



EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF CHINESE STUDIES 7 (2024)

— M. WOESLER, ED. —

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FROM HISTORY: CHINOISERIE,
WESTERNIZATION OR
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European Journal of Chinese Studies 7 (2024)

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A Transcultural View on Ambivalence, Ambiguity and Juxtaposition

**„Don't push the river, it flows by
itself" - related to the first Study-
results: „Mental State of Chinese
Students in Germany"**

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and Law, China

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Abstract

The distinction between inter-, multi-
and transcultural communication is applied

to a specific study. It is about the mental
state of Chinese students in Germany.
Initial results are also examined from the
perspective of ambivalence, ambiguity and
juxtaposition. Finally, these three
behavioural and communication
dimensions are discussed from a Chinese
cultural perspective.

Key words

Chinese students, research, transcultural
communication, ambivalence, ambiguity,
juxtaposition

Transcultural project: mental state of Chinese students in Germany

For many years I have been working
as a psychologist, communication expert,
body psychotherapist and executive coach
in China and in relation to China. Likewise,
I am also active there as a member of the

German-Chinese Academy for Psychotherapy (DCAP).

Working with people in China is an exciting, multi-layered, novel experience for me. After all at the beginning, it is also about working in a culture that we are not at all familiar with. This work feels like a voyage of discovery, like a communicative adventure and a wild water of emotions, of surprisingly emerging, sometimes confusing impressions as well as of encounters with people who have increasingly fascinated me.

The psychological work on site with the people, the very personal encounters as well as the immersion in the millennia-old culture, which is still evident in everyday life, not only to me, aroused an interest in me, especially in the beginning, to learn more about the (inter-) cultural aspects. I was curious to see how Chinese express joy, fear, anger or other feelings. Therefore I

was curious to see how contact comes about, how contact can develop, how contact turns into a relationship or breaks off. Finally, I was also interested in experiencing how life presents itself in everyday life, in the here and now of current events on the one hand. On the other hand, it also reflects culture and history in the form of perhaps typical patterns of behaviour and effects. (multi-cultural perspective).

This alone is an approach that, before you know it, can be emotionally upsetting. The impressions, the experiences, the respective scenic experience therefore accompanied me from the beginning go.. While at the beginning I was still interested in gaining impressions like a new insight, this quickly turned into a reciprocal resonance experience.

What do I mean by that? What do I mean by a reciprocal resonance experience?

Imagine that you have learned a foreign language, have sufficient vocabulary at your disposal and have mastered the grammar so that you can express yourself in writing in the said foreign language. But now imagine that you are in the country whose language you have learned. I can well imagine that such an experience feels like jumping into cold water, as if you were starting to communicate without an emotional safety net, so to speak. More right than wrong. Perhaps you now remember a similar experience and can still relate to the emotional resonance that always arises in such an event. Now imagine that the person you are talking to in the foreign country is experiencing a similar emotional resonance. The two of you begin to exchange words verbally. You look at each other, you pay attention to the facial expressions of the other person, to the changes in facial expressions, to his or her gestures in order to be able to take a

look behind the words. The verbal and the non-verbal thus unite into one event. It is like being on a theatre stage. The verbal happens on the front stage, while the emotional and what they can only perceive and understand to a limited extent happens on the back stage. Understanding then seems to be possible only by beginning to read between the lines. Reading between the lines means opening one's own senses in order to experience the other, the totality of the situation but also oneself like a small scenic communicative biotope. (Transcultural Communication)

I noticed right at the beginning during my work in China, in my encounters with people in everyday life, but also in my exchanges with colleagues, that this dimension of encounter was consciously not so familiar, so that we could have consciously talked about it.

This experience awakened curiosity in me about what could not be consciously discussed or experienced. But this dimension of communication and encounter makes up an essential part of the profundity, differentiation and particularity of the respective experience. So I began to wonder how Chinese would experience and express ambivalence ambiguity, emotional tension, mutual emotional resonance or something similar. How would they then put what they experience into words in order to consciously exchange about it in such a way that a more differentiated, deeper understanding of the respective situation becomes possible.

On the one hand, I used the opportunity to exchange ideas with colleagues and psychological and psychotherapeutic experts in the context of my work. On the other hand, as Chinese and German colleagues, we started a study on the psychological condition of Chinese

students in Germany. On the one hand, we wanted to understand more about the students' experience, the adjustment, the difficulties and peculiarities in everyday life in Germany, in order to develop guidelines from this that could be helpful in order to better support Chinese students in Germany psychologically emotionally, but also through concrete offers of action. In the project, we were therefore particularly interested in phenomena such as the experience and handling of ambivalence, ambiguity, emotional tension, etc. The present article is an abridged version.

This paper is an abridged version of my presentation at the 6th World Conference on Chinese Studies. An extended, detailed description and analysis of our perspective will follow later in a more detailed technical article.

Here is a brief overview of the structure of the study, initial findings,

central questions on the one hand. On the other hand, I will refer to what is meant by ambivalence, tolerance of ambiguity and juxtaposition. I will then briefly relate this to statements by Chinese students who have commented on how they themselves understand ambivalence and ambiguity tolerance.

It is about the psychological condition of Chinese students in Germany and their living situation. There are four basic objectives:

- Analysis of the situation and assessment.
- Development of guidelines for support
- Communication to stakeholders
- Development of practical support together with stake holders.

We decided to use a mix of social-psychological methodological approach:

- Exploratory study
- Independent (fluid) project team
- Action research approach
- Continuous, collegial exchange of ideas

The basic tools were

- Student reports of experience
- Online questionnaire
- In-depth interviews
- Collegial exchange/literature and reference to other similar projects

First basic results (among others)

- New University milieu (open lectures, new way of thinking, group-

- | | |
|---|--|
| discussion, brainstorming, asking questions etc.) | honest with oneself |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To make one`s own decision, more freedom | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proud to feel self-experience as Chinese without polarisation (no mission) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No final examination / fixation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joy of sharing this experience with one`s own family |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • new culture of error or making mistakes | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading texts self-critically | The first results show that the answers |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life is slower and more attractive | invite for a thorough (self-) reflection and professional, collegial discourse. There will |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal-oriented communication vs. communication as shared experience with others (lived language) | be no simple or mere quantitative approach being helpful. The aspects will lead to multi-modal interpretation. This of course |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life is different compared how one was prepared in China, not overprotected any longer | includes aspects of ambivalence and ambiguity. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New: The learning of learning | Specific essence being based on the |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience of self, self-development and self-enrichment | first results could be |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To feel more independent and more | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Important is the experience of different modes of making experience |

- Experience the tension between being overprotected in China vs. feeling independency, maturity and self-esteem
- Showing up as Chinese and respect curiosity for other cultural identities
- Experience the relevance of different and changing roles
- Importance and permission of asking questions (self-critical question)
- To feel oneself in an more open that pre-structured situation
- There is no „yes” or „no”, there is yes **and** no.

A first and essential insight is the need to more concretely differentiate and define the mode of our gaze on different cultures.

Cultural perspective of ambivalence, ambiguity and juxtaposition in China

Looking at different cultures principally seen there are as already mentioned three different dimensions

- *Intercultural perspective*

it is about cultural knowledge, social identity and application-oriented

- *Multicultural perspective*

it is about cultural perception, cultural rules, patterns and psychological identity, solution-oriented

- *Transcultural perspective*

It is about cultural co-designing, cohesion, emotional resonance and hybrid identity

The three differences can be compared to learning a foreign language. You learn the vocabulary, you learn the grammar and finally you learn to communicate with someone in the foreign

language. Learning vocabulary can be compared to the intercultural aspect. The acquisition of grammar can be compared analogously to the multicultural perspective. Finally, jumping into the cold water of linguistic exchange with a counterpart can be compared to the transcultural perspective. When you begin to speak with someone in a foreign language, you exchange verbal information and at the same time pay attention to the facial expressions, gestures and posture habitus of the other person in order to understand him or her better. The same happens in reverse. The other person pays attention to my facial expressions, gestures, posture and so on. This helps us to become familiar with the different levels of communication. This also includes the emotional resonance of my counterpart and myself that is touched, mobilised or neglected during speech. So this is about intermediate tones, about experiencing the

spoken word, and so on. Words are exchanged and only in the course of the conversation does one begin to understand the meaning that is to be expressed by the words spoken. In this process of reciprocal communication, ambivalences, ambiguity and ambiguity arise. The art of learning and using a new language involves all these different perspectives and modes.

Without going into the definition of ambivalence and tolerance of ambiguity in more detail at this point, I would like to refer to a mode that is perhaps not exactly untypical for China. It is called juxtaposition.

Juxtaposition basically means to place two aspects close together or side by side, especially with an arresting or surprising effect, or in a way that invites comparison or contrast. Or: a side-by-side-position.

Here are some examples: Any time unlike things bump up against each other, you can describe it as a juxtaposition. Imagine a funeral mourner telling jokes graveside, and you get the idea — the juxtaposition in this case is between grief and humour. Juxtaposition of two contrasting items is often done deliberately in writing, music, or art — in order to highlight their differences.

- Typical sentences:

-“Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country“

-“Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate“,

- Typical examples: 1 is 1, 4 is 4

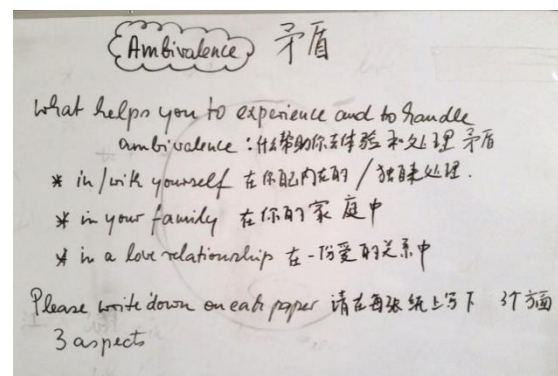
and the juxtaposition of both is

so different: $\frac{1}{4}$ litre of milk

You can imagine that it is not so easy to become familiar with this mode of communication especially when you meet another culture. It is even more difficult to communicate as a westerner with someone from a culture which is more characterized by symbolic understanding, interpretation or similar dimensions.

I have therefore occasionally done spontaneous guided workshops to learn more about how ambivalence and tolerance of ambiguity are understood.

Central questions were the following:



I will be able to go into detail about the answers in another article.

First experiences and quintessence are:

- „and” instead of „but”
- both and as well as
- and instead of but
- Not (only) the Other is other, I am (also) other to myself
- There is always an aspect you don't know and can't know. That's life.
- Ask questions, questions already the answer
- Don't push the river it flows by itself
- astonishment and curiosity are an utmost important start to learn
- be aware and decide, this is the most important decision

If one wants to learn more about and become familiar with how Chinese communicate and how (in the process) ambivalence, ambiguity tolerance and juxtaposition play a role there, it can be useful to use these quintessences as a reference for mutual, reciprocal understanding. We are therefore faced with a great challenge in the research team. At the same time, we are convinced that it is necessary to use this view. After all, it is also important to analyse the students' statements more deeply and in a more differentiated way against the background of Chinese culture and to grasp their culturally conditioned meaning. Such a procedure is necessary in order to define the guidelines and concrete support offers more precisely.

I recommend the following articles for more in-depth reading:

- About the „dependent self ” and „interdependentself”

<https://sollmann-online.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/9.9pdf.pdf>

- Ambiguity and corona

<https://sollmann-online.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/4.4pdf.pdf>

- A psychological view on China

<https://sollmann-online.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/11.11pdf.pdf>

- Psychosomatic case study under the perspective of culture and gender

<https://sollmann-online.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/11.11pdf.pdf>

As no current study can currently be found that addresses the topic presented here, there are only informal collegial

discussions. In a detailed presentation of the evaluation of the online survey, we hope to be able to establish a reference to the topic also through similar studies.

I will present a differentiated analysis of the approach presented here in a subsequent publication. And yet, if you have any queries, you can also contact me now.

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on ambivalence and ambiguity –
„Don`t push the river, it flows by
itself“, lecture at the 6th World
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