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Interculturality in a Different Light: Modesty Towards Democracy in Education?



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Abstract

This article problematizes interculturality in relation to how the notion of democracy is constructed, especially in education. Discourses of democracy have become more central in “interculturalspeak” (a somewhat uncritical approach to intercultural matters), especially after the mass arrival of asylum seekers and the spread of terrorism around the world. The authors challenge the often Western-centric considerations of the Other’s democracy, through a close reading of a Chinese textbook. China seems to represent the Other *par excellence* when democracy is discussed. The article does not decide “subjectively” which country is better than others at “doing” democracy, especially in education. Neither do the authors wish to accuse anyone of “doing” it wrongly. What is demonstrated is that the topic of “democracy” is indeed found in China’s secondary school textbooks. The following questions are asked: *Which topics are covered? How is democracy problematized explicitly/implicitly? What potential similarities are to be found with the “Western” understanding of democracy?* This rare insight into discourses of democracy (*the changing self; relations between self-other; citizenship, rights, duties* in the textbooks) from China proposes to rethink how we see self-other in intercultural terms, to develop more intercultural modesty and to learn *with* each other rather than against or merely from the other.

Keywords: democracy, China, Western-centrism, critical interculturality

Introduction

In Europe, recently, the idea of democracy has been added to discussions of interculturality, especially since the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015. The example of the Council of Europe is telling. The intergovernmental organization promotes, trains about, and produces educational materials on human rights, citizenship and intercultural education. In March 2015, the Council announced that it was

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working on a “universal and objective system to define and measure democratic competences” (e-mail message to authors, 18.3.2015). “Big” names from different branches of interculturality were involved in this project. Interestingly, the idea of democratic competences is used interchangeably with intercultural competence in the message from the institution. Twenty core “democratic” competences were defined by the institution: (amongst others) responsibility, tolerance, conflict resolution, listening skills, linguistic and communication skills, critical thinking, empathy and openness, and autonomous learning skills (ibid.). Descriptors for each competence describe what people know, understand, and are able to do and refrain from doing. According to the head of the institution’s department of education, the main objective was to define levels of attainment for each competence and “to incorporate into teacher-training programmes, recruitment tests, and the school curriculum, across Europe and beyond” (ibid.).

The initiative was taking place, of course, in a specific context: Extremism was increasing on many fronts in Europe; people questioned who they are and where they belong, often putting boundaries between themselves and others to defend themselves; the world was also facing horrific refugee crises, and so on. So, one might think that the work of the Council was much needed and welcomed. However, while reading the description of the initiative, we worried about its supposedly “universal” and “objective” appeal. Who would make the final decision as to what democracy refers to and entails? Whose voices would be included in the descriptors? Would this lead to the “centre” (Europe) dictating to the rest of the world what democratic and intercultural competences are?

This article proposes to decentre the way we think about interculturality through challenging a certain representation of democracy, which places the other in an inferior position. Interculturality has often relied on biased and overly subjective and ethnocentric comparisons between cultures and countries (see McSweeney, 2002 about the work of Hofstede for example). That is why we adopt a critical intercultural perspective (Dervin, 2017; Li & Dervin, 2018), which attempts to reframe democracy from the “centre” (“the West”) to the “periphery” (China). A critical intercultural perspective requires questioning the terms, concepts and notions that we use to discuss this topic, moving away from Western-centric (and other kinds of centrisms), somewhat biased and limited/limiting discourses, leading to believe that we are “better,” more “civilised,” more “democratic” than the Other (Phillips, 2005). What is more comparative discourses on how democracy is “done” “off the centre” often triggers self-sufficiency, self-promotion and a-criticality. At a recent seminar on democracy and human rights in education in Finland (a country that is often considered as a top performer in democracy, human rights and equality), we were surprised to hear Finnish scholars and representatives of NGOs talk about China’s problems and not to hear them discuss the issues faced by the “West,” including the Nordic countries (Simpson & Dervin, 2017). China seemed to serve as a “bad example” for democracy. When we asked the speakers what they knew about democratic education in the country, they seemed puzzled by the question, wondering if there could be such a thing in China.

Global discourses of democracy often place China in an inferior position. Many and varied Democracy Indexes, produced by the “West,” have confirmed a somewhat negative vision of the Middle Kingdom. For example, the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index of 2016 places China in the category of “authoritarian regime” at place 107 (out of 167 countries – note that the USA was recently relegated to the “flawed democracy” category¹). According to the World Democracy Audit Ranking (worldaudit.org), China is 126 out of 154 countries. It fares very poorly for political rights, civil liberties, press freedom and corruption. Studies by the Pew Global about the perception of China by the rest of the world, show that China is generally perceived positively by the rest of the world, except

¹ Four categories: *authoritarian regime, hybrid regime, flawed democracy and full democracy.*

for individual liberty (Wike, Stokes, & Poushter, 2016). Our question is: according to whose (negotiated) standards these are decided upon?

In this article, we do not decide “subjectively” which country is better than the others at “doing” democracy, especially in education. Neither do we wish to accuse anyone of “doing” it wrongly. What we propose to do is to show that the topic of “democracy” is indeed found in China’s secondary school textbooks. Which topics are covered? How is it problematised? Although we do not intend to compare to how democracy is discussed in other educational contexts, we will note potential similarities as is recommended by the critical and reflexive perspective on interculturality that we follow (Dervin, 2016). Our goal is first to problematize the idea of democracy from critical and reflexive intercultural perspectives. As the anthropologist Jack Goody asserts: “Democracy has become a highly value-laden concept considered to have universal applicability” (2006, p. 253). We then propose a close reading of how textbooks of a compulsory school subject in China called Thoughts and Virtues (*Si Xiang Pin De*, 思想品德, *People Education Press, China* 人民教育出版社), offered in basic education (years 7-9), aim to help Chinese students to reflect on many and varied topics related to different aspects of democracy, from an individual and relational perspective to a broader civil and human rights perspective. As we only look at discourses in the textbooks (which might reveal shared ideologies about democracy), and not at the reality of what is happening in classrooms and beyond, we do not claim to generalise for Chinese students, China and the Chinese in general – which would be contradictory to our intercultural perspective. Both the selection and analysis of the data were inspired by a specific form of discourse analysis called *dialogism* (Dervin, 2016). This method allows researchers to examine marks of (inter)subjectivity in the construction of an object of discourse (here: democracy). In other words: how multiple voices are used to create and negotiate discourses of democracy in the textbooks. Many and varied linguistic elements are used to identify and analyse these voices such as *deictics* (markers of person, time, and space such as personal pronouns, adverbs, and verbs) but also *utterance modalities*, which can give us a clue about the attitude of the speaker towards what she/he is saying (adverbs, shifters, etc.) (Dervin, *ibid.*).

We believe that our article offers a peek into how democracy might be dealt with in certain contexts of Chinese education. At the same time, we wish to contribute, modestly, to more critical knowledge about China.

Problematising Democracy Interculturally

The theft of democracy?

Many scholars, from different fields, have studied and deconstructed Western vs. Eastern values of democracy (e.g., Acharya, 2013; He, 2016). In this section, we are very much inspired by a book we consider to be very important in relation to intercultural communication education: *The Theft of History* (Goody, 2006). In the book, the anthropologist Jack Goody reviews a certain number of terms that the West has appropriated and hijacked “for its own particular history” (*ibid.*, p. 240). Democracy is one of these words. The origin of democracy is often given a geographical flavour, by claiming its European Antiquity of Greece and Rome identity (*ibid.*). This often leads to the idea that the “contemporary Western world is the primary custodian and the only model” (Goody, *ibid.*, p. 247). Goody reminds us however that Ancient Greece was deemed to be a democracy, which was limited to males, and excluded slaves, women, and resident strangers (Goody, *ibid.*, p. 249).

Interculturally, Goody makes a very important point when he suggests that democracy has to be viewed contextually, “in relation to specific institutions” (*ibid.*, p. 247-249). He provides us with the following observations of a Ghanaian friend visiting a factory in England:

(...) compare the contemporary workplace with that existing under conditions of simple agriculture. My Ghanaian friend whom I took to visit a local factory in England saw women standing in line over a workbench, punching a “clock” on entering and leaving the workplace. “Are they slaves?” he asked me in his own language. His own labour in the fields was of a much “freer” kind, that did not involve relationships of authority.

In terms of democratic procedures, Goody argues that the ways in which the opinion of people is taken into account can vary across contexts (ibid.). In the “West,” the opinion of people has been consulted in secret written forms to choose between alternative courses of action since the nineteenth century, although one should bear in mind that this can be done in very different ways. Goody notes however that for some important issues such as declaring wars in the UK for instance, the voice of the Queen or King is enough – people are not consulted, but left with the “rule of force” (Goody, ibid., p. 255). In many “Western democracies” some individuals are not entitled to vote or to purchase land or house. This is the case of immigrants and sojourners in Switzerland for example (Goody, ibid., p. 253). The anthropologist also reminds us that many dictators like Hitler were elected in the “West.” Goody explains: “[an elected dictatorship] is a regime that has postponed or abandoned “normal” elections and suppressed the opposition, though it may make use of referenda” (ibid.).

In other contexts, democracy might have a different flavour, for instance, in the ways those representing people are labelled. In the “West,” representatives belong to different political parties, while in many other parts of the world, people might prefer representatives from tribes or local loyalties (ibid., p. 252). China also includes the idea of democracy at the centre of its Core Socialist Values (社会主义核心价值观). Promoted at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, 12 values were put forward at three different levels: *the national* values of prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony; *the social* values of freedom, equality, justice, and the rule of law; and *the individual* values of patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendship. Some of these values look Confucian (in reference to the philosopher Confucius, 551 BCE-479 BCE: *harmony, sincerity*) while others look more “Western.” It is important to note that the use of the word *democracy* in Chinese (mínzhǔ, 民主) was added to the Chinese dictionary by the Japanese during the so-called Meiji Restoration in the 1860s. In 2013 the Communist Party of China produced guidelines to include, cultivate and practise these values in schools all over China (Xinhua, Dec. 24th 2013). Since the early 2000s, China has positioned itself as the “world’s largest democracy.” For Holbig and Shuher (2016) “it has been challenging the West’s prerogative of interpretation of political order.” Lu and Shi (2014) have studied the meaning of democracy (minzhu, 民主) in China by means of a large-scale survey in the country. For the respondents, democracy has very little to do with the “Western” definition of democracy (e.g., multiparty systems or free elections) but relates to the performance of governance: Can the government ensure a stable environment for social, economic and political development and growing prosperity? As the goal of this article is not to define Democracy “the Chinese way,” we must insist that Lu and Shi’s results might represent one understanding of democracy in the country and that, depending on the survey questions, contexts and respondents, the answers might be different.

Goody (2006, p. 102) is also very critical of the argument that most Asian countries are qualified by despotism. He shows, for instance, how Confucian ethics (derived from the teachings of Confucius), which is often described as a strong characteristic of Chineseness, actualizes certain virtues which have to do with democracy in human relationships. Confucianism can be summarized as the way to be two ideal persons: *Junzi* (君子) and *the sage* (圣人) (Cheng, 1997). While the figure of the Sage is unreachable for most humans, Junzi, second to the Sage, represents the “gentleman,” “the superior man” (ibid.). For Confucius, Junzi is clearly an intellectual resister, who can transcend personal

concerns and prejudice. It is through and with the other that Junzi disciplines him/herself and considers the consequences of his/her actions. However, and this is where Confucianism has been misunderstood in the “West,” Junzi aims to be harmonious with others but he “can have different opinions and should not just follow blindly” (子曰：“君子和而不同，小人同而不和。” - 《论语·子路》). Politically (Goody, *ibid.*) this translates in Confucian terms (Mencius (372-289 BCE) as “anyone who loses the support of the people loses the state” (得天下有道，得其民，斯得天下矣。 - 《孟子·离娄上》). Nie (2011, p. 152) also explains that well before Locke, “there exists a rich heritage of democracy-oriented philosophies and traditions in Asia and [that] this can contribute significantly to the evolution of global democracy.” He gives the example of the political philosophy of Mencius, who, like Confucius, suggested: “people first, kingdom second, emperor or rulers third” (民为贵，社稷次之，君为轻 - 《孟子·尽心章句下》) (Cheng, 1997).

Interculturality, western-centrism, and democracy

“The other is neither a paradise nor a hell, neither a source of salvation nor an inferior being” (Nie, 2011, p. 11)

Many scholars agree that is impossible to measure democracy as its definitions are many and varied, but also very much contested around the world (e.g., Goody, 2006). The global democracy indexes, mentioned in the introduction, produced by the “West,” rely on specific conceptual formulas, which could be deemed “Western-centric.” For instance, the Democracy Ranking refers to “one political dimension and five non-political dimensions, which are (1) gender (socio-economic and educational gender equality); (2) economy (economic system); (3) knowledge (knowledge-based information society, research and education); (4) health (health status and health system); (5) environment (environmental sustainability).” These elements are given the following weights: politics: 50%, gender: 10%, economy: 10%, knowledge: 10%, health: 10%; environment: 10% (Campbell, 2008).

Research on the intercultural perceptions of China and the Chinese shows that a certain number of prejudice and negative representations remain strong in the “West” (Cheng, 2008; Dervin, 2013). No doubt these have an influence on Western discourses of democracy in China. Nie (2011, pp. 37-38) examines the leading sets of oppositions between the West and China, which show strong biases against the Chinese, who are seen as somewhat blindly obedient, avoiding debates and discussions, group-oriented, amongst others. One can easily see how these characteristics hint at a specific vision of democracy.

Table 1

Imagined Oppositions of China and the “West” (Adapted from Nie, 2011)

China	The “West”
Family decision-making	Individual autonomy
Family and filial piety	Individual development and self-realization
The social common good	Individual liberty and interests
The family, collective, community or nation	The individual
The concept of social duty and obligation	The notion of individual freedom
Trust	Contract

Nie explains that “Chinese-Western cultural differences are far more complicated, subtle, fascinating, and thus more difficult to discern and articulate than these clear-cut contrasts can indicate” (*ibid.*, p. 161). He also reminds us that, although the official state ideology of China may not tolerate pluralism,

individually “examples of the coexistence of sinicized Western Marxism and communism, traditional Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, and Christianity and Islam are not hard to find, in the ways people actually live and even in official pronouncements” (ibid., p. 94).

Democracy-talk, combined with such misused and abused perceptions, often leads to moralistic judgements about self and other interculturally. It also shows how one can easily imagine one’s identity and superiority compared to others. This article contributes to this discussion by showing that a country like China, which may not be deemed “democratic” enough by the “West,” infuses key discussions related to democracy in its basic education, in similar but also different ways, at micro and more macro-levels.

Infusing democracy in Chinese basic education? The example of Thoughts and Virtues (思想品德) textbooks

What follows is based on a dialogical discourse analysis of units from Thoughts and Virtues (思想品德) textbooks published and used in China (*People Education Press, China* 人民教育出版社). The excerpts have been selected when they contained strong voices related to democracy (and especially when there was intertextuality with “Western” discourses of democracy; Simpson & Dervin, 2017).

Thoughts and Virtues is a compulsory school subject which corresponds to subjects called, for example, *citizenship, character and moral education* in other parts of the world (Yu & Zeng, 2004; Li & Zhang, 2017). We shall concentrate on three topics that emerged in years 7, 8 and 9 textbooks. These topics are directly related to the idea of democracy: *the changing self, relations between self and other, and citizenship, rights and duties*. Before we start the analysis, we need to say a few words about textbooks in general.

Textbooks are “the major conveyor of the curriculum” but also of “hidden curricula” supported by political forces (Sleeter & Grant, 2011, p. 186). They provide “expertise, are timesavers, and provide security for both teachers and students in outlining content, scope and sequence” (Eisner, 1987, p. 12). Besides “Textbooks are crucial instruments in the shaping of the future citizenry of a nation or of the global community to which these citizens will belong” (Kramsch, 2013, p. 24). On the other hand, textbooks are never neutral; the way they are written, published and used usually derives from the “official” knowledge a society wants children to develop. It is also vital to remember that textbooks are not produced in a vacuum as they represent a multi-million-dollar industry worldwide.

Although textbooks are important, we need to note that the analysis presented below does not claim to describe the way teaching of Thoughts and Virtues is actually carried out as teaching material in itself does not always represent the reality of the classroom (Dervin *et al.*, 2016). What is more, we cannot make any claims on the actual learning outcomes of the students, in relation to long- or short-term periods. Our goal is to show that there are implicit and explicit discussions of democracy in Chinese textbooks, in a somewhat comprehensive manner.

Reflecting on the changing self

Many of the themes, activities and assertions presented in the textbooks under review might come as a surprise to those who have relied on certain preconceived ideas about the Chinese (see e.g., Nie, 2011; Chu, 2013; Dervin, 2013). In the textbook for Year 7 (first semester, Unit 2, lesson 5), the students learn to reflect on themselves (“Learning about myself” 自我新期待), which could be considered as the first step to democracy: *the more I learn about myself, my changing self, my multiple identities, the more confident I can feel about who I am, the more I can create myself in different ways,*

and deal with others.

(1) Who is the creator of the value of our lives? We, ourselves, are the masters of our own lives, fully aware of ourselves, giving full scope to our potential. We can realize our own ways of being and make our life more wonderful.

谁是我们生命价值的主宰？我们自己。

我们是自己生命的主宰，全面地认识自我，使自己潜在的能力得到充分地发挥，就有可能实现自我价值，让自己的生命更精彩。

These objectives seem to describe a typical approach to self which relies on agency and autonomy, which goes against the usual misleading views about Confucian Chinese from a “Western” perspective, whereby Confucians are said to be “static,” “one” and “collectivistic” (Puett & Gross-Loh, 2015, p. 42). Democracy starts with the self, with formulating the plurality and changing of the self.

A certain number of activities are included to help the students start pondering over these issues: short explicative texts, stories, self-reflective tasks, questions and quotes.

At the beginning the students should list their own strengths, mistakes and weaknesses. Quotes from classic Chinese philosophers are to be found at the beginning and the end of the lesson, as accompanying pedagogical discourses to this activity:

(2) *People who know people are smart, people who know themselves are wise. - Lao Tzu*

知人者智，自知者明。——老子

Someone told me that I was wrong, what a pleasure! - Mencius

人告知以有过，则喜。——孟子

If you make a mistake, change it. If you make a mistake, keep going. - Zhu Xi

有则改之，无则加勉。——朱熹

These quotes confirm an approach to (neo-)Confucianism, which relies on autonomous evaluation of self (Cheng, 1997).

The textbook also gives many pieces of advice to the students in order to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses:

(3) Know your own potential: Language, Music, Mathematical Logic, Spatial Intelligence, Physical Exercise, Interpersonal Communication, Self-awareness.

认识你的潜能。人有七方面智能：语言智能，音乐智能，数理逻辑智能，空间智能，身体运动智能，人际交往智能和自我认识智能。

Besides referring to Chinese thinkers, these excerpts could contain direct hints at “Western” scholarship, such as the American developmental psychologist H. Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1983).

Theoretically, the students are made to reflect on four keywords in order to problematize how they themselves change: *Knowledge, habits, abilities, personality*. The textbook suggests that the students bear in mind that people are constantly changing and that they must look at themselves from a life-long developmental perspective. This first approach to democracy, through reflecting on self, introduces the topic of the interdependence between self and other to be examined in the next section. As such, these ideas correspond precisely to a more postmodern, critically and reflexively informed

type of interculturality, whereby the *inter-* outweighs *the cultural* in intercultural encounters, by infusing reflections on ethics and care (Abdallah-Preteceille, 2003).

Concerns with self and the idea of change are a first step to help students think about democracy. As such, through these processes, students could learn to feel more comfortable with themselves and thus to approach the other and society more confidently. Clearly, this first learning element is very much influenced by Confucian ethics (see The theft of democracy above).

Self and other

The relations between self and other are at the crux of a certain understanding of democracy. Many scholars have argued that there is no self without the other, and no other without the self (e.g., Phillips, 2005). The embedment of these two entities should lead people to consider issues such as belonging, equality, equity, and social justice – pivotal but unstable components of democracy. The second topic covered in this section contributes to reflecting on this essential aspect of democracy.

In the second semester of Year 7 (Unit 1, Lesson 1), students are introduced to the topics of dignity and confidence (做自尊自信的人), in relation to self and other. The lesson from the previous section had already hinted at the vital importance of the other in reflecting on self:

(4) Everyone is a member of the community. The community is fertile ground for personal growth to understand one's own personality and potential, we must understand the role of society for various types of job expectations, social needs and one's own reality, and thereby we can establish goals for our personal growth.

每个人都是集体的一员。社会是个人成长的沃土。我们要了解自己的个性和潜能，了解社会对于各种工作和角色的期望，了解社会需求和自身现实的差距，从而确立个人成长目标。

The unit on dignity and confidence starts with a commentary on the need to respect and love oneself and others, and thus how these two go hand in hand. The following activity is used to help students think about this aspect in relation to self and thus complement the previous topic of the changing self:

(5) Complete the following sentences:

1. Although I am not beautiful, I like myself because I am smart, I am very hard-working, I am very . . .

我不漂亮，但我很喜欢自己，因为我很聪明，我很勤奋，我很……

2. My academic performance is not very good, but I already know the reason why, so I will catch up, I will. . .

我的学习成绩不太好，但我已找到原因，我会奋起直追，我会……

3. My parents are ordinary, but they love me and care about me, they let me feel the warmth of home. . .

我的父母很平凡，但他们很爱我，很关心我，使我体验到家的温暖……

4. I do not have any special talent right now, but from now on, I will still be able to cultivate my hobbies, lifelong learning . . .

自己目前还没有特殊的才能，但我从现在起培养兴趣爱好还来得及……

Before asking the students to list ten of their own advantages and shortcomings, and making them realize that one can change shortcomings into advantages too, the story of the French Nobel-prize

winner Grignard, who had been shamed and rejected by a young beautiful woman at a banquet in his youth, is told. The story illustrates the need to question vanity but also to reflect on the following questions: What is the significance of your existence to others? What does the existence of others mean to you? Like the previous unit, quotes from Confucian ethics are included to illustrate paths to be taken (e.g., Mencius, fourth century BCE).

Dignity and confidence are also problematized in a long paragraph about the issue of difference between people, and how this should be celebrated by self:

(6) The world is wonderful because of differences. Different personalities live together to form a colourful world.

世界因差异而精彩，不同个性的人生活在一起，组成了多姿多彩的世界。

As a consequence of the discussions around difference, the students are urged to not have excessive self-esteem. Respect for others should make people more modest. The textbook says: “Respect for others is respect for yourself; respect each other to win respect” (尊重他人就是尊重自己；彼此尊重才能赢得尊重). Students are asked to treat others with politeness, respect the work of others and respect others’ personalities. For the textbook, this is how one can realize that everyone has strengths and weaknesses and thus, that people can learn from each other. However, the textbook suggests that students think critically towards respect and that they should “vilify against vicious insults and fight back in time. And if necessary, learn to use legal weapons to protect their dignity.” (对于恶意的侮辱与诋毁，则要及时予以回击，必要时运用法律武器捍卫自尊)

Like the previous section, one can find many elements related to a certain understanding of democracy here. The message contained in this textbook is: Democracy (although the word is not used directly) at the micro-level of individuals relies on confidence and dignity of each individual, respect for diversity, while at the same time, it contains the capacity to stand up for one’s views and sense of injustice.

Citizenship, rights, and duties

In Years 8 and 9 (respectively: Unit 1 Lessons 1-2; Unit 3), the topic, *Citizenship, rights and duties*, corresponds to a more canonical understanding of democracy in the “West” (see The theft of democracy above). Yet alone, this topic does not suffice. That is why it is built up on the preceding learning objectives (*changing self, self and other*). In these units, students are made to reflect on and practice these ideas in relation to China.

The units list a certain number of facts and information about citizenship, rights and duties in China. Through various activities such as role-plays, the students are made to practise what they learn. In Year 8, the unit starts with the following statement about socialism being central to Chinese democracy:

(7) Our country is a socialist country led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants and under the people’s democratic dictatorship. In China, all the people, including the workers, peasants, intellectuals, socialist labourers, the builders of the socialist cause, the patriots who support socialism, and the patriots who support the reunification of the motherland are the masters of the country and society.

我国是工人阶级领导的、以工农联盟为基础的人民民主专政的社会主义国家。在我国现阶段，包括工人、农民、知识分子和其他社会主义劳动者，社会主义事业的建设者，拥护社会主义的爱国者，拥护祖国统一的爱国者在内的全体人民，都是国家和社

会的主人。

A list of rights and the protection of rights is then listed. Civil rights recognized by the Constitution and the Law are first discussed. Human rights are then introduced by a statement that could puzzle the “West”: “Our country’s Constitution clearly stipulates that the state respects and guarantees human rights.” Eight basic rights of citizens are listed:

(8) The Constitution stipulates that the basic rights of our citizens include the following aspects:

(1) All are equal before the law;

(2) Freedom of political rights and freedoms, including the right to vote and to be elected, freedom of speech, publication, assembly, association, procession and demonstration;

(3) freedom of religious belief;

(4) Personal rights, including inviolability of personal liberty, inviolability of human dignity, inviolability of dwellings, freedom of correspondence and privacy of communications, are protected by law;

(5) The right to supervision, including the right to criticize, make suggestions, appeal, prosecute and prosecute state organs and their staff members and obtain compensation according to law;

(6) Socio-economic rights including the right to work, the right to rest for workers, the right to life for retirees, and the right to social security and material assistance from the state and society for being old, sick, disabled or incapacitated;

(7) Freedom of social and cultural rights and freedoms, including the right to education, freedom of scientific research, literary and artistic creation and other cultural activities;

(8) Women's right to protection, including women's equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, social and family life;

(9) Marriage, family, mother and children are protected by the state;

(10) The legitimate rights and interests of overseas Chinese, returned overseas Chinese and their relatives of overseas Chinese are protected by the state.

《宪法》规定我国公民的基本权利，主要包括以下几个方面：

(1) 法律面前一律平等；

- (2) 政治权利和自由，包括选举权和被选举权，言论、出版、集会、结社、游行、示威的自由；
- (3) 宗教信仰自由；
- (4) 人身与人格权，包括人身自由不受侵犯，人格尊严不受侵犯，住宅不受侵犯，通信自由和通信秘密受法律保护；
- (5) 监督权，包括对国家机关及其工作人员有批评、建议、申诉、控告、检举并依法取得赔偿的权利；
- (6) 社会经济权利，包括劳动权利，劳动者休息权利，退休人员生活保障权利，因年老、疾病、残疾或丧失劳动能力时从国家和社会获得社会保障与物质帮助的权利；
- (7) 社会文化权利和自由，包括受教育权利，进行科研、文艺创作和其他文化活动的自由；
- (8) 妇女保护权，包括妇女在政治、经济、文化、社会和家庭生活等方面享有同男子同等的权利；
- (9) 婚姻、家庭、母亲和儿童受国家保护；
- (10) 华侨、归侨和侨眷的正当权利和利益受国家保护。

No need to say that these rights are very much in line with rights found in the “West.” The use of “strong” words such as *freedom, equality, individual rights* mark a clear intertextuality with “Western” discourses of democracy, although these may appear contradictory to the strong socialist framing of the Constitution, to “Western” ears. However, one needs to bear in mind that most “Western” democracies might be framed by a political force from the Left, Centre and/or Right, who also has/have an influence on how similar rights are negotiated and interpreted – although the “ideology” of the political party in power may not be inscribed in the Constitution. Furthermore, inscription of such rights in the Constitution never guarantees their (full) application. For example, in Finland, the idea of equality is included in the Constitution (731/1999), where equality of the sexes is said to be “promoted in societal activity and working life, especially in the determination of pay and the other terms of employment, as provided in more detail by an Act.” However, although Finland, like other Nordic countries, is regarded as one of the most gender-equal countries in the world there are still very strong gender equality problems in the Nordic country, especially in relation to gender pay gap, amongst others (Saari, 2011).

Following the discussions around civil and human rights, a “tip box” aims at helping students become aware of the importance of self-other in relation to rights, as mediated by institutions:

- (9) 1. 公民在行使公民权利时要尊重他人权利。
 2. 公民在行使权力时不得损害国家的、社会的、集体的利益。
 3. 要在法律允许的范围内行使公民权利。
 4. 要以合法方式行使权利。

Tips

1. Citizens must respect the rights of others when exercising their rights.
2. Citizens shall not undermine the interests of the state, society and the collective while exercising their rights.
3. Citizens should exercise the rights to the extent permitted by law.
4. Citizens should exercise their rights in a lawful manner.

The unit ends with students reflecting on the notion of moral obligation, which is defined in the textbook as: “refer[ing] to the social members in accordance with social ethics, voluntarily assume the

responsibility of others, the community's moral responsibility.”

The final unit under review (Year 9, Unit 3) helps students understand how people can exercise being the “masters of the country.” The unit is structured by means of twelve straightforward questions and answers, following by advice to students. We reproduce questions 2 and 10:

(10)

2. 如何选出全国人大代表?

10. 为什么政府要依法执政?

2. How are the National People's Congress (NPC) deputies elected?

10. Why should the government administer according to the law?

If one examines the proposed answer to question 2 (*How are the National People's Congress (NPC) deputies elected?*), one can see that deputies (Members of the Congress), like in the “West,” are said to be elected directly (at county level) and indirectly through representatives at the national level. The latter are “elected by the people, responsible to the people and supervised by the people” (由人民选举, 对人民负责, 受人民监督).

For question 10 (*Why should the government administer according to the law?*), an answer in five parts is proposed: for the people, for administrators, for the government, for the country and for society at large. For each of these categories, the terms used are very much reminiscent of those used in the “West” to talk about democracy:

(11) For the people

It is good for the government to give top priority to the interests of the people and safeguard people's democratic supervision and other legal rights;

对人民: 有利于保障人民群众的权利和自由

For administrators

It is conducive to administer personnel in accordance with the law, they must be diligent and efficient, honest and serve the public, to prevent corruption from happening;

对于行政人员: 有利于加强廉政建设, 保证政府及其工作人员不变质, 增强政府的权威

For the government

It is conducive to listen to the voice of the government; they should work efficiently, and enhance their credibility;

对政府: 有利于防止行政权力的缺失和滥用

For the country

It is good to maintain legal authority, promoting the governance of the country according to the law and building a socialist country ruled by law;

对国家: 有利于带动全社会尊重法律、遵守法律、维护法律, 推动社会主义民主法制建设。

For society at large

It is conducive to ease social conflicts, safeguard social fairness and justice, promote social stability and build socialism;

Contributing to the building of an overall well-to-do society and the realization of socialist

modernization.

对广义的社会:有利于缓解社会矛盾,维护社会公平正义,促进社会稳定,建设社会主义。为全面建设小康社会和实现社会主义现代化做出贡献。

Words and phrases such as “the interests of the people,” “credibility,” “social justice,” “stability,” etc. are also often found in political and legal discourses in other parts of the world. The presence and mentioning of socialism give a special and different flavour to these statements, if compared to other contexts. But, again, because of the polysemy of many of these terms, Western societies also often face problems of application and interpretation (see our comment about gender equality in Finland in the previous section).

Conclusions

This article represents an attempt to problematize interculturality in a different light. The example of the contested idea of democracy is explored. To our knowledge this is the first attempt to describe what is happening in Chinese basic education in relation to democratic education. Our aim was not to condemn or defend the way it is understood and used in different contexts, but to hint at the need to decentre and to look at democracy in education critically, reflexively and interculturality. Actually, many of the observed elements in the Thoughts and Virtues textbooks for Chinese basic education share similarities with individual and legal discourses of democracy in other parts of the world. This is an important point: under the seemingly different, similarities often hide (Dervin, 2016). This article remained at the level of discourses found in textbooks and does not aim to generalise a certain understanding of democracy in China.

We believe that by describing, problematizing and discussing similarities and differences interculturality, we can learn to question our own perceptions and Western-centric, ethnocentric tendencies. This can also help us to be more modest about how we construct who we are and to accept that no context is perfect but that they all have advantages and disadvantages. The Chinese idiom 有則改之, 無則加勉 (correct any mistakes you made, but maintain your good record if you did not make them) can also guide us there.

The intercultural perspective should also help us to be more equipped to be critical towards “easy” and uncritical discourses about one’s own approach to democracy as it is constructed by the media, decision-makers and educators in relation to other approaches. The context of Finland which we know very well, is often opposed to the “Dragon” for being more democratic, more equal, more transparent. We believe that the Nordic country could also learn to question its own practices, which are often not as “good” as they are described by rankings and/or nation branders (Simpson, 2018). For instance, in its 2016/2017 report about Finland Amnesty International notes, amongst others, that services for women who have experienced violence (Finland is one of the worst countries in Europe in this matter) remained inadequate and under-resourced in the Nordic country (see <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/finland/report-finland/>).

In a global world like ours, learning *with* each other should be the basis of educational research and practice. A form of critical and reflexive interculturality that goes beyond mere differentialism, essentialism and ethnocentrism is needed more than ever (Holliday, 2010; Dervin, 2016). We strongly believe that the “West” could learn with the “Dragon,” should it be willing to (and vice-versa). At governmental levels, there needs to be more dialogue, more cooperation to negotiate the meaning of words and the ways these words are implemented in education. In academia, it would be important to spend time trying to spend quality time with each other to understand what we do in education. With

the increase in study abroad, young generations could play a central role in mediating between different spaces of knowledge. Many misunderstandings and biases could be avoided if such efforts were made.

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