Re-examining Intercultural Competence in Mainland China through Actor-Network Theory

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Abstract: This study advances a re-conceptualization of intercultural competence as an emergent, relational practice constituted within dynamic networks of interaction. Employing a conceptual methodology informed by Actor-Network Theory (ANT), it proposes a perspective that considers both human and non-human actors/actants, including technological artifacts, semiotic and linguistic resources, institutional structures, and spatial-material configurations- as integral to the production of intercultural agency and meaning. This perspective highlights how intercultural competence is enacted through networks and assemblages, emphasizing its distributed, performative, and contextually contingent nature. Rather than relying on essentialist, individual-centered paradigms that conceptualize competence as a stable attribute rooted in the accumulation of cultural knowledge and personal experience, which often reinforce static cultural categories and perpetuate stereotypes, this study employs ANT to shift emphasis from the autonomous individual to the assemblages through which communicative agency is enacted. By destabilizing subject-centered assumptions, the proposed framework offers a more nuanced theoretical account attuned to the complexities of intercultural communication in increasingly hybrid, technologized, and interconnected environments.

Keywords: Intercultural Competence, Actor Network Theory, Culture, Assemblage, Narrative, Heterogeneous

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1. Introduction

Intercultural competence is widely regarded as a fundamental skill in the 21st century and a critical asset in today's increasingly globalized world. As individuals engage more frequently with people from diverse cultural backgrounds shaped by varying values, beliefs, and lived experiences, the cultivation of intercultural competence seeks to dismantle persistent barriers such as xenophobia, ethnocentrism, and prejudice (Hajisoteriou and Angelides, 2020, p.251). In the realm of higher education, this competence is viewed as essential for students to navigate complex global challenges, participate meaningfully in an interconnected international system, and effectively resolve intercultural conflicts (Council of Europe, 2008; Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). Beyond its utility for global workforce preparation, intercultural competence contributes to the construction of a harmonious international community, grounded in respect, mutual understanding, and culturally meaningful interactions (e.g., Buchtel, 2014; Demetry & Vaz, 2017; Wang & Kulich, 2015).

In the context of mainland China[2], intercultural competence predominantly incorporates and applies key theoretical perspectives originating from European and American scholars, including influential theorists such as Deardorff, Byram, and Bennett. These dominant theories conceptualize intercultural competence mainly as the ability to communicate and interact effectively across cultural boundaries, with a strong emphasis placed on individual language proficiency, behavioral appropriateness, and attitudinal orientation. For instance, Deardorff (2006) defines intercultural competence as the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills, and attitudes that result in behavior and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions. Byram (1997) emphasizes linguistic competence as a central component of intercultural understanding, asserting that such competence includes knowledge of others and oneself, skills to interpret and relate, skills to discover and interact, the ability to value different cultural perspectives, and the capacity to relativize one's cultural position. Similarly, Leung, Ang, and Tan (2014) define intercultural competence as the ability to operate effectively across different cultural environments, both domestically and internationally. Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003) frame it as the ability to think and act in culturally appropriate ways. These models have significantly shaped the way intercultural competence is understood in China and resonate with the broader objectives of modernization, such as fostering citizenship, embracing cultural diversity, and promoting coexistence with different communities. However, by focusing largely on individual performance and internal traits, these approaches tend to avoid engaging with broader political or structural dimensions.

It becomes evident that the dominant conceptualizations of intercultural competence emphasize the individual as the central actor, while underestimating or ignoring factors that exist beyond the individual level. Moreover, intercultural competence is often treated as a

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[2]For the sake of readability and conciseness, "China" hereafter refers to Mainland China in this article.

fixed reality, reflected through the actual experiences of cultural encounters that individuals from different backgrounds engage in. For example, when a Chinese and an American person meet, the interaction is frequently interpreted as an exchange between "Chinese culture" and "American culture," as though each individual inherently carries a culturally distinct identity. Similarly, when students express a desire to learn French, they are often assumed to be engaging with a singular, monolithic "French culture," despite the fact that French-speaking people and French cultural expressions extend far beyond the geographic borders of France. These examples illustrate a static conceptualization of culture, one in which cultures are perceived as pre-existing, bounded entities, and intercultural interactions are seen as exchanges between these already-defined cultural containers. As Hall (1959, p. 169) famously stated, "culture is communication and communication is culture." In this view, intercultural communication is not the result of pre-existing cultural differences, but rather, it is through communication that cultural difference is created and understood (Hall, 1992, p. 281). Thus, the central issue is not identifying the cultures that are supposedly interacting, but instead examining how cultural interactions are produced and constructed through the communicative process itself.

However, prevailing definitions tend to reify culture as a completed and stable entity, viewing intercultural communication (跨文化) as the natural result of encounters between individuals bearing these culturally fixed identities. Mainstream theories of intercultural competence similarly present cultural exchange as a neutral and organic outcome of human social development. In doing so, they present culture as a human practice enabled by language and depicted as a static product. These perspectives also portray individuals in intercultural encounters as agents who act according to predetermined cultural scripts grounded in the values and orientations of their social groups. Moreover, such theories implicitly suggest that communication within intercultural contexts is a predictable process in which individuals position themselves as representatives of clearly defined cultural collectives (Baraldi, 2015, p. 52).

In practical terms, today's global challenges, including economic interdependence, ecological crises, transnational security threats, the COVID-19 pandemic, and regional and international conflicts, have exposed the limitations of such conceptualizations. These crises have stripped away the supposed neutrality of intercultural encounters and revealed enduring inequalities, injustice, xenophobia, and racism that existing models of intercultural competence have largely failed to address. Consequently, despite decades of investment in intercultural training and education, our current understanding of intercultural competence remains inadequate in addressing contemporary global challenges, especially those involving political, structural, and contextual complexities.

Given these limitations, it is crucial to move beyond conventional, individual-centered approaches to intercultural competence and re-examine how this concept is generated, sustained, and operationalized within broader systems. Actor-Network Theory (ANT), as developed by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law, provides a powerful framework to disrupt traditional epistemologies by incorporating both human and non-human actors into the analysis. ANT challenges binary thinking and essentialist assumptions, allowing scholars to rethink the relationships between actors and the networks they constitute. Rather than merely expanding our understanding of who can act, ANT compels us to investigate how heterogeneous entities, including people, technologies, institutions, texts, spaces, and symbols, interact and assemble into meaningful networks that produce intercultural competence.

ANT directs attention to the relational dynamics in which actors are embedded, focusing on how those actors influence, shape, and participate in network formation. It presents the world as composed of hybrid entities that include both social and material components (Latour, 2005). In this theoretical framework, an actor-network includes and connects humans and non-humans indiscriminately. As Callon (1986, p. 20) asserts, there is no ontological distinction between human and material entities or between the social and the natural. Law (1992, p. 383) further defines an "actant" as an effect produced by a network of heterogeneous, interacting elements. What is central in ANT is not the fixed identity or self-awareness of the actor, but its agency, defined through relational positioning with others. In this sense, roles are not predetermined; they are enacted and redefined through interactions.

This theoretical lens enables a shift in understanding intercultural competence in China, not as a natural, individual quality, but as a socially and materially constructed phenomenon. ANT helps illustrate how intercultural competence is assembled through networks of historical, institutional, technological, and symbolic actors that actively shape meaning. Within this model, the individual is not the primary or most essential subject but is instead one among many actors involved in the construction and maintenance of the network.

Through this perspective, one gains insight into why intercultural competence in China has developed in its current form. Traditional models interpret culture as a finished product and regard intercultural communication as the outcome of interactions between individuals bearing these pre-fabricated cultural packages. In contrast, ANT views culture as the result of networked interactions, always in flux, always negotiated. Accordingly, the development of intercultural competence is not an isolated, individual task but a collective effort involving a multiplicity of actors, including people, governments, institutions, media, policies, language programs, and technological infrastructures. These networks jointly constitute what is recognized as intercultural competence.

Furthermore, ANT encourages us to reconsider the explanation of culture as a product of class, geography, or nationality. Rather than seeing culture as something that arises from these categories, ANT prompts us to examine how culture is constructed in practice, through actions, expressions, performances, and material arrangements. To fully understand intercultural competence, then, one must follow how these networks are built and maintained, and how different actors contribute to this process through ongoing negotiation, alignment, and translation.

2. Main Debate on the Concept of Intercultural Competence

Since the beginning of intercultural competence research, scholars have been trying to define intercultural competence comprehensively and understand its meaning. They have put forward a variety of definitions but have yet to reach a consensus. The exploration and debate continue. Among them, several concepts are related to intercultural communication in English and Chinese. The most commonly used today is *intercultural*, which includes *cross-cultural* and *trans-cultural*, all translated as 跨文化 in Chinese. The Chinese term for intercultural communication is also a matter of debate. Some translate

it as 跨文化交际, others as 跨文化沟通, and others as 跨文化交流 and 跨文化传播. Some scholars argue that the different translations imply different research orientations. For example, 跨文化交际 and 跨文化沟通 focus on interpersonal interactions, 跨文化交流 focuses not only on interpersonal interactions but also on intercultural interactions between organizations and even countries, and 跨文化传播 focuses mainly on intercultural interactions achieved through the mass media. Another concept related to intercultural studies in English is *cross-cultural communication*. According to Gudykunst's (2004) distinction, *intercultural communication* emphasizes intercultural interaction, while *cross-cultural communication* emphasizes intercultural comparison. So, an accurate translation of *cross-cultural communication studies* would be *comparative cultural studies*, although some scholars use the two concepts indiscriminately. Moreover, *trans-cultural communication* complicates the conceptual issues. In English literature, the concept concerns the phenomenon of mingling or intermingling of cultures. These concepts intersect with each other, and ambiguity persists.

Another controversial point is whether *intercultural communicative competence* and *intercultural competence* are two different concepts. Fantini (2000) and Kim (2001) considered that *intercultural communicative competence* and *intercultural competence* are two ways of saying the same concept. In Fantini and Kim's view, *intercultural communication skills* are used interchangeably, and only *intercultural communicative competence* is more focused on language communication, while the other stresses the purpose of cultural communication. In his early research, Byram also often used *intercultural competence* and *intercultural communication* interchangeably. However, in recent years, he proposed in his research that foreign language education is transforming and should shift from language education to intercultural citizenship education. A foreign language is not only a tool for communication but also an essential component of cultural competence. Based on this cognition, his related works in recent years use the term *intercultural competence* instead of *intercultural communicative competence*. Some Chinese scholars, such as Yang and Zhuang (2007, p. 16), believe that equalizing *intercultural communicative ability* and *intercultural competence* is conducive to liberating our concepts from the narrow vision of language communication. It can remind us not only to focus on language communication skills but also to pay attention to intercultural awareness, thinking ability, and non-verbal communication skills. While Jiang (2013, p. 20), based on distinguishing *intercultural communicative competence* and *intercultural competence*, refines the classification of intercultural competence from different dimensions and summarizes the tripartite method: attitude, skills, and knowledge, and binary classification of intercultural competence: general abilities and specific abilities, and subject classification dimensions. The research emphasizes that the analysis of the components of intercultural competence cannot be separated from the human subject. Intercultural competence needs to be reflected in people's practice. According to the classification of intercultural competence, it is proposed that the cultivation of intercultural competence should not only pay attention to the structure of intercultural competence but also focus on the subject of intercultural competence.

Furthermore, intercultural competence is viewed as a personal characteristic of communicators, such as openness, sensitivity, knowledge, flexibility, and cooperation (Howard-Hamilton et al., 1998; Hunter et al., 2006). Some scholars argue about intrinsic human potential and extrinsic effects, such as Gudykunst (1998), who argues that intercultural competence is communicative effectiveness and that competence and effectiveness are almost equivalent and interchangeable concepts. While Deardorff (2006, pp. 247–248) defines intercultural competence as the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills, and attitudes that lead to visible behavior and communication that are effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions. Other scholars, on the other hand, argue that intercultural competence is not the external effectiveness of communicative acts but the communicator's inner literacy, potential, and strength of personality (Gao, 1998; Yang, 2012).

When using the term *intercultural competence*, scholars overlook its indiscriminate universalization, despite its varied meanings and historical-political contexts. In mainland China, though some have noted the limitations of the individual-centered view, this perspective still dominates research.

3. The Research State on Intercultural Competence in China

Intercultural studies in China are a relatively young and increasingly popular field. They encompass various aspects such as cultural communication, foreign language acquisition, and cultural comparison. Additionally, the study of intercultural competence is inseparable from the broader scope of intercultural studies; it is an essential component and is generally interconnected with intercultural communication. In contemporary research, interdisciplinary collaboration is a notable feature of intercultural competence due to the widespread interest it has garnered across various disciplines. Judging from current studies, research on intercultural competence spans across various fields. However, based on existing academic achievements, the theory and practice of intercultural competence have primarily evolved within two disciplinary scopes: intercultural communication and foreign language education, particularly within the context of foreign language teaching and international Chinese education.

Current research on intercultural competence in China is mainly influenced by the US and Europe, including the construction of concepts, methods, and models. There are relatively few theoretical constructions of intercultural competence developed within China, and most rely heavily on the achievements of European and American scholars. The 1980s marked a promising period for the study of intercultural communication in China. Scholars engaged in foreign language teaching and research, such as He Daokuan and Hu Wenzhong, introduced this emerging discipline from the West to China in the early 1980s (Dai, 2018, p. 23), and Chinese scholars began to apply theories and methods of intercultural communication, such as those of Edward Hall (1959) and Geert Hofstede (2001), in an effort to construct an intercultural model suitable for their own national context. However, to a large extent, they still did not break away from the Western theoretical framework.

On the other hand, many scholars have begun to explore how cultural contexts affect foreign language learning and teaching by focusing on the relationship between language and culture, which provides a solid foundation for research on intercultural competence in foreign language acquisition. China began conducting meaningful research on intercultural competence at the beginning of the new century, and this research has mainly been concentrated in the field of foreign language teaching. Chinese scholars pay attention to intercultural competence in individual development, its evaluation and measurement, and related issues concerning the cultivation of intercultural competence in the language domain (Jiang, 2017; Zhang & Yao, 2020; Li, 2021; Ren, 2018; Meng, 2021; Yang & Zhuang, 2007).

In recent years, increasing attention has also been paid to exploring intercultural competence in teaching Chinese as a foreign language (international Chinese education) in China. The leading scholars in this area are Hu Wenzhong and Zu Xiaomei. The textbooks they have authored remain the primary materials used in intercultural courses across Chinese universities. In their conceptualization of intercultural competence, Hu Wenzhong (2013) defines it as the individual's ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds. In contrast, Zu Xiaomei (2003) argues that intercultural competence, in addition to communicative ability, should also include knowledge, attitudes, cultural awareness, and other dimensions.

In addition, assessment models are continuously emerging in China. Chinese scholars, influenced by foreign models, such as M. J. Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity development, Byram's model of intercultural competence, and Darla K. Deardorff's Pyramid Model, have been committed to developing ways of measuring and evaluating intercultural competence. This has led to the creation of numerous assessment tools. Examples include: Chen and Starosta's integrated model of intercultural communication competence; Chen's model of global communicative competence; Gao and Wu's intercultural competence model of Chinese expatriates; Yang's model for building intercultural competence in Company F; Li and Tang's review on the theory and modeling of expatriate competence; Li's empirical research on expatriate intercultural competence; Zhao's theoretical and empirical study of Chinese expatriates' competency model; Xiao and Zhang's componential model of intercultural competence in international business; and Luo's Guanxi-based model of intercultural competence in business contexts.

In all of these models, the individual-centered approach is apparent. On one hand, intercultural competence is treated as a procedural system in which individual abilities are categorized into specific domains. For instance, many models incorporate affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions within a comprehensive intercultural competence framework (Gertsen, 1990). On the other hand, some models emphasize the context of interaction or highlight the interdependencies between participants involved in specific intercultural communication episodes (Thomas, 2003, p. 142). The proliferation of such models is overwhelming, yet this diversity also reflects the fundamental lack of consensus on how to define the term *intercultural competence* itself.

4. Questions on Intercultural Competence

In the realm of intercultural competence, the prefix "intercultural" is a subject of controversy when translated literally. While the typical expressions in Chinese for *Kua* (跨) include "cross-," "inter-," and "trans-," a more fundamental question arises: What exactly do "inter-," "cross-," or "trans-" pertain to? What does "culture" mean in the contemporary context for those studying and practicing intercultural competence? Furthermore, how is culture defined in the Chinese educational context?

Practically, culture is defined in general, inclusive ways but operationalized in narrow, specific ways. Hofstede (1980), for instance, saw culture as the collective programming of the mind but primarily studied cultural differences related to nationality. Gudykunst and Kim (1992) considered culture as systems of knowledge shared by a relatively large group of people, but identified groups according to political boundaries between countries. Haworth's (1989) channel ratio model of intercultural communication seemed applicable to any context, but all their illustrations related to differences in nationality. In the Chinese context, the practice of defining cultures based on countries is prevalent. Many intercultural events or activities center around participants from different countries sharing aspects of their cultures, such as food, drink, music, etc. However, is using the country as a proxy for culture an oversimplified and limited approach? Notably, "Chinese" and "Western" cultures are commonly used as distinguishing factors for understanding intercultural competence in China. For example, typical Chinese culture focuses on collectivism, while Western culture emphasizes individualism (Hofstede considers collectivism and individualism as one of the dimensions for cultural differentiation), which represents a typical form of dualism. Can the so-called cultural differences still be explained in terms of cognition, such as "Western rationality" as opposed to "the mystery of the East" (Jensen, 2005, p. 201)? Chinese culture and Western culture are like two labels for cultural categories, but we do not know exactly what they contain. And culture is seen as an explanatory concept in intercultural competence rather than a phenomenon needing explanation.

Such concepts might initially seem like closed-off boxes; they appear to have clear boundaries and to work the way we expect them to. However, taking a second look, one might notice how a jumble of entities, actors, and relations, all of which are very hard to define and delineate, makes up such concepts. How can one describe what appears as closed and efficient boxes at one point and, at another, as a jumble of entities, actors, and relations (Ren & Petersen, 2013, p. 101)? Max Weber believed that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he has spun. Geertz considered culture to be those interpretive webs in search of meaning; he espoused culture as essentially semiotic (Geertz, 2017). In other words, culture is the ordered system of meaning and symbols. He used the term *thick description* to characterize behavior's intentional, communicative, interpretative meaning, why it was done, how it was read, and which social codes. And Geertz (2017) believed that if you want to understand what science is, you should look, in the first instance, not at its theories or findings and certainly not at what its apologists say about it, you should look at what the practitioners of it do. Isn't that what we need to do if we want to understand these concepts? Intercultural theories try hard to describe the intercultural process as a neutral and natural process of cultural exchange between people. However, the actual situation involves all aspects of politics, economy, ideology, environment, business, society, etc. It is filled with cultural hegemony or cultural colonialism, Eurocentrism, and Sinocentrism (narrow cultural nationalism), depending on the standpoint of the present. According to Latour (2004, 2005), interconnectedness and hybridity are characteristics of the "modern world", neither pure science nor pure politics; they muddle and mix in an ever-weaving network of social and technical relations. He suggests that understanding the world requires considering the chains of practices, technologies, and materialities that constitute it. The same is true: Isn't the culture in intercultural concepts a network made up of heterogeneous entities and actors in a mixed construction process that involves all kinds of interactions? Therefore, the final source of dispute involves understanding the term *culture* when used in the context of intercultural competence (Rathje, 2007, p. 260).

As previously mentioned in the dominant theories (including Deardorff, Byram, and Bennett) and Chinese research, intercultural competence emphasizes language skills, personal cognitive understanding, the establishment of interpersonal relationships, attitudes, and emotional perception, including empathy and adaptability. This leads to the question: Does the

emphasis on intercultural competence place too much responsibility on individual interaction and the ability of individuals to acquire the required skills? Isn't the presumption of a seemingly objective perspective, one from which the individual can transcend the subjective, inherently reflecting a Western-centric viewpoint? As Ferri (2018) argues, a view of intercultural communication predicated on the search for a final moment of understanding, when all cultural conflicts are resolved, is problematic. As Blasco (2012, p. 476) puts it, this paradoxically reproduces an ethnocentric way of perceiving oneself as perspicacious, self-transcendable, and able to expose the features of a fixed and knowable other. A further issue is that constructions of interculturality are frequently predicated upon solid approaches to culture (Dervin, 2016), in which cultures are seen as stand-alone entities that influence how individuals think and behave. This can easily lead to pigeonholing individuals into static identities related to national cultures or other racialized identity markers (Kim, 2007; Tian & Lowe, 2014). In intercultural competence training, many methods focus narrowly on learning about culture as a static, self-sufficient entity, making it possible to essentialize and stereotype cultural belonging.

Moreover, due to business reasons, the focus for some scholars shifted from theoretical investigation to attempts to create scientific models that could be used to identify other nations' characteristic features, mainly to ensure good understanding and smooth communication, as well as to predict behavior. Research became dominated by the aspiration to find simple solutions to complicated problems, and researchers focused on developing cultural parameters that would make it possible to fit all the nuances of different people's behavior, thinking, and feelings into rigid frameworks. It became necessary to promptly devise methods of teaching people with no relevant training to communicate with those of other nations, without spending too much time gaining knowledge about their history and culture (Meissner, 2006). Then, the so-called experts attempted to ram diverse cultures into definite parameters suitable for teaching practical communication skills and gradually tried to turn it into a competence that can be scientifically measured and evaluated. The question arises: Who defines this specific cultural relationship? Secondly, who is encompassed within this so-called ability range? Does it target individuals in business, government officers, or agents? Or does it focus on those with access to contact with "other countries' cultures"? For example, in a study on communication competence across social classes, Whiting (1971) suggests that since most researchers are middle-class and insensitive to working-class communication strategies, scholarly investigations of "competence" may exhibit class bias. In a similar vein, Colquit (1977) argues that definitions of "competence" are class- and race-biased, privileging the communicative style of middle-class white Americans. Likewise, the cultivation of intercultural competence in China today is primarily concentrated in foreign language majors and international Chinese education in Chinese higher education. Are only those who study in these areas and who can become diplomats, translators, or teachers of Chinese as a foreign language considered qualified to possess intercultural competence? To which group does China's intercultural competence refer? When faced with these questions, much like Carey (1975) asks, where, if anywhere, does ideology leave off and science begin?

In addition, foreign language education remains the primary domain for cultivating intercultural competence, as evident in current research. Specifically, research in China predominantly centers on language learning, particularly in international Chinese language education and the practical application of other foreign languages such as English, French, German, Japanese, etc.[3] Suppose languages of different countries serve as the basis for dividing cultures. Does it imply that people who speak the same language do not encounter intercultural issues, or that people who speak different dialects are exempt from such issues? To pose the question in reverse: what distinguishes intercultural issues from interpersonal communication issues if the answer is negative? In terms of research, the majority of teaching and theory in this domain concentrates on proficiency in the target language, familiarity with the target culture, and competence in translation or understanding between the target language and the native language. Educational departments and language training institutions specializing in intercultural communication often equate knowledge and skills of the relevant language and culture with intercultural competence. This perspective rests on the belief that such competence minimizes miscommunications and misunderstandings in intercultural encounters, thereby ensuring intercultural success. This belief is rooted in a broad concept of human communication and its pedagogy, viewing communication as the exchange of information or knowledge that can be objectively expressed and understood. This approach suggests that proficiency in the target language, familiarity with the target culture, and competence in translation between the target language and the native culture are crucial for successful intercultural communication. The outcome of communication is perceived as the effect of knowledge, and the role of pedagogy is seen as providing knowledge and information to students. Is the origin of this kind of view caused by a lack of investigation into the concept of reality, knowledge, or culture?

5. An ANT Approach

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) was developed by Latour (1987, 2005), Callon (1986), and Law (1992). ANT focuses on the relationships in which actors participate and how these are used to influence the building and shaping of a network. It examines the motivations and actions of human actors that align their interests with the requirements of non-human actors. It can be used to investigate the process whereby the respective interests of different human and non-human elements are aligned into a social and technological arrangement of artifacts. The focus on actors is not based on notions of "identity" but rather on "agency." This is because what matters to the analysis is not the self-consciousness or "natural state" of the actor but its relations with other actors, between humans and non-humans, where roles are not pre-determined but translated through interactions. The core of ANT is the process of translation (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1986). Through negotiation in the translation process, a multifaceted interaction in which actors and actants share in the reconstruction of the network leads to system stabilization.

ANT also introduces the concept of "black-boxing," which refers to the process by which a network's complexities are hidden within a "black box" when an actor or process becomes stable and unquestioned. Once black-boxed, these elements are taken for granted, and the focus shifts to their outputs rather than their internal workings. This suggests that what we consider as reality and knowledge is not inherent but rather constructed through networks. As my research indicates, the term

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[3]According to the official release of the "2023 Academic Ranking of Majors in Chinese Universities" by the higher education professional evaluation institution, the top ten foreign language major rankings for Chinese foreign language majors are English, Russian, German, French, Spanish, Arabic, Japanese, Persian, Korean, Filipino.

"intercultural competence," used as an explanatory concept, needs to be rethought as the result of multiple practices.

ANT offers a framework to investigate how actors, beyond individual entities, function and challenge the conventional perception of the individual as the sole subject of intercultural competence. Simultaneously, the approach considers and observes all participating actors, including both human and non-human elements, within an integrated system. It disrupts conventional thinking by encompassing both human and non-human actors, prompting a re-examination of intercultural competence. ANT shifts the focus away from how we understand intercultural competence as an individual-centered construct toward how we interpret the relational network and identify which actors possess the capacity to act. By abandoning the notion that intercultural competence is solely an individual's responsibility, we begin to understand actors as enacted by the relational network. Their characteristics are determined entirely by the connections they form within the network; in other words, actors derive their capacities and potentials through their relationships with others (Latour, 2005). ANT prompts us to consider how actors in a network relate to one another.

In this process, intercultural competence is observed by how it is constructed through actors rather than by assuming that intercultural phenomena already exist as specific, predefined elements of reality. ANT, therefore, describes a process in which heterogeneous elements are woven together and assembled into what becomes accepted as reality. At the same time, ANT defines what constitutes knowledge (epistemology) and provides a set of assumptions about the nature of the world's reality (ontology).

Therefore, according to ANT, if we want to understand intercultural competence, it is not enough to merely observe individual performance. We also need to consider questions such as how intercultural competence is shaped into an essential skill through policies and education, and how politics is linked to individual abilities. In taking up ANT, we need to follow both human and non-human actors to see how various practices are constructed in given circumstances. This marks a departure from traditional notions of who or what is capable of acting and retains the relational perspective, shifting the focus from individuals and their actions to how both human and non-human actors are connected within a network.

In Latour's framework, society is not an independent domain separate from nature or technology. It is viewed as a collective that includes various actors, both human and non-human, who participate in shaping social reality. Intercultural educational practices are not only considered real social practices but also discourses shaped by the collective. These discourses mix with things and societies and are embedded in translation, where translators negotiate meanings and create shared understandings during the process of translation. They translate, mediate, and extend the networks; they trace networks; they build actor-networks. They embody a set of relations, a set of memories, and a set of preferences. Their discourses are embodied in a set of performances, a set of materials, and a series of spatial arrangements, corporeal and otherwise. None of these are necessarily crucial on their own, but together they generate the effect (Law, 1993, p. 143). Performances that work are not created out of thin air. A large assemblage of actors must be assembled and put in place (Rowan & Bigum, 2003, p. 184).

ANT provides us with a new methodological approach. Its contribution directs attention toward studying how reality comes into being (Farías & Mützel, 2015, p. 526). We can shift the perspective on intercultural competence, traditionally grounded in the individual and language use, by adopting a comprehensive analytical framework that addresses the complexity of intercultural dynamics. This approach allows for a broader analysis that avoids reduction (or stabilization) into a one-dimensional process. Using the ANT method allows us to challenge the traditional notion of viewing culture as a static and predefined system, proposing instead a more dynamic understanding in which culture is continually constructed through the interactions of various actors. Similarly, within the ANT framework, intercultural competence emphasizes the ongoing processes of translation and mediation within the network, disregarding traditional cultural boundaries. ANT's focus on the agency of both human and non-human actors reshapes our thinking about culture and intercultural concepts. As Latour (2005, p. 109) reminds us, we have to free matters of fact from their reduction by "nature," just as much as we should liberate objects and things from their "explanation" by society.

6. Intercultural Competence in China and the Discussion through ANT

Intercultural competence is typically defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural differences based on particular knowledge, skills, and attitudes. A person who is considered interculturally competent is expected to draw on a collection of attributes to manage interactions among culturally distinct individuals by alternating between different perspectives and being conscious of their evaluations of difference. However, if we re-examine intercultural competence in China through the lens of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), this seemingly neutral way of assigning responsibility to individuals merely obscures the operations of the broader power dynamics involved in these interactions.

Take education as an example: we can see that the "knowledge" about intercultural competence and the "intercultural reality" are not natural, neutral, or objective. Instead, they constitute a network of collectives, realities, and narrative accounts that represent a political project. The three interrelated domains of educational leadership, teaching practice, and social media outside the classroom can be examined to demonstrate the construction process[4]. Following the relations within the network, I observe national/governmental/political bodies, educational instruments, school leaders, teachers, students, and other vital roles, along with China's social media system (social media platforms, users, technology, etc.). Together, these elements assemble and enact a set of practices that shape a reality characterized by its performative, multiple, and partially connected nature within the realm of material semiotics. This process narrates the creation of a heterogeneous reality that embodies a specific set of knowledge about intercultural competence (Callon, 1998, 2007).

Firstly, I observe the process of translation, including the four moments[5]: problematization, interessement[6], enrolment,

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[4]Due to space limitations, the empirical case studies mentioned in this paper are only briefly introduced. The primary focus of this article is to present the innovative use of ANT as a theoretical approach. For more detailed empirical analyses, readers may refer to the author's other three papers on case studies. The other three papers are currently in the publication process.

[5] The four moments are raised by Michel Callon in *Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St. Brieuc Bay.*

and mobilization, pertaining to educational leadership. I elaborate on leadership within Chinese universities as a nuanced power structure intricately constructed by various forces, including actors, mediators, and intermediaries. This examination illustrates how the network establishes and maps intercultural competence. Furthermore, it underscores that knowledge of intercultural competence is a product of power dynamics; it emerges from a network composed of heterogeneous elements, reflecting the social outcomes of various power relationships. These relationships constitute a complex interplay of authority and influence, manifested in a dynamic translation process imbued with notions of obedience and authority.

At the same time, by tracing the teaching practice, I can elucidate how the knowledge of intercultural competence becomes black-boxed. It is highlighted that this knowledge is not simply bequeathed or given but is instead constructed through reflective, dialogical practice by actors as a series of actions within a network becomes enacted into being. Knowledge, such as utilizing national boundaries to demarcate cultural distinctions or interpreting culture through symbolic representations like calligraphy, cuisine, and clothing, may initially appear as fairly closed boxes, ostensibly possessing clear boundaries and functioning in expected ways. However, upon closer examination, one may discern a myriad of undefined and indescribable entities, participants, and relationships that actually constitute these forms of knowledge. As Armand (2002) pointed out, symbols serve as a means of social control, with the definition of politics originating from language and culture. In the current international landscape, all ideas and meanings are mediated, symbolized, and swiftly disseminated worldwide through informatization.

I also observe how social media acts as a mediator in constructing and stabilizing knowledge networks. Social media platforms, algorithms, smartphones, and other technological devices are active participants that regulate our interaction with knowledge and shape our perceptions of reality. Throughout this process, the interaction and interdependence of social media with other actors become materialized and symbolized through media frames, thereby shaping the technological and ideological means through which knowledge about intercultural competence is created and communicated. In the mediatized age, culture exists as a form of power, both materially and cognitively, within this network construction.

A fundamental aspect of fostering intercultural competence in China entails nurturing cultural identity and the ability to promote cultural symbols (evidence of which can be found in Chinese textbooks, teacher training, social media, school activities, etc.). This involves adopting borrowed terminology and promoting a friendly and inclusive demeanor to showcase the allure of Chinese culture. Various cultural symbols serve as ambassadors of China's image. Chinese culture has become a symbolic system composed of Chinese characters, Kung Fu, Peking Opera, Confucius, calligraphy, traditional Chinese medicine, pandas, tea, Chinese food, porcelain, and more. Additionally, hosting major global, international, or regional events, producing industrial products with international appeal, and exporting cultural and artistic goods (such as literature, dance, music, painting, and film) all contribute to enhancing China's global presence (Liang, 2014, p. 110). In this discourse, Chinese culture remains central in the cultivation of intercultural competence in China. It is not only seen as a core part of Chinese people's cultural identity but also contains values that state leaders can promote to legitimize their continued governance, such as personal morality, civic responsibility, and social harmony. Among these efforts, the most common method is teaching how to use cultural symbols in communication to enhance the national image.

The application of cultural symbols is one of the most effective tools in this construction process. Due to the metaphorical and metonymic nature of symbol encoding, along with the expansion and value-added properties of meaning, the information conveyed through cultural symbols, when used to construct a national image, requires the signifier and the signified to be mutually recognized. The relationship between symbols and their meanings must be made intelligible to others for the symbol's message to become shared knowledge between the nation and the global community. In this way, the practical construction of the national image through cultural symbols gains real significance.

Besides, intercultural competence in China has also shifted from explaining China to the world to "telling Chinese stories well" and "spreading China's voice effectively" (e.g., *The Belt and Road Initiative*, 2013; *Outline for the Development of China's Foreign Cultural Exchange*, 2014; *Outline of the Cultural Development of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era*, 2016, etc.). This transformation requires that China's intercultural communication research and practice take the idea of a "community with a shared future for humankind" as its core. The epistemological starting point is to narrate China's historical, developmental, governance, civilizational, and global stories while constructing new concepts, categories, and expressions, and to understand the Chinese story from both local and global perspectives.

In this process, symbolic forms (abstract signifiers) and narratives (stories that define and give meaning to the symbolic) serve as the conceptual aspects of cultural ritual. Within cultural rituals, we can identify the enactment of spatial form and the materiality of culture, shifting our understanding of material practice from a focus on form to process. At the same time, emphasis is placed on the notion that the actor, or actant, is "created" through connections in the process, each regarded as an agent entity that forms part of an extensive network (Cerulo, 2009). These actors are considered a "string of actions where each participant (human and non-human, subject and object) is treated as a full-blown mediator" (Latour, 2005, p. 128). The networks of connections must be actively performed; neither actors nor networks merely "exist." It is the performances in, by, and through relations that render networks durable and fixed (Law, 1999, p. 8). In other words, it is a relational effect. Thus, agency, as Latour (1996, p. 374) argues, is simultaneously natural, social, material, and semiotic. We must explore how these dimensions come together, rather than distinguish between them.

Moreover, in China's intercultural discourse, country and culture are always closely linked, and China's cultural identity is primarily a national identity. The evolution of China's narrative model, coupled with national policies and initiatives such as the *Belt and Road Initiative*, *Construction of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind*, *Telling Chinese Stories Well*, and *Enhancing Cultural Confidence*, demonstrates that cultivating intercultural competence has become an integral part of government policy. Chinese culture, to a large extent, functions as a national symbol. Leveraging China's rich cultural resources to launch cultural symbols with universal cognitive value and to resonate psychologically with both domestic and international audiences is essential for asserting China's voice on the global stage. Therefore, promoting the "going-out"

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[6] From Michel Callon's explanation, it originally refers to a series of processes by which the researchers sought to lock the other actors into the roles that had been proposed for them in that program.

strategy of Chinese culture and enhancing China's national image holds significant practical importance. Constructing cultural identity and shaping the national image have become among China's most critical political imperatives.

The education of intercultural competence constitutes a core component of China's domestic and international strategic framework. Domestically, it serves as a vital aspect of patriotic education and national identity construction. The dissemination and application of intercultural competence concepts and knowledge support China's path to modernization and its integration into a globalized world. This initiative aims to develop an education system grounded in modern principles, positioning China as a modern nation. Furthermore, it is a strategic move to foster a cohesive national identity internally while competing for ideological influence globally. Actively shaping China's international image and effectively narrating the "China story" are integral parts of a broader nationalist movement aimed at generating international goodwill and understanding toward China.

In constructing intercultural competence, there is an effort to shape culture from a seemingly neutral standpoint, aiming to socialize individuals' needs and values so that they align with the interests and actions of those in power. This form of power operates without overt conflict, opposition, or resistance, not because such elements are absent, as in cases of non-decision-making power, but because individuals subjected to this power may no longer perceive any conflict of interest. Consequently, this form of power can be exercised without coercion or reward, and without generating perceptions of manipulation or conflict (Ng & Deng, 2017). Anderson (2016) argued that the nation is an imagined community, and a culture based on collective consciousness lies at the core of national identity construction. Specifically, a nation's identity is constructed through a national narrative composed of collective memory, national symbols, and historical events. It comprises stories, images, landscapes, scenes, historical events, national symbols, and rituals representing shared experiences, sorrows, triumphs, and tragedies that endow the nation with meaning.

Therefore, culture is strategically packaged as a tool for producing and reproducing national legitimacy. It is deployed by the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) as a crucial field alongside economic development. Following China's accession to the World Trade Organization, the CPC initiated cultural system reforms. Since 2012, China's national identity, officially promoted as the "Chinese Dream," has been pragmatically framed using traditional Chinese culture to reinforce the CPC's legitimacy and sustain its leadership. By repositioning and endorsing Chinese culture, the CPC seeks to construct a broader national identity while consolidating political authority and preserving legitimacy (Xu, 2018, p. 621). Culture is regarded as a vital ideological element of national memory (Ho, 2013, p. 680), contributing to the formation of national identity and helping individuals situate and interpret their personal experiences (Anderson, 2016; Githens-Mazer, 2006). It is an invisible but powerful force that encourages individuals to imagine themselves, and their cultural group, as a homogeneous collective identity.

This is also what ANT reminds us of when re-examining intercultural competence in China: a crucial aspect that cannot be overlooked is its political dimension. This highlights the need to consider material participation, power dynamics, institutional structures, and societal contexts in shaping how intercultural competence is understood and practiced. One of ANT's core ontological insights, emphasized by Bruno Latour (1987; 1988), is that politics is inherent to any construction of reality. Similarly, Mol (1999, p. 81) sees the construction of reality as a political struggle, asserting that reality is not singular or fixed but multiple and performative. These realities are inherently political, as they produce specific constructs, such as intercultural competence, which are not natural, neutral, or objective, but are constituted through networks of collectives, narratives, and practices reflecting political projects.

Thus, culture should not be understood as a distinct or static part of reality; rather, it continuously emerges within heterogeneous material-discursive practices. In this view, culture results from interactions among human and non-human actors and is not a fixed set of symbols or meanings. ANT encourages us to analyze how cultural elements are enacted and materialized through networks of relations and practices, offering a more dynamic and fluid understanding of culture. Moreover, culture should not be seen merely as a human-centered practice. These practices should be understood as enactments of socio-material realities. The performative characteristics of reality also invite a reconsideration of the roles that culture, knowledge, and other key elements play in specific practices.

While ANT is not the only theory that highlights the importance of semiotics, technology, and materiality in cultural practices, it consistently reminds us that we often treat these elements as external to culture. In doing so, we risk reinforcing the very dichotomies that ANT seeks to deconstruct. Since ANT does not privilege human over non-human actors, it requires methodological openness to follow the actors wherever they lead, even if this crosses traditional boundaries between social sciences and natural sciences, or between cultural and material analysis. This approach emphasizes the co-production of cultural products, materials, producers, and audiences. ANT reveals the intimate interconnections between humans and materials, actors and actants, and the networks they inhabit. In this method, technology, artifacts, and material objects are granted voice, as much as possible, to describe their alliances, frictions, and victories.

7. Conclusion and Further Outlook

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) provides a comprehensive framework for examining the dynamic networks involved in intercultural competence. Unlike traditional sociological approaches, which often emphasize static social structures or cultural norms and tend to overlook material practices, ANT conceptualizes the construction of intercultural competence as a dynamic network of interactions involving both human and non-human actors (or actants). It views this construction as an effect produced by a network of heterogeneous, interacting materials. This perspective emphasizes that intercultural competence is not merely an individual achievement but rather a collective effort shaped by the actions and interactions of diverse participants and networks. In other words, intercultural competence is a collective endeavor, and the collective is not a homogeneous entity. On the contrary, it comprises various elements that form networks. It includes individuals and groups, various entities such as states, parties, governments, educational institutions, media, and other actors, such as policies, language exchange programs, communication technologies, etc.

In this process, ANT also enables us to understand culture as something emergent from interactions within the network rather than stemming from a single source. If we follow ANT, culture is not predetermined but constructed through the

connections and associations within a network. It is also an ongoing negotiation, translation, and alignment of interests among different actors, rather than a static object. In such a network, as Law (2009, p. 146) mentions, there is material-semiotic relationality (a network whose elements define and shape one another), heterogeneity (a diversity of actors, human and otherwise), and materiality (an abundance of "stuff," not merely the social). There is also an insistence on process and its precariousness; every element must play its part moment by moment, or the network collapses. Moreover, there is attention to power as an effect (as a function of network configuration and the creation of immutable mobiles), and to space and scale (concerning how networks extend themselves and translate distant actors).

Culture, according to ANT, draws attention to the mechanics of the material and the semiotic by emphasizing how society, organizations, agents, and technology are all effects generated within patterned networks of diverse materials, not simply human ones. Since networks are ordered by materials and strategies, these patterns generate effects such as power and hierarchy in institutions and organizations (Law, 1992, p. 381). According to ANT, culture is nothing other than the patterned networks of heterogeneous materials composed of people, machines, animals, texts, architecture, symbolic materials, and more. Therefore, the task of explaining culture is to characterize these networks in their heterogeneity and explore how they come to be patterned to generate effects such as organizations, inequality, and power.

Our narrative of culture is, thus, a depiction of the process of network construction. Rather than viewing narrative language as a singular, fractional form of knowing, it should be expressed through multiple storytelling practices, forming rhizomatic networks: elaborations and interactions that hold together fractionally, like a tissue of fibers (Law, 2002, p. 5). Therefore, in analyses of culture, it is necessary to consider how 'culture' is constructed differently through the actors that classify knowledge and practices. The construction of culture is socially meaningful and socially enacted, and both human and non-human actors participate in different ways in such cultural assemblages. It is these dynamic processes that we should focus on.

This approach helps illuminate how cultural practices emerge, stabilize, and evolve. By tracing these interactions and their impacts, ANT reveals the complex, interconnected nature of cultural phenomena, highlighting how every actor, human or not, contributes to the broader cultural narrative. It uncovers the continual making and remaking of culture through a wide array of interactions and negotiations. As Law (1992, p. 389) observed, social structure is better treated as a verb than as a noun; perhaps the same applies to the various networkings of culture, and this is the starting point for rethinking intercultural competence.

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