

**Foreword:**  
**Learning and teaching culture beyond fantasies?**  
Fred Dervin

“Beyond the ideas which are chilled and congealed in language, we must seek the warmth and mobility of life.”  
Henri Bergson (2002, p. 350)

The Joseph E. Hotung Gallery at the British Museum explores China, South Asia and Southeast Asia from the Palaeolithic to the present. In the section devoted to Chinese civilization, one finds a group of 12 colourful and impressive ceramic figures from the tomb of Liu Tingxun, an important military and political character of Tang China from around 700 CE – the “golden age of achievement, both at home and abroad” (MacGregor, 2010, p.55). These were the heydays of the Silk Road. Walking in procession, these creatures, humans and animals of about one metre high, are meant to guard the dead and to impress the judges of the underworld “who would recognise his rank and his abilities, and award him the prestigious place among the dead that was his due” (MacGregor, *ibid.*). To untrained and ignorant eyes, these sculptures look very “Chinese”, even “typically Chinese.” Yet, when one looks closer at the faces of the pair of lokapāla figures (Sanskrit for “guardian of the world”) one cannot but see Indian faces. At the back of the procession, the horses were, at the time, a new breed in China, brought from the West, while the Bactrian camels originated from Afghanistan and Turkestan.

The Indian, Afghan, and Turkestan references highlight China’s close links with Central Asia and other parts of the world at that time. Like other countries, China has always been in contact with the world and its culture bears witness to the many and varied mixings, *mélanges*, but also inventions and constructions of different eras. We could do a very similar analysis of Chinese artefacts from the 19<sup>th</sup> century or even from today – or of any other “culture” for that matter. A cultural artefact such as the Liu Tingxun tomb also denotes both the symbolic power of the “other” and the power relations between “cultures.” As such, the horses and camels, “borrowed” and monetized from other parts of the world, contributed to the General’s prestigious status when facing the judges of the underworld.

When one reads about China in Europe and elsewhere, the country is often described as a “monochrome forest” (Cheng, 2008), in which over 1 billion people (and the Chinese “diaspora” abroad) become “chilled and congealed” (see the quote by Bergson at the beginning of this foreword) in limited, static, and sometimes implicitly negative representations. For Alleton (2007, p. 249), such ideas have been constructed since the Roman Empire based on the “fragmented information” brought back by merchants, travellers and missionaries who visited China. They also contributed to constructing “illusions and fantasies” about China and the Chinese. As we shall see later, the Chinese themselves have also cultivated these elements by (re)inventing themselves and their culture, and reversing the representations that the so-called West has created. At the same time, however, the Chinese have also othered the “West.” It is always important to bear in mind that othering is an international “sin” of which we are all guilty (Dervin, 2012).

Attitudes towards China have evolved throughout history, changing how its culture has been described and discussed. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, China was admired. “Enlightenment philosophers used virtuous China as a foil to decadent Europe. Every

aspect of Europe was held up to criticism: Christianity, hereditary monarchy, and scholastic philosophy; by contrast, China was hailed as the perfect state: land of atheism, benevolent despotism, and social harmony” (Lo, 2013, p. 106). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, China was described as a cruel and deceitful land while the 20<sup>th</sup> century marks a certain fascination with the Chinese revolution. Today, China is the “other” *par excellence*, especially the “other” to be feared. Recent books published in the “West” disclose, in a sense, this fear: *China Shakes The World: The Rise of a Hungry Nation* (Kynge, 2009); *When China Rules The World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (Jacques, 2012); *Tiger Head, Snake Tails: China Today, How It Got There, and Where It Is Heading* (Fenby, 2013).

Throughout the centuries, one figure has been used more frequently than any other to construct Chinese culture in China and abroad: the philosopher Confucius (551-479 CE; his name was Latinized for the first time by Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci in the 16<sup>th</sup> century). Even if Confucianism (a notion invented by the “West”) is said to be the basis of Chinese thinking, behaviour, and culture, Confucius has not always been revered in China and has witnessed ups and downs. Philosopher, historian, and writer Li Zhi (1527-1602) was very critical of Confucians and Neo-Confucians. During the May Fourth Movement in 1919, one of the slogans was “Down with Confucianism!” Mao Zedong himself banned the teachings of Confucius in 1949. Finally, The Criticize Lin (Biao), Criticize Kong (Confucius) Campaign (批林批孔运动) that ran from 1973-1976 is also worth mentioning.

Today, Confucius appears to be a “market” (Cheng, 2009), not only in China but also in Korea. The philosopher has also won reverence in Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore, and in overseas Chinese communities. Cheng (2009) goes as far as talking about the emergence of “Confucius Economicus” in the period of 1990-1997. In China, political, media, educational, and social discourses are increasingly related to the importance and influence of Confucius. As such, during the Olympic Games, Confucius’ saying 四海之内皆兄弟也 (“all the people of the world are brothers”) welcomed people from all over the world.

Interestingly, in his 2012 book entitled *Confucianism and Democratization in East Asia*, Doh Chull Shin shows that so-called Confucian values such as hierarchical collectivism, interpersonal reciprocity and accommodation, communal interest and harmony, and Confucian familism in Asia are no more Confucian than those of people in other parts of the world. Shin (ibid.) bases his criticisms on extensive surveys conducted from 2005-2008 by the World Values Survey Association and the Asian Barometer Survey. This is potentially a direct blow to culturalist and essentialist approaches to such things as intercultural communication, which have used these elements as a way of defining China and the Chinese for many decades (see, for example, the highly criticized work of Hofstede; MacSweeney (2002) and Holliday (2010) offer very convincing criticisms). These ideas have been taught and “alibied” in the sense that they offer “culture as an excuse” (Dervin, 2013) to thousands of university students, student teachers, businessmen, etc. around the world.

## Culture language and teaching: Towards a new agenda?

“If one says: “You think like this and we think like that”, then we just stare at each other and “dialogue” stops here.”

Anne Cheng (2010)

Going back to Henri Bergson’s quote, what the philosopher suggests is that we, as thinkers, intellectuals, researchers, and practitioners, start concentrating on the “warmth and mobility of life” instead of freezing it. The article by Mads Jakob Kirkebæk in this book is quite telling in this sense as it problematizes the central issues of this volume on learning and teaching culture. Asked to create a “China-box” filled with Chinese artefacts for language and culture education in Denmark, the author is puzzled: “How is culture to be defined? Is culture something that can be fitted into a box? If not, how do we teach culture, and how do we fill up that box?”

The excellent book edited by Mads Jakob Kirkebæk, Xiangyun Du, and Annie Aarup Jensen on the power of context in teaching and learning culture offers many of answers to these questions. The rich and exciting chapters that they have collected propose a Task-Based approach to these issues in order to infuse instability, *mélanges*, intersubjectivity, and individuality at the centre of culture learning and teaching. Many of the chapters deal with Chinese “culture” and how to teach-learn it from a complex perspective.

The editors and authors are, in this sense, very close to the current criticisms that have appeared in sinology and anthropology, for example. In what follows, I will take up some of these ideas to summarize and add to the arguments presented in the book.

Let me start with sinologists. First of all, Gernet (2007, p. 21) argues that examining Chinese culture necessitates looking into the alterations that have taken place in China in social, religious, and political terms, and as we did with the Tang tomb figures from the British Museum, to problematize foreign influences and reciprocities.

Anne Cheng, who is a professor of the intellectual history of China at the prestigious *Collège de France* in Paris, endeavours to “show that there is not one unique way of thinking in China and to recognize the fact that China did not stop thinking in Ancient times, or when Western modernity was introduced to her” (2007, p. 11). She also suggests avoiding comparison (and, at the same time, opposition) between European and Chinese cultures in favour of examining how ideas have circulated between these two political and “imagined” spaces (2008). According to Laplantine (2012: 43), this could allow us to go with the “flux of movements” between China and the rest of the world rather than stop them. He adds: “continuously distinguishing and building up contrasts (...) often turn (them) into stereotypes” (ibid.). In relation to literature, Laplantine (ibid.) suggests examining the many similarities between authors such as Su Dongpo and Montaigne, Lu Xun and Kafka, Shen Congwen and Rousseau, or Lao She and Bertold Brecht.

The philosopher Billeter (2006, p. 82) also argues against making comparisons and suggests that we base our analyses of intercultural encounters between the Chinese and other peoples on the “unity of human experience.” This is very much in line with Moghaddam’s interesting proposal called omniculturalism in the field of education (2012). Based on a two-stage approach, “the omniculturalism imperative compels us to give priority to human commonalities, and requires that children are taught the important scientifically-established commonalities that characterize human beings” (ibid, p. 306). In stage two, differences between groups are introduced to students, but

the priority is always *human commonalities* (ibid.). There will always be differences between individuals, even from the same country, but identifying what we have in common might require more intellectual and strategic work (Abdallah-Preteille, 1986), which makes this approach more stimulating.

Cheng (2008) also proposes becoming aware of the “spectacles” that we wear when we read the relations between two cultures, as these often blind us. Interestingly, in this volume, this is what Niels Erik Lyngdorf, Ulla Egidiussen Egekvisst, Xiang-yun Du, and Jiannong Shi do in their article concerning a dinner organized for Chinese students during an intercultural student exchange program between Denmark and China:

“When dinner was ready, the Chinese students were surprised to find that one of the dishes was plain, raw carrots. The Danish teachers had prepared a menu that they believed was very Chinese-inspired (rice, stew, and raw vegetables on the side) to make sure it would be to everyone’s liking; however, they soon realized that the Chinese guests were not used to eating raw vegetables. As a result, only a few Chinese students politely tried eating the raw carrots.”

This reflective approach to self and other can lead to new learning, not so much about culture, but about how and why we (co-)construct certain entities in certain ways. For the anthropologist Laplantine (2012, p. 23), when one speaks of the Chinese or when a Chinese person speaks of an “other,” much is said about the self through the way the other is imagined.

This is very reminiscent of how research into ethnicity, for example, has been problematized over the last decades. In his summary of its major paradigms, Wimmer (2013, p. 1) explains how research into ethnicity, and also research on culture teaching-learning, has moved from primordialism (ethnicity is natural) to instrumentalism (people choose identities as they see fit); essentialism (ethnicity is stable) and situationalism (people identify with different categories depending on the situation); perennialism (ethnicity is stable) and modernism (ethnic distinctions are changing). In my own research on the Chinese (Dervin, 2011; Dervin & Gao, 2012; Dervin & Gao, forth.), through applying the more critical sides of Wimmer’s continuum, I have examined how the opposite sides are put into play in discourses of otherness. In relation to Chineseness, I am especially interested in culturalism. For Eriksen and Stjernfelt (2012, p. 249), this notion refers to the argument that “individuals are determined by their culture only; that these cultures constitute organic and closed wholes; and that the individual, because of this over-determination, is unable to emancipate and free from her culture: on the contrary, she can only blossom in this culture.” According to Laplantine (2013, p. 43), culturalism “erects a wall of opacity between continents and isolates “cultures” in unchangeable oppositions” (ibid.). This is definitely an approach that we may want to avoid in culture teaching and learning.

This leads me to another essential aspect in our renewal of culture learning-teaching that will have to be examined in more depth in the near future. The idea that culture is related to struggles of power has been hinted at earlier in this foreword. In her volume on identity/difference politics, Dharmoon (2009, p. ix) proposes to analyse and critique “how and with what effects power shapes difference.” Through this approach, Dharmoon problematizes an important aspect of “doing culture”: discourses of culture can serve as a way of reinforcing certain supremacies, such as (neo-)colonialism, (neo-)racism, etc. (ibid.: 2). As such, many scholars have examined how

culture often serves as a proxy for such things as the concept of race and leads to disguised forms of racism (Bayart, 2002). Dhamoon lists a number of questions that I believe can help practitioners to problematize these issues in their teaching-learning activities (Dhamoon, 2009, p. 56):

“How are meanings of difference constituted relationally through discourse (historically, institutionally, and practically)? How do the forces of power constitute subjects differently and differentially, why, and with what effects? How are meanings of difference constituted in different historical social contexts, and how do these meanings constitute social-political arrangements? How can penalizing and privileging meanings of difference be disrupted?”

The notion of intersectionality is also central in Dhamoon’s approach. Intersectionality represents the crossing of different identity markers when analysing interaction between e.g. individuals from different countries. So instead of concentrating solely on the old and tired concept of culture, which tends to “wrap us in its suffocating embrace” (Prashad, 2001, p. xi), one should also look into systems of race (or racialization), gender, class, ethnicity, disability, etc. (Dhamoon, 2009, p. 63) and how they *intersect*.

To summarize the approach to culture learning and teaching as it is put forward in this volume, I would like to refer to the ethnopsychiatrist Georges Devereux’s distinction between two different approaches to research (1968). He uses the metaphor of holding a stick to describe these approaches. The first approach, which corresponds to culturalism and essentialism (or simple and naïve approaches to culture as described earlier), forces the researcher-practitioner to hold a stick very rigidly in the sense that s/he restrains her/himself from infusing any of the following aspects in her/his work: instability, *mélanges*, intersubjectivity, and individuality. The second approach suggested by Devereux, which is constructivist, contextual, intersubjective, and reflective in relation to culture teaching-learning, consists in holding the stick loosely (*ibid.*) and letting instability, anxiety, and negotiation enter our teaching-learning. This is, I believe, what the editors and authors are doing with brio in this volume, by moving beyond the fantasies that the rigidly-held stick approach imposes on its holder and those around her/him.

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