Chinese-English Interpreting and Intercultural Communication, by Jim Hlavac and Zhichang Xu (Routledge Advances in Translation and Interpreting Studies Series). London and New York: Routledge, 2020. 224 pp., £120.00 (hbk) ISBN 9781138669628, £36.99 (pbk) ISBN 9781032174716, £33.29 (e-book) ISBN 9781315618111.

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Chinese-English Interpreting and Intercultural Communication, co-authored by two academics specialising in cultural studies, with one (Hlavac) being also a certified interpreter, is a contribution to interpreting studies in particular and to intercultural communication in general. Serving as a vivid reflection of the interdisciplinary nature of interpreting studies, this book integrates intercultural communication theories into analyses of Chinese-English interpreting practices in various settings.

The 214-page volume comprises five chapters that can be grouped into three parts: Chapters 1 and 2 lay theoretical foundations, Chapters 3 and 4 analyse empirical data, and Chapter 5 reports findings and implications.

With a view to renewing readers’ understanding of intercultural communication in the current globalised world, Chapter 1 starts with an appealing anecdote: a Chinese-English interpreter avoided misunderstanding of a joke told by an Australian senior government official to a group of Chinese officials through “representing” relevant ideas. The strategy highlights the necessity of not only bilingual proficiency but also “intercultural communicative competence” (p. 15) for achieving successful interpreting-facilitated communication. Key concepts and models relevant to intercultural communication (language, culture, interculturality, communication, intercultural communication, and competence for intercultural communication) are reviewed and integrated into an “Inter-Culturality Framework” (ICF). Embodied in the framework are two pillars: “intercultural discourse” (covering intercultural frames and models) and “intercultural agency” (enacted through intercultural schemas and strategies) (p. 21). Reading experience of this chapter is optimised as the content is introduced in an orderly way from simple to complex. The comprehensive review of the literature covers key concepts, facilitating understanding of the theory-laden framework proposed at the end of the introduction.
In Chapter 2, before zooming in on interpreter-mediated intercultural communication between Chinese and English speakers, the concepts “Chinese speakers” and “English speakers” are redefined, reflecting the heterogeneous language backgrounds of the two groups and the complexity of norms and conventions involved in interpreting-facilitated intercultural communication. Key paradigms and frameworks are critically reviewed to help interpreters work effectively in intercultural communication between Chinese and English parties. These include intercultural pragmatics (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1994; Hymes, 1974), terms of address (e.g., kinship terms, honorifics, occupational terms of address), conceptualisation of face and maxims of politeness used in communicative events (e.g., greetings, openers, ice-breakers, small talk), and non-verbal features (e.g., paralinguistic features, proxemics, speech acts). The chapter concludes by engaging critically on interpreters’ positioning, agency, and changing roles. The potential cultural gaps listed in this chapter provide valuable references for both interpreters and researchers, and indeed anyone involved in intercultural exchanges.

Chapter 3 starts with an overview of interpreting theory, depicting evolving perceptions of interpreting from the initial perspective of inter-lingual transfer to the sense-transferring (through deverbalisation) perspective of the Paris School and finally to the social turn perspective. The authors focus on different interpreting settings, advocating that not only interpreters, but also monolingual speakers, engage as “protagonist(s) with inter-cultural communication competence” (p. 68). The role(s) of interpreters has been increasingly codified (e.g., AUSIT Code of Ethics) along with the professionalisation of interpreting, yet in real performance, interpreters often deviate from these perceived roles. The authors discuss this “stepping out” (p. 71) from the perspectives of demographics, gaze correlation, Goffman’s (1961) understanding of a continuum of role shifts, and the notion of footing/agency. Data and excerpts from the most common interpreting settings—namely, conference interpreting, diplomatic interpreting, media interpreting, business interpreting, legal interpreting, and healthcare interpreting—are presented and analysed from the perspectives of intercultural features, the interpreter’s role and discourse strategies (such as interpretive summaries, message replacement, and comprehension checks). The authors discuss challenges in different settings, interweaving previous research with recollections from interpreters and researchers. After discussing the behaviour of professional interpreters, untrained interpreters and ad hoc interpreting are analysed, revealing how intercultural communication fails through improper application of cultural-pragmatic knowledge and inadequate understanding about interpreters’ roles. The perception of culture is specified within the context of numerous guideline documents such as the Chartered Institute of Linguistics’ Code of Professional Conduct, the AUSIT Code of Ethics and Code of Conduct, and California Standards for Healthcare Interpreters. Comments from Chinese-English interpreters on whether interpreters should work as “cultural clarifier(s)” (p. 121) are also reported. This chapter covers many topics without losing the general design, thereby presenting a holistic picture of intercultural interpreter-mediated communication.

Chapter 4 reports responses to surveys from three groups of informants (25 monolingual Chinese-speaking patients, 24 monolingual English-speaking healthcare professionals, and 33 Chinese-English interpreters) involved in interpreter-mediated healthcare interactions. Participants’ perceptions of their own and others’ linguistic and paralinguistic behaviour are presented. The questionnaires cover a full range of
situational features in healthcare interpreting and yield valuable empirical data. The quantitative data are fully interpreted by referring to previous research findings and commentary of professional practitioners. The survey findings reveal different perspectives and practices between the interpreters and the users of the interpreting services. Section 4.2 deals with (self) introductions, role explanations, and pre-interactional briefings; Section 4.3 presents perceptions of physical proximity, the use of small talk, and body language; and Section 4.4 focuses on how information is presented or elicited in the context of Hall’s (1976) distinctions between high-context and low-context cultures. Section 4.5 investigates how the different groups conclude interactions. Finally, Section 4.6 explores participants’ metalinguistic awareness and how linguistic features are adjusted in intercultural communication.

Chapter 5 begins by summarising major findings of the previous chapters and outlining their implications for Chinese-English interpreting, mainly in terms of interpreter training. Besides stressing the need for bilingual and intercultural proficiency, situated practice and simulated interactions are advocated to help trainees better understand their roles and overcome challenges arising from differences in procedures, hierarchies, turn-taking conventions, and registers of speech. Trainees are also encouraged to learn culturally acceptable behaviour in terms of situational features (e.g., introductions, role-explanation, pre-interactional briefings), proxemics, phatic language, kinesics, and haptics, as well as culturally acceptable ways to rephrase or digress from original speeches. The authors conclude by proposing “three steps” for intercultural interlocutors (including interpreters): they should acknowledge paradigm shifts, anticipate intercultural differences, and acquire new competences for effective intercultural communication. Although their findings are thoroughly interpreted, the authors miss the opportunity to emphasise the book’s contribution to raising interpreters’ metalinguistic and cultural awareness, especially in the context of public service interpreting.

The strength of this volume lies in its well-knit theoretical foundation. The authors base their ICF on an exhaustive review of concepts and models involved in interpreter-mediated intercultural communication, and demonstrate its applicability in their ensuing study. ICF may promisingly be applied by other researchers as an effective tool to investigate interpreting-facilitated intercultural communication.

Another merit of this volume lies in the diversity of the analysed instances. An extensive coverage of examples from common interpreting settings is presented in Chapter 3. Moreover, both acceptable performance achieved by professional interpreters and annoying embarrassment caused by untrained interpreters are analysed. All these instances serve to inform trainees of ways to identify and regulate their behaviour in intercultural mediation.

Finally, this volume is characterised by an integrated methodological approach. Readers’ understanding of interpreter-mediated intercultural communication is developed step by step via the authors’ systematic and critical review on previous literature (Chapters 1 and 2); qualitative analysis of examples, anecdotes, and individual interviews with eight interpreters (Chapters 3 and 4); and quantitative analysis of questionnaire data (Chapter 4). The triangulation of multiple research methods achieves a comprehensive and multi-perspective understanding of the topic discussed.

In view of a second edition, the following improvements are suggested. First, the table of contents is extremely brief, showing only titles for chapters, which inconveniences
readers’ intent on intensive reading. A more reader-friendly table of contents that lists titles of each section, enabling readers to swiftly grasp the structure of the book and quickly locate specific information, is recommended for a second edition. Second, readers would appreciate having access to the three questionnaires discussed in Chapter 4, either as an Appendix at the end of the book or by including a URL link. Third, more careful proofreading would be required in a subsequent edition in order to avoid grammatical mistakes, typos, obvious repetitions (e.g., the paragraph summarising features of conference interpreting on p. 128 is repeated on p. 200), and translation errors (e.g., “How do others position themselves to you . . .?” is wrongly translated as “别人怎么对待你” [how do others treat you], p. 158). Fourth, the discussion in the concluding chapter focuses mainly on interpreting pedagogy and intercultural communication. However, as an academic monograph, its contribution to furthering theoretical exploration, empirical investigation, and methodological advancement could have been better elaborated.

Nevertheless, the merits outweigh the flaws. This work will definitely appeal to interpreting practitioners, trainees and trainers, as well as researchers.

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