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Academic Participation and Identity of Chinese Overseas Visiting Scholars Based on the Theory of Community of Practice

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Research Domain: International Perspectives and context (IPC)

Abstract:

The state funded visiting scholar program has had far-reaching effects for China. However, Chinese scholars still face many practical difficulties while abroad. Based on Wenger's(1999) theory of Community of Practice(CoP) and Legitimate Peripheral Participation(LPP), this exploratory qualitative research studies academic participation and identity transformation of Chinese visiting scholars sponsored by Chinese Scholarship Committee (CSC) program and visited overseas world-class universities.

Chinese visiting scholars face various kind of Community of Practicedestination institutions during their visits as an academic community of practice built by scholars. Chinese visiting scholars may undergo transformation of identities and different trajectories during the process from peripheral to full participation.

On the basis of semi-structured interviews with 21 Chinese overseas visiting scholars, Findings of this research show that visiting scholars can broaden their academic horizons and establish academic contacts with foreign scholars. But problems like restrictive policies of governments, incapable language skills, unsuitable identities and motivations can hinder visiting scholars' academic participation.

Paper: Introduction

Nowadays, more and more Chinese university professors have been sent to other countries for academic visiting. The Chinese Scholarship Committee(CSC) was established in 1996 in order to support Chinese visiting scholars' professional development and build world-class universities.

The visiting scholar program has brought significant social economic benefits to China and has had far-reaching effects. However, lacking systematic supervision, information feedback and evaluation, the problems encountered by visiting scholars and the long-term impact of academic visiting on

academic development is quite scarce(Xue, Chao, & Kuntz, 2014). Visiting scholars still face many practical difficulties in academic participation while abroad(赵昱通, 彭安臣, & 刘 , 2018).

Purpose

In view of the many problems faced by Chinese overseas visiting scholars, this explanatory qualitative research hopes to investigate the perception of identity and experiences of Chinese visiting scholars based on the theory of Community of Practice. Exploring how Chinese visiting scholars perceive their academic participation and identity during the visit, which in turn affects their academic visit. Analyzing the data of interview, this research asks three research questions:

1. How do visiting scholars participate in overseas academic activities?
2. How do visiting scholars construct or transform identity in the process of academic participation?
3. What factors influence academic participation and identity construction of visiting scholars?

Methodology

This qualitative study selects 21 Chinese visiting scholars from all levels of Chinese universities (including those of the double first-class program universities) who are sponsored by the CSC program. Participants of this study are selected through purposive sampling and snowball sampling and contact with e-mail. Most of the participants were in their destination world-class universities (including ARWU top 10 universities) from Europe to North America while being interviewed, thus they were interviewed online.

The analysis of interview data adopts a qualitative approach, coding the words transcribed from interview records in an inductive way. The code system of this research contains three levels, including initial coding, focused coding and axial coding. Themes that emerged from the data were interpreted based on the concept of Community of Practice and previous researches of visiting scholars(杨春红, 2017).

Techniques were used to enhance the trustworthiness of this study and ethics issues are also carefully valued. Appropriate ethical research standards were followed including maintaining confidentiality. And the information of interviewees are supplemented by online CVs and visiting scholar policies.

Table 1. The Code System Example

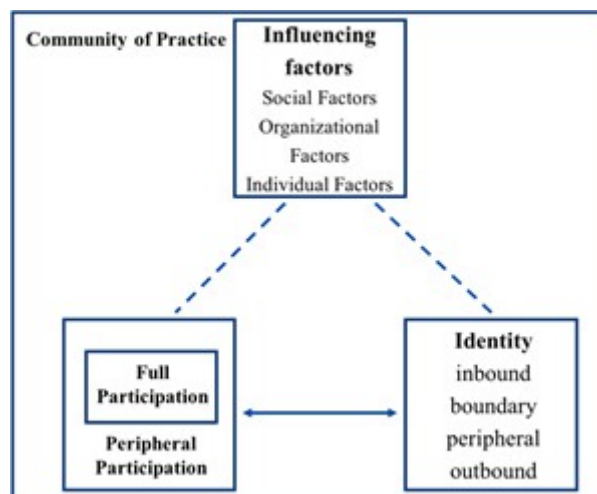
	A
B3. Academic interactions between visiting scholars and tutors	

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Wenger's theory of Community of Practice (CoP) and Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) as the theoretical basis. According to Wenger (1999), a community contains joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire. The community of practice characterizes learning as legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice (Wenger & McDuffie, 2004), where newcomers like visiting scholars move from participation that is at first peripheral toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community. This study intends to treat visiting scholars' destination institutions during their overseas visits as an academic community of practice built by scholars, as academia consists of scholars sharing similar competency and common culture (Guo, Kang, & Shi, 2018). Chinese visiting scholars are regarded as gaining "legality" in accessing overseas academic practice communities when visiting overseas institutions.

As the experience of participation increases so the newcomer's identity settles into one or other trajectory (Wenger, 1999), including inbound trajectories, peripheral trajectories, boundary trajectories and outbound trajectories.

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework



Findings and Discussions

According to the interviews and data analysis, this study found that Chinese visiting scholars broadened their academic horizons during their visits abroad, mastered new research and teaching methods, to some extent met their motivations.

However, problems of language, institutional academic atmosphere, facilities, unsuitable daily schedule, and fewer opportunities for communication with foreign scholars have made it difficult for Chinese visiting scholars to truly engage in academic participation. Recent restrictive policies of some countries also seriously hindered academic participation of Chinese visiting scholars.

In the process from peripheral participation to full participation, the visiting scholars perceive the change of their own identity as learners and the identity as researchers. While other visiting scholars who find it hard to communicate with foreign peers and participate in their research, return to connect with domestic scholars or supervisors, transforming to the outbound trajectories. Beside CoPs formed by school faculties, some visiting scholars successfully entered the CoPs of graduate students or those of different visiting scholars and established academic contacts with some scholars, who regarded themselves as a bridge of international academic cooperation.

This study may also provide implications for CSC policy makers, visiting scholars, and foreign governments. Although most of the visiting scholars thank the CSC for its funding, it will be better for CSC to offer a more flexible choice of visiting duration. For visiting scholars, different identities will affect the effectiveness of their academic participation. While some foreign governments also need to reduce restrictive policies in order to promote international talent mobility.

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