Article

Sustaining Faculty Development through Visiting Scholar Programmes: A Transformative Learning Perspective

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Abstract: International academic visits by university faculty members are common around the world. While most researchers approach such an international experience in terms of intercultural communication and acculturation, in this study we view the travel experience as a learning opportunity in light of Mezirow's transformative learning theory (TLT). Drawing on Singleton's '3H model' (head-heart-hands), we find that the outcomes of transformative learning (TL) are related to cognitive, affective and behavioral domains, the prevalence of which were then explored among 314 visiting scholars. The results are further interpreted by drawing on key concepts from TLT to better understand the learning process. We conclude that the international experience is beneficial for scholars' sustainable development, and call for more study abroad opportunities for Chinese university faculty.

Keywords: Chinese visiting scholars; transformative learning; mixed-methods study

1. Introduction

Short-term visits by university teachers to other countries is a widespread measure for facilitating a faculty's sustainable professional development and has been implemented by many higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide [1]. This international movement of highly-skilled personnel also avoids 'brain drain' as the visitors remain affiliated to their original institutions. International visiting scholars may be defined as faculty members who engage provisionally in teaching or research in foreign countries, yet return to work in their home universities to which they are still affiliated [2].

In the higher education sector, such faculty visits for short-term research and teaching are organised as visiting scholar programmes throughout the world. In China, faculty members are administered and supported by a non-profit agency, the China Scholarship Council (CSC), which was established in 1996 to manage and fund visiting scholars. Each year, many scholars who participate in the State Sponsored Study Abroad Programmes (SSSAPs) are sent to other countries to improve their research and teaching capabilities and further contribute to building world-class universities [3]. Several national initiatives have been enacted to align Chinese faculty members' research and teaching with international standards, which has led to Chinese universities' institutional regulations that connect overseas experience to academic promotion [4].

From the perspective of sustainability, visiting scholar programmes, which promote personal and professional growth, are now an important form of continuing education for the sustainable professional development of faculty members [5]. Further, the prevalence of international academic visits can also be attributed to the belief that it is beneficial for the sustainable development of universities. HEIs and governments around the world are convinced that the mobility of scholars has led to numerous positive effects such as appreciation of diversity, worldwide professional networks, updated viewpoints and enhanced creativity [6]. These outcomes add a more international flavour to teaching and research, improve faculty's daily work, and enhance the quality of teaching, learning and public service, thus promoting the sustainable development of universities [7].

Chinese faculty members' visits abroad have attracted researchers and therefore yielded publications, albeit in small numbers. Rhoads and Hu [8] discussed the positive influence of international experience on Chinese faculty members' teaching and course development. Liu and Jiang's [4] interviews with 16 Chinese academics who were visiting Canada indicated that international experience improved teaching, research and cross-border academic cooperation and led to conclusions regarding internal, external and long-term outcomes. The internal outcomes were represented cognitively and affectively, such as a better understanding of Canadian culture and society and attitudinal changes. Once the cognitive and affective outcomes were internalised, external outcomes—in terms of teaching and research—were seen in the form of significant changes in the scholars upon returning home. Liu and Jiang [4] further contended that international academic experience had an enduring, transformative impact on visiting scholars' personal growth. In the Canadian context, Fedoruk's [9] qualitative research examined 10 Chinese visiting professors' crucial learning moments and the impact of their overseas experience on their teaching practice after returning to their home institutions in China. Moreover, employing a mixed-methods design, Zhao et al. [10] revealed various positive effects of international academic visits and their generalisability. In a recent study, Hu et al. [11] explored Chinese scholars' visiting experiences and professional growth at American universities and found that visiting faculty members were able to achieve professional growth. Overall, the overseas experience seems to be rewarding, as research has constantly demonstrated that it helped to update knowledge, improve research capabilities and problem-solving skills, enrich cross-cultural collaboration, increase joint research programmes and co-authored publications, promote the use of English as the medium of instruction and different pedagogical approaches, and diversify curriculum content and design [9]. There are, nonetheless, several challenges such as unbalanced funding opportunities, insufficient academic guidance by the foreign supervisors and limited chances to participate in supervisors' research programmes [5]. As also anticipated, the visiting Chinese scholars also sometimes encountered multiple difficulties in adapting to a linguistically and culturally different world [4].

Despite the existing literature, Xue et al. [3] have claimed that Chinese visiting academics, as a group, have often been neglected. Many researchers [2,11,12] similarly claim that empirical studies on the experiences and outcomes of visiting scholars are rare. In a broader sense, a lack of concern over visiting scholars seems to be universal internationally, even though the number of such scholars has been increasing [2]. It is therefore necessary to strengthen empirical study on this particular group.

International academic visiting opportunities provide visiting scholars with rich, extended lived experiences. Although faculty members can enrich their factual knowledge and understanding of other countries without travelling abroad due to the development of modern technology, immersion in other cultures and first-hand experiences are likely to facilitate deep and profound learning by pushing academics to learn from people and experiences through dealing with dilemmas and confusion in a context that is culturally different from their own [13]. Drawing on Mezirow's [14] transformative learning theory (TLT), in this study, we view scholars' international experiences as a course of learning, categorise the outcomes, and understand the process. First, we explore the Chinese visiting academics' changes as indicative of TL. Second, we further develop a survey instrument (questionnaire) that builds on the results of the qualitative phase to test the prevalence of these themes (changes) with a sample of 314 academics. In line with Creswell and Creswell's [15] taxonomy of mixed-methods study, the present research has an exploratory sequential mixed methods design.

2. Theoretical Framework

TL is a process "by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) 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" [14] (p.76). Essentially,

TL is a deep change, as it has an impact on one's core world outlook and perspectives that influence one's actions [16].

Mezirow coined TLT to explain adults' learning experiences as fundamental shifts in perspectives or frames of reference. A frame of reference is the configuration of assumptions through which we view and comprehend our experience [14]. Disequilibrium in a frame of reference may cause disorienting dilemmas, an experience that is the root of negative feelings. This is because people must reflect on and change their established assumptions and expectations post-learning experience, which is a challenge to many. Critical reflection and rational discourse are necessary to challenge and change firmly-held beliefs and values in order to facilitate new frames of reference and TL [17]. Mezirow [14] has contended that there are three types of critical reflection: content, process and premise. While the first two focus on what was done in the past and the origins of actions, premise reflection is more concerned with how people's ingrained values, beliefs and assumptions shape their actions. Engaging in rational discourse and talking with others plays a pivotal role in critical reflection. This process, in which different interpretations, perspectives and pertinent evidence are presented and explored, facilitates the exchange of opinions and encouragement, and the establishment of mutual trust among people. Learners are expected to be able to reflect on the assumptions that underpin intents, attitudes, beliefs and emotions [18].

TL has been proven to be a helpful framework for exploring travel experiences [4], with visits to unfamiliar countries and forays into foreign cultures serving as catalysts in the TL process [19]. Dunn et al. [20] have pointed to the importance of context in adult learning opportunities, claiming that many study abroad programmes are designed to be transformative. Indeed, travelling abroad may yield memorable, transformative experiences [17]. Furthermore, Ritz [21] has argued that newly-gained experiences that challenge previously held beliefs serve as the basis for the development of overseas study experiences that allow transformative learning to take place. However, existing studies have tended to focus on student travel/visit experiences [22,23]. This study therefore takes a look at the often-untouched group of visiting scholars. There are at least two primary differences between students and visiting academics. First, compared to young(er) students, faculty members are more experienced and cognitively mature. Second, whereas students' primary aim is to obtain a degree at various educational levels, visiting scholars have diverse aims based on their overseas experiences—such as expanding global awareness, facilitating international research collaboration, learning new research techniques and publishing in journals that are linguistically different. It is these contrasts that make visiting academics' TL experiences worthy of research.

Singleton's [24] 'head-heart-hands' (3H) model (Figure 1) corresponds to the cognitive (academic learning and comprehension), affective (values and attitudes) and psychomotor (skills and capabilities) domains of TL and demonstrates thinking, feeling and doing as the triple essential prerequisite elements of TL experience. We employ this 3H model as a useful framework for analysing and describing the engagement in TL of Chinese visiting scholars.
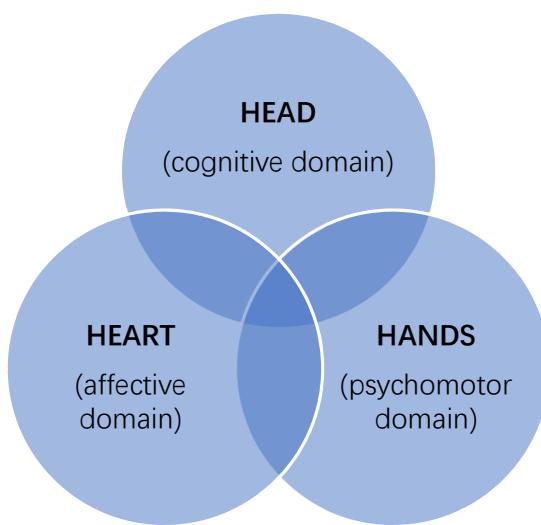
Figure 1. The 3H model.

3. Methodology

An exploratory sequential mixed methods design [15] was adopted in this study. The first phase was in-depth individual interviews with 22 scholars, all of whom had international visiting experience. Data analysis led to the emergence of several prerequisites to TL. We then developed a scale to test the prevalence of the themes/indicators within a larger sample. Note that the research design was driven by a qualitative approach and greater emphasis was put on qualitative data. Researchers should consider this QUAL>quan design when instruments are unavailable or variables are unknown [25]. To our knowledge, there is no specific scale that is appropriate for this study.

3.1. Qualitative Study

The first phase aimed to understand how people make meaning from their international experiences; therefore, a qualitative research design was adopted. Purposive sampling was employed, and the following three criteria were used for selecting participants: (1) should be faculty members working in mainland China; (2) should have experienced academic visits in other countries; (3) should be interested in this investigation and agree to share their experience. Table 1 shows the participants' information. In total, 22 faculty members working for over ten mainland China universities were investigated. A small number of the participants were returnees, i.e., they had studied abroad before going on to visit as a scholar in other countries, but in all cases the places of visited were different from that in which they had studied.

Data were collected by means of in-depth face-to-face and telephone interviews. Open-ended questionnaires were also employed, as two participants preferred to respond in writing. The main interview questions included the following: What were the reasons for you joining the visiting scholar programme? Describe your visit experience and the ways in which this experience impacted and changed your thinking and performing.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. Each digitally-recorded interview was initially transcribed verbatim. In order to ensure the credibility of the qualitative data analysis [26], we sent a copy of each interview transcript to each participant for review prior to the analysis; that is, each individual had the opportunity to edit what they had said and add information, if necessary. We then read and repeatedly re-read all the transcripts to achieve familiarity [27]. To ensure the rigour of the data analysis, we independently coded the transcripts and compared the codes. When disparities occurred, we negotiated with each other to reach a consensus. All the potentially relevant data were sorted and collated into themes. This was followed by a refinement process, in which we reviewed "the coded data extracts for each theme to consider whether they appear to form a coherent pattern" [28] (p. 9). Ultimately, we distilled each theme's essence and identified the different

aspects pertaining to each captured theme so as to allow readers to understand the themes that are represented in our research. Table 2 details the codes, sub-themes, themes and examples to demonstrate and exemplify the analytical process.

Table 1. Interviewee Background Information.

Code	Gender	Length of Visit	Age *	Ranking	Country
VS01	Male	One year	37	Associate Professor	USA
VS02	Male	One year	32	Associate Professor	USA
VS03	Male	One year	42	Professor	UK
VS04	Female	Half a year	44	Associate Professor	UK
VS05	Male	One year	33	Lecturer	USA
VS06	Male	One year	35	Associate Professor	Australia
VS07	Male	One year	34	Lecturer	USA
VS08	Male	Half a year	39	Associate Professor	UK
VS09	Male	One year	38	Lecturer	USA
VS10	Male	One year	32	Associate Professor	Canada
VS11	Female	One year	32	Lecturer	UK
VS12	Male	One year	37	Associate Professor	Australia
VS13	Male	Half a year	52	Professor	UK
VS14	Female	One year	31	Associate Professor	Canada
VS15	Female	One year	34	Lecturer	USA
VS16	Male	One year	35	Lecturer	UK
VS17	Female	One year	30	Associate Professor	USA
VS18	Female	One year	34	Lecturer	UK
VS19	Male	One year	42	Professor	UK
VS20	Female	One year	37	Associate Professor	UK
VS21	Female	One year	41	Professor	UK
VS22	Female	Half a year	36	Associate Professor	Canada

* *Note*. Age refers to how old the participants were when the academic visit began.

3.2. Quantitative Study

Based on the thematic analysis results, we designed a questionnaire to test the prevalence of each theme. The scale was reviewed by the second author, who is an expert in questionnaire development. It was then tested in a pilot study of 20 faculty members with international visiting experience, who were encouraged to comment on the draft. The comments and suggestions resulted in the final scale, which consisted of three themes indicative of TL, namely changes in (a) perspective and understanding (cognitive domain, three items, Cronbach's α = 0.911); (b) motivational and emotional aspects (affective domain, four items, Cronbach's α = 0.823) and (c) research and teaching or professional practice (behavioural domain, five items, Cronbach's α = 0.921). The value of KMO was 0.907 and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity value was significant. Each theme contained several sub-themes, all of which were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree'. We then began to search for appropriate participants online by browsing the webpages of scholars in universities, followed by sending invitation emails containing the questionnaire website link.

In total, 314 scholars from the Humanities, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences participated in the survey. Of the sample, 175 (56%) were male and 139 (44%) female. Almost all (291) respondents reported the countries they had visited, and the top five nations were the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia and Germany. The numbers and percentages are shown in Table 3.

Table 2. The analytical process.

Codes	Sub-Themes	Themes	Examples
• Established assumptions • Prior knowledge • Ideological differences • Western countries • Language differences • Australian culture	(1). Changing previous assumptions	Cognitive dimension	" . . . corrected my previous impression that Australia was just following the UK and the US."
• Chinese cultural activities • Disseminating Chinese culture • Promoting communication • Deepened understanding	(2). Deepening the understanding of cross-cultural communication		"I also deepened my understanding of cross-cultural communication . . . "
• Lack of passion • Being passive • Following orders • External assessment	(3). Generating new understanding		"I found that we lack passion in doing things."
• Introducing positivity • Biased report • Correcting locals' bias	(4). Changing others' assumptions and beliefs		" . . . my presentation of the positive aspects changed their existing viewpoint."
• Invigoration in research • American university research environment • Learning from American colleagues • Habit and enthusiasm • New aspirations	(1). Changes in motivation	Affective dimension	"I want to work hard and make some contributions."
• Making presentations abroad • Feeling good • Changed thought • Comparing Chinese and foreign scholars	(2). Increasing confidence		"Academically I have become much more confident now."
• Seeing both sides of Canadian HE • Evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of Chinese and Canadian HE • Pre-visit preparations • Seeing the similarities • A neutral attitude	(3). Changing attitudes		"I will not blindly . . . say [that] all of them are better than us and we are not doing well." " . . . I will not depreciate my own country and expect too much of other countries."
• A son learning in an American school • Buying and hanging the national flag • Patriotism evoked	(4). Emotional changes		" . . . this little event stimulated my patriotism."

Table 2. *Cont.*

Codes	Sub-themes	Themes	Examples
• Multiple methods used by Australian researchers • Being impressed • Borrowing new methods • Seeing the research gap • Intention to change research orientation • Different ways of researching moral education • Seeing different research paradigms • Appreciation of the British way • Changing research practice • A joint research programme on TPACK • Different responsibilities in research	(1). Changed research practice	Behavioural dimension	" … I tried to borrow these novel methods and improve the quality of my research." " … I intend to change my research orientation." " … I learned to focus more on empirical research and place greater attention on the norms and details of research." "I once investigated the literacy of TPACK of Chinese teachers with my co-advisor in the USA."
• Knowing how to teach overseas students • Deepened understanding of teaching international students • New intention to focus on teaching overseas students • Cooperative teaching programmes signed with the visiting country • Academic exchange • A joint online course	(2). Changed teaching practice		"Now I intend to focus on education for foreign students." "We're jointly running an online course, which will be available next week."

Table 3. Destination Countries.

Country	US	UK	Canada	Australia	Germany	Singapore	Japan	Korea	Other
Number	144	53	22	19	12	8	7	5	21
Percentage	49	18	8	7	4	3	2	2	7

The scholars' lengths of stay are shown in Table 4. It can be seen that most academics spent at least one year in the country they were visiting.

Table 4. Duration of stay abroad.

Duration	3 Months or Less	3–6 Months	6–12 Months	12–24 Months
Numbers	14	40	193	67
Percentages	4	13	62	21

Table 5 shows that most respondents were aged between 31 and 45 when they went abroad.

We used SPSS 21 to calculate the frequencies, percentages, means (M) and standard deviations (SD) where appropriate. The results for each item are listed in Table 6.

Table 5. Age groups.

Age Groups	25−	26–30	31–35	36–40	41–45	46–50	51+
Number	7	20	89	104	65	17	12
Percentage	2	6	28	33	21	6	4

Table 6. Quantitative results of the survey.

		Items	Strongly Disagree *n* (%)	Disagree *n* (%)	Neutral *n* (%)	Agree *n* (%)	Strongly Agree *n* (%)	M	SD
Cognitive Domain	1.	I have changed my previous assumptions of the country of visit.	13 (4.14%)	19 (6.05%)	88 (28.03%)	99 (31.53%)	95 (30.25%)	3.78	1.07
	2.	I have developed new insights into Chinese affairs.	6 (1.91%)	4 (1.27%)	15 (4.78%)	114 (36.31%)	175 (55.73%)	4.43	0.8
	3.	I have changed foreigners' existing perception of China.	15 (4.78%)	27 (8.6%)	75 (23.89%)	113 (35.99%)	84 (26.75%)	3.71	1.1
Affective Domain	4.	I have become more motivated to research.	2 (0.64%)	12 (3.82%)	53 (16.88%)	116 (36.94%)	131 (41.72%)	4.15	0.88
	5.	I have become more confident academically.	3 (0.96%)	9 (2.87%)	61 (19.43%)	118 (37.58%)	123 (39.17%)	4.11	0.88
	6.	I have become objective and neutral when making comparisons between the host and home countries.	6 (1.91%)	4 (1.27%)	25 (7.96%)	107 (34.08%)	172 (54.78%)	4.39	0.84
	7.	I have become more patriotic.	8 (2.55%)	10 (3.18%)	34 (10.83%)	90 (28.66%)	172 (54.78%)	4.3	0.96
Behavioural Domain	8.	I use advanced technology from abroad in my research.	6 (1.91%)	3 (0.96%)	37 (11.78%)	118 (37.58%)	150 (47.77%)	4.28	0.85
	9.	I have changed my research area.	5 (1.59%)	15 (4.78%)	58 (18.47%)	114 (36.31%)	122 (38.85%)	4.06	0.95
	10.	I am now able to teach in English for both Chinese and international students at my institution.	13 (4.14%)	32 (10.19%)	108 (34.39%)	94 (29.94%)	67 (21.34%)	3.54	1.06
	11.	I have helped to establish new joint programmes.	20 (6.37%)	50 (15.92%)	113 (35.99%)	69 (21.97%)	62 (19.75%)	3.33	1.15
	12.	I have co-authored articles or academic monographs with international colleagues.	12 (3.82%)	33 (10.51%)	78 (24.84%)	101 (32.17%)	90 (28.66%)	3.71	1.11

4. Findings

Singleton's [24] 3H model was used as a framework for analysing and describing the TL experience. More specifically, three main themes were identified as prerequisites to TL for the Chinese visiting academics as a result of their overseas experiences: (a) changes in perspective and understanding (cognitive domain); (b) changes in motivational and emotional aspects (affective domain) and, (c) changes in research and teaching or professional practice (behavioural domain). These shifts correspond well with the 3H model. To make the presentation clearer and more structured, the findings of both qualitative and quantitative phases are integrated and reported below.

4.1. Changes in the Cognitive Domain

Some scholars reported having changed their previously-held or established assumptions; that is, prior to experiencing the destination country in person, the visiting scholars had held certain assumptions that subsequently changed because of their new experiences and perceptions. Obtaining a PhD degree in a European country, VS06, for example, had assumed his visiting country, Australia, would be similar, or even identical to the UK or America in terms of language, tradition and scientific research culture. This was because all three states share an Anglo-Saxon culture and are ideologically categorised as western countries by the Chinese. Their differences might be very subtle, to say the least. However, during his stay in Australia, VS06 truly sensed the differences in various aspects, which fundamentally changed his cognition as exemplified by the statement below:

> *Before the visit, I thought Australia would be very similar to the UK, since it used to be a British colony and (is) now a British Commonwealth country. However, Australia has its own characteristics in terms of culture, conventions and language. . . . For example, the British would say 'excuse me', but the Australians say 'sorry' and they seldom use 'excuse me'. If you thank an American, s/he would reply 'you're welcome'. But the Australians say 'no worries'. Incredible, right? Australian English is very special. . . . As for research, I think Australia is trying to build its own unique research culture, which corrected my previous impression that Australia was just following the UK and the USA.*

Our survey data showed that 194 participants (61.78%) agreed or strongly agreed that they had changed their established assumptions regarding their countries of visit while 88 respondents (28.03%) were neutral about this.

The abovementioned changes led to a deepened understanding of certain aspects. For instance, VS15 reported that the experience helped her learn more about intercultural communication and become more interested in it:

> *I successfully organised a series of Chinese cultural activities, such as calligraphy workshops, cooking workshops, music workshops, and spring festival gala evenings, and [I] received positive feedback. These activities played an important role in disseminating Chinese culture and promoting communication between Chinese and American students. I also deepened my understanding of cross-cultural communication and strengthened my research interest in Chinese and Asian cultures.*

Meanwhile, some scholars were able to develop insights into phenomena in their home country. As a philosopher, VS08 described his understanding of the lack of passion in China:

> *Upon returning home, I found that we lack passion in doing things. Not only individuals, but the institution and even the whole society, (all) lack passion. We do not know where passion comes from. You are assigned to work somewhere, and told what to do, and evaluated by performance assessment. Especially for our humanities and social sciences researchers, we lack passion. We just follow orders and do things for the purpose of various indicators of performance appraisal.*

These comments demonstrated a critical and reflective understanding. This subject seemed to be dissatisfied with individuals and institutions driven largely by external mandatory forces such as performance indicators and assessments. He was also depressed to see that many people did not realise that usually passion comes from within. In Chinese academia, social needs and national development are the top priority for academic research in HE. Numerous research projects take the form of hierarchical arrangements which often ignore researchers' interests and expertise. Autonomy and close involvement are devalued. Therefore, it is less likely that scholars will fully engage in authoritative research contracts with great commitment and enthusiasm. From a cultural identity perspective, VS08's reflection and critical comments strengthened his identity as a Chinese scholar, and he seemed to link himself as an individual with the nation as a whole. Recognising himself as Chinese, VS08 found fault with Chinese academia and even with the whole society, but with the ultimate goal of improving both.

The survey data indicated that 289 participants (92.04%) agreed that they developed new insights into Chinese affairs, a surprisingly high number. It seemed that immersion in a culturally different context (the host country) could stimulate reflections upon familiar surroundings (the home country) and thus facilitate new thoughts or ways of thinking.

The aforementioned cognitive shifts seemed to be inward; that is, scholars' understanding and awareness changed as a result of their experiences in other countries. However, some attempted to project these changes outward by trying to change others' beliefs, assumptions and understandings. This effort was seen when Chinese academics described their intentions to change foreigners' understandings of China through various activities, such as in the following statement from VS06:

> *In Australia, I introduced positive aspects of China to the locals. I hosted a lecture to present the education situation in China and my personal research. The Australian newspapers reported (on) China every day, but in a biased way. Therefore, my presentation of the positive aspects changed their (the locals) existing viewpoint.*

The quantitative data suggested that many participants (*n* = 197, 62.74%) confirmed that they had changed local people's existing perceptions of China, although 75 (23.89%) were uncertain about this. This tended to suggest that many academics would actively provide corrections when they felt that people in host countries misunderstood certain issues and phenomena regarding China.

4.2. Changes in the Affective Domain

The heart dimension encompasses motivational and emotional aspects [29]. A few participants were found to be more motivated towards work; in particular, they showed more enthusiasm for research. According to VS05, this was because of the competitive environment in foreign universities, where there was a strong appreciation for innovation and professional dedication. This environment impacted scholars in a positive, lasting way, helping them to form a habit of devoting themselves to work. This is evidenced in the following statement from VS05:

> *Upon my return, I became very much invigorated, totally different from how I used to be. I became much more motivated to do things. (Why?) This is because the research environment in American universities was perfect. The researchers around you are energetic and hardworking, and I learned a lot from them, so I wanted to do many things. I then brought this habit and enthusiasm back to my university in China. The impetus is still ongoing, and I can clearly feel it. I want to work hard and make some contributions. This is a remarkable change.*

A few scholars reported that they had become much more confident academically, as the case below demonstrates:

> *Academically, I have become much more confident now. I gave several academic presentations in the London knowledge lab and I felt good. I didn't think our Chinese scholars academic competency was inferior to that of the foreigners. Some of them (non-Chinese scholars) were just so-so, to be honest. Their thinking abilities are not necessarily much better than ours. It's just because of their academic norms and discourse system, and they have been set as international standards. (VS21)*

Such confidence in scholarship and academia could be attributed to the academic communication in the visited country. The visiting scholars gradually became more capable of exchanging thoughts and ideas skillfully in English. Furthermore, through this communication and immersion they became more familiar with western academia and so might have changed a previous belief that Chinese scholarship was inferior to that of the west—a change which could help them establish new confidence in their research.

The qualitative findings were also supported by the survey results which showed that 247 respondents (78.66%) were motivated to do well in research. Furthermore, 241 (76.75%) reported that their academic confidence had been boosted due to the international visiting experience.

Having worked in Chinese universities for years, the visiting scholars had gained extensive experience and knowledge of their society and institutions. While living and working in their host countries and universities, they also gained first-hand experience through observing, experiencing and rethinking. The co-existence of previous and new experiences facilitated comparison and contrast, which led to scholars' judgement on the strengths and weaknesses of both host and home countries. VS10 stated that:

Visiting enabled me to fully understand the advantages and disadvantages of foreign universities. I will not blindly say (that) all of them are better than us and we are not doing well. Spending such a long time in Canada, I was able to realise that, for example, our government was doing better (in terms of) financially supporting higher education research. At the same time, we need to learn from the Canadians (how) to make our institutions more flexible.

Such a case illustrated that a change in the cognitive domain could result in a change in the affective domain. That is, the first-hand and resulting subjective judgment led to scholars' more neutral attitudes. A misconception that everything in foreign countries was better than China was corrected and replaced by a more rational view. Thus, the blind worship of western or developed countries no longer existed.

The visiting academics, such as VS18, were also aware of the similarities—such as Chinese and British schools' similar coping strategies regarding external visits. Having observed this and other commonalities, VS18 became calmer, more peaceful and neutral, and she thought more rationally, given her diminished prejudice. In this sense, observed similarities could also lead to changes in attitudes, as VS18 described:

I organised a visit by a group of Chinese people to a British school during my stay in the UK. I found that the people in the school had already made good preparations before our visit, for example, selecting excellent students and preparing "official answers" to our questions. This was what we did in China. I then realised the similarities between the two countries. Now, I will not denigrate my own country and expect too much of other countries. With such a neutral attitude, I can think about some issues more rationally.

In the subsequent questionnaire survey, we found that a majority of scholars (*n* = 279, 88.86%) stated that, post-visit, they were able to hold a more objective attitude when comparing host with home countries. Having experienced two different contexts, they might evaluate and identify the strengths and weaknesses of each part, which helped to develop a more neutral attitude.

Some interviewees were also found to be more patriotic in terms of emotion. VS15 descried her experience in the USA:

I visited the USA together with my child. He was learning in a school which recruited many students from diverse countries and cultures. There were lots of national flags hung in the long corridor, but no Five-Starred Red flag. I said to my child we should buy a national flag next time and hang it there to let everybody know where we came from. You see, this little event stimulated my patriotism.

The above experience illustrated that VS15 experienced a reinforcement of her identity as Chinese and stimulated her love of her home country. She thus showed assertiveness in presenting and defending this, without hesitation or bashfulness, through real actions. This might be due to the strong identity contrast and comparison between 'us' (Chinese) and 'them' (foreigners or local people). This in turn evoked the scholar's awareness of who she (and her child) were and what she could and should do to show their identity.

Similarly, some scholars felt that they loved their home country much more while abroad. The quantitative statistics indicated that 262 (83.44%) participants agreed that they were much more patriotic.

4.3. Changes in the Behavioural Domain

The scholars were found to have changed their research and teaching or professional practice as a result of their academic visits overseas. First, foreign researchers' techniques

seemed to inspire Chinese scholars. VS06 mentioned encountering innovative educational research methods. His overseas experience enabled him to reflect on his own research practices and change his research approach. As evidenced in his statement below, he came to believe that novel techniques could improve research quality:

> *I learned a lot from the methods used by Australian researchers. For example, they would use camera, video and audio for details of classroom teaching, which I had never heard of. Then, the collected data were analysed from different perspectives. Such methods of data collection and analysis have greatly impressed me. Before the visit, I was unaware of new research methods and (I) just used very traditional research techniques. But now, in my research, I try to borrow these novel methods and improve the quality of my research.*

This finding was further strengthened by the survey data, which revealed that 268 respondents (85.35%) agreed or strongly agreed that they used more advanced technology from abroad in their research.

A few Chinese scholars experienced a more profound change with respect to research. Even though VS04 had returned from a German university as a PhD graduate many years ago, her visiting experience in the UK was also fruitful and productive. Having been inspired by her supervisor, VS04 explained that she changed her research field.

> *VS04: I saw and began to understand how they (British researchers) conduct research. I realized ... the gap between Chinese and British research. In the UK, my co-advisor's insights greatly influenced me. Now, I intend to change my research orientation.*

> *Interviewer: What change? What do you mean?*

> *VS04: I want to study moral education in a different way. You and I both know that moral education is more like moral indoctrination in our country (China), leaving very limited space for research. But my supervisor made me realize that we can study moral education through analytic philosophy and elaboration, a way that is more scientific. He (the supervisor) would try to convince you, persuade you, instead of forcing you to do something. Would you be disgusted with it? No, you wouldn't.*

In contrast to the aforementioned changes that simply concerned learning and the adoption of new techniques, VS04's change occurred with respect to her research orientation, which seems to have been more penetrating and far-reaching. This change is mentioned because the participant clearly perceived the different ways in which British and Chinese scholars studied the same issue (moral education). More importantly, VS04 highly appreciated the British approach, which was definitely an impetus to follow and change. A change relating to research field or orientation could be fundamental and long-lasting, even throughout her remaining academic life.

Similarly, after VS19 observed a research paradigm discrepancy between the Chinese and the British, he decided to change his own research practices. The discrepancy made him reflect on Chinese habitual and taken-for-granted educational research practices, which prefer grand and broad topics and often employ a literature-to-literature research approach. Following this paradigm, Chinese scholars came up with 'konghua' or 'empty talk', i.e., meaningless words that have very little impact on reality. Immersing himself in a different research culture, VS19 gradually understood and appreciated the British approach, which valued more specific problematisations and utilised diverse empirical approaches. VS19 described his intention to modify his own research practice:

> *I attended a number of lectures and seminars during the visit. When comparing, I found many differences in ways of doing research between China and the UK. I think most Chinese researchers, including me, like broad topics most, and we frequently do many literature-to-literature works. However, the British prefer more specific questions, and they will use carefully selected methods to address their problems. There is little empty talk. I think this is good. Upon (my) return, I learned to focus more on empirical research and place greater attention on the norms and details of research.*

Quantitatively, 236 academics (75.16%) reported that their research had been affected and intended to change their area of study. This suggests that international academic experience could have an enormous impact on research work.

A few participants reported that they were more capable of teaching in English. VS08, for instance, was a typical case. Having returned from Sweden as a doctoral degree holder, he later visited the UK to experience higher education in another country. This latest immersion deepened his understanding of instruction and strengthened his teaching abilities. As a result, he found himself more capable of giving sessions to overseas students who were studying in his university in China. Obviously, this was a result of his language usage and intercultural communication in the UK.

> *I stayed in Sweden for many years for my PhD degree. To some extent, I more or less knew and understood how to teach overseas students because I used to be an international student as well. This new experience of visiting the UK deepened my impression of teaching international students as I observed from a scholar's perspective. So, upon my return, I found I could teach foreign students in my university skillfully. Now I intend to focus on education for foreign students. So I think my overseas experience gave me another 'rice bowl' to earn my living.*

The quantitative data illustrated that only half of the respondents (*n* = 161, 51.28%) believed that they were capable of using English as the medium of instruction; 45 (14.33%) reported that they were not able to do this and a large number selected 'neutral' (*n* = 108, 34.39%).

International joint programmes have been facilitated and developed as a result of the engagement and the active role visiting scholars played in the process. For instance, VS20 talked about a teaching programme between the visiting university and the institution she was working for:

> *It's about international cooperation projects. I signed a few small cooperative programmes with the visiting university in the UK. After I returned, my British friends came to my university for academic exchange. I've been working closely with Diana. We're jointly running an online course, which will be available next week.*

During their stays in their host countries, active Chinese scholars had plenty of face-to-face communication opportunities with foreign researchers, allowing an in-depth understanding of the resources and needs of both parties and thus promoting potential cooperation. The cross-cultural teaching and learning programmes were positive results of these academic visits, demonstrating a change from thinking to action. Such international projects are beneficial for stakeholders in HE, in particular the students. In this sense, an individual academic visit may lead to collective profits.

Another collaborative action was synergetic research and publication. Both the Chinese visiting scholars and their newly-made foreign friends participated in the whole process. Both parties were involved in different research stages, either jointly or separately, such as designing, data collecting and analysing, drafting, revising and submitting. VS01 detailed a joint research project with an American faculty:

> *I once investigated the literacy of TPACK of Chinese teachers with my co-advisor in the USA. First we discussed the questionnaire design together, and then I was in charge of approaching the survey subjects, handing out and collecting the questionnaires. My co-advisor conducted the follow-up in-depth analysis. Now the research article has been completed and we're looking for suitable journals.*

However, the survey data did not fully support the qualitative finding. Less than half of the respondents (*n* = 131, 41.72%) had helped to establish joint programmes upon return. Approximately 70 (22.29%) never did so and 113 (35.99%) teachers selected 'neutral'. Joint publication seemed to be slightly better. According to the statistics, 191 scholars (60.83%) had published collaboratively with international colleagues.

Notably, the last three changes (being able to teach in English, playing an active role in establishing new joint programmes and co-authoring articles or academic monographs

with international colleagues) seem to be less prominent compared to other TL indicators as the mean numbers of these items are lower. Such statistical findings indicate that, although conceptual, mental, emotional and attitudinal changes are prevalent, it is not always easy to take action and manifest the behavioural gains. To make the visiting scholar programmes more meaningful and sustainable, actions must be taken. Appraisals of the transnational academic visits need to pay more attention to actions, rather than thinking or intentions that have not been turned into real actions.

5. Discussion

Understanding the nature of changes requires discussion of the findings in relation to TLT. TLT is used to explain and depict how people's experiences change their frames of reference, or the ways in which they make sense of the world. The TL process is often troublesome, in that individuals tend to deny those ideas, perspectives, experiences, thoughts and behaviours that do not align with their existing frames of reference. According to TLT, experiencing a 'disorienting dilemma' is a critical premise for modifying frames of reference. In fact, international stays may possibly lead to just such disorienting dilemmas as new cultural experiences alter one's way of thinking [30] and challenge formerly held assumptions. People's first-hand knowledge of another culture is deemed to be essential for perspective transformation, which then gives rise to changes in frames of reference [31]. By immersing oneself in an environment that is culturally different from one's own, one may experience something unexpected, or even conflicting, which then triggers an examination of long-standing values, notions and beliefs; this self- examination, in turn, acts as an impetus for the TL experience [32]. In this sense, the novelty that visiting scholars encounter in a new country or culture is essentially a catalyst for TL [19,23].

Most of the participants were over 30 at the time of their stay, as Table 1 shows. Prior to their visits, most scholars had spent at least three decades in their home country (China), during which time their ideas, perspectives and habits were formed and reinforced. However, living in and experiencing a new cultural environment, the Chinese visiting scholars naturally encountered many unfamiliar and unexpected ideas, events and behaviours. They very frequently found it difficult to integrate the new experiences into their existing meaning perspectives, and thus they experienced significant disorienting dilemmas while abroad. To address this problem, individuals may either deny the new experience or change their perspectives to accommodate it. According to our data, most participants actually practice TL, which encourages trying new things that originate from fresh experiences. This implies that many scholars view the dilemma as a catalyst for learning and change, or, in other words, an opportunity for TL. This confirms the assertion of Nada et al. [23] that TL often occurs through the engagement of international experience. Compared to young(er) students [23] then, these groups of Chinese visiting scholars, most of whom are over 30, may experience a more profound shift in meaning perspectives. As Nada et al. [23] have argued, this is due to the questioning of older individuals' long-standing, taken-for-granted meaning perspectives.

Both rational discourse and critical reflection are indispensable for TL [33]. Rational discourse is essentially a form of dialogue aiming at searching for common understanding and evaluation of the justification of an interpretation or belief [34]. The participants' transcripts show that they looked for opportunities to communicate with other Chinese visiting scholars or peers. VS09, for example, describes the experience: "I often chat with other Chinese visiting scholars, because I like the comfortable conversation atmosphere. We share our experiences, discuss respective views and we became good friends. Such informational discussion plays a role in changing my presuppositions and beliefs." First, we can see that participants' perception of a good atmosphere is a key precondition. As Mezirow [35] contends, positive feelings such as trust, solidarity and empathy are crucial premises for participating in rational discourse. Second, the discourse is not about who wins or loses in argument. Rather, it mainly encompasses reaching an agreement, being open to differences, testing other viewpoints, searching for the common between mutually

contradictory things and seeking synthesis and reconfiguration [35]. Through this process, knowledge may be constructed and long-standing beliefs changed.

In TL, adults' assumptions or presuppositions comprise the object of critical reflection. Mezirow [14] identified three levels of reflection: content, process and premise reflection. As Kreber [36] has claimed, content reflection deals with questions like 'What do I know?' Process reflection is related to procedures and methods. Premise reflection seems to be more profound and far-reaching since it queries the assumptions underpinning people's knowledge. Only premise reflection has the potential to lead to perspective transformation and thus bring about TL. Therefore, premise reflection is often regarded as a more advanced reflective thinking pattern [37]. Changes in academics' professional practice illustrate this point. Given that Chinese visiting scholars are in an unfamiliar context, they question the ways in which local faculty members think, feel and behave in terms of research and teaching. They constantly make comparisons between their newly-gained and pre-existing experiences, which may lead to critical self-reflection and the re-examination of their long-held, socially- and culturally-constructed assumptions, beliefs and values with respect to research and teaching. During this process, they may recognise the justification for and superiority of Western-style research and teaching and thus change their existing unconsciously-assimilated understanding and behaviours which were formed in the Chinese higher education context. Such a shift can be quite difficult because beliefs and assumptions are often deeply embedded. Consequently, the scholars' behaviours, or more specifically, their professional practices, have been re-directed. For example, VS19 critically examined the deficiency in his previous research paradigm which relied excessively on the macro-level literature-to-literature research style. Having gained an understanding of the merits of empirical research, he decided to shift his focus and ultimately change his approach.

All the findings correspond well with Hoggan's [38] typology of transformative learning outcomes. Transformative learning involves changes in assumptions and attitudes, which can be represented by the scholars' changed assumptions regarding their country of visit, and more objective and neutral attitudes while comparing host and home countries. The development of new insights demonstrates new awareness or understandings. A few participants were found to be more motivated in their research, which could indicate a transformative outcome of changing in "the perceived meaning and purpose of a person's life" [38] (p.72). Some scholars' enhanced confidence in academic work may be the result of transformative change affecting their sense of self and increasing their self-knowledge, leading to clearer perceptions of personal strengths and limitations. Affectively experiencing the world is also deemed to be a transformative learning outcome [39]. In this study, the changed living environment affected the visiting academics' feelings and emotions, in particular making them more patriotic. The changes in the behavioural domain are consistent with Hoggan's [38] professional practices and skills categories. Hoggan [38] contends that transformative outcomes are manifested by new professional practices such as those which were found in the visiting scholars' research (using technology from abroad, change in research area, international publication with foreign colleagues), teaching (using English as a medium of instruction) and service (building new international programmes) in the present study.

Some of the findings in this study are consistent with those of other studies, such as changing the stereotypes and previous perceptions of colleagues in the host country [4], the pedagogical change of being capable of teaching in English [40], changing research area or focus and adopting new methodology and technology [4], conducting joint research projects [13], renewed enthusiasm for research and commitment to high-quality research [4], collaborating with foreign colleagues on international publications [11] and more academic self-confidence [4,9]. Nevertheless a few unique findings in this research are also interesting. Previous research tends to show that Chinese scholars generate insights into their host cultures and societies while abroad [4]; in contrast, the participants in this study report having developed new understandings of and perspectives on the affairs of their home

country, China. This suggests that people in an unfamiliar environment could develop new ideas on contexts and phenomena that they are familiar with. Having changed local people's (in the host country) existing perceptions of China is another finding that has seldom been reported previously. It demonstrates that Chinese visitors not only learn from their environment, but they also attempt to make changes. Liu and Jiang [4] find that the scholars would, whether intentionally or unintentionally, make comparisons between host and home countries, leading to the expansion of their horizons. Our qualitative and quantitative results add an affective dimension (objective and neutral attitudes) to such factual comparisons and horizon expansions. Finally, existing studies scarcely mention the patriotism of the visiting researchers, yet both our datasets clearly demonstrate the patriotism of Chinese scholars abroad. They are concerned about the reputation of their nation and show love of their home country.

The integration of both qualitative and quantitative data has broadened the empirical foundation of this study and increased its depth. It is not difficult to see that there are both agreements and disagreements between the two datasets. In general, the degree of convergence in the cognitive and affective domains is high. As reported in the interviews, many respondents reported in the survey that they had changed their previous assumptions regarding their visited countries, developed new insights into their home country, changed local people's existing perceptions, were more motivated to do well in research, had boosted their academic confidence and become much more patriotic. There are, however, more discrepancies in the behavioural domain. For instance, even though the interviewees reported that they could use English as the medium of instruction upon returning to China, only half of the respondents believe that they are able to do this. This might suggest that, although the interviewees have gained linguistic abilities, on a larger scale, being able to teach in English is not so prevalent among returned visiting scholars. Furthermore, less than half of the respondents have played a role in establishing joint programmes, which does not support the qualitative finding. In this sense, it cannot be taken for granted that returned scholars will always help to create new international programmes. Note that such discrepancies do not question the quality or design of a mixed methods study [41]; rather, it provides a more complete way to understand the research findings and proves the value of the mixed methods design. Unlike some pure qualitative studies [2,8,9,11] of visiting scholars, a more holistic picture of the outcomes of international experience is gained. The contradictions between qualitative and quantitative datasets may be viewed as cues for follow-up studies.

There seems to be an issue regarding imbalance, more specifically the unidirectional learning, which could hardly be viewed as academic exchange. People in the visiting country seldom learn from the Chinese visitors, or, at least, there is very little evidence to this effect. Even though VS06 mentioned that he had corrected some misconceptions held by people in his host country, examples like this are few and far between, and such a case seems to be more social than academic. One possible reason may be the long-standing reverence for the west, particularly in social sciences in China, where most theories and research approaches have been borrowed from western countries. Another cause relates to the aim of visiting scholar programmes—to promote the sustainable professional growth and improvement of Chinese faculty members [5]. In the Chinese context, visiting scholar programmes refer to "Guo Wai Fang Xue" or "Chu Guo Jin Xiu". Both "Fang Xue" and "Jin Xiu" imply learning from the host countries while abroad. Such programmes, in this sense, are basically continuing education that focus on learning, improving and professional development. Therefore, a majority of scholars place an emphasis on learning and input rather than output.

6. Conclusions and Implications

Based on Mezirow's TLT, the present study identified three significant changes that are indicative of TL. They revolve around the cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects of TL. Drawing on the key concepts within TLT, we can better understand visiting scholars'

international experiences as TL experiences. The existing research seems to place much emphasis on the acculturation and sociocultural perspective while analysing the cross-border movement of people [42]. In contrast, in this study we view the visiting scholars' overseas experiences as sources of learning in light of Mezirow's TLT. The study contributes to TLT by elaborating on how such experiences impact the TL of Chinese visiting academics.

This empirical study has demonstrated that visiting faculty programmes are a sustainable measure of the professional development of Chinese university faculty members due to the significant changes they bring about. Given these positive outcomes, it is reasonable to call for the sustainability of such programmes for Chinese faculty. We concur with Liu and Jiang [4] that scholars who are interested in international academic visits should be able to make more than one. Faculty members, universities and government should do their part to facilitate the sustainability of visiting scholar programmes. On the part of individual teachers, a high level of academic commitment and self-management while abroad is the key to a fruitful visit. Universities are expected to establish appropriate management and assessment mechanisms to better regulate and monitor the process and effects of international visits, so that the sustainability of such cross-border programmes can be realised. Moreover, the dissemination of positive outcomes of overseas experiences upon their return, which has often been neglected, should also be encouraged. The value of such dissemination lies in promoting the sustainable impact of international experience. Faculty members with rich overseas experience should play a more active and constructive role in the sustainable development of internationalisation of Chinese HEIs upon their return, such as engaging in international student education, transnational research cooperation, and faculty and student exchange: through such activities, the sustainable influence of international experience can be witnessed. In respect of the state-level management, due to the high costs of such programmes, pertinent government departments such as the CSC should also improve their administration.

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