Language and Intercultural Communication

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmli20

Engaging non-essentialism as lived wisdom: a dialogue between intercultural communication and Buddhism

Vivien Xiaowei Zhou

To cite this article: Vivien Xiaowei Zhou (2022): Engaging non-essentialism as lived wisdom: a dialogue between intercultural communication and Buddhism, Language and Intercultural Communication, DOI: 10.1080/14708477.2022.2046768

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2022.2046768

Published online: 14 Mar 2022.

LANGUAGE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2022.2046768

Engaging non-essentialism as lived wisdom: a dialogue between intercultural communication and Buddhism

Vivien Xiaowei Zhou

The Business School, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper examines some philosophical groundwork underlying intercultural studies through an inter-epistemic dialogue with Buddhism. This dialogue joins resonating developments in the two fields through their common goal of overcoming essentialism and comparable methods for praxis. It also illuminates on areas for potential advancement in intercultural theory and praxis through considering how Buddhism approaches these at nuanced levels. Particularly, the paper emphasises the needs to differentiate non-essentialism from *anti*-essentialism, incorporate a 'responsibility for the self' into intercultural ethics, and develop corresponding methods for co-existing with the vulnerability of the human mind that prompts one to act essentialistically in concrete situations.

本文借用与佛学'跨界对话'的方式对当代跨文化研究的哲学理论基础进行分析论述。此对话将展示，跨文化研究和佛学均以对治本质主义为目标，并在指导实践行为方面发展出具有相似性的方法体系。同时，此对话也将通过对佛学在若干层面的细微解读，探讨跨文化理论和实践进一步发展的方向。此文建议，拓展跨文化研究应尤其考虑以下几点：'非本质主义'需与'反本质主义'相区别；跨文化伦理道德需纳入'对自我的责任'的思考；以及（基于以上理论）发展相应的实践方法，帮助人们在生活中学习（练习）如何与人类自身思维的脆弱面（即驱使人类以本质主义的角度思维事物的'本能'）积极共存。

KEYWORDS

Intercultural communication; non-essentialism; Buddhism; dialogue; inter-epistemic

Introduction

Human activity at the 'interface between cultures' has long been a subject of intellectual interest, particularly so in an age of modernity that resounds with cheers for, and worries about, the so-called unprecedented pace and scale of globalisation. Among the relevant academic disciplines, intercultural communication (hereafter IC) has established itself as a field dedicated to understanding and educating communication practices for developing benign and enriching relations in the intercultural space. These objectives have been pursued through scholarly debates around concepts such as culture and communication and interventionist efforts to transform people's experiences in a world of differences. In the recent decade or so, a sentiment has emerged within the IC field that interrogates the ideological position (or the lack thereof) underlying existing scholarship, especially in the wake of intensified social justice issues. For example, Gorski (2008) comments that interculturalists 'expend much energy fighting symptoms of oppressive conditions […] instead of the conditions themselves' and 'ignoring systemic oppression means complying with it' (p. 519). Ladegaard and Phipps (2020) observe a 'regrettable' situation that 'not many language and/or

CONTACT Vivien Xiaowei Zhou v.zhou@napier.ac.uk

intercultural communication scholars have tried to bridge the gap between research and theory development on the one hand, and the potential for social and political action that could ensue from this research on the other' (p. 70). Resonating with these concerns, this special issue calls for deliberations on the extent that existing IC scholarship is progressing and making a difference to issues such as intercultural misunderstanding, prejudice, exclusion, and forms of oppression.

What is perceived here is a failure of connectivity between intellectual developments and the real world problems these developments set out to cure. Situated in this self-questioning movement, this paper examines several trends in IC scholarship to bring to light some paradoxes in its philosophical groundwork, which may underpin the disjuncture observed in the spheres of theory and practice and afford pointers for future development. Particularly, this paper responds to the call of this special issue by inviting the reader to travel beyond the exercise of internal criticism to a dialogue with 'alternative knowledges' (Santos, 2018). In his criticism of cognitive imperialism, Santos (2018) argues that progressive critical thinking in the Western academia has strong epistemological affinities with Western-centric conservative thinking, thereby generating critical theories that often produce the (unintended) perverse effect of narrowing down alternatives (p. viii). Although the singularity and homogeneity connoted in this view regarding 'Western' intellectual traditions is itself open to discussion, it is useful to note that in order to deepen understandings of IC with its underlying paradoxes, it is crucial to recognise and overcome the epistemological limits in existing scholarly conventions through expanding our lenses for interpreting the cultural world.

The external lens I call upon in this paper is Buddhism. Buddhism has had some presence in IC literature through the notion of 'mindfulness' or as an 'East Asian' approach to communication and ethics (selected examples include Chuang & Chen, 2003; Dorjee, 2017; Huang, 2020; Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019). Much in line with Santos' (2018) observation about non-dominant epistemologies in general, writings in IC literature employing Buddhist frameworks are scarce and scattered, with Buddhism appearing (or being received) as little more than a mirror image of conventions that are valorised as 'academic knowledge'. Therefore, efforts to expand our cognition in this direction involve struggles for recognition in epistemic power hierarchies, to some extent requiring recognition to precede cognition (Santos, 2018, p. 3). Against this backdrop, I will begin the paper by providing some context about Buddhism before justifying my approach to using it for analysing IC scholarship and explicating its relevance for our current concerns.

For complex historical reasons, Buddhism in our time is usually known as a 'religion' originating from the 'East'. This is its most prominent identity in contemporary academic studies dominated by epistemic traditions that separate the domains of reason and spirituality and privilege the former as the entrance to knowledge (Merican, 2012). Nonetheless, the philosophical value of Buddhism is not foreign to thinkers based in the geographical West. Cross-cultural philosophers have noted various features that Buddhism shares in common with, and even anticipating, their own traditions, such as subjective idealism, existentialism, empiricism, pragmatism, phenomenology, and postmodernism (see, for example, Chinn, 2006; Garfield, 2002; Kochumuttom, 1982; Lusthaus, 2002; Miller, 2008; Olson, 2000). These writers also discern important differences and argue that Buddhism should not be labelled – reductively or even mistakenly – as an Eastern equivalent to any of their own schools. These scholars' insightful comparisons are worthy of note, for they set a theoretical ground and glossary that render conversations between Buddhist and 'Western' thinking both possible and valuable.

My approach to analysing IC scholarship through a Buddhist lens is inspired by the exercise of 'cross-cultural dialogue' in comparative philosophy. The purpose of such exercise is not to simply demonstrate what might emerge when two traditions are put 'in contact' for comparison (Garfield, 2002, p. 169). Rather, it aims to 'search for a common ground on which to construct mutual understanding and appreciation' (Olson, 2000, p. 20) that illuminates on concerns shared by both traditions. To do so, it requires a critical reflexivity regarding the analyst's pre-understandings and a hermeneutical effort to decentre from the vantage point of either tradition under discussion. In a similar spirit, rather than introducing Buddhist ideas as an 'exotic' paradigm to be integrated

into IC studies, my purpose is to examine some paradoxical questions that critical interculturalists seek to address as enlightened by an inter-epistemic 'dialogue' between IC scholarship and Buddhist thoughts.

Before I enter the main discussion, some methodological reflections are necessary regarding my inquiry into Buddhism as a complex epistemic tradition. Buddhism is known for its ancient origin (approximately dated back to 2,500 years ago), its sectarian plurality, the 'terse and often cryptic verses' in which many doctrinal texts were composed (Garfield, 2002, p. 24), and the variability, even 'inconsistency', in the ways the same ideas are formulated and expounded vis-à-vis the teaching context and the audience's potential of comprehension (Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, 2016). These 'characteristics' pose considerable challenges for inquirers working with contemporary academic conventions, such as the unknowability concerning the exact sources of many classical doctrines, the difficulty to pinpoint authoritative definitions of key concepts, and even the appropriateness to refer to the epistemic tradition in question with the monolithic word 'Buddhism'. Nevertheless, Buddhist scholars and practitioners commonly agree that there are coherent and discernible 'broad commitments that define a position as Buddhist' (Garfield, 2015, p. 1). It is this level of understanding that forms the basis of my discussion in this paper.

My understanding of Buddhist thought is itself an intercultural reconstruction, contextualised by the linguistic and theoretical resources available to me (Stelma et al., 2013) vis-à-vis my 'Chinese' background by birth, upbringing and earlier education and the 'Anglophone' background of my later life experience and scholarly engagement. My understandings are primarily informed by the Mahāyāna traditions (major schools include Madhyamaka and Yogācāra) and drawn from a heterogeneous corpus of material, which consists of commentaries, academic essays, and Dharma writings and talks contributed in Chinese and English by contemporary Buddhist scholars and practitioners (e.g. Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, 2017; Garfield, 2002; Nhat Hanh, 2012; Shi-Xue-shan, 2020; Ye, 2011). My understandings derived from these secondary sources are complemented by readings of the more original texts from historical Buddhist scriptures and treatises (via their Chinese and English translations).

In my approach to constructing a dialogue between IC studies and Buddhism, I adopt several strategies following the writing conventions established by contemporary cross-cultural Buddhist scholars. I employ a blended vocabulary system to 'bridge' comparable concepts from the two fields. More specifically, in my discussion of Buddhism's philosophical vision, I use terms familiar to readers with a background in Western social sciences (e.g. 'epistemology', 'reification', 'essentialism'). When presenting key Buddhist doctrines, I use more original representations from Buddhist literature (e.g. 'dependent origination', 'emptiness', 'suffering') and indicate their expressions in Sanskrit / Pāli (the original languages in which Buddhist canons were communicated) and Chinese (a major language through which earlier and later developments of Buddhism were disseminated). I will explain the key Buddhist concepts with a level of clarity adequate for my purpose in this paper, but also retain a degree of conceptual fuzziness. This is due to the aforementioned hermeneutical challenges and also an intentional strategy to invite the reader into a 'Buddhist way of knowing'.

In the following, I set out my understanding of what Buddhism is about and why I consider it relevant to IC. Then I elaborate on a dialogue between them, which is guided by a number of questions: How might theories of IC 'encounter' Buddhist thoughts? What are the similar paradoxes they grapple with and how are these examined in their respective traditions? How can scholarship in IC be enriched by Buddhist insights? What advantages does IC with Buddhism have in promoting a praxis for the betterment of interhuman communication and relations?

Buddhism and intercultural communication: a preliminary 'bridging'

Buddhism places at the centre of its thinking and practice a soteriological concern with *suffering* (in Sanskrit, Duḥkha; in Chinese pinyin/character, kǔ苦). Based on the framings of this concept across

various Buddhist texts, I summarise the meaning of suffering as unease and disquiet that, recurringly and in myriad forms, afflicts the wellbeing of humans' sentient existence. There are salient affinities between this notion and the various unsettling phenomena that attract interculturalists' attention and yet never seem satisfactorily understood or 'resolved', e.g. cognitive and psychological shock, stereotyping, prejudice, and hostility that people experience at 'the boundary between cultures'.

Buddhism traces the root of suffering to the workings of human consciousness and provides a system of methods for dissolving the problem therein towards restoration of our 'pure' existence. At the heart of all Buddhist theses is the notion of *emptiness* (śūnyatā; kōng空), a position that negates the innate nature of all phenomena and indicates *impermanence* (anitya; wúcháng无常) and *dependent origination* (pratītyasamutpāda; yuánqǐ 缘起) as key aspects of truth. These doctrines would find much resonance with IC theory, especially the postmodern strand that is critical of cultural essentialism and emphasises the fluid, intersectional, and relational qualities of IC.

As a transformative project devoted to the liberation from suffering, Buddhism provides many insights that closely connect with our challenges concerning the environment, personal wellbeing, ethics, education, and politics. For instance, the doctrines of emptiness and dependent origination prompt one to deconstruct the idea of a *substantial, enduring self* (ātman; wǒ我), refrain from dwelling in dualistic conceptions, and see one's existence as 'inter-being' (cf. 'being') (Nhat Hanh, 2012). This perspective is explanatorily useful for locating the origin of suffering (wherein its ultimate 'cure' is to be sought), e.g. layers of consciousness that spawn our inclination to construe the phenomenal world through categorisation and division *as well as* our inclination to continually cling to what we construct out of such cognitive activities (Miller, 2008). Additionally, the nondual perspective of inter-being is regarded as an organic ground for the formation of certain temperaments, which will function as antidotes to suffering, such as humility, compassion, and equanimity and a sense of equality (towards all human and non-human beings). This system of thoughts resonates immediately with interculturalists' attention to the ethical dimension of IC (more on this later).

Buddhism does not, however, assume the above to occur as a straightforward result of intellectual study. Buddhism draws attention to a gap between what is expressed through language and 'that towards which language purports to point' (Lusthaus, 2010, p. 107). As would be echoed by contemporary thinkers inquiring about the philosophy of language, Buddhists hold that language and conceptual thought are inherently oriented to differentiation and enclosure; that the meaning of language is always subject to appropriation, and concepts ineluctably vulnerable to reification. While recognising the constitutive powers of language and thought, Buddhism is more interested in how these at the same time 'veil' one's cognition of truth insofar as perceptibility – something beyond the 'limits of expressibility' (Garfield, 2002) – is concerned. Thus conceived, the end purpose that Buddhism sets for its practitioners is to *unveil* and *comprehend* existence as it is rather than *attain* a specific metaphysical view about existence or an ethereal mode of existence. This comprehension is to occur both through and beyond intellectual study, the latter being regarded as instrumental to one's enlightenment but not in itself an end point (Tsai, 2014). Conceptual knowledge expressed in linguistic forms is deemed useful to, and only to, the extent that it provides the necessary access to truth, and such knowledge is to be transcended subsequently for further progress to be made (Garfield, 2002).

Therefore, Buddhism disapproves of blind deference to, and uncritical practice of, its teachings. It also warns about getting 'caught up' in *language and conceptual elaboration* (papañca; xì lùn戏论). From a Buddhist standpoint, true wisdom only transpires from a careful praxis that is oriented not to the 'arrival' at a destination, but to the continuous striving to 'return', a process that dissolves the boundaries between the conceptual and the perceptual, the abstract and the concrete, doubt and belief. Practitioners of Buddhism are urged to engage in an 'authentication' exercise for deeply comprehending the doctrines (Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, 2016), such as the ubiquity of suffering, emptiness, and dependent origination. Among the repertoire of methods are seated and walking meditations and contemplative observation of one's immediate experience of phenomena, both

ordinary and extra-ordinary. In turn, this exercise will: give rise to learners' conviction in the doctrines, not least by yielding the 'side effect' of alleviating the practitioner's suffering in concrete difficult situations; transform intellectually acquired concepts into 'a correct perspective in a positive sense' (Tsai, 2014, p. 332); and motivate the practitioner to continually embed the latter in his/her everyday conduct.

With its teachings grounded in elaborate ontological and epistemological considerations and attending to the complex whole (e.g. affect, cognition, and behaviour) of human experience, Buddhism has influenced many generations, guiding political leadership, scholarly work, and lay persons' daily lives. While it would be intellectually naïve to vaunt Buddhism as a tradition of knowledge and practice simply on the grounds of history, as I have outlined here and will elaborate below, this living heritage provides a system for human enlightenment that, in many ways, converges with IC studies conducted in the 'postmodern' paradigm (see Holliday & MacDonald, 2020). Now I proceed to expand on several areas where I argue IC potentially 'encounters' Buddhism.

'Truths' about intercultural communication

The work in the IC field is characterised by variety, not least in terms of authors' research interests (e.g. communication behaviour, identity formation), purposes (e.g. competence development, emancipation) and theoretical traditions (e.g. ethnographic, linguistic). Apart from a shared broad interest in human phenomena that occur in sites of interaction where 'cultural difference' seems at play, what unites IC researchers is perhaps a growing awareness of the controversial nature of the concepts central to their thinking. In the work of critical interculturalists, the contestation is particularly intense regarding the core concept 'intercultural'. The field has seen detailed deconstruction of the 'cultural' component of the word during the last two decades and attention is now increasingly paid to the prefix 'inter-'. There are also considerations associated with the form of the concept, including an emergent trend of using and conceptualising it as a noun (e.g. 'interculturality') (e.g. Dervin, 2016; Zhu, 2015), efforts to retain the adjectival feature of the word (e.g. 'the intercultural') whilst asserting its status as a primary concept (e.g. Collins, 2018; Holliday & MacDonald, 2020), and more radical proposals to substitute 'inter-' with alternatives, such as the term 'transcultural communication' (e.g. Baker's paper in this issue).

Underlying much of this contestation is a postmodern critique of cultural essentialism, whereby understandings of culture, thought, and behaviour formulated in relation to stable and mutually exclusive identity categories (e.g. national, ethnic) are deemed inadequate for explaining our empirical experience in a world characterised by hybridity, intersectionality, 'messiness', and precarity (Ferri, 2018; Holliday, 2010). Furthermore, a reductive and fixed view of IC entails the retaining of 'boundaries'. Holding onto such a perspective can thus strengthen certain barriers for interaction and fertilise the ground for prejudice, discrimination, and other forms of injustice. Therefore, for alternative directions regarding IC research, many critical interculturalists advocate a postmodern position that rejects essentialism and, in the words of Zotzmann (2017), focuses on the '*true* hybrid, procedural and contingent nature of language, culture and identity' (p.79) (author's own emphasis).

Rather resonantly, according to Olson (2000), Buddhism's philosophical efforts can be viewed as 'attempts to overcome essentialism' (p. 119). Buddhist doctrines comprise a spectrum of statements about *satya* (dì 谛), which corresponds to the English term *truth* or *reality* (Garfield, 2015). A best known satya is *emptiness*. Although this concept has been nuanced by later Buddhist schools from different exegetical perspectives, the various developments broadly depart from a common 'definition': nothing in the phenomenal world has *intrinsic nature* or *independent existence* (svabhāva; zìxìng自性). For Buddhists, emptiness is not only applicable to objects of experience (e.g. entities, self, other), but also to concrete events involving objects (e.g. a communication incident), and our perceptions of events and processes (e.g. pleasure, frustration).

The notion of emptiness is particularly elaborated in Mahāyāna Buddhism. In *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (see its translations and commentaries by, for example, Garfield, 2002 and Ye, 2011), a text regarded as foundational to the Mahāyāna traditions, Nāgārjuna (2nd – 3rd century CE) delivered a systematic analysis of emptiness through the device of reductio ad absurdum. This analysis showed how arguments attempting to defend the intrinsic nature of phenomena always end in self-contradiction or lead to infinite regress, thereby ultimately failing to stand. Another doctrine intimately intertwined with emptiness is *dependent origination*, which can be broadly understood as a regularity in the phenomenal world that every entity or event comes into being or arises *with* (not the same as *because of*) other entities or events, i.e. all phenomena are dependent on causes and conditions and lack permanence in their existence (hence the doctrine of *impermanence*). In an IC context, Buddhists would thus concur with postmodernists that culture and cultural identity lack fundamental essence, their formation depends on a variety of conditions, and their existence is characterised by instability. Communication and interaction would be viewed as fleeting moments that form part of a stream of events, which arise and cease in some relation to (but not determined by) each other. Therefore, from both Buddhist and postmodernist perspectives, to awaken to the truth of IC would involve the liberation from fixed and static views, together with a recognition of the impermanence of human existence.

It is important, however, to note that Buddhist *satya* does not fully correspond to the modern Western idea of ontological reality. Emptiness refers to the lack of intrinsic nature, or essencelessness, of things, but not the absence of their existence. While Buddhists would see culture, identity, and communication as empty and impermanent, they would simultaneously accept that these phenomena are real in our empirical experience and may have an enduring feature in concrete contexts. This is not a naïve compromise made between competing ontologies, but is rather a considered position for balancing different levels of theory, a position known as the Two-Truths doctrine (Garfield, 2002, p. 75).

In Buddhist literature, emptiness is often presented as the *ultimate truth* (paramārtha-satya; shèng yì dì 胜义谛) in conjunction with the notion of *conventional truth* (saṃvṛti-satya; shì sú dì世俗谛). The latter refers to the level of reality perceived through humans' sensory and conceptual faculties and reaffirmed communally through language mechanisms. In IC studies, statements about difference and similarity in cultural values and practices, explanations of conflict scenarios through such lenses, proposals of communicative competence, and ethical guidelines for dealing with cultural difference would fall into the Buddhist domain of conventional truth. In comparison, postmodern deconstructions of the essentialist orientation in (some of) these conceptual developments are more akin to the Buddhist idea of the ultimate truth.

In IC research, conventional formulations about culture, identity, and communication have sparked considerable debate due to their susceptibility to essentialist interpretation. This debate advances a critical movement of *rejecting* the types of IC work that categorise the identities of cultural entities and *resisting* practices that have an essentialist character or connotation. 'Essentialist' IC work is increasingly seen by critical interculturalists as theoretical 'fallacy', mere 'fashion', and 'past bad practices' (Dervin, 2017; McSweeney, 2013).

Nevertheless, the *anti*-essentialist movement has also received scepticism. In response to criticisms of his cultural dimensions theory (a framework of statistically-derived country scores along continuums of polarised cultural values such as individualism and collectivism), Geert Hofstede (2002) draws attention to the fact that his work 'has been integrated into the state of the art in various disciplines dealing with culture' and has seen 'surprising applications' non-academically (p.1356). Resonantly (albeit with a different purpose), some critics comment that the popularity of the cultural dimensions framework has less to do with its theoretical sophistication than with its convenience for application, the absence of a persuasive alternative, or simply habit (Taras et al., 2009), and the resultant 'fashion' is arguably strengthened by the consumerist and neo-liberalist ideologies in the modern society. If we leave aside the detail of this academic debate, we come to

notice the conventional value of the type of theory that represents IC through categorisation and binary oppositions, a reality that confronts anti-essentialism in the field of *practice*.

Scepticism also arises within the anti-essentialist community. Dervin (2016) expresses concerns that the aims of anti-essentialism are often unreachable vis-à-vis the instability of human life. An individual's retreat from battles against essentialist discourses may be due to his/her experience of fatigue and stress rather than ideological allegiance to essentialism. Similarly, Zhou and Pilcher (2018) note from their students' group project experiences on an IC course that despite their enthusiasm to 'apply' non-essentialist principles to real-world tasks, students sometimes 'fell back' on essentialist explanations to deal with tough experiences with their culturally different peers. Elsewhere, Ryazanov and Christenfeld (2017) interrogate the popular 'detrimental' narrative concerning essentialism, contending that the *effects* of essentialism should be separated from the idea of essentialism itself, for they depend variably on motivation and context. If strategically used, essentialism can be useful for identity formation and reducing blame over uncontrollable factors. These observations and comments echo MacDonald and O'Regan's (2014) call that IC theory is in need of 'reciprocal engagement' vis-à-vis paradigm shifts.

Buddhism has encountered a very similar question, and its Two-Truths doctrine can be viewed as its response. This doctrine rejects the comparability of the conventional truth and the ultimate truth in ontological terms. Instead of appealing to a true-false metaphysics, this doctrine acknowledges both truth claims and presents them as a paradoxical dyad to be understood and accepted at the limits of expressibility (Garfield, 2002). Statements about the ultimate truth (e.g. emptiness, dependent origination, impermanence) point to the 'vast network of interdependent and continuous processes' that life typically presents to us, while the conventional truth formulates the properties of particular phenomena (including 'causal' relations between phenomena) carved out for conceptual explanation (Garfield, 2002, p. 29). The conventional truth is always grounded in 'our explanatory interests and language' (ibid, p.29), thus being relatively true and theoretically open to interrogation and revision.

From a Buddhist perspective, the conventional truth is indispensable to both our everyday operations in ordinary life and our access to the ultimate truth. We cannot directly observe emptiness and impermanence through our sensory apparatus. Understandings of these are inferred from our empirical experience of their material manifestations in streams of discrete events, and discursive communication about such manifestations can only be conducted in conventional terms. The conventional truth therefore embodies the ultimate truth, but does not amount to anything more than its nominal value. The very understanding of this status of conventional truth is the ultimate truth. Therefore, the 'two' truths point respectively to the nature and manifestation (or form) of truth rather than asserting separate, alternative ontologies. As famously formulated in *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya* (the *Heart Sūtra*), 'form is emptiness, and emptiness is form; form is no other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than form' (translated by Nhat Hanh, 2012, p. 411). From this perspective, to seek to rectify the conventional truth as a cognitive error *per se* is problematic and undesirable. The conventional truth is integral to sentient beings' relation with the phenomenal world and cannot be superseded by a transcendental truth claim. Nevertheless, if mistaken for the ultimate truth, the conventional truth can become a source of suffering (a point I shall return to later). Therefore it needs to be transcended in the consciousness of those seeking liberation.

In the IC field, when defending his cultural dimensions theory vis-à-vis postmodern critiques, Hostede (2002) writes:

> Some people have tried to imitate my approach cheaply for commercial purposes. Some carry the concepts further than I consider wise. At times my supporters worry me more than my critics. […] I never claim that culture is the only thing we should pay attention to. In many practical cases it is redundant, and economic, political or institutional factors provide better explanations. But sometimes they don't, and then we need the construct of culture. Also, the validations of my dimension scores do not imply assumptions about causality: validations can point to causes, effects, or association based on circular causation or on hidden third factors. (pp.1357-1359)

The author's perception of his message going 'astray' in others' interpretation and application reminds us of a familiar hermeneutical problem, to which neither anti-essentialism nor Buddhism is immune. Because of this, there lies the potential for the various schools of theory, which diverge and even oppose in certain respects, to become connected. In this regard, the Buddhist Two-Truths doctrine demonstrates a possibility of *looking beyond* rather than *looking at* paradigmatic divides when we search for deeper understandings of the problems that confront us all.

A Buddhist reading of non-essentialism: more a 'Middle Way' than an antithesis

Like Hofstede, postmodern interculturalists have been confronted with critiques concerning their position on ontology and causation. Now I consider how a Buddhist lens can contribute to a better understanding of this level of contestation in the IC field. In my observation, the challenges encountered by postmodern interculturalists involve two aspects. For convenience, I call these the 'no essence' problem and the '-ism' problem. The former reflects critics' direct interrogation of postmodernism regarding causation; the latter reflects postmodernists' position on this ontological issue via an epistemological route, a position that frequently evades critics' attention and can become clearer by way of a Buddhist reading. In the following, I adopt the term *non*-essentialism rather than *anti*-essentialism for reasons to be elaborated below.

A typical criticism that non-essentialist IC work receives is that while it empowers individuals through deconstructing the 'essences' of culture and identity and foregrounding hybridity, fluidity and (inter)subjectivity, there is a tendency for non-essentialism to foster what MacDonald and O'Regan (2014) call a 'radical intercultural subjectivism'. This tendency is considered by critics to underplay the influence of socio-cultural mechanisms on individual activity and promote a benign, yet utopian, vision that individuals can freely negotiate their intercultural identities and relations to the effect of transforming the situations in which they operate (Zotzmann, 2017). Some writers scrutinise this 'no essence' problem in the light of the structure-agency paradox that underlies the broader social sciences and call for more balanced theorisation that avoids excessive emphasis on either end of the spectrum (Block, 2013). I now consider in some detail a recent contribution made by Zotzmann in this line of work.

From the perspective of critical realism, Zotzmann (2017) examines some theoretical limitations of non-essentialism ('non-essentialism' and 'anti-essentialism' are not particularly differentiated in her work) and proposes an IC research approach that combines 'a weak constructivism with a critical ontological realism' (p. 87). This position emphasises a 'temporal ordering of processes' in communication (p. 85) underpinned by a stratified ontology that differentiates the 'real', the 'actual', and the 'empirical'. While postmodernists emphasise what is empirically observable, critical realists draw attention to the latent generative powers of 'durable social, economic, political, discursive and other structures' (p. 87), which are considered to exist independently from the observer (hence 'real'), pre-structure concrete interactions, and may have a causal effect on the outcome of interaction. The actualisation of such generative and causal powers is conceived of as 'emergent' and contingently dependent upon an interplay of conditions, a view that would be shared by postmodernists.

This critical realist perspective insightfully calls interculturalists to recognise in their theory the potential constraints placed upon intercultural interactants by larger structures that are often beyond the interactants' control. However, while often considered by their critics to neglect this element, postmodernists do not actually exclude social structure from their explanatory frameworks. For postmodernists, what is at issue is not a question about 'whether-or', but the 'degree of imposition on reality' (Holliday, 1999, p. 240). In his dedicated development of non-essentialist IC frameworks, Holliday (2019) conveys a refusal to explain culture and interculturality definitively, emphasising the 'unfathomable complexity of culture' and proposing that culture, social structure, and concrete intercultural events be seen in 'loose (conversational) relationships' that are 'sometimes harmonious and sometimes ridden with difficult conflict' (p. 2).

Compared with postmodernists' 'reluctance' to address causation directly, critical realists put this issue more in the spotlight. However, as current developments from this paradigm stand, the clarity on how causation operates in IC still remains limited. According to Zotzmann (2017), from a critical realist perspective, causation neither has to display regularity, nor determines the outcome of interaction. Citing Margaret Archer, she explains:

> Structures […] pre-exist social agents and offer particular *affordances and constraints*. At the same time, their existence and even their form depend on the *intended or unintended* actions of social agents who *either* change (morphogenesis) *or* reproduce them (morphostasis). The outcomes of this interaction are hence *emergent* […]. The resulting changes in the form of social structures or the reasoning of individuals (to name *but two* causally effective elements of the social world) form the basis for and hence pre-exist subsequent actions of and interactions between individuals. These, in turn, again *have the potential to* change the context. (pp.84-85) (emphasis is mine)

The 'non-deterministic', 'both this and that', and 'may or may not' formulations seem characteristic of the critical realist proposition at each level of what it deems the causal chain. These formulations do not seem to dissipate the mystery surrounding causality any more than affirming it as an occult potentiality.

At different levels, Buddhism resonates with both postmodernism and critical realism, but also differs from them. Buddhists would agree with critical realists on the principle of stratified realities and the influence of conventional forces on people's action. However, Buddhist theorists are more interested in realities by *facticity* than realities by *inference* (Lusthaus, 2018). If we accept that impermanence and causal links are both 'unobservable', the former is at least more accessible than the latter. Impermanence as an empirical regularity is hard to deny by experience (and constantly supported by evidence from modern science), whereas justification of causal links would require higher orders of reasoning. For Buddhist thinkers, in the end, 'what counts as real depends precisely upon our conventions' (Garfield, 2002, p. 25).

In his reflection on modern Western metaphysical discourse, Garfield (2015) comments:

> It is common to consider relational properties to be candidates for essences. […] The essence of everything is given by its place in a structure of relations. But then nothing bottoms out, and everything exists only in relation to everything else. That itself […] amounts to a deep kind of essencelessness: if the identity of all that exists is dependent on other things, the Buddhist position is simply right. (p.67)

If critical realists' proposition on causation is not intended to create another essentialist framework about the relation between entities, then the ambivalence in their expressions about 'regularity' (i.e. the repeatability of a causal link observable across concrete events) and 'determinism' can be viewed as support for a 'universal regularity' that Buddhism points out: 'When this arises, that arises; when this does not occur, that does not occur' (Garfield, 2015, p. 25). The point here is not a factual or hypothesised causal link between a concrete 'this' and a concrete 'that', but the general – and simple – temporal dimension of reality: phenomena arise, endure, and cease in succession (Tsai, 2014, p. 332). From a Buddhist standpoint, this is *all* that *can* be said as a satya. Any further propositions grounded in this regularity entail conceptual overlays on truth and thus cannot be truth itself.

Ontology and causation are, however, not marginalised from Buddhist literature. On the contrary, they are thoroughly discussed especially in the Mahāyāna texts (e.g. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*), as critical engagement with these questions is deemed crucial for establishing their position regarding the ultimate truth. Garfield (2002) summarises the Mahāyāna position as *positionlessness*, which is also known as the 'Middle Way' in various contexts. This position is not a passive or diplomatic 'indecision regarding competing claims' (p. 8). Rather, it is a positive action of refusing to assert propositions (due to the inability to do so from a non-perspectival perspective) and relinquishing all views with regard to ontological primacy (due to the inevitability of determinism implied in any view) (p. 66).

Because the ultimate truth is beyond expressibility, it cannot be adequately stated through language without connoting a perspectival bias or triggering distorted interpretation and

subsequent dogmatic application. Therefore, to declare their 'metaphysical silence' (Chinn, 2006), Buddhist thinkers – following classic Indian logico-epistemological traditions – often employ a non-dualistic verbal strategy through the use of negation (Tsai, 2014). This strategy uses conventional concepts as a vehicle to point to the ultimate truth as residing somewhere beyond and between any constructed polarities. The quote below from Nāgājuna's explanation of dependent origination in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* is paradigmatic of this discourse:

> Whatever is dependently arisen is unceasing, unborn, unannihilated, not permanent, not coming, not going, without distinction, without identity, and free from conceptual construction. (Nāgājuna, 150 CE; *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* / *The fundamental verses of the Middle Way*, dedicatory verse in Chapter 1) (translated by Garfield, 1995)

Similar formulations can also be found in Nāgājuna's comments on emptiness (e.g. *no* intrinsic nature) and two truths (e.g. truth is *neither* existent *nor* non-existent if viewed from the ultimate perspective and the conventional perspective respectively). The full version of this linguistic strategy (which can be found in various Buddhist treatises), i.e. *four-fold negation* (Catuskoti; sì jù 四句) (not X, not not-X, not both X and not-X, not neither X nor not-X), particularly serves the purpose of precluding the dualistic interpretations that: (a) refusing to assert X entails the asserting of X's opposite as true; (b) a naïve combination of X and its 'opposite' or a naïve rejection of both (i.e. seeking a 'third' alternative) brings us closer to truth.

Buddhist Middle way and its non-dualistic articulation about truth have been highly controversial among casual and serious readers of its doctrinal texts. The Middle Way formulations can be perceived to be nonsensical and dangerously nihilistic or, conversely, profoundly radical and constructive, depending on whether they are read within or beyond a dualistic perspective. Here, it is important to note Buddhism's soteriological purpose of 'curing' the suffering of sentient beings. Its target is the ill of dualism, which is considered a fundamental obstacle that holds the human mind from liberation. The controversial reception of the unconventional Buddhist use of language shows exactly its effectiveness in disturbing the dualistic mind, which habitually seeks to grasp realities by searching clarity between 'what is' and 'what isn't'. Buddhist thinkers, like many Western sceptics, consider this search ultimately futile, for it seeks to find permanence in a world that is not permanent (Garfield, 2002; Miller, 2008). The desire to grasp the 'ground' of realities renders the human mind vulnerable to 'metaphysical extremism' through slipping into the camp of reificationism or nihilism (Garfield, 2002, p. 7). For this, the Buddhist 'cure' is the Middle Way:

> […] the midpoint between reification of causation, the adoption of a realistic view with respect to causal powers, and nihilism, the view of a random and inexplicable universe of independent events, is the acceptance of the reality of conditions, and a regularist account of explanation. (Garfield, 2002, p. 72)

This position brings Buddhism closer to postmodernism, as Olson (2000) reflects on the latter:

> Since there is no longer any truth or certainty that can be established by a correspondence between the human mind and objective reality, and since it is impossible to gain any vantage point outside of the world in order to conceive of a unified worldview, not only is an all-encompassing worldview untenable, but […] we should give up the search for truth and be satisfied with interpretation. (p.16)

In IC studies, the problem of reification has generated rich debates, ranging from the conceptualisation of culture (e.g. cultural essentialism?), to the meaning of the prefix 'inter-' (e.g. between bounded cultures?), and the attitudes promoted for ethical IC (e.g. 'tolerance' of 'cultural difference'?). As the problematisation of such issues matures, a subtle nihilistic sentiment seems to emerge, characterised by rejection of the value of earlier (structuralist) frameworks and loss of confidence in current (critical) theories. Through a Buddhist lens, I contend that the 'cure' is not promised by the 'future' or 'elsewhere', but consists in the present. The breakthrough lies less in the search of a 'new alternative' within the confines of dualist thinking than in the exploration of non-dualistic knowledge through a critical moderation of the developments already in place.

For this purpose, a device readily available is the theory of non-essentialism, not its anti-essentialist variant. Resonating with the Buddhist Middle Way conceptually and rhetorically, non-essentialism points us in the direction of, rather than asserts, the truth of IC through deconstructing the ontological status of cultural essences, drawing attention to observable regularities through accounts of complexity and emergence, and refraining from establishing an alternative ontology. It does not deny 'large' cultures (e.g. national, ethnic) as conventional realities, but it targets the '-ism' problem, i.e. the epistemological tendency to take conceptualised endurants *as* ontological truth and the habit of uncritically clinging to this tendency. As Holliday (1999) addresses the problem of essentialism in IC studies in his seminal article *Small Cultures*:

> My purpose in suggesting that [essentialist] large culture is a reification is not therefore to reveal it as false. It is rather to increase awareness of what its conceptualisation involves, and […] some of its ideological implications (e.g. culturism, otherisation). (p. 242)

Due to the challenging nature of a non-concept as such, like the Buddhist Middle way, non-essentialism for IC has been received with controversy, a topic I shall take up next.

Non-essentialism as a threshold concept: from thought to consciousness

As previously mentioned, non-essentialism has become an established tenet in critical IC research, but feedback from the practical field is ambivalent. It is often felt that non-essentialism is 'easy to agree with' but 'hard to apply'. Among postmodernist followers, non-essentialism is increasingly embraced as a theoretically 'correct' view, a doctrine for good IC practice, and a conceptual lens for analytical exercise. It is being practised so that it almost becomes a reified ideal and uprooted from the realities empirically experienced by sentient beings. However, such practice of non-essentialism is seeing itself losing persuasion and inviting nihilistic reaction when people are emotionally disturbed by real world problems.

Noticeably, non-essentialist theories do not explicitly address the affective dimension of IC. Mental disturbance and human predicament are not infrequently recognised, though, as reasons for IC inquiry, with attention steadily paid to socially marginalised groups. This is particularly evident in the recent trend of activist IC research and practice (MacDonald, 2020). However, apart from the culture shock theory (e.g. Adler, 1975; Oberg, 1960) that played an active role in earlier IC literature (and has often been criticised for its theoretical simplicity), subsequent theoretical development dedicated to psychological wellbeing remains thin. This dimension deserves important attention, as the self-sabotage that critical interculturalists sometimes observe when practising what they believe to be right needs to be better understood. Importantly, a richer understanding in this regard affords the potential of further unleashing the power of non-essentialism (as a non-dualistic intellectual intervention) to foster benevolent intercultural relations through appeal to human connectivity rather than cultural differentiation.

It is thus beneficial to consider how the affective dimension of human wellbeing is addressed elsewhere in Buddhism. In Buddhist teachings, this subject is densely examined through the satya of *suffering*, which is presented not as a situation to be lamented, but a key for unlocking 'the door to reality' (Nhat Hanh, 1999, p. 136). The Buddhist concept of suffering (c.f. early Buddhist scriptures such as *Madhyama Āgama*) refers to a broad spectrum of predicaments associated with mundane experiences of 'suffering' (e.g. birth, death, illness, aging, unsatisfied desires, the distress from feeling trapped in undesired situations) and 'pleasure' (e.g. satisfied desires); and with a conviction in 'permanence'.

As the first satya in the Buddhist theory of Four Noble Truths, suffering involves at least four levels of meaning. First, it is a universal phenomenon that spares no sentient being and, like all other phenomena, is ultimately empty by nature. Second, suffering is an entry point of the path to awakening, which in turn leads to the cessation of suffering. Third, suffering is rooted in human consciousness and arises from the interplay between the experiencer's consciousness and

relevant external conditions (the latter is conceived of as the outcome of collective consciousness that has acquired enduring and shaping powers over time). Fourth, the reversed state of suffering, i.e. what follows its liberation, is not 'pleasure', but mental tranquillity.

From the Buddhist perspective, approaches to dealing with suffering guided by limited insight into its satya nature (e.g. denial of suffering through palliative methods or distraction to 'pleasure', unequal recognition of sentient beings' suffering due to selected interests, imbalanced attribution of suffering to either external or internal 'defects' rather than their interplay) can have relative value, but are insufficient for liberation. Such approaches are considered to close the door to enlightenment and sow the seeds for further forms of suffering (e.g. separatist mentality, depression from senses of powerlessness to change the surrounding environment). In comparison with such approaches, Buddhism aims beyond the amelioration of concrete instances of suffering, as it regards this as conducive to keeping the *cyclical suffering-laden life processes* (Saṃsāra; lúnhuí轮回) in motion. It is more concerned with bringing the wheel of suffering to a stop.

The implications of this theory of suffering for human communication can be profoundly challenging. The kind of relation that Buddhism seeks to explain and harmonise can be expressed as the relation between self (e.g. sentient being) and the world (e.g. that which is collectively constructed by sentient beings), not the relation between self and other as concrete sentient beings standing in juxtaposition. Buddhism emphasises individuals' contemplative capacity as the ultimate driving force for transformation and liberation, a capacity that bears a certain resemblance to the ideas of 'agency' and 'reflexivity' explored in IC studies. However, the Buddhist perspective does not suggest that individuals generally have the intellectual and/or material powers to revise the structures and institutions set up by collectivities in the historical or recent past. Instead, the 'agency' that Buddhism invokes is the power of consciousness possessed by each and every sentient being – even though sometimes dormant – to comprehend the conventional and empty natures of suffering and, with this insight, direct one's action towards the cessation of its cyclicity in empirical realities. Buddhist 'agency' is grounded in a humility to impermanence. It is oriented to the discovery of the world as we find it and an acceptance of the way life reveals itself (Garfield, 2015; Shi-Xueshan, 2020). This perspective relinquishes the search for objects of blame and is usually manifested through a peaceful action of non-resistance or what Miller (2008) paraphrases as a 'critical intelligent silence'. In an IC context, this can translate into a kind of tolerance of difference, tension, and conflict. It is an action of directing suffering to its own dissolution in the field of emptiness through the agentive exercise of consciousness, which should be differentiated from the act of ignoring the arising of suffering in uncomfortable situations or suppressing it with material or mental power.

For those who believe in the possibility of a better version of life and the value of steering efforts progressively towards that potentiality, the Buddhist approach to suffering can appear to be 'a passive kind of nihilism, a sign of weakness' (Garfield, 2002, p. 187). Indeed, it can work that way if one engages with Buddhism superficially and dogmatically. However, a deeper understanding of its teachings reveals that it is the possible actualisation of liberation (from suffering) *in the present* that Buddhism draws attention to. This is the locale where the mentally disturbed aspire to settle and participants in progressive projects draw energy from, and thus arguably may be a realistic locale where the promise of a better future lies.

This emphasis on presentness can be further understood in relation to the Buddhist view that sentient beings are afflicted by a basic proclivity of *grasping* or *clinging to* (upādāna; zhí qǔ执取) their epistemologically constructed ontologies, 'ontologies' that are constrained by our language and conceptual apparatus plagued by dualism (Lusthaus, 2018). According to the Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, if one falls prey to the proclivity of clinging to one's projections for that onto which one is projecting, one fails to truly understand what one seeks to understand (Lusthaus, 2018). When the mind compels itself to generate understandings of the present by evoking thoughts formed in the past and/or projected towards the future, one faces the challenge of making (or failing to make) the transition from the phenomenal aspects of reality to the ground of being (Hanh, 1999, p. 136). This disjuncture from presentness is the very condition for suffering to arise. Depending on

one's continued ignorance of, or awakening to, this 'grasping' proclivity, suffering can subsequently gain vitality and endure or move in the direction of dissolution. The liberation of suffering therefore involves loosening the psychological 'grasp' through an awareness of the empty nature of that which is 'grasped'. The outcome is a state of *equanimity* (upekṣā; shě舍), where the mind settles in tranquillity and consciously separates itself from desire, aversion, delusion, arrogance, and jealousy – the five principle *poisons* (kleshas; fánnǎo烦恼) that, according to Buddhism, perennially afflict sentient beings by deluding them into believing that these poisons are their 'selves' (or the 'selves' of others).

Through this Buddhist lens, essentialist responses to IC challenges in the practical field can be viewed as both reactions to, and sources of, suffering. This would concern those falling victim to essentialist discourses and acts, and also those seeking essentialist 'pain-relief' (e.g. blame the other) through clinging to their epistemological constructions about the 'ontology' of their suffering. The suffering of the directly victimised is now a well-recognised theme in existing discussions about IC ethics, usually considered through a 'responsibility-for-the-other' discourse (MacDonald & O'Regan, 2013). In comparison, the suffering experienced at 'the other end' of the relation (i.e. self) has received much less attention. This seems to echo Olson's (2000) argument that with regard to the self-other relationship, postmodernists emphasise the de-centring of the self but move in the direction of divinising the other, thus promoting an abstract self solely guided by rationality. In comparison, Buddhism emphasises a concrete, sentient self without transforming the other into something divine or quasi-divine (p.142), which is important for resolving the cycle of suffering.

An insight that can be teased out of this complex analysis of suffering is that intercultural well-being ultimately resides in non-essentialism as being itself rather than a theory about being. Like the empty nature of all phenomena when viewed from a Buddhist perspective, the non-essentialist nature of IC is 'openly manifest' (though in paradoxical ways) and 'at the same time concealed' by linguistic and conceptual overlays, hence difficult to 'grasp' with one's intellectual powers (Olson, 2000, p. 196). Thus what is crucial to one's comprehension of non-essentialism – as a mode of intercultural existence – is the consciousness of non-essentialism as a *non-theory*, coupled with an exercise that trains learners to live the insight rather than to 'grasp' it through the duality of conceptual thought and practical application.

A resonance emerges here with the educational term *threshold concept* (Land et al., 2010) in that the learning of non-essentialism involves a 'troublesome' threshold where learners may find themselves 'in a […] suspended state of partial understanding, or 'stuck place', in which understanding approximates to a kind of 'mimicry' or lack of authenticity' (p. x). Comprehension of a threshold concept can result in insights that are 'transformative (occasioning a significant shift in the perception of a subject), integrative (exposing the previously hidden inter-relatedness of something) and likely to be […] irreversible (unlikely to be forgotten, or unlearned only through considerable effort)' (p. ix). Buddhist thinkers would agree with this account about the process of comprehending truth and would pinpoint the hermeneutical problem for explaining the 'troublesome' aspect. According to Garfield (2002):

> Essentialism is virtually built into the grammar of our language. That is why it is so seductive. To articulate the critique requires a careful account of how language works, and of how it is being used in the philosophical critique in question. And that account itself will be subject to the same misconstruals. But we *can* understand what it is to kick away the ladder, and we *can* question the primacy of assertion as a linguistic act. This kicking and questioning – this banging our heads against the walls of language – is essential to attaining clarity about the role of language and conception in ontology and in our mode of being in the world. (pp. 49-50) (author's own emphasis)

Buddhists would also agree with the threshold learning theory that once its truth doctrines (e.g. emptiness, impermanence, and the cessation of suffering) are experientially comprehended, learners will likely remain aware that these are far more profound than what is cognitively acquired through the verbal doctrines. Apart from these resonances, Buddhism offers a unique perspective on 'threshold learning': sentient beings' *forgetfulness* (Miller, 2008; Shi-Xueshan, 2020). From the Buddhist standpoint, conceptual projections are so ingrained in our consciousness that they

often escape our consciousness in concrete experiences by tempting us to believe that they are the 'truth' that has caused our experiences. Therefore, apart from establishing the 'right view' about truth, central to Buddhist praxis is the *development of a habit* to combat this forgetfulness, an exercise that is contemplative in character and *diligent* (vīrya; jīngjìn精进) in implementation. And suffering, which is ever emergent in the vicissitudes of life, gives impetus to this exercise by constantly waking us up from mental projections to the call of (inter-)being.

As such, Buddhist teachings involve sensitising learners to suffering as well as its enlightening affordances, and guiding learners to blend this perspective with their ordinary life through cultivating a habit of contemplation. This approach would find some methodological parallels with reflective practice in IC education, as both utilise introspective exercise to explore an 'accessible and transcendable self' (Blasco, 2012). In comparison, reflective IC learning tends to depart from the previously-mentioned 'responsibility for the other', focusing on rational analysis of events and practising discursive approaches to IC (e.g. see Holliday & Amadasi, 2020 for the 'block and thread' strategies for navigating intercultural conversation non-essentialistically). Buddhist contemplative practice attends more closely to one's affective responses to experience and emphasises the training of the mind to constantly *return* to the presentness of being (i.e. liberation of suffering) through increased consciousness of one's thought streams that frequently escape to past, future, or imagined realities. These differences provide worthy pointers for thought when interculturalists explore ways of promoting non-essentialism for the wellbeing of interhuman communication.

Conclusions

In this paper, I developed an inter-epistemic dialogue between IC studies and Buddhism for examining some difficult questions raised by critical intercultural researchers. These questions concern truth claims about IC, the disjuncture between IC theory and practice, and the ambiguous roles that structure and agency play in shaping IC experiences. The dialogue shows that the paradoxes associated with these questions are valuable resources for deepening existing knowledge and need not be regretted as defects. However, from this dialogue also surfaces a paradigmatic challenge for interculturalists seeking breakthroughs: to 'overcome the limitations' of existing developments by incorporating these limitations into – rather than rejecting them from – intercultural theory. This entails efforts to direct theoretical debates towards collegiality – rather than competition – between seemingly incompatible paradigms. Such praxis can be hardly conceivable within a dualistic logic, a logic that simultaneously illuminates our understandings of lived experiences and constrains our imagination of paradoxical inter-being. Nonetheless, resistance to dualism (e.g. representation of cultures as binary oppositions) is a known tradition in critical intercultural scholarship, and herein lie the potential of advancing IC theory: to further stretch our non-dualistic endeavours from interrogating the representational aspect of culture to examining the mode(s) of thinking that undergirds our theoretical work and debate.

This paper has demonstrated what this theoretical exercise might look like via an inter-epistemic dialogue with Buddhism. Specifically, with inspirations from the Buddhist Middle Way, I discussed the affordances that the already-established non-essentialist IC theories can provide for transcending the limits of dualism. I emphasise, however, that for non-essentialism to work pertinently to non-dualistic effects, there is a need for more nuanced understanding of non-essentialism, particularly in relation to its *anti*-essentialist variant. Within our linguistic conventions, the negation designated in the 'non' prefix too easily activates the dualistic mechanism in the human mind, directing people's attention to absence or denial vis-à-vis the reification of a 'thing' that can stand by itself. While this 'default' perspective has much value and utility to offer, it is important to recognise that this is *not the only way* non-essentialism can be comprehended. We have seen examples in Buddhist elaborate teachings about non-concepts (e.g. emptiness as the 'lack of intrinsic nature') and non-action (e.g. 'critical intelligent silence') for comprehending our existence. To interrogate the meaning of non-essentialism in a similar way challenges interculturalists to confront

the limits of language and the habit of searching for conceptual clarity within these limits, thus opening up new grounds for exploring actions that are positively directed at the actualisation of intercultural wellbeing (cf. resistance to 'bad actions').

Any critical interculturalist would agree that, ultimately, non-essentialism should be expressed in practice rather than principle. However, exploring the possibility of living non-essentialistically is no easy task. This is well reflected in Buddhists' millennia of hard efforts and the historically ambiguous identities Buddhism has taken on to teach about the human mind's susceptibility to dualism and approaches to transcend it. Nevertheless, non-essentialist living is a rewarding enterprise to engage with, as shown by numerous followers' commitment to Buddhist praxis, supported by a faith acquired through seeing examples from Buddhist masters and practitioners across temporal, geographical, and linguistic contexts.

The IC field has developed a rich corpus of conceptual frameworks that help people *understand* and *act*, not only for benign scenarios where they exchange and construct mutually enriching intercultural experiences, but also for adverse conditions that require countermeasures. In complementarity with these cognitive and politically-sensitive approaches to relating with the other, insights from Buddhism call us to explore a non-essentialist *wisdom* that empowers people – by turning inward to one's consciousness – to settle in the presentness of their experiences with equanimity vis-à-vis the impermanent empirical realities that are sometimes within, at other times outside, their power of influence; and vis-à-vis the habitual tendency inherent in the human mind to cling to mental constructions of 'essence'. The reasons for striving towards such settlement are realistic and practical: it defines one's wellbeing in the immediacy of an intercultural relationship; and such wellbeing – attested by and to oneself – is crucial for sustaining progressive projects aimed at future changes in the social conditions that influence our intercultural lives.

This paper has shown a range of elements in IC education and pedagogy (e.g. critical theories, reflective learning) that resonate with Buddhist thoughts (e.g. doctrines of emptiness and dependent origination, contemplative practice), which afford much potential to facilitate explorations of this non-essentialist wisdom. Compared with Buddhism, IC research and education are more expressly constrained by modern forms of knowledge dissemination, not least through expectations of measurable outcomes, emphasis on cognitive learning and the use of written text as the means of evidence, and the relegation of the wholeness of our experience of intercultural being to projects designed within a 'theory-practice' duality.

Alongside critical interculturalists' efforts to fight against these institutionalised burdens, this paper examines the possibility of transformative change through re-calibrating elements in existing IC work. In the light of Buddhist teachings and praxis, I make a number of suggestions for projects aimed at developing non-essentialist IC. First, non-essentialism is explicitly introduced as a threshold concept. Learners are sensitised to the difficulty of comprehending it and guided to practise suspending their proclivity to seek conceptual clarity *as a way of engaging* in the process of comprehending non-essentialism. Second, explanations of IC concepts are grounded in a philosophical reflection on the limits of language and constituted by:

> […] a metaphysically modest inventory of what we find [about the nature of the world in which we live], together with a psychologically sophisticated account of the manner in which we present the world and ourselves to ourselves, and of the sources of distortion that inevitably involves, including the sources of distortion of any account of any sources of distortion. (Garfield, 2015, p. 88).

Third, the unrest experienced by the *self* in intercultural encounters is foregrounded as an ethical component of IC learning. Reflective exercises that involve the affective dimension of IC experiences will move beyond verbal analysis of what happened in past incidents or imagination of what can be done alternatively in future scenarios. Importantly, such exercises will address how one can practically use non-essentialist insights to settle one's unrest in the here-and-now of a given context. Fourth, learners are sensitised to the vulnerability of the human mind to dualistic thinking, which prompts one to habitually cling to forms of 'essence' as the source of explanation. Therefore, it is

important for learners to practise the *constant remembering* of this vulnerability, of the disquiet that may ensue when the vulnerability is expressed in specific IC encounters, and of the reflective methods they can use to act on what I call a 'responsibility for the self' by helping the disquiet dissolve.

These are a few broad moves that are worth making from the domain of *know-that* towards the praxis of *know-how* when interculturalists search new directions for making a difference to the way of influencing our communities. The detail therein merits further exploration, and this can benefit from continued dialogue with Buddhism and other epistemic traditions that share similar concerns about interhuman communication and have developed rich repertoires of methods for guiding relevant praxis. Finally, in spite of theoretical and practical challenges, it is important to have faith in the power of non-essentialism in enlightening our pursuit of intercultural wellbeing as individuals and social collectivities – as would be echoed by Buddhists who have witnessed similar struggles and achievements through their endeavours across space and time.

Note on contributor

Vivien Xiaowei Zhou is Lecturer in Intercultural Communication and Deputy Programme Leader for MSc Intercultural Business Communication at Edinburgh Napier University. Her research interests primarily concern the intercultural dimension of human identity, communication and relations, with a particular interest in the narrativity of individuals' lived experiences and intellectual dialogue across linguistic, disciplinary, and epistemic traditions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Vivien Xiaowei Zhou http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4458-1236

References

Adler, P. S. (1975). The transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, *15*(4), 13–23. https://doi.org/10.1177/002216787501500403

Blasco, M. (2012). On reflection: Is reflexivity necessarily beneficial in intercultural education? *Intercultural Education*, *23*(6), 475–489. https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2012.736750

Block, D. (2013). The structure and agency dilemma in identity and intercultural communication research. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, *13*(2), 126–147. https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2013.770863

Chinn, E. Y. (2006). John Dewey and the Buddhist philosophy of the Middle Way. *Asian Philosophy*, *16*(2), 87–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/09552360600772645

Chuang, R., & Chen, G. (2003). Buddhist perspectives and human communication. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, *12*(4), 65–80.

Collins, H. (2018). Interculturality from above and below: Navigating uneven discourses in a neoliberal university system. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, *18*(2), 167–183.

Dervin, F. (2016). *Interculturality in education: A theoretical and methodological toolbox*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Dervin, F. (2017). Critical turns in language and intercultural communication pedagogy: The simple-complex continuum (simplexity) as a new perspective. In M. Dasli, & A. R. Díaz (Eds.), *The critical turn in language and intercultural communication pedagogy: Theory, research and practice* (pp. 58–72). Routledge.

Dorjee, T. (2017). Intercultural communication: A Buddhist perspective. In S. M. Croucher (Ed.), *Global perspectives on intercultural communication* (pp. 71–74). Routledge.

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche. (2016). 佛教的见地与修道 [The view and path in Buddhism]. In J. M. Ma, Y. Z. Yang, & G. Z. Chen trans (Eds.), New Star Press.

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche. (2017). Prajnaparamita (Heart Sutra). Dharma talk in Kathmandu, Nepal, 30 Apr – 4 May, 2017. Accessed 15 Apr 2021, via https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6-wArQbu9GBV9adFXp4NfUar6g-70_OZ

Ferri, G. (2018). *Intercultural communication: Critical approaches and future challenges*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Garfield, J. L. (1995). *The fundamental wisdom of the middle way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Oxford University Press.

Garfield, J. L. (2002). *Empty words: Buddhist philosophy and cross-cultural interpretation*. Oxford University Press.
Garfield, J. L. (2015). *Engaging buddhism: Why it matters to philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
Gorski, P. C. (2008). Good intentions are not enough: A decolonizing intercultural education. *Intercultural Education*, *19*(6), 515–525.
Holliday, A. (1999). Small cultures. *Applied Linguistics*, *20*(2), 237–264. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/20.2.237
Holliday, A. (2010). Complexity in cultural identity. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, *10*(2), 165–177. https://doi.org/10.1080/14708470903267384
Holliday, A. (2019). *Understanding intercultural communication* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
Holliday, A., & Amadasi, S. (2020). *Making sense of the intercultural: Finding deCentred threads*. Routledge.
Holliday, A., & MacDonald, M. N. (2020). Researching the intercultural: Intersubjectivity and the problem with post-positivism. *Applied Linguistics*, *41*(5), 621–639. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amz006
Hostede, G. (2002). Dimensions do not exist: A reply to Brendan McSweeny. *Human Relations*, *55*(11), 1355–1361. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726702055011921
Huang, Z. M. (2020). Learning from the 'right' ground of mindfulness: Some insights for the 'good' interculturalist. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, *20*(1), 50–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2019.1672711
Kochumuttom, T. A. (1982). *A Buddhist doctrine of experience: A new translation and interpretation of the works of Vasubhandhu the Yogācārin*. Motilal Banarsidass.
Ladegaard, H. J., & Phipps, A. (2020). Intercultural research and social activism. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, *20*(2), 67–80. https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2020.1729786
Land, R., Meyer, J. H. F., & Baillie, C. (2010). Editors' preface. In J. H. F. Meyer, R. Land, & C. Baillie (Eds.), *Threshold concepts and transformational learning, pp.ix-xlii*. Sense Publishers.
Lusthaus, D. (2002). *Buddhist phenomenology: A philosophical investigation of Yogācāra Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih lun*. RoutledgeCurzon.
Lusthaus, D. (2010). The two truths (Saṃvṛti-satya and Paramārtha-satya) in Early Yogācāra. *Journal of Buddhist Studies*, *7*, 101–152.
Lusthaus, D. (2018). *What is and isn't Yogācāra*. Online essays and articles on Yogācāra Buddhism. http://www.acmuller.net/yogacara/articles/intro.html
MacDonald, M. N., & O'Regan, J. P. (2013). The ethics of intercultural communication. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *45*(10), 1005–1017. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2011.00833.x
MacDonald, M. N., & O'Regan, J. P. (2014). A global agenda for intercultural communication research and practice. In J. Jackson (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of language and intercultural communication (1st ed.)* (pp. 553–567). Routledge.
MacDonald, M. N. (2020). A global agenda for ethical language and intercultural communication research and practice. In J. Jackson (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of language and intercultural communication* (2nd ed.) (pp. 555–572). Abingdon: Routledge.
McSweeney, B. (2013). Fashion founded on a flaw: The ecological mono-deterministic fallacy of Hofstede, GLOBE, and followers. *International Marketing Review*, *30*(5), 483–504. https://doi.org/10.1108/IMR-04-2013-0082
Merican, A. M. (2012). Representations of philosophy: The Western gaze observed. In S. Nair-Venugopal (Ed.), *The gaze of the West and framings of the East* (pp. 79–92). Palgrave Macmillan.
Miller, R. (2008). *Buddhist existentialism: From anxiety to authenticity and freedom*. Shogam Publications.
Nhat Hanh, T. (1999). *The heart of the Buddha's teaching: Transforming suffering into peace, joy and liberation*. Rider.
Nhat Hanh, T. (2012). *Awakening of the heart: Essential Buddhist sutras and commentaries*. Parallax Press.
Oberg, K. (1960). Cultural shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology*, *os-7*(4), 177–182. https://doi.org/10.1177/009182966000700405
Olson, C. (2000). *Zen and the art of postmodern philosophy: Two paths of liberation from the representational mode of thinking*. State University of New York Press.
Ryazanov, A. A., & Christenfeld, N. J. S. (2018). The strategic value of essentialism. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *12*(1), e12370, https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12370
Santos, B. d. S. (2018). *The end of the cognitive empire: The coming of age of epistemologies of the South*. Duke University Press.
Shi-Xueshan. (2020). 关于训练觉知的文章合集 [A collection of essays on the training of mindfulness]. The website of Xueshan Chan Buddhist Monastery. http://www.xueshanchanyuan.com/index/xueshan/detail/id/107.html
Stelma, J., Fay, R., & Zhou, X. (2013). Developing intentionality and researching multilingually: An ecological and methodological perspective. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *23*(3), 300–315. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijal.12040
Taras, V., Rowney, J., & Steel, P. (2009). Half a century of measuring culture: Review of approaches, challenges, and limitations based on the analysis of 121 instruments for quantifying culture. *Journal of International Management*, *15*(4), 357–373. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intman.2008.08.005
Ting-Toomey, S., & Dorjee, T. (2019). *Communicating across cultures* (2nd ed.). Guilford Publications.
Tsai, Y. M. (2014). Language as an instrument of soteriological transformation from the Madhyamaka perspective. *Asian Philosophy: An International Journal of the Philosophical Traditions of the East*, *24*(4), 330–345.

Ye, S. (2011). 中: 梵藏汉合校·导读·译注 *[Mūlamadhyamakakārikā: New editions of the Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese versions, with commentary and a modern Chinese translation]*. Zhongxi Book Company.

Zhou, V. X., & Pilcher, N. (2018). 'Intercultural competence' as an intersubjective process: A reply to 'essentialism'. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, *18*(1), 125–143. https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2017.1400510

Zhu, H. (2015). Interculturality: Reconceptualising cultural memberships and identities through translanguaging practice. In F. Dervin, & K. Risager (Eds.), *Research identity and interculturality. Routledge studies in language and intercultural communication* (pp. 109–124). Routledge.

Zotzmann, K. (2017). Research on intercultural communication: A critical realist perspective. In M. Dasli, & A. R. Díaz (Eds.), *The critical turn in language and intercultural communication pedagogy: Theory, research and practice* (pp. 75–90). Routledge.