

Fostering Interculturality in Foreign Language Teaching Literature in a Chinese Language Classroom

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Abstract Since its earlier theorizations in the 1990s, interculturality has gained increasing prominence in the field of foreign language pedagogy. Interculturality calls for the acquisition of a complex set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that makes any separation between language and culture in foreign language teaching untenable. This article examines the potential of literature for an intercultural approach to Chinese language teaching in Italian upper secondary school, also known as 'high school'. A reflection on what constitutes Chinese culture and the place of literature in the teaching of Chinese provides the background against which an empirical pedagogical experiment is presented. The teaching experience involves the use of a Chinese authentic literary text to promote an intercultural approach to two seemingly unrelated topics: Chinese New Year travel rush and sexual harassment. The activity shows the affordance of literature for developing an intercultural approach to diversity and complexity beyond simplification and orientalizing epistemologies.

Keywords Interculturality. Chinese as a foreign language. Literature. Italian upper secondary school. Sexual harassment.

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1 Introduction

Since its earlier theorizations as “intercultural communicative competence” (Byram 1997), the notion of interculturality has gained increasing prominence in foreign language pedagogy, as testified, for instance, by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Companion Volume* (hereafter CEFR, Council of Europe 2020). First published in 2001, in its latest iteration (2020), the CEFR ties the project of setting clear objectives and goals for language education to the urgency of promoting “plurilingual and intercultural education” (13). One of the key theoretical resources upon which the whole document is built is the *Guide for the Development and the Implementation of Curricula for Plurilingual and Intercultural Education* (2016), authored by Jean-Claude Beacco and Michael Byram, among others. In the *Guide*, while plurilingualism refers to “the ability to participate in different cultures” also by learning different languages,

Interculturality denotes the ability to experience otherness and diversity, analyse that experience and derive benefit from it. The intercultural competence acquired from doing this helps individuals to understand otherness better, establish cognitive and affective links between past and future experiences of that education, mediate between members of different social groups, and question the assumptions of their own cultural group and milieu. (Beacco et al. 2016, 20-1)

In such a definition, interculturality expresses the need to educate individuals who can mediate in situations of cultural diversity - thus preventing and/or overcoming conflict - and can effect social change by nurturing a model of active citizenship that is not constrained by national boundaries and cultures (Byram 2009). By emphasizing the encounter between languages and cultures in plurilingual and complex societies, interculturality has set new goals for foreign language teaching: the ideal intercultural speaker is not simply an individual who speaks a foreign language fluently, but someone who is able to mediate communication across languages and cultures and to understand diversity in a critical and reflexive fashion (Byram 2012; Balboni, Caon 2015). As a competence and a mode of interaction according to which understanding of the other’s language and culture is predicated upon understanding one’s own language and culture, interculturality calls for the acquisition of a complex set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that makes any separation between language and culture in foreign language teaching untenable. While the contours of such a reformed theoretical and discursive horizon are becoming clearer, the practical problem

of how to bring culture into the language classroom to promote intercultural learning is far from being solved.

Responding to this challenge, this article examines the potential of literature for an intercultural approach to Chinese language teaching in Italian upper secondary school (scuola secondaria di secondo grado), also known as 'high school'. A reflection on what constitutes Chinese culture and the place of literature in the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language will provide the background for a teaching experiment carried out in a high school in Milan in the spring of 2023. The activity involves the use of a Chinese authentic literary text to promote an intercultural approach to two seemingly unrelated topics: Chinese New Year travel rush (*chūnyùn* 春运) and sexual harassment. Specific criteria and objectives informed the selection of the text as well as the designing of activities aimed at enhancing students' motivation and active participation. Throughout, a deep connection was maintained between language and culture, offering the students multiple occasions for developing intercultural perspectives from which to appreciate the heterogeneous nature of the Chinese language, and to identify sites of linguistic and cultural tension and oppression, beyond national specificities.

2 Chinese Culture

Chinese culture is a central component of Chinese language curricula in Italian universities and high schools alike. These programs have sought to align the teaching and learning of Chinese to the guidelines that the CEFR has set for foreign language instruction, even though it was not conceived for non-European languages (Bulfony 2008, 148). While the CEFR remains a fundamental reference, another document is available to high schools in Italy: *Il sillabo della lingua cinese* (MIUR 2016).

The *Sillabo* spells out specific cultural topics that students engage with in each school year, envisioning different paths according to the particular orientation of the school. In Italy, Chinese is generally taught in 'linguistic high schools' (licei linguistici), from the first to the fifth year, and in 'technical institutes' (istituti tecnici) from the third to the fifth year. For students of the first two years (biennio) in linguistic high schools, the *Sillabo* recommends a focus on demographic, ethnic, and anthropological aspects of the Chinese culture. The suggested topics include the history of Chinese characters, dialects, geography, ethnic minorities, symbols of the Chinese state, the lunar calendar, the festivals, the horoscope, calligraphy and martial arts, as well as the phenomenon of Chinese migration (106). The same topics are recommended for the first year of Chinese in technical high schools. Starting from the third year, the study of Chinese culture

in linguistic high schools translates primarily into a study of history, philosophical traditions, and literature. In technical schools, the study of history is combined with a study of economic history, trade, tourism, relations East-West, and topical issues (108).

The *Sillabo* invites a two-pronged reflection on 1) what constitutes Chinese culture, and 2) how Chinese culture is taught. As the *Sillabo* reveals, Chinese culture is primarily understood in terms of facts (history), artifacts (literary and artistic), and practices (e.g., martial arts, festivals). This understanding of Chinese culture is corroborated by the various Chinese language textbooks that have been created for high school programs. Browsing a number of these textbooks,¹ one can immediately notice a tremendous investment in introducing Chinese culture by means of eye-catching images of Chinese cultural artifacts, alongside sections specially dedicated to the presentation of ‘cultural’ issues. However, by placing Chinese culture within specially dedicated ‘boxes’ in which culture can be apprehended as a transparent object of study, textbooks perform a process of reification and ‘othering’ of Chinese culture that seems to offer little opportunity for students to “unearth cultural assumptions in authoritative discourses” (Jin, Dervin 2017, 28). Here the problem of what constitutes Chinese culture becomes the problem of *how* to teach culture beyond orientalizing epistemologies. On this the *Sillabo* does not offer any methodological guidance.

Tackling the intertwined questions of how to define and how to teach Chinese culture, Zhang Lingfen (2022) suggests expanding the notion of culture to include ‘perspectives’ (values), along with products and practices (the three ‘P’), and drawing attention to how they are embedded or constructed in language in actual usage. Zhang’s suggestion is apt and well-timed. Her approach is intercultural in nature. Interculturality, understood as “teaching culture *through* language”, can help students realize that “culture is constructed in discourse”, and challenge their own assumptions and prejudices (Jin, Dervin 2017, 25; italics in the original). As such, it emerges as an effective approach to address complexity and to counter mechanisms of misrepresentation or mystification.

2.1 Literature for an Intercultural Approach to CFL

Even though literature has lost its former prestige in the era of communicative approaches, catalysing various attempts to (re)define literature and defend its value for language learning (Hall 2015; Naji, Subramaniam, White 2019; Paran 2008; Starr, Hu 2020), Chinese

¹ I have consulted Ambrosini et al. 2016; Masini et al. 2021; Varriano et al. 2022.

literature, as shown by the *Sillabo*, has been granted a prominent position in Chinese language curricula in Italian high school. Chinese literature is considered an effective tool to learn Chinese culture. This idea resonates with the claim that literature “helps learners to understand and appreciate other cultures, and perceive differences and commonalities between their own cultures and others” (Naji, Subramaniam, White 2019, 81). But as Naji, Subramaniam, and White emphasize, such claim can be supported only if literature is used interculturally to problematize the notion of ‘culture’ and defy assumptions (85).

Scholars have explored multiple ways in which literature can promote intercultural learning, showing, for example, how literature stimulates a better understanding of otherness (Burwitz-Meltzer 2001), how the practice of reading literary texts helps delineate a ‘third space’ “where the production of meaning emerges in the relationship between text and reader” (Matos 2005, 60), and how literature can engage the readers cognitively and affectively (Lodrović 2018).² While building on their findings, this article draws attention to literature’s ability to afford insights into the possibilities inherent in language to create, assert or subvert cultural identities. To this end, literature is approached as a discursive phenomenon that intervenes in processes of identity and cultural negotiation. Since culture designates an unstable, contested space where discursive forces compete with one another and with other forces – material, social, gender, and so on – reformulating literature as ‘discourse’, as Geoff Hall (2015) points out, can help connect literary study with the study of language and culture (134-7).

The study of literature, then, need not to be compartmentalized, along with culture, into a sphere that is isolated from the study of language. More importantly, the study of literature need not be restricted to translated texts and/or non-authentic texts, i.e., texts that have been created specifically for language learners. Authentic materials can provide benefits to language learners on several counts. Linguistically, they can expose students to ‘real language’, with positive effects on the acquisition of linguistic and pragmalinguistic competences (Gilmore 2007).³ They can also stimulate motivation and emotional engagement (Mishan 2005, 21-41). The cultural benefits seem almost obvious.

As one kind of authentic material, literature can yield multiple linguistic, cultural, and intercultural learning opportunities. But

2 See also Matos, Melo-Pfeifer 2020 for more recent discussions on literature and intercultural learning in language education.

3 See Huang 2018 for an extensive discussion on the main arguments in favour and against the usage of authentic materials.

literary language is considered more difficult than ordinary language. The correlation between everyday language and simplicity is called into question by Bazant-Kimmel (2018). She shows how attempts to imagine a basic user of Chinese who is able to read ‘short’ and ‘simple’ texts, on the basis of the descriptors provided by the CEFR for basic users (level A2), are problematic because

intelligible, everyday functional texts are not simple, in that the everyday vocabulary and structures learned in beginners’ communicative classes (*kǒuyǔ* 口语, spoken language) do not match those of Chinese written texts. (213)

Awareness of the way literature cuts across registers and styles invites us to pursue the possibilities that literature offers for an intercultural approach to the teaching and learning of Chinese language and culture. Literature, in this experiment, is not employed to make stylistic claims or to illuminate an author’s standing within a certain literary and cultural tradition, but as an instantiation of authentic production and as a discourse that can open a window into cultural and social issues whose import can be discussed interculturally.

3 A Teaching Experiment

To explore literature’s affordances to an intercultural approach to the teaching and learning of Chinese language and culture, a teaching experiment was carried out in a high school in Milan in the spring of 2023. Due to its outstanding reputation, the school attracts students from various areas, in and out of the city of Milan. Enrolment, however, is limited, and students are selected by means of an admission test. In spite of an appearance of elitism, the school boasts a varied composition of students, many of whom choose Chinese as a major.

One of the most popular high schools for the teaching of Chinese in Milan and throughout Italy, the ‘Polo Civico’ provided an ideal context for an experimental teaching intervention. With the aid of one of the Chinese language teachers at the school, Emanuele Marsili, a short lesson sequence aimed at promoting intercultural learning via literature was created and implemented.

3.1 Methodology

We worked with a class of fifth-year students, aged 18-19, all born in Italy. In terms of gender distribution, the majority were female: of the twenty students who participated in the activities, only five were male. They were majoring in foreign languages (linguistic

curriculum) and had been studying Chinese from their first year, reaching a lower-intermediate level of proficiency. At the beginning of the experiment, the students, who had reached the age of majority, provided their consensus to participate in the activities and share their work with me for the purpose of writing this piece.

The lesson sequence was created around a short story by contemporary woman writer Zhang Tianyi 张天翼 (1984-), “I Only Want to Sit Down” (*Wǒ zhǐ xiǎng zuòxià* 我只想坐下, 2021). The sequence comprised four activities: 1) reading comprehension; 2) in-class debate; 3) in-class translation, and 4) questionnaire. First, using the method of flipped learning, we asked the students to read the text and do a number of reading comprehension exercises on their own, outside the class. The flipped classroom method was chosen to stimulate independent engagement with the materials and a reading experience unaffected by predetermined interpretive frameworks. The independent reading of the text was followed by an in-class debate that constituted a key moment in the pursuit of an intercultural reflection, and a crucial site to register students’ responses and attitudes. After the debate, at a different meeting, the students worked in small groups and translated the text from Chinese to Italian. This activity was not so much designed to assess the students’ translation skills – even though the search for an appropriate rendition in Italian is in and of itself a practice that demands intercultural reflection/awareness (Borghetti, Lertola 2014) – as to promote cooperation among peers and develop motivation. At the end of the sequence, to collect further feedback, students filled out an anonymous questionnaire that was circulated via email.

As an experiment bound to a particular group and a specific context, the experience cannot provide generalizable, universal results. That said, observation and note-taking have been coupled with the analysis of the products of the students’ work (exercises and translation) and their anonymous feedback to verify the potential of literature for intercultural learning.

3.2 Choosing a Text

The selection of the text was made according to the following criteria: 1) the popularity and impact of the text in China (among native speakers); 2) the potential of the text for an intercultural reflection; 3) the possibility it offers to articulate interculturality in terms of ‘active citizenship’, that is, to foster among learners a sense of responsibility and active participation “in their own immediate community and in the international or supra-national communities” (Byram 2020, 595), as recommended by national and European guidelines

for school teaching;⁴ 4) a textual complexity that students can manage; and 5) a length that allows relatively fast reading in light of the limited amount of time allocated for the sequence (about six hours). Zhang Tianyi's "I Only Want to Sit Down" matches most of the selection criteria, except for the length, as illustrated below.

To begin with, the story received much attention in China, quickly gaining in popularity. It has reached a score of 8.5/10 on *Dòubàn* 豆瓣, a Chinese platform where users can rate books, movies, and other media. The story unfolds against the backdrop of the Chinese New Year 'travel rush' that sees millions of Chinese people - especially migrant workers - return to their hometowns. Chinese New Year is a popular topic in Chinese language classes, yet approaches to the festival invariably veer toward the presentation of standardized images of dumpling-making and happy family reunions. What Chinese New Year may mean for many Chinese who struggle to find tickets to return home and, until the recent extraordinary expansion of the high-speed rail network, had to endure long journeys before reaching their homes, is obscured by most textbooks for Chinese language learners.

By shifting attention from dumpling-making and simplified images of happy reunions to people's travels, the hardships of uncomfortable journeys on hard seats, as well as to the myriad of activities that keep Chinese people busy during the long journey, Zhang's story presents a picture of Chinese New Year that replaces stereotyping with a representation of material culture and living human experience. For this reason, the story provides a unique opportunity to help students approach Chinese New Year in a new light, stimulating a reflection on material culture, human habits and experiences that lend themselves to intercultural interpretation.

In the context of the travel rush, the story zooms in on the specific experience of a female college student named Zhan Lili 詹立立, who suffers from sexual harassment on the train home. The events are narrated mainly from her perspective. Unable to buy a train ticket that includes a hard seat (*yìngzuò* 硬座), Lili is forced to travel standing. The journey home is too long and painful to be endured without a seat. Yet, after a series of circumstances Lili takes a seat in the ticket inspector's cabin, at his cordial invitation. The inspector, who has won the girl's trust by kindly offering his seat, will turn out to be the predator who takes advantage of an exhausted Lili, and while she is asleep, touches her leg. Awakened by the touch, Lili, however, does

⁴ Nationally, L. 92/2019 has set up clear goals for civic education in Italian schools of all levels and grades, emphasizing the importance of fostering conscious citizenship. Details on the law, the official guidelines, and other relevant materials can be found at https://www.istruzione.it/educazione_civica/. The European Commission's guidelines on citizenship education can be read at https://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/pdf/citizenship_education_in_europe_en.pdf.

not push the inspector away. This moment is incredibly significant. Lili accepts being touched for the sake of keeping the seat. The story's finale is a fascinating moment that offers productive opportunities to reflect on the multiple possibilities of language as an instrument of creativity and oppression. The analysis can be articulated interculturally, also by stimulating a reflection on the phenomenon of gendered violence in and outside of China, and how it can be combatted in everyday life ('active citizenship').

Finally, even though the text presents a level of difficulty that the students could manage, Zhang's story is a bit too long for a short teaching sequence. Significant passages were selected and assembled into a narrative flow that put into relief the episodes that are conducive to the intercultural reflection. Indeed, shortening the story is an intervention that alters the original text. However, at the level of sentences or paragraphs, nothing was modified. The authenticity of the language, if not of the text, was preserved.

3.3 Learning Objectives and Learning Materials

In alignment with the sought-after integrated, intercultural approach to the teaching/learning of Chinese language and culture, we set clear learning objectives aimed at promoting the development of linguistic/communicative, cultural, and intercultural competences. While evoking Byram's formulation of "linguistic competence", "sociolinguistic competence", and "discourse competence" (1997, 48) and his model of intercultural competence articulated in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (34), the objectives cut across divisions between linguistic/communicative, cultural, and intercultural competences, underscoring their intersection and interdependence.

Students will:

- Learn lexicon and expressions related to travelling in China by train (linguistic/communicative competence).
- Be able to identify and analyse passages that describe how travel rush is experienced (linguistic/communicative, cultural competence).
- Become aware of the fluid and heterogeneous nature of Chinese language and culture (linguistic/communicative, cultural competence).
- Become aware of the discursive nature of language - Chinese and otherwise (linguistic, cultural, intercultural competence).
- Recognize moments of tension in the text, by pointing out the specific language used and how it is used (linguistic/communicative, intercultural competence).
- Learn about the phenomenon of 'Spring Festival travel rush' beyond cultural stereotypes (cultural, intercultural competence).

- Be able to reflect interculturally on Chinese New Year and migrations of people (linguistic/communicative, cultural, and intercultural competence).
- Reflect critically on sexual harassment as portrayed in the text and as a phenomenon that may interest women (and men?) in and outside of China (intercultural competence).
- Develop motivation and interest (intercultural competence).

We decided to let the students familiarize themselves with the text on their own before the in-class discussion. It was also decided not to attach to the text a list of (new) words coupled with their Italian translations. To promote a *gestalt* approach to the text, that is, an appreciation of the narrative as a whole (Mezzadri 2022, 143), we only provided a few reading comprehension exercises to be done at home *after* the reading experience. The exercises were carefully and thoughtfully designed to guide the students toward a general comprehension of the text, while impressing on them a few specific images and terms that would be crucial to carrying out the in-class discussion (see Appendix).

The first set of exercises consists of multiple-choice questions designed to encourage the students to identify some general elements of the story. The second exercise highlights a few terms/expressions that students must use to fill gaps in sentences unrelated to the text. The third exercise is made up of three questions: the first question asks what kind of train tickets Chinese people can buy; the second question revolves around the activities that Chinese people engage in while travelling by train; the last question asks what Lili experiences on the train. The question format was chosen to stimulate the students to return to the terms/expressions already encountered in the previous exercises as they formulate their own answers. Finally, the fourth exercise lists several terms extracted from the text and asks the students to find their opposites in the text. The sequence of exercises was built around a few issues and a limited number of keywords to trigger a process of understanding and simultaneous consolidation of a few crucial terms to prepare the students for the in-class debate.

3.4 Students' Production and Debate

In order to maintain a relaxed atmosphere throughout, submission of the exercises was not required but desired. At the end of the week, nine students handed in the assigned exercises. The students' responses reveal a good general comprehension of the text.

Of the multiple-choice questions, the second one - about the type of ticket bought by Lili - caused the most misunderstandings. The

expression ‘without a seat’ (*wú zuò* 无座) proved to be challenging or confusing for several students, likely because *wu* in *wu zuo*, standing for ‘have not’ or ‘there is not’, is one of those literary function words that is presented, if at all, at an advanced stage of the curriculum (Bazant-Kimmel 2018).

Students fared pretty well in the first two exercises. Although students encountered difficulties at the level of language details and specific linguistic usages, unawareness or ignorance of those details did not affect their overall understanding of the text, as the third exercise suggests.

Strikingly, all the students responded correctly to the questions in the third exercise, demonstrating a good grasp of the events narrated in the text. As an example, let us examine the students’ answers to the third question (“What does Zhan Lili experience on the train?”, *Zhān Lìlì zài huǒchē shàng jīnglì le shénme* 詹立立在火车上经历了什么). One response goes: “She suffers sexual harassment” (*tā shòudào xìng sāorǎo* 她受到性骚扰). The student used the Chinese expression ‘sexual harassment’ (*xìng sāorǎo* 性骚扰) that, to our knowledge, they had never encountered before. The student must have looked up the expression, but such a search was necessarily predicated upon their correct understanding of what the short story portrays. At least three students, used the same words encountered in the first exercise to explain what the protagonist experiences on the train: “she lets the passenger seated next to her touch her leg” (*ràng zuò zài tā pángbiān de chéngkè mō tā de tǔi* 让坐在她旁边的乘客摸她的腿). They could not come up with a different phrasing and relied entirely on the language we provided in the exercise worksheet, but their answer reflects not only comprehension of the issue at stake but also their ability to make good use of the previous exercises.

Surprisingly, the activity that proved most challenging was the last one: students struggled to identify sets of opposites in the text. Recognizing this challenge was crucial to rethinking how to facilitate the in-class discussion. A PPT presentation made of ten slides was designed to support the in-class discussion. Images and keywords served as prompts that helped the students refresh some of the details of the story. Reconstruction of the storyline constituted the first part of the in-class discussion. Students participated actively, using Chinese as much as they could. The second part of the discussion was devoted to cultural and historical contents, mainly presented by the instructors. Finally, the third part pushed the conversation toward the role that everyday behaviour and language play in perpetuating discrimination, violence, and oppression.

Aware of the difficulties that students had encountered in parsing the lexicon in a meaningful way, we designed a slide specifically to assist the students to discern tensions and contradictions in language and critically reflect on what language can do and how it does it.

可另一种无声的噪音越来越响，那是**屈辱与气愤**的叫嚷。……
你要想明白了，如果撕破脸，就得走！走出这个明亮舒适的地方，
走向无所依靠、无可归属的浊臭里，重新用两只刚消肿的脚站着，
痛苦地站着。

她的呼吸慢慢平息下去，心想，这倒不错，家里可以传下去的火车的故事，又多一个了。二十年后她给别人讲这故事的时候，总会嘴角往下撇着**笑**，说：老娘卖半条腿，换个包厢软座，值了。再说，隔着牛仔褲秋褲，他个傻×能摸出啥来？

Figure 1 PPT presentation, slide no. 8

The slide visualizes the final section of the story divided into two discernable parts. We used different colours to highlight terms that express feelings or a mood (this activity could be done interactively with the students in class): red for negative feelings, blue for positive feelings. The first passage represents Lili's first response to the physical violation. She is upset. So we find terms such as *qūrǔ* 屈辱 (humiliation) or *qìfèn* 气愤 (indignation). In the following section terms such as *píngxī* 平息 (to calm down) or *xiào* 笑 (to smile) instead seem to index a shift toward positive feelings. The change of register calls attention to itself and became the occasion to reflect more deeply and critically about what language does in this text. It did not take long for the students to see that if the first paragraph reflects Lili's spontaneous reaction, the second represents the moment when Lili sets aside her most authentic feelings to internalize a language that is not entirely her own. The second section in fact stages Lili's decision to accept the man's behaviour in order to keep her seat. The language of outrage and indignation is thus replaced by an ironic, seemingly playful language that enables her to turn what she is experiencing into one of those "train stories" (Zhang 2022, 199) that she will recount with a smile on her face.⁵ In the scene she conjures up in her mind, she sees herself summarize the event as such: "I exchanged (*huàn* 换) half a leg for a soft seat, it was worth it (*zhí le* 值了)" (199). The language of economic transaction did not escape the students' attention. We had a lively conversation on the usage of the verb *huàn* (to change, to exchange for) and the striking fact that the transaction

⁵ Translations from Chinese to Italian and from Italian to English are by the Author.

involves a bodily part. One question was then asked to the students: “Which section of this text strikes you as more violent or oppressive?” (using both Italian and Chinese). The students, without a shadow of doubt, perceived the second paragraph – the one that is linguistically built around seemingly positive feelings – as especially oppressive.

Zhang’s text and the ambiguities suggested by its language offered a unique occasion to reflect on the way we speak and what words can do, regardless of whether we use Chinese or Italian. The debate landed on two final questions (raised in Chinese): “Does she have a choice?” and “What would you do if you were Lili?”. We registered divergences in the students’ responses to the first question. Most of the students felt that Lili’s compromise was necessary. A few students suggested that she could have tried to report the fact to the police. Finally, addressing the last question, students found it hard to imagine a satisfactory solution or ending.

The debate succeeded in making the students aware of the possibilities of language as a tool that constructs realities rather than simply reflecting them. The Chinese short story then became an occasion to think interculturally about language, sexual harassment, and gender discourses, and to realize that transformation in a society depends as much on the way we behave as on the way we speak. More importantly, the difficulty of finding a satisfactory solution productively helped the students to address certain phenomena in their complexity, without simplification.

After the debate, at a different meeting, the students collaborated in small groups and translated the text. The translation, which turned out to be quite good, created a space in which students exchanged ideas on how to render the text previously discussed. Their translation shows not simply a correct grasp of the events, but also precision in the way specific details are rendered. The fluidity of their translation proves that, in spite of the apparent difficulties of the text, students felt competent enough to translate an authentic Chinese text.

3.5 Students’ Feedback

At the end of the sequence, the students filled out an anonymous questionnaire in Italian. Participation in the survey was voluntary. Thirteen students participated. Overall, their assessment is fairly positive and very useful in understanding the strengths and the weaknesses of the activities. For instance, answering the first question about what they had found especially interesting and/or formative about the teaching sequence, most of the students pointed either to intercultural comparison or to the debate. As the graph below shows, 54% of the students thought that the intercultural comparison was the most interesting event of the sequence, while 31% of the students

felt that the debate as a whole constituted the most interesting part. This result clearly shows that students appreciated being pushed toward a way of thinking that reveals nuances rather than relying on simplifications.

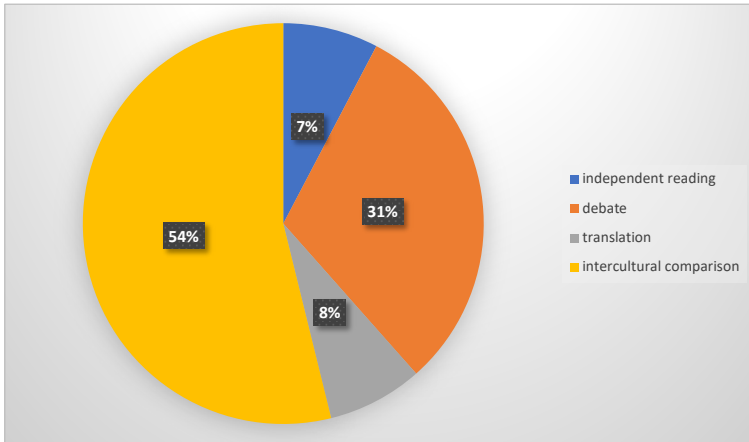


Figure 2 Students' answers to the first question

Interestingly, to the question included in the questionnaire of whether Lili could have acted differently and whether the story could lead to different outcomes, should it happen on a train in Italy, one student responded (in Italian):

Lili's response to violence, in my opinion, is not determined by a specific cultural belonging, but by a feeling of fear, a feeling that does not know borders. I don't think I would change the finale if the story was set in Italy, because any change would downplay the fear of reacting and the sense of paralysis in the face of a similar event. Each person responds in their own way, but that does not rule out the fact that personal relativism has its own limits, especially if one belongs to what is still deemed the 'second' sex.

The student's thoughtful reflection on the relation between 'personal relativism' and gender and sexual identity is fascinating and did not come up - at least not in these terms - during the debate.

Indeed, the experiment was not without shortcomings. It would be worthwhile to think of better ways to tie specific topics to events or cultural products that belong to the Italian context/tradition, for example by mobilizing Italian literary narratives, movies, and legislation on sexual harassment. Time constraints posed a challenge to

the thorough development of the project. However, these limitations only remind us that, under different conditions, the teaching intervention could have led to even more substantial results.

4 Concluding Remarks

This article offered a new reflection on the place and the possibilities of interculturality as a competence and an analytical perspective in foreign language education. Focusing on the specific field of Chinese as a foreign language instruction, it has drawn attention to the urgency of an integrated approach to the teaching/learning of Chinese language and culture via interculturality. A teaching experiment showed the potential of literature to develop an intercultural approach to diversity and complexity beyond simplification and stereotyping. The value of the experiment rests in the effort it has made to explore the possibilities of teaching in an intercultural direction. It has contributed to a teaching plan and ideas that can inspire instructors and students alike in developing new strategies and techniques aimed at promoting interculturality in foreign language education.

Appendix: Exercises

1. 选择正确答案

- 在课文第一段中主人公詹立立在哪儿？
 - 医院
 - 饭店
 - 火车站
 - 学校
- 最后詹立立买什么票？
 - 卧铺
 - 无座
 - 软座
 - 硬座
- 詹立立回家过什么节日？
 - 春节
 - 端午节
 - 中秋节
 - 圣诞节
- 下列哪个活动不是乘客做的？
 - 打扑克牌
 - 吃瓜子
 - 织毛活
 - 画画
- 课文中的“撕破脸”是什么意思？
 - 让人感到满意
 - 得罪别人并绝交
 - 打扰别人
 - 让人感到无聊
- 对詹立立来说,为了不放弃自己的座位她不得不接受什么？
 - 让她坐在她旁边的乘客摸她的腿
 - 给一个乘客钱
 - 跟一个乘客交朋友
 - 给警察打电话

2. 请选择合适的词语填空

熬 彼此 热乎乎 一动不动 撕破脸

- 我们只见过一次, () 不是很了解。
- () 夜会损害身体健康。
- 小狗坐在我的拖鞋上, () 地看着我。
- 两个国家之间的关系越来越不好, 似乎要彻底 () 。
- 冬天的时候, 因为有暖气, 房间里面 () 的。

3. 回答问题

- 在中国坐火车旅游可以选择买什么样的票？
- 火车上的乘客怎么打发时间？
- 詹立立在火车上经历了什么？

4. 请写出下列词汇的反义词 (可以在课文中找到)

肉体 ≠
悲哀 ≠
痛苦 ≠

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