



# Perceptions, awareness and perceived effects of home culture on intercultural communication: Perspectives of university students in China



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## ABSTRACT

The widespread use of English has brought into the dominance of Anglophone cultures in intercultural communication (IC). For this reason, it is important to investigate how English language learners' perceptions and awareness of home culture influence the social practice of intercultural communication. Conceptualizing home culture as a key topic in IC, this study used questionnaires and interviews to investigate Chinese university students' perceptions and awareness of their own culture and the perceived effects of home culture on IC. Anchored in descriptive statistics and qualitative content analysis, the findings show that: 1) the majority of students had a rather superficial understanding of their home culture; and 2) most students reported that perceptions and awareness of home culture play critical roles in negotiating with speakers of other backgrounds. This suggests that home culture should be regarded as a resource to challenge the dominance of Anglophone cultures in English language teaching classrooms. It also calls for an integration of home culture and other cultures into the English language curriculum, material development and pedagogical practice.

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## 1. Introduction

The global spread of English has facilitated its use for intercultural communication (IC), and in recent years, IC has become an important topic in English language teaching (ELT) because language learners are expected to communicate in English with people of different lingua-cultural backgrounds (Baker, 2012; Nieto, 2010; Widodo, Wood, & Gupta, 2017). Despite the difficulty to provide a widely agreed-upon definition of IC, this paper adopts the perspective of sociolinguistics and multi-lingualism which views IC "as a social practice rather than an object and of fluidity and change" (Baker, 2015, p. 27). The use of English in various lingua-cultural contexts as a social practice challenges us as teacher educators and practitioners to ponder how intercultural components, in particular, home culture, can be integrated into English language classrooms (Handoyo Widodo, personal communication).

The global prominence of English has led to rise not only in its *intranational* use in traditional inner- and outer-circle contexts (Kachru, 1992), but also, more widely, in its *international* use as a medium of communication (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2011). As a result, the number of non-native English speakers has surpassed that of native English speakers,

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making English no longer solely the property of its native speakers (Graddol, 2006; Seidlhofer, 2011; Widdowson, 1994). The development of English as a lingua franca (ELF) (Jenkins, 2007, 2014; Seidlhofer, 2011) has drawn attention to approaches to teaching this international language and the various ways in which people from various lingua-cultures use it in IC (Baker, 2012, 2015; Corbett, 2003; Fang, 2011, 2017). In today's globalized world, the fact that English is being used as a lingua franca by increasing numbers of non-native speakers in multicultural contexts prompts the question of whether Anglophone cultures should serve as the sole norm in teaching cultures in the ELT classroom (Baker, 2015; Canagarajah, 2005; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Wen, 2016).

In addition, questions arise concerning the significance of home culture, or as McKay's (2002) term, the "source culture," and how or whether it should be acknowledged in the ELT field (Guo & Beckett, 2007; Knutson, 2006; Soria & Troisi, 2014). Against this backdrop, Fang (2011) suggests that teachers need to develop their cultural awareness and understanding of cultural diversity, which will help students gain a sense of intercultural awareness and learn to reflect on their own cultures during the English learning process (see also, Gu, 2016). Similarly, in their study, Guo and Beckett (2007) voice concern that the idolization of "Anglocentric culture in the name of authenticity" (p. 124) has marginalized local Chinese culture. They point out the importance of implementing critical multiculturalism and multilingualism to reclaim local languages and cultures within ELT.

To extend this scholarship, this study recognizes that the concept of culture is not fixed against the backdrop of globalization and that home culture is a highly complex concept encompassing a constantly changing set of beliefs, ideas, thoughts, and values. Traditionally, in English classrooms the correlation of English and the English-speaking western cultures has been taken for granted. However, the new thinking about culture has challenged this simplistic region- and nation-bounded understanding of culture (Baker, 2011, 2015; Holliday, 2009; Risager, 2007). In particular, in ELT, the view of culture is often oriented toward Anglophone cultures (Canagarajah, 2005; Kramsch, 2014; Nault, 2006), while "the dynamic and liminal nature of much intercultural communication" (Baker, 2011, p. 198) is often neglected. The next section explores the new thinking about culture in relation to IC to challenge the over-simplistic correlation of language and culture in ELT, with a focus on the Chinese context.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Home culture and IC in ELT

Culture plays a central role in effective communication because it not only represents the sum total of shared experiences but also shapes the life experiences of the individuals who occupy a particular culture as members of that community (Guilherme, 2002; Nieto, 2010; Tang, 2006). Echoing the status quo of the global use of English, this paper defines *culture* from a poststructuralist approach conceptualizing it "as a complex social system, as opposed to natural system, that emerges through individuals' joint participation in the world giving rise to sets of shared knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and practices" (Baker, 2015, p. 71). In this way, culture is perceived not merely as a cognitive concept (as knowledge, it cannot only be cognitive – but must also involve social practice), but, rather, from a critical perspective that challenges an essentialist set of cultural meanings (Baker, 2012; Guilherme, 2002; Piller, 2011). Thus, culture is viewed as a discourse, practice, and ideology in which IC is as a process tightly bound to identity negotiation and construction (Baker, 2015; Liddicoat, 2015; Ren, Chen, & Lin, 2016). When discussing the concept of home culture and researching IC within the Chinese context, *home culture* refers to Chinese culture, understood to be fluid and dynamic. However, some researchers report that Chinese students share many core concepts related to Chinese culture and view these as part of their own identities (Gao, 2010; Gu, 2010; Lo Bianco, Orton, & Gao, 2009).

Language instruction has long emphasized the crucial, inherent relationship between language and culture (Corbett, 2003; Kramsch, 1993, 2009; Liddicoat, 2015), and cultural instruction occurs within language teaching classrooms (Baker, 2012; Byram, 1997; Risager, 2007). It might seem unquestionable that specific languages are generally associated with target cultures, but when English is used as a global language, the term *target culture* cannot be applied to the majority of English language learners (or language users, from an ELF perspective). Cultural globalization requires that learners of English gain exposure to more cultures than the culture of traditional Anglophone countries to be successful in international communication with people from different lingua-cultural backgrounds. The ideology of *native speakerism* in the ELT field has resulted in the problematic, monolithic, unilateral view defining culture as representative only of Anglophone countries (Holliday, 2006, 2011; Kubota, 2016), but to a large extent ELT has "privileg[ed] native speakers and marginaliz[ed] nonnative speakers in matters related to language use, language learning, and language teaching" (Kumaravadivelu, 2016, p. 71).

The complexity of the nature and politics of IC has led scholars, such as Baker (2015), Piller (2011), and Kramsch (1993, 2009), to explore the relationship between IC and ideology, to critically re-examine cultural practices, and to re-address the concept of intercultural awareness against the backdrop of globalization. For example, Kramsch (2009) introduced the term *the multilingual subject*, arguing that language learners need to develop a cultural position from which they can comfortably mediate between their own culture and that of the target language as symbolic competence that is multiple and subject to change. This requires a negotiation process, which helps learners shuttle between home culture and other cultures on IC. This is relevant to the discussion of home cultures situated in China.

## 2.2. The interplay of home culture and IC in the Chinese context

Although ELF has no target culture, people naturally mediate between cultures in IC. Therefore, we argue that home culture is a key element in the mediation process. For example, X. Hu (2005) investigated teachers' preferred cultural content in English classes and found that teachers preferred American English but viewed American, British, and their own cultures as equally important. Similarly, X. Hu (2005) argued that “courses should be developed that illustrate a context to which Chinese learners can relate and in which not only western customs and values are reflected but also their own and those of other non-English cultures” (p. 36). Holmes (2006), who studied how Chinese undergraduate students attending a New Zealand university coped with their language learning and communication experiences, concluded that Chinese students' rules of IC did not correspond with the standards of effective communication in the context of a New Zealand classroom. However, Holmes (2006) also maintained that “some Chinese students appeared to be engaging in critical self-reflection, and evaluating appropriate and effective communication strategies to engage in boundary crossing” (p. 29).

Other researchers focused on studying linguistic imperialism and challenging the hegemony of English (Phillipson, 1992). For example, Guo and Beckett (2007) argued that the spread of English as a global language has promoted Anglophone cultures in China as many people believe in “the superiority of Anglo culture and the inferiority of their own culture” (Guo & Beckett, 2007, p. 124). In addition, they pointed out the disadvantages of the monolingualism of using only English in the classroom. They called for a policy shift to develop a critical perspective “for the reclamation of local languages and knowledge through critical multiculturalism and multilingualism” (Guo & Beckett, 2007, p. 126) and urged validating the usefulness of the Chinese variety of English in IC. Although Guo and Beckett (2007) considered only one of the multifaceted aspects of English as a global language – linguistic imperialism – their study pointed to the significance of home culture in ELT. Wen (2016), from an ELF perspective, discusses the dilemma of balancing the teaching of native speakers' cultures, ELF learners' home culture and the other ELF learners' cultures. She voices the importance to promote students' positive and critical awareness in the process of English learning and that “ELF instruction needs to devote more time to developing learners' intercultural pragmatic awareness, strategies and skills” (p. 173).

As seen, although it has been argued that Anglophone cultures should no longer dominate language classrooms, both policy makers and language practitioners may still lack critical intercultural awareness in ELT practices (Fang, 2011; Holliday, 2009; Lei & Hu, 2014). For example, many ELT textbooks focus solely on Anglophone cultures (see discussions e.g., Gray, 2010; Ren & Han, 2016; Shin, Eslami, & Chen, 2011; Xiong & Qian, 2012), resulting in rather restricted language teaching practices and limited introduction of Anglophone cultures into the classroom by language teachers and students (Jenkins, 2014; Kumaravadivelu, 2006, 2016). Although McKay (2002) points to the significance of students' own cultures as an indicative of the establishment of a sphere of interculturality in the process of language learning, research on how the perceptions of one's home culture may influence IC is lacking. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to investigate students' perceptions and awareness of their home culture and the perceived effects of home culture on IC. Through investigating perceptions and awareness of home culture and its perceived effects, this study further addressed the issue of languages and cultures across local and global communities.

Regarding the key terms of the study, *perception* (*renzhi*: 认知) and *awareness* (*yishi*: 意识) were used. In this study, *perception* refers to one's knowledge and understanding focusing more on the cognitive know-what (Garrett, Coupland, & Williams, 2003) because students might be able to understand some cultural concepts or knowledge. *Awareness* refers to having or showing realization or knowledge which has deeper know-how and even know-why because students can explain and illustrate these cultural aspects in intercultural encounters. Perception and awareness are linked, and critical language and cultural awareness can act as powerful tools related to behavioral elements, challenging deeply-rooted language ideologies and teaching practices (Fairclough, 1992; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Van der Walt, 2000). Accordingly, two research questions (RQ) were formulated:

- To what extent are Chinese university students aware of home culture, and how do they perceive it in IC?
- What possible effects do Chinese university students perceive home culture to have on their understanding of IC?

## 3. Methodology

The study was conducted at a university in southeast China, whose English curriculum promotes English proficiency, autonomy, sustainability, intercultural competence, and critical thinking skills as its principal objectives. After entering the university, students are required to take an English placement test and complete at least four levels of integrated English courses to be awarded a bachelor degree. The Level 3 English course focuses on cultural teaching and IC. For this reason, students taking this course were recruited to participate in this study. This course aims to equip students to be able to identify and apply intercultural communication concepts and to discuss common generalizations concerning western and Chinese cultures.

### 3.1. Participants

All the participants were first and second year university students whose home languages may vary from regional Chinese dialects, although they can all use Putonghua with high proficiency and share it as a lingua franca in daily communications. They had studied English for at least six years. Most participants did not have study-abroad experience but did have experience communicating with people from other cultural backgrounds, especially with international teachers and exchange students working and studying at their university.

### 3.2. Data collection

This study employed both a Chinese-English questionnaire and face-to-face interviews as research methods. This approach enabled investigating the RQs in depth and triangulating the data to better address the complexity of the perceptions and awareness of home culture on IC studied.

#### 3.2.1. The questionnaire

In a pilot study, ten students were asked to complete the questionnaire to test the validity and reliability of question items. Two colleagues were also invited to share further comments on the question items before the questionnaire was finalized. Based on the feedback, we revised some wording and added Chinese examples in question 7 to explain what we meant in the options (see [Appendix 1](#)). The questionnaire asked participants about their perceptions and awareness of Chinese culture and the perceived effects of home culture on IC. An aim of the RQs was to gain a preliminary overview of how students perceived the concept of Chinese culture while developing intercultural awareness when learning English. To ensure validity, the questionnaire, which had closed-ended questions, was administered anonymously, and the students were given explanations of the research background and why they had been asked to participate ([Dörnyei, 2007](#)). The researchers distributed 168 copies of the questionnaire and received 160 completed copies.

#### 3.2.2. The interview

Interviewing is a mediation of understanding discourse “manifested through language, [and] consists of a system of beliefs, attitudes, and values that exist within particular social and cultural practices” ([Danielewicz, 2001](#), p. 11). Therefore, interviews were conducted to triangulate the data obtained from the questionnaires and support the validity of the questionnaire responses. During the recruitment process, the first author contacted the students who had completed the questionnaire either face-to-face or by email to explain the research purpose in more detail. Through cluster sampling, eight students enrolling in the Level 3 English course agreed to participate in face-to-face interviews (see [Table 1](#) for a profile of interview participants). They were informed of the main topics before the interviews, which were conducted by both researchers using the same list of probing questions (see [Appendix 2](#)).

**Table 1**  
Profile of interview participants.

Interviewees	Major	Gender	Hometown
S1	International Business	Female	Guangdong
S2	Finance	Male	Jiangxi
S3	Journalism	Male	Jiangsu
S4	Finance	Male	Jiangsu
S5	Law	Female	Guangxi
S6	Finance	Female	Guangdong
S7	International Business	Female	Sichuan
S8	Journalism	Female	Jiangsu

The students were asked about their perceptions of Chinese culture, the role of home culture in IC, and ways to increase their awareness of Chinese culture. In the interviews, students were asked “what,” “why,” and “how” questions to elicit more specific details and opinions. The interviews were conducted over a one-week period, and each lasted approximately 30–40 min, with the shortest lasting only 20 min. To ensure that the students understood the concepts of culture and to gain more specific, valid information, the interviews were conducted in Putonghua and transcribed verbatim. Putonghua was used in the interviews to enable students to respond to the interview questions in more depth ([Mann, 2011](#)).

### 3.3. Data analysis

The responses were manually entered into SurveyMonkey to facilitate data analysis. Descriptive statistics was adopted for analyzing the questionnaire data. The analysis was mainly to look for general patterns in order to help ‘summarize findings by

describing general tendencies in the data and the overall spread of the scores' (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 213). Given the small sample size and the simple research design, the analysis focused on the percentage of respondents' reported tendencies for a general picture before exploring deeper into the specifics of this study (Dörnyei, 2007; Garrett et al., 2003).

Qualitative content analysis (QCA) was adopted when analyzing the interview data (Schreier, 2012). All the interview data were input into NVivo software for coding purposes. After the transcription process, the researchers read the transcripts from the NVivo software and listened to the recordings to develop possible themes for analysis. After re-listening to the recordings and re-reading and annotating the transcripts, main themes such as *home culture*, *intercultural communication*, *culture teaching*, *perceptions*, *awareness*, and *perceived effects* were generated as nodes with the help of Nvivo. By looking at these emergent themes, the data of each theme were attentively interpreted (see section 4.2) to answer the RQs.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Questionnaire results

To address the first research question (RQ), we analyzed questionnaire questions (QQ) 1–3, 7, and 8, while we investigated QQs 4–6 to answer RQ2 (see Appendix 1 for more detail).

The first three QQs aim to determine the respondents' knowledge and understanding of their home culture (QQs 1–3). Among the responses of 160 students in QQ1, 73 (45.6%) reported that they had a general understanding of Chinese culture, and 74 (46.3%) responded that they were familiar with some aspects of Chinese culture. A small number ( $N = 10$ , 6.3%) argued to have a thorough understanding of Chinese culture (see Table 2). For QQ2 addressing the respondents' willingness to introduce their home culture when communicating with people from other cultures, most students ( $N = 148$ , 92.5%) showed a positive attitude; only 11 (6.9%) demonstrated indifference toward doing so (see Table 3).

**Table 2**  
Students' description of knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture.

To what degree do you describe your knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture?		
Answer Options	Response Count	Response Percent
I have a thorough understanding.	10	6.3%
I have a general understanding.	73	45.6%
I know some aspects of Chinese culture.	74	46.3%
I know little about Chinese culture.	3	1.9%
I don't know about Chinese culture at all.	0	0.0%

**Table 3**  
Willingness to introduce Chinese culture.

When you have a chance to talk to a foreigner, to what degree are you willing to introduce Chinese culture to him/her?		
Answer Options	Response Count	Response Percent
Very willing	73	45.6%
Willing	75	46.9%
Indifferent	11	6.9%
Not very willing	1	0.6%
Not willing at all	0	0.0%

However, among the very willing and willing responses ( $N = 148$ ) to QQ3 asking what aspects of Chinese culture students might be willing to introduce, 75 (50.6%) indicated that they would introduce food, 44 (29.7%) festivals, 45 (30.4%) history, 30 (20.2%) customs, and 21 (14.1%) tradition, without giving more specific details. Only a few considered introducing deeper topics, such as values, beliefs, and communication styles (see Fig. 1).

QQs 4–6 investigated the effects that the participants perceived home culture to have on IC. The results for QQ4 show that the majority of students perceived that their knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture would greatly ( $N = 18$ , 11.3%) or to some degree ( $N = 92$ , 57.5%) help them understand other cultures. However, a small portion ( $N = 27$ , 16.9%) believed that their knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture would somewhat limit their understanding of other cultures, while one student thought that home culture would greatly limit understanding of other cultures. Similarly,

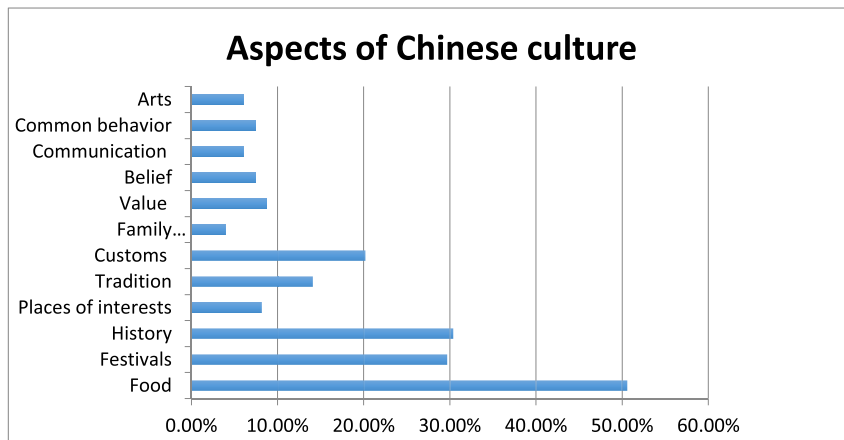


Fig. 1. Aspects of Chinese Culture students would introduce.

according to the QQ5 responses, most students perceived that their knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture would significantly ( $N = 20$ , 12.5%) or to some degree ( $N = 91$ , 56.9%) help them communicate with people from other cultures, while a minority ( $N = 26$ , 16.3%) indicated that their knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture might hamper their communication with foreigners. The responses to QQ6 ( $N = 159$ <sup>1</sup>) affirmed the significance of raising awareness of home culture in IC. Of the respondents, 113 (71.1%) reported that it is very important and 40 (25.2%) somewhat important to raise awareness of Chinese culture. These responses indicate that the students recognized the importance of home-culture awareness to IC.

QQs 7 and 8 further investigated students' opinions on what aspects of Chinese culture awareness should be raised for purposes of IC. QQ7 suggested the following aspects of Chinese culture, with some examples in Chinese: common behavior, such as greeting styles and responses to compliments; common knowledge, such as information about festivals and food; common values, such as matters viewed as important in life; common beliefs, including religious and philosophical beliefs, and common perspectives, such as attitudes toward social and political issues. The responses show that the participants placed almost equal importance on these aspects of Chinese culture; approximately 40%–50% of the respondents mentioned these concepts. Slightly more respondents (60%) named common values as important. In QQ8, students voiced possible factors that might influence their knowledge and understanding of their home culture. A relatively high percentage of students considered interest to be an important factor ( $N = 113$ , 70.6%) and reported that communication between cultures ( $N = 97$ , 60.6%) could affect their knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture. These two factors were considered to play more important roles in improving awareness of Chinese culture than other factors, such as reflection ( $N = 84$ , 52.5%) and learning resources ( $N = 76$ , 47.5%).

## 4.2. Qualitative findings

Three main themes were selected to answer the RQs on awareness and understanding of home culture, influence of home culture on IC, and perceptions of Teaching about home culture in IC.

### 4.2.1. Awareness and understanding of home culture

To understand the perceived effects of home culture in IC, the students' beliefs and confidence regarding their home culture were explored. After students evaluated their understanding of home culture, it was found that only three students (S2, S3, and S6) felt relatively confident about knowledge of their home culture. Additionally, S2 and S3 indicated an interest in Chinese history and traditions, such as dynasties in Chinese history. S6 recounted that:

#### Extract 1

I would give myself a score of 4 out of 5, as my family members were interested in talking about Chinese culture when I was young. [...] I would do some reading and watch TV series related to Chinese history. I believe that I am quite familiar with Chinese culture.

<sup>1</sup> One student skipped Q4, so this question had only 159 responses.

When talking about Chinese philosophy, S6 mentioned a Chinese philosophical adage: “Don’t think any virtue is trivial and so neglect it” (毋以善小而不为). Other participants, such as S1, S7, and S8, believed that they understood Chinese culture at a surface level, while S5 acknowledged to have never thought about this concept as she felt that her home culture was an integral part of her life. Interestingly, S4 viewed this concept from a different perspective as he was interested in Confucianism and had done some readings on both Taoism and Confucianism. However, as shown in Extract 2, he opined that his peers did not have a deep understanding of Chinese culture:

### Extract 2

Researcher: In general, compared with your peers, how do you understand Chinese culture and acquire cultural awareness?

S4: I believe that the reality is that people simply limit themselves to some basic knowledge of Chinese culture. [...] Many of my peers are not interested in Chinese culture. [...] In comparison, they are more interested in western cultures, [...].

This extract indicates that some students seem to pay little attention to Chinese culture. S4 also mentioned that western cultures might be considered to be privileged and the home culture to be somewhat neglected in IC. The cultures of the center seem to still dominate the ELT domain, which is centrally controlled and leaves little space for local ELT practices (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Phillipson, 1992).

S1 expressed a similar point of view that people tend to regard western cultures as a model worth emulating while undervaluing home cultures in IC. S1 argued that “a basic reason is a lack of awareness of home cultures, which leads to the misunderstanding as people worship newly introduced cultures without reflecting on their own home cultures.” This comment also shows that the blind advocacy of Anglophone cultures in ELT might have negative impacts on westernization (Guo & Beckett, 2007; Niu & Wolff, 2003, 2007). Western cultures might no longer be perceived as the norm for cultural exploration, while the influence of home culture and the negotiation between different cultures in IC remain concepts to be explored.

#### 4.2.2. Influence of home culture on IC

The majority of participants recognized that local Chinese culture should be a key aspect of IC. This belief can be seen in the process of negotiating between cultures and attempts to find common ground in IC. For instance, S2 mentioned his attitudes toward the understanding of Chinese culture in IC:

### Extract 3

Researcher: Emm how about yourself? Do you think that an understanding of Chinese culture may help you to understand western culture?

S2: Emm, it would help to some extent. As for myself, an awareness of Chinese culture will have some indirect functions in understanding western culture. Chinese culture has some philosophies, such as “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” I feel that some concepts are common and can be adopted in both Chinese and western cultures.

S2 believed in the inter-relationship between Chinese and western cultures which have some common ground. S2 mentioned another concept in Chinese culture: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (己所不欲勿施于人), indicating his awareness of both Chinese and western cultures and knowledge; this is a common philosophical belief in both cultures. S2 also mentioned the idea of openness when learning about and experiencing cultures in IC. In this sense, when awareness of one’s home culture is lacking, the IC process cannot proceed smoothly.

In a similar vein, S6 acknowledged that a strong sense of personal identity and Chinese culture play key roles in IC:

### Extract 4

I think that it will help people communicate with people of other cultures if their understanding of Chinese culture is enhanced. If one understands his or her own culture, then one will have a certain set of inner-qualities (*qizhi*) in IC.

This statement indicates that S6 realized the influence of home culture on IC, although this effect might be subtle rather than straightforward, and she believed that local Chinese culture should be emphasized. For example, S6’s use of the word *qizhi* (气质) shows how home cultures can be immersed in IC through both verbal and nonverbal communication. This observation emphasizes that understanding of one’s own home culture might have a critical influence on IC and so requires further attention.

In the Chinese academic context, S3 provided an example of Chinese students who accidentally committed plagiarism by copying one or two sentences from Wikipedia. The foreign lecturer gave students a score of 0 on their essays and insisted that

they deserved to receive that score. S3 believed that the grades were somewhat unreasonable:

#### **Extract 5**

On one hand, we respect what he [the teacher] did, because sometimes we should have a learning principle or educational standard. On the other hand, I think that he could have made some compromises, as he teaches English in China and should somewhat understand Chinese culture.

Teachers and researchers should understand the consequence of plagiarism and not promote or tolerate any forms of it, but when looking at this extract, it is also clear that, due to cultural complexities in the ELT domain, IC should also be sensitive to local contexts. S3 explicitly disagreed with the assigned grades because he believed that certain standards cannot be held as the only benchmarks in all circumstances. S3 explained, “we tried to explain the reason to the foreign lecturer face-to-face and through emails, but he insisted that we should not be given a second chance to rewrite the assignment.” While recognizing the importance of referencing, S3 argued during this negotiation process that western standards should sometimes be adapted to accommodate local practices because IC is a two-way, emergent process in which local contexts and cultures should also be taken into consideration.

These findings reflect how the positioning of home cultures in IC blurs the so-called fixed target cultures (presumably Anglophone cultures). Therefore, it is necessary to explore how students perceive the introduction of home culture in ELT and seek ways of “discussing how ‘culture’ has been deployed [...] and exploring the implications and consequences for multilingualism” (Piller, 2011, p. 26), particularly within the Chinese context.

#### *4.2.3. Perceptions of teaching about home culture in IC*

Students who participated in the interviews expressed complex attitudes toward the teaching of Chinese culture to facilitate IC. For example, S7 expressed her understanding of this topic:

#### **Extract 6**

Researcher: Do you think that it is necessary, based on your language level, to introduce Chinese culture through English as the medium?

S7: First, why does it need to be English?

Researcher: Because this is based on the background of intercultural communication. As we discussed earlier, do you think this will help you in terms of intercultural communication?

S7: Yes, if a course like this exists.

Researcher: Do you think it is necessary?

S7: Personally, yes, as we cannot be that utilitarian to learn something; it is fun to learn different cultures. I would watch some videos online [...]

S7's comments are interesting because she critically challenged the assumption that English is the only medium for teaching IC. S7 thus seemed to understand the concept of multiculturalism and to want to be exposed to different languages and cultures. S7 also negotiated the culture of the center and periphery because she seemed to realize that it does not help to use English as the only medium of instruction if home culture is raised in IC. This view is similar to the suggestion that language educators should critically view culture as a process or a discourse, as “we are all members of multiple cultures and continually engaged in ‘jumping in and out’ of different cultural domains” (Baker, 2015, p. 61). In this extract, S7 also mentioned the need for exposure to different cultures and to avoid learning about culture only from a utilitarian perspective.

S8 likewise argued for the importance of including Chinese culture and challenging the dominance of only teaching the cultures of the center:

#### **Extract 7**

There is still a preference for introducing western cultures. [...] What we are learning now, for example, how to deal with and solve conflicts, ways of thinking, is all based on their [western] values and the concept of individualism. In terms of relationships and family, we seldom get exposure to Chinese culture.

S8 lamented that local Chinese culture is neglected in the content of IC. S8's use of the word “their” indicates her identity as a Chinese individual. Although people in the periphery are inevitably exposed to the notions of cultures of the center in IC, S8 worried whether home cultures or values are abandoned when teaching and learning IC.

Although the majority of students believed in the importance of introducing home culture into IC classrooms, others thought that doing so was not easy due to the dominance of Anglophone cultures and lack of awareness of home cultures (S1). Some also considered it to be unnecessary because they assumed that students would already have gained adequate



knowledge of Chinese culture (S2, S6). Thus, the concern of how ELT practitioners can integrate home cultures into real-life, day-to-day language teaching arises (Canagarajah, 2005; Holliday, 2006, 2011; Kumaravadivelu, 2016).

## 5. Discussion

Regarding the understanding and awareness of home culture (RQ1), the results indicate that the majority of participants had a general but not thorough understanding of their home culture, and most could communicate only basic and superficial aspects of their home culture to people from other lingua-cultural backgrounds. Most students recognized that perceptions and awareness of home culture play essential roles in IC and believed that home culture should be integrated into ELT to challenge the dominance of western cultures.

Several explanations for the students' basic and general perceptions of home culture as related to the IC process can be offered. One possible explanation lies in how Chinese culture has been taught and learned. Previous studies have pointed out that Chinese education "is conceived more as a process of knowledge accumulation than as a process of using knowledge for immediate purposes" (G. Hu, 2005, p. 653). Although Chinese is a mandatory subject in primary and secondary education, it is generally introduced as fixed knowledge rather than a fluid and dynamic concept. Therefore, many students attempt to memorize knowledge about Chinese culture without applying reflection and critical thinking skills; consequently, they might understand Chinese culture at a basic level without developing deeper interest and exploring cultural values. Additionally, most IC is mediated in English, so students' English proficiency level might limit their communication of home culture. The students revealed that they were willing to introduce basic and superficial aspects of Chinese culture but less willing to introduce deeper and more abstract aspects, such as values, beliefs, and social relationships. It is possible that relatively low levels of English proficiency limit the ability to address deeper, more abstract topics when introducing concepts from one's home culture.

Regarding the perceived effects of home culture on IC (RQ2), perceptions of home culture might supplement understanding of other cultures in IC. An understanding of one's own culture might become a step toward accessing other cultures. For example, the sayings "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" in English and "己所不欲勿施于人" in Chinese convey similar meanings which reflect values common to both cultures. Insufficient understanding of one's home culture might decrease comprehension of other cultures. Thus, effectively understanding other cultures requires adequate comprehension of one's own home culture. Moreover, perceptions and awareness of home culture can influence and play important roles in IC. It was found that some students simply followed western standards and ways of dealing with matters when communicating with foreigners, even though they might have felt that western standards should sometimes be negotiated with local contexts. For example, when referring to the case of plagiarism discussed, it can be seen that, while the students who committed plagiarism were in the wrong, many Chinese students are not taught academic conventions for citing and referring to other sources (Hu & Lei, 2016). Operating from a critical perspective, S3 believed that the foreign teacher might not understand this circumstance and so accused the students of deliberately plagiarizing. In this case, students should not simply follow the communication style, standards, and value systems of other cultures; instead, they should be open to cultural exchanges and negotiations with people from other cultures (Wen, 2016). Therefore, plagiarism should be seen as cultural appropriation (Hu & Lei, 2016; Hu & Sun, 2017).

## 6. Limitations and implications

Before moving to implications, the limitations of this study are addressed. First, because of time constraint, this study did not employ ethnographic interviewing that requires more social engagement with participants. Future research could apply this technique to further unpack different discourses of participants' perceptions of home culture and their understanding of IC. Second, most of the participants did not have study-abroad experience, so they might not have been able to elaborate their understanding of IC in detail. If possible, students with study-abroad experience should be recruited to further investigate how home cultures influence IC and whether certain aspects of home cultures are more important than others (see Fang & Baker, forthcoming). Third, the concept of culture should be more critically analyzed. In a language course, it is challenging to increase students' cultural awareness because whether consciously or unconsciously, the course delivers cultural and ideological knowledge, leading to the question of whether students reinforce stereotypes and view culture as fixed in IC.

Nonetheless, based on the research findings, this study offers several practical implications for the inclusion of home-culture education in IC. First, language proficiency and communication skills are clearly important factors. It, therefore, is crucial to assess students' language proficiency levels and communication skills and provide adequate training in these areas to facilitate their expression of and communication about their home cultures.

Second, the local practices of cultural instruction require attention. Students' home cultures might be neglected, especially in classrooms where English is used as the medium of instruction and textbooks focusing on Anglophone settings are adopted (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Lei & Hu, 2014). The entrenched ideology that unquestioningly places Anglophone cultures at the center of ELT thus should be questioned from the ELF perspective (see Baker, 2011, 2015), and aspects of students' home cultures should be embedded in ELT to challenge the deep-rooted ideology of native speakerism and help both language teachers and learners develop critical cultural awareness (Byram, 2008; Kumaravadivelu, 2016). It is important that local educators take ownership of English and recognize that they do not need to refer to the so-called target cultures in their pedagogy (McKay, 2002). It is essential that instructors be aware of students' home culture when introducing the concepts of

IC. For example, when introducing a festival for a possible intercultural encounter, teachers could encourage students to think more deeply about various cultural and ideological aspects of the festival, such as its history, value and associated myths.

Third, information about students' home culture should be introduced in more vivid and communicative ways to elicit students' individual experiences and facilitate their understanding in various contexts (Wedell & Malderez, 2013). For example, sharing personal interests and communicating with others could play more important roles in helping students understand their home culture than learning and memorizing cultural knowledge presented in textbooks. Additionally, documentaries about students' home cultures could be used to aid the learning process and develop learners' interest in exploring various aspects of culture. The notion of critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997, 2008; Guilherme, 2002; Piller, 2011; Risager, 2007) as "an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in *one's own and other cultures and countries*" (Byram, 1997, p. 53, emphasis added) also requires introducing one's own culture into language classrooms. Materials from the home culture, therefore, should be included in the design of course syllabi, added as supplementary listening and reading assignments, and discussed and reflected on from a critical perspective by both teachers and students against the backdrop of globalization. This will enhance students' awareness and understanding of their own culture in relation to other cultures. More broadly, these techniques could also be effective in other, similar settings facing similar challenges.

Finally, regarding which aspects of home culture awareness should be increased, the students in this study placed equal importance on shared behaviors, knowledge, beliefs, and perspectives in their home culture and accorded slightly more significance to shared values. Classes on home culture, for example, could be designed as common-core courses to equip Chinese university students with relevant knowledge. In addition, students must understand the concept of values (e.g., the Confucius ideology in Chinese education) in more in-depth and reflective ways because values (re)shape culture. This concept could also be manifested and re-appropriated in other similar contexts, although focusing on home cultures could risk building an equally essentialized national view of culture (Will Baker, personal communication). This issue should be explored in further research due to the limited space here.

## 7. Conclusion

This study has described Chinese students' perceptions, awareness and perceived effects of home culture in IC. From the poststructuralist perspective, culture should be viewed as a fluid and dynamic concept. Additionally, the research results call for a new thinking and understanding of the relationship between culture and language, which is traditionally perceived as inextricable – to demystify traditional Anglophone cultures and to acknowledge that they should not be perceived as the sole benchmark for the transmission of values and cultures in ELT practice. An integration of home culture and other cultures into English language curriculum, material development and pedagogical practice is the fabric of culture teaching in today's globalized world (Wen, 2016).

Viewing IC and the incorporation of home culture from a more critical perspective does not necessitate creating an ethnocentric perspective of cultural instruction; rather, the study results support an inclusionary vision of culture built on deliberate connections and the identification of similarities and differences. This study can contribute to increasing stakeholders' perceptions and awareness of home culture in IC to reconstruct the bonding of language and culture, particularly in ELT, and the amalgamation between local and global communities. Particularly in English language education, the findings of the study give a catalyst for teacher educators and practitioners as well as learners to adopt a more critical perspective to understand the complexity and fluidity of culture in IC.

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## Appendix 1. Questionnaire

How Chinese college students' perceptions and awareness of home culture affects intercultural communication 中国大学生对本国文化的认知和意识对跨文化交际的影响

Dear student,

The purpose of this questionnaire will be only used for research. The information you provide below will remain confidential. Thank you for your time and cooperation.

Questionnaire

1. To what degree do you describe your knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture? 你怎么描述你对中国文化的认知程度?
  - A. I have a thorough understanding. 我对中国文化有全面深入的理解。
  - B. I have a general understanding. 我对中国文化有大概的了解。
  - C. I know some aspects of Chinese culture. 我了解中国文化的一些方面。
  - D. I know little about Chinese culture. 我对中国文化了解很少。
  - E. I don't know about Chinese culture at all. 我完全不了解中国文化。
2. When you have a chance to talk to someone from another culture, to what degree are you willing to introduce Chinese culture to him/her? 如果你有机会和来自其他文化人交流, 在某种程度上你乐意向他/她介绍中国文化?
  - A. Very willing 非常乐意
  - B. Willing 乐意
  - C. Indifferent 不置可否
  - D. Not very willing 不太乐意
  - E. Not willing at all 非常不乐意
3. What aspects of Chinese culture are you willing to introduce? 你会向外国人介绍中国文化的什么方面?
 

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4. How do your knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture affect your understanding of other cultures (e.g. western culture)? 你对中国文化的认知对你理解其他国家的文化(例如西方文化)有什么影响?
  - A. It greatly helps me. 对我理解其他文化帮助很大。
  - B. It to some degree helps me. 对我理解其他文化有一定帮助。
  - C. It doesn't affect my understanding. 对我理解其他文化没什么影响。
  - D. It to some degree limits my understanding. 一定程度上限制了我对其他文化的理解。
  - E. It greatly limits my understanding. 很大程度上限制了我对其他文化的理解。
5. How do your knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture affect your communication with people from other cultures? 你对中国文化的认知对你和来自其他文化的人的交流有什么影响?
  - A. It greatly helps me. 对我和外国人交流帮助很大。
  - B. It to some degree helps me. 对我和外国人交流有一定帮助。
  - C. It doesn't affect. 对我和外国人交流没有影响。
  - D. It to some degree limits our communication. 一定程度上限制了我 and 外国人交流。
  - E. It greatly limits our communication. 很大程度上限制了我 and 外国人交流。
6. To which degree do you think awareness of Chinese culture should be raised in intercultural communication? 你认为提高对中国文化的意识在跨文化交际中重要吗?
  - A. Very important 非常重要
  - B. Somewhat important 有些重要
  - C. Indifferent 不置可否
  - D. Not very important 不太重要
  - E. Not important at all 一点都不重要
7. In what aspects of Chinese culture do you think awareness should be raised? (multiple choice) 你认为你对中国文化哪方面的意识需要提高?(多选)
  - A. common behavior 普遍的行为 (例如:打招呼的方式,如何应对夸奖等)
  - B. common knowledge 普遍的常识 (例如:节日,名人等)
  - C. common values 普遍的价值观 (例如:人们觉得在人生中和社会中什么是重要的)
  - D. common beliefs 普遍的信仰(例如:人们有什么宗教信仰或人生哲学受什么影响)
  - E. common perspectives 对事物的普遍看法 (例如:人们对时事的评判)
  - F. others 其他 \_\_\_\_\_
8. What affect your knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture? (multiple choice) 是什么影响了你对中国文化的认知程度?(多选)
  - A. interest 兴趣(你对中国文化的兴趣)
  - B. reflection 思考(你对中国文化的思考)
  - C. resources 资源(例如你可以获取信息的课程,书和网站等)
  - D. communication 交流(你和别人对中国文化的交流)
  - E. others 其他 \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you very much for your cooperation.  
(感谢你的参与)

## Appendix 2. Interview prompts

1. Describing the degree of students' knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture
2. Aspects of Chinese culture students understand
3. Aspects of Chinese culture are you willing to introduce to others
4. Influence of awareness of Chinese culture on understanding of other cultures. Why? (e.g., Not enough knowledge/understanding of Chinese culture? More information of aspects of other cultures? The attitudes of young people in favor of western cultures?)
5. The role the awareness of Chinese culture in intercultural communication. Why?
6. Aspects of Chinese culture that awareness students should be raised
7. In what ways Chinese university students' awareness of Chinese culture could be raised? (e.g., Various and interesting ways? To link culture and real life experiences? More communication with people from other cultures?)

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