Academic Visits as Transformative Learning Opportunities: The Case of Chinese Visiting Academics

Xiantong Zhao¹ and Xu Liu²

Abstract
Cross-border academic visits by university faculty members are becoming prevalent globally. Unlike previous research, which has focused on the cross-cultural adaptation arising from the cross-border movement of people, we view scholars’ visiting experiences as a learning opportunity in light of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (TLT). We employ Addleman et al.’s three-stage proposal to better understand the transformative learning process of Chinese visiting scholars. Drawing on Hoggan’s typology, we identify changes in scholars’ worldviews, selves, and behavior as outcomes of transformative learning. We conclude that international experience is beneficial for scholars and call for more study abroad opportunities for Chinese university faculty.

Keywords
academic visit, Chinese visiting scholars, transformative learning

Introduction
Sending university faculty members to other countries for short-term visits seems to be a common method of promoting faculty members’ professional development, and has been adopted by many higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world (Maldonado & Bassett, 2014). In China, such visits are administered and supported by the nonprofit China Scholarship Council (CSC); established in 1996, the CSC manages and provides financial resources to visiting scholars. Each year, a large number of Chinese faculty members who participate in the State-Sponsored Study Abroad Programs (SSSAPs) are sent to various countries including the USA, UK, Canada, and Australia to improve their research and teaching capabilities and further contribute to building world-class universities (Xue et al., 2015). According to Xue et al. (2015), over 84,443 Chinese scholars have benefited from this study abroad program during the last 15 years.

As Liu and Jiang (2015) have argued, the prevalence of study abroad programs can be attributed to two top-down incentives. First, Chinese scholars’ overseas visits or short-term mobility, sponsored by either the national government or universities, was a typical representation of engagement arising in internationalization (Li et al., 2021). The internationalization of higher education drives Chinese universities to add more international flavor to their teaching and research. Second, the national strategic plan for building world-class universities pushes Chinese HEIs to raise their institutional profiles. To this end, many universities stipulate that faculty members should have overseas academic experience before being promoted to associate or full professors.

Researchers have been paying increasing attention to Chinese visiting scholars and, as a result, publications, albeit in modest numbers, have been produced. Investigating 16 Chinese academics who visited Canada, Jiang and Liu’s (2015) research demonstrated that the visiting experience improved the visitors’ teaching, research, and cross-border academic cooperation. The academics also gained cognitive, attitudinal, and social benefits. Furthermore, Liu and Jiang (2015) reported the outcomes of the overseas experiences of 17 Chinese

¹Southwest University, Chongqing, China
²Southern University of Science and Technology, Shenzhen, China

Corresponding Author:
Xu Liu, Center for Higher Education Research, Southern University of Science and Technology, Shenzhen, 518055, China.
Email: liux9@sustech.edu.cn
visiting scholars who spent up to 1 year at five Canadian universities. Fedoruk (2018) focused on the significant learning experiences of 10 Chinese visiting academics as well as the impact of their travels on their teaching practices once they returned to their home institutions in China. Moreover, employing a mixed-method design, Zhao, Liu et al. (2018) revealed various positive effects of international academic visits, which manifested in attitudes, international understanding and communication, and professional networks. Drawing on a survey of 314 Chinese visiting scholars, Zhao, Liu et al.’s (2018) found that positive effects were prevalent among the respondents, and the attitudinal (e.g., scholars were confident about China’s development) and professional or academic (e.g., scholars expanded their academic horizons due to their exposure to the academic environment in the host institutions) gains were particularly remarkable. However, Zhao, Peng et al. (2018) categorized several predominant challenges for Chinese visiting scholars, namely redundant pre-departure work, a lack of effective academic cooperation between Chinese and host academicians, and weak pursuit of scholarship. They also argued against the prevalent regulation among Chinese universities which stipulated that in order to be promoted, academics must have undertaken at least a 1-year academic visit to another country. Unfortunately, the effect of this particular regulation is that academics focus on the outcome rather than the process of the international visit. Recently, Hu et al. (2020) explored Chinese scholars’ visiting experiences and professional growth at American universities and concluded that, despite multiple challenges from several forces, visiting faculty members were able to achieve professional growth. Liu et al. (2020) focused on the factors that motivated language teachers to be visiting scholars as part of their professional development. Building on the data they collected through questionnaires and interviews, they proposed ways of sustaining motivation at the policy, tutor system, and individual levels.

Xue et al. (2015) have claimed that “Chinese visiting scholars as a special minority group have been underrepresented in the research field” (p. 290). This has been echoed by Liu and Jiang (2015), who found that empirical studies on the experiences and outcomes of returned Chinese scholars are rarely seen. Similarly, Hu et al.’s (2020) recent research found that most researchers focus on the international experiences of students, and there are far fewer studies on visiting academics while Zhao and Liu’s (2022) research conclude that the international experience is helpful for scholars’ sustainable development. The study calls for more research abroad opportunities for university faculty. With this study, we thus attempt to further academic visits as transformative learning opportunities as taking the case of Chinese visiting academics.

The existent studies that address the effects of academic mobility appear to agree that it has benefits. For example, Bodycott and Walker (2000) found that academics benefited from an improvement in their professional skills. Hamza (2010) claimed that the educators interviewed added an international dimension to their teaching when they returned to their home American institutions, and they also helped their colleagues prepare for their international experiences. Scholars’ international movement and exchange are also closely connected to scientific research. Auriol (2010, p. 18) argued that “[i]nternational exchange has always been an integral part of the research activity.” Therefore, “mobility among researchers and scientists is a normal part of scientific life and a well-established norm” (Thorn & Holm-Nielsen, 2008, p. 151). Scholars also establish significant networks and acquire and accumulate social capital as a result of their overseas experiences. For instance, investigating the International Medical Educators Exchange (IMEX) initiative, Ten Cate et al.’s (2014) research emphasized the value of developing relationships with colleagues from other countries. Furthermore, Clapp-Smith and Wernsing (2014) contended that working in a culturally different environment forced reflection which led to perspective transformation, a powerful stimulus for professional development.

There are, of course, various challenges for scholars temporarily working and living in another country. Studies have consistently shown that visiting faculty encounter challenges in navigating diverse conventions, regulations, politics, languages, and relationships (Freeman, 2015; Grenier, 2016). Moreover, being absent from an established home university research group can be detrimental to scholars in some countries where feudal-like hierarchies characterize the academic system (Morano-Foadi, 2005) and, for early-career scholars, spending several months abroad may affect their progress toward tenure (Walker, 2005). Furthermore, research cultures and academic styles differ between nations, which may affect visiting faculty negatively (Bauder, 2015).

Academic visiting opportunities, or study abroad programs, provide visiting scholars with rich, extended lived experiences. Even though faculty members can enrich their factual knowledge and understanding of other cultures in multiple ways, first-hand experiences facilitate deep learning by pushing them to learn from people and affairs through dealing with dilemmas and confusion in a context that is culturally different from their own (Biraimah & Jotia, 2013). In light of Mezirow’s (2012) transformative learning theory (TLT), we argue that
scholars’ visiting experiences are a learning process and aim to elaborate on the outcome as well as the process: what significant changes did the Chinese visiting academics experience as indicators of transformative learning (TL) due to their international experiences?

**Theoretical Framework**

In Mezirow’s (1996, p. 162) terms, TL is the process “of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action.” During the process, people transform their:

> taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, [and] mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective, so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (Fleming, 2017, pp. 7–8)

As Wang et al. (2019, p. 238) point out, the essence of TL is “deep-seated change in the core of individual perspectives and worldviews that ultimately shape activities and behaviors.”

TL is a useful framework for exploring visiting experiences (Liu & Jiang, 2015), in particular visits to unfamiliar countries and foreign cultures which serve as catalysts (Stone et al., 2017). Mezirow (2012) used TLT to explain the learning experiences of adults as essential shifts according to the perspectives or frames of references and that this frame is “the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions” (p. 82).

Disequilibrium in individuals’ frames of reference might cause a disorienting dilemma, the root of negative feelings. Cavender et al. (2020) point out that critical reflection and rational discourse are required to challenge and change held beliefs to facilitate new frames of references and TL. People need to undergo a difficult process of reflecting on and changing their assumptions and expectations. For critical reflection, talking with others and engaging in rational discourse have significant roles. This is the process in which different interpretations, perspectives, and pertinent evidence are explored and which facilitates the exchange of opinions and the establishment of trust among individuals. As a result, learners are expected to “become critically reflective of the assumptions underlying intentions, values, beliefs, and feelings” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 6). Critical reflection can take different forms, including content, process, and premise (Mezirow, 1991). While content and process center on what has been done and the source of actions, premise reflection concerns how individuals’ rooted beliefs and assumptions shape actions.

The context in adult learning is important that study abroad programs are designed to be transformative (Dunn et al., 2014). Traveling abroad may yield memorable, transformative experiences (Cavender et al., 2020). Ritz (2011, p. 168) has furthermore argued that “new experiences that contest held beliefs . . . are foundations for [the] development of study abroad experiences that provide opportunities for transformative, emotional, and social learning to occur.”

However, as previously noted, the majority of current studies focus more on students’ mobility (e.g., Kumi-Yeboah & James, 2014; Nada et al., 2018). This study explores visiting scholars, an often-neglected group. The two main differences between students and visiting academics, we suggest, are that visiting academics are more cognitively mature and experienced and, compared to young(er) students, they have more diverse aims—such as learning new research techniques, facilitating international research collaboration, and publishing in a non-mother tongue language, while students aim to develop global awareness and obtain degrees. Therefore, visiting academics’ TL experiences are worthy of research.

**Methodology**

When addressing questions about experience, qualitative methods are often employed (Hammarberg et al., 2016). This research aims to examine the significant changes that the Chinese visiting academics experience as indicators of TL as a result of their international experiences. Therefore, a qualitative research design was adopted. In contrast to Hu et al.’s (2020) recent study on Chinese scholars visiting America, we attempted to recruit a group of academic visitors who had visited different countries, including the USA, the UK, Canada, and Australia, in order to provide a wider, more comprehensive understanding.

Purposive sampling was employed, and the following three criteria were used for choosing participants: the participant should (1) be a Chinese university academic in the social sciences, (2) have experienced at least one academic visit overseas, and (3) be willing and agree to share his/her experience. Table 1 shows background information on the 22 participants, who work for 16 mainland Chinese universities.

Data were collected primarily through in-depth face-to-face and telephone interviews. Open-ended questionnaires were also employed to investigate two participants who preferred to respond in writing. The interview questions included the following: Why did you participate in the academic visiting program? Could you describe your
academic visit experience? How did this experience affect your ways of thinking about yourself and performing as a faculty member? What do you think you learned from the academic visit?

This study is based on the same research dataset of published article by two authors (Zhao & Liu, 2022). In this study thematic analysis is employed in which each digitally-recorded interview was transcribed verbatim. Several approaches were used in order to ensure the quality of the data analysis.

Before the analysis, we returned the interview transcripts to all participants for their review. In this way, each participant had the opportunity to check what they said and make any revisions they felt necessary (Liu, 2018). We then repeatedly read the transcripts to familiarize ourselves with their contents (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After that, we independently coded the transcripts and then compared the codes to ensure the rigor of the data analysis. If there were disparities, we discussed until we reached a consensus and all the data were sorted and collated into different themes. In this process, we particularly considered whether the coded data extracts for each theme appeared to form a coherent pattern (Nowell et al., 2017). This process helped to distil each theme and their different meanings.

Findings and Discussion

Mezirow (1991) proposed a 10-phase model for perspective transformation: (1) a disorienting dilemma; (2) self-examination with feelings of shame and guilt; (3) a critical assessment of psychic, epistemic, or sociocultural assumptions; (4) recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change; (5) exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions; (6) planning of a course of action; (7) acquisition of skills and knowledge for implementing plans; (8) provisional trying of new roles; (9) building of self-confidence and competence and in new relationships and roles; and (10) a reintegration into life on the basis of conditions dictated by the new perspective (pp. 168–169). Building on this model, Cranton (2002) proposes a seven-phase model:

- An activating event that typically exposes a discrepancy between what a person has always assumed to be true and what has just been experienced, heard, or read
- Articulating assumptions, that is, recognizing underlying assumptions that have been uncritically assimilated and are largely unconscious
- Critical self-reflection, that is, questioning and examining assumptions in terms of where they came from, the consequences of holding them, and why they are important
- Being open to alternative viewpoints
- Engaging in discourse, where evidence is weighed, arguments assessed, alternative perspectives explored, and knowledge constructed by consensus

| Pseudonym | Gender | Duration of/age at Visit | Academic ranking | Destination |
|-----------|--------|--------------------------|------------------|-------------|
| Wang      | Male   | 2015–2016 (38)           | Associate Professor | USA         |
| Qian      | Male   | 2014–2015 (31)           | Lecturer         | USA         |
| Chang     | Male   | 2012–2013 (41)           | Professor        | UK          |
| Fang      | Female | 2013–2014 (45)           | Associate Professor | UK         |
| Lei       | Male   | 2016–2017 (32)           | Lecturer         | USA         |
| Zhao      | Male   | 2016–2017 (34)           | Associate Professor | Australia   |
| Guo       | Male   | 2012–2013 (34)           | Lecturer         | USA         |
| Liu       | Male   | 2011–2012 (39)           | Associate Professor | UK         |
| Tang      | Male   | 2013–2014 (39)           | Associate Professor | USA         |
| Deng      | Male   | 2016–2017 (33)           | Associate Professor | Canada      |
| Kai       | Female | 2016–2017 (31)           | Lecturer         | UK          |
| Lan       | Male   | 2017–2018 (39)           | Lecturer         | Australia   |
| Da        | Male   | 2013–2014 (53)           | Professor        | UK          |
| Niu       | Female | 2016–2017 (32)           | Lecturer         | Canada      |
| Qin       | Female | 2016–2017 (33)           | Lecturer         | USA         |
| An        | Male   | 2015–2016 (34)           | Lecturer         | UK          |
| Qiu       | Female | 2010–2011 (30)           | Associate Professor | USA         |
| Kuang     | Female | 2016–2017 (34)           | Lecturer         | UK          |
| Jun       | Male   | 2013–2014 (43)           | Professor        | UK          |
| Ma        | Female | 2015–2016 (38)           | Associate Professor | UK         |
| Yu        | Female | 2014–2015 (42)           | Professor        | UK          |
| Wu        | Female | 2012–2013 (35)           | Lecturer         | Canada      |
• Revising assumptions and perspectives to make them more open and better justified
• Acting on revisions, behaving, talking, and thinking in a way that is congruent with transformed assumptions or perspectives.

In this study, we employ the three-stage model as proposed in Addleman et al.’s (2014) research. Building on Mezirow’s (1991) and Cranton’s (2002) models, Addleman et al.’s (2014) three-stage proposal focuses on major components of the TL process and represents “a fluid and recursive process rather than concretely defined boundaries” (p. 190). The three-stage model is more succinct than the 10- or 7-stage ones, yet also embraces key elements included in the other two. More importantly, the model has been proved by Addleman et al. (2014) to be a helpful framework for analyzing TL experience through cultural immersion. Therefore, we employ this model to divide different phases of the visiting scholars’ experiences. The three stages are: triggering experiences or initiating events; frame of reference examination via reflection and dialog; and transformative changes.

Stage 1: Triggering Experiences/Initiating Events

Triggering experiences or initiating events are disorienting incidents that provide a catalyst for TL. It was not difficult to identify such triggering incidents, which were the results of immersion in a different cultural and social context.

Feelings and emotions are critical for TL (Mezirow, 1991). As Addleman et al. (2014) find, international travelers’ emotional responses to incidents decide whether or not these key events facilitate critical reflection on existing assumptions and expectations. While Mezirow’s 10 phases of perspective transformation placed emphasis on shame and guilt, we found multiple emotions described by the participants during their stay abroad.

Very few participants expressed their anger at the beginning of their visit. For example, Qiu said:

I quarreled with my French roommate because of some lifestyle and cultural reasons. The institution got involved to try and reconcile us but failed. Finally, it [the institution] had to separate us and re-arrange accommodation for each of us.

This unpleasant experience could have a deep impact on the visiting scholar’s life and academic visit as a whole. It could have been a result of a culture clash, but could also be attributed to a personality clash.

The most common emotion reported by the scholars was surprise, which was due to truly seeing and sensing the differences between two distinct cultures and lifestyles (Chinese and non-Chinese). Fang described her experience:

I was surprised to see that most people there [in the host country] drink coffee when reading, and they use ovens for cooking quite often. Such a lifestyle is different from our own. One day I went to a park and I saw some people were making speeches there. It seemed they were propagating their political ideas. People either listened carefully or just went away after a short while. You hardly ever see these events in our country, right?

The surprise was also attributed to the contrast between previously-held assumptions and newly-gained experiences. Zhao explained that what amazed him was that his new observations contradicted his presuppositions.

Before I visited Australia, I thought it was similar to Britain because it was a British colony and now a Commonwealth country. However, my new experience tells me that Australia is unique in its culture, traditions and language.

Fang’s surprise derived from the academic differences, more specifically, her research interest in moral education and that there was another way to approach it:

In our country, moral education is didactic; it is about the indoctrination of moral doctrines. This method makes you sick. But I was pleased and surprised to see there was another approach in the UK: analytic philosophy. The British researchers take advantage of analytic philosophy through rigorous and scientific argumentation. They try to convince you, not forcing you to believe or do something. There are no doctrines, but only analysis.

Teaching and learning methods also surprised some Chinese scholars. Qiu, for example, described her reaction to classroom teaching in the US:

I truly felt the big difference in terms of classroom organization. In American universities, teachers leave learning tasks on blackboards for students to prepare. During the class, you can see students working in groups to discuss some topics. Normally, the teacher lectures little and acts as a facilitator throughout the whole process. The classroom seems to be dominated by students. I was also amazed to see that students are allowed, even encouraged, to eat and drink in class. What’s more, the teacher buys snacks for the students. I don’t know why … maybe teachers want to be highly evaluated by their students, or just to create a casual learning environment.

The teaching and learning depicted above were quite different from a Chinese university teacher’s perspective. In China, even though in-class activities such as group discussions and presentations are increasingly used, traditional teacher-centered instruction still has a vital role to
play. Moreover, unlike the Americans, Chinese students are definitely not allowed to eat or drink in class.

Frustration was also expressed by a few scholars. Tang’s experience was representative:

I got a chance to communicate with a well-known professor. He criticized right from the start. He said, you never take into account the actual, social, political, and cultural background of the enactment of a policy, its implementation, and effects. You just focus on making comparisons between the US and China, at a textual level. I then asked if we could write and publish articles jointly, but he refused. I was totally frustrated; I lost my face. But that conversation was memorable and useful, and I think it is worth reflecting on.

It seems that Tang never expected such a conversation. The professor said something negative in a very straightforward way, although his critique made some sense. Tang added that the professor’s comments were insightful and deserved consideration, but that he felt very embarrassed and depressed.

Stage 2: Frame of Reference Examination

A key feature for this stage is the consciousness and evaluation of frames of reference via critical reflection and rational discourse (Addleman et al., 2014). This stage, therefore, encompasses critical reflection and rational discourse, both of which are indispensable for TL (Taylor, 2017).

Critical reflection is a process through which people deal with beliefs and assumptions, evaluating their authenticity according to new information and experiences, examining their sources, and probing their fundamental preconditions (Cranton, 2002). An individual’s assumptions or presuppositions comprise the object of critical reflection. Mezirow (1991) identified three levels of reflection: content, process, and premise. As Kreber (2004) has said, “when engaged in content reflection, we ask ‘what do I know?’ and when involved in process reflection we ask ‘How do I know my method of problem-solving works/if I am effective with what I do?’” However, “when engaged in premise reflection, we question the presuppositions underlying our knowledge” (pp. 30–31). Only premise reflection has the potential to bring about TL, since such reflection “is seen as a higher level of reflective thinking, as it is through premise reflection that we can transform our meaning framework ... [because] it opens the possibility of perspective transformation” (Kember, 1999, p. 23).

Kuang’s statements demonstrated the questioning of her presuppositions:

During my stay in the UK, I arranged for a group of Chinese to visit an English school. I found that the people at the school prepared well before our visit; for example, they picked excellent students to interact with us and prepared formal answers to our questions. This is what we do in China. It was only then that I realized what the two countries had in common. Now I will not belittle my country nor will I expect much from other countries. With such a neutral attitude I can think more rationally about some issues.

Kuang’s case illustrated disillusion. Before her visit, she had witnessed that Chinese schools usually prepared careful coping strategies in response to external visits, including “official answers” and pre-selecting students. It seemed that Kuang did not like this and assumed that a western and developed country would be different. Realizing the similarities, Kuang underwent self-examination. She might have asked herself “Why did I think like this?” Questioning the appropriateness of her assumptions and expectations regarding a different country, she then accepted the reality and shifted her perspective. The self-reflection made her change prior assumptions as well as attitudes.

Critical reflection is embedded in rational discourse (Fleming, 2018), which is essentially a form of dialog aiming at searching for common understanding and evaluation of the justification of an interpretation or belief (Mezirow, 1991). There are several important prerequisites for rational discourse, such as equal access to the dialog, complete information, objective evaluation and argument, avoidance of coercion or distorting self-deception, openness to alternative perspectives, reflection on presupposition(s), and “a willingness to seek understanding and agreement and to accept a resulting best judgment as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence, or arguments are encountered and validated through discourse” (Mezirow, 2000a, p. 14). Note that these are the “ideal” conditions, which can never be fully met in reality (Mezirow, 2000a). The interview extracts below exemplify the conditions.

The data showed that they sought chances to communicate with other Chinese peers. Tang, for example, said:

I frequently talked with different Chinese visiting scholars, because I find the conversation environment comfortable. We all shared our experiences, discussed our individual views and grew to become friends. These kinds of conversations performed a function in altering my presuppositions and beliefs.

First, a good atmosphere is important. As Mezirow (2000b) contends, positive feelings such as trust, solidarity, and empathy are crucial preconditions for rational discourse. Second, the discourse is not predicted on who wins or loses. Rather, it “involves finding agreement, welcoming difference, ‘trying on’ other points of view, identifying the common in the contradictory, tolerating the anxiety implicit in paradox, searching for synthesis, and
rational discourse in academic research. Fang’s dialog with a British professor demonstrated a process conducted through an interaction between two people. The comments seemed to be objective, and most participants were open-minded and willing to consider alternative viewpoints. The above narratives indicate that the shared identity of Chinese visiting scholars was important: it allowed everyone to participate in an equal footing rather than in a hierarchical setting. Furthermore, such a shared identity could close the gap between different people. Each scholar shared and expressed their experiences, observations, opinions, and reflections, and obtained others’ feedback and recommendations. Chang recounted common dialogs that took place over dinner.

Chang’s narratives covered several prerequisites for rational discourse. The dinner or conversation location was open to each visiting scholar, which allowed equal access to the dialog. As Chang said, scholars expressed their opinions because they wanted to, not because they had to. The comments seemed to be objective, and most participants were open-minded and willing to consider alternative viewpoints.

Mezirow (2000a) contends that discourse can be conducted through an interaction between two people. Mezirow (2000b) found six broad categories representing significant changes as a result of TL. The first category in this typology of TL outcomes is the worldview, that is, remarkable changes in the learner’s understanding of the world and how it operates. The second, self, refers to the ways in which an individual experiences a remarkable change in his/her sense of self. Third, epistemology means an individual’s “beliefs about the definition of knowledge, how

Stage 3: Transformative Changes

At this stage, a range of outcomes has been found. Since the focus of this study is TL, only transformative learning outcomes are developed here. C. D. Hoggan (2016b) proposes three criteria for determining whether learning outcomes can be considered transformative: depth, breadth, and relative stability. Depth concerns the degree of the impact, and only major changes that affect the way people experience the world can be transformative. Breadth refers to the range of contexts in which changes are manifested. Transformative learning outcomes should cover a wide range of contexts. Temporary changes are not considered to be transformative, as they should have relative stability. For this criterion, C. D. Hoggan (2016b) highlights “irreversibility” and argues that once we obtain new ways of experiencing, old ways would only reappear occasionally. It should also be noted that there is no limit to the number of times people can experience transformative changes; transformative changes “now” do not preclude possible future changes. These three criteria were used to identify the TL outcomes in this study.

Reviewing 173 articles, C. D. Hoggan (2016b) found six broad categories representing significant changes as a result of TL. The first category in this typology of TL outcomes is the worldview, that is, remarkable changes in the learner’s understanding of the world and how it operates. The second, self, refers to the ways in which an individual experiences a remarkable change in his/her sense of self. Third, epistemology means an individual’s “beliefs about the definition of knowledge, how
knowledge is constructed, how knowledge is evaluated, where knowledge resides, and how knowing occurs” (Hofer, 2001, p. 355). Fourth, ontology deals with people’s existence-related issues. Fifth, behaviors are the actions resulting from TL and represent an emphasis on doing. Sixth and finally, capacity refers to greater abilities to comprehend, explicate, and function in the world. The findings in this study echo C. D. Hoggan’s (2016b) worldview, self, and behavioral categories.

**Changes in Worldview**

The first set of changes corresponds to C. D. Hoggan’s (2016b) broader category of worldview: some academics reported having changed their previous assumptions. Before experiencing the host countries in person, the scholars had held assumptions that later changed due to their new experiences. As previously stated, Zhao’s change is a typical example. He had assumed that Australia would be similar to the UK in terms of language, and scientific research culture since they share an Anglo-Saxon culture and are categorized as western countries, but the new experiences changed Zhao’s cognition. According to Cranton (2002), Zhao experienced a process of working through his beliefs and assumptions, evaluating their validity according to newly-obtained experience and knowledge, and re-thinking their origins. The resulting change in belief is stable and profound, as it is achieved through first-hand experience. Zhao stated that “Australia is building its own research culture; now I won’t think Australia is just a follower of the UK or US.” Clearly, Zhao would no longer hold to his previous assumptions.

Other participants also reported attitudinal changes. Such alterations were the results of “seeing the differences.” Having worked in Chinese universities, the visiting scholars understood their own society and institutions. Immersing themselves in the host countries and universities, they obtained new first-hand experiences through observing and experiencing. The coexistence of old and new experiences facilitated comparison, which gave the scholars a new appreciation of the advantages and weaknesses of their home and host countries. Deng stated that:

I was able to properly understand the benefits and drawbacks of Canadian universities thanks to my visit. I won’t simply state that they are all superior to us. I understood that, for instance, our government was doing better [in terms of] financially supporting higher education research. At the same time, we must study the Canadian culture to understand how to adapt our institutions.

This case illustrates how cognitive domain change results in another change in the affective domain. That is, the first-hand and subsequent judgment resulted in more neutral attitudes. The misconception that all things in foreign countries were better than in China was corrected by a more rational view.

Some scholars reported having generated insights into phenomena in their home country, validating C. D. Hoggan’s (2016b) “new awareness/new understandings” in the worldview category. As a philosopher, Liu explained:

When I got back home, I discovered that we didn’t have much enthusiasm for anything. The institution, the organization, and possibly the entirety of society, lack passion. We couldn’t understand the source of society, lack passion. You are given a job assignment, told what to do, and given a performance evaluation. We lack enthusiasm, especially among our social science and humanities scholars. We simply carry out instructions and tasks in order to meet various performance evaluation indicators.

These comments illustrated a critical understanding. The visiting scholar seemed to be unhappy with institutions and individuals primarily driven by external mandatory power. He was depressed since many people did not realize that passion comes from inside. In Chinese academia, national development and social needs are usually the priority for academic research for many scholars and many research projects take the form of hierarchical arrangements which ignore researchers’ interests. Liu’s reflection strengthened his identity as a Chinese scholar, and he seemed to link himself as an individual with the nation as a whole.

**Changes in Self**

Some scholars reported being even more motivated in their work; in particular, they showed more passion for research. According to Lei, this was the result of the emulative environment in overseas universities, where creativity and professional diligence are highly valued. The surroundings impacted scholars in a wonderful and lasting way, helping them to form a new habit of dedicating themselves to their job. He explained:

When I returned, I was very different and more energetic than before. I was more motivated to do things. [Why?] Because the research environment in American universities was ideal. Researchers around you were energetic and hard-working and I learned a lot from them so I wanted to do a lot of things. I brought that habit and enthusiasm back to my university in China. The momentum is still building and I feel it clearly. I will work hard and do some work. This is a notable change.

Lei’s narratives, according to C. D. Hoggan’s (2016b) typology of transformative learning outcomes, demonstrated a
change in the broad category of “self.” More specifically, this change included some aspects within the self-knowledge subcategory. Lei clearly described his perception of his motivation in scientific research and further explained that it was due to his international academic immersion in another country. Additionally, this could also be related to the responsibility category as Lei’s determination to make some contributions in his particular area of research implies a sense of responsibility.

Changes in Behavior

C. D. Hoggan’s (2016b) subcategory of changing professional practices was verified by the Chinese visiting scholars. Most participants reported that they had gained a lot in terms of professional practice through their academic visits abroad. More specifically, they changed their research and teaching practice to a great degree: it seemed to be more creative and innovative because of the fresh ideas and practices encountered in foreign universities.

Observing the differences between research paradigms in China and the UK, Jun altered his previous research practices. In his view, the Chinese prefer grand, broad topics, and they often take a literature-to-literature research approach. In contrast, the British focus on more specific research questions, addressing them by means of stringent empirical methods. He described his intention to modify his practice:

I went to a variety of lectures and seminars. I discovered that China and the UK do research in quite different ways. Most Chinese scholars, including myself, prefer broad subjects, and we frequently do numerous literature-to-literature activities. The British, on the other hand, favor more precise queries and employ a variety of approaches to solve their issues. There isn’t much idle talk. This is good, in my opinion. Upon my return, I decided that I should pay more attention to the standards and specifics of study while concentrating more on empirical research. So, it’s time to change.

Similar to Addleman et al.’s (2014) findings, Jun’s statement could also be aligned with Whitney’s (2008) notion of “resolving to reorient” future behaviors, rather than a concrete plan for action (Mezirow, 1991). Jun delineated few specific actions; instead, he showed appreciation for another research paradigm and a desire to move away from his “comfort zone”—from broad topics and a literature-to-literature approach to specific questions and carefully-selected methods.

Fang’s narrative showed that she took action to change her previous research practices. With an interest in the philosophy of science, she had firmly believed that educational research should follow a scientific way. During her visit to a well-known British university, she discussed her ideas with an emeritus professor. The professor pointed out that while Fang’s claim made sense, it was aimless. He argued that science was a tool that should be directed by an appropriate humanistic goal, which had a profound impact on Fang’s research. Now Fang is working to combine the tool (science) and the aim (humanities) together, a new research agenda for her.

In education research, I was crazy about science. But my supervisor, a well-known education philosopher, said to me that only science was not enough, I must consider for what purpose. He claimed that science was only a tool, which should be guided by an appropriate humanistic aim. So I’m now combining the tool (science) and the aim (humanities). My supervisor has had a truly great influence on my research.

Clearly, Fang was able to alter her previous perspective and decided to try a new perspective: linking the scientific and humanistic approaches. To implement this new research plan, she had to acquire new knowledge and skills. During the interview, Fang talked about her decision on the new research plan confidently and firmly, without hesitation or worry. All of these echo certain elements embedded in Mezirow’s (1991) and Cranton’s (2002) models, such as trying new actions, obtaining new knowledge and skills for implementing new plans, being confident in new actions, and behaving in ways that are consistent with transformed perspectives.

Hamza (2010) found that American faculty members’ teaching experience in the Gulf States led to changed instructional methods in the classroom. Similarly, this study also demonstrated that the visiting academic experience promoted a remarkable and fundamental shift in terms of undergraduate teaching. Unlike the American lecturers in Hamza’s (2010) research, the Chinese visiting scholars were not allowed to teach in the universities they visited. However, their classroom observation and experience did bring about changes in their own classroom teaching on their return. Jun’s example demonstrated that visiting scholars could borrow and implement a more learner-centered philosophy by assigning learning tasks and encouraging students to participate in diverse classroom activities.

Jun: In the past, I dominated classroom teaching. However, the visiting experience widened my horizons and made me aware of some more student-centered approaches to teaching. I have been trying to make my class more learner-centered since my return. I use group discussions and student presentations much
more than before to stimulate... [my students’] own motivation for learning. This has made my classroom more vivid, attractive, and informative.

**Interviewer:** How did you learn all this during your stay in a foreign university?

**Jun:** I observed several sessions in the university I visited and I chatted with the students and teachers. I found it was really different. Now I give the students more learning tasks and materials before class. I also try to make my class livelier through in-class discussions, debates, presentations, and even role play. They [the students] should be the host of their own learning, and I try to motivate their initiative and enthusiasm for learning.

As evidenced in Jun’s statement, the visiting experience made him aware of the existence of a totally different conception and style of student-centered teaching and motivated him to modify his previous approach. This alteration engaged undergraduates in learning activities to a large degree and required more student involvement. The students’ initiative and enthusiasm for learning could be motivated in this way. In contrast to the aforementioned “resolve to reorient,” the change in teaching is the ongoing real action.

Apart from the dominant alterations of professional practices, changes in living habits were also reported. Habits, formed while abroad, had a persistent impact on themselves and their families as well, as Yu explained:

I never drank coffee before my visit abroad. But upon return, I often drink coffee when reading. After I came back, I bought an oven for cooking. I never knew roasted chicken or fish or baked potato. But I learned all these things and now I often make these dishes for my family. Our lifestyle seems to be westernized [laughs].

In line with C. D. Hoggan’s (2016b) notion of “relative stability,” acquiring a new way does not necessarily mean the old habit would be magically forgotten. The old habits are still stored in our repertoire of behaviors and reappear occasionally, depending on the context. Note that Yu used “often” rather than “always.” This could imply that, even if her habits have been somewhat westernized due to her immersion in the host country, her Chinese lifestyle has not been totally forgotten.

**Conclusion, Implication, and Limitations**

Based on Addleman et al.’s (2014) three-stage model, the present study discussed a group of Chinese visiting scholars’ TL process. Drawing on C. D. Hoggan’s (2016b) typology, we identified several changes in worldview, self, and behavior as TL outcomes. The existing research seems to place much emphasis on the acculturation and sociocultural perspective while analyzing the cross-border movement of people (Heng, 2020). In contrast, in this study, we view the visiting scholars’ international experiences as the source of learning in light of Mezirow’s TLT. The study contributes to TLT by elaborating on how international experiences impacted the TL of Chinese visiting academics.

This empirical study has demonstrated that visiting faculty programs are an essential part of the professional development of Chinese university faculty members. They help Chinese scholars to improve their research practices and facilitate changes in their instruction methods and underlying teaching concepts. Liu and Jiang (2015, p. 465) recommend that such “opportunity ... no longer be once in a lifetime but can be pursued multiple times for those who would like to, thus forming a cycle of international mobility.” However, due to the high costs of such programs, pertinent departments such as the CSC should also improve their administration. On the part of scholars, a high-level academic commitment and self-discipline while abroad are indispensable.

This study is not without limitations. First, the data presented in this study reflects a relatively short overseas experience (1 year) by the Chinese scholars and the depth of their observations and self-reported TL could have been limited by such a relatively short exposure to the host country and culture. Second, according to C. Hoggan (2016a), the relative stability of the transformation over time is a key criterion for TL, which stresses permanent rather than interim change. TLT helps to explain significant changes that happen to individuals and addresses both the outcome and process of learning (Nada et al., 2018). However, minor changes with limited impact on one’s meaning perspectives do not “merit the descriptor of transformation” (Hoggan et al., 2017, p. 51). Drawing on TLT, this study has demonstrated that the participants have changed in significant and fundamental ways, yet it is difficult to know whether the changes will be permanent and are really or always transformative in nature. It is possible that the scholars’ previous perspectives and behaviors still exist and may reappear under certain circumstances (Kegan, 1982). Therefore, it may be premature to assert that certain changes are enduring and irreversible by using a one-time interview.

**Future Studies**

Although we did our best to ensure participant diversity, the sample size was small and it focused exclusively on social science scholars. It is therefore recommended that future studies expand the sample and employ research approaches other than a qualitative design (Stone et al., 2017).
All the destinations the participants visited in this study share an Anglo-Saxon cultural and linguistic context (Australia, Canada, UK, USA). While the shared context makes the present research more focused, it would be interesting to explore the visiting experience in non-Anglo-Saxon cultural and social contexts. Furthermore, a comparative design conducted in both the pre- and post-visit stages would facilitate the reflection of transformation.

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ORCID iDs

Xiantong Zhao https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9599-0689
Xu Liu https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1567-7925

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