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A plea for change in research on intercultural discourses: A ‘liquid’ approach to the study of the acculturation of Chinese students

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Research on intercultural communication and education is often unsatisfactory in the ways it examines the utterances of research participants, especially if they are ‘Others’. This often seems to be the case in research on acculturation of ‘the Chinese student’ abroad. In this exploratory article, I propose to look at intercultural discourses through a ‘liquid’ approach. The article first describes the components of such a constructivist and open-ended approach to the ‘Other’: a constant effort to review and interact with interdisciplinary concepts; the use of research methods that are dynamic such as linguistic dialogism and theories of enunciation; and a fundamental renewal of the role and positioning of researchers in their studies. In order to illustrate the approach and verify if some of its aspects are taken into account by researchers, four studies from the fields of intercultural education and communication on ‘the Chinese student’ abroad are examined. The results show that the researchers base their analyses on solid/culturalist approaches, which place a lot of emphasis on a loose and static understanding of the concept of culture. The research discourses of some articles also derive from a Janusian vision of interculturality, which encompasses both culturalism and an open-ended, individual and hermeneutic vision of the Other. No consistent liquid approach to intercultural discourses was identified. This article thus represents a plea for renewing epistemological and methodological positioning in the study of Otherness and intercultural discourses.

Keywords: discourse analysis; solid; liquid; Chinese students; research discourse

Introduction

For the novice researcher, who enters the fields of intercultural communication and education, through any door (language didactics, intercultural education and communication, anthropology, psychology), finding her way into researching it is a delicate mission as the literature on interculturality is often disparate, scattered, and contradictory in the theoretical and methodological approaches used (Abdallah-Preteille 2003, Dervin 2008, Holliday et al. 2004). This is why it seems increasingly more urgent to offer ways of examining scientific approaches to interculturality and allow both clear(er) epistemological and methodological positioning. There is also an ethical component to this: researchers hold a responsibility towards their research subjects but also towards society at large and need therefore to be able to distinguish themselves from ‘common sense’ (or the *doxa*), contradictory discourses

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and help to challenge and transform preconceived ideas and unconvincing claims about the 'Other'. In this paper, interculturality is understood as the positioning and negotiation of individuals who come from different spaces-times (rather than 'cultures' as will be discussed in the paper). Identification but also the concept of intersubjectivity are thus central.

It is my aim in this article to explore the potential of a critical and constructivist approach to interculturality that I name *liquid*, inspired by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's paradigms of solidity/liquidity to differentiate Modernity to Postmodernity (cf. Bauman 2004). The basis of the approach derives from discourse analyses of data related to various intercultural research contexts (international student mobility, Dervin 2008; language education, Dervin 2010; binational couples, Dervin 2009), which have allowed identifying three types of intercultural discourses: *solid*, *liquid*, and *Janusian*. A liquid approach to interculturality is based on the idea that 'knowledge, society and subjectivity are all dynamic and contextual phenomena which can be theorized in terms of dialogues between different (real and imagined) perspectives' (Gillespie and Cornish 2009, 15). Studies on interculturality often remain at the surface of discourse by using research participants' utterances as mere 'facts' and present them as research results. However, it seems necessary to go beyond the surface increasingly and explore various layers of 'hidden' discourses which can provide more hints on identification and the co-constructive aspects of interaction. The mobility of Chinese students and the way their 'acculturation' is being conceived by researchers will serve as an illustration. The choice of the 'Chinese student' is based on the fact that critical voices are increasingly being heard about the essentialization of China and the Chinese. In philosophy, for example, a recent book by the philosopher Billetier (2006) attacked one of the main proponents of an essentialized China, François Jullien (author of 'Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking', 2004), and criticized his tendency to 'otherize' Chinese thought through *hegemonic representations* (Moscovici 2008). The same goes for applied linguistics where essentialized visions of the Chinese are put into question (Feng 2009, Grimshaw 2010). Yet more critical voices need to be heard in research.

The paper is structured as follows. I first present my conception of a liquid approach to interculturality and discuss the role of researchers, the context, and dialogism in the treatment of data. Four studies on 'the Chinese student' will then be examined in light of these aspects in order to determine the approach(es) used by researchers when dealing with their acculturation.

1. Researching interculturality

1.1. Going beyond culturalism

A liquid approach to interculturality constitutes an important move beyond culturalist, 'soft constructivist', and contradictory approaches to Otherness. These approaches do not take into account the complexity of individuals who interact with each other and reduce them to cultural facts or give the impression of 'encounters of cultures' rather than individuals. For Laplantine (1999), this approach 'believes strongly that there are resolutely distinct human essences' (p. 46). In a recent criticism on culturalism or solid interculturality in the teaching of intercultural management, Jack (2009) asserts that: 'epistemologically, I believe that a "dimensional" approach to culture, which allows us to plot or map representatives of national cultures onto

some kind of continuum, presents students with unhelpfully fixed categories of analysis that essentialize culture and divest it of its key processual and political contingencies'. This approach to interculturality also corresponds to a vision of acculturation which consists in believing in the possibility of merely swapping cultures (as one changes clothes) or oscillating between 'cultures'. All in all, culturalism corresponds to what I shall call later on 'a solid approach' to intercultural discourses.

The following epistemological problems arise from this approach. First, analysis is often based on a simple review of what research participants say during data collection (interviews, focus groups). This means that their discourse is taken at face value and serves the purpose of providing evidence and/or 'truth'. Second, and this is extremely important for intercultural research, researchers rarely implicate themselves in the analyzing section of their research. This means ignoring the fact that the researcher cannot but intervene in the creation of data and ensuing discourses: in short, eradicating intersubjectivity and falling into the trap of *Othering*.

Finally, and probably most importantly, the use of central concepts is loose and lacks interdisciplinary discussion and debate. This is often the case with the concepts of *culture* and *identity* which are central in intercultural research. As such, one of the main criticisms directed at acculturation theories is the fact that the primordial and basic concept of culture is often used in uncritical, systematic, and reified ways, i.e. 'presenting cultures as essential entities composed of different dimensions and components which are able to "influence", "predict", "affect", and "change" people's functioning as if they are some kind of physical force or natural power' (Chirkov 2009a). This reified vision of culture is seen as a way of either allowing the Other to be fully 'engulfed' into the 'host culture', i.e. becoming the Other (Dervin 2008; Dervin and Dirba 2008) or helping him to preserve the 'home culture' and being actively involved with the 'host culture' (Bhatia and Ram 2009). In a commentary on some of the issues being raised in an issue of the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* reviewing these concepts, Waldram (2009) reminds us that the use of culture in psychology is based on Redfield, Linton and Herscovits' 1936 classic definition (i.e. 'the artificial nature of the(ir) notion of "cultures" as distinct, bounded units harbouring identical citizens') and 'stuck with it, determined to make it fit into the psychology worldview'. The same criticism has been directed at studies on interculturality and academic mobility (Abdallah-Pretceille 2008; Dervin 2008). The concept of *Culturespeak* proposed by Hannerz (1999) to point at the uncritical and systematic use of the word culture in discourse is of much use when examining visions of the Self and the Other put forward in intercultural discourses.

1.2. Towards a liquid approach to intercultural discourses?

Having now outlined the problems posed by culturalism or a solid approach to intercultural discourses, let me now delineate what a contrasting 'liquid' approach could consist of. First, it seems important that the approach works within real interdisciplinarity and treats concepts carefully, i.e. in relation to how they are discussed and criticized in other fields. This means that the researcher is aware of changes in the understanding of concepts that they borrow from other fields. As such, the omnipresent keyword of culture needs to be reassessed. While it has been massively rejected by e.g. anthropologists as it tends to lead to limited, restrictive, and solid visions of the self and the other, the word is used more than ever in every day intercultural encounters, in transnational politics and in the media. Deterritorialization through new

technologies, 'Global localism' ('a place is open to ideas and messages, visitors, migrants, to tastes, foods, goods and experiences to a previously unprecedented extent'; McDowell 1996: 38) and the multiplication of short-lived and multiple 'peg-communities' (Bauman 2004) all have an impact on the malleability of culture and thus on how acculturation should be defined and worked upon. There is consequently a need to move away from solidified, reified, polarized, and objectivist visions of cultures (Bhatia and Ram 2009) in such complex and mixed worlds of our accelerated globalization (Pieterse 2004). This is why for example Bhatia and Ram (2009) propose to work from 'a more fluid and politicized understanding of migrant identity'. Chirkov (2009b) suggests dealing with acculturation through an *understanding* rather than *explanation* paradigm. He adds: 'Researchers could look at acculturation through the prism of the interpretative social sciences and focus on the dynamics of the changes in the intersubjective meanings of various culturally constructed realities and study individuals' intrasubjective meanings that immigrants assign to their actions in a new country'. Bhatia and Ram (2009) also consider this method as a way of 'think[ing] of acculturation and identity issues as contested and mixing and moving'.

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

The second essential point in renewing research on interculturality and proposing a liquid version of it is based on research methods. If interculturality is about changing, co-creating but also resisting, manipulating, and fighting, researchers need analytical tools that fit better the purpose of working on unstable discourses. Merely repeating what research participants have to say as evidence of a phenomenon may not be the best option for such purposes. This is where Dialogical methods (Dervin 2009, Linell 2009) and Theories of enunciation (Marnette 2006) can help researchers renew their analysis of interculturality. It is through the identification of 'voices' (those of others and sometimes that of the utterer; identifiable voices/unidentifiable voices) inserted by speakers that one can identify discourses. Linguistic mechanisms such as the use of passive voices (*I was robbed*), represented discourses (*he told me that ...*) but also modalities (*he might have come*) and the choice of specific words and metaphors, are concrete tools that can be used to examine discursive choices, manipulations, and contradictions that go below the surface of research participants' utterances. We need to bear in mind that these methods are not 'magical' in the sense that they cannot help us to answer all our questions (too many aspects of interaction are not accountable for) nor provide with 'truth'.

The French linguist Charles Bally was one of the first to insist on the importance of taking into account the heterogeneity, instability, and variability of language in its personal and daily 'concrete' use and performance (i.e. 'discourse', Blanchet 2000: 19, Gee 2005: 1) when analyzing data. Discourse is always a subject's representation or perspective that s/he (co-)constructs, negotiates, contests while interacting, which goes 'far beyond "giving and getting information"' (Gee 2005, 2). This also applies to discourses created through research and must be taken into account when collecting and analyzing data to move beyond the 'individualistic bias' (Gillespie and Cornish

2009, 3). Discourse, which is ‘a system of options from which language users make their choices’ (Chouliaraki 1998, 6), helps speakers to construct ‘reality’ and their perception of phenomena but also to (re-)position themselves. However, in doing so, speakers are not ‘free from all constraints’ in the sense that discourse involves at least two interlocutors who are led to co-construct what is being uttered, and who, in an unplanned fashion, influence each other in terms of the content and the manner in which it is evoked (Gee 2005, 5). The importance of societal contexts, research contexts, addressivity, non-verbality, paraverbality, etc. must also be taken into account by researchers to allow going beyond specific interactions, that is if they are ‘graspable’, which is not always the case.

This is why no discourse can be considered to have a univocal/truth-conditional meaning as ‘reality’ needs to be interpreted and transformed into images before it is uttered (Charaudeau 2002, 556). As such, liquid interculturality rejects the quasi-systematic equation between discourses and acts (i.e. *what I say I do may not correspond to what I do or will say later*), and internal and external descriptions of ‘cultures’ and their ‘members’ as truth-conditional evidence or arguments (cf. Eriksen 2001). It thus suggests that any act of interaction is obligatorily dramatized and that it contains enunciative and dialogical aspects which make it a co-construction between interlocutors rather than an act of communication between static ‘senders-receivers’ (Hermans 2004). Ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identity is considered by this approach as ‘the image they [individuals] wish to project at a particular time rather than as evidence of an essentialist [national] culture’ (Holliday et al. 2004, 12). In other words, researchers, who wish to take a critical and ‘liquid’ stance towards intercultural discourses, shouldn’t be interested in the question ‘what’s the student’s culture/identity/intercultural competence/sense of acculturation?’ but rather ‘how do they construct their culture/identity/intercultural competence/sense of acculturation?’.

Let us now move on to a review of four research articles which deal with ‘the Chinese student’. Do the researchers take into account the criticisms presented here? Do they approach the research participants in a liquid or solid way, based on their discourses?

2. An exploration of intercultural research approaches through the ‘acculturation of the Chinese student’

For the purpose of this exploratory article, I have chosen to concentrate on four research articles from the broad fields of intercultural communication and education. The articles are to serve as illustrative case studies (see ideal-types) and obviously do not mean to claim exhaustivity. In other words, I am merely using these case studies to build up my argumentation in this article. Further research is therefore needed to complement and oppose the arguments being proposed here.

Published in 2006 and 2008, the articles deal with the acculturation of Chinese students in the UK and Australia and are taken from publications related exclusively to intercultural education and language learning-teaching. ‘Chinese students’ now hold fairly prominent positions within international academic mobility. As such, and according to the Chinese Ministry of Education, more than 100,000 Chinese have studied abroad annually since 2002, and the figure is still expected to rise in the near future. Chinese students are often considered as ‘curiosities’, struck by inherent differences by institutions and their representatives. Often tainted with ‘cultural robotness’ (‘the Chinese think that ...’; ‘the Chinese behave in such or such way. ...’ reducing 1.3 billion people to a homogeneous entity), these discourses are

Table 1. Basic data on the corpus.

Author	Title of the paper or article	Date of publication	Code	Country
Christine Burnett & John Gardner	The one less travelled by ... The experience of Chinese students in a UK university	2006	CG	UK
Prue Holmes	Problematising intercultural communication competence in the pluricultural classroom: Chinese students in a New Zealand university	2006	PH	Australia
Jane Jackson	Ethnographic pedagogy and evaluation in short-term study abroad	2006	JJ	UK
Qing Gu & Alan Maley	Changing places: A study of Chinese students in the UK	2008	GM	UK

reminiscent of centuries old differentialist and essentialist discourses on China. The case of the 'Chinese student' in intercultural studies is quite emblematic of the current interests in 'otherness' but also of the (over)emphasis on difference and culture in education. For Gu and Schweisfurth (2006, 75), 'The phrase "the Chinese learner" invites us to see this group as homogeneous, and their needs and responses as determined by their cultural background. However other aspects of the process: the backgrounds and goals of the learners, their specific motivation for learning, the setting for the interaction and the nature of the relationship between teachers and learners, are also influential'. I am interested in the formation of discourses on 'the Chinese student' by the researchers.

Amongst the four articles, two were published in a book edited by Byram and Feng (2006) and two in the international peer-reviewed journal *Language and Intercultural Communication* (Routledge). The articles are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 2. Details about the research projects.

Article	Number of students	Research methods	Research objectives
CG	40 undergraduates 4 individual students	Qualitative Interviews Drawing session	Students' experience of moving to the UK Critique acculturation models Create a new model of acculturation
PH	15 first-year Chinese students	Interviews Focus groups	Chinese students' Learning and communication experiences
JJ	15 Hong Kong students in Oxford BA English	Ethnography	Experiences and perspectives of students in a short-term study and residence abroad program
GM	163 Chinese students in 4 universities and colleges 13 Chinese undergraduate and postgraduate in 10 universities 10 British lecturers	Quantitative and qualitative questionnaires (Likert six-point scale) Semi-structured interviews	Explores the intercultural experiences of Chinese students at British universities Investigates the pedagogical, sociocultural and psychological challenges that they have encountered

The articles are centered around the UK (3) and one is based on the Australian context (PH). Three out of four articles deal with long-term mobility, while JJ examines short-term mobility of Hong Kong students in England (over a summer). The choice of one article dealing with Hong Kong students may come as a surprise and be debatable to the reader as Hong Kong has a special political and economical status within China. Yet, the researcher in question often refers to the students' cultural background in terms of Chineseness, which are very similar to the other researchers' discourses on Chinese students. All the other articles deal with students from continental China. Table 2 gives some background research information to the articles.

The total number of Chinese students represented in all the articles is 250. The research methods are mixed but mostly qualitative and interpretative. The research objectives are very similar between the papers as they all attempt to explore the students' intercultural experiences abroad.

3. Solid approaches to interculturality

Let us now turn to the articles under scrutiny to see how the authors deal with the students. Surprisingly very little of the liquid approach suggested in this paper was identified in the articles.

3.1. Omnipresent *culturespeak*

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

Culture, being the 'host' and 'home' cultures, plays several roles in the articles:

- It determines the students and turns them into 'cultural robots' (cf. 'scripts'):
- CG, 87: 'The students had arrived in Britain **with their own cultural scripts** which were no longer applicable in the new environment'.
- It needs to be understood to be experienced 'properly':
- CG, 71: 'Their pre-departure training had given them a general idea of what to expect but this was insufficient to allow them **to make sense of the host culture** when they were actually experiencing it'.
- CG, 81: 'However, sharing a flat with two Chinese students who had been in Britain for some time had helped her to **understand the local culture**'.
- It is an actor, 'someone' that one meets:
- CG, 65: '**first-hand contact with another culture**'.
- CG, 71: 'It seemed rather that **coming in contact with a different culture** forced them to become aware of their own cultural perspectives'.
- JJ, 134: 'the opportunity to **experience the target culture and speech community** firsthand'.
- CG, 68: 'the sojourner may consider that **maintaining relations with the host culture** (...)'.
● It is a place one enters and lives in:

- CG, 67: 'These questions highlight the dilemma for the sojourner **on entry to the host culture**'.
- CG, 65: 'with the intention of **returning at some point to their home culture**'.
- GM, 226: 'taking up **temporary residence in another culture**'.
- GM, 239: 'On the whole, the questionnaire respondents were fairly positive about their experiences of **living in a different culture**'.

What appears clearly in these excerpts is that culture is put forward as if it were a 'social agent' (Eriksen 2001, 132), with which one interacts, learns, and lives in. This 'culture' has an empty meaning in all the excerpts: What culture are we talking about? National cultures? Culturality (i.e. malleable culture)? What are its boundaries? There also seems to be some underlying idea that culture equals a country (Phillips 2007).

Let's take examples from JJ to illustrate further. When JJ talks about the 'target country' for her Hong Kong students (i.e. England), she gives a very generic and homogeneous image of it. For example, on p. 139, when she explains what the research consisted in, she emphasizes that 'For five weeks, each student lived with an English family (homestay) to more fully experience the local culture'. There seems to be one problem here. When she talks about an English family, she seems to imply a 'native' or 'real English family', as the objective of sending students abroad is to experience the 'local culture'. JJ seems to be a victim of 'boundary fetishism' here and to forget that, as in most countries, England is a very diverse country, and that many 'citizens' were not born in the UK but that they do also represent this 'local life'. On p. 138, she confirms this confusion when she presents the model of intercultural competences that she uses: 'Skills of interaction . . . Draw upon the previous three areas in real time to interact successfully with English people in England'. She emphasizes that the people to be met are 'English people' not just 'any person'; she even uses the term 'natives' to refer to them. It is hard to tell if JJ positions her discourse within façade diversity (the English as a homogeneous entity) vs. diverse diversities (any person, regardless of their nationality, in the UK).

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

3.2. Discourses of unicity and differentialism

As a follow-up to the first section on culturespeak, let us examine how the researchers present the Chinese students in their articles. The first impression that

one gets when reading the articles is that of clear *Othering*. For Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1996: 8), othering takes place when one represents the Other in terms of what one is not, in an often ethnocentric way (Duncan 2003, 150). These discourses of unicity about the Other that result from Othering (they are all the same, they are 'governed' by the same *culture, habits, thoughts*) have been largely put into question by many and varied fields such as psychology where unicity 'begins to stand out like a relic from a bygone era' (Cooper and Rowan 1999, 1).

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

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

Let us start with an excerpt from CG who explain that the idea of having to abandon one's cultural identity to adapt to another (a sign of acculturation or integration) is not envisionable for collectivistic individuals. They write (p. 68): 'The notion of being able to set aside one's cultural identity is one that many people, especially those from collectivistic cultures, would find difficult to embrace'. In order to justify and support this argument, which may appear as ethnocentric or judgmental, the researchers quote Leung and Markus and Kitayama¹ and draw the conclusion that: 'If these contentions are accurate, for such people, self-identity and collective identity are very closely linked, and this may create problems for this model' and thus denigrate models of acculturation. It is interesting that CG use an essentialist idea (*the Chinese are collectivistic so ...*), instead of questioning the dubious idea of 'abandoning' one's cultural identity. In a sense, the researchers try to show some open-mindedness by emphasizing that the model was created by a 'Western mind' and that it may not apply to the Chinese, while they categorize them as being collectivistic, which can be perceived as reductionist. We find here what Gillespie (2008) calls an alternative representation or 'the representation of a potentially competing representation from within a social representation' (p. 380). The same strategy of introducing other researchers' voices (Authorities) to the points made are used by GM on p. 230 when they explain how Confucianism 'molds' these students: 'The influence of the Confucian tradition, and its relation to high learner motivation and respect for teachers has been widely acknowledged (Cummings 1996; Wing On 1996)'.

PH also often resorts to authorities confirming unicity to explain some of her findings. She refers to Confucianism, collectivism, respect for authority, interdependence (p. 24). She draws the following deontic conclusion about these elements: 'These values should be maintained at all times, thereby facilitating the development of trust, an essential component in distinguishing between in-group/out-group relationships', thus giving again a robot-like discourse on the students. She also characterizes 'Chinese ways of communicating' through referring back to

ancient times (p. 25): 'Although Chinese rhetoric from the Chinese classical period (ca. 400 B.C.) is constructed around argumentation and persuasion (Garrett 1993), dialogic communication tends not to be developed or rewarded in Chinese classrooms (Greenholtz 2003; Hammond and Gao 2002; Watkins and Biggs 1996)' (note the use of many authorities again to defend her discourse). She even includes other spaces such as Taiwan and Malaysia ('Confucian societies') to affirm that these societies (p. 25) 'do not encourage critical discussion and debate'. On p. 26, quoting Gao and Ting-Toomey, she adds that 'In preserving relational harmony, Chinese communication emphasizes the importance of roles and politeness where, in the transaction, speakers are accorded respect'. These discourses are interesting as one can wonder if PH considers that they do not apply to the 'Western world', though they are also basic societal behaviors in 'Western' societies. The resulting picture is exaggerated, exotic, and uncritical towards the Chinese but also indirectly 'Westerners'.

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

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

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

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

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

3.3. Janusian discourses

Until now, the elements that have been collected in the articles indicate an approach to interculturality which is mostly solid. Janusian discourses of interculturality were also identified, which gives the articles an air of contradiction. Recently (Dervin 2008), I have identified another way of *discoursing* on interculturality in research which I call Janusian, in reference to the two-faced God. Through this approach, a researcher juggles with discourses that are liquid (open-endedness, (inter)individualism) and solid (culturalism, differentialism) at the same time. Let us give an example of this approach: a researcher warns us first of all that every individual is multiple and plural and that one should respect this and not reduce them to representations and stereotypes, on the other hand, they resort to solid/solidifying elements to analyse their subjects’ behaviors and thoughts, to interpret results, etc., the whole thing leading to contradictory discourses tainted with pseudo-objectivism and solidification. This often translates in using a theoretical framework which is constructivist but in results which are presented in a categorizing, biased, and ‘culturalized’ way. To my knowledge, this approach hasn’t been systematically studied.

In the articles under scrutiny, the researchers tend to protect themselves, either at the beginning or at the end of their papers, by opting for a ‘liquid’ discourse on the Chinese and discourses of plurality within this group. Let us start with CG who seem to protect their ‘academic discourse’ by reminding us on p. 76 that they ‘tr[ie]d’ to understand the process from the perspective of the student, rather than in some objective sense, through encouraging the students to talk of their experiences of moving to a new culture’, even though they often transformed their discourses into some sort of ‘objectivity’. What is striking about this comment is that a few lines later, they remind us that a difficulty of working with Chinese young people is that ‘having

been taught to have great respect for both parents and educators (Lee 1996), are often reluctant to express anything that may reflect negatively on an authority figure or institution'. If the researchers were working from the students' perspective, this comment does indeed reduce them to some pseudo-objective fact.

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

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

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

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, I proposed a critical and 'liquid' approach to intercultural discourses in research worlds. It emerged from the analysis of four articles dealing with the

acculturation of 'the Chinese student' that two other ways of researching intercultural discourses were in use: the 'classical' culturalist and thus solid approach and a contradictory, 'interculturally correct', and Janusian interculturality. The results are in a way disconcerting as it became clear through the analysis that none of the articles are consistently liquid in the way they 'treat' the students.

This leads me to a final comment on the essential role of the researcher in both data collection and analysis. In accordance with Shi-xu (2009) and if applied to the liquid interculturality approach suggested here, I believe that it is important for researchers to become aware of their biases towards others (e.g. ethnocentrism, stereotypes, generalizations), especially if they are from different disciplinary discourses ('Western' vs. 'non-Western'; cf. Shi-xu 2009: 32 for a discussion of these contested notions). The second move consists in admitting their biases, e.g. in their research articles, especially when analyzing data. If in doubt as to why a participant might have said something, a look at one's interlocutory role might not help to solve a problem but it might put things right and show that one worries about data and about giving a fair treatment to participants.

In his paper proposing a reconstruction of Eastern paradigms of discourse studies, Shi-xu (2009) also makes a convincing proposal for *de-imperialising* discourse studies, which tend to be too 'Western'. He proposes, amongst other things, that scholars 'should try to investigate into and make sense of Eastern discourses from local, indigenous and native perspectives' (Shi-xu 2009, 42). Would this contribute to a liquid approach? In the articles that we have looked at earlier on in this paper, the authors attempt to do what Shi-xu recommends by e.g. mentioning research or ideas put forward by scholars who are 'representatives' of the same 'culture' as that of research participants. I am not convinced that this could be placed under the label of liquid interculturality though. In fact, we need to ponder over the following central question: *what is a native perspective?* How do we know if something that is presented by a researcher or a person as representative of a local and indigenous practice and/or discourse is 'true' or can be applied in analyzing data? In other words, is an individual better suited for a liquid approach to interculturality if she comes from the same 'cultural', political space than research participants? I agree to de-imperializing multi-/inter-research, but we need to be careful not to return to essentializing and culturalizing data and people by working from other 'imagined', 'generalized', and 'stereotypes' perspectives.

French philosopher Henri Bergson (1895), in a text on 'the education of good sense' reminds us that science and education should move beyond 'ready-made ideas', 'simple ideas', 'generalizations', and 'excessive self-confidence':

The education of good sense will thus not only consist in rescuing intelligence from ready-made ideas, but also in turning it away from excessively simple ideas, stopping it on the slippery slope of deductions and generalizations, and finally preserving it from excessive self-confidence. (Bergson 1895, 345)

Many of the comments made by the researchers, through the use of authorities, 'facts' and the students' discourses, seem to contain some of the elements emphasized by Bergson. This danger has been analysed by Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) who have demonstrated how scholars themselves often make extra-scientific claims, which are more related to the doxa ('common sense') than scientific achievements. These are treacherous when results reach readers and are popularized. Could the

liquid approach to intercultural discourses represent one of the options available to researchers to avoid this pitfall? The future will tell.

Note

1. The references reproduced in the quotes from the articles were not included in the references in this article.

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