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Intercultural communication education beyond 'Western' democracy-talk? Zhongyong (中庸) as a way of decentring democracy-based teaching

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Abstract: This chapter starts from the need to decentre from overly Western-/Euro-centric ways of dealing with interculturality as an object of research and education. And while democracy-talk has started to 'creep in' intercultural communication education, under the leadership of e.g. the Council of Europe, other voices from the periphery (e.g. the Global South) are still to be heard and listened to about interculturality. The authors focus on the concept of Zhongyong (中庸) from China as a proposal for thinking, unthinking and rethinking interculturality. An untranslatable in English, the concept has been referred to as e.g. *centre, Doctrine of the Mean,* or *The Golden Mean* and derives from Confucianism and has always been at the centre of Confucian concerns (e.g. community life). The chapter makes sense of this complex concept and shows how it can help interculturalists enrich their take on the notion of interculturality by both seeking for similarities with their own understanding of the notion and exploring the specificities of Zhongyong. The authors argue that multilingual, systematic, critical and reflexive engagement with concepts from outside the 'West' can make interculturality as an object of research and education *more intercultural* and thus prone to dialogue and negotiations, revising imbalanced power relations in global knowledge production.

Keywords: interculturality, Zhongyong, identity, (counter-)balancing, processes, democracy-talk

Introduction

In his *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Barthes (1994) recalls how, every time he went swimming in a sea invaded by jellyfish, and came out covered with stings and blisters, the beach attendant would hand over Potassium salt for people to cleanse their bodies. Comparing the jellyfish to the Doxa (i.e. opinion of the majority, from Greek for 'opinion, praise') he adds (1994: 122): "In the same way, one might conceive of taking a (perverse) pleasure in the endoxal products of mass culture, provided that when you left the immersion of that culture, someone handed you on each occasion, as if nothing had happened, a little detergent discourse". Our chapter proposes to use some of that 'detergent discourse' about what we refer to as the increasing democracy-talk in the field of intercultural communication education. It all started in 2015, in the middle of the so-called European migrant crisis, when the Council of Europe, an organization of countries located in 'Europe' that seeks to protect 'democracy', 'human rights' and 'European unity', made a 'U-turn' in a plan to propose ways of assessing intercultural competence (a popular concept in the field and within the Council of Europe itself under the long-term leadership of British scholar Michael Byram), by putting forward a Framework of Competences for *Democratic Culture* (Council of Europe, 2016, our emphasis). Very much reminiscent of Byram's highly influential model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram, 1997), the Framework has since had an influence on teachers in Europe (and elsewhere), scholars and students, with e.g. Scandinavian countries investing money with the Council to train countries from the former Eastern Block to integrate the Competences in their school curricula and to train parents to treat their children 'democratically' (e.g. Council of Europe, 2022). At the same time, another concept from Byram (2008), intercultural citizenship, a companion concept to Democratic Culture, is also increasingly visible in research on interculturality (see e.g. Porto et al., 2017; Yulita, 2018 in language and intercultural pedagogy).

Through the introduction of what could be labelled as 'trojan horses' in the field of intercultural communication education – which soon could lead to a democracy/citizenship turn – scholars and practitioners are experiencing contradictory times. Although there is a strong push, like in many other fields, to be more epistemically inclusive and to listen to other voices in the way the complex notion of interculturality is understood and worked upon, Euro- and Western-centric democracy-talk threatens to close the door to significant, alternative, and critical discussions around the notion. It is not the use of the word democracy that is problematic here but the lack of engagement around it in the literature in the field – the right to disagree with certain aspects of its definition, of how it can be 'taught' and of our right to imagine another form of democracy, e.g. beyond parliamentary democracy. Talking about liberal democracy (the dominating form of democracy in the 'West') Dányi maintains (2020: 300):

> Recent developments, however, suggest that this background is less robust than it seems: The cracks made visible by the Brexit referendum, the election of US president Donald Trump and the sustained support of Viktor Orbán's vision of illiberal democracy, to name only the most obvious examples, have exposed the vulnerability not only of standard political institutions (including opinion polling companies and mainstream news media), but also of *democratic politics as such*.

Democracy is not necessarily a coherent or logical set of ideas. When words like democracy and citizenship become substitutes for other concepts (e.g. interculturality, competence) and start being used as mere automatons which are rarely defined *again and again* or defined following a 'big name' without questioning their ideologies, we are running the risk of creating a situation where the strongest voices in the field of intercultural communication education ('white', 'European', 'American'), holding onto specific ideologies, are still in control of who is allowed to speak, how and about what – negating in the process the core ideas of democracy and interculturality itself. At the same time, the very notion of interculturality is relegated to a secondary position (behind democracy and citizenship); it remains unproblematized although many scholars have argued that it is much more complex than e.g. 'cultures meeting' or 'the clash of cultures' (e.g. Ferri, 2018; Dervin, 2016, 2022).

In this chapter, we are inspired by this element from 国语 郑语 史伯为桓公论兴衰 (*Discourses on the Governance of the States*, Zuo, 2015): 声一无听，物一无文 (shēng yī wú tīng, wù yī wú wén), *a single note does not compose a melodious tune, nor does a single color make a beautiful pattern*. We put aside the note of European (Council of Europe) democracy-talk for a moment here and listen to other voices, not to offer an alternative (how could we, considering the power of the European *note* in the field?) but to share with the reader a need for curiosity concerning other ways of problematizing, conceptualising and evaluating the notion of interculturality. Deleuze and Guattari (1994) maintain that new (lesser known) philosophical concepts can open new horizons for thought. Considering the difficult times that our world has been facing since 2020, now is the right time to think otherwise…

This exercise in decentration occurs by looking eastwards (or westwards, northwards, southwards, depending on where one is located in the world), or to be more precise *near east* (or *near west, north, south*), "an interstitial space that challenges standard geopolitical constructs of 'North' and 'South,' yet still remains close to them" (Simone, 2014: 112). We make use of the Chinese concept of

Zhongyong (中庸, zhōng yōng)[1] to enrich discussions of interculturality, arguing that it could serve as a companion in democracy-talk. The word is an untranslatable (Cassin, 2016), which means that it has to be translated again and again – but not that it cannot be translated. Following Zhang (2021: 1) Zhongyong could be labelled as a 韵-yun-word in Chinese, which means 'rhyme', 'rhythm', 'charm' or 'beauty'. Used to refer to tea, yun can be found with other words to express specific aspects of a given tea. For example, 喉韵 (hou yun, 'throat yun') could refer to the sweet and lingering sensation in the throat after drinking tea (Zhang, 2021: 1). Zhongyong can thus leave different yun in different languages. As such it could be translated as centre, unchangeable, Doctrine of the Mean, The Golden Mean – with each of these words 'flavouring' differently for different speakers of e.g. English (as a second language). In the proposed translations one can already feel the idea of people balancing, centering when they interact with each other, and as we shall see, the concept has a lot to offer to unthink and rethink how to *be(come) together*. Unlike democracy, Zhongyong already has one advantage: that of poly-flavours in English and other languages, which can lead to curiosity in the word. At this stage, we can say that Zhongyong has been presented as one of the central themes of Confucian thought and in the 12th century AD a book of the same name was republished together with three other canonical texts of Confucianism (e.g. *The Analects* of Confucius, 论语 lún yǔ) and served as official subject matter for civil servant examinations in China until the early 20th century. For Wang (2022) the book named *The Zhongyong* was never as popular as e.g. *the Analects* or *the Book of Changes* 易经 (yì jīng). However, like 'benevolence 仁 (rén)' and 'rite 礼 (lǐ)', Zhongyong as a concept has been deemed a central principle and methodology in the construction of the Confucian framework (Xu, 2015). The book is said to have been authored by Zisi 子思 (zǐ sī), a grandson of Confucius (551-479 BCE). When Zisi wrote the book, he was directly inspired by Confucius's *Doctrine of the Mean*, which he deepened from moral and ethical perspectives (Xu, 2015). For Xu (2022: 285) Zhong in *The Analects* of Confucius refers to moderate, right, appropriate and inclusive. Although Zhongyong is systematically associated with Confucianism, it is important to bear in mind that e.g. the term Zhong was also a key concept in many schools of thought such as Daoism, the School of Logicians, and the Legalist school (Li, 2020: 1).

While Fang (2012) has written about the Chinese notion of 阴阳 (yīn yáng) and Servaes (2016) about 关系 (guān xì, inter-relationships) and 面子(miàn zi, face) in the contexts of intercultural business communication, to our knowledge, Zhongyong has not been used for problematizing interculturality in the literature. As an element of Chinese thought, Zhongyong was never meant to be discussed in relation to the modern idea of interculturality since, in e.g. Pre-Qin times (2,100 B.C.E.-221 B.C.E.), people thought of themselves and others in different ways. Although the concept of culture was already in use, it referred to different realities, since the world and China were organised and divided up in very different ways as they are today (Fang, 2019). Besides, travel and mobility were much slower but the world was most likely as diverse (see even more diverse, but this claim is a bit far-fetched since our worlds are so different) as today. However, we believe that 'digging' into the idea of Zhongyong, trying to be as less anachronic as we can, cannot but enrich our thinking about the notion of interculturality which deserves to be unthought and rethought again and again. Considering the vitalities of e.g. Confucian thoughts from the past and today, which have changed throughout the centuries, we argue that there is a lot to be learnt from Zhongyong.

[1] In the chapter, we only put Zhongyong in italics when we refer to the book of the same name (*The Zhongyong*). By not using italics for the concept, we wish to send the message that the word should be equally treated as other concepts in English and suggest thus integrating it fully in the research language of interculturality.

Making sense of Zhongyong

Approaching Zhongyong is an intercultural exercise in itself since it includes looking into the complex history of ideas, etymologies through the medium of an international language, English, that does not always allow us to reproduce the complexities of the concept.

As asserted before, Zhongyong has been presented as the core of Confucian thought, encompassing all aspects of human relations. On top of the translations proposed in the introduction one could also include in English: equilibrium, honesty, lack of prejudice, moderation, objectivity, propriety, rectitude, sincerity, and truthfulness. *Key Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture* (2022a: n.p.) provides the following explanation for Zhongyong: "a friend should be neither too close nor too remote. Neither in grief nor in joy should one be excessive, for unregulated happiness can be as harmful as uncontrolled sorrow. Ideally, one must adhere unswervingly to the mean, or centre course, at all times and in every situation".

If one decomposes the word itself, one finds Zhong (中, zhōng or zhòng), which can mean middle, mean, central and being moderate in one's words and deeds and *Yong* (庸, yōng) referring to common, ordinary, unchanging and in some cases inferior. Zuo (2005: 175) tells us that Zhong as a verb also means to correspond or fit (符合, fú hé), as well as hit the target or score a hit (命中 mìng zhòng, 射中 shè zhòng). All in all, Yong refers to 'doing' while Zhong guides people 'how to do'. According to *The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary (现代汉语词典)* (2005: 1761) Zhong is a location word that means "to keep equal distance around" and center; in the middle of two sides, levels; being impartial or unbiased; right, good; in progress or continuing and one's surname. These words seem to indicate that 'doing' Zhongyong is being moderate in dealing with others and in one's own conduct. This is confirmed by the same dictionary (2005: 1765) which offers as a first definition "being impartial or unbiased when we are with people and to adjust one's attitude to a middle position that does not bend to any side". The dictionary also provides another definition, from which many Chinese seem to understand the concept today: "person whose ability and behavior are mediocre". We shall come back to this second meaning in a later section.

Since Zhongyong is positioned within Confucianism, it has to do mostly with interpersonal communication and is considered as a method for interacting and negotiating with others. Yao (2017) reminds us that, while Confucian morality is focused on self-cultivation, and as the foundation of all educational, political and religious practices, it also places an important stress on the self's contribution to community life, especially in adopting equality as a core principle for dealing with others, humans and non-humans included. One finds here many connections with the idea of interculturality itself, where the root *inter-* and the suffix *-ality*, usually within the contexts of national, ethnic, racial, linguistic differences, indicate the importance of balancing interactions, in-betweenness and of a never-ending process (Dervin, 2022). It is also important to note here that Zhongyong has had an importance socio-politically in China. In the Pre-Qin Period, Zhongyong was instrumental in trying to create a new kind of society and to achieve a new political system with new values, in guiding rulers to govern their kingdoms and in urging the people to follow a pragmatic approach and to resist extremes, reflecting on the values of wisdom, appropriateness, moderation and moral cultivation (Li, 2020).

Scholars like Xu (2017) have compared Zhongyong and The Golden Mean from Aristotle. Ni (2017) and Li (2020) note for example that these two concepts both urge to achieve personal virtues through appropriateness while staying away from all forms of extremes. However, Zhongyong focuses on moral self-cultivation towards the standard of being a 'good' person, while The Golden Mean resembles a political strategy (Li, 2020). Another difference resides in Zhongyong being about the interrelations between the human and nature, systematically putting nature in front of the human. The Golden Mean, on the other hand, disregards these links (Li, 2020).

To conclude this first introductory section on Zhongyong, before we link it up more closely to interculturality, let us summarize the 'fluidity' of the concept in Ancient China, from Zhong and Zhongyong in Confucian Classics (Li, 2020). It is vital to remember that the Confucian classics have changed through 2000 years of history, with each generation of Confucian scholars having annotated, interpreted and reinterpreted them constantly (Cheng, 2007; Yao, 2000). Through an extensive review of Zhongyong between the pre-Qin period (reminder: 2,100 B.C.E.-221 B.C.E.) and the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), we have identified the following central elements:

1. Focusing on the 'good' relationships between heaven (天, Tiān, meaning: nature) and the human (the non-human included);
2. Highlighting the importance of looking into the personal inner world, placing the cursor on self-cultivation, learning, education, discipline and (critical) self-examination, self-reflection constantly;
3. Treating others in a moderate way, neither too much nor too little, keeping one's self and others at middle course in interactions with each other;
4. Preparing to adapt to changing circumstances, always keeping in mind 'adaption' and 'change';
5. Creating a sense of diversity in harmony with others, by balancing differences and similarities;
6. Pushing forth an equal, just, fair and liberal governance system;
7. Standardising and restricting the ruler's power, letting people have a chance to give their opinions on governance and join in the construction of the country by giving them appropriate power.

Three principles from *Zhongyong*

In this paper, we maintain that Zhongyong is a concept that can help us formulate a useful framework for interculturality. Based on the previous discussions of Zhongyong, all the different dimensions that we have identified can be summarized as follows (Cheng, 2020; Xu, 2015): 1. (personal moral dimension) all individuals should develop their self-consciousness and self-learning; 2. (communicative dimension) moderation when interacting, negotiating and dealing with others in terms of conduct, levelling and (if possible) staying away from strong impulses and extremes, being partial and aiming for justice; (socio-ecological-political dimension) harmony in diversity. For Yao (2017: 4) Zhongyong is thus about "human position in politics, human initiatives in education and self-education, but also how to treat the non-human environment and how to see humans in relation to the metaphysical world". We note that the inclusion of the non-human is very limited (see non-existent) in discussions of interculturality – in conjunction with e.g. democracy.

In order to deepen our understanding of Zhongyong and to link it closer to interculturality, let us explore the book entitled *The Zhongyong* (Xu, 2015; all the excerpts are our own translations). Divided into 9 parts and 33 chapters, *The Zhongyong* starts by reflecting on why it is not so easy to abide by it. The book provides the following hypotheses: since Zhongyong is a common and simple way of being, thinking and behaving, people might forget about it; since it is polysemic, people might understand it

differently or misunderstand it; the book also admits that, as a principle, it is very difficult to achieve. The other sections of the book review the benefits of Zhongyong (e.g. one becomes spiritually stronger; one improves interpersonal relations); the influences on the legal and political; and provides examples of 'Sages' who have managed to 'do' Zhongyong.

Space is limited in this chapter to offer a complete review of the book. However, we have chosen three stimulating elements to discuss the relevance of Zhongyong for interculturality: *Inner concentration, striving for the middle ground (tolerant and yet not always compromising),* and *the ability to observe and negotiate change with others*.

The Zhongyong does insist on the need for self-examination and self-awareness as a key to meeting others, 'doing' the balancing act of moderation with them. An important notion appears in relation to this central aspect in the first chapter: Shendu (慎独). According to Yao (2000), Shendu could translate as *being cautious, to cultivate one's morality,* or, more precisely *being and behaving carefully when alone, i.e. inner concentration*. Accordingly, Fei (1999: ix) maintains that being a good person relies more on how we perceive ourselves rather than how others see us. In this sense, Shendu requires from people to adhere to the principles of 'watching' and 'surveying' themselves before and during interactions with others. Chapter 14 of *The Zhongyong* explains that failure to communicate should 'send us back' to the self, to critically evaluate what we did and to identify e.g. any contradiction and inconsistency in e.g. our thoughts and attitudes. Ni (2017: 74) argues that Zhongyong has to do with the art of archery: "To become a good archer, one needs to constantly practice the art of archery in everyday life so that one achieves the ability to hit the proper mark all the time." We have identified a similar argument concerning Chapter 14 in Xie (2017). If people want to understand themselves, the first step is for them to reflect on their own actions and reactions in the case of conflicts with others. Finally, for Wang Yangming (1472-1529) Zhongyong is thus like a mirror that can reflect self in relation to others. Reflexivity and criticality are two central elements of interculturality too.

As we have seen on many occasions, Zhongyong has a strong moral bearing in relation to others. As such, in Chapter 13, *The Zhongyong* urges us to practice sympathy, empathy and tolerance of others (see "施诸己而不愿，亦勿施于人" (Shī zhū jǐ ér bù yuàn, yì wù shī yú rén), the so-called Golden Moral Rule translated word-for-word from the Chinese as *Do not do to yourself, do not do to others*). At the same time, Li (2020: 65) clarifies the tenet of Zhong by asserting that one needs "to have their own judgment and standard to abide by and never to seek personal gain by bending their principles or compromising their principles for whatever reason". In other words, and that's the second important principle of Zhongyong, while being 'tolerant' of others, one should not go to extremes but stay at middle course, training to balance one's identities, intentions and actions in complex, changeable and diverse situations. Not 'giving too much' to the other, while refraining from closing ourselves, is another important tenet – striving constantly for the 'middle ground'.

Yao (2017) stresses that another important aspect of *Zhong* is the self-other relational perspective. Concurrent with inner concentration and tolerance-'resistance', is the ability to help and negotiate with others (e.g. Chapter 25). The principles of *equality, respect, closeness, understanding, greatest love, sympathy (treat others as part of self),* but also *diversity* (amongst others) are proposed as guidelines for 'doing' this aspect of Zhongyong. The most important element in *The Zhongyong* is observing and accepting change in self and others as one interacts and influences each other, as is reflected in e.g. Chapters 23 and 26. Change is often problematised in *The Zhongyong* by means of metaphors referring to (inevitable) changes in nature: the four seasons, night and day, rotation of the earth… Personal adaptation to change is based on the capacity to improve oneself, hence the necessity to Shendu (inner concentration) to observe self in relation to others. Zhongyong thus advocates being flexible (e.g. embracing diversity) while following one's principles at the same time (chapter 27), e.g. learning from

history and innovating on the basis of the present (Li, 2020). In Chapter 18 it is noted, for example, how Confucius learned about politics from previous dynasties and adapted it into a policy applicable to the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BCE). In Chapter 30, the principle of 万物并育而不相害，道并行而不相悖 (wàn wù bìng yù ér bù xiāng hài, dào bìng xíng ér bù xiāng bèi, translated as: *All things grow together without harming each other*) summarizes this specific take on *change*.

Before moving on to explore these aspects more specifically for interculturality, we feel the need to comment on one important aspect of Zhongyong. One of the definitions of the concept provided by *The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* (2005: 1765) was: "person whose ability and behavior are mediocre". We noted that in today's China some people might perceive Zhongyong negatively because of their awareness of this definition. As a never-ending process of balancing acts, Zhongyong might include moments of extreme and dishonest performance through which one might act as a 老好人 (lǎo hǎo rén, lit. *one who tries never offend anybody*) or 和稀泥 (Huò xī ní, *try to smooth things over*). These instances might resemble Zhongyong in form but they represent poor, manipulating and immoral examples of it, 'faking' the mediating, balancing qualities of Zhongyong.

Zhongyong for interculturality

Figure 1 summarizes the three main aspects of *The Zhongyong* that we find inspiring for reflecting on interculturality.

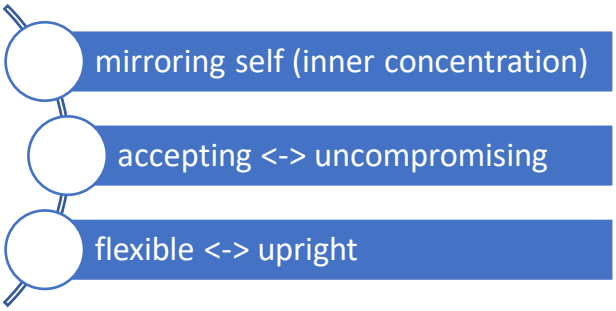


Figure 1 – Retained principles for interculturality

As we can see, Zhongyong is about self-learning through encounters, observation of other people, timely and cadenced change, and balancing similarities and diversities. Although the phrase has not been used until now, all these elements have to do with power relations, i.e. Zhongyong urges us to balance what marks, creates, and potentially deepens power gaps between interlocutors. The same issue is central in interculturality: meeting someone from (amongst others) another cultural, racial, linguistic group will lead to inequality and balancing just identity co-constructions and actions remains one of the main challenges of 'doing' interculturality (e.g. Holliday et al., 2004). Accents in a given language, the mention of a nationality, skin colour or a combination of all these, will often lead to encounters that do not necessarily give space to 'never-ending processes' (*inter-*) of 'in-betweenness' (*-ality*) but, rather, to solidification, misrepresentation and e.g. discrimination and rejection (Dervin, 2016). As such, the powerful often have the 'right to speak' over, and even for, the weakest in interculturality and to silence them un/consciously (Dervin, 2016). Although Zhongyong could never be a 'magic recipe' for interculturality, practicing it (which anyone can do, the 'strong' *and* the 'weak') represents an original attempt at disrupting and potentially reducing these discordant phenomena.

Zhongyong for interculturality could be defined as "a constant (inner) appeal to (counter-)balance power between self and other and to trigger and negotiate potential change in them, while retaining one's right for difference". Let us unpack the carefully chosen words and formulations here. *Constant*

reminds us of the *-ality* of interculturality: One is never fully ready for interculturality (and Zhongyong!) since it is a lifelong balancing act. We place *inner* between brackets to remind the reader of the importance of both Shendu (inner concentration) and of observing (with) the other what we do and say. This continuum of self and other is a necessity in doing interculturality; we need to navigate between these two poles all the time, reflecting on what these do and say together, and influence each other, *inwards*. We chose the word *appeal* here in relation to its Latin etymology, whereby *appellare* means *to accost, address, summon, name* (from *ad*, 'to' and *pellere*, 'to beat, push, drive'). An appeal urges us to speak to each other and to *name* things as they are. For the verb *balance*, we have added the word-forming element *counter-* between brackets to emphasize the need to see balance as a potentially two-way phenomenon, going the other way around too. Finally, *potential* was inserted before the important idea of *change* to remind ourselves that we do not necessarily need to aim for change: 1. Change occurs all the time but we don't necessarily notice it; 2. Change does not have to be positive and/or negative; 3. Change might not be noticeable by self; 4. *Change also changes*, thus making it challenging to observe and discuss.

In what follows we wish to share some hints at how one could (counter-)balance self and other in interculturality, bearing in mind the necessary tensions of e.g. flexible-upright and accepting-uncompromising:

- Since self-awareness is central in Zhongyong, 'disciplining' oneself and considering the consequences of one's actions on others and situations – seeing things from others' perspectives – is the first step in unthinking and rethinking interculturality. The use of 'technologies of self' (Foucault, 1981) such as diaries, blogs or peer-assessment practices can support us in understanding and rebalancing our actions. Ideally, after reflecting on self, talking to the other about our own thoughts on e.g. an incident between us, while listening to them, represents an ideal situation of Zhongyong.
- Listening carefully to and examining the language that self and other use to talk about and to each other. Language is central to Zhongyong since it is the main tool that provides us with access to discourses, ideologies and actions. Language can also lead to e.g. discrimination, misrepresentations. Balancing our own way of speaking to and with the other is vital. When we misunderstand the other, we try to counter-balance by asking questions and making efforts to listen to them (and vice versa). In many situations of interculturality, we often 'pretend' to understand each other not to make the other feel uncomfortable, which unbalances Zhongyong and thus needs to be recalibrated as often as possible.
- The idea of harmony in diversity, finding similarities in differences and differences in similarities, is also a good starting point when meeting others interculturally or while reflecting on intercultural encounters. The necessary tensions of differences and similarities force us to perform endless but stimulating balancing acts, at times, allowing us to get closer to the other. It is through such acts that change takes place. Paying attention to how harmony in diversity occurs – note: harmony here does not refer to static phenomena but 'fluid' moments of negotiations, influenced by the diversity of those involved and of the contexts of interaction – can help us reflect on the types of change (e.g. obvious short-term change, 'invisible' long-term change that suddenly becomes visible…) that we experience alone and with the other. There is a concept in *The Book of Rites* 礼记 (lǐ jì) which can enhance our understanding of the idea of harmony in diversity: 中和 (zhōng hé), which can translate as neutralize or balanced harmony. Zhōnghé refers to a state of mind based on expressing feelings such as happiness or anger in an unbiased way. In *The Book of Rites*, it has to do with politics and how a ruler should exercise governance with this principle in mind. *Key Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture* (2022b: n.p.) notes that "If a ruler can reach such a state of mind and exercise governance accordingly, everything in heaven and earth will be in its proper place, be

orderly and in harmony with each other. This will deliver common prosperity and development for all."

- To finish, observing the world around us, and especially how others behave, speak and treat others, is a major source of inspiration for interculturality. It can help us 'jump out of our own self-comfort' by questioning our misconceptions about e.g. a certain group of people or what we have been made to believe about others. For example, we can learn to 'un-label' others – and self concurrently. This can also urge us to adopt new ways of being and speaking to balance our own ways of being and speaking. Zhongyong gives a central place to intellectual and emotional curiosity.

Figure 2 summarizes these four components of Zhongyong for interculturality.

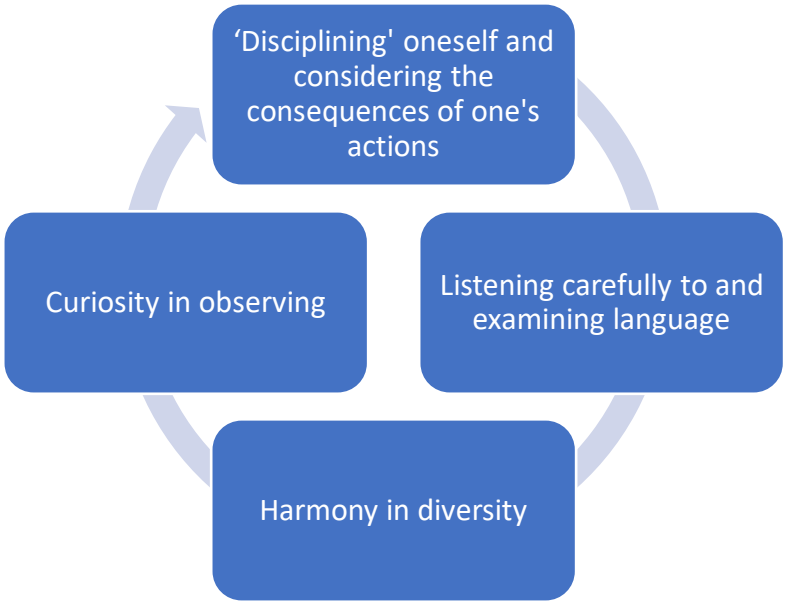


Figure 2 – 'Doing' Zhongyong in interculturality

Conclusion

As we were putting the last touch to this chapter, we received an email from the *ECNU Review of Education* notifying us of their latest issue (volume 5, issue 2, June 2022). To our great surprise, a paper by Baohong Tian, included in the section entitled Voices, dealt with the ideas of Zhong. In the paper, the author explores the philosophical signification of the concept for education and speculates about its potential influence on e.g. education reforms. In the paper, Zhongyong only occupies a paragraph, with the author noting that "Although modern China has begun reconsidering Zhong Yong, the principles and methods of the Zhong Yong (moderate) way of life still occupy an important position in the history of Chinese ideological development" (Tian, 2022: 371).

The specificity of our chapter was to try to link up Zhongyong and interculturality. What interculturality means and entails in different parts of the world is a contested element in research on intercultural communication education. Depending on the concepts that one uses to determine it (e.g. race, nationality, language, religion, Minzu in China…), the dominating and opposed ideologies of interculturality, and the geo-economic-political context where the notion is being used, one might be presented with very different types of interculturality. As such the notion is a chameleon. However, the way it tends to be treated in global research and education tends to be solid, ideologically monological and unproblematised. Although we all push for interculturality, the way we do and think

about interculturality in research and education often appears to be un-intercultural – ignoring the diversities of conceptualisations of this important notion. Throughout the decades, specific western-centric ideologies and discourses have dominated research (amongst others): *culturalism* (whereby culture is the only explanation for everything that people say and do, see e.g. Piller, 2010; Dervin, 2016), *intercultural-competence based perspectives* (e.g. Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2019), *essentialism* (an idealistic view that urges scholars and students to treat the other beyond any 'essence', e.g. Holliday & Amadasi, 2020). Many other entries from outside the West, such as Interculturalidad, Minzu or Ubuntu have not been taken seriously into account (see Aman, 2017; Dervin & Jacobsson, 2022). Since 2015 an increasingly popular trend of democracy- and citizenship-based intercultural education has led to many research projects and publications. By pushing forth these political projects from a 'province' of the world, this Euro-/Western-centric approach, which 'hides' itself behind Grand Narratives of e.g. the European Enlightenment and Bildung, disregards entirely the very idea of interculturality as a simplex (simple + complex) object of research and education (Dervin, 2022). What is more the pressure is on the user of e.g. the framework of 'democratic cultures', while most issues of democracy (in the way it is problematised in Europe for instance) rest in the hands of governments and decision-makers. Finally, what these ideologies do is that they create even bigger chasms between the ones who are fantasized as having 'real' democracy and those who are said to have no democracy at all – essentialising individuals based on some scholars' political decision to use democracy as the main gauge in their dominating work.

What our chapter has proposed is to look elsewhere and to 'rest our mind' for a moment, outside of the current stifling democracy-talk. Interculturality is never straightforward; it never occurs in a straight line. As a social phenomenon it requires from us to be satisfied, unhappy; to pull and be pulled in all directions; to adapt, to change, but also to resist, to let go, to lie, to attack, to hide, etc. All these taking place at least two-ways, with some being obviously noticeable, others invisible, kept inside of us, building up anxiety and/or joy. These uncontrollable, at times rational, irrational, phenomena start from and are controlled first and foremost by the individual who has to deal with other people and economic-political systems (of oppression). What Zhongyong reminds us is that we are constantly (counter-)balancing these acts, with no end in sight. In that sense, Zhongyong shares many similarities with the way interculturality has been problematised in different parts of the world.

Having the right to this very 'state' of trying to balance in ourselves and with others is something that each and every one of us can work on, at times being successful, at others unsuccessful – or both at the same time. In Ancient China Zhongyong was an important trait of a good ruler who was meant to balance between using their power to govern and to listen and (genuinely) 'drop some weight' to their people.

Like democracy-talk, Zhongyong does not offer any miraculous solution to 'doing' interculturality. However, it reminds us that in order to deal with such an unpredictable phenomenon as interculturality through which we might face (our and others') inconsistencies and contradictions, it is better to adopt a malleable way of thinking/doing, un-thinking/-doing and re-thinking/-doing – spaces for renegotiation. While democracy-talk tends to give us 'orders' and to make dialogue impossible between some people (e.g. 'these rules are non-negotiable', 'my democracy is the real one, yours is not: people cannot vote'), Zhongyong reminds us of the importance to listen to ourselves and others, to think carefully, to self-critique, and to try to achieve a middle ground as much as we can. Since it does not give us 'strict' orders, except maybe to (counter-)balance self and other, Zhongyong could represent an important flexible entry into interculturality, empowering all involved to (un-)speak, to listen to others, and to be listened to *ad infinitum*. Zhongyong tells us that there is not one way of dealing with interculturality but an uncountable adaptable way of engaging with the other.

Finally, although we have tended to focus on interpersonal relations in this chapter, it is important to note that Zhongyong can also support individuals in dealing with the interculturality of e.g. a given institution or structure. As noted several times in the chapter, the concept was also used in Ancient China to guide rulers and the people in balancing their relations. Zhongyong can provide us with the power to speak, to ask questions – see to challenge – in order to create more equal relations and interactions. Although an institution is an invisible entity, 'spoken for' by individuals, encounters with the latter through Zhongyong could also have some potential effects on both the one affected by e.g. systemic injustice and the structure.

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