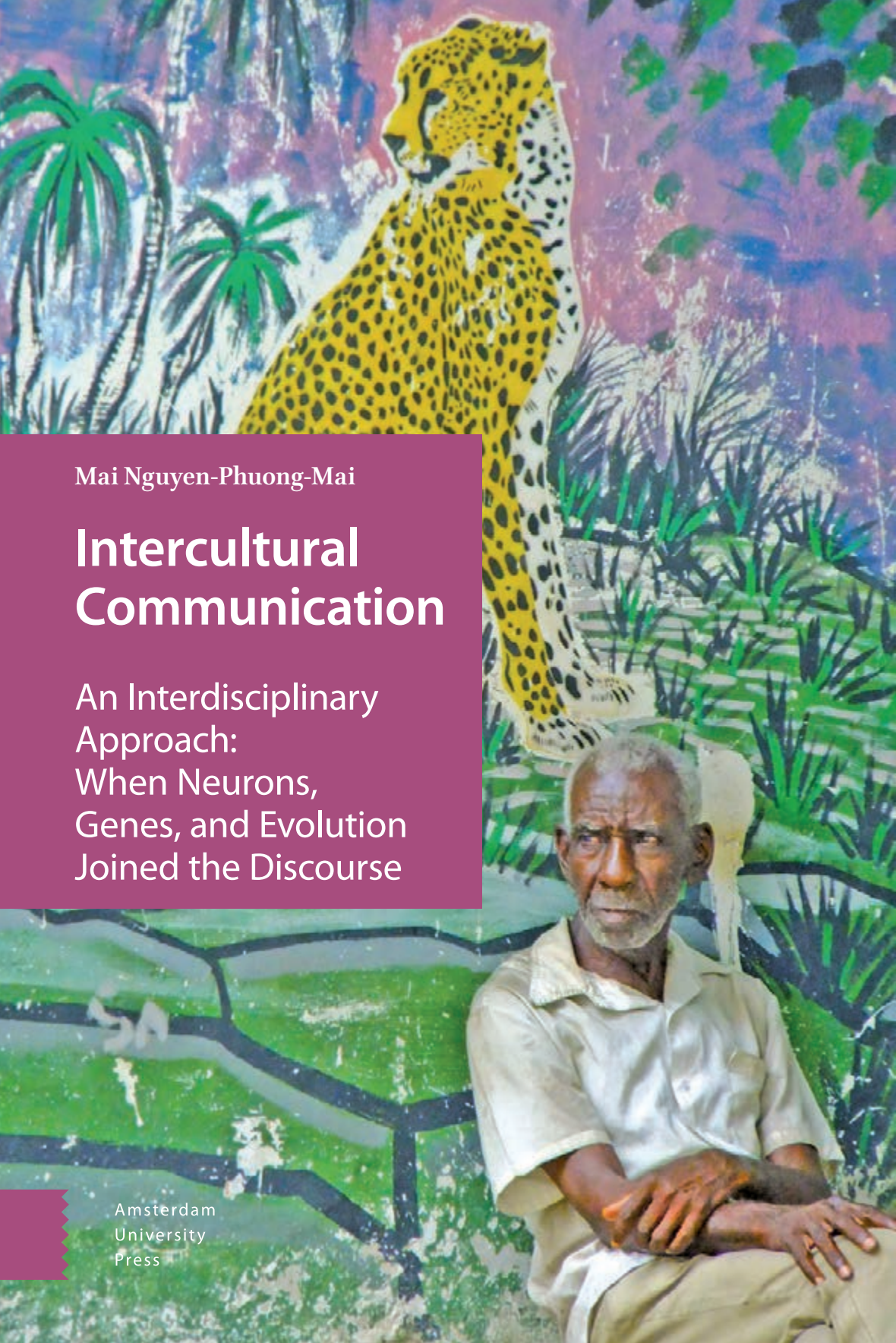

Mai Nguyen-Phuong-Mai

Intercultural Communication

An Interdisciplinary Approach: When Neurons, Genes, and Evolution Joined the Discourse

Amsterdam University Press

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To Chị Lan

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Preface

It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon. We were twenty journalists from all over the world who had gone through a selection process in order to win a place for an intensive training with Reuters in London. On that day, as we were about to work on a news coverage, the door was suddenly thrust open. A dozen militants armed with machine guns violently rushed in. They shouted in a language we didn't understand and forced us to lie down. We were all shaken to the core when they pulled out blind folds and covered our eyes with them. In the darkness, we were led outside and into a truck that smelled like it had come straight from an abattoir.

It was the scariest training simulation I've ever had in my career. The coaches – very experienced war correspondents – put us through it so that we could experience what it would be like to be kidnapped. We kept analyzing the situation during the training, and through these discussions, I learned a few more lessons that had nothing to do with reporting in a war zone.

The first lesson came from a discussion in which an editor emotionally told me that the experience was very similar to living in Johannesburg. There, armed guards walked among pedestrians, and many houses look like fortresses. He then tried his hardest to kill my plan to go there. At that point, a British news anchor joined us and said: "We are journalists, not judges. Why do we have to *jump right into sensational differences?* Let's start with something we all share. Like, we all agree that French is not a real language." Everyone laughed.

While I didn't always understand the mocking, teasing, and mildly xenophobic jokes in Europe, I immediately got the message when another reporter expressed her surprise when I revealed that I had never watched the classic kidnapping masterpiece *Fargo*. She looked at me with half a smile: "*Where have you been*?" The micro-aggression was so subtle I didn't realize it at first and felt ashamed. This was the second lesson I learned: The world clearly revolved around the US. A known movie in this part of the globe is supposed to be a universal phenomenon. A country on the other side of the water is a distant, faraway land. The eurocentrism was also deafening. My name was praised for being "normal" because it was written with the Latin alphabet.

On the last training day, we interviewed a series of people on ethnic conflicts. In the simulation, we had to go through a checkpoint where the guards asked people to identify her/his racial background. An Italian

colleague said: "White" and got into a row, because the guards blamed him for having dishonored his own race: "You look Arab. You are Arab. Point!" The message was clear: *Your biology defines your identity.* When it was my turn, I jokingly declared: "I'm Asian, but people call me 'banana' – yellow outside, white inside." Not missing a beat, the woman behind me whispered in my ear: "I'm a reversed coconut! No worries."

Soon after the training with Reuters, personal circumstances drove me away from journalism and onto the road of academia. I kept the nomad lifestyle, carrying with me the cultural baggage that revealed itself in the training as I moved across various borders. But the lessons I learned only took their shape during the time I taught intercultural management at the Amsterdam School of International Business (AMSIB).

As I delved deeper into the literature and conventional practices of the field, these lessons constantly popped up. They reminded me that even in a study that is meant to bring people together, differences are used as a warning, rather than a benefit. People are cautious of consequential conflicts, rather than seeing them as a promising synergy. Business students are told that if they don't learn about culture, they will fail in the future because the others are so different from us. This cultural gap is "a nuisance at best and often a disaster."[1] "The world is a more dangerously divided place today than it was at the end of the Cold War."[2] Every time a book or a lesson was opened with a cultural blunder or mismatch, the words of my colleague in the training flashed on: "Why do we have to *jump right into sensational differences?* Let's start with something we all share!"

This book is my attempt to put that remark into action. The journey to find similarities has taken me back to the subject of evolution, down to the biological level of genes and neurons, and opened me up to the newly emerging discipline of cultural neuroscience. The insight from neuroscience labs has excited many interculturalists with just two words: "brain plasticity." It means our brain is like a muscle, as it can grow and adjust, and it enables us to represent multiple cultures. I can't change my skin color, but with regard to the inside, to use the words of my dear friend Ida, I can be as white as a banana, or turn orange if I have to. Country of origin and biology need not to be the foundation of my identity. And thus, I've learned to introduce myself without carrying the cultural baggage that instantly invites stereotypes. Different contexts call for different values and practices. *Context is a dynamic force* that allows each one of us to be an active agent and problem solver, rather than a cultural dope. This is the spirit I want to share in this book.

In the writing process, I created a list of all the countries, main continents and gender pronouns. I carefully marked each time a place was mentioned

and each time a "he" or a "she" was used. The result was a colorful coded sheet that shows my failure to give equal weight to all countries and cultures, despite my deliberate attention. Nevertheless, I now understand the reason why literature in our field as well as in others is so US-centric. American narratives dominate the media and the academy. Take a look at the curriculum you are using and start coding the cases, arguments and theories. Even though you already have an idea, the result may still surprise you.

In sum, while this book is meant as an introduction to intercultural communication, it is also a novel attempt to incorporate the much-neglected dynamic paradigm of culture in the literature, the insight from other disciplines, and the representation of non-mainstream cultures.

To all of those who helped me finish this book, I extend my thanks. I am grateful to all the people I had the honor to befriend and meet on my journeys from the early days of my journalistic career, whose stories inspired me and became part and parcel of this book. To my colleagues and students who reviewed the manuscript, I owe you my thanks. I would like to thank my program manager John Sterk for giving me the much needed support to arrange my work so that this book could be finished on time. Finally, I thank the staff at AUP for their professionalism, and my research assistant Blerta Kola for her dedication.

1. The Survival of the Most Cultured

Objective

At the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain the nature of culture and its roles in the evolution of human species.
- Identify the role of cultural diversity.
- Discuss and illustrate with examples the dynamic interaction between culture and other factors: environment, genes, brain, and behaviors.
- Describe the process of globalization from evolutionary biology's perspective.
- Distinguish the unique characteristics of globalization in the modern era.

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2. The Evolving Culture

Objective

At the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain the "tree of culture" and position diverse cultural elements in accordance with this metaphor.
- Explain the dynamics and stability of the different elements in the tree metaphor with appropriate examples.
- Describe the Inverted Pyramid model and position a cultural case in the correct layer and unit of analysis.
- Prove the significance of intercultural competence in doing business internationally.

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3. Stereotype – A Necessary Evil

Objective

At the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain the origin of stereotypes and prejudices from biology's point of view.
- Explain the pitfall of stereotypes and prejudices with accurate examples.
- Given a specific case, recognize stereotypes, prejudices and explain the reasons.
- Given a specific case, propose alternative solutions.
- Describe strategies to live with stereotypes and reduce prejudices.

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4. Non-Verbal Communication – How You Make Them Feel

Objective

At the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain the role of non-verbal communication and its root in biology.
- Describe the role of context in non-verbal communication at the universal, collective and individual level.
- Prove the significance of non-verbal cues in communication.
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Objective

At the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain the evolutionary origin and the characteristics of Group Attachment, Hierarchy Acceptance, Gender Association, Uncertainty Avoidance and Time Orientation.
- Given a case or a phenomenon, identify related concerns and values.
- Given a case or a phenomenon, identify the possibilities of paradoxes, the impact of change and the non-binary nature of associated values.

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6. Intercultural Competence – Creating Yourself

Objective

At the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain why the most cultured individuals are more likely to be the most successful individuals.
- Describe different stages of acculturation according to the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS).
- Describe the requirements of Cultural Intelligence (CQ).
- Given a specific case, recognize stages or components of DMIS and CQ.
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