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Collective Reflections on James Lantolf and his Influence in China¹

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Abstract

The current paper reports the collective reflections of eight Vygotskian scholars in China who had frequent academic interactions with Professor James Lantolf in the past decade. The results of the thematic analysis of the scholars' semi-structured interviews present how they perceive his contributions as a world-renowned scholar advocating Sociocultural Theory (SCT) in second language development and his influence on their personal, institutional, and China's SCT development as a whole. Their views on the future of SCT in China are also presented.

Keywords: *James Lantolf, Collective Reflection, Vygotskian Researchers, Sociocultural Theory Development in China*

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²Introduction

The first author is a linguistic professor at a top university in Northwest China, a part known for its lack of development compared with East or South China. She first encountered the name of James Lantolf (Jim henceforth) by the recommendation of Rebecca Oxford in 2011 when they were talking about Dynamic Assessment (DA). The first author then invited Jim over in 2012 and 2014 respectively, and successfully recommended him as Changjiang Scholar to

¹ The current reflections are based on the interviews of Xiaomei Ma, Ruiying Yang, Lili Qin, Yanhong Zhang, Xi Qian, Jiao Xi., together with the two authors' own answers and discussions. Jinfen Xu also made contribution to this study.

² This paper is part of a special issue (2024, 46) entitled: In Honour of James P. Lantolf's Contributions to Sociocultural Theory, Second Language Development and Language Pedagogy (edited by Mirosław Pawlak, Zhisheng (Edward) Wen, and Hassan Mohebbi).

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China Ministry of Education in 2016. His yearly visits and talks on national or international academic occasions fueled the emerging SCT sparks in China.

Research design

Participants

Eight EFL teachers from four universities, who, on one occasion or another, expressed to the first author their appreciation and gratitude to Jim for his devotion and generosity, as well as his lead in their own SCT endeavors. They were happy to join this study as participants, of whom, five are EFL professors (X, Y, M, Q, and Z), one associate professor (F), and two novice teachers (J and H). M, Q, Z, and F used to be visiting scholars mentored by Jim in the Pennsylvania State University. X and Y were teachers in a top Chinese university where Jim worked as the Yangtze River Scholar. J and H were former PhD students supervised by Jim in University X. Their first encounters with Jim dated back to as early as 20 years ago in 2004 and as late as 2018. They all mentioned their frequent contacts with Jim. Apart from face-to-face interactions, their email exchanges are also amazingly large in number, especially for M (1442), J (1260), and H (370) to the time the study was received.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study came from semi-structured interviews. Based on the communication history of the eight participants and the two authors' discussions on the relationship between Jim and the SCT development in China, the semi-structured interviews were designed. Each participant shared their most impressive stories with Jim, their expression of his qualities as a forefront Vygotskian scholar, his influence on them, and their perspectives on the future of SCT in China. Six of the participants' interviews were done in written Q&A format and the rest two were audio recorded and transcribed. The data collection was conducted in January, 2024.

The second author transcribed the interview recordings, based on which, thematic analysis was carried out. Then the two authors separately read the texts repeatedly and identified the shared themes. Next, both of them compared and discussed to reach an agreement on the major themes, i.e. Jim's cultivation of Chinese SCT learners, his academic influence on them, his noble qualities, their perspectives on SCT development in China. Finally, the authors refined these themes to reflect the data. In addition, special attention was paid to the core SCT concepts and how they were related to the data to support the major themes, such as Jim's practicing ZPD-based mediation on H's paper writing (see the following for details). The ultimate purpose is to report Jim's interactions with the local SCT scholars, his leading role, and their confidence in the future of SCT in China.

Results

The following three parts are their reflections and perceived SCT prospects in China. The original quotes are borrowed as subheadings.

Jim in the Eyes of Chinese SCT Scholars

“His passionate and tireless pursuit of SCT”

This is quoted from Professor Y’s interview when she was both amazed and touched by Jim’s “decades-like-a-day persistence” in his deep delving into SCT studies, especially by his “innovative exploration and interpretation” of the dialectic, holism, and unity of “mind and body” between Marxism and SCT. F used the same words in her comments on Jim’s readily “associations of SCT with many current L2 issues” and admired Jim’s “perseverance in his pursuits”, even “many times being cold-shouldered”. This echoes Jim’s workshop in Beijing in 2018 with his then PhD candidate J. See the following excerpt by J:

“I was assisting Jim interpreting one part in a two-day workshop, and barely did I finish when a guy stood up and began to vent his criticism against SCT, bilingually. His words were harsh, like lashes on me. I was shocked, speechless, and helpless, tears in my eyes, a situation I had never encountered in my whole life. Jim stood up and asked the man to attack him instead, offering that he would love to discuss and debate with the man about every point he criticized. Later that day, Jim comforted me by sharing his early stories of being relentlessly attacked, even at such big academic events like AAAL. He told me he had ‘undergone even worse, but survived them and made all his way here’. I was deeply touched by his fortitude in defense of his academic pursuits.”

This reminds us of an image of a warrior standing fast on his ground, holding high the flag of SCT. J also shared Jim’s story with the journal *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* (SSLA):

“The first time he submitted an SCT paper to SSLA, it was rejected for ‘being too novel (to be accepted)’, a few years later only to find that he was invited by the same journal to submit a State-of-the-Art manuscript of research informed by SCT. What’s even more amazing was that a top level journal the Modern Language Journal (MLJ) was willing to publish the first SCT special issue in 1994 (Volume 78, Issue 4). The honor of being elected as president of American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL³) for 2004-2005 was another example of his recognition in the world of Linguistics”.

In retrospect, his experience from anonymity to recognition proved that SCT has its place in second language learning and teaching. More importantly, his arduous and unremitting efforts were worth the while. The journey he went through is better mirrored by the advocate of Complex Dynamic System Theory (CDST) Kees de Bot’s comment (2015). He ranked Jim as the world’s top 3 linguists in his book *A History of Applied Linguistics* (de Bot, 2015, p. 38). Quoting de Bot’s words “He (James Lantolf) has more or less single-handedly generated a new branch of Applied Linguistics, through his tireless defense and illustration of Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory” (de Bot 2015, p. 41). de Bot’s words precisely depicted to the linguistic

³ Founded in 1977, the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) is a professional organization of scholars who are interested in and actively contribute to the multi-disciplinary field of applied linguistics (<https://www.aaal.org/about-us>).

world the path Jim traveled through. Later on, the honor of being the recipient of AAAL's Distinguished Scholarship and Service Award in 2016, once again, confirmed the world's acknowledgment of his contributions. Since being awarded the Changjiang Scholar⁴ in China, he had put a lot of time and efforts into introducing SCT to Chinese scholars, as Professor Q said: *“Jim expanded SCT research in China on his own. His persistent endeavors in explaining the key terms and clarifying the misconceptions enhanced the acceptance and application of SCT in EFL teaching and research locally.”*

“Bringing SCT into China” and “promoting China’ SCT to the world”

The quote is from Associate Professor F when she talked about Jim's contributions to SCT development in China. By *“Bringing SCT into China”*, she meant that Jim took every opportunity to carry out related activities like giving talks, workshops, and holding conferences, seminars and forums to familiarize the local language teachers SCT and related practices. No matter how hard and inconvenient, he managed to accept invitations or requests for help, even for novice researchers and graduate students. F shared her first meeting (as a PhD candidate in 2014) with Jim at a conference just before his plenary talk, when Jim arrived early sitting in the front row of the conference hall waiting. She ventured to introduce herself and asked him tentatively for advice on her PhD proposal. His brisk reply *“Sure”* dispersed all her worries. In her own words:

“No words could convey my excitement when he agreed to discuss it with me the next day. He was as good as his words! ‘Good. Really Good!’ was what he said before we started our discussion the next day, which both relieved me and encouraged me enormously at the time when I had been uncertain about it, but had no expert to resort to. He then gave me some suggestions on how to conduct my study.”

It was obvious such moments of enlightenment and encouragement are especially in urgent need for young SCT researchers in China. J and H as his former PhD candidates benefited even more from their frequent interactions with Jim. In J's words:

“No matter how simple and silly my questions were, Jim always listened with great interests and explained to me with patience. I would then receive his email sharing the related publications afterwards for me to read. Such discussions inspired the ideas of our two paper collaborations to help other scholars struggling like me differentiate several terms like mediation, scaffolding, ZPD, etc. It never had occurred to me that paper writing, once a torture, became a by-product of our casual and pleasant Q&A sessions, an enjoyable experience.”

Jim also initiated several SCT conferences in China and invited some well-known SCT scholars over to share their expertise. This helped establish the academic bonds with the local

⁴ Changjiang Scholarship is the highest academic award issued to an individual by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. It is also known as the Cheung Kong Scholar and the Yangtze River Scholar award.

novice Chinese scholars and many of them are booming right now, as can be seen from their cooperation and published papers and chapters.

By “*Promoting China’ SCT to the world*”, F means Jim did his best to enhance the visibility of Chinese SCT scholars and to disseminate their achievements to the world. F said:

“He applied to be guest editor (together with Matthew Poehner) of an MLJ’s special issue exclusively for East Asian SCT scholars, and later another special issue in Language Assessment Quarterly (LAQ), both of which are top tier SSCI journals many Chinese scholars could only dream of. This helped bring the local contributions to the world academic arena, greatly promoting the SCT development in China.”

About this, Y, a senior professor, also recalled her story of her study based on Concept-based Language Instruction (CBLI) of citation instruction in her academic writing course, and how the study was finally published in *MLJ*:

“The idea of this study was inspired by one of Jim’s workshops here, and was carried out in my Academic Writing class. When my student and I were presenting this new study in our SCT conference session in 2019⁵, Jim happened to be in the audience. “Very innovative!” he commented. This greatly motivated us to move on. Every time I read Jim’s feedback (as one of the guest editors of the MLJ special issue of 2023, Volume 107, Issue S1); I couldn’t help wondering how he could be so brief but to the point. Anyway, under his guidance in our two-year-long revision journey, the paper was greatly improved, a learning journey for us!”

Y summed up by saying: “An internationally renowned scholar as Jim is, he was still so supportive and generous for a small potato like me.”

From Y’s and F’s stories, we can see the remarkable scope and depth of Jim’s sustained supports and leadership. H, Jim’s the other former PhD supervisee in China, insightfully related Jim’s above qualities from SCT perspective:

“Once Jim returned my paper draft, for which I had expected many revisions of my major points or logic, but to my surprise, nothing of this kind was found. I began to pride myself on being very smart, only to find out, after I talked with J, that ‘Jim usually followed the author’s original thinking instead of making drastic revisions head-on. In this way, he helped deepen and expand the authors’ thinking’. It struck me like a revelation that Jim practiced mediation and ZPD himself whenever possible. By awakening creativity within ourselves rather than offering what we didn’t have, he respected our current ability and valued such opportunities for our possible ZPD expansion. This is just the essence of mediation, the core of Dynamic Assessment. In another word, he practiced his philosophy and ideal.”

⁵ The second Social Cultural Theory conference held on May 10-12, 2019 in Xi’an Jiaotong University, Xi’an, China.

As an exceptional and exemplary SCT figure, Jim supports the younger Vygotskian scholars by first valuing their creativity, preliminarily estimating their ZPDs, and then offering an appropriate amount of mediation, assisting them in solving problems and ultimately gaining their independence. He relives the true meaning of what he advocates. He is now a promising SCT scholar willing to devote her future career to exploring the depth and applications of SCT.

Jim's above interactions with the Chinese scholars reveal his qualities: sincere, encouraging, inspiring, and supportive.

Chinese SCT Scholars were Stimulated to Move Forward

"We should also do our part in promoting SCT"

When talking about how Jim influenced them. All the interviewees shared what they learned from Jim. M, for example, said:

"Through Jim, I met a team of scholars who are fully committed and don't measure efforts against rewards. For example, Jim paid for the price differences between business and economy class international flight tickets every time he came to visit. I guess he lost money because of this. From him, I learned that academia is not for profits. Jim's selflessness motivated many of my colleagues and students here. Since then, I found myself never complaining. My new motto became: Do what you can, the rest will come in its way."

Jim's commitment and sacrifice didn't even stop there. To him, it was sometimes at the expense of his convenience, comfort and even health, which can best be reflected in the following excerpt by J:

"Before coming to China in May 2018 (before the first SCT conference in China), he suffered a leg contusion, but he didn't cancel his trip as his doctor suggested. Instead, he had an occlusive injection. His leg was severely swollen after nearly 20 hours of flights and transfers. He appeared in his office the next morning, gave his plenary talk and listened to the parallel sessions in the afternoon. Not until late in the afternoon, did I notice he had to lean against the wall to answer conference participants' questions. I was so astonished when I knew the truth. The Chinese acupuncturist (I invited for him later on) was even more deeply touched after his diagnosis of Jim's condition."

Moments like this moved us immensely. Indeed, we can see in him a mission to SCT, and to people in need of his guidance. This spirit inspired many people around him. See Professor Z's reflection (with Jim's help, she finished the first Dynamic Assessment PhD dissertation in China as early as the year 2000): *"Jim's rigorous exploration of academic issues, selfless help to young scholars, and the eternal passions for his pursuits have deeply influenced me and led me to move forward."*

When talking about how Jim influenced her, she added:

“Jim has a big impact on my later academic career. I now deem providing the best possible help to those young people as my duty now. For example, with my supervision and continuous supports, one of my MA students' DA dissertations won the National Excellent Education Master's Thesis and Provincial Excellent Master's Thesis. As a teacher educator, I also take every opportunity to offer SCT-related training courses to benefit novice and pre-service teachers.”

Cases of Jim's impact on the Chinese scholars are not easy to be exhausted. Such spirit will become a tradition and treasure for us to draw strength and inspirations.

“I explored my way to integrate SCT into my research”

As indicated, the interviewees benefited not only in their beliefs and attitudes towards research, but also gained new approaches. The following is what M mentioned about how she balanced the SCT qualitative approach with her highly quantitative research practices:

“I used to tread on a very narrow quantitative research trajectory, maybe because of my belief that language assessment research should be based on strict statistical analysis. Enlightened by Matthew Poehner (Jim's former PhD student) and Jim, I included DA as a follow-up intervention part for our assessment studies, a perfect combination to complete the diagnosis→feedback→intervention cycle. My validation process also helps make sure the mediation is construct-informed. The two approaches complement and push each other towards new stages. My awarded China Social Science Fund (the top government-funded project) in 2016 and several published papers are good examples of this innovative combination.”

The significance of M's changes in research belief and methodology is not at the individual level. Her research team is also doing its best to advance the localization and new applications of SCT. The examples are DA of L2 English listening (Meng & Fu, 2023; Meng et al., 2024a), DA of academic paraphrasing (Qian et al., 2023), CBLI of Chinese college students' L2 Russian tense and aspect (Nikitin & Meng, 2024), DA of EFL listening inferencing ability (Geng & Meng, 2023), English listening multiple choice question's added distractors in DA (Geng & Meng, 2024), DA-based rural secondary students' reading ability (Meng & Lyu, 2024) and introduction of *perezhivanie* as an analytical framework for a holistic perspective of China's foreign language education (Meng et al., 2024b).

As Jim' PhD supervisees in China, J and H were even more inspired. They made enormous advancements in interpreting SCT from a philosophical perspective. J proposed an effective pedagogical framework based on the link between SCT and Marxism and then identified a reliable source of conceptual knowledge for CBLI based on Cognitive Linguistics. The thus derived concepts promoted the American Chinese L2 learners in developing the two very difficult Chinese “Ba” and “Bei” structure (Xi, 2022). H employed Marxist's holism to interpret and approach the “myth” of the SCT concept of *perezhivanie* as a psychological “prism”, and then adopted it as a unit of analysis. It was then used to address the research identity dilemma and development of some individual Chinese foreign language teachers (Zhagn et al., 2022; Zhang, 2024). The two PhD dissertations not only deepened our

understanding of SCT from the philosophical perspective, but more importantly fostered the application of SCT in L2 education. Together with other active SCT teams headed by Jinfen Xu in Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Lili Qin in Guangdong University of Foreign Studies and other Vygotskian scholars, the Chinese SCT studies have also made considerable contributions to the world.

“SCT research in China will be more thorough and multi-dimensional”

The statements to the similar effect were expressed by 5 of the interviewees when they talked about the prospects of SCT in China. H mentioned the possible areas for future SCT research:

“Considering SCT’s emphasis on the emotion-cognition dialectic in psychological development, the future DA or CBLI empirical research may focus on the coordinated development of an individual’s emotion and cognition. Another prospective area is perezhivanie as a unit of analysis, like the concept of “commodity” adopted by Marx as a unit to study the capitalist society. Perezhiavnie can approach the macroscopic whole of development with the emotion-cognition contradiction as a starting point, which necessitates further theoretical and empirical investigations. Moreover, it is crucial to note that in China, SCT is primarily applied in higher education, yet there is a need for its broader application in primary and secondary education.”

Considering that microgenesis is a particularly new approach to foreign language education and related research is still very limited, Z pointed out that more thorough research is necessary.

J, H, and M also highlighted the possible integration of SCT into the local context because *“SCT demonstrates significant cross-cultural inclusiveness and explanatory capability”*. For one, both SCT and the Dialectical Research Paradigm posited by Professor Wen (2022) share foundations in Marxist dialectical materialist philosophy, thereby mutually reinforcing each other. For another, Foreign Language Education Studies, as a new discipline founded in 2024 in China, advocates incorporating students’ emotions, attitudes, ways of thinking and behaviors in language teaching practice, which again, aligns with SCT’s perspective. Furthermore, SCT’s dialectical paradigm and holistic perspective can be beneficial to changing the fragmented perspective of Chinese foreign language education (Meng et al., 2024b; Wang & Liu, 2021).

Other interviewees also proposed that more related events like conferences, workshops should be organized to advance the understanding and application in China. Virtual (Clod) communities can also be organized for SCT scholars to share their latest studies, thereby enriching the depth and breadth of SCT research and nurturing the emerging talents.

Conclusion

The quote “A Single Spark May Start a Prairie Fire”, as is repeated by one of the participants, best summarizes the current collective reflections. Jim did his utmost to sow the SCT seeds and nurture them in the China’ soil. The thriving Chinese SCT scholars, in turn, were motivated to move forward by his dedication, persistence, and selflessness. The above reflections and achievements, though not representative of all in its kind in China, present a picture of warmth and promise illuminating a bright SCT future.

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Ethics Declarations

Competing Interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.

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