). The complication is partly due to technological developments that have enabled “geographically dispersed interactants to form and

maintain communities” and to connect (Jenks et al., 2013, p. 121). Culture and identity then become ever complex and constantly evolve, as people will resort to differing cultural constructs and enact diverse social categories across ‘transnational spaces’ in interactions (Dooly & Rubinstein, 2018; Jenks et al., 2013; Ladegaard & Jenks, 2015).

Amidst these trends of evolution in the field of IC, critical scholars have been using the term ‘interculturality’ to describe an emergent, interactional and co-constructed phenomenon in interactions. In this paper, we come to a working definition derived from the insights gained from several contemporary critical interculturalists. Interculturality is concerned with advocating a critical understanding of cultural discourses by engaging the individuals in “questioning their views and opinions of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’” with the purpose of “constructing a space of diversity, social justice and more ‘transparent’ encounters” (e.g., Holliday, 2012; Jin and Dervin, 2017, p. 3). Clearly, part of this concept implies the tendency and the ability of the individuals to critically evaluate and understand relevant cultural values and practices, and in literature, this ability is regularly linked to the central idea of the notion of critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997). Whilst we mainly rely on the term of ‘interculturality’ to expound the dynamic process of negotiating and constructing intercultural relations through the interaction, we occasionally draw on ‘critical cultural awareness’ to refer to the elements of criticality.

Intercultural pedagogy and intercultural learning

In study abroad research, the critical and reflexive stance towards the notion of interculturality has proffered new advances in intercultural pedagogy. Jackson (2018) notes that, in accordance with the shifts in understanding the core concepts in IC, current intercultural pedagogy begins to assume the vital role that learners play in constructing meaning through real-world intercultural experience. Instructors and educators, in turn, adopt the role of mentor and facilitator, concentrating on providing students with the

analytical tools to hone criticality or critical cultural awareness in a guided [END OF PAGE 569] and structured manner. This kind of guided critical approach is understood as theory-driven cultural mentoring or contemporary intercultural intervention to which reflective experiential learning is integral (Paige & Goode, 2009; Jackson & Oguro, 2018). The basic tenet of experiential learning is that learners should learn to engage in critical reflection and reflexivity about their intercultural experiences, which will lead to transformational learning (Passarelli and Kolb 2012). However, intercultural education researchers have also cautioned against potential positive bias towards reflexivity and experiential learning, in that empirical evidence for the effectiveness of the method is still lacking and that reflexivity might risk becoming a placebo, leading us to “feel we have ‘dealt with’ complexities” that are not duly exemplified in carefully controlled settings of intercultural encounters (Blasco, 2012; Zhou & Pilcher, 2018, p. 128).

Some major empirical initiatives to support intercultural learning in student mobility in Europe have been undertaken under the banner of the IEREST project (2015), which produced a set of teaching modules guiding teachers and students to explore intercultural experiences in different stages of study abroad (Beaven & Borghetti, 2016). Within this broad context, Van Maele et al. (2016) studied the criteria considered by mobile students as essential for a successful study abroad stay and they found that high priority was ascribed to establishing social contacts and cultivating aspects of personal development. Beyond the Erasmus student context, Van Maele and associates (2021) conducted an intervention project in Belgium on encouraging engineering students to encounter and probe strangeness. While the students learnt about the importance of first-hand experiences and the role of open-mindedness and of avoidance of an essentialist view, the members of the research team discovered the value of team cultural diversity for engaging in reflexive dialogues and examining different perspectives.

As to intercultural learning of Chinese study abroad¹ students, much empirical research has traditionally focused upon the intercultural experiences of student sojourners, typically involving issues of confrontation and intercultural adaptation, psychological wellbeing as well as struggles with academic studies (see e.g., Zhu, 2016 for an exhaustive review of research on international Chinese students). Gu (2011) comments that, although those studies offer deep insights into identifying the major issues in intercultural education, they fall short of explaining the influence of the cultural backgrounds of the individuals in intercultural interactions; some may be overly replete with the deterministic role of culture in students' experiences. Drawing on the educational experiences of Chinese returnees sojourning in the UK, Gu (2011) and Gu & Schweisfurth (2015) show that the challenges, changes and achievements of students result from the interaction of the learners with their particular living and studying environments. In this process of interaction, students' agency is a key driver of achieving personal growth as regards a broadened outlook and a reflexive understanding of themselves in the wider world. In relation to institutional and pedagogical support Chinese sojourners receive, Jackson (2010) has developed the most extensive study abroad support and research programme that consists of presojourn, sojourn and postsojourn elements at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The insights gained have allowed her to lay the groundwork for theorising the vital part intercultural educators can play in helping students optimise their intercultural learning in various stages of their sojourn (see our review earlier in this section). It is also this strand of intercultural pedagogy that has inspired us to carry out the intervention project on which the current paper is based.

Research questions

In this paper we attempt to emulate critical interculturalists in addressing interculturality as an emergent process of negotiating and constructing cultural meanings and intercultural relations in intercultural engagement. We examine the role of a series of intercultural dialogues, which are contextualised in an intercultural intervention and through self reflections, in scaffolding the development of interculturality. Two broad questions are formulated: [END OF PAGE 570]

- 1) What do students' reflections on the intercultural dialogues reveal about the process of developing interculturality? What characteristics emerge as being prominent in intercultural engagement?

- 2) How do the Chinese international students perceive the outcomes of these intercultural dialogues for their intercultural learning? What is the role of autoethnography in cultivating their interculturality?

The Intercultural Intervention Project

The context of the study

Our intercultural intervention project constitutes part of a broader continuing education intervention, subsumed under the 'Internship Training Initiative' developed by the teaching team of the Chinese Minor (the authors) at a key university in Brussels. The overarching goal is to capitalise on the available linguistic resources of Chinese study abroad students either pursuing an MA or fulfilling degree requirements within a home-based degree programme in the field of language communication. Since internship forms part of these students' course requirements, we have introduced this internship initiative to recruit and train successful student applicants in giving one-to-one structured language

practice as an after-class activity to Belgian undergraduates studying Chinese as an L2 in the minor programme.

The intercultural dimension relates to the additional one-to-one intercultural dialogues between the interns and the Belgian students. Our motivation behind devising these dialogue sessions rests on the premise that the intercultural encounter, with cultural perspectives being made topical, can provide students of the minor with meaningful, personalised interaction with the Chinese language, people and cultural practices; it will help cultivate an experience-based critical view of cultural positioning in the interns and promote a mutual intercultural understanding through meaningful bottom-up interactions.

Methodology

The primary objective of the intervention reported in this paper was to offer the participants the opportunity to exchange, discuss and explore their cultural perspectives whereby they could develop critical cultural awareness to expose, challenge and re-examine some potentially culturally shaped assumptions in their thinking. To achieve this objective, we employed a qualitative ethnographic method. As we were drawn to their personal experiences, reactions and emotions to be conveyed introspectively, we took an interest in them “articulating insider knowledge of cultural experience”; this purpose can be best accomplished using autoethnography, which is a qualitative, transformative research method that employs personal experience to “engage in self-reflection to identify and interrogate the intersections between the self and social life” (Adams et al., 2017, p.1 & 3). Autoethnography can be regarded as one form of reflective experiential learning, involving self-reflection as reflexivity conducted by the participants as agents who think, behave and do in intercultural encounters. The steps in applying autoethnography are illustrated in the next section.

Participants

The participants included two female Chinese interns and five Belgian students of the Chinese minor of whom three were females and two males. Both interns majored in English and translation in their BA studies in Chinese universities located in the north-eastern and south-eastern regions of China and were enrolled as MA students in language communication at the time of the research. For the interns, the dialogues ran parallel to the language practice sessions of which they took charge as part of their internship programme; for the Belgian students, the activity was [END OF PAGE 571] recommended, but participation was voluntary. All participants were aged 21 to 24 years old and were either bilingual or multilingual. Informal consent was sought from the participants according to the ethics guidelines of the university.

Two training sessions were run for both parties, respectively, to provide detailed explanations of the procedures. It was stressed that the dialogues were meant to be spontaneous natural interactions for which no recording was required. Both parties judged the information and training to be highly useful. The actual intercultural dialogues were held virtually in the spring semester in 2021 over ten weeks.

Design

The research design of the intercultural intervention was both complex and thorough, involving the researchers' theory-driven process of conceptualizing the key notions, the participants' intercultural engagement and sense-making processes, and the researchers' understanding and interpreting of the students' experiences and reflections. We carefully considered the advice of Lengel et al. (2020, p. 211) that "qualitative researchers need to actively reflect on their own values and beliefs during the research process to evaluate how they influence their inquiry". The processes of our design and investigation, therefore, qualify as those of reflexivity in which we were fully alert to the cultural and

ideological origins of our perspectives as well as the presence of power relations (Patton, 2002). Consequently, we sought to scrutinise our values and assumptions by discussing the possible perspectives associated with our own cultural backgrounds among us to contemplate the effect on the participants and on our data analysis. Besides, we were acutely aware that our role as supervisors to the interns and teachers to the students was likely to generate unequal power relations that must be minimised. Apart from transparent communication about our research and absolute assurance that no judgement, interference or repercussions would occur, with the provision of appropriate tools, full control was given to the participants concerning the actual dialogues and the reflections. As to the relation between the Chinese interns and the Belgian students, despite the tutoring role of the former that necessitated familiarity at the beginning, this small distance between their status did not raise any concern about the power relation.

Steps and instruments

Concerning the steps of the activity, we found the PEER (Prepare, Engage, Evaluate and Reflect) model developed by Holmes & O'Neill (2010) useful in that these interconnected and interdependent phrases are compatible with our goal to scaffold the process of learning. Since our research aim and setting and participants differ from theirs, adaptations were made and the 'Evaluate' phase was excluded, while the three other steps were retained. The final PER (Prepare, Engage, Reflect) model was applied as follows.

The 'Prepare' step is intended for the participants to think about any assumptions, stereotypes or prejudices held about some cultural practices, which the conversation topics would help elicit. The topics were determined roughly in line with the sequence and the themes of the dialogues in 'HSK Standard Course' Chinese textbooks for students of the minor. They revolve around health, education, use of technology, travel, leisure and entertainment, food and hospitality, outlook towards the world and patriotism, the

balance between work and life, philosophy or religion in society, and a recent situation or incident. Each topic was accompanied by a few broad questions to assist them in approaching the subject. The other factor in selecting the topics and suggesting the questions was the principle of authenticity, which was cardinal in creating the opportunity to link the participants' existing knowledge of the other society to real-life current cultural practices. 'Engage' refers to the actual process of chatting with each other freely in English, using the above-mentioned topics as a basis. Each dialogue lasted approximately 30 minutes and the dialogues were not recorded to ensure naturalness and spontaneity, maintain fun as well as balance the power relations identified above.

In the 'Reflect' phase, the students reflected on their experiences of the encounters, assisted by some guiding questions with inspiration drawn from Holmes & O'Neill (2010). The questions [END OF PAGE 572] are related to any feelings and emotions about the conversation, highlights, realisations, or clearance of preconceptions, and potential adjustment to and re-examination of existing views. The participants were strongly encouraged to be open and candid in their reflections that were to be documented with either audio recordings (within 10 minutes in length) or short writings (approximately one-page long), depending on which form would take them least amount of time. As for the language of reflections, all of them were told to choose the language they felt most comfortable with. The Chinese interns chose to keep oral journals in Mandarin. The Belgian students kept written journals and four wrote in English² and one in French. The two interns, in addition to keeping the oral journals, wrote a short reflection report on their experiences after they had completed all the dialogues. This was intended to elicit their holistic views of the whole process. Several questions were accordingly offered as guidance, focusing on the highlights, the primary emotions, the

experience with the autoethnography method and the steps as well as any insights gained into intercultural understanding. They opted for Mandarin as the language of their reports.

Semi-structured interviews

Besides self-reflections, we employed semi-structured interviews that would allow us to conceptualise, interpret, verify and analyse any manifestation of intercultural learning experiences. Three group sessions were held with the participants. The first occurred with the interns before the activity started, as they had just completed an MA module on IC. The purpose was to discover what they had learnt about IC. The second discussion took place with the five Belgian students after all the dialogues had ended and the aim was to enrich our understanding of the strongest impression, the highlights and the observations recorded in their written reflections. The third session was held with the interns after they had written a short reflection report. This chat is comparable to post hoc clarification of the opinions they shared in the reports. All three interviews lasted approximately thirty to forty-five minutes. We took notes of key information emerging during the chat sessions.

In the last two chat sessions, the participants were first asked to rate themselves on a scale 1 (low) – 5 (average) – 10 (high), before and after the dialogues, on the knowledge of their own society and the other society, and the abilities to reflect, evaluate and negotiate cultural perspectives and understanding. The self-rating was merely a rough reference to suggest if the individual had perceived any growth. Since the research itself was a theory-based process of reflexivity for us, our close attention to power relationship prompted us to provide a secure environment in which the participants felt reassured from the outset, beginning with the training sessions until the point of interviews.

Data and analysis

We collected around fifty oral journals, each lasting from three to eight minutes, thirty-five written reflections³, data from the group interviews and two written reflection reports, which, together, form the data set for analysis. The oral journals were not transcribed but listened to repeatedly. Guided by the most essential concepts framed in the critical theories on the nature of intercultural engagement, i.e. dialogic and relational, a dynamic process of co-constructing cultural meanings, we performed a thematic analysis to study if and to what extent our data corroborate those notions. The stages of analysis comprised data familiarisation, data coding, iterative reading and listening, and theme development and revision (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The identification of themes was akin to exploring ‘interpretative repertoires’ that include sets of terms, descriptions and identifiable items informed by the related theories (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). As the first step, the first author roughly handled and coded the data with the associated key words and descriptions; the second and the third authors then joined her to collate those initial codes into potential themes; they reviewed the themes across the data set and determined the examples to present the data. In the next section, we present our findings, mainly drawing upon extracts from the reflections, but with support of further insights yielded from the group interviews. **[END OF PAGE 573]**

Findings

While our project was premised on the idea that the dialogues had the potential to bring the two groups of students together and engage them in discussion of greater depth than they would otherwise have had without facilitation, we were devoid of any expectation of how the participants would experience the dialogues and if they would perceive the encounters to be interculturally insightful. Analysis of data confirmed that firstly, notions such as relational and connecting, negotiating and co-constructing meanings did emerge

as being prominent in students' intercultural engagement; secondly, the two Chinese interns perceived significant gains in developing critical cultural awareness, notably thanks to the method of autoethnography.

To answer the two research questions, we group these predominant emergent findings under three themes, with the first two themes addressing our research question 1) and the third theme answering research question 2). The findings build on the relevant extracts from the Belgian undergraduates with the pseudonyms of Ari, Carine, Gina, Nora and Sander and the two interns whom we name Mei and Ran. Occasionally, the names mentioned in the extracts are obscured with a simple symbol of 'X'. Following Zhou & Pilcher (2018), we indicate the source of each extract using codes such as 'R-PH' or 'C-IS-2' or 'M-IS-29/04', referring to the initial of student's pseudonym, the *in situ* (oral or written reflections as part of the activity) or *post hoc* status of their reflection and the number of the reflection or the date of the dialogue on which it was based.

Seeking to relate and connect

In answering the first research question about the prominent characteristics as revealed in the reflections on the dialogues, we find that 'relational' and 'co-constructed' arise as playing a key role in students' interactions. The relational aspect is mirrored through their expression of emotions such as palpable senses of enjoyment, delightful surprises and empathy on a personal level; it is also reflected through the opinions that represent the focus on and the outcome of recognising and negotiating "points of sameness" (Holmes, 2014, p.2). The students' voices uncovered the importance attached to relation-building, interconnectedness and being engaging interlocutors in their experiences. We argue that this emphasis mediates the process of developing the knowledge of cultural practices and that of becoming willing and prepared to challenge the self and familiar tropes, thus helping the students cultivate criticality. Another indication of the development of

interculturality is that all of them unanimously signalled an increase, although to varying degrees, in the knowledge of their own society and the other society and in their abilities to reflect, evaluate and negotiate cultural perspectives.

To begin with, all five Belgian undergraduates and both Chinese interns explicitly described the conversation episodes to be ‘fun’, ‘enjoyable’, ‘very interesting and engaging’, ‘enlightening’ and ‘enriching’. They further stressed the significance of this affective dimension to the encounters in the group interviews. On the part of the Belgian students, the most common and distinct emotional reactions include ‘delightful surprises at their [the Chinese interns’] level of open-mindedness’ and ‘feeling surprised that we agreed on so many things’. For instance, in the group interview Ari found that ‘it was so easy to talk with them and I liked all the information we talked about’, and Nora added, ‘it was more fun than I had expected’. Gina commented ‘I was surprised how far I could push [about some sensitive topics in the conversation]’, while Carine emphasised that ‘there was a sense of security that allowed both of us to ask questions and find balanced views together’. Sander additionally said, ‘you have to put yourself in the shoes of the conversation partner’.

Under the auspices of these attitudes and emotions, the participants tried to channel the conversations on different topics in the spirit of finding and settling on the points of sameness. Carine’s reflection below is representative of this collaborative endeavour. **[END OF PAGE 574]**

We came to the conclusion that even though there are a lot of differences, some aspects are still pretty much the ‘same’ [...] “I was glad that we understood each other so well. When we had a different view on certain topics, we just tried to understand the other person. (C-IS-2)

As far as emotional empathy is concerned, Gina’s reflection threw some light on that process of evocation.

The biggest question I asked was about the stereotype of Chinese people always travelling in big groups and taking very little time to visit big cities. I was raised to see this very negatively. When I went on holiday somewhere with my family we would take a week or longer for just one city so we could make sure to really get an understanding of the culture and visit as much musea [museums, sic] as possible. [...] However now, thanks to X, I know better. It took me a while to make the one eighty but these travelling groups, or Chinese people in general... simply don't get the same freedom we do in travelling. X mentione [sic], for example, there are more complicated procedures and stricter requirements for individual tourists to get a visa in order to travel. In conclusion I have arrived at the understanding that the uneasiness we felt about it shouldn't escalate into racist jokes or spreading this harmful [sic] stereotype. [...] Seeing X feel sad about the regulations [to get a visa] definitely altered a small part of my worldview since I personally never thought about the governments putting [visa] restrictions on simply travelling abroad of all things. (G-IS-21/03)

This episode of exchange evidently made Gina feel empathy with her Chinese interlocutor. More importantly, as she later reiterated in the group interview, it compelled her to question an old view and reshaped her opinion about what she called 'a stereotypical image' of the Chinese travellers.

Co-constructing meanings

As indicated earlier, the sense of relatedness between the interlocutors further mediates the individual's willingness and preparedness to construct a balanced or contextualised understanding of some issues in ways that have transcended the simple and static idea of cultural borders. For example, Sander recognised the additional insight gained from the talk, which helped illuminate the role of a wider context in forming a view. He also acknowledged cultural plurality within a given cultural context.

This discussion gave me a more nuanced view of education in China. Although my preconceptions were partially confirmed, I can now see that they make sense in the broader cultural context of China. I also saw that, just as in Europe, there is not only one vision on educating your children in China. (S-IS-1)

For Nora, as the excerpt below shows, the conversation enabled her to see two sides of the same coin, increased her awareness of multi-perspectives and brought about deeper thought into the impact of given cultural systems on their citizens.

Today's conversation was about the education systems, in both Belgium and China. I learned a lot, because my knowledge about Chinese education system was close to zero. That really changed in this conversation. X really took the time to explain the system to me, a lot of which I didn't know. I realized there is a big difference in work ethics in China and Belgium, but also in pressure on the students. Both systems have their pros and cons, and this conversation made me aware of those and it was a good way to compare it and see what the consequences of these systems are on the students. (N-IS-3/03)

Another striking orientation in students' interactions relates to the attempt to disassociate from the alleged cultural memberships and position themselves in regard to their immediate social environment. This is indicative of the recognition of diversity beyond any specific fixed boundaries and of the effort to deconstruct an essentialist view of culture. Having discussed the topic of entertainment, Gina wrote:

how domestic series [soaps] are seen as 'cringe' by younger people over here while a lot of older people tend to watch them still. It surprised me in a positive way that this seems to be a thing in China as well. (G-IS-25/03)

Gina's response suggests the discovery of 'generation similarities', which Nora clearly echoes: **[END OF PAGE 575]**

I did learn about myself that i [sic] am not really an ambitious person, or don't know what way my ambitions are heading into. I think X had the same idea. I realised this might be more of a generation thing, because of all the possibilities and luxuries nowadays. (N-IS-28/04)

This identification of a youth identity shared by the interlocutors as members of the generation of global citizens is particularly vocal in one of the Chinese interns, Ran's⁴ reflection.

I felt enlightened by X's critical view on the negative influence of technology on our lives [...] what impressed me most was that we, together, achieved a consensus that technology has also corrupted and undermined our mind, and what's also interesting was we both find the older generations more obsessed with using smartphones." [...] As for the topic on recycling and unnecessary waste of food, I also introduced the 'Clearing Your Plate' action launched by the Chinese government. In the west, people are well aware of the importance of reducing unnecessary food waste, but the government is rarely involved in this kind of matters" [...] For me this conversation is much more than a cultural dialogue; it makes me realise the progress that is being made by our generation [across borders] (R-IS-10/03)

Here, Ran assigned two layers of meanings to her words regarding the notion of co-construction. She not only accentuated their joint effort in reaching a consensus but also enunciated the confidence in the collaborative outcome between members of their generation who feel connected on so many levels.

Heightening critical cultural awareness

This subsection focuses on the two Chinese interns, Mei and Ran, whose reflections generated enormously rich data of which merely a small segment can be presented here. Overall, the intercultural dialogues have exerted profound positive effects on them when they interpreted the experiences as 'the most enjoyable component' in their internship programme, with an acknowledgement of a concomitant sense of personal transformation. Compared with the Belgian students of the minor, Mei and Ran perceived more pronounced outcomes of 'doing interculturality'. An explanation could be that as the design and the nature of the intervention prescribed, they had far more frequent chances of engaging with their conversation partners, receiving substantial input of ideas

and recording their reflections. This resulted in them having more intensive experiences. Thus, their oral journals featured an abundance of content, and sounds of merriment were clearly discernible in a cheery tone in the recordings. Their reflections typically centred around cultural information and perspectives being reflected, compared, analysed, negotiated and summarised. It is worth noting that their narrations were not in the slightest mechanical; instead, they were characteristic of genuine emotions, which they later affirmed in the post hoc reflection reports and in the interview. The following two extracts provide a glimpse of those common processes of thinking and reflecting.

I learnt about the difference in the selection processes of students being admitted to college [details of the major differences] ... the information my conversation partner introduced expanded my view on the education system here and helped put together the pieces ... China has undertaken some education reforms, but exam-oriented education is still very much prevalent. With a large population base, college entrance examination in China may offer the benefit of selecting some raw talents for certain fields of specialisation, so there are two sides to it. (M-IS-02/03)

The Chinese younger generation defines success differently ... they focus more on the practical aspects like salary and realisation of own value, while young people here care more about individual happiness. Both sides consider it important to maintain a work-life balance ... there are underlying reasons to explain this [the Chinese orientation] – pressure from the society, expectations from the family, competition between the peers. (R-IS-29/04)

The extracts offer an example of how Mei and Ran attempted to invoke an internal dialogue that scrutinises ‘what I know’ and ‘how I know it’, which testifies to the power of self-reflexivity. Next to the regular structure applied to reflect on, examine and negotiate specific information on the related topics, they also heeded criticality in their reflections. For instance, Mei recorded [END OF PAGE 576] the following in which she discussed how that episode inspired her to question, re-examine and adjust her own cultural perspectives.

We chatted about freedom of expression on the internet especially regarding political issues [...] and concerning the truthfulness of the news circulated on the internet. I start to re-examine some of my own cultural perspective; for instance, I'm used to reading news on WeiBo and I think I should learn to critically evaluate whether particular pieces of news are true or not. So, I begin to adjust my own way of thinking - whether it's about news or technology, I shall first think carefully and then judge if the information is reliable. (M-IS-11/03)

This developmental process of a critical stance is consonant with the idea of intercultural learning being “a process of ideological becoming with the other” in working towards understanding that foregrounds relationality rather than dichotomy between the speakers (Harvey, 2016, p. 379).

Since the intervention was conceived to be theory-driven with a critical dimension to it from the researchers' perspective, we strove to ascertain if the reflections had been potentially undermined by the power relationships between us and the interns and if the use of autoethnography was pertinent. Mei and Ran offered us deep insights into this scrutiny by clearly attributing their senses of willingness and readiness as well as enhanced self-discovery and personal growth to the application of the method.

I find these three steps ['prepare', 'engage', 'reflect'] very useful [...] my favourite step is 'reflect' because when reflecting, I can summarise my own thoughts, share new knowledge I gained today, and trace any changes in my way of thinking. Compared with everyday conversations and communication, this practice of summary and reflection is quite unusual; the reflections I've done lately really make me see its significance and impact on me [...] This process [of doing autoethnography] has had a significant effect on me; it's helped me adjust some [formerly] relatively rigid way of thinking and clear some preconceptions and stereotypes I had [...] I feel transformed [...] the dialogues helped me see a China in the eyes of the others, which offered me a fresh understanding of my own country and culture ... it was also clear to me my conversation partners have a slightly outdated and stereotypical image of China, so I believe, through my description, they've got to know about a modern China to some extent. (M-PH)

Mei's writing above gave prominence to the welcome structure and guidance of learning, which substantiated the genuineness associated with her reflections. It shed light on the process whereby she learnt to reject a former self and transform the intercultural experiences into an opportunity for personal enrichment. Similarly, Ran validated the advantage of using ethnography below. In drawing a close link between opinions and the relevant immediate social context, her account bears a vivid testimony to Ladegaard & Jenks' (2015, p. 1) recommendation that "only by looking at cultural and linguistic practices in people's lives as they work, talk, socialise and go about their everyday business do we get an insight into their orientations and dispositions in a globalised world".

[a detailed description of the benefits of the three steps] what I also learnt is [...] only when you are really immersed in the culture, have conversations with the locals, observe their daily lives will you discover that the stats and some words are far from enough to present a full picture ... we should abandon preconceived notions, seek a deeper understanding of culture from different angles, with well-founded theories and also concrete facts and evidence [...] 'Take the Cream, Discard the Dross'. One should be open-minded, embrace everything, try to accept different voices. One should certainly take pride in their own culture and identity, while doing their utmost to understand and respect other cultures. (R-PH)

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the role of a series of intercultural dialogues deployed as an intercultural intervention in scaffolding the students' development of interculturality. The findings above provide a glimpse of the ten-week-long experiential learning experiences gained through the form of autoethnography. The intervention setting was solely conceived as a catalyst and a medium for initiating a series of continual dialogues that might otherwise have been fragmented. Through those dialogues and the reflective approach, we sought to explore a learner-centred [END OF PAGE 577] pedagogy that

focuses on combining meaningful personalised intercultural engagement with the exploitation of potential critical reflections.

Our data offer a small window into the individuals' meaning-making process where relation-building, collaboration, empathy, and mutual understanding are given precedence in intercultural engagement. This serves as a reminder that "IC is an intimate, 'intersubjective' activity, in that it generally requires people and language for it to be enacted" (MacDonald & O'Regan, 2012, p. 563). Above all, the dialogic nature of the engagement and the attention paid to negotiating both similarities and differences affirm the idea of "doing interculturality" in which any predetermined "cultural differences are salient *only if* participants make them relevant during interaction" (Zhu, 2010, p. 192, italics ours). In our study, the individuals have been observed to view themselves and their positioning in the world through the eyes of each other, and that level of self-awareness is contingent upon the situation and context in which solid cultural categories are not made salient, whereas the personal and relational aspects bear true meanings. Hence, the relationship between culture and identity is fluid and multifarious, subject to unpredictability and discursiveness of the nature of social interaction (Dervin & Jackson, 2018). We have also detected that the students negotiate a sense of belonging to what they call a circle of generational reality. This projects the tendency to reject being "subsumed beneath any established cultural descriptions" (Holliday, 2010, p. 175). It underpins the direct relevance of the diversity of cultural tendencies shaped through globalisation and transnational mobility, resulting in a process of 'transculturing self' where the individual perspective changes "through infinite and reiterative interactions with both internal and external diversity" (Monceri, 2009, p. 49).

The insightful reflections of Mei and Ran witness how "autoethnography has been a vehicle of emancipation from cultural and familial identity scripts" (Spry, 2001, p. 708).

This reflective approach facilitates them to have a conversation with themselves about their experiences, thus producing satisfactory outcomes for them. The insights into the role of autoethnography coincide with Borghetti's (2017, online access, italics ours) advocate of "adopting a general substantial shift from assessment-*of*-learning to assessment-*as*-learning" in discussing various assessment methods available in studying intercultural competence. From a critical perspective, the outcome of intercultural experiences is not to be assessed with fully quantifiable forms of assessment, but "to be measured in terms of the quality of the experience and of the skills acquired, particularly of transferable skills" (Convey, 1995, as cited in Jackson, 2005, p. 165).

Central to the discussion above is a disclaimer that we have no intention of romanticising the effects of the intercultural dialogues, which are, precisely, discursively constructed in this specific intervention setting. In a fashion that concurs with our aim of exercising reflexivity ourselves in devising this pedagogy, we provide some reflective remarks by linking to some caveats that have been identified by critical IC researchers. Firstly, as Zhou & Pilcher (2018) rightfully warn, it is incumbent on intercultural educators to have heightened awareness of the tension between relatively neutral locales in which reflective experiential learning occurs, and much-vaunted positive IC attributes, and the complex actualities of intercultural encounters. This propels us to acknowledge the neutral and later possibly benign nature of the intercultural encounters in our setting, when the participants already held a rather open-minded attitude towards different societies from the start, and their familiarity with each other gradually grew throughout the course of the intervention. However, upon our full realisation of the limitation of this intervention in dealing with complexities, we maintain that the reflective experiential learning is not a placebo; instead, it has led to truly meaningful and rich experiences for our students enrolled in the specific study programmes. After all, "autoethnography is

intrinsically subjective” (Custer, 2014, p. 8) and “ethnographic projects are geared to the small, the local and the detailed” (Roberts, 2003, p. 127). Future effort should go into exploring alternative and various ways of ‘doing interculturality’, with consideration given to exposing students to more ‘critical’ or ‘problematic’ scenarios (see e.g., Dervin & Härkönen, 2018 for a framework for training). [END OF PAGE 578]

Secondly, the willingness and preparedness Mei and Ran harboured as well as the abilities they honed to question the self and embrace a space of diversity have urged us to interrogate and revoke our initial suspicion that they might stand to gain more from the critical discussions than do the Belgian undergraduates. While they have proved to gain substantial personally transformative experiences, we, as researchers, are reminded of the prejudice and the danger of essentialising the study abroad experiences of Chinese students and international students in general. Dervin (2011) and Harvey (2016) have both explicitly challenged the western ‘hidden’ intercultural discourses in which Chinese students and international students are categorically characterised as a *reduced other* or being *too different*. We firmly align ourselves with this position and make a case that the local students equally, if not more, need tremendous support for becoming globally and interculturally minded. Taken to the broader context of internationalising universities, this suggests the need and the benefits for staff and students in any international universities to engage with international students with a mindset to learn from them and with them (Jin & Cortazzi, 2017). In this sense, practising ‘cultures of learning’, that is, devoting “attention to the different cultural ways and emphases of learning” will help achieve “reciprocal learning and cultural synergy” (ibid, p. 241, 248).

Furthermore, as Van Maele et al. (2016) and Sakurai et al. (2010) have demonstrated, social contacts and social ties are strong indicators of sojourn success for mobility students. We believe it crucial for higher education institutions to find ways to

connect local students with study abroad students on an international campus. In times of mounting geopolitical tensions, it is utterly imperative to warrant bottom-up meaningful interactions between students from diverse backgrounds. As intercultural mentors, helping students eliminate the solid self/other dichotomy and boundaries requires us to put to the fore “the socially and historically constructed nature of their motivations, desires and identities’ (Harvey, 2016, p. 371). Finally, it has been observed that the current practice of intercultural teaching in China remains unsystematic and fragmented and that both teachers and students lack a deep understanding of the dynamics and diversity of cultures (RICH-Ed, 2021). We thus hope that the combination of reflexivity on the part of us, the researchers, and that on the students’ part as well as the critical theoretical approach we take to interculturality will provide intercultural educators in Chinese higher education with some inspiration. [END OF PAGE 579]

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Notes

¹ In this paper, we label our Chinese participants as ‘international students’, but we use ‘study abroad students’ and ‘study abroad experience’ as the umbrella terms to discuss general border-crossing student sojourners and their experience in mobility (cf. Kinginger, 2009).

² For these four multilingual students Dutch is their dominant language and yet they chose to write in English presumably because the conversations were conducted in English.

³ There were more oral journals than written ones in that the interns held multiple dialogues with different students weekly and some Belgian students did not provide weekly reflections.

⁴ Ran and Mei originally used Mandarin for their reflections. Owing to space limitations, we only present the translations, which were provided by the first author who lectures on EN-CH

mediation and who has taken care to ensure the accuracy of the translations by adhering strictly to code of academic integrity.

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