Applying a Delphi process towards assessing the status and conceptualization of intercultural communication studies in China

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Abstract
Aiming at pooling the opinions of internationally and nationally known intercultural experts on the status and conceptualization of intercultural communication studies in China, this research project adopted a Delphi process. Exploratory questionnaires were sent to an identified set of experts (N = 45) via email for the first stage, responses (N = 34) compiled, evaluated, and questions edited; a more focused questionnaire redistributed to experts for the second stage (N = 20); and a summary of findings was checked and confirmed for the third stage (N = 15). Themes and theoretical issues were formulated through each stage, compiled, and where possible integrated. This research process has generated the following findings: (1) leading topics related to intercultural communication are identified; (2) major research methodologies adopted in each related field are examined; (3) highly cited authors and theories most applied in intercultural communication studies are ranked; (4) emerging trends in the field are listed; and (5) assessments and recommendations for the ongoing development, significance, and relevance of intercultural communication studies in the Chinese context are highlighted. Strengths and weaknesses of the results and this study are then noted toward future development of the field.

Keywords
China, status, conceptualization, Delphi process, intercultural communication studies

In the early 1970s, intercultural communication, also generally known as IC (or by some authors as ICC, for example, Kim, 2017), developed into a field of study when systematic courses began to be offered in universities and the first academic associations were established in the United States in the 1970s (Kulich, 2012). The field has grown, deepened, and expanded since it was...
introduced to China by scholars returning from studying abroad experiences in the United States in the 1980s, and formalized in 1995 with the establishment of the Chinese Association for Intercultural Communication (CAFIC). As the field nears 40 years of Chinese domestic development, members of the research team of the SISU Intercultural Institute (SII) have been seeking to assess the history and nature of the field in various contexts and conducted a three-stage survey on the status, conceptualization, and development of IC studies in China. This article reports on the research findings generated through a Delphi process.

**Review of literature on IC studies in China**

Since the IC field was introduced in China (He, 1983), IC studies have grown in richness and diversity. Reviews from different perspectives have been offered, the most reviews focusing on IC studies in the context of foreign language teaching (FLT; for example, W. Z. Hu, 2010b; Kulich & Wang, 2015; Li & Ju, 2018; Peng, 2010; Zhang, 2010), some in the context of international communication (e.g. Guan, 2006; Z. R. Hu & Ji, 2011; Suo, Weng, & Kulich, 2015), or considering IC studies in China in its global context (e.g. Kulich, 2018). But other areas, like IC studies in international education, business, literary or translation studies, psychology, and so on, have largely been ignored. Academia at large still questions the status and conceptualization of IC in China due perhaps in part to its interdisciplinary nature. To understand panorama and position of what falls under the label of “intercultural communication studies,” more research is needed to fill the gap. Awareness of this need is obvious, as one frequently hears academics discuss or present conference papers on questions about (1) the major challenges and opportunities facing this field in China, (2) the core content or popular research topics, (3) the major theories applied or research methodologies adopted, (4) its academic status, and (5) the relevance or future prospects for IC studies in China.

To find answers to these questions, the SII, a university-level center of Shanghai International Studies University (SISU) began a process to involve Chinese and international intercultural experts to obtain firsthand perspectives and evaluations of the current status, conceptualization, and development of this field in China, especially during this new era of the increased significance of China in global interaction.

**Review of literature on Delphi**

The Delphi technique was first applied by the Rand Corporation to collect experts’ opinions regarding technological predictions in the 1940s. In recent decades, numerous corporations, government institutions, and academic institutions have adopted this method on diversities of research projects (i.e. Custer, Scarcella, & Stewart, 1999; Green, Armstrong, & Graefe, 2007; Hilbert, Miles, & Othmer, 2009; Vander Schaaf, & Stokking, 2011).

The Delphi method is generally used to obtain and summarize information based on the judgments of those “in the know” (Rowe, Wright, & Bolger, 1991). Deardorff (2006) argues that Delphi is especially applicable to collecting consensus of physically distant experts. As a means of structuring group communication, a Delphi process allows individuals of a group to effectively solve a particular issue as a whole and allows all members to “contribute equally without dominance by a few” and has a cyclic character that generates convergence (Linstone & Turoff, 1975). This group communication process is achieved through the following steps (Linstone & Turoff,
(1975): (1) individual contribution of information and feedback, (2) group judgment or evaluation, (3) individual modification, and (4) anonymity of individual answers. By adopting the Delphi method, researchers usually mean to arrive at consensus on an issue under study by means of the anonymous contributions of individuals in a specified group.

**Rationale for adopting Delphi**

Related to the field of IC, Deardorff (2006) selected the Delphi technique both for her groundbreaking study on assessing and developing a framework for intercultural competence, and also as the backbone for her handbook (Deardorff, 2009) that integrates the professional perspectives of a wide range of experts. Based on Cogswell and Stubblefield’s (1988) attempt to use the Delphi in training designs, Brislin and Yoshida (1994: 18–20) include a step-by-step questionnaire-based Delphi procedure as an important component of identifying issues of stakeholders for carrying out a broad-based needs assessment toward developing effective IC training designs. Not only for use in applied contexts but also for the academic profiling of a field or approach, Heath, Neimeyer, and Pedersen (1988) used this process to survey a panel of 53 identified experts to access the scope and probable future of the field of cross-cultural counseling. Each of these inter- or cross-cultural field publications demonstrated the capability of this technique to survey the observations or opinions of a selected sample of experts toward assessing the needs, issues, or prospects of a field. In the Chinese context, IC continues to be an emerging and evolving field positioned within or between different disciplines and seemed to have characteristics similar to previous IC-related Delphi applications. Therefore, to understand how this subdiscipline (cf. Kim, 2017) is perceived, practiced, or formulated, a dynamic research approach like the Delphi seemed best applied to assess and include the ideas of the diverse group of scholars and practitioners that constitute IC in China.

Based on methodological recommendations, Delphi can be considered when one or more of the following properties exist (Linstone & Turoff, 1975: 3–4): the problem does not lend itself to precise analytical techniques but benefits from subjective judgments on a collective basis; more individuals are needed than can effectively communicate in a face-to-face situation; time and cost make frequent group meetings impractical, to name only a few. Because intercultural scholars are often spread among a number of fields, and yet work with similar constructs, theories, and methods, they constitute a type of “invisible college” (Kulich & Zhang, 2012). Thus, the use of a Delphi process was selected to provide the best means to elicit summaries and confirm assessments on the state of the IC field from them.

**Research design**

**Methodology**

The purpose of this research was to assess the current status, conceptualization, and development of IC studies specifically in China. To achieve this purpose, information was needed from a geographically and academically diverse group of experts. An investigative Delphi process was decided on to collect “the views and knowledge” (Worthen, Sanders, & Fitzpatrick, 1997) of intercultural experts who know the field well both domestically and internationally. The research consisted of three distinct phases of (1) identification and elicitation of experts’ assessments, (2) summary and synthesis of responses provided, and (3) checking and confirmation of emerging conclusions.
To launch this exploratory process, a preliminary questionnaire was first distributed to a broadly selected group of qualified experts involved in IC studies via email. At this initial stage, we were not concerned with consensus, but rather with diversities, issues of unclarity, and areas that needed improvement to help refine the process (the needs assessment stage, for example, Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). We were aware that consensus would be difficult, if not impossible, because of the very interdisciplinary nature of “intercultural communications” (IC) as a set of related fields positioned in different academic domains. In dealing with issues arising from ambiguous answers appearing in some experts’ responses, the research team attempted to simplify and improve survey questions with an open attitude at the second stage and check and confirm research findings at the third stage. Themes and patterns began to emerge along this repeated Delphi process of data collection and analysis, until an integrated set of responses was generated.

Sample selection and data collection

The selection of participants involved in Delphi is of vital significance to the reliability of the whole research process (Dalkey, Rourke, Lewis, & Snyder, 1972). In order to select the most appropriate scholars for this research, our team members searched CNKI, the most comprehensive scholarly data base in China, for the most frequently occurring names related to IC studies. We also personally consulted the pioneering figures in IC studies in China like Hu Wenzhong, Jia Yuxin, Guan Shijie, and so on, asking for their recommendations. From an initial potential target group, we identified a starting list of 45 well-known scholars for our research. The research process was then conducted through three stages.

First-stage survey. At this stage, we distributed our survey questionnaire to relevant scholars via email. To ensure the reliability of our research findings, the participants were not aware of others’ participation and thus could complete the survey independently. Three sets of questions were raised at this stage:

- What are the topics, theories, and methods used for intercultural research in the discipline(s) you work with?
- What kind of intercultural research do you think is needed in and by China in your discipline? What are the important topics or issues to be explored?
- What’s your vision of the disciplinary standing of intercultural research in the future, especially for the Chinese context?

Forty-five questionnaires were distributed, and 34 were completed and returned (76% response rate). Among them, 27 Chinese scholars and 7 international scholars replied.1 On the demographic of educational status, 88% of the participants are professors, 6% are associate professors, and another 6% are up-and-coming young scholars.

When analyzing the 34 returned questionnaires, our research team found some problems: some scholars provided meaningful answers to certain questions while neglecting others, and other scholars answered questions with such simplicity that our research team found it impossible to link them to specific parts of the existing data base or generate worthy interpretations. To address these problems, our research team conducted a further round of research.
Second-stage survey. To avoid both repetition of the previous research questions and seek to prevent general or unsubstantiated responses, our research team reformulated the previous three questions and sought answers to six related but more specific questions at this stage:

- How do you evaluate the status of IC studies in China?
- What challenges and problems do you think IC studies in China are faced with currently?
- How to promote the official recognition or status of IC studies in China?
- What practical and theoretical issues should IC studies in China address?
- What recommendations would you put forward for the further development of IC studies in China?
- As an intercultural scholar, how do you evaluate the prospects of IC studies?

Research at this stage was aimed to urge the scholars to reflect on the answers provided and the themes generated from the first stage.

At this stage, 20 out of 45 participants contributed from the backgrounds of FLT, literary studies, linguistics, discourse studies, journalism and mass communication, and international education. In terms of their academic titles, 11 (55%) are professors or associate professors and 18 (90%) have PhD degrees. Their responses added important clarifications to the initial survey, expanded some areas related to the more specific questions, and provided a fuller picture than the first stage.

Third-stage survey. In order to test the validity and potential consensus of the research findings generated from the first two stages, we conducted a follow-up survey with 20 participants from the second stage (selection based on accessibility and thoroughness of previous responses). When the data analysis and summary report was written up from the first two stages, we sent this group what had been found, inviting further comments, inputs, or confirmation. At this stage, 15 out of 20 scholars (75% response rate) responded with insightful comments and helped update the research findings reported here.

Data analysis

As the research questions are mostly open-ended, the data generated are basically qualitative. Analysis of qualitative data usually proceeds along steps like the following: familiarize oneself with the contents and organize data, group data into manageable units, integrate data, seek patterns, try to note and reveal significance, specify follow-up research, and decide on how to present research findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Our research process basically followed these procedures.

First, based on the precision of the varied answers provided in the first stage research, we decided whether or not these answers were functional for analytical purposes. Then, we grouped the first three sets of questions into seven separate questions (based on the nature of the data reported, expanding our original set by one new area).

- What are the topics that interest you in the discipline(s) you work with?
- What are the theories used for intercultural research in the discipline(s) you work with?
- What are the methods used for intercultural research in the discipline(s) you work with?
- What kind of intercultural research do you think is needed in and by China in your discipline?
- What are important topics or issues that remain to be explored?
• What’s your vision of the disciplinary standing of intercultural research in the future, especially for the Chinese context?
• What are required for further development of intercultural research in China?

These seven questions were analyzed as tentative themes. As for the first 5 questions, our research team coded the data (three researchers each independently theme coding the compiled set of responses) based on the participants’ respective academic fields, which generally fell into seven disciplinary or field categories: mass communication studies, FLT, linguistics, international education, psychology, business, literature. The aim was to clarify how IC studies are conducted and to what extent IC studies are developed in each relevant field. As for the last two more open-ended questions, we coded the data based on the participants’ diversified views. In doing so, our purpose was to evaluate whether there exist points of consensus regarding the developmental prospects of IC studies in China among these leading intercultural scholars, as well as in what way(s) these scholars disagreed on this issue.

To facilitate further data collection and data analysis, specificity was prioritized in the second-stage research questions. With the question areas more clearly set, the research team could categorize and summarize the data under each question (less need for further coding procedures, though that was done for the relatively few new topics or perspectives added). At the third stage of confirmation with the experts about the research findings, comments were assessed and incorporated into the final report.

Grounded in the procedures of interpretation and integration of the data from the three stages and subsequent ranking of the significance of content produced from each of those research questions, research findings are presented in the following five areas: (1) leading topics, (2) preferred methods, (3) highly cited scholars and key theories, (4) new trends, and (5) recommendations.

Discussions of research findings

Because of its cross-disciplinary nature, the IC field has both grown out of and divided into several streams on a global scale (cf. Baldwin, 2017; Kulich, 2017). Generally, scholars from the discipline of communication rank in first place; those from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and anthropology rank second; and only a limited number of scholars are from the disciplines of FLT, education, linguistics, and so on (consistent with Kim, 2017). This study reveals that IC studies do not yet follow a uniform route of development in China and that there is also unevenness across the disciplinary foci. For example, the larger group focuses on IC studies of interaction or exchange (kuawenhua jiaoji) in language and culture areas related to FLT or IC education, while another growing group focuses on IC mass communication (kuawenhua chuanbo) in journalism, media, and macro levels of communication, again distinct from those few focusing on intercultural psychology (kuawenhua xinli) or other areas. Even in this sample, diversity can be detected in research topics, methods, key theories, as well as evaluations of its new trends and future development across the disciplinary fields of journalism and communication, psychology, international education, business, FLT, linguistics, literature, and so on.

Leading topics

In China, the term “IC” used by mass communication scholars is usually equivalent to the terms of “international communication” or “global communication,” which primarily addresses “macro-level
issues pertaining to mass mediated and other technological forms of mass communication (such as
the Internet) involving two or more nation-states” (Kim, 2017). Numerous mass communication
studies focus on the relationship of media, nation, and the world (where nation is usually treated as a
comparative variable). Typical topics include national image, soft power, the history and structure of
international/global/regional communication, culture dimensions of mass communication; the com-
bination of international communication of popular culture and international journalism with the
newly launched soft power project of the Chinese culture and Chinese government’s going-out strat-

gy; otherness in news coverage, cross-cultural journalism and communication, cultural conflict and
IC, intercultural adaptation of overseas journalists, and so on. In the past several years, some critical
scholars have begun to show increasing interest in the impact of cultural hegemony, power politics,
post-colonialism, and imperialism on international communication. With the rapid technological
development in new media, big data, AI, and 5G as well as the increasing role China is playing on the
global stage, how to apply new technologies to the international communication of Chinese culture
and how to facilitate intercultural dialogues across nations are becoming significant topics.

Intercultural studies in the field of psychology center more on culture at the micro interpersonal
(or even intrapersonal, perceptual) level. Their major research topics include but are not limited to
the following: how people from different cultural groups engage in IC and adaptation and how to
study developmental psychology, personality, emotion, psychological consultation, and health psy-
chology from the perspective of IC. In the meantime, issues such as intercultural comparison of
personalities, intercultural decision-making, and intercultural negotiation have drawn some schol-
arly attention. Theorizing in this field is mainly concerned with comparison, testing, and applica-
tion of key psychological concepts and theories in different cultures.

The field of international education, especially educational exchange, has gradually become a
burgeoning frontier for IC research and practice with increasing number of international students
coming to China. With the formalized launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, this field is still in its
infancy, but shows great prospect for informing both domestic IC and testing or reframing interna-
tional theoretical work. Scholars in this area note some basic concepts and theories of intercultural
education often citing work done in the United States (it was this trend after WWII that helped launch
the field formed in the 1970s), introducing intercultural education approaches in other countries, and
exploring ways of developing intercultural education in China. In addition, topics such as the inter-
cultural adaptation of international students in China, IC between international students and Chinese
students, intercultural communication competence (ICC) of Chinese overseas students, public diplo-
macy, and development of ICC of teachers from Confucius Institutes are being widely studied.

Intercultural business communication studies were generally established as a focus in the
1990s. Early studies only focused on cross-cultural comparison of different business communi-
cation behavior. Only in recent years, research topics such as intercultural management commu-
nication, intercultural public diplomacy, cross-cultural comparison of work attitudes and values,
and intercultural conflict management have attracted wider attention. Respondents noted that
there are increasing attempts to integrate cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives into
intercultural business training.

In China, scholar/practitioners in FLT have been the impetus and mainstream of IC studies
since the 1980s. With ICC development being identified as a key objective of foreign language
teaching by Ministry of Education of the PRC (Suo & Chi, 2018), ICC development and evalua-
tion of university students and teachers involved in FLT has consistently been among the most
focused on areas of study. Topics such as value orientations, intercultural adaptation, and self- and
cultural-identification; the interaction of language/discourse and IC (i.e., intercultural adaptation, intercultural conflict, etc); culture and FLT, and FLT and intercultural citizenship/global citizenship have also been widely studied. Intercultural communication in academic exchange, science and technological exchange, emotional intelligence (EQ) or its related cultural intelligence (CQ) in the educational settings, have come into view. In recent years, some scholars further attempt to frame IC theories from an Eastern or even specifically Chinese perspective and to apply them to FLT at the middle school and higher education levels; others are exploring ways to conduct IC training in the context of FLT relevant to Chinese needs and strategies; still others are applying new educational technologies (i.e. MOOC, Micro-videos, etc.) to improving ICC of Chinese university students. The influence of power and positionality on IC is also gaining attention from critical scholars.

In the field of literature and comparative literature, scholars have made efforts integrating IC studies into comparative literature and comparative culture research. The focus has been on racial literature, world literature theories, translation, comparative poetic studies, ecological critiques, and narratology and intercultural autobiography. Apart from these, such research topics as intercultural comparative studies between the West and the East, and “Chinese culture going out,” are gaining popularity. Critical studies concerning post-colonialism and post-modernism have also attracted attention in the past several years.

In summary, traditional core topics such as cultural difference, adaptation, competence, value, face and identity, and so on have mostly been emphasized by scholars from FLT and international education, with competence and adaptation being the hottest in the past decade. Critical IC has been a newly found focus of study in the fields of literature, FLT, and journalism and mass communication (and some in translation, but few noted this in their responses). Intercultural communication at the macro, national and international level has attracted the most attention from scholars in the fields of business, journalism and mass communication. Intercultural communication at the interpersonal and intra-personal levels has been given consistent priority in the fields of psychology and FLT.

**Preferred methods**

In the early decades, intercultural research in China attached little importance to research methodologies or empirical methodology. Field pioneers W. Z. Hu (2006) and Guan (2006) both noted that the lack of empirical, data-based research (whether quantitative or qualitative) constituted the biggest obstacle for the development of IC as a serious field of study in China. In each of the related IC fields, we see efforts to address this since they highlighted this deficiency (see Table 1).

| IC-related fields | Most widely used research methods |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|
| Mass communication| big-data analysis, social network analysis, rhetorical studies, critical studies, dialogue/discourse analysis to social science surveys or experimental designs |
| Psychology studies| quantitative methodologies such as experiments and questionnaire surveys |
| FLT               | quantitative methods such as questionnaire surveys, qualitative methods such as interviews, focus group, action research phenomenology, auto-ethnography, textual analysis, critical discourse analysis, narrative studies |
Mass communication studies in China tended to adopt qualitative methods earlier (case and content analysis studies especially). With the maturity of media and the technological revolution led by the Internet and digital technology, data-based intercultural research methodologies have been gradually acknowledged. Social media, as a new platform for IC, calls for a set of Internet-based research methods—whether big-data analysis of trends, or social network analysis—to better understand the multi-layered relationships in broad IC contexts. Currently, great diversities have also been noted in terms of more established intercultural research methods ranging from rhetorical studies, critical studies, and dialogue/discourse analysis to social science survey research or experimental designs.

Generally, psychological studies tend to adopt more quantitative methodologies such as experiments and questionnaire surveys. Among them, experiments based on cultural priming, and hierarchical regression based on big data, feature in the most recent psychological studies. However, one scholar noted that the compatibility and suitability of these methods needs to be scrutinized in indigenized studies, as not all generalized claims based on Western scales or models may adequately consider indigenous interpretations. Language and culture-related inquiry exhibits the wide adoption of qualitative methods from multi-disciplinary perspectives (interviews, discourse analysis, and content analysis). In the field of international education, intercultural training, and intercultural business communication, the influence of qualitative methods are also seen through various uses of interviews (structured, semistructured, or grounded theory), focus groups, and participant observer reports. In all these fields, various methods are linked together via mixed-method designs, where the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods, seeking to more carefully test or confirm findings.

As the pioneers of IC teaching and studies in China, scholars in FLT, with their previous focus on classroom explanations that highlight observed or descriptive comparisons, inadvertently neglected research methods. Most of the early studies conducted before 2005 were based on personal observations, and experiential evidence. It is only in the past 15 years that FLT scholars engaged in IC studies began to advocate the use of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies (e.g. W. Z. Hu, 2010a; Peng, 2005). Up to now, extensive studies have been conducted using questionnaire survey, interviews, and some control-group experiments or action research designs (often with more pre- and post-tests designs now), and a few theoretical conceptualizations using critical thinking or intercultural comparison/contrast have also been noted. In addition, qualitative approaches such as phenomenology, auto-ethnography, textual analysis, critical discourse analysis or narrative studies have been gaining prominence. Many scholars argue that both etic (culture-general) and emic (culture-specific) approaches have inherent benefits and risks, so it is best for researchers to utilize more than one perspective appropriately and integrate research findings. In addition, an increasing number of FLT scholars have learned to collect and analyze data with the help of computer softwares such as Nvivo, MAXQDA, Antconc, etc.

John Condon noted that IC studies in the United States tend to be more conservative than decades ago. There seems to be safety for scholars in carrying out historical studies, engaging prominent theories in literary criticism, and especially in conducting quantitative studies that apply established theories using tested questionnaire surveys. Pioneering work through carefully designed, long-term observatory or ethnographic studies is now scant as they may be questioned on their validity, reliability, or representativeness. There is increasing pressure to design studies that minimize subjectivity, cite well-established studies, and get published more quickly.
In Chinese IC studies, comparative studies, longitudinal studies, and critical studies are still in their infancy, and more attention needs to be paid to fully considering historical contexts and shifts, relational factors, and triangulation of diverse data sources. Access to international samples is also a constraint in many Chinese settings. To address this, Wang and Kulich (2015) found that a mixed-method intercultural competence training design could be used in a multi-step interview and assessment process even in “limited” domestic “home”-based higher education contexts in China. “Context” counts and must be increasingly and more complexly considered in well-triangulated multi-method research designs.

**Highly cited scholars and key theories**

Although IC is considered to integrate research findings from the fields of mass communication, psychology, FLT, international education, and intercultural business communication, the data collected suggested that the following scholars and theories rank as the five most cited ones among Chinese IC scholars (see Table 2). They include (1) ICC theory proposed by M. Byram, (2) the cultural value orientation dimensions proposed by G. Hofstede, (3) the integrated theory of intercultural adaptation proposed by Y. Y. Kim, (4) the theory or taxonomy of high and low context identified by E. T. Hall, and (5) face management theory and identity management theory proposed by S. Ting-Toomey. To understand why, Byram’s theory has been widely promoted among foreign language teachers of higher education, the biggest group of scholars interested in IC, especially during the last 10 years. In addition, these also reflect in part the ready reliance and applicability of these theories to the language teaching classroom or ICC studies, and the context of international education and business communication, historically the most active contexts.

| Noted Rank | Scholars       | Theories                                      |
|------------|----------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| 1          | M. Byram       | Intercultural communication competence theory |
| 2          | G. Hofstede    | Theory of cultural value orientation dimensions |
| 3          | Y. Y. Kim      | Integrated theory of intercultural adaptation |
| 4          | E. T. Hall     | Theory of high- and low-context               |
| 5          | S. Ting-Toomey | Face management theory and Identity management theory |

Table 2. Most highly cited scholars and widely applied IC theories in China.

Beyond the five noted, other widely applied theories and concepts include the following: John Berry’s theory of intercultural acculturation strategies, Gudykunst’s anxiety and uncertainty management (AUM) theory, Guo-Ming Chen’s three dimensions of ICC, Bahktin’s theory of dialogue, as well as Ruben’s concept of empathy.

In addition to these commonly acknowledged theories, there are some theories that are characteristic of certain areas. For example, in the field of mass communication and international relation, Joseph Nye’s theory of soft power, developmental communication theory, and S. Huntington’s theory of the clash of civilizations are often cited. In the field of business communication and training, Burgoon’s expectancy violation theory, Shenkar’s theory of cultural distance, and French and
Raven’s theory about the bases of power are influential. In the field of psychology, the theories of personality, development, and psycho-analysis are most frequently referred to.

These all suggest that IC is a dynamic and developing field. Bridging fields as it does, there are continually proposals of new conceptual frameworks that show growth in this strengthening academic orientation. For example, starting from critiques of dichotomizing Chinese/Eastern culture and Western culture, Wu (2010) put forward the perspective of both glocalization and “cultural China” in studying contemporary discourse in today’s China. Kulich and Weng (2015) proposed a multi-level cultural construction process model for the extension of Gudykunst’s IC theorizing beyond the prevailing interpersonal-level interactions.

**New trends**

Based on quantitative research and social structural analysis, Z. R. Hu and Ji (2011) identified five problems facing IC studies in China as follows: (1) the ambiguous status of IC studies in all academic fields, (2) lack of critical studies integrated with social and structural contexts, (3) lack of interaction between different academic fields, (4) the tendency of over-emphasizing application-oriented research, and (5) lack of diversity in research design and methodologies, and of empirical studies with practical bases.

Findings generated from this Delphi-process study were compatible with these summaries in some respects, yet different in others. First, it continues to affirm that the academic status of IC studies remains undefined, and scholars are divided as to whether or not IC studies should develop into an independent field of study or be tucked in under existing disciplines. In the United States, IC has been a vigorous area of study within the field of communication (as Kim, 2017 notes, a “sub-discipline”). But in China, IC studies exist only as a minor branch in the field of mass communication, language and literature, business, and psychology. Disagreements arise at many levels, from the use of basic terminologies, themes, and frameworks among these fields, which have become some of the biggest obstacles for the future development of this emerging field.

Second, theories, models, and new perspectives proposed by Chinese scholars are still limited in numbers but growing steadily in recent years. As discussed in the “highly cited scholars and key theories” section, many scholars in the field of FLT have been attempting to build on ICC theories proposed by Western scholars, to propose ICC dimensions and to formulate self-assessment rating scales for the Chinese university students (e.g. Fan Weiwei’s and Peng Renzhong’s group from Huazhong University of Science and Technology). In addition, other scholars are making breakthrough in terms of perspectives, approach, and broader theoretical paradigms in intercultural education (e.g. Jia Yuxin’s group from Harbin Institute of Technology3 positing an inclusive, integrative, and open Asian or Chinese anthropocosmic vision in contrast to the Western anthropocentric vision). Still others are theorizing IC in the globalized and digitalized mass communication context (e.g. Hu Zhengrong from China Education Television4 and his approaches to New Media).

Third, empirical studies are increasing rapidly in IC-related studies in recent years, but greater rigor is needed. Compared with 10 years ago when empirical studies were still scarce, IC studies with solid research methodologies are increasingly required by key journals in China in all IC-related fields. Furthermore, young scholars who have studied abroad are well-trained by international scholars and tend to produce more solid empirical studies.

Fourth, as has been noted in the “leading topics” section, critical studies have begun to attract attention of the scholars from the field of literature, FLT, journalism and mass communication,
and linguistics in the past 5 years, but are still very much needed in a world fraught with dominant or unreflected paradigms, persisting inequalities, marginalization, conflicts, and wars. As the Eurocentric paradigm has long dominated IC research, more diverse research paradigms remain to be explored in the Chinese context to address both Chinese and global realities.

Fifth, research subjects are still limited, and convenience samples are still overused. Intercultural studies in China should be more targeted on what types of research subjects best address the research questions at hand and include more diversified intercultural groups. Too much concern has been shown for Chinese university students and teachers, international students in China, while Chinese people who visit other countries as scholars, travelers, businessmen, or students have not received much attention (though granted, with their mobility they are not a ready convenience sample). Intercultural research on issues related to economics, politics, society, and many aspects of cultural transition can also be strengthened.

To summarize, IC studies have witnessed development in terms of the quantity of theory building, critical studies and empirical studies. However, the issues of its disciplinary status, research subjects, etc. remain the key challenges that respondents noted for the future development of this field.

Recommendations

One issue respondents were divided on was whether IC studies should develop into an independent subject field. About 60% of the experts believe that intercultural studies, as a subject field with tremendous theoretical and practical significance, should define its boundaries and possess an independent academic status as linguistics and literature do. About 30% of the scholars argue that IC studies from a single perspective cannot deal with complicated intercultural issues, and thus IC studies should not and cannot develop into a subject field in China. They believe that IC studies should continue to integrate perspectives of the fields of mass communication, psychology, literature, international relations, linguistics, and FLT, and become more cross-disciplinary and multidisciplinary in the future. Several communication scholars maintained that IC studies in China should be communication-centered, which means IC studies should serve the interest of journalism and mass communication studies, facilitate the reform of Chinese journalism industry, and lay a solid theoretical foundation for the reform of international news report and other means of international mass communication.

Despite their divide in the evaluation of the future prospects of IC studies, scholars have arrived at consensus concerning the significant role IC studies will likely be playing in the future and proposed the following suggestions to promote IC studies:

First, as intercultural scholars from the field of linguistics, psychology, FLT, and journalism and mass communication are engaged in their individual studies with few exchanges, it is advocated that intercultural scholars attach more importance to cross-disciplinary exchanges and build up cross-disciplinary research teams.

Second, the practical value of IC studies lies in the application of IC theories to real-world problems. Thus, IC studies should address more real social and global issues facilitating or hindering Chinese national and social development. The New Silk Road initiative (One Belt One Road or OBOR, now called the Belt and Road Initiative, BRI), the “trade war” between China and the US, the aim of “building a community with a shared future for mankind”, are some hot issues that IC
scholars need to become more active in considering how our knowledge and theory base can be applied meaningfully and strategically.

Third, in terms of research foci of IC studies in China, Zhang (2010) proposed the concepts of “inside extension” and “outside extension.” From this research, scholars suggest that IC studies in China should focus more on the following aspects in the future: (1) comparative studies of different cultures and cultural groups for a better understanding between nations and cultures, (2) studies of diversified regional cultures in a multicultural context in China in an effort to build a more harmonious society, (3) IC at the interpersonal level in people-to-people exchanges, and (4) IC at the group level involved in bilateral conflicts.

Above all, government funds are essential in promoting the development of this field in the future, which includes more intentional and successful focus on drafting strong, collaborative research projects for national, Ministry of Education, provincial, or local funding. Joint efforts and cross-disciplinary collaboration of intercultural scholars are needed to make this happen.

**Implications and limitations**

As a technique aiming at generating significant factors concerning a related topic through the contribution of opinions of the experts, an elaborately planned Delphi study can contribute directly to updating relevant theories and solving practical issues, in spite of the fact that its major goal is not to construct theories (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004) but note the landscape, needs, and where possible consensus. Applying a Delphi process, this research has produced some initial research findings that can hopefully inform, inspire, and influence current efforts and the future development of IC studies in China.

Even though different fields and backgrounds are involved in intercultural studies in China, this research shows that this multi-track tendency does not necessarily reflect a disadvantageous factor and may in fact strengthen this growing IC field (or set of fields). As John Condon further noted, each focal point from an intercultural perspective will lead to new concepts, visions, and theories. Theorizing and conceptualizing from a multi-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary perspective will definitely facilitate the healthy development of this field in the future.

An acknowledged limitation of this research is that a Delphi process generates qualitative data and reporting that is mostly descriptive and integrative across a broad spectrum of inputs, rather than theoretical, in-depth, and analytical. Also, though the sample involved scholars from many fields of study and attempts were made to involve the top scholars in the field, there were limitations in response. More efforts can be made to recruit responses, not only from the original list of 45 but also from the new generation of scholars emerging (likely a sample pool of over 60 should be targeted for future studies). For in-depth analysis and greater likelihood of the Delphi goals of consensus, future studies could also focus on only one or two fields. This study has, however, shown some clear consistencies as well as diverse dynamics at work in developing the field of IC that help contribute to deepened understanding and more in-depth research as intercultural scholars work in specific contexts like China.

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1. These scholars prefer to be anonymous in this research.
2. “Case Studies of Cultural Differences between China and the United States” (1993) written by Zhuang Enping was a case in point.
3. Jia Yuxin’s book *Experiencing Global Intercultural Communication: Preparation for a Community of a Shared Future for Mankind and Global Citizenship* is soon to be published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing, China.
4. More details can be found in Hu Zhengrong’s papers about “Key Factors in International Communication” at http://www.huzhengrong.net

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