Intercultural communication in Asia: education, language and values

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BOOK REVIEW

Intercultural communication in Asia: education, language and values, edited by Andy Curtis and Roland Sussex, Multilingual Education 24, Cham, Springer, 2018, 280 + xii pp., US$119.99. (hardback), ISBN 978-3-31-969994-3

The chapters in this book are based on papers that were presented at the Third Macao International Forum in December 2014, and one of the stated goals of both the conference and the book is to move the focus of studies of intercultural communication away from analysis of how various cultures differ from western cultures and to focus instead on Asia. However, nearly all of the material from Asia is actually from East Asia, especially China, Japan, Macao and Vietnam, and there is almost no consideration of other Asian contexts such as India, Indonesia or Iran. (Unfortunately, there is no index in the book, so it is hard to check how many references there are to countries such as these.)

In addition to the introduction and the conclusion by the editors, *Intercultural Communication in Asia* contains 11 chapters in five parts. Part I is entitled 'Models, Intercultural Competence and Education', and has three chapters. In the first, Andy Curtis models international communication under three aspects: the individual, particularly the individual as cultural artefact; the institutional, especially the role of educational institutions but also that of *guanxi* ('relationships') in China; and the intercultural, focusing on the influence of the Internet. The second chapter is by Andrew Lian and Roland Sussex. After outlining five principles that constitute a conceptual framework for an extended approach to learning, they describe the results of research into innovative methods for teaching English pronunciation in China. In the third chapter, Don Snow discusses his working assumptions for teaching intercultural communication and then outlines how ethnocentrism, stereotypes and ingroup bias can affect our intercultural judgements. Part II focuses on values and communication in cultural contexts. It has just one chapter, in which Thi Hong Nhung Pham discusses the role of the Confucian system of ethics in Vietnamese society and then analyses the responses by 24 Vietnamese people regarding memorable incidences, either good or bad, in their interactions with native speakers of English. Part III is about English as a lingua franca (ELF) in intercultural communication, and consists of two chapters. In the first, Juliane House discusses how ELF interactions often adopt different pragmatic practices from native-speaker interactions, and she argues that ELF is not a threat to the acquisition of first languages or to the importance of translation into indigenous languages. In the second chapter, Istvan Kecskes analyses the difference between intracultural and intercultural communication and shows that, while intracultural interactions often depend on fixed, prefabricated chunks of language that the participants are familiar with, intercultural exchanges more often rely on emergent cultural understandings developed at the individual rather than societal level.

Part IV is entitled 'Focal Areas of Intercultural Communication', and consists of three chapters. In the first, Joanna Radwańska-Williams analyses the linguistic landscape of Macao, including the use of Portuguese, Chinese and English, based on about 1900 photographs taken in December 2014 along Avenida de Almeida Ribeiro, the main road in Macao. In the second chapter, Roland Sussex describes the various ways in which different cultures talk about pain and how this can lead to misunderstandings between health providers and patients. In the third chapter, Kimie Oshima discusses the use of humour

in teaching intercultural communication, especially the use of Rakugo performances to express various facets of Japanese culture. Finally, Part V, which is entitled 'Identity', consists of two chapters. In the first, Doreen Wu and Chaoyuan Li compare the emotional branding of nine world-famous brands, such as Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Samsung and BMW, in English on Twitter and in Chinese on Weibo; and in the second, Yihong Gao traces the fluctuation of English education policies in China from the late 1970s to the present.

As is sometimes the case with a book originating from a conference, there is only a tenuous thread connecting the chapters. While there are plenty of rich data from East Asia, with interesting instances of cultural misunderstandings arising from the Confucian values prevalent in Vietnam described by Pham, the fascinating analysis of street signs in Macao by Radwańska-Williams, the detailed discussion of Rakugo humour to introduce aspects of Japanese culture by Oshima, the insightful analysis of differences between cultures when talking about pain by Sussex and the useful comparison of corporate Internet communication in the West and in China by Wu and Li, it is not entirely clear how the innovative teaching of pronunciation described by Lian and Sussex or the fluctuation in educational policies in China over the past few decades outlined by Gao involve intercultural communication. Also, while the model presented by Curtis and the discussion of the role of ELF by House are certainly interesting and valuable, it is hard to see that they are really about Asia, or, indeed, what an analysis that focused on pan-Asian culture would look like.

A few editing problems exacerbate the lack of a coherent thread between the chapters. In the introduction (p. 13), the chapter by Kecskes is stated to be in Section 4 rather than where it actually occurs, in Part III. Furthermore, the introduction lists three points of departure for the book (p. 9), but these points of departure are re-ordered in Curtis's own chapter (pp. 21–22), with the original Q1 re-numbered as Q3. (The website suggests that the order shown on pages 21–22 represents the correct ordering; see Macao International Forum 2014.) On page 58, Snow states that he will outline his four working assumptions for teaching intercultural communication, but it seems that only three such working assumptions are actually discussed, and it is not clear what the fourth one might be. Finally, in the concluding chapter, the editors seem to suggest (p. 267) that Pham's data depend on a single interaction between a Vietnamese employee and her Anglophone employer when in fact Pham discusses seven such interactions in some depth.

In connection with lapses in the editing or proof-reading, in places the text is inappropriately indented, interfering with the ease of reading it; for example, in House's chapter (p. 104), the indentation of the text discussing Extract 2 suggests that it is part of Extract 1—and the same occurs with the discussion of Extract 10 (p. 235) in Wu and Li's chapter. While such formatting problems are, of course, not of paramount importance, lack of care about formatting raise questions about the overall accuracy of the data. For example, on page 236, 童鞋 ('children's shoes') is translated as 'classmates'. Is this correct? Or should the Chinese characters actually be 同学? Maybe童鞋is an instance of playful use of language found on Weibo? In the same chapter, on page 237, in a post by Samsung on Weibo, the phrase 真正强大的人is translated as 'the true man' rather than the correct 'the truly great man', and the phrase 面对疲惫和困扰 'dealing with tiredness and problems' is entirely omitted from the translation. These errors give rise to doubt about the accuracy of the analysis.

One other issue with the presentation of data occurs in the chapter by Kecskes. He includes detailed transcripts of interactions between a Chinese student and a Japanese student (p. 119) and of a Polish woman talking to a man in Hong Kong (p. 121), but it is hard to evaluate these without some background about when, where and how they were

recorded. In contrast, the first extract in the chapter is about a librarian dealing with a book return (p. 117), and this seems to be describing a prototypical exchange, perhaps a standard schema for this kind of library interaction, so it might not be actual data; but then what of the later extracts? Are they genuine data or not? It is hard to evaluate such material without some context.

Despite these lapses in the editing of the text and the presentation of data, there is some excellent material in this book, making valuable and profound contributions to our understanding of intercultural communication in East Asia. Perhaps, as is unavoidable with such a rich set of data, alternative analyses are often possible. For example, in her chapter on cultural misunderstandings in Vietnam, Pham attempts to classify instances as involving either Face or Association Rights (showing empathy for one's associates), but might the incidents be interpreted differently? Extract 1 (p. 84) is classified as involving Association Rights when an Australian did not appreciate concern from his Vietnamese interlocutor about getting married, but one might note that it also involves Face, as the Vietnamese mentioned that he lost face in front of their driver when the Australian laughed at him; and Extract 6 (p. 88) is classified under Face when a newly-appointed American boss cut short his Vietnamese employee who was giving a detailed account of the merits of each of his staff, but could this alternatively be interpreted as lack of empathy, and so classified under Association Rights?

Another possible alternative interpretation involves the analysis of language usage along a Macao street by Radwańska-Williams. She describes the multitude of brand-name posters that 'bombard the eyes' and concludes: 'In the Chinese context, the crowded aesthetic feels joyful and inviting, in an iconic parallelism to the often crowded nature of this street' (p. 155). Might other analysts feel that the posters are overwhelming and threatening? Then, in discussing communication about pain between health-care providers and their patients, Sussex contends that, in order to communicate issues of pain effectively, 'the patient should not be constrained by the stereotypical or cultural models of the all-powerful and omniscient health practitioner' (p. 197). But does this itself not reflect a western bias? Might not an alternative conclusion, based on East Asian culture, be that in some contexts the patient should learn not to challenge the authority of the health practitioner? Also, in her chapter on humour to teach about intercultural communication, Oshima suggests that 'the successful use of ethnic stereotypes is an effective way of mitigating the friction and tension among ethnic groups' (p. 206). While this might be true in Hawaii, and videos of Rakugo performances by Oshima (for example, EnglishRakugo 2012) confirm that they are indeed delightful, in many other societies the use of jokes involving ethnic stereotypes is more likely to exacerbate tension between ethnic groups than mitigate it.

Finally, in their data on corporate Internet posts, Wu and Li classify as Pragmatic (i.e. involving providing information about the product) the following post by McDonald's (translated from the Chinese): 'Double-cheese Burger has become the new star burger! It's rich and delicious, and costs 10 yuan only!' (p. 233). But is this really providing information about the product? Or could it alternatively be classified as Sensualist; that is, promoting individual lifestyle and hedonism? However, such questions about the analysis of data on intercultural communication are probably inevitable, and suggesting alternative interpretations does not in any way undermine the value of the rich assortment of data and the thoughtful, insightful description in this book.

In conclusion, although there is some lack of cohesion in the chapters, there are one or two questions about the accuracy of the data and the contexts for data collection are occasionally missing, there is a good deal of excellent material in *Intercultural Communication in Asia*, and many of the chapters make substantial contributions to our knowledge and understanding of

intercultural communication in East Asia. Many readers will find most of the chapters of considerable interest, even if the book as a whole sometimes lacks a coherent overall thread, and therefore may not lend itself to providing a new theoretical framework of intercultural communication studies that is focused on Asia.

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