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From Communities of Practice to the Emergence of Thirdness: Voices, Identities, and Subject Positions of Chinese International Students in the U.S.¹

1. Introduction

The landscape of higher education in English-speaking countries, e.g., the U.S., the U.K., and Australia, has witnessed dramatic changes in the ethno-lingual composition of their student populations over the past few decades, which have been deeply bound up in the influx of non-native English speaking international students from diverse backgrounds (Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2011; Gürüz, 2011). Against the backdrop of this emergent trend of global student mobility, the living and learning experiences of these transnational young adults have drawn increasing scholarly attention. Of significance, the majority of studies in this field tend to take a communities-of-practice (COP) approach (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lave, 1991; Lave, 1993; Wenger, 1998) to interpreting the socialization process associated with these students at both the institutional and societal levels (e.g., Halic, Greenberg, & Paulus, 2009; Hsieh, 2006; Kim, 2011; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Morita, 2004). In this regard, the living and learning experiences of the students, in addition to issues surrounding identity construction contained therein, are conceptualized in reference to a voluntary and one-way process whereby newcomers gradually move toward fuller participation in well-established socio-cultural practices of a given community. Based on data collected from in-depth interviews with 15 Chinese international students enrolled in a large public university in the U.S., this exploratory study brings to the fore the heterogeneous and contentious nature of negotiating one's voices, identities, and subject positions as an international student in a transnational milieu. The findings of this study cast doubt on the extent to which a unified and neutralized account of social engagements, as suggested by the framework of COP, captures the dynamics involved in the socialization process associated with international students who have to navigate their day-to-day lives at the interstices of varied languages, cultures, relations, and expectations. Instead of drawing decisive conclusions about what counts as an ideal framework for understanding and interpreting the living and learning experiences of international students, the study is intended to foreground the potential of a post-structurally informed framework, as characterized by the affordances of "thirdness" (Kramsch, 2009), for envisaging alternative ways to think and talk about this burgeoning student population.

2. Background & Literature Review

Before delving into a discussion of the design and implementation of this study, it is important to develop a general understanding of the theoretical and epistemological considerations underpinning the existing and the proposed approaches to exploring issues surrounding the student population in question. In this section, I begin with a critical review of the genesis of the COP framework, in addition to its implications for the growing body of research on international students. Building on the insights gained from this review, I then introduce the notion of thirdness, which indexes a more vibrant conceptual framework for examining the ways in which international students negotiate their living and learning experiences within and across contexts.

¹ This report is not structured in an academic paper format. My main objective here is to provide a narrative that captures the major points highlighted in my presentation.

In the meantime, I also draw attention to the potential of a particular interpretive lens, as informed by metaphor analysis (Gibbs, 1998, 1999; Kramsch, 2003), for leveraging the affordances of the proposed framework.

2.1. COP and International Students

The genesis of the COP paradigm can be traced back to four major works (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lave, 1991; Lave, 1993; Wenger, 1998) developed by two scholars, i.e., Jane Lave and Etienne Wenger, in the 1990s. While it is beyond the scope of this report to provide a detailed account of the history of this paradigm, I acknowledge the necessity of offering a reflection on the implications of COP for educational theory and practice, which can be elucidated in reference to two key interrelated concepts:

- Situated Learning - perceiving learning not so much as the internalization of certain forms of knowledge on an individual basis, but as a process of becoming a member of a sustained community of practice
- Legitimate Peripheral Participation - indexing the process whereby people who initially learn at the periphery of a given community, move continuously towards the center of the community as they become more knowledgeably skillful.

Of significance, when being interpreted through the lenses of these two concepts, the process of identity construction, as a crucial dimension of COP, is considered vis-à-vis a specific kind of centripetal force that orients oneself towards well-established membership determined by the “gradual mastery of knowledgeable skill” (Lave, 1991, p. 77). As mentioned earlier, the COP framework has been widely adopted by studies focused on living and learning experiences of international students, with particular attention to those young adults who come from non-native English speaking background and pursue their degrees in English-dominant countries (e.g., Halic, Greenberg, & Paulus, 2009; Hsieh, 2006; Kim, 2011; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Morita, 2004). Accordingly, the majority of these studies tend to situate their arguments in relation to a voluntary and one-way socialization process whereby newcomers gradually move toward fuller participation in routinized communities of practice, at both the institutional and the societal levels. In this regard, identity issues surrounding international students, which lie at the heart of most of those studies, are explained in terms of the development of a restricted set of knowledgeable skills, e.g., native-like English proficiency, that have long been recognized and legitimized by given communities.

2.2. The Craft of Thirdness

It is worth emphasizing at the beginning of this sub-section that the purpose of my study is not to debunk the COP framework. Nonetheless, based on data collected from in-depth interviews with a group of Chinese international students enrolled in a large public university in the U.S., it has become increasingly clear to me that the complexities of their transnational experiences, along with the identity construction process involved therein, cannot be reduced to a linear and centripetal model of socialization as proposed by the COP framework. In light of these considerations, I foreground the notion of thirdness (Kramsch, 2009) in my work, with a focus on its affordances for thinking and talking about international students. Specifically, by drawing on Kramsch’s (2009) conceptualization of thirdness as a reframing of social realities that “[stresses] process, variation and style over product, place and stable community membership”

(p. 248), I propose a tri-fold frame of reference to approach this concept, which is briefly illustrated below in comparison with the tenets of the theory of COP.

- Heteroglossia - Emphasizing the coexistence of centripetal and centrifugal forces, which in turn indexes a dialogical relationship between Self and Other (Bakhtin, 1981) that is largely downplayed by the COP framework. In this sense, the socialization process of international students is guided not merely by the centripetal force. Rather, it is constantly negotiated at the intersection of conflictual forces.
- Historicity - Emphasizing the roles played by one's embodied memories in orienting oneself towards identifying with social realities not only in their perceived present styles, but also in the styles of their remembered past and imagined future. This temporal dimension is also under-addressed by the COP framework, wherein the target population, e.g., international students, is always depicted as "newcomers" to certain communities.
- Performativity - Emphasizing the agentive aspect of socialization. Take international students as an example, rather than adapting themselves, either successfully or unsuccessfully, to established ways of being and becoming associated with given communities, they tend to create alternative ways of being and becoming through discursively-mediated practices.

2.3. Metaphor Analysis

To better capture the nuances embedded in the notion of thirdness, I draw on metaphor analysis (Gibbs, 1998, 1999; Kramsch, 2003) as it offers me an insightful lens to explore the ways in which the reframing of social realities is manifested in my interview data. As argued by Kramsch (2003), viewed from a discursive constructionist standpoint, "metaphor [is not so much] stylistic ornamentation [as] a bridge between contextually contingent, changing and often conflictual subjective experiences and their expression, communication and enactment through language" (p. 125). Although at the moment, I am still in a very preliminary stage of my work (including data analysis), I do want to foreground the potential of this analytical approach for grappling with the notion of thirdness.

3. Methodology

The participants of the study were 15 Chinese international students enrolled in a large public university in the U.S. They were all recruited by the researcher (myself) with the help of two student organizations run by Chinese international students in that university (see Table 1). With regard to data collection, I adopted two qualitative methodologies in this study, i.e., focus groups and individual interviews. In total, 3 focus groups² were convened between September and October, 2017, and each participant was included once in one of those groups. Based on the general topics and themes that emerged from the focus group discussions, 8 follow-up individual interviews³ were further conducted between October and November, 2017. All the discussions/interviews were executed in Mandarin, and were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim before having been translated⁴ into English.

² Each focus group lasted between 90 and 120 minutes.

³ Each individual interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

⁴ Translation reliability was not assessed in this project. But it will be incorporated into the researcher's future work.

Table 1: A glimpse of the participants

Participant's Pseudonym	Gender	Year	Major	Prior Living/Learning Experiences in English-speaking Countries
Chen	Female	Freshman	CS	< 6 months
Li	Female	Freshman	Psychology	< 6 months
Ma	Male	Freshman	Sociology	< 6 months
Wang	Female	Freshman	Applied Math	< 6 months
Xu	Female	Freshman	CS	< 6 months
Song	Female	Freshman	Psychology	> 2 years
Hao	Male	Sophomore	Math & CS	< 6 months
Wei	Male	Sophomore	Math & Physics	< 6 months
Wu	Female	Sophomore	Statistics	< 6 months
Zhang	Male	Sophomore	Math & Economics	< 6 months
Zhou	Female	Sophomore	Psychology	< 6 months
Tian	Male	Sophomore	Philosophy	< 1 year
Liu	Female	Sophomore	Psychology	< 2 years
Pan	Male	Sophomore	Psychology & Math	< 2 years
Cheng	Female	Junior	Political Science	> 2 years

4. Findings

Based on a preliminary analysis of the data collected from the focus groups and the individual interviews, I developed two analytical tropes, i.e., “sedimentation” and “pivoting”, to contextualize the notion of thirdness vis-à-vis the living and learning experiences of my participants. In comparison with the structuralist underpinnings characterizing the COP framework, these two tropes represented a post-structuralist perspective on the process of identity construction, which were briefly discussed below:

1) The first trope, sedimentation, was intended to situate issues surrounding identity negotiation in relation to the resignification of one’s embodied memories. In the presentation, I

drew on stories from three participants, i.e., Liu, Ma, and Wang, to illustrate the nature of this trope. One of them was recapitulated here to give a general sense of the trope.

Liu, a native-Mandarin speaker, who first entered an art school, and then an international school, both in China, before coming to the U.S. to pursue her undergraduate degree. In the interview, Liu mentioned that she felt she was not very Chinese when she was in China, because she didn't receive traditional Chinese education. And how such memories, somewhat stigmatized as that of Ma (when he talked about his broken Shanghainese), got re-signified through her living and learning experiences in the U.S., which again created an alternative reality that is different both from an orientation towards American ways of being and becoming, and from an undisrupted alignment with her own past in China (a vignette from Liu's story).

2) The second trope, pivoting, was intended to situate issues surrounding identity negotiation in relation to the repositioning of oneself vis-à-vis varied subjective stances. In the presentation, I drew on stories from two participants, i.e., Tian and Pan, to illustrate the nature of this trope. One of them was recapitulated here to give a general sense of the trope.

As for the case of Tian, he mentioned in the interview that he assumed a bystander's viewpoint towards things happening not only in China, but also in the U.S. With respect to his subject position vis-à-vis the U.S., he referred to a metaphor, i.e., Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, wherein he was a passerby. In terms of his subject position vis-à-vis China, he created a narrative of visiting a place where he had lived a long time ago. In this sense, what was conveyed through his discourse was a liminal stance, which thus prompted us to think and talk about international students in reference to dynamic, relational, and emergent social constructs, as opposed to stable communities, as suggested by the COP framework (a vignette from Tian's story).

5. Discussion and Reflection

The implications of this exploratory study are two-fold. First, it has brought to the fore the affordances of a post-structuralist approach to exploring the interplay between language, culture and identity. As suggested by Pennycook (2004), “identities are formed in the linguistic performance rather than pre-given” (p. 17). Second, it has called for the development of a refined conceptual model to think and talk about international students, which has the potential for transcending the limitations of the COP framework. By paraphrasing Blommaert's (2010) argument concerning the process of globalization, I propose that the living and learning experiences of international students index a tremendously complex web of individuals, contexts, discourses, and tempo-spatial scales connected by material and symbolic ties in often unpredictable ways. In this regard, future research in this field should also expand their focus beyond documenting the maintenance and reproduction of stable “communities”, insofar as probing into the construction and transformation of contingent “networks”.

***Acknowledgements**

Included in the PDF version of my presentation (page 17).

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