Developing the Leadership of Chinese Higher Education Institution Leaders: Transformative Learning in the Third Space Through Overseas Leadership Development Programmes

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Abstract   This chapter explores the leadership development of Chinese HEI leaders through participation in overseas leadership development programmes. Transformative learning theory and the conceptual term 'the third space' are employed to analyse three HEI leaders' perceptions of their leadership, both before, during, and after attending overseas leadership development programmes. After travelling to Canada, the U.K. and the U.S., respectively, the Chinese HEI leaders shared their learning experiences from the programmes and connected their reflections with possible leadership practices in their own HEIs within the Chinese higher education system. Qualitative data were collected and content analysis was used across the three cases. The findings show that the overseas leadership development programmes transformed their understanding of leadership from being a leader to becoming a service-provider, from being a practitioner to a reflective-thinker and from being a learner to a communicative-creator. By acknowledging the dynamic interactions between hybrid cultural forces, the overseas leadership development programmes create a third space in which Chinese HEI leaders can transform their perceptions and practices relating to their routine work. The findings confirm the value of overseas leadership development programmes and have practical implications for other countries wishing to develop their HEI leaders' leadership through intercultural exchange within formal programmes.

Keywords Leadership · Transformative learning · Third space · Overseas leadership development programmes · Chinese HEI leaders

1   Introduction

Globalisation and the evolution of the knowledge-based economy have caused fundamental changes in the functions of higher education (HE) in China. Over the past two decades, China's HE has gone through dramatic growth and multiple rounds of reform, aimed at expanding Chinese HE and developing world-class HEIs. Learning

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from the developed countries and improving the perspectives of HEI leaders is of critical importance. With the internationalisation of HE, intercultural educational exchange has become an important vehicle for facilitating a global exchange of teaching, research and service in universities (Knight, 2004). This internationalisation requires HEIs to prepare their teachers, students and institutions to operate in an increasingly dynamic, complex and competitive environment (Sanderson, 2011). In doing so, an international challenge is to develop the leadership abilities of HEI leaders to equip them to lead in today's globalised HE (Bryman, 2007; Juntrasook, 2014; Wang, 2014).

Officially initiated by the MoE, the overseas leadership development programmes aim to develop HE and the leadership abilities of HEI leaders. Their leadership may be defined as the process of administrating and coordinating HE affairs, including teaching, research, student development, social services, and logistics (Yang, 2019). In considering the impact of these programmes, certain questions need to be asked: In the context of policy, what did the Chinese HEI leaders experience during the overseas leadership development programmes? In what ways did their leadership develop after their overseas leadership development experiences? These two questions are addressed in this chapter through a cross-case qualitative analysis involving three participants.

A review of relevant theoretical literature is first introduced to undergird the chapter. In this chapter, the concept of 'HEI leaders' leadership' and the theoretical perspectives of 'transformative learning' and 'the third space' are brought together and integrated. By applying a qualitative methodology, three HEI leaders' interviews are probed using the thematic analysis method. The findings are around a focal theme involving Chinese HEI leaders' transformational leadership. Finally, the impact of the overseas leadership development programmes from the participants' perspectives is distilled to provide insights into the development of the Chinese HEI leaders' leadership.

Based on a case study of the overseas leadership development programmes, this chapter implies that intercultural exchange creates a 'third space' for HEI leaders in which to reflect on and practice their leadership. It is suggested that overseas leadership development produces embodied experiences of leadership through transformative learning in the third space and creates possibilities for making a difference in their customary work. Thus, the conclusions of this chapter may contribute to international reflection on leadership and to the HE systems of other countries.

2 Literature Review

2.1 HEI Leaders' Leadership

Leadership is defined as a process of influence in which an individual exerts intentional influence over others to structure activities and relationships within a group or

organisation (Yukl, 2002). In the context of education, Bush and Glover (2003) argue that leadership can be understood as a process of influence based on clear values and beliefs that lead to a vision for an educational institution. The vision is articulated by leaders who seek to win the commitment of staff and stakeholders to a dream of a better future for education, its students and stakeholders. In the context of HE, the leadership of the leaders is of great importance in HEIs. How the leadership abilities of HEI leaders' can be developed is a cutting-edge topic.

Similar to the present chapter, Wang (2014) investigated the experiences and perspectives of Chinese HEI leaders who participated in a two-week China-Australia Executive Leadership Programme in 2013. She found that the programme enabled the HEI leaders to explore leadership challenges and future developments in teaching, research and HE management that involved both China and Australia. This type of intercultural exchange can be an effective way in which to develop the leadership abilities of HEI leaders. More recently, Xing, in his doctoral research, showed that the leadership of HEI leaders contains four dimensions: setting directions, developing faculties, redesigning the organisation, and managing instructional programmes (Xing, 2019). These dimensions are also evident in a set of cross-national exchange programmes (e.g., Wang, 2014). However, evaluation of the development of leaders' leadership is an issue that still needs to be addressed.

In the U.S., the provision of leadership programmes assists the talented in moving up towards holding HEI presidencies. The directors of most of the major programmes in the U.S. describe their focus, curriculum, and participants' reactions. Leon (2005) highlights programmes aimed at minorities since they stand to benefit the most from them and since their participation will probably have the greatest impact in the U.S. HE. Leon mainly uses historical methods and literature analysis to evaluate various programmes aimed at the development of HEI leaders.

Watkins et al. (2011) present an evaluation model based on the theory of change approach, which identifies critical incidents leading to new behaviours and explores change at the individual and organisational levels. This evaluation model relies on repositioning management learning within leadership development programmes and incorporates theories of action and workplace and organisational learning. Watkins et al. (2011) claim that the development of leadership is a process of learning and that the learning process is largely influenced by critical incidents. This inspires me to employ certain learning theories in interpreting the development of HEI leaders' leadership abilities in the leadership development programmes.

2.2 Transformative Learning

Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991, 1997, 2000) suggests that adult learners can be transformed when critical reflection prompts a change in a previously held frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). This learning theory has resonance with the orientation of the present chapter on changes in HEI leaders during the overseas leadership development programmes. When going through a transformative

process, adult learners adjust their frames of reference to make them more 'inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective' (Mezirow, 1997, p. 75). In this way, they are able to support the development of justified opinions that guide their actions.

In terms of the realisation of transformative learning, Mezirow (2000) suggests that transformation is initiated by experiencing a disorienting dilemma. This indicates to the individual that their currently-held frame of reference is somehow inadequate. Adopting this perspective, attention is given to transformative learning theory across the whole corpus of data by highlighting moments and experiences during the overseas leadership development programmes that may have unsettled the participants' frames of reference sufficiently to make transformation possible. It is these moments of tension, discomfort, or productive unsettling that are brought into conversation with postcolonial theories of culture and identity.

This view of learning through transformation has been employed to interpret the HEI leaders' leadership. As in Wang's (2014) study, the HEI leaders' learning, both during and after their overseas leadership development programmes, can be depicted as a transformative trajectory. The cross-border leadership development experiences enhanced intercultural learning and an understanding of foreign HE in general, and of institutional practices in the host HEI (Wang, 2014, p. 78). Thus, I decided to adopt the theory of transformative learning in conceptualizing the development of leadership in the HEI leaders.

When describing transformative learning, it is helpful to distinguish between informational learning and its opposite, transformative learning (Kegan, 2009). When someone learns information, the learning facilitates a change in 'what' they know, whereas, through a transformative learning experience, a person makes changes in 'how' they know; an epistemological shift occurs (Kegan, 2009, p. 52). Kegan (2009) asserts that both types of learning are helpful, but when thinking about transformative learning, it is imperative to understand exactly what 'form' is being transformed. In his emergent theory of transformation, Mezirow describes that transformation involves a restructuring of 'problematic frames of reference' and 'sets of fixed assumptions' (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58). Transformation is thus both an outcome and a process. Nohl (2015) summarises the process in five phases: (1) a non-determining start followed by (2) a phase of experimental and undirected inquiry, and (3) a phase of social testing and mirroring. The process is boosted during (4) a phase of shifting relevance, which finally, leads to (5) a phase of social consolidation and reinterpretation of biography (p. 39). In each phase, work is done to alter cognitive structures, which will ultimately reconfigure problematic frames of reference, making them more inclusive, flexible and reflective. Transformative learning thus describes a phenomenon in which actors reconstruct their perceptions of a certain thing and learn something totally new. This understanding of transformative learning is suitable for describing the experiences of HEI leaders in overseas leadership development programmes.

2.3 The Third Space

In the overseas leadership development programmes, the learning of the HEI leaders took place in a new environment called 'the third space'. Stemming from sociological postcolonial theory, Bhabha (2004) draws attention to the concept of a third space, a space of in-betweenness, a border zone, neither here nor there, a space whose 'most salient features are instability and lack of clarity about where one belongs and what one should be doing' (Barad, 2007; Barlow, 2007, p. 244). Using the metaphor of a stairwell, Bhabha (2004) describes the liminal space as holding tension and possibility, where 'differences overlap and displace each other and cultural values are negotiated, individuals often emerge transformed' (Barad, 2007; Barlow, 2007, p. 245). Maintaining this space as liminal 'prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities' (Bhabha, 2004, p. 5).

It is believed that the transformation towards cultural hybridity is always in transition and is always infused with traces of unequal and unstable power relations. Third spaces are full of ambivalence and contradiction and provide opportunities for initiating 'new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself' (Bhabha, 2004, pp.1–2). It is in these third spaces that prior, binary frames of reference are sometimes cracked open.

It is important to acknowledge that Bhabha's construct of a third space has been adopted by a number of writers and in a variety of ways by different scholars. In relation to adult learning and development, Bhabha's concepts are helpful for discussing the effectiveness of overseas leadership development programmes as inherently in-between, and also in presenting moments where binary generalizations concerning East and West start to crumble, exposing, for example, the HEI leaders' assumptions and preconceptions of China and the Chinese HE system. At times, the programme participants' projections of 'westernness' infused their expectations and preconceptions, which fell short in the presence of complex, real individuals. In addition to the connections noted, overseas leadership development adds meaning and nuance to potential moments of disequilibrium that require frame of reference reorganisation (Mezirow, 1991). Attention is here drawn to the liminal spaces within the programme—spaces of unstructured learning, interaction and tension.

Closely related to the central topic of this book, Bhabha originally used the conceptualisation of the third space to illustrate how contrasting cultural experiences can combine to create a hybrid transformative space from which new understandings emerge that are not bound by any one cultural discourse. He also considers third spaces to be in-between spaces that 'provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation' (Bhabha, 2004, 1–2). A third space is in this chapter is more a metaphorical rather than a material space, within which individuals can make sense of the (sometimes competing) discourses and systems that are prevalent in the other spaces they inhabit. For example, in this chapter, when the Chinese HEI leaders visited abroad, they were positioned amidst a new place where created a third space (e.g., inter-dialogical cultures) in their mindset. At this moment, the agentive participants

should make a decision about what could they learn from the overseas leadership development programmes. Meanwhile, the decision-making and meaning-making process made their development of leadership possible. For this reason, I consider the concept of 'the third space' (Bhabha, 1990) to provide a helpful lens through which the leadership development of Chinese HEI leaders may be viewed and understood.

3 Methods

3.1 The Participants

The three Chinese HEI leaders, as the participants in this chapter, were all from Shaanxi Province, in the north-west of mainland China. Shaanxi has 110 HEIs (Education Department of Shaanxi Provincial Government, 2021). Apart from a few elite HEIs (e.g., Xi'an Jiaotong University, Shaanxi Normal University), most HEIs are governed by the Education Department of the Shaanxi Provincial Government. Supported by the MoE (2013), some of the provincially-governed HEIs in Shaanxi have an opportunity for their leaders to attend overseas leadership development programmes. The participants in the present chapter visited three different Western countries, namely, Canada, the U. K. and the U. S. They shared common backgrounds in terms of HEI type, their roles, duties and leadership development experience.

First, they represented three similar provincial HEIs from Shaanxi Province, China. Their HEIs were all administrated by the Education Department of the Shaanxi Provincial Government. Second, they were all male vice chairmen and in charge of student affairs at their HEIs. Third, it was their first time attending an overseas leadership development programme, and none of them had visited the receiving countries prior to the leadership development. Fourth, based on their interviews and reflective reports, they were all active learners and keen to learn from other cultures (Table 1).

However, their host countries and programme themes varied. Code names were used to protect the participants' privacy, and their personal details are introduced as

Table 1 Profile of the participants, data and coding (U.S., U.K. and Canadian programmes)

No	Role	Main responsibilities	Country visited	Programme time	Interview	Learning report	Coding
1	Vice chairman	Student affairs	U.S.	2013	Yes	Yes	VC-3
2	Vice chairman	Student affairs	U.K.	2016	Yes	Yes	VC-2
3	Vice chairman	Student affairs	Canada	2017	Yes	Yes	VC-4

Note The role refers to the role held at the time of interviewing

follows: VC-3 attended a U.S. leadership development programme on the theme of a *student-centred teaching service system* in 2013. The programme was organised by the CEAIE and included 22 participants. VC-3 had served as vice chairman for two years prior to the leadership development. The second participant, VC-2, attended a U.K. leadership development programme in 2016 on the theme of university research and *education for innovation and entrepreneurship.* The programme was organised by the NAEA and included 23 participants. He had served as vice chairman for more than one year prior to the leadership development. Finally, VC-4, attended a leadership development programme in Canada in 2017, on the theme of *Pedagogy in HEI and student development*. The programme was organised by the NAEA and included 22 participants. He had been vice chairman for two years prior to the leadership development.

3.2　Data Collection

The data for this chapter included three interviews, four learning reports and follow-up news collected from the websites of the participants' HEIs. All the data were originally in Chinese. Between April and June 2018, the team members of the research project conducted interviews with the three participants at their respective HEIs.

The participants also shared their reflective learning reports with the research team. These learning reports were required as homework by the organisers. In addition, VC-2 shared another, simplified, learning report with the research team. Based on the interviews, the research team searched for follow-up news from the participants' HEI websites. These data served different purposes in verifying or supplementing each other, which was considered the richness of the chapter. All the participants accepted the research invitations, arranged for sufficient time and gave their full support to the interviews. Each interview lasted for 40 to 60 min.

3.3　Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in Chinese as the author is a native Chinese speaker and the raw data was in Chinese. Qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) was used for the analysis of the data. The author not only analysed the texts of the data, but also paid attention to the HEI leaders' indigenous meaning-making around leadership and their learnings in the overseas leadership development programmes. As a Shaanxi local, the author was easily able to understand some slang spoken by the interviewees.

Overall, the following steps were applied to the qualitative data collected: First, the author examined the three HEI leaders' overseas leadership development experiences and highlighted particular situations they had experienced as leaders. Second, the author connected with the Chinese HE context when pondering the participants'

knowledge of the Chinese HE system, such as the challenges of polarisation and the marketisation of HE, and the comparison between Chinese and Western HE systems. Third, considering the three participants' career trajectories and their changing beliefs following the overseas leadership development programmes, the author explored significant shifts in thought that they experienced in relation to how their ideal HEI should be.

The analysis was not purely inductive since the author was familiar with and influenced by some key studies and theories prior to the analysis. The theoretical perspective of transformative learning and the concept of 'the third space' were then applied to interpret the data. This involved some expanding and collapsing of themes and further refinement of the descriptors.

3.4   Ethical Considerations

In addition to the operational methods, ethics is an important concern in educational research. Cohen et al. (2011) point out that ethical issues are present during all steps of a research project, and they include the nature of the project itself, the context of the research, the procedures adopted, the data collection methods, the nature of the participants, the types of data collected, what is done with the data and how it is disseminated. Thus, throughout the research process, ethical issues were carefully taken into consideration. First, the study gained the approval of the National Office for Educational Sciences Planning, China (NOESP). All the participating HEI leaders took part in the study voluntarily. They were informed of their right to refuse to join in or to freely withdraw from the study. The interviews took place in a natural environment, and the HEI leaders were briefed beforehand. Interviews were audio-recorded using a digital recorder. The recordings were stored electronically on a password-protected computer. The names of the participants were allocated anonymously. All these endeavours aimed to reveal the participants' opinions on the overseas leadership development programmes authentically and reliably.

4   Findings

Following their eye-opening journeys to the West, the three research participants described their experiences of more than one month of leadership development. The overseas leadership development programme, as a critical incident, broke all their preconceptions and changed their approaches to their work in the HEIs. In this section, the theoretical perspective of transformative learning is used to reflect on the effect of the overseas leadership development experiences on the HEI leaders' leadership. Here, instead of clarifying objectively what leadership is, a subjective interpretation of how the participants identified themselves is manifested as the findings. Furthermore, as the author, I interpret changes in the participants' leadership in

terms of the third space. Thus, I use the roles and experiences of the HEI leaders to represent the transformative process and the outcomes of their learning, both during and after their overseas leadership development programmes.

4.1 From a Leader to a Service Provider

VC-3 visited the eastern part of the U.S. in March 2013. In his learning report, the topic he wrote about was 'building a student-centred teaching service system'. The term 'service' became a keyword in VC-3's transformative learning experience during the overseas leadership development programme. VC-3 described his visit as follows:

> I was appointed to chair the student affairs by HEI A in 2011. Two years later, I had a chance to participate in this overseas leadership development programme. It was an enjoyable experience overall....... We visited a lot of places in the eastern part of the U.S., including George Mason University, etc. (VC-3, interview)

VC-3 regarded the overseas leadership development programme as a bridge that connected with his prior working experience. It seemed that his visit to the U.S. gave him a new perspective on his previous work. When being interviewed about his achievements, he said,

> The timing of this programme was perfect for me. I had administrated the students' affairs at my HEI for two years. I was seeking an opportunity to learn something new and incorporate that into my practice. The major achievement [for me] persists in the idea of student-centred learning in the HEI. The former Minister of Education [in China] said that HEIs serve two groups, i.e., the teachers and students. I especially focus on the subjective experience of students in the HEI. Seeing students as involved in the foundations of the HEI is important. Students should be encouraged to engage in HEI governance and management. I used to think that the teacher-student relationship in the university was merely based on transactions. Students pay, and we provide a service. But I changed my views after the programme: we should regard students as the owners of the HEI. One trainer told us that students are potential investors after graduation. They would endorse the HEI in the future. We use jargon in speaking of 'student management'. Should the students be managed? This idea is totally wrong. Although, in China, we respect the absolute authority of the teachers, students share equal status with the teachers in modern times. (VC-3, interview)

His overseas visit to the U.S. HEIs changed VC-3's ideas regarding teacher-student relationships in the HEI. From the perspective of an HEI leader, VC-3 considered the unsustainability of HEI financial support that came merely from the government. 'Students as potential investors' is a metaphor that describes a novel connectedness between adult teachers and young students. VC-3 looked not only at the uni-direction of teaching students, but also formed an interactive relationship between the HEI and the students. This future-oriented perspective gave VC-3 a new stance in supporting a student-centred service. Not only did VC-3 transform his views and ideas on HEI, but he also enacted some reforms at his HEI. In VC-3's report, he wrote:

> The institution and its methods should be constructed systematically. The students' assessment policy was reformed with more emphasis on their learning. Not only the academic learning, but also their service learning as the second class [extracurricular activities]. Tutoring is also a policy by which students communicate with their teachers at least once every semester. We set a reward system for tutors who sacrifice their time to mentor their students. (VC-3, learning report)

The visit and his observations enabled VC-3 to identify the deficiencies of his HEI under the Chinese HE system. He might not have reflected critically on student affairs if he had not participated in the overseas leadership development programme. VC-3 said,

> The wireless internet has not covered the whole campus. And, the reconstruction of students' accommodation, such as air-conditioners, is not good. We should put our students in our hearts. (VC-3, interview)

In terms of how to change situations in his HEI, VC-3 believed that it involves something that is 'unconsciously influenced':

> We can write the phrase 'student-centred' into HEI regulations, but nobody would realise it. It would be useless. So, the problem is with people's epistemic views. It is something that unconsciously influences the HEI. (VC-3, interview)

VC-3's visit to the U.S. HEIs transformed his perspectives on HEI governance. Students as the subjects of HEI need systems that are more supportive in enabling them to become autonomous persons. VC-3, in his interviews, repeated the word 'autonomy', which is another key factor in HEI reform and student development. This intercultural learning opportunity helped him to reflect on the weaknesses of his HEI and the orientation needed for future endeavours.

4.2   From a Practitioner to a Reflective Thinker

VC-2 visited the U.K. in September 2016. VC-2 talked most about innovative education and education for entrepreneurship in his report. Prior to the leadership development, he considered himself a practitioner who had little theoretical understanding of HE. However, the U.K. leadership development programme provided him with an opportunity to reflect on his routine work. He recognised that the specific operation was less important than the 'condition of people'. VC-2 said in the interview,

> In fact, from the point of view of the HEI, it is of critical importance that teachers have enthusiasm for education, students and their work. However, our teachers are more interested in their scientific research [instead of educating students], because publication is related to their titles and promotions. So how to truly embody the love for education, love for students, devote themselves to teaching and cultivate talents? (VC-2, interview)

VC-2's questioning originated from his observations on the HEI campuses in the U.K. He noticed that at the University of London, both college students and faculty members embraced a 'sunny optimism'. The living conditions in British HEIs

highlighted huge differences in comparison with those in Chinese HEIs. Coming from a background of accountability and 'publish-or-perish', VC-2 transformed his understanding of the aims of the HEI as they relate to student development:

> It is the most important thing to cultivate talents. Cultivating talents does not only mean that you teach this course well, but you also need to do it with your heart. Then you are a leader, a teacher and a model for students through your speech, behaviour and thought. (VC-2, interview)

In terms of how to cultivate young students, VC-2 continued:

> I looked forward to this visit since I knew that from the first industrial revolution to the second, and then to the third, the U.K. has always been the pioneer. I think the height of a nation is determined by its reading level. An HEI campus without reading has no real education. A city full of books is the people's spiritual home. In fact, I think the most important thing is to cultivate students' ability to read and to learn. But now, our students sometimes do not read, even some of our teachers do not read. I think it's incredible. (VC-2, interview)

The opportunity of an overseas visit gave VC-2 a critical perspective on the Chinese HE system and on the micro-practice of his own HEI. In his narrative, VC-2 repeated the 'culture' of the HEI, and he saw the transforming of the HEI culture to be his current goal:

> It is an issue of culture. It's that inner thing of [HEI] itself. I feel deeply there, i.e., the lowest level of leadership is management by person. The second level is management by rules, and the third [highest] level is culture reconstruction. I consider that my HEI is now operating at the second level, i.e. in its evaluating of colleges and faculties. The evaluation system is perfect, but you cannot see much of it in the British HEIs. (VC-2, interview and learning report)

VC-2's interpretation of executive leadership is very interesting. He divides HEI leadership into three levels from the lowest to the highest:

> When you go to their [British] campus, you will feel the culture [of the HEI]. Many things seem to be formed naturally. Students love learning, and teachers like teaching. A teacher has that kind of noble personality, who not only teaches but also educates people. Culture cannot be seen or touched but is very important. It is just like the air, you cannot see or touch it, but you need it and cannot do without it. I think it is very important to construct an advanced campus culture in the HEI. Once a culture is formed, it will be amazing. (VC-2, interview)

After the overseas leadership development programme, VC-2 tried to organise more activities for students to enable them to understand the HEI culture. I found from his university's website news that he proposed the 'scholarly campus' and used the metaphor of the 'fragrance of books' to describe his expectations for students to be reading. Meanwhile, he considered sports meetings, entrepreneurship competitions and accommodation systems to be rituals through which HEIs would cultivate young people. Through his overseas leadership development, VC-2 developed his personal understanding and new practices of HE administration. The visit to the U.K. created a third space in which VC-2 could look back and then look forward to visualise a trajectory for development in his Chinese HEI.

4.3   From a Learner to a Communicative-Creator

VC-4 visited Canada in November 2017. As his first time to go abroad, he considered the experience 'an eye-opening journey'. Prior to the leadership development, VC-4 viewed himself as a learner who would gain advanced educational experiences from the Western countries he visited. However, his intrinsic observations did not result in his comparing the differences between China and Canada. VC-4 noted,

> There is no big disparity between China and Canada. China has made extensive reforms during the past decades. The city infrastructure in Toronto, for example, is no better than that in Xi'an. (VC-4, interview and learning report)

VC-4's account revealed a perspective on intercultural competence: hybridized and simultaneous diversity is vital for HEI leaders when they communicate with cultural others. Nevertheless, VC-4 admitted that the HE system in Canada was more advanced than that in China.

> Although most HEIs in Canada are public, they have higher autonomy than their Chinese counterparts. In Canada, the government gives financial support to universities but has little control......The Chinese HEIs nowadays pursue comprehensive education. However, each HEI should have its own ideas and characteristics. (VC-4, interview and learning report)

VC-4's observations at the University of British Columbia indicated his awareness of 'real internationalisation in HE'. VC-4 continued,

> Canadian HEIs emphasize internationalisation and have a strong sense of crisis. One challenge is how to enrol more students. Canadian HEIs pay more attention to enrolling international students. This creates for us the implication that we, Chinese HEI leaders, should expand our international exchanges and improve our internationalisation level. (VC-4, interview)

VC-4 connected his reflections with HE education reform in China. In his learning report, VC-4 wrote that Chinese-foreign cooperatively-run HEIs are a new trend in China. However, the foundation of cooperation is at the level of reciprocal learning, which is related to a synchronised position of intercultural competence. VC-4 acknowledged that:

> Changing the mindset is the most important [task] for HEIs in the central and western China. We should re-think: what to learn and how to learn from the Western countries? Meanwhile, we should not forget the Chinese national [political] situation, like our social regime. Intercultural learning needs institutional change, and the government needs to do this. (VC-4, interview)

VC-4 did not think that the Canadian HEI management was much different from that in China. He noticed that in Canada and North America, ideological education is much the same as in China. VC-4's transformative learning emerged in this overseas leadership development programme as he moved from a negative learner to a communicative-creator.

VC-4's case prompts a very interesting discussion about how intercultural learning empowers learners' cultural confidence. Most studies place China as a developing

country, where culture, ideas and technologies are largely inputted from the West. However, with the increasing development of the Chinese economy and democratic politics, national confidence is necessary if it is to achieve 'the two-hundred years mission of the Chinese dream', according to VC-4's words. Thus, HEI leaders should work as cultural communicators by introducing experiences of Chinese HE to foreign HEIs.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

Having transitioned the field texts into research texts, it is now possible to highlight the all-encompassing implications that are woven throughout the participants' accounts, as we have now crafted them. Produced through a process of narrating overseas leadership development experiences, the discussion that emerged provides insights into what occurred on the trips abroad and how they helped Chinese HEI leaders to transform their perceptions of leadership.

From the three HEI leaders' narrative accounts, it is evident that their overseas experiences in Western countries renewed their understanding of running an HEI. The five phases of transformative learning, as conceptualised by Nohl (2015), could all be identified in the data. For example, VC-3 acknowledged that the central concept of the HEI should be student-centred. In an era of internationalisation, it is necessary to borrow advanced ideas to reconstruct the Chinese HEIs. Similarly, VC-2 was aware that the HEI culture is the most important and inherent quality of the HEI operation. He went on to propose detailed practices, such as organising reading clubs and appraising teachers' scholarship as expressed in their teaching. An interesting finding showed how VC-4, in his first experience of going abroad, dismantled his preconceptions of the developed countries. He realised that China had also been developing and had achieved almost the same infrastructure as the Canadians, which led him to have higher expectations for the Chinese HEIs. VC-4 considered autonomy to be of significance for HEI faculties. All these three vice chairmen experienced transformative learning during and after their overseas leadership development programmes, which implies that a transformative dimension should be a new consideration in the leadership development of HEI leaders. Their new ways of thinking about their work, their transformational roles as executives and their possible intentions to reform existing policies in their own HEIs are all evidence of the learning outcomes and the development of their leadership. Resonating with Watkins et al.'s (2011) study, future evaluation and reflections on HEI leaders' leadership development programmes could focus on participants' changes of perception, attitude and vision for their work.

The chapter shows how the three Chinese HEI vice chairmen transformed their understanding of HE after just one experience of participating in an overseas leadership development programme. It is firstly aligned with Crevani's (2018) argumentation that leadership is a fluid state which is an ongoing development. Meanwhile,

in this chapter, the intercultural setting is a vital factor and facilitator in the transformation of HEI leaders' leadership. In the present chapter, I describe the intercultural setting as a 'third space', a space of in-betweenness, a border zone, neither here nor there, a space whose 'most salient features are instability and lack of clarity about where one belongs and what one should be doing' (Barad, 2007; Barlow, 2007, p. 244). It is showed in the three cases that their development of leadership and transformation of roles and identities towards cultural hybridity was infused with traces of reflection, reflexivity, and dialogicality. The East–West-HE-Third-Spaces are full of ambivalence and contradiction and provide opportunities for initiating 'new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation' (Bhabha, 2004, pp. 1–2) in the future of the Chinese HEI leaders' professional work.

As described in the present chapter, the overseas leadership development programmes for HEI leaders are creating this third space. In other words, the attending executives' contrasting and conflicting cultural experiences combine to create a hybrid transformative space, from which new understandings can emerge that are not bound by any one group's cultural discourse. For example, in this chapter, the three vice chairmen's reflections on their own HEI administration made possible the development of their leadership through role-reformation. The third spaces of this chapter were the in-between spaces that 'provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation' (Bhabha, 2004, pp. 1–2). Third spaces are also cultural and collective spaces, within which individual HEI leaders can make sense of discourses on teaching and learning in the HEI and of the administrative systems that prevail in the other spaces they inhabit. The transformative learning process of these three HEI leaders arose spontaneously from the third space and from the people they met within it. The third spaces in the present chapter could be observed and interpreted as spaces between the past and the future, the East and the West and between the various roles held as both educator and learner. The outcomes furthermore confirm that the official overseas leadership development programmes for Chinese HEI leaders made positive contributions to the participants within those spaces: geographically, socio-culturally, interpersonally, and relationally (Cox & Hassard, 2018).

In the globalised world today, the internationalisation of HE has permeated individuals' thinking and behaviours. The official policies for HEI faculties, including their leaders and international exchanges, create opportunities for developing countries such as mainland China. The narrative and interpretation of the three Chinese HEI vice-chairmen's experiences reveal the validity of the overseas leadership development programmes and imply the possible transformation of HE systems both inside and outside of an HEI. The successful experiences reflected in this chapter could be transferred to other countries and contexts with cautious attention and localised adaptation.

To summarise, this chapter, as seen from the emic stance of the participants, highlights a transformative learning process resulting from overseas leadership development programmes. Acknowledging the dynamic interaction between hybrid cultural forces, the overseas leadership development programmes created possibilities for the Chinese HEI leaders to transform their perceptions and practices relating to their HEI

work. The significant contribution of this chapter is its confirmation of the value of the overseas leadership development programme. The chapter has implications for other countries that would develop their HEI leaders' leadership through cross-national exchange. First, long-term cross-national exchange programmes will have positive impacts on the leadership of HEI leaders. Second, the participants' reflections and inquiry could enhance their learning outcomes and the transformation of their leadership. In terms of the limitations of the chapter, more studies involving longitudinal investigation are critically needed to examine the programmes' effectiveness, both for the individual executives and for systemic changes in HE.

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