How university students of Mandarin Chinese experience 'Chinese culture': An interculturality and small cultures perspective

This article draws on original interview data to report how students of Mandarin Chinese in UK universities were exposed to and responded to 'Chinese culture' as part of their studies on a university degree programme. The activities and experiences that the students shared as well as the ways in which they responded demonstrated their understanding of cultural complexity, and incorporated a fluid and dynamic view of culture as interculturality. Participants interviewed tended to move beyond talking about cultural differences. They showed their transnational sensitivity and an awareness of cultural diversity. They also demonstrated a degree of culturally-inflected reflexivity. Key to understanding participants' responses was their negotiation with discourses about 'Chinese culture', their engagement with their personal life and their experience of sojourning abroad.

Keywords: small cultures, interculturality, Mandarin Chinese, reflexivity, personal agency, social structures

Introduction

This study explores how students of Mandarin Chinese in UK universities were exposed to and responded to 'Chinese culture'. This question focuses on how they experienced this rather than on what their academic course covered. I include inverted commas around the phrase 'Chinese culture' because the notion itself cannot be clearly defined and may imply a simplified and fixed notion of culture. The study, which draws on interview data from students of Chinese, further examines the underlying factors affecting their perspectives and responses. During the study, I engaged in a dialogue with the participants about their intercultural encounters and experiences. This approach therefore differs from one that seeks to simply define what 'Chinese culture' is or to evaluate the appropriateness of how course designers conceive of what this is.

This approach implies a shift in the way the concept of 'culture' is understood within the teaching and learning of Chinese, moving away from a focus upon cultural content towards instead, cultural experiences that people had or encountered while they studied the language. There is a longstanding argument in favour of including cultural content in the teaching of Chinese language at all levels at which it has been taught (see e.g. Danison, 2013; Wen & Grandin, 2010; Xing, 2006). Zhang & Li (2010) have argued that teaching materials in use well into the 2000s continued to lack content that reflected 'Chinese culture'. More recently, Wang (2018) has argued, in relation to university Chinese language courses, that materials often provide only stereotypical or superficial cultural information. A further issue is that teachers of Chinese may themselves have narrow understandings of what the term 'culture' entails (see Zhu & Li, 2014). Their pedagogy may be negatively affected by possessing, as a result of a lack of appropriate guidance themselves, only a partial awareness of cultural stereotyping (see Wang & Guo, 2017). In line with these perspectives, Jin & Dervin (2017) have called for the teaching and learning of Chinese to focus on interculturality, understood as a fluid and dynamic view of culture, rather than a 'superficial' and fixed conceptualisation of culture that focuses only on materials and a limited range of social practices. 'Interculturality' in this article refers to the dynamic and critical process of making sense of intercultural experience in relation to people's own backgrounds and trajectories within the social structures in which they find themselves. This definition follows Dervin (2016), who has emphasised a non-essentialist, critical and reflexive stance towards the notion of interculturality: moving away from differentialist and individualist biases, and viewing interculturality as a becoming process thus taking into account failure, exceptions, instabilities and power differentials. The discussion of Dervin (2016) on interculturality highlights the importance of intersectionality and

justice and calls for going beneath the surface of discourse and appearances. The fact is that students of Chinese may find various constructions of 'Chinese culture' in their learning practice in the classroom and beyond which may involve a discourse about national 'Chinese culture' (Wang, 2016), while 'China' and 'Chinese' denotes cultural complexity. Thus, following the call for the focus on interculturality in the teaching and learning of Chinese, this study highlights the importance of understanding cultural issues through students' perspectives. The term 'culture' in this study is thus understood in relation to an individual's experience, on their own and in various forms of dialogue with other individuals and groups, and the various social circumstances and influences that shape this experience.

The students interviewed studied in China for a period of time, except one student referred to in this article who had not yet been to China by the time of his interview. This student aside, the research question of how students of Chinese responded to forms of 'Chinese culture' that they encountered while sojourning abroad considers their personal agency in response to cultural issues. While recognising such an understanding in making Chinese language courses 'more cultural', some studies have focused on language learners themselves, for example, their learning trajectories (Liu & Wang, 2018), their reasons and plan for studying (Dretzke & Jordan, 2010), their experiences studying abroad (Wang, 2018; Wang & Guo, 2017; also see other studies in the collection of Dervin, Du, & Härkönen, 2018) and their learning in Chinese heritage language contexts (Wang, 2017). On the one hand, many of these students have been described in the literature as 'cosmopolitans' (e.g. Brimm, 2010) who may be from international families whose parents are from different social and cultural backgrounds, or have extensive travel experience which may have helped them to develop a cosmopolitan outlook. Study abroad experiences have been identified as a significant

component of Chinese language courses (Liu & Wang, 2018). Students following BA Chinese Studies courses in UK universities usually spend one year studying abroad. However, the experience of international students in China remains largely under-reported (see, however, Dervin, Du, & Härkönen, 2018; Jin, 2014, 2017). On the other hand, the social reality is that the universal scale of mobility and the development of online contacts have significantly changed the way in which cultural differences are perceived across national boundaries (Kramsch & Zhu, 2020). An intercultural trend is reflected in UK university language courses with students discussing wider issues of global concern (Quist, 2013), and is also evident in the biographical pathways and experiences of UK university students of Mandarin (Jin, 2017). I am not suggesting that these cosmopolitan students have already developed intercultural understanding, rather, I emphasize that their understandings of cultural issues should be investigated in relation to specific contexts in which they are involved (see Piller, 2011). While studies have investigated ethnic Chinese school students' constructions of 'Chinese culture' (e.g. Ganassin, 2019), there are few studies that focus on non-native Chinese speakers' understandings of 'Chinese culture' and the experiences they have in leading themselves towards certain cultural perceptions. Thus, this study seeks to understand the perspectives of students of Chinese and examines the underlying factors affecting their perspectives.

The article identifies that student interviewees themselves, often independently of their taught courses, may bring to or develop within Chinese language courses, more nuanced understandings of culture, partly as a result of their previous and ongoing lived experience, including their study abroad encounters but also through their capacity to be reflexive in their understandings of themselves and others. Rather than learning a target/native/national 'Chinese culture' (see Danison, 2013), these students made sense

of cultural meaning by embracing a fluid and dynamic view of culture, and so exhibiting a sense of interculturality. In what follows, I discuss how Holliday's grammar of culture (Holliday, 2016c, 2018) can help to investigate complex cultural issues. I will then describe the research methodology adopted by this study, followed by an analysis and discussion of the interview data. Finally, I conclude with three key issues for understanding the students' responses.

Understanding of the intercultural

This study is interested in students' wider experiences. It moves beyond the classroom context in order to understand their perceptions of cultural issues. Holliday's (2016c, 2018) 'a grammar of culture' is employed as a means of navigating the complex cultural environments and influences that shape and structure a person's life - an approach to understanding culture itself as being socially and politically constructed through different forms of social interaction, emphasising how individuals and groups of individuals think, see, interact and experience life as intercultural travellers. The personal trajectory identified by the framework is of particular significance in relation to this article, not least because it provides a basis for reflexivity and also for the way in which the process of personal agency is emphasised by means of extending threads and linkages in and across 'social and political structures' (Holliday, 2018: 3). 'Personal trajectories' are understood as 'the individual's personal travel through society', bringing into their social interaction 'histories from their ancestors and origins' (Holliday, 2018: 3).

The grammar itself consists of four domains which are presented purposefully in loose connection with one another: particular social and political structures (cultural resources, global positions and politics); personal trajectories; underlying universal cultural processes (small culture formation); and, particular cultural products (artefacts

and statements about culture). Culture here is perceived as being complex, dynamic, and something shared, interacted upon and negotiated between people (Geertz, 1973; Jensen, 2007). It is viewed (after Kelly, 2009) as 'verbal' and 'adjectival' rather than 'nounal', a definition that follows the social action theory of Weber (1964), which places culture in dialogue with social structures, and which stresses individual agency in the dialogue process.

Small cultures

Holliday (1999) has suggested the notion of 'small culture' as distinct from 'large culture' in order to challenge the grand narratives about 'culture' that so often shape fixed and generalised ideas of what it is. In Holliday's (1999: 237) words, large cultures, as the 'default notion of "culture"', refer to 'prescribed ethnic, national and international entities', which makes them vulnerable to an essentialist thinking of 'culture' as they tend to view people's behaviour as defined by their cultures. An example of 'large culture', or grand narratives about culture, is presented in Said's (1978) influential work on Orientalism, which draws attention to how ideas of otherness informed the cultures of the West in relation to the East. As Kirkebæk (2013) has pointed out, in parallel with Orientalism, dominant powers in China once promoted the notion not only of one 'Chinese culture' but, of situating China geographically and symbolically at the centre of the world, and of projecting a view of 'Chinese culture' as being superior to the cultures of the other nations of the world. These grand narratives about culture suggest that the term 'culture' is often politically and ideologically inflected and associated with wider ideas about nation, race, ethnicity and location (see Holliday, 2018). As Lavanchy et al. (2011) have argued, grand narratives about 'culture' can create essentialised 'others' - a process of seeking to create imagined characteristics within other people and communities in order to stress and valorise qualities and characteristics within one's

own social or community group.

In opposition to large culture, the small culture paradigm 'attaches "culture" to small social groupings or activities wherever there is cohesive behaviour, and thus avoids culturist ethnic, national or international stereotyping' (Holliday, 1999: 237). In short, it is about - and about studying - human interactions and human inter-understandings rather than cultural 'products' or culture in more abstract terms, such as 'Chinese culture' or 'British culture'. Unlike large cultures, culture in this sense is understood as being co-created during interactions, and is therefore ever-changing and fluid. This is not to say that one kind of culture or approach to studying it exists in place of the other; rather, when people begin talking about culture, they are often negotiating between the inherited grand narratives of cultures and the personal narratives derived from their own 'on the go' small culture experiences (Amadasi & Holliday, 2017: 2-3). These small cultures people experience can become a resource helping them to connect cultural threads with others or when engaging with new environments (Holliday, 2016a; 2013). Holliday (2016b) has highlighted the dynamic intercultural relationship that the idea of 'the small culture formation on the go' contains, in a way which resonates with the meaning of interculturality, and the phenomenon and practice of dynamic interrelations between the self and the other (cf. Lévinas, 1990; MacDonald & O'Regan, 2017).

Personal agency in relation to structures

Both theoretically and methodologically, interculturality places an emphasis on *personal agency* through examining the meanings present within social action and exchange (see Holliday 2016a). As noted in the introduction, interculturality references a dynamic and critical process of making sense of oneself and others and of connecting with others based upon a personal reflexivity and the experience of varied social

realities. Individuals travel through and make sense of the social world as shown through small culture formation on the go (e.g. reading and making culture; constructing rules and meanings; imagining self and other) (Holliday, 2018). It is personal agency which puts different elements of the grammar of culture in connection with one another. However, interculturality also places emphasis upon the impact of wider social structures on the lives of individuals, and so envisions a dialectical relationship between structures on the one hand and agency on the other (Bhaskar, 1998). One way of demonstrating personal agency is through reflexivity. Reflexivity emphasises the individual's 'reading' of that grammar, which may be acquired and practised independently. Reflexivity can also acknowledge the influence of social structures. Moore (2018) has adopted the term reflexivity to describe how people access and understand this grammar and thereby question and challenge the impacts and effects of the various cultural influences that have shaped them, and how they in turn understand themselves and others. For example, the cultural backgrounds of individual learners and their prior experiences are important in understanding how they have come to see the world as they do (Levy, 2007; Risager, 2007). Unlike 'standard reflection', Moore (2018: 14) has promoted reflexivity, focusing not so much on analysing an event, object or experience *per se*, but rather on how - and, crucially, why – people *experience* and respond to events, objects and experiences. It encourages people to seek to understand how subjectivities are constructed and shaped as a result not only of their personal trajectories through life but of the social and economic conditions and circumstances within which those trajectories are contained.

This article aims to explore how students of Chinese were exposed to and responded to 'Chinese culture' and further examines the underlying factors affecting their perspectives. To this end, this study sought out examples of how students

encountered the ‘grammar of culture’ while they studied the language, and how they revealed their personal agency in their testimonies and in the context of the social structures in which they were embedded.

Research approach

By following Holliday’s ‘grammar of culture’, students’ perspectives on cultural issues and the intercultural in specific contexts are thus elicited and explored via a social constructionist approach that understands knowledge as always socially constructed. This approach focuses on the ways in which individuals interact with the world (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Robson, 2011). It does so in response to a recent call from Holliday & MacDonald (2019) for a more emphatic shift to a postmodern, ‘constructivist’ outlook in order to address the highly intersubjective nature of the intercultural. While this call is welcome, by adopting an interculturality perspective, this article also wishes to acknowledge the influence of social structures in this relation as ‘a necessary condition for any intentional act’ (Bhaskar, 1998: 27). Through this dialectical constructionist framework, discursive realities may be constructed by participants independently as well conjointly through their interactions with the researcher, but always within pre-existing structural formations. The understanding of cultural aspects and the intercultural can in this way be studied through interpretive research by examining the construction of meanings in context (Geertz, 1973). This study also values the researcher’s interpretations of meaning contained in participants’ narratives (Maggs-Rapport, 2000). The study thus draws upon interpretive strategies in order to analyse and situate the discourses that arise from the participants’ perspectives.

The supporting data for this article have been drawn from a larger study exploring understandings of interculturality through the perspectives of students of Mandarin in British universities. One strand of this larger study, which is further

developed in this article, explored how these students experienced and responded to ‘Chinese culture’. This is illustrated in this article by interview data drawn from 8 of the participants (pseudonyms are provided) in this study. The participants were recruited through personal contacts and were selected due to their willingness to be interviewed. The participants were also prioritised in relation their national and ethnic backgrounds, and efforts were also made to have a relative balance of male and female participants. In total, three were British nationals; one was from the USA, and the remaining four were from various countries on the European continent. The gender balance was slightly in favour of men, with five male and three female respondents, and their ages ranged from nineteen to twenty-seven.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with these participants either within university spaces in the UK or via Skype. Two rounds of interviews were planned. However, only four participants were available for the second round of interviews with two emailing their responses. Following Holliday's (2016c, 2018) four domains of the ‘grammar of culture’, the first round of interviews explored questions regarding personal information, including their language careers to date, their travel experiences, and their experience of learning Mandarin. In addition to this, their understanding of the language, Chinese cultural aspects, and intercultural communication experiences were also explored. Questions in the second round were further developed based on the first round of interviews. In recognition of the fluid and emergent nature of participants’ perspectives and experiences, I maintained contact with them over a period of time between the two rounds of interviews. For example, I communicated with Jack for about nine months and with Enrique for about one year, eliciting and refining the data they provided.

Interviewees were invited to share items of their choice, which they felt were illustrative of their exposure to 'Chinese culture'. These included: textbooks, photographs relating to Chinese people or simply to China itself, and examples of their own interactions with Chinese people. In the case of participants whose studies had included an element of studying abroad, this particularly included references to experiences and things they had seen during their visits to China. A narrative inquiry approach (Floyd, 2012) was employed to stimulate participants to talk about their experiences and through their interactions with the researcher make it possible to explore the underlying meanings of their narrative. The study explored the participants' autobiographical histories in order to consider the degree to which their experiences had been influenced by previous aspects of their lives. A narrative inquiry approach is suitable when seeking to elicit and use biographical sources and for the purpose of the analysis of participants' interview responses (Floyd, 2012). I interacted with these participants using the term 'Chinese culture' which needed to be critically reflected upon in the data analysis. As Merrill & West (2009) have argued, the biographical research also needs to take into account the role of the researcher, whose interests and ways of making sense of others, in addition to the processes of their relationship with the participants contribute to the nature of the data that is collected. Thus the study engaged with the researcher's own role in the construction of the participants' narratives. The grand narratives about 'Chinese culture' that I had personally experienced and largely received uncritically as a child growing up in China were of interest to me for the purposes of conducting this research.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 160 minutes, and was audio recorded and transcribed. I analysed the data for the content of what was said (thematic analysis) and for how the interviewee talked about the content (discourse analysis): for example, by

exploring their interpretations, why they spoke in the way that they did, and how they understood themselves and the roles they played in their worlds. While participants' personal encounters and experiences were all individually different, they responded in ways which reflected a shared sense of 'interculturality'. The findings below are structured around emerging themes in relation to interculturality.

Interculturality in practice: student understandings of cultural complexity

This section illustrates some of the ways in which participating students exhibited interculturality in their experiences of and responses to 'Chinese culture'. This is also taken to include any pre-existing dispositions which may have attracted them to Chinese Studies programmes in the first place.

Moving beyond 'cultural differences'

The first observation worth noting is that most of the participants interviewed exhibited an understanding of culture as a somewhat slippery term, which meant different things to different people and could be utilised to achieve different ends, while also engendering a feeling of uncertainty. Some presented a resistance to notions of 'large cultures' or grand narratives about cultures, as being too stereotypical and monolithic. Some also revealed an understanding of culture as practice, as experience, as interaction, and as something that was constantly evolving. Harald, a European citizen following a BA course in Chinese, explained in a follow-up email about his difficulty when answering some of my questions:

> I found it a bit tricky to answer some questions about Chinese culture since I haven't spent that much time with many different Chinese people. So, although I live with two people from China (who in many ways act quite "Western" if you can put it like that) and know some other Chinese people as well, I don't know enough people to be able to distinguish with complete certainty whether their ways

> of behaving are individual characteristics or whether they are characteristics from Chinese culture.

Harald might be simply stating that he had not met many Chinese people therefore was not able to sum up 'characteristics from Chinese culture'. However, he did not regard his Chinese flatmates as significantly different from himself, instead observing that they were 'quite "Western"'. Harald's first language was not English. He could speak Swedish and Danish, and a little German. He came from a multi-ethnic family. His parents had also adopted two children from South-East Asia in addition to him. As the 'grammar of culture' suggests, statements about culture, such as 'Chinese culture' and 'Western culture' exist in our lives and thus appear normal to this participant. My question about 'Chinese culture' itself indicates a degree of distinguishing 'Chinese culture' as something that is monolithic. He had not been to China by the time of the interview and mentioned how he had gained some insights into Chinese cuisine from his two Chinese flatmates: Chinese dumplings and congee. However, partly as a result of his personal trajectory and experience of everyday 'small cultures' with his room-mates, this participant encountered some difficulty in answering my questions, as he recognised individual characteristics, habits and preferences. His inclination to put the concept 'Western' into inverted commas in his written communications to me is another evidence of his sensitivity to oversimplified generalisations.

Another participant, Jack, was completing a BA Chinese and Anthropology degree and spoke of the importance of identifying and challenging cultural assumptions and, specifically, of challenging the assumption that:

> Chinese culture is not the same as English culture, to assume that it's something separate, even though there is no reason to think this … They are not so separate, as I'm sure that we would assume.

Jack's recognition that referencing 'Chinese culture' (as I had done in my own interview question) often reflects and creates a fixed idea in people's minds that does not conform with the reality of the social world, echoes the description of Lavanchy et al. (2011: 8) of 'culturalisation as an othering process'. Jack continued by saying, 'I think the issue is the term. If we say culture, if we put something like, say, a place name or language, if we say Chinese culture, we just decided there *is* Chinese culture'. Jack was British by birth, and had learned Spanish and French at school. He had been in China for a year and had travelled to many places such as Spain, Australia, India and South America to practise his languages and explore the wider world. Statements about culture were challenged by his personal trajectories and his discipline of study, anthropology (see Wells et al., 2019), as well as by everyday small culture formation on the go. For example, he mentioned experiencing in-depth exposure when living in a community and working in a business environment; for example, in a Chinese restaurant or shop in London, and stated that 'every situation is going to be different'.

The experience and practice of sharing cultural identities rather than becoming focused on supposed differences was added to by another European respondent, Margarida, who participated via email. She was studying Mandarin as part of her postgraduate course, and wrote that cultural differences only mattered 'with people who overemphasize what they see as unbridgeable cultural differences ('You in the West don't understand this!' as if 'the West' was a monolithic bloc)'. Referring to her own experiences while living and traveling in mainland China and Taiwan, she went on to observe:

> On several other occasions these 'cultural differences' were not [the] cause of any difficulty but actually a casual topic of conversation (on the words used to describe things, on food, on our country's history, on teaching methods, on family

> expectations, etc.) and curiously we tended to find a lot in common (in which variations were more at an individual level than one of nationality).

Margarida's cultural understanding seemed to arise out of the circumstances and experiences of her life in the manner suggested in Holliday's observations regarding the power of small cultures to shape one's experience and outlook (e.g. conversations on food, history, teaching methods and family expectations), as well as the impact of personal trajectories in negotiating grand narratives about culture (e.g. cultural differences and the West) (Holliday, 1999; 2011; 2012). The kind of conversation which is mentioned in this excerpt, is also echoed in the research findings of Quist (2013), who often found that her students thought the cultural topics they discussed were not confined to any particular national perspective, but could be much more broadly applied in many diverse contexts internationally. Margarida's experience and embracing of small cultures seem to have helped her to develop resistance to accepting the concepts of monolithic (large) cultures. She thus moved beyond the unsatisfactory acceptance of 'cultural differences' to suggest a sense of interculturality. In the same email she wrote that, 'I connected with many people on different levels (personal/friendship, professional, common interests, etc.) and most of the time I didn't see these people as 'Chinese friends' but simply as 'friends', 'people' I liked to be with/ talk to'. She recognised and found the cultural threads in their personal cultural trajectories in order to connect these to the threads of others (Holliday, 2016a).

Transnational sensibility and awareness of cultural diversity

It is important to point out that, both because of global developments and because the student interviewees had chosen to undertake higher, post-compulsory study of another language ('Chinese'), it seemed not unreasonable to expect that these students would be likely to have embraced and 'practised' interculturality previously. Student interviewees

revealed their transnational sensibility and awareness of diversity, challenging the monolithic national idea of culture. They did this through their own backgrounds and experiences and when they encountered a multilingual and multicultural social landscape in China.

An example of transnational sensibility was illustrated by an undergraduate studying for a BA in Law and Chinese, Enrique. Given his Spanish/Bolivian family heritage and his experience of life in Bolivia, he disregarded preconceptions and stereotypes that might result in othering China and Chinese people:

> There are many stereotypes, maybe about Chinese people in the west. But my family is really like certain type of people … who understand stereotypes. When I went to China…. [I did] not have a set of idea of what China would be like ... coz my mother is from Bolivia, and I've been to Bolivia … I expect like maybe something [in China] are similar, and yeah, they were similar.

This student participant was cognizant of how ethnic stereotypes had become a central feature of national politics in Bolivia with the election of Evo Morales as the first indigenous Latin American President in 2006. Other interviewees whose data has not been included in this article also shared a similar kind of transnational sensibility with this participant, such as two of the British students, both of whom had ethnically diverse heritage backgrounds through their parents. One was Seychellois-Burmese, and the other was Singaporean-Chinese. Participants might also see themselves as being ethnically 'Chinese', but having a non-Chinese nationality and a different sense of belonging. For example, the American Chinese (introduced later) and the Belgian Malaysian-Chinese participants (data not included in this article) fell into this category. As Risager (2007: 234) has noted regarding the cultural background of language learners:

> No matter what the long-term (and necessary) aim of foreign-language teaching is, the various participants will already have formed early on a habitus and have developed certain symbolic forms of capital that dispose them to, or orientate them towards, particular positions in the cultural encounter.

So it was with these participants that they brought a transnational sensibility to the way they expressed their views, often laying claim to an intercultural identity which was not associated with any 'culture'. This habitus also meant that these participants were predisposed to adopting certain positions when experiencing intercultural encounters.

An example of students' awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity within China can be found in the testimony of a British participant, Harry, who was following a BA in Chinese and another ethnic Chinese language, when showing me a video of Xinjiang music:

> At this point I realized how, this is where there is a word is missing in English: how *hao fengfuduocai* 好丰富多彩 [abundant and colourful] the Chinese country is. It's like how they have so many different cultures, so many different languages, so many amazing people.

Harry started learning Chinese at school in the UK and had travelled to many places in China. He started his postgraduate study in Xinjiang after his BA studies. A multilingual and multicultural landscape can be encountered almost everywhere in China with the use of Mandarin acting as a national lingual franca embracing many languages, dialects and local variations. Indeed, coping with such diversity became the dominant experience of these students' time in China. Of course, this linguistic and cultural diversity is not merely a Chinese phenomenon, but a reality that can be found globally in many places. Harry in the interview referred to the diversity of cultural resources in China, such as its educational practices, its languages and its religions. He also emphasised the universal cultural process by stating that: 'everyone in the world is

same'. When he first started his Chinese language course in the UK, his impression was that 'things are so different and so exciting'. But when he learned the Chinese language, went to China and talked to Chinese people, he found they were not so different, and that 'people are just people'. This participant's experience reflects that of five other students who were interviewed in the larger study. They might be accustomed to encountering and even adopting in their speech statements about 'Chinese culture', but when they met individuals in their 'on the go' small cultures, they found they had many things in common. A respondent in an earlier study (Jin, 2014: 29), commented that 'Chinese language' could be used in relation to cultural identity and unifying people, but that 'the word Chinese means absolutely nothing' and is 'completely useless' owing to the linguistic and cultural diversity and complexity it represents.

Participants also revealed an awareness of cultural diversity that went beyond particular cultural products. In response to my question about cultural aspects of their Chinese language courses that they had engaged with, a Dutch-German participant, Lotte, identified certain views of culture that were presented in textbooks:

> If you have books … published in China, which are sponsored by the Chinese government, they will contain certain texts. They will probably contain texts on ethnic minorities, or they will have texts on Chinese new economic growth … Chinese emperor, or a description about summer palace, um, so you are actually forced to take these topics to you, like, to read about these topics just because they are Chinese books, which makes sense … I guess the Chinese government wants to portray a certain image of itself … life is better now than for the previous generation: 'We have more infrastructure. We have more big cities, um, and, like, look at our ethnic minorities. They can dance and they can sing, and it's so great. Everyone is living in harmony' … but I think the more perhaps the disadvantages of it, or, like, more social problems, I think these are less frequent in these books. You know, I think that's actually the part of the culture as well … to dare discuss negative points, um, so I think you get culture, but in a certain angle, or in a certain way. So, I think it's good to try to have books from other countries, from other publishers, that try to expose you to different aspects.

Lotte had graduated with a BA in Chinese and History. When mentioning 'Chinese culture' and cultural differences, she also believed that people were all the same with different cultural

resources (e.g. education, learning different languages) and personal trajectories (e.g. raised differently by parents). She noted that textbooks could introduce partial and biased views and that culture should cover both positive and negative images. Chinese language courses in UK universities have for a long time been embedded in Area Studies thus incorporating the idea of learning the 'culture' of the target language country. Textbooks often contain quite fixed ideas about national identity (Wang, 2016) and such content is likely to be questioned by international learners, particularly those who have previously developed a transnational sensibility. Textbooks ought to have the capacity to promote a breadth of views. This would enable the development of a more open discourse so as to enhance classroom participation and intercultural understanding (Wang, 2016).

Reflexivity

Participants' cultural understanding was also informed by reflexivity (Moore, 2004, 2018) which may itself have been the product of their particular experiences and backgrounds. Caroline, a British national reading for a BA in Chinese Studies, observed in the interview that she was herself becoming 'hybrid' as an intercultural traveller learning another language and having been abroad, in China. She highlighted the importance of 'critical attitudes and open minds' towards using the language (e.g. not accepting the face value of some Chinese words) and towards what she saw and said (e.g. not giving 'a biased impression'). By the time of our interview, she had seen me as another intercultural traveller whom she could talk to. When talking about encountering other cultural aspects of China, she emphasised that:

> I think you need to be able to keep in mind that your attitudes would be changed, you can't stay too fixed in your own way, but you need to remain critical, and it's difficult … understanding your own reactions is as important as being open to other people's opinions.

Her statement seems to imply an ability and determination to be reflexive - a view which resonates with Piller's (2011: 176) argument that ‘it is more important to understand our own cultural lenses than the supposed cultural traits of others’. Levy's (2007) description of ‘culture as elemental’ also identifies the significance of learning about our own preconceived views and expectations. This idea of reflexivity contains meanings of firstly, having pre-existing assumptions and understandings (and misunderstandings) of culture(s), secondly, being in a position and having the will and the skills, to challenge those pre-existing assumptions and understandings, and thirdly, also appreciating the significance of what has been called ‘assumption hunting’ (Brookfield, 1990).

Another example of reflexivity in action is provided by a Chinese American participant, Daniel, who was following a BA course in Chinese and French, who responded via email:

> I think anyone who studies a language, profoundly questions their morals at some point. For me, my morals have fluctuated a lot since I studied Chinese, positively and negative[ly]. At one point, I made China into something that it wasn’t, but at some point I admitted that Chinese culture has its problems, like any culture does. At this point, all of my encounters are intercultural encounters.

Daniel was open to meaningful negotiation while studying Chinese. This understanding relates to the way in which reflexivity involves accepting that the process of learning a language itself may challenge and change some pre-conceived ideas held by the learner. His reflexivity is connected to his self-identification. He said that the fact he had a Chinese heritage, was born in the United States, and studied in Europe and China ‘definitely confuses a lot of people’, as people usually labelled him according to how he looked. He did not think China was one concept and was concerned about ‘the illusion

of nationalism'. His interview generally revealed a lack of negative concern about ethnicity or nationality but a sense of himself as an intercultural individual.

A third example is taken from a far more detailed response of Margarida in relation to the request for participants to share and discuss images that represented their understandings of 'Chineseness' and, through this, their understanding of the wider concept of culture. Margarida sent me a series of photographs indicative of a broad view of 'Chinese culture' in which the 'traditional' and the 'modern' were juxtaposed, along with her own written commentary on why each photograph had been selected. These photographs included a shot from Xi'an city walls with skyscrapers in the background; a shopping mall, contrasted with a photo of 'a more "classical" view of the Qinhuai River' in Nanjing; a picture of a Taipei night market 'where one can buy everything from traditional snacks to the latest street fashion', which also included 'a girl holding a McDonald's cup'; and a photo from a former military dependants' village in Taipei 'which is now a kind of museum and art space' with, behind it, 'the tallest building in Taiwan, the famous Taipei 101'. In her commentary, this participant wrote:

> The contrast between different objects, architectural styles, ways of life, past epochs, history & histories, etc is what fascinates me here. I don't know the answer to the often-heard question of what is more genuine and real. For me, they all seem real and they all seem to exist together, even if I don't deny the contradictions, the pressures and the problems that mark this coexistence. If I was to make an analogy for this idea using film (yes, I do love Chinese cinema!) this would be a double bill with one of Jia Zhangke's [a well-known Chinese film director and screenwriter] films and *Tiny Times* [a film series and novel]. They are both visions of today's China. Photo 2 is a famous temple in Taipei full of offerings, and photo 3 is a Budaixi [a type of opera using cloth puppets] show taking place next to a different temple, during a traditional festival (the multi-generational audience was composed by many, many people indeed, which really marvelled me - Taiwan's people's liveliness in cultural events, be it most traditional forms of entertainment or more avant-garde pieces always did, as if past and present and future can have interest to

> so many people, be valued, debated and enjoyed). I could have added a photo of my tea classes or of the National Palace Museum, or the painting and calligraphy shops near my school. They highlight one of the aspects I find fascinating in Taiwan, the way Chinese culture(s) is cherished, protected and promoted there (but also integrated in today's realities, included in different visions of 'modernity'). Because I have lived in Taiwan for almost a year and a half and, so far, have only visited cities in China (and HK, and Macau) for brief periods of time, you'll forgive me for being more at ease at sharing pictures of Taiwan. I am not making a comparison with mainland China, mind, nor saying Taiwan is more real or genuine. China's way too vast and multiple for me to risk making abusive generalisations about it. I am simply showing fragments of visions of Chineseness (whatever that even means) I've had in Taiwan.

Both the selection of images and Margarida's explanations and commentary revealed interculturality on her part, as well as the complex nuances that lie within considerations of cultural specifics, reflecting the influence of her lived cultural trajectory. Margarida had commented earlier about 'cultural differences' as a casual topic of conversation, and had a range of primary cultural interests including Chinese cinema, which was a specialist interest that offered her with a point of entry into a complex array of cultural traditions and styles. Through her selection of images, she revealed a sophisticated cultural understanding of China. At the same time, she demonstrated reflexivity both in placing speech-marks (as with the participant previously mentioned) around 'the 'traditional' and the 'modern', and also, more strikingly, in her recognition that generalisations about 'Chinese culture' are not simply misleading but potentially 'abusive'. Unlike some of the participants in Amadasi and Holliday's (2017) study, who sometimes fell into essentialist thinking about culture, Margarida clearly recognised 'Chinese culture' as comprising coexisting and contradictory elements, although she might also see 'culture/s' as entities prompted by my request for images. It is equally evident that her 'small culture' academic studies (she was conducting a PhD study) and

interest in Chinese cinema contributed to her developing a reflexive and critical approach towards cultural practices, objects and forms.

Discussion and conclusion

Following Holliday's (2016c, 2018) grammar of culture, this article has drawn on original research data to highlight the ways in which university students of Chinese were exposed to and to some extent resisted forms of thinking about 'Chinese culture'. They partly did this by bringing to bear their own cultural and linguistic resources, which were drawn from their own life trajectories and their travel and study abroad experiences. The activities and experiences that the participants shared, as well as the ways in which they responded, demonstrate 'small culture' formation 'on the go', as Holliday describes it, incorporating a sense of interculturality by connecting one's self with an other. These cultural reflections, on the other hand, can at times appear to be fragmented understandings rather than in-depth reflections on cultural values. The reality for these participants is that among their peers there existed a host of shared interests and activities, creating a social sphere in which differences began to vanish in favour of feeling comfortable with the growing presence of diverse intercultural identities.

There are, however, certain issues emerging from the research data which may help us to understand the participants' responses in addition to demonstrating the influence of social structures. Firstly, the way that a concept is spoken about or introduced as a topic of discussion is of significance. The expression, for example, of 'Chinese culture' that I as the researcher and other researchers have adopted (e.g. Danison, 2013; Wen & Grandin, 2010; Xing, 2006) can itself suggest a fixed, essentialist and monolithic idea of culture, establishing parameters for discussion that may, in themselves, exhibit and promote a process of othering (Lavanchy et al., 2011).

Examples of such an essentialized discourse are the persistent use of the dichotomous phrases 'East'/'West', 'English culture'/'Chinese culture' and such expressions as 'You in the West' and certain views of culture presented by textbooks. As one of the more reflexive participants, Margarida, in this study argued, there is a danger of easily slipping into 'abusive generalisations' about cultures. Interestingly, even this participant, aware as she was of the danger, was still drawn into a fairly widespread conceptualisation of China as a place in which the traditional and the modern exist side by side - as though this were not true of the majority of other nations. Therefore, the exposure to and negotiation around discourses about 'Chinese culture' may be the normal state of these participants' studies and lives.

A second issue concerns the representation in the language studies literature regarding the socio-cultural background of students of Chinese and their views of 'culture' where essentialist views might prevail (e.g. Wang, 2018). This study has revealed that there is already a wealth of diverse experience and expertise within student populations (also see Jin, 2017) and many in this study have shown their critical opinion of cultural issues by integrating their intercultural identity into their discourse. The students interviewed had already formed a 'habitus' (Risager, 2007: 234), wherein they had acquired and developed, not immediately consciously, 'certain symbolic forms of capital' which predisposed them to adopt certain positions when experiencing intercultural encounters. It is important to note that this habitus can produce either a fixed, essentialist view of culture(s) or a more intercultural one, and that one of the roles of reflexivity is to reveal and challenge the habitus of taken for granted modes of thought and action: effectively, to seek to understand how and why people have come to understand culture(s) in the way they have, including some of these participants thinking about cultural issues in an inconsistent way and holding a range of fluctuating

perspectives. In the case of the participants cited in this article, processes of reflexivity were clearly in evidence in the present and, it might be surmised, in the past also. Thus, the nature of and engagement with their personal lives are resources for these participants to respond to 'Chinese culture'.

The third issue concerns the study experiences of the participants including their encounters while studying abroad (see e.g. Dervin et al., 2018; Liu & Wang, 2018). The study of Mandarin, as a global language, does not seem to represent a separate culture to which they have to adapt; rather, it acts as a dynamic process for participants to open themselves to the wider world. One should not underestimate the value to the self and, potentially, to others, of experiences of studying and living in China. It was evident in this study that participants who had been through the experience of sojourning abroad had further enhanced their understandings of culture, and so also their own experience of interculturality, while also coming to appreciate the importance of reflexivity both in terms of their ongoing studies and in relation to their perceptions of themselves and the wider social world.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank John O'Regan, Richard Fay, the editor Malcolm MacDonald, and the anonymous reviewers for comments they made on an earlier draft of this paper.

References

Amadasi, S., & Holliday, A. (2017). 'I already have a culture.' Negotiating competing grand and personal narratives in interview conversations with new study abroad arrivals. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2017.1357727

Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press.

Bhaskar, R. (1998). *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.

Brimm, L. (2010). *Global cosmopolitans: The creative edge of difference*. New York,

NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Brookfield, S. D. (1990). Using Critical Incidents to Explore Assumptions. In J. M. and Associates (Ed.), *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: a guide to transformative and emancipatory learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Danison, N. (2013). Integrating culture and language in the Chinese as a foreign language classrom: A view from the bottom up. In I. Kecskes (Ed.), *Research in Chinese as a Second Language* (pp. 81–113). Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.

Dervin, F. (2016). *Interculturality in education: A theoretical and methodological toolbox*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dervin, F., Du, X., & Härkönen, A. (Eds.). (2018). *International students in China: education, student life and intercultural encounters*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dretzke, B. J., & Jordan, K. (2010). Expanding Secondary School Chinese Language Programs: A Study of Potential Challenges. *American Secondary Education*, *38*(2), 57–72. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/41406162

Floyd, A. (2012). Narrative and life history. In A. R. J. Briggs, M. Coleman, & M. Morrison (Eds.), *Research methods in educational leadership and management* (3rd ed., pp. 223–235). London: SAGE.

Ganassin, S. (2019). Teaching and learning about Chinese culture : pupils' and teachers' experiences of Chinese community schooling in the UK experiences of Chinese community schooling in the UK. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, *19*(2), 167–183. https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2018.1504953

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.

Holliday, A. (1999). Small Cultures. *Applied Linguistics*, *20*(2), 237–264.

Holliday, A. (2012). Culture, communication, context and power. In J. Jackson (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication* (pp. 37–51). London: Routledge.

Holliday, A. (2013). *Understanding Intercultural Communication: Negotiating a Grammar of Culture*. London: Routledge.

Holliday, A. (2016a). Difference and awareness in cultural travel: negotiating blocks and threads. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, *16*(3), 318–331. https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2016.1168046

Holliday, A. (2016b). PhD students, interculturality, reflexivity, community and internationalisation. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2015.1134554

Holliday, A. (2016c). Studying culture. In H. Zhu (Ed.), *Research methods in intercultural communication: A practical guide* (pp. 23–36). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Holliday, A. (2018). *Understanding intercultural communication: negotiating a grammar of culture* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Holliday, A., & MacDonald, M. N. (2019). Researching the Intercultural: Intersubjectivity and the Problem with Postpositivism. *Applied Linguistics*, (Holliday 1999), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amz006

Jensen, I. (2007). *Introduction to cultural understanding*. Roskilde: Roskilde University Press.

Jin, T. (2014). Getting to know you : The development of intercultural competence as an essential element in learning Mandarin. *London Review of Education*, *12*(1), 20–33.

Jin, T. (2017). Moving beyond 'intercultural competence': Interculturality in the learning of Mandarin in UK universities. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, *17*(3), 306–322. https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2016.1259320

Jin, T., & Dervin, F. (2017). Identifying and contextualising the key issues. In T. Jin & F. Dervin (Eds.), *Interculturality in Chinese language education* (pp. 1–22). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kelly, A. V. (2009). *The curriculum theory and practice* (6th ed.). London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Kirkebæk, M. J. (2013). Filling Up A "China-Box": How Task-Based Problem-Based Learning Can Be Applied to Teaching in Chinese Culture. In M. J. Kirkebæk, X.-Y. Du, & A. A. Jensen (Eds.), *Teaching and Learning Culture: Negotiating the Context* (pp. 13–25). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Kramsch, C., & Zhu, H. (2020). Translating Culture in Global Times: An Introduction. *Applied Linguistics*, *41*(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amz020

Lavanchy, A., Gajardo, A., & Dervin, F. (2011). Interculturality at Stake. In F. Dervin, A. Gajardo, & A. Lavanchy (Eds.), *Politics of Interculturality* (pp. 1–25). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars.

Lévinas, E. (1990). *Totality and infinity: an essay on exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Levy, M. (2007). Culture, culture learning and new technologies: towards a pedagogical framework. *Language Learning & Technology*, *11*(2), 104–127.

Liu, S., & Wang, F. (2018). A qualitative study on learning trajectories of non-native Chinese instructors as successful Chinese language learners. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, *3*(2), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-018-0043-5

MacDonald, M. N., & O'Regan, J. P. (2017). The Ethics of Intercultural Communication. In Y. Y. Kim (Ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Intercultural Communication*. Malden MA: Wiley & Sons.

Maggs-Rapport, F. (2000). Combining methodological approaches in research: ethnography and interpretive phenomenology. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *31*(1), 219–225.

Merrill, B., & West, L. (2009). *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research*. London: Sage.

Moore, A. (2004). *The good teacher: Dominant discourses in teaching and teacher education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Moore, A. (2018). *The Affected Teacher: Psychosocial Perspectives on Professional Practice and Policy Resistance*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Piller, I. (2011). *Intercultural Communication: A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Quist, G. (2013). *Reading with my eyes open: Embracing the critical and the personal in language pedagogy*. London: Ubiquity Press.

Risager, K. (2007). *Language and Culture Pedagogy: From a National to a Transnational Paradigm*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Robson, C. (2011). *Real world research: A resource for users of social research methods in applied settings* (3rd ed.). West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Wang, D. (2017). Developing Intercultural Competence Through Cultural Activities in London Chinese Complementary Schools. In T. Jin & F. Dervin (Eds.), *Interculturality in Chinese Language Education* (pp. 131–150). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wang, Danping. (2016). Learning or becoming: Ideology and national identity in textbooks for international learners of Chinese. *Cogent Education*, *3*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2016.1140361

Wang, J. (2018). British university students studying abroad in China: Issues of Interculturality. In F. Dervin, X. Du, & A. Härkönen (Eds.), *International students in China: education, student life and intercultural encounters* (pp. 77–94). Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wang, J., & Guo, Z. (2017). Developing Intercultural Competence Through Study Abroad Programmes in China: An Analysis of Student Experience at Two British Universities. In T. Jin & D. Fred (Eds.), *Interculturality in Chinese Language Education* (pp. 41–62). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Weber, M. (1964). *The theory of social and economic organisation*. New York: The Free Press.

Wells, N., Forsdick, C., Bradley, J., Burdett, C., Burns, J., Demossier, M., … Wall, G. (2019). Ethnography and Modern Languages. *Modern Languages Open*, *1*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.242

Wen, X., & Grandin, J. (2010). The role of Chinese culture and language in global education: The Chinese international engineering program at University of Rhode Island. In J. Chen, C. Wang, & J. Cai (Eds.), *Teaching and Learning Chinese: Issues and Perspectives* (pp. 199–216). Charlotte: IAP-Information Age.

Xing, J. Z. (2006). *Teaching and Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language: A Pedagogical Grammar*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Zhang, G. X., & Li, L. M. (2010). Chinese language teaching in the UK: present and future. *The Language Learning Journal*, *38*(1), 87–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/09571731003620689

Zhu, H., & Li, W. (2014). Geopolitics and the changing hierarchies of the Chinese language: Implications for policy and practice of Chinese language teaching in Britain. *The Modern Language Journal*, *98*(1), 326–339. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2014.12064.x 0026-7902/14/326–339