

**CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE
EDUCATION: A STUDY ON CHINESE LEARNERS OF PORTUGUESE ¹**

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ABSTRACT: Studying a foreign language is strongly associated with learning the target culture(s), developing representations of the foreign language realities, and acquiring interculturality.

A pilot study conducted over a 4-year bachelor's degree program in Portuguese as a Foreign Language aimed at understanding the cultural representations of Portuguese-speaking realities by Chinese students and how they evolved.

Results show that: the foreign culture representations only slightly change over the 4 years; the mobility programs' destination greatly influences representations of the host country; the students' passivity causes superficial and school-based cultural representations of the target cultures, countries, and their inhabitants. These results have several pedagogical implications concerning the mobility programs' preparation and the intercultural approach in the classroom.

KEYWORDS: cultural representations, interculturality, mobility program, Chinese learners, Portuguese as a Foreign Language (PFL)

RESUMO: O estudo de uma língua estrangeira está fortemente associado à aprendizagem da(s) cultura(s)-alvo, ao desenvolvimento de representações das realidades da língua estrangeira e à aquisição da interculturalidade.

Um estudo-piloto realizado ao longo de uma licenciatura de 4 anos em Português como língua estrangeira teve como objetivo compreender as representações culturais da realidade lusófona por estudantes chineses e como elas evoluíram.

Os resultados mostram que: as representações da cultura estrangeira apenas mudam ligeiramente ao longo dos 4 anos; o destino dos programas de mobilidade influencia muito as representações do país de acolhimento; a passividade dos alunos provoca representações, acerca das culturas-alvo, dos países e dos seus habitantes, que são superficiais e apenas baseadas nas aprendizagens escolares. Estes resultados têm várias implicações pedagógicas na preparação dos programas de mobilidade e na abordagem intercultural na sala de aula.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: representações culturais, interculturalidade, programa de mobilidade, aprendentes chineses, Português como Língua Estrangeira (PLE)

1. Introduction

The relationship between language and culture is strong, complex, based on several parameters and able to modify and transform an individual's perspective on the world and the way of interacting with it, as highlighted by many authors (e.g., Friedrich, 1989; Agar, 1994; Byram & Morgan, 1994; Hall, 1997; Kramsch, 2001; Risager, 2006, 2018; Dervin, 2022). Consequently, learning a (foreign) language should also mean getting to know a (foreign) culture and developing interculturality. In fact, competence in intercultural communication is necessary to interact with people linguistically and culturally different from oneself (e.g., Deardorff, 2009; Dervin, 2022) and to develop an effective intercultural dialogue (e.g., Council of Europe, 2008).

This intercultural communication depends greatly on the representations or images of Self and Other: “Both knowledge and attitudinal factors, which are closely related to the images that the individuals construct of the world, of themselves, and of the Other, are thus established as preconditions for effective intercultural interaction” (Basílio, Araújo & Simões, 2016, p. 25). And these images are also connected to “unthink and rethink [the intercultural] encounters” (Dervin, 2022, p. 181), making interculturality “the *never-ending process of in-betweenness*” (Dervin, 2022, p. 181) across cultures.

It is also important to note that these images or social representations about the language, the speakers and the countries where it is spoken both (i) have an impact on the language-culture learning, either fostering or hindering it, depending on their positive or negative nature, and (ii) are dynamic, their (de)construction and (re)construction depending on complex interactions among different participants and several factors, such as formal learning contexts, stays in the countries where the language is spoken, geographical proximity, media, literature, and tourism brochures (see Castelotti & Moore, 2002, for a review).

Investigating specific cases of interaction among different pairs of cultures in the context of foreign language learning can shed further light on how these

mental representations of Self and Other are built and recreated across time. The Chinese/Portuguese-speaking case is an example of such a pair of (very) different cultures, allowing for the contrast between specific Eastern and Western cultures.

Since the mid-2000s, China has experienced a considerable increase in the interest in Portuguese as a Foreign Language (PFL) (e.g., Castelo & Sun, 2020), mainly due to the need for human resources to support the Chinese political and economic relationships with the Portuguese-speaking countries (e.g., Grosso et al., 2021). Besides these countries, the Special Administrative Region of Macao, a territory of the People's Republic of China, also has Portuguese as an official language until 2049. These realities and cultures are frequently referred to as 'Lusophony' or 'Lusophone cultures' and are quite rich and diverse.

Despite all this, some facts suggest that the intercultural knowledge and cultural representations of the Lusophone realities by Chinese learners of PFL should receive more attention. For instance, the curricula, the teachers' performances, and the exchange program destinations observable in Chinese universities do not seem to foster the awareness of this cultural diversity, as these programs are mainly related to Portugal and Brazil only (e.g., Jatobá, 2019; Castelo & Sun, 2020). Almeida and Almeida (2017) and Fernandes (2018) have already assessed, among other aspects, some cultural representations of Portugal and the Portuguese by Chinese learners studying PFL and having the experience of mobility in Portugal. Also, in Grosso et al. (2021), there is some data on the images of Portuguese-speaking people among learners of PFL. However, these studies do not allow us to track the changes in the cultural representations, as the data were collected in only one specific moment and are not longitudinal. Besides, both Almeida and Almeida (2017) and Fernandes (2018) address only the representations related to Portugal and the Portuguese culture, leaving aside all other Lusophone cultures.

Consequently, it is crucial to investigate the knowledge level and the cultural representations of Lusophony in Chinese learners of PFL. Macao constitutes an excellent territory to explore this topic. Its character of Chinese

region with Portuguese as one of its official languages turns it into a very different reality from Mainland China. It is also relevant to understand what feeds these cultural representations (contacts with native speakers, internet, music, press, cultural events, literature, or other readings, etc.) and how these images evolve during a language-culture study by the PFL learners. To find answers to these questions, a first study was conducted in 2016 (Xavier, Castelo & Rouxinol, 2017). Later it was reformulated, and a pilot study was prepared to collect longitudinal data with other students. A part of the results obtained in that pilot study is analysed in the present paper.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Context and research questions

The Special Administrative Region of Macao is a unique territory. Due to its history, besides the Chinese language, Portuguese is the second official language of Macao until 2049 (e.g., Grosso et al., 2021), but it is not used daily or as a vehicular language by most Macao inhabitants; only 2,3% can actually speak some Portuguese according to the 2016 Intercense (e.g., Caeiro, 2021). However, being an official language with a long history has several consequences in Macao that are mentioned in different texts (e.g., Fernandes, 2018; Castelo & Sun, 2020; Caeiro, 2021; Grosso et al., 2021).

A total of at least 20 different higher education (graduate and postgraduate) programs related to Portuguese are offered in the higher education institutions of Macao, including several B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. programs (e.g., Castelo & Sun, 2020). The higher education programs related to the Portuguese language normally target absolute language beginners, include an exchange year abroad in a Lusophone country, mainly in Portugal, present content on language, culture, translation and interpretation techniques, and allow the students to become future teachers, translators, interpreters, or mediators in companies. Most students enrolled in these programs are Macao citizens that have Cantonese

Chinese as their mother tongue, use traditional Chinese writing, and have at least some superficial contacts with the Portuguese language and culture. Some, however, are from mainland China, having Mandarin Chinese (or other Chinese variety) as their mother tongue and using the simplified Chinese writing system. The programs for bachelor's degrees normally take four years, and it is expectable that during that period the students' cultural representations and knowledge level about Lusophone cultures evolve towards a more real and complete understanding of these realities.

Considering all the previously mentioned facts, this paper has the following research questions:

1. According to their own perception, what is the students' knowledge level about the different Lusophone countries and cultures? Does this knowledge change over time?
2. Which are the students' cultural representations of Portugal and the other Lusophone countries and cultures? Do they evolve over time?
3. What is feeding the students' knowledge level perception and cultural representations about the Lusophone countries and cultures? Are there changes over time?

2.2. Participants and data collection

This research is a case study that allows us to gain some insight into what may happen with other students in bachelor's degree programs related to the Portuguese language or Lusophone culture in the Special Administrative Region of Macao. The participants consist of the only class of a bachelor's degree program related to Portuguese in a higher education institution in Macao, assessed at different moments. Although this class has 22 students (16 students from Macao and 6 from Mainland China), at each moment and for several reasons, only 21 participants answered the questionnaire, and the missing student at each moment is different. This can be considered a longitudinal study in terms of the group, but not at an individual level: the anonymous way the results were

collected allows for comparisons among the group at different moments of time but not for intra-subjects' comparisons.

The program has four years and the data collection took place at the end of three different years, in order to understand the evolution in crucial moments of the students' training. The curriculum and data collection can be summarised as follows:

- Year 1: courses mainly related to language learning (grammar and the four communicative skills) and a single course on culture; first data collection (June 2018);
- Year 2: exchange year spent in Portugal, with several courses on language skills and two courses on (Portuguese) culture; second data collection (August 2019);
- Year 3: two common courses on language skills and six on different aspects of Lusophone culture; option for one of two branches – the Educational (to train teachers of PFL) presenting two courses related to Foreign Language Education, or the Portuguese Language and Culture one (to prepare translators, interpreters, and other bilingual staff for diverse functions, namely the business-related ones) with two courses related to culture in Lusophone countries;
- Year 4: two common courses on culture-related topics; Educational branch's seven courses relating to Didactics and the practicum; five out of the eight Portuguese Language and Culture branch's courses dealing with cultural topics; third data collection (May 2021).

Concerning the experiences of the participants in the present study, it is worthwhile to highlight several points. In Year 2, the exchange year took place in a small inland town in Portugal. This town, according to them⁵, was a small, rural, peripheral, quiet, and safe place, having a slow pace, relaxed people, and a good environment to live in, but also presenting few means of transportation connecting

⁵ Responses to a brief written questionnaire in November 2018 (not published), about the strengths and weaknesses of the mobility program, addressed to the course coordinator - one of the authors of this study.

to other cities, few commercial infrastructures, and an older population. There they experienced some situations of ethnic discrimination. Also, in Year 3, thirteen participants in this study chose the Educational branch, and the other nine students opted for the Portuguese Language and Culture branch.

2.3. Research instrument and procedure

The research instrument of this survey was a questionnaire, whose design was based on the previous literature, the knowledge the researchers already had about the population via professional experience and the research questions for this project. The same questionnaire was administered at the three moments of data collection to allow for comparisons (in the general trends) at the different periods. Most questions are closed to facilitate the participants' responses and their later treatment and are written in Portuguese and Chinese to ensure their full understanding by the respondents. The questions' contents will be referred to as the results are presented.

In terms of procedure, first, we got the approval to administer the questionnaire from the higher institution's relevant authority. Then, the questionnaire was anonymously responded to by each student on a printed copy and during a few minutes of a class. During the first and second questionnaire's administration, the students had support from the teacher (one of the authors) if they needed to clarify some issue. The last data collection was done during a class with another teacher. As there is no ethics committee related to the context of this research, the data collection followed the usual ethical procedures for this type of study.

2.4. Data analysis and limitations

Each participant's responses were inserted as a case in a database in Microsoft Excel, being the several responses of a participant coded as different variables. The database was then used to compute the frequencies of each

response type (later converted into a percentage scale) and to create the relevant charts and tables.

Although providing new and informative results about the evolution of cultural representations, knowledge level perceptions and their origins, the present pilot-study has some limitations that should be addressed in future longitudinal investigations on these topics. One limitation is the impossibility of intra-subject comparisons at different moments, which prevents us from looking at the evolution on an individual level and from understanding how the attended courses might have influenced the students' responses in a more detailed way (as some students chose the Educational branch while others attended the Portuguese Language and Culture branch, which offers more courses on Lusophone culture). Also, some items in the questionnaire (duly pinpointed during the results' presentation) should become simpler or present clearer scales in a future reformulation of this research instrument. Finally, being a case study, the number of participants is limited and, therefore, the obtained results should be observed with caution.

3. Results

The presentation of the results analysed in this study includes four parts: (i) the characterization of the respondents in terms of general aspects like sex, age, number of years studying Portuguese, mother tongue, and parents' educational level (section 3.1); (ii) the participants' own perceptions on their knowledge level about the Lusophone realities (section 3.2); (iii) the participants' cultural representations about the Portuguese-speaking countries and cultures (section 3.3); (iv) the amount of the participants' contacts with the Lusophone realities (section 3.4).

3.1. Characterization of respondents

The participants are mostly female students, present the expected age for those who complete high school with no lost year and immediately enter the university, and started to study PFL in Year 1 (see Table 1).

	Sex		Age group			Years studying PFL			
	F	M	18-20	21-23	24-30	<1	1-2	3-4	>5
Year 1	76%	24%	76%	14%	10%	62%	28%	5%	5%
Year 2	76%	24%	53%	33%	14%	0%	76%	19%	5%
Year 4	76%	24%	0%	81%	19%	0%	0%	90%	10%

Table 1 – Characterization of respondents in terms of sex, age group, and number of years studying PFL

Table 2 exhibits the respondents' L1 and the educational level of their parents. It should be noted that the slight differences in L1 and parent's educational level across the three years can be attributed both to a small change in the group of respondents and to some misunderstandings related to the concepts of L1 and primary vs secondary education level.

	Mother tongue			Father's education			Mother's education		
	Cant.	Mand.	Other	Prim.	Sec.	High.	Prim.	Sec.	High.
Year 1	71%	19%	10%	29%	52%	19%	29%	52%	19%
Year 2	67%	28%	5%	33%	53%	14%	19%	62%	19%
Year 4	76%	19%	5%	33%	53%	14%	19%	62%	19%

Table 2 – Characterization of respondents in terms of mother tongue and parents' education

Notes: Cant. = Cantonese; Mand. = Mandarin; Other = other Chinese language;

Prim. = Primary; Sec. = Secondary; High. = Higher Education

3.2. Participants' perceptions of their knowledge level about Lusophone realities

To understand how much the participants think they know about the different Lusophone countries, participants had to assign the level 1 to the country

they know the most about, 2 to the second-best known and so on until level 8, assigned to the least known country. This subjective measure allows us to compare their knowledge level about the different countries and understand which ones are the best and worst known. For clarity's sake, the scale was converted into points so that the highest number of points corresponds to the best-known country (and not the other way around, as it was used in the questionnaire). Table 3 presents the mean number of points obtained by each country. The best-known country is Portugal, followed by Brazil and Angola. East Timor, São Tomé and Príncipe as well as Guinea-Bissau are among the least known. Also, there are not so many differences across time: the general tendencies of best and worst known are kept across the three moments of data collection, only with a slight increase in knowledge level about East Timor, São Tomé and Príncipe, Guinea-Bissau, Cabo Verde, and Brazil in Year 4. There is also a very slight increase in knowledge level about Portugal in Year 2 when the students return from the exchange year in this country.

	Angola	Brazil	Cabo Verde	Guinea-Bissau	Mozambique	Portugal	São Tomé and Príncipe	East Timor
Year 1	4,7	5,3	3,8	2,8	4,1	6,8	2,9	2,2
Year 2	4,8	5,2	3,6	2,5	4,7	7,1	2,3	2,0
Year 4	4,7	5,7	4,2	3,1	4,2	6,9	3,7	3,7

Table 3 – Knowledge level of each country

Note: Scale 8-1, corresponding the highest mean number of points to a better knowledge level.

Participants were also asked to choose the two best well-known areas of each country, by assigning 1 to the best well-known area, and 2 to the second best. Table 4 shows us the results obtained in this question. In general, the best well-known areas consist of Geography, History, Gastronomy, Literature, Economy/Politics, and Tourist Attractions. Over the three time periods, the knowledge of Geography, History, Literature, and Economy/Politics tends to

increase, while the familiarity with Tourist Attractions, Gastronomy, Music/Dance, and Sport tends to decrease.

	Angola			Brazil			Cabo Verde			Guinea-Bissau			Mozambique			Portugal			São Tomé & Príncipe			Timor (East T.)			Total			
	Y1	Y2	Y4	Y1	Y2	Y4	Y1	Y2	Y4	Y1	Y2	Y4	Y1	Y2	Y4	Y1	Y2	Y4	Y1	Y2	Y4	Y1	Y2	Y4	Y1	Y2	Y4	To
Tourist attractions	3			8		1	5	2		1	1		8	1		8	7	4	3	1	3		2		36	14	8	58
Cinema		1		1	1		1									1	1	1							3	3	1	7
Sport	2			11		4			2			2			2	2	2	1	1	1	1			1	16	1	13	30
Economy/Politics	3	1	6	1	1	5	3		5	1	2	4	3	3	7		1	6	1	4	3		2	7	12	14	43	69
Gastronomy	2	2	1	4	1	5	3	3	1	4	3	3	5	4	2	15	5	5	6	3	3	1	2	1	40	23	21	84
Geography	11	10	19	11	9	8	10	11	18	7	13	19	8	9	14	6	2	7	4	12	19	8	9	16	65	75	120	260
History	4	5	10	3	4	11	4	6	8	3	2	8	1	6	10	2	6	7	1	1	9	2	2	12	20	32	75	127
Literature		3	9		4	5		5	6		4	6		3	6		2	5		4	3		4	7	0	29	47	76
Music/Dance	2	3	1	8	5		1		2	1			1	1			2		1	2		2			16	13	3	32
TV/Radio/News.										1							2	1							2	0	2	4
Traditions/festivities				1	2						2					5		1							6	4	1	11

Table 4 – (Two) Best well-known areas of each country

Notes: Sum of points received by each area, corresponding the highest number of points to a better knowledge level, after converting each selection of best well-known area into 2 points and each selection of second-best into 1 point; Y1 = year 1; Y2 = year 2; Y4 = year 4.

3.3. Cultural representations of the participants

Two questions help us to gain some insight into the cultural representations of the participants on the Lusophone countries' inhabitants and the Portuguese culture and inhabitants.

The first of these questions asks the respondents to choose the three best-characterizing adjectives for each country's inhabitants, from a list of options, by assigning 1 to the most important adjective, 2 to the second-most important and 3 to the least important. In Table 5, the occurrence frequency of adjectives for characterizing each country's inhabitants is presented. In general, the positive adjectives for all Portuguese-speaking inhabitants prevail (kind, cheerful, nice/sympathetic, and optimist), but the fifth most frequent selected adjective is 'slow'. Over time, there is a decrease in the selection of the 'don't know them' option and some adjectives (positive ones: nice/sympathetic, kind, optimist; negative one: envious), as well as an increase and later decrease in some others (positive ones: hardworking; negative ones: slow, pessimist, lazy, racist, sad). In total, there were also 36% of answers 'don't know them' (182 / 504 possibilities [21 participants x 3 data collections x 8 countries]).

In terms of particular countries, the Portuguese tend to be considered kind, nice/sympathetic, cheerful, and optimistic, but also slow, lazy, racist, and snob. The general evolution of the attitude towards the Portuguese goes from very positive to a mix of positive and negative, and finally to not so negative. Both the Brazilian and the Mozambican are often considered cheerful, kind, optimist, nice/sympathetic, and hard-working, but their image by these Chinese students tends to become less favourable over time.

	Angola			Brazil			Cabo Verde			Guinea-Bissau			Mozambique			Portugal			São Tomé & Príncipe			Timor (East T.)			Total						
	Y1	Y2	Y4	Y1	Y2	Y4	Y1	Y2	Y4	Y1	Y2	Y4	Y1	Y2	Y4	Y1	Y2	Y4	Y1	Y2	Y4	Y1	Y2	Y4	Y1	Y2	Y4	Y1	Y2	Y4	To
cheerful	7	3	5	20	16	11	7	8	8	3	4	8	5	13	9	13	3	4	2	6	3	2	3	5	59	56	53	168			
snob																	9											0	0	9	9
kind	15	3	4	18	12	8	6	7	8	3	7	2	10	8	10	32	15	6	3	2	2	3	2	2	90	56	42	188			
talkative		1	1	2			2						1	1	2	1	2	3			2		1		5	5	9	19			
envious	2			3	1	1	1				3			1		1	1				1			1	10	3	3	16			
slow	1			2	2	3					3		3	3		8	22	18							14	25	23	62			
optimist	5		7	14	10	8	3	1	4	1	4	3	4	11	4	14	2	1	4	3	1	1		4	46	31	32	109			
patriot			4			10			4			4		4			6							3	0	0	35	35			
pessimist		1		2	1			1		2	1			1		1	1		1				1		4	8	1	13			
lazy				4										1		8	7								4	9	7	20			
racist						4										8	1								0	8	5	13			
nice/ sympathetic		4	2	11	7	4	1	7			5	2	3	14	1	24	3	16	2	1	3		2	1	41	43	29	113			
hard- working		6	1	6	1						2	1	4	5				1					3	2	11	17	4	32			
sad				1							1		2												1	3	0	4			
don't know them	11	10	8	3	5	4	11	8	8	12	9	8	10	2	7	0	0	0	12	11	10	13	11	9	72	56	54	182			

Table 5 – (Three) Best-characterizing adjectives for each country's inhabitants

Notes: Sum of points received by each adjective, corresponding the highest number of points to a more frequent association, after converting each selection of the most important adjective into 3 points, second-most important into 2 points, and third-most important into 1 point;

Y1 = year 1; Y2 = year 2; Y4 = year 4.

The second of these questions is an open one, and asks the participants to indicate the two most and the two least appreciated aspects of Portuguese culture or inhabitants. Table 6 shows the most appreciated aspects. The trends found in the participants' answers allowed us to create categories and recognize that the most appreciated aspects are the people (in the first place, but showing a decrease over time), the history/culture/festivals (with a slight increase in Year 2), the

gastronomy (with an increase at the end of the program) and geography/landscape/climate (also with a slight increase in Year 2).

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 4
Nice/sympathetic /kind	17	11	3
Other positive characteristics	6 (warm-welcoming, hard-working, slow, cheerful, patriots)	6 (optimist, kind, helpful, cheerful and passionate, enjoying life)	4 (people, passionate, enthusiastic, optimistic)
Geography, landscape, climate	2	4 (sky, fresh air)	4 (sky, sea & beach)
Tourist attractions	1	0	0
History, festivals, culture	5 (Discoveries, rich culture, festivals, religion)	7	7 (silver, architecture, art)
Literature	0	2	0
Music	5	3	1
Gastronomy	4 (coffee)	4	8
Alcoholic drinks	2	2	1
Lifestyle	0	0	2 (tranquillity in the town, slow lifestyle)
Other	0	3 (architecture, few people on the streets, rich)	0

Table 6 – Most appreciated aspects of Portuguese culture and inhabitants

Note: The several mentioned aspects were organized into categories, and the figures correspond to the number of times each category occurred. The information in brackets illustrates some aspects that were included in the category, although its categorization was not so straightforward.

Table 7 shows the least valued aspects of Portuguese culture and/or inhabitants. The least enjoyed aspect of Portuguese culture is the people (which contrasts with the results of the Portuguese people as the most appreciated aspect of this culture). This dislike increases in Year 2 and diminishes in Year 4. Some Chinese participants also do not appreciate the Portuguese gastronomy and

history/festivals/other cultural aspects (with decreases over time), as well as the Portuguese lifestyle (dislike that raises in Year 4). It is also noteworthy to realize that the concentration of responses in one category tends to diminish over time.

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 4
Slow or lazy	6	6	3
Talkative	4	2	2
Racist	1	5	1
Other negative characteristics	2 (fast-speakers, coffee-takers)	8 (attitudes, dirty, speak without thinking, speak too much about their History, some youth)	2 (people)
Geography, landscape, climate		1	
History, festivals, other cultural aspects	8 (football, cinema, architecture)	3 (football)	2 (Colonialism, cinema)
Literature		1	3
Music	2 (fado)		1 (fado)
Gastronomy	8	4 (too sweet, cheese)	2 (too sweet)
Lifestyle		3 (pavement, healthcare)	5 (transportation, pavement, infrastructures)
Other	4 (many thieves, difficulty with language verbs)		

Table 7 – Least appreciated aspects of Portuguese culture and inhabitants – see note of Table 6

3.4. Contacts with the Lusophone realities

In terms of contacts with realities in Portuguese, one question asks the amount of time the students spent in each Lusophone country. The results indicate that the participants only visited Portugal (0 months of stay in all other Lusophone countries), and the mean duration of stays corresponds grossly to the exchange year: before this year, the average stay length is 2,37 months (existing a student

with a stay of 48 months, 3 students with a stay inferior to a month, and 17 students who have never visited the country); after Year 2 the average increases do 13,47 months; at the end of Year 4 the mean duration of stays in Portugal is 14 months, not much different from the mean after Year 2.

Another important question to address the contacts with the Lusophone realities consisted of instructing the participants to indicate the (mean) weekly number of hours they used each means to learn the Lusophone cultures. The results obtained also show that the contacts with the Lusophone realities are not as strong and frequent as one would desire for students of Portuguese (see Charts 1, 2, and 3, for Year 1, 2, and 4, respectively).

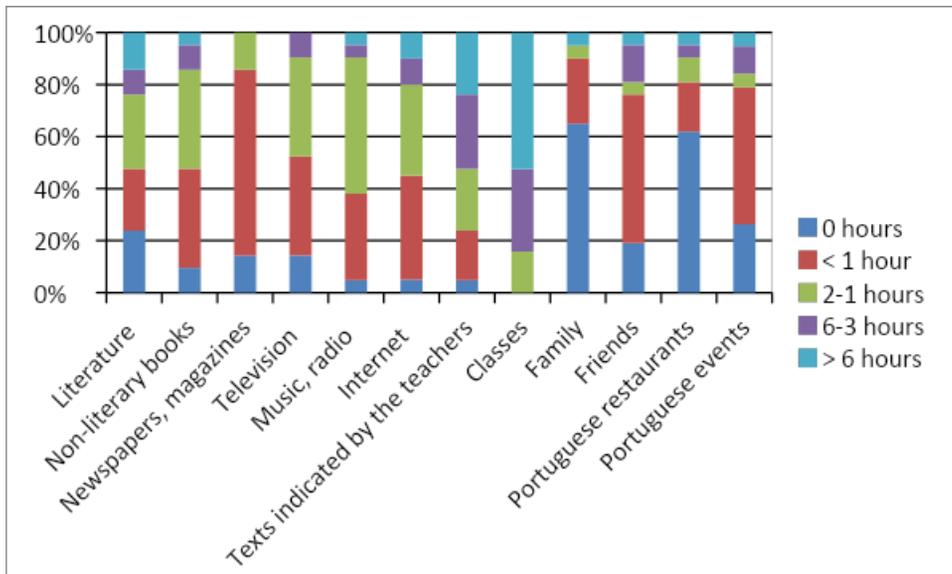


Chart 1 – Number of weekly hours in contact with Lusophone cultures in Year 1

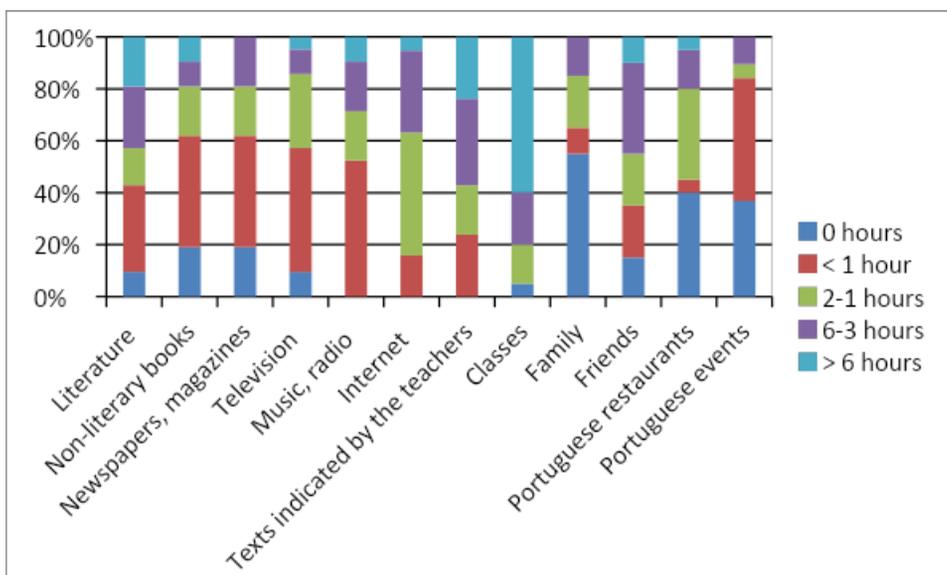


Chart 2 – Number of weekly hours in contact with Lusophone cultures in Year 2

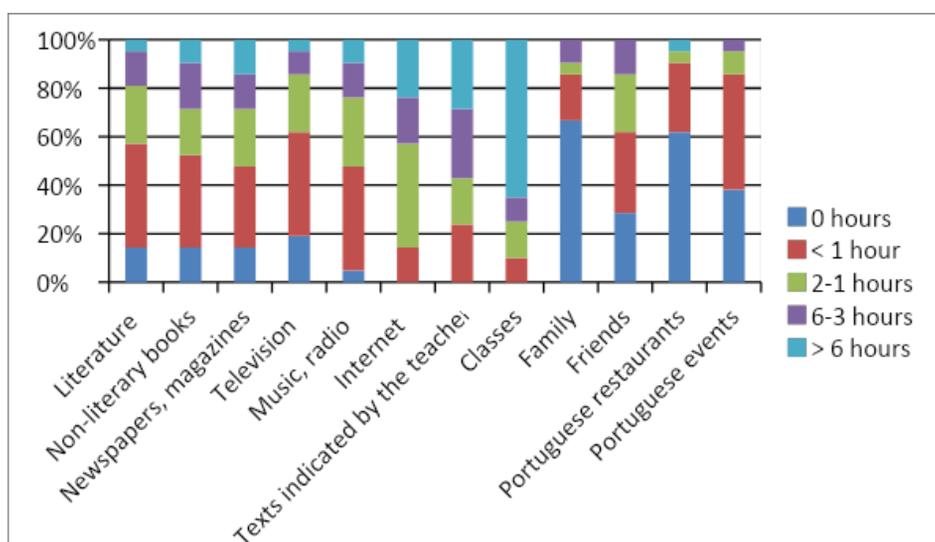


Chart 3 – Number of weekly hours in contact with Lusophone cultures in Year 4

In general, there are few changes in the usage frequency of different means to learn the Lusophone cultures along the three collection moments, and the means most often used by the participants to contact with the Lusophone cultures are the classes and the texts indicated by the teachers. The use of literature, non-literary books, newspapers and magazines, television, music and radio, and the

internet to feed the knowledge of Lusophone cultures is lower; the contact with Lusophony through friends, restaurants and Portuguese events is even lower.

4. Discussion

According to the students' perception of their knowledge level about the Lusophone countries and cultures (Research Question 1), in Year 1 the best-known countries and cultures are Portugal, followed by Brazil, and then Angola and Mozambique, and best-known areas consist of tourist attractions, gastronomy, music/dance, and sport. Over time we can find only small changes in the best-known countries/cultures and areas, and it is noticeable that these changes can be curriculum-influenced. In fact, at the end of Year 4, after attending several courses related to the Lusophone countries' history, geography, literature, economy/politics, the students refer to these as the best-known areas (leaving behind areas more associated with personal likes and hobbies), and their perceptions show an increase in knowledge on countries only studied in the classes (East Timor, São Tomé and Príncipe, Guinea-Bissau, and Cabo Verde).

In terms of students' cultural representations of Portugal and the other Lusophone realities (Research Question 2), most students consider they know the inhabitants of the Lusophone countries, especially the Portuguese, followed by the Brazilian and the Mozambican. The images of the native speakers are generally positive and tend not to change much. The only noticeable changes over the program duration correspond to shifts in the representation of Portuguese people (from very positive in Year 1 to negative after the mobility program and to a bit more favourable again in Year 4), a slight tendency for less favourable images of the Brazilian and Mozambican in Years 2 and 4, as well as a decrease in the concentration of answers in a few categories in Years 2 and 4. More personal experiences in dealing with native speakers may explain this dispersion of answers into different categories, as the personal experiences are also different. However, this dispersion should be much more evident, and generally, the

changes in cultural representations over time are rather small and mainly related to the 1-year stay in Portugal.

Concerning only the specific properties of Portuguese culture, the students mention that the most appreciated aspects are the people (especially considered nice/sympathetic/kind, although there is a decrease in this response over time), the history/culture/festivals, the gastronomy, and the geography/landscape/climate. Interestingly, the least appreciated features also include the people (especially evaluated as slow and lazy), the gastronomy, and the history/culture/festivals. These apparent contradictions seem to us positive, as they can reflect more personal views related to specific individual experiences. Simultaneously, these choices for most and least appreciated features of the Portuguese culture greatly coincide with the results obtained by Almeida and Almeida (2017), Fernandes (2018), and Grosso et al. (2021), which suggests they correspond to very common representations of the Portuguese reality, probably partially associated with shared pre-established ideas among the group of Chinese learners of PFL. Also important are the facts that only a few of these representations vary in an obvious way during the 4-year program and that many features are undoubtedly due to the mobility program's destination (many answers are related to the small town where they spent the exchange year and not to the general Portuguese reality: tranquillity in the town, slow lifestyle, few people on the streets, transportation, infrastructures, healthcare).

The sources for the reported cultural representations of the Lusophone countries and cultures (Research Question 3) are mainly the school curriculum and assignments. In fact, the number of weekly hours spent by the students in contact with the target realities through the mass media and personal dealings is very low (which is in line with the scarce use of Portuguese outside class reported by Grosso et al., 2021) and does not change significantly across time. Also, the exchange year in Portugal influences their representations of the Portuguese reality, but most students only go to a Portuguese-speaking country thanks to the mobility program (which also coincides with the results by Almeida & Almeida,

2017). Consequently, this suggests that the learners lack proactivity in looking for opportunities to deepen their foreign culture knowledge (which might be associated with a certain passivity of the Chinese learners mentioned by several authors – e.g., Fernandes, 2018; Grosso et al., 2021) and that they do not assign great importance to culture learning (also agreeing with the results of Grosso et al., 2021).

Combining all these results, it is possible to highlight two important ideas. Firstly, the representations of Lusophone cultures by Chinese learners of PFL do not seem to change significantly over the 4-year language program, although they are greatly influenced by the mobility programs' destination, for most students the only stay they have in a Lusophone country. In fact, the location of the exchange year seems to condition some images the students develop about the host country as they tend to overgeneralize what they experience in a small town to the whole country's reality. However, at the same time and due to a lack of proactivity in using all opportunities to deepen their cultural knowledge (like dealing with native speakers while staying abroad and using the available mass media to contact the target cultures), most representations are not altered by a 1-year stay in a country where the target language is spoken. In a way, this is not surprising, as many Chinese students mention that they keep dealing mostly with their nationals (and not with the native speakers) during the exchange period (Almeida & Almeida, 2017). This confirms that “residence in a foreign country does not of itself produce positive representations of that country [...] the knowledge acquired about a given culture is not systematically proportional to the length of residence” (Byram & Zarate, 1996, p. 8) and that “students, when abroad and even when they encounter international students in their courses in their home institutions, do not interact with those who are different from themselves” (Sierra-Huedo & Foucart, 2022, p. 2). So, the change in perceptions about the Other was not significant enough throughout the course, not even after the year of exchange in Portugal.

The second idea to emphasize is that the students' passivity leads them to develop cultural representations mainly based on the contents of their school

curriculum. As we have seen, this study strives to understand how much the Chinese learners of PFL (think they) know about the Lusophone realities and what is feeding that knowledge. In the studied case, the knowledge of other Portuguese-speaking countries is acquired during the four years of the degree program, without the possibility of visiting most Lusophone countries. As these learners do not invest much time in activities related to target-cultures beyond school assignments, most mental representations must be acquired through classes, especially in courses regarding cultural subjects in Year 3 and Year 4, that help to reduce the preconceived ideas about the Lusophony. In fact, “Prejudices involve [...] an *a priori* information deficit. This often engenders negative valorisations, or else starry-eyed idealizations, both of which stand in need of correction” (Beller, 2007, p. 5). The information students have access to is very important to fight against prejudices or idealizations, and this is seen in our study since ‘preconceptions’ tend to be mitigated over time. For instance, when the students return from the exchange year in Portugal, there is a slight increase in their knowledge level about this country, their dislike of Portuguese culture and in their prejudices against Portuguese. Nevertheless, in Year 4, some of these misjudgements slightly decrease again, which can indicate that classes during Years 3 and 4 may have contributed to the deconstruction and rebuilding of the image of Lusophone realities and people. This is a strong possibility since, in these academic years, students have a more significant number of cultural courses, and the results of our study show that amount of contact with Lusophone realities after classes is not considerable and does not change too much during the four years.

Also, according to their own perceptions, these learners are better acquainted with the realities of Portugal, followed by Brazil and Mozambique. In a way, this is not surprising since their mobility year is in Portugal, and many of their teachers in Macao are Portuguese. However, many of them will probably have work relationships with other countries (e.g., Jatobá, 2019), and they seem not to be very motivated to deepen their knowledge of the other Lusophone

realities. In fact, all students seem to present the same pattern of knowledge level, highly dependent on the school curriculum and tasks, without personal initiative to deepen their knowledge according to individual interests.

These results have several pedagogical implications that can be worked out not only in a classroom but also in the mobility exchange programs. Firstly, having a considerable impact on the cultural representations developed by the students, the preparation of the mobility programs is crucial: it must not only help the students to have frequent and enriching interactions with native speakers but also include activities and trips that allow them to be (a bit more) aware of the country's real situation and diversity. Exchange programs can be an important source of construction and/or deconstruction of images of the Other. Even if the contexts of linguistic immersion do not solve all questions and may even contribute to the construction of negative images, as our study shows, this is a privileged moment of academic training in PFL. It allows for direct contact and friendships with native speakers, increases the interaction between students (natives and non-natives) and improves the level of linguistic and cultural proficiency. In fact, "when people from various countries and cultures meet each other, real experience and mental images compete" (Beller, 2007, p. 7).

Secondly, it is crucial to take the most of classes to promote students' intercultural competence. In fact, the classroom activities should help the learners to raise awareness of the images of Self and Other, to develop adequate (and not preconceived and misjudging) mental representations of the target cultures, to acquire a proactive and autonomous attitude in the search for real knowledge of all target cultures, and to have a receptive, open-minded and critical perspective towards differences in the Other's cultures.

According to Castellotti and Moore (2002), the studies carried out to that date showed that the images created when learning other languages were strongly stereotyped. Twenty years later, our study comes to similar conclusions. The question that arises, then, is: How to act on the representations of the Other through the teaching of a foreign language? The role of the teacher is very

important in what concerns encoding and decoding the representation of Otherness, bearing in mind that the cultural representations are complex, malleable, and changeable, as well as linked to learning environments and to contact with the Other (Hall, 1997). Theoretical models have integrated ‘culture’ as an important part of language education and training but it is often viewed through the humanistic approach based on cognitive knowledge of civilization; cultural and intercultural understandings and cross-cultural interactions, as necessary components of language pedagogy, need to be integrated with logical coherence (Lussier, 2011).

Castellotti and Moore (2002) summarize different ways of addressing the social representations in language learning, and thus promoting this open, positive, and intercultural attitude. Importantly, “teachers should have responsibility and attention to address the cultural and linguistic differences of Portuguese in an inclusive and enriching way, in order to offer the learners greater awareness and positive attitude about the diversity of the Portuguese language(s)” (Jatobá, 2019, p. 4). Studies in metacultural approach that prioritize activities such as identifying, reacting, analysing, interpreting, extrapolating, comparing, transposing, judging, and evaluating, as defended by Puren (2014), may also help us to foster a more effective way of creating intercultural learning environments. More recent studies also put forward other suggestions for developing students’ global/intercultural competence, such as the following: teaching to listen to others and to oneself, making the students reflect on their own intercultural competence and do something meaningful collaboratively with others so that they experience their similarities and differences (Dervin, 2022); using technologies to promote collaborative work/projects among students with diverse cultural backgrounds (Shadiev & Dang, 2022); investing also in practices of Internationalisation at Home and internationalisation of the curriculum (Sierra-Huedo & Foucart, 2022).

Besides those recommendations for didactic practices, we would also suggest: (i) to use an interdisciplinary approach, with a large dialogue between different fields such as linguistics, literature, culture, history, sociology,

psychology, and anthropology; (ii) to avoid the simplification of cultural representations in the classroom; (iii) to become aware of the learners' cultural representations so as to adapt methods and techniques of deconstruction and reconstruction of the image of Other; (iv) to draw PFL teachers' attention to the reflection and adequacy of pedagogical-didactic practices of (re)construction of these images.

The consideration of all these recommendations by the teachers when planning their pedagogic activities will probably help the students to develop their intercultural competence as well as have their cultural representations of the Other evolve during the language study and according to their real experiences (instead of accumulating stereotypes).

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