

# *Current Situation and Future Development of Activity Theory in China*

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**Abstract.** *The cultural-historical activity theory was developed by the Russian psychologist Vygotsky and his colleagues in the 1920s and 1930s. Since then, it has been expanded globally and rapidly, particularly during the past 15 years. However, there has been little interaction between the broader international community and China with respect to the development of the theory and its applications in China, which has taken place along a path of its own. This paper aims to examine this development, focusing on 1) the general situation and background of the research, 2) the basic understanding, theoretical construction and unique features of development; 3) the focal areas in and limitations of the application; and 4) idea evolution in terms of different generation theories. At the end of the paper, emerging trends and future prospects of activity theoretical research in China will be suggested and discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Vygotsky, Cultural-historical activity theory, China*

## **Introduction**

The Cultural-historical activity theory was developed by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky and his colleagues in the 1920s and 1930s. Since then, it has been expanded globally and rapidly, particularly during the past 15 years. Striking out from other schools of psychological theories, the activity theory is particularly concerned with the ways in which tools, collectivities and historical and material conditions together form the actions and contexts of problem solving and knowing (Start, 1998).

The Vygotskian research was initiated relatively early in China. The earliest introduction of Vygotsky and Luria's work in China was in 1936 when an article "Russian Psychological Research" by Chen Hanbiao was published in the journal *China Educational Society*. The earliest introduction on Leont'ev idea can be traced back to an article "Historical perspective on human psychological research" (translated by Ye Sun) published in 1962 in China (see H. S. Liu & Zhou, 2005). The major research, however, has been conducted only after the earth-shattering political movement known as the "Cultural Revolution" (1966-1976) when China's new reformation and open-to-the-world policy launched (Gong, 2001). So far more than 100 research papers, reports and translated articles have been published concerning this line of research. The original books of Vygotsky and Leont'ev have been translated, and Vygotskian ideas have more thoroughly been introduced in some of the nation's higher educational textbooks particularly in educational psychology and child psychology.

In 1998, the National Vygotskian Research Association was established, and since then five nation-wide seminars have been held subsequently. The Vygotskian and activity theoretical research has then been conducted in a more organized and systematic way. However, there has been little interaction between the broader international community and China with respect to the development of the theory in China, which has taken place along a path of its own. A new way of interactive learning is ahead of us as well as a new challenge in knowledge sharing and creation in a global context.

Drawing on a critical review of the existent literature which was found most relevant, we aim in this paper to examine the perspective development of activity theory and its applications, focusing on the following aspects: 1) the general situation and background of the research, 2) the basic understanding, theoretical construction and unique features of development; 3) the focal areas in and limitations of the application; and 4) idea evolution in terms of different generation theories. At the end of the paper, emerging trends and future prospects of culture and activity research in China were suggested and discussed.

When we conducted this review, we realized that in most literature we reviewed, the following terms were frequently adopted to refer to the same line of studies we are going to review and examine: Vygotsky's theory/doctrine, cultural-historical developmental theory or sociocultural-historical theory,

Vygotsky-Leont'ev-Luria school (VLL school), activity theory (AT), Leont'ev's activity theory or Leont'ev' activity-personality theory. Different terms may imply different research interests and focuses and their applications. In this paper, we focus on the perspective development of cultural-historical activity theory rather than giving a general overview covering the whole range of the Vygotskian school and its work. We limit our review and examination of this development within the researchers and scholars from mainland China. The focus or limit scoped here is in a relative sense, serving the convenience of our analysis.

## **General Situation**

### *Major Types of Research and Concerned Topics*

Drawing from the literature, we have identified the following major types of activity-theoretical research and concerned topics: 1) introduction and/or critical review on AT; 2) theoretical comparison; 3) application exploration and discussion or research imagination and discussion on the application of the theory; 4) reconceptualization, theoretical integration and development of AT based on existing theories; and 5) research and practice in light of the activity theory.

**Introduction and/or critical review.** This type of research include the general introduction and research evaluation of Vygotsky's view on the development of thinking (S. J. Xu, 1980), the contributions and limitations of Vygotsky's theory on higher-order mental functioning (Gong, 1985), theoretical analyses on the current wave of Vygotskian research (G. R. Wang, 2000a); the-state-of-the-art of the Russian research on Vygotsky's psychological thoughts (F. X. Zheng & Ye, 2003). In particular, work with a focus on AT include the historical formation and basic tenets of Leont'ev activity theory and evaluation (X. Li, 1979; 1982; S. Y. Zhang, 1985); and the introduction and critical review of more recent development of the activity theory (Chen, 1986; Zhao, 1997; T. N. Zheng, 2005). This type of study is still the dominated form of the Chinese research.

**Theoretical Comparison.** The focus of the comparison is on the concept of activity derived from Vygotsky versus Piaget (Gong, 1993; J. X. Zhu, 1999) and the theories of cognitive development developed by Vygotsky versus Piaget (Ma & Ye, 2004). The comparison between the theories of Vygotsky and Piaget seems to be inspired by Bruner's work (1998). Other theoretical comparison or bridging has much to do with the relevant theoretical constructs such as Marxist view of practice (Z. Li, 1981), social constructivism/constructionism (Gao, 1999b; Ma, 2006; Yang, 2000), and situated cognition and learning (W. J. Wang, 2002).

**Application Exploration and Discussion.** This line of research refers to the attempts and efforts of seeking for the significance and enlightenments of the activity theory for the application in some professional areas such as preschool education (W. J. Wang, 2000a), school learning (T. N. Zheng, 2005), teaching

design and facilitating technology and environment (Xiang & Lai, 2005; W. L. Zhang & W. G. Li, 2003), computer supported collaborative learning – CSCL (Liu et al., 2005; Xiang & Lai, 2005), virtual group learning and discussion (S. Zhang & Y. B. Li, 2005); linguistic studies (G. Y. Xu, 2001), second language acquisition research (Mao, 2002), and mental health education (Shi & Chen, 2003; 2004), and process modeling in product development (J. F. Zhang, et al., 2003). Typically, this type of research remains only at a discussion level, there is no empirical research nor any practices conducted according to the theory.

**Reconceptualization, Theoretical Integration & Development.** Chinese psychology was very much and is still influenced by Russian psychology, in which Marxist dialectical materialism is an important guideline for all areas of psychological research and practice. Particularly in this case, Vygotsky's psychological theory based on Marxism has not only been well introduced and reviewed, it has also been absorbed, elaborated and reconceptualized, being integrated in many theoretical frameworks developed by Chinese psychologists, in particular, this is the case in the nation's leading theories in child psychology and psychology of thinking development (Z. X. Zhu, 1979; Z. X. Zhu & Lin, 1988) and in educational psychology (Pan, 1980).

**Research and Practice in light of AT.** The research of this type aims to combine theory with practice. The studies conducted in this line are quite few. One exceptional series of experimental studies in real school setting is concerned with the building of class community and students personality development (Gong & Huang, 1999). Similar kinds of follow-up studies are emerging and they are conducted in organizational and business settings (Hong, 2000; Hong & Engeström, 2004; Wu, 2002).

### ***Translation Work, Textbooks and Journals***

Several major works of Vygotsky and Leont'ev have been translated into Chinese (see Appendix 2). They all were translated directly from Russian versions. Furthermore, the Vygotskian theory has well been introduced and integrated into several important university textbooks in educational psychology (Pan, 1980) and developmental psychology (Z. X. Zhu, 1979; Z. X. Zhu & Lin, 1988). Several nation's leading journals in education (e.g., *Education Research*) and psychology (e.g., *Acta Psychologica Sinica*, *Psychological Science*, *Mental Development and Education*) have published articles on the concerned topic during the past decades.

### ***Organized Seminars and the National Vygotskian Research Association***

In 1998, the National Vygotskian Research Association (NVRA) was established in China. The association is attached to Chinese Academic Association of Child Psychology and Educational Psychology. Since the establishment of the NVRA, five seminars have been held in 1998, 1999, 2000, 2002, and 2004, respectively. The number of active participants in each seminar was a little over 30. The participants were mainly professors and researchers from universities

and research institutes all over the country. Altogether more than 60 papers were submitted and presented during the five successive seminars (NVRA, 1999, G. R. Wang, 2000b, 2003).

The first seminar was held in Zhou Shan, Zhejiang Province. The seminar covered different aspects of Vygotskian research and practice. Over ten papers have been submitted for the seminar. They dealt with various topics, including the introduction and review of Vygotsky's contributions to psychological science, the introduction of the influence of Vygotsky's scientific heritage on Western nations, the cross-cultural research of Vygotsky's theory and its impact on educational practices, comparative research of Vygotsky and Piaget on the issue of child egocentric speech, and how to understand the significance of Russian and the Soviet Union's psychological research, etc. Practical issues such as the application of Vygotsky's theory in the reform of school education has received particular attention.

The second seminar was held in Shangyi, Zhejiang Province. The seminar received 14 submitted papers. The themes of the seminar include the evaluation of Vygotsky's fundamental academic thoughts, Vygotsky's educational thoughts and the country's present reform of education, and the relation between worldwide "Vygotskian wave" and the development trend of the 21st century's path to psychology.

The third seminar was held in Wu Han, Hubei Province. 14 papers were submitted to the seminar. The main themes were on the Vygotsky's scientific thoughts in China, Vygotsky's *autonomic educational thoughts* (自主性教育思想), Vygotsky's social constructivism and its implications for China's education reform, and the comparison between the theories of Vygotsky and Jean Piaget.

The fourth seminar was held in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province. 18 papers were submitted. The main theme of the seminar was on the enlightenment of the Vygotskian research wave on the development of modern Chinese psychology and Vygotsky's thoughts of educational psychology and the country's educational reform in the new millennium. Eight papers were mainly presented and discussed during the seminar (the list of the presented papers is attached as Appendix 1).

The fifth seminar was held in Lianyungang, Jiangsu Province. The deputy chairman of the Chinese Psychological Association, Chongde Lin had a speech in the seminar, making an explicit proposal for the establishment of the China school of education and development. In the seminar the psychological thoughts of Vygotsky were discussed in connection with local developed theoretical ideas by the nation's founder of child psychology Zhixian Zhu, and the application of Vygotskian thoughts in China's education research and practice was emphasized.

Vygotskian research in China, according to the NVRA chairman Haoran Gong (2001), has gone through three stages after China's reform started in the late 1970s. The first stage is the recognition of the scientific value of Vygotsky's psychological thoughts. The second stage is the exploration into the

country's reform of school education with the guidance of Vygotsk's theory. The focus at this stage is on the application, modification and development of Vygotsky's theory in the Chinese context. The representative research work includes, for instance, the natural experiment on the building of a school class community led by Haoran Gong and teaching design and experiments led by Wen Gao. The third stage is concerned with more systematic and organized research activities and the attempt and efforts to make Chinese Vygotskian research known to the world. The establishment of the NVRA is the first but important step to lead to more fruitful work in China's Vygotskian and activity theoretical research.

## **Theoretical Construction and Unique Features**

### ***The Concept of Activity***

The concept of activity is actually the most confused term in the previous literature. The vagueness of the concept of activity and the appropriateness of using the concept in the Russian psychological literature have been questioned and discussed by Chinese scholars (X. Li, 1979; S. Y. Zhang, 1985). This is mainly related to the central argumentation that the concepts between activity in general and the concept of *perceivable activity* (*Gan Xin Huo Dong*, 感性活动) and *practice* (*Shi Jian*, 实践) are not well differentiated in Leont'ev' usage of activity. Owing to this confusion, the appropriateness in understanding the concept of activity is difficult to obtain. One of the major problems is due to the particular emphasis on the study of activity, the subjective initiative of human actions is thus weakened or ignored. Therefore, the theory as such is unable to identify the essential feature of human actions. X. Li (1979) argues that in view of Marx, the study of activity should be approached and understood from its subjective aspect. Another critique on Leon'ev' application of Marxism is on his improper way of analyzing individual actions. Leon'ev adopted from Marx's work the principles of analyzing social activities for the analysis of individual actions (S. Y. Zhang, 1985).

In Chinese literature, activity in most cases is understood as individual activity. X. Li (1982) suggests that the conceptual domains such as *life practice* (生活实践, in Lenin's term) or *practice activity* (实践活动, in Marx's term) should perhaps be included in the psychological study, which expound better the essential nature of human doing (which differ from that of animals) and at the same time not only individual but shared human activities are emphasized.

### ***Theoretical Connections and Perplexes***

In Chinese literature, the most commonly used term for activity theory is *Leont'ev's activity theory*. Some scholars use the term *activity theory represented by Leont'ev* (Chen, 1986), others adopt the term *VLL School activity theory* (Shi & Chen, 2003, 2004), or just activity theory (Xiang & Lai, 2005; T. N. Zheng, 2005; W. Zheng & D. W. Wang, 2005). Whatever the case, when activity theory is intro-

duced, the theoretical root from Vygotsky is always indicated.

However, when it refers to or focuses on Vygotsky's work, the term *cultural-historical developmental theory* is most likely to be adopted. The terms such as *cultural-historical theory*, *sociocultural-historical theory* and *VLL School* are quite often used as substitutions for cultural-historical developmental theory (Z. X. Zhu & Lin, 1988). It seems VLL or cultural-historical school is used when introducing the Vygotskian school in a broader sense, in which activity theory naturally form an organic part of the theory.

This serves just as a rough clarification. Still today there seems to be a gap how Leont'ev's activity theory is actually connected to Vygotsky's cultural-historical development theory. People may keep asking: "Is Vygotsky's theory the same thing as what we have talked about to be the activity theory?" Or a similar question: "Is the activity theory only an expansion of Vygotsky's theory?" As Chen (1986) indicates that for many reasons, there was very little published concerning Leont'ev's work during the 1930s. This seemed to lead to a "vacuum zone" (Chen's term, p. 216) between Vygotsky's seminal works published during 1929-1936 and Leont'ev's writing "An Introduction to Mental Development". Furthermore, this may also have much to do with the fact that new theoretical development and connections of activity theory developed beyond Russian schools have not well been introduced to China. Many Chinese researchers still believe that it is impossible to study or make good use of activity theory in their research because of their lack of the Russian language.

**Leont'ev versus Rubinstein.** The debate between Leont'ev and Rubinstein on basic issues of psychological theories has caught attention of Chinese researchers. The debate was originated in Russian psychology. Table 1 summarizes only some commonalities and differences of Leont'ev and Rubinstein which were discussed by Chinese researchers.

TABLE 1 A Conceptual Comparison: Leont'ev versus Rubinstein

Leont'ev	Rubinstein
concrete analysis & enrichment of the principle of unifying consciousness with activity;	the first introduction of the principle and it then remained at a theoretical level;
the emphasis on the dynamic aspect of psychological study: "meaningful internal movement";	the emphasis on the dynamic aspect of psychological study: "mind as process";
the whole activity system as object of research;	particular elements of activity as object of research;
differentiated relation between activity-motive, action-goal, and operation-condition;	loose coupling of the relations with multi-connections among those elements;
the determinant of external activity	the determinant of "the external function through the internal"

Sources: Chen, 1986; X. Li, 1979

In relation to the comparison in Table 1, we noticed that some comparison in English literature indicates also the limitations inherent to each approach: the drawbacks of the variant of activity theory proposed by Leont'ev are related to simple internalization of ready-made standards, while those of the version proposed by Rubinstein underestimates the role of mediation in the process of human activities (Lektorsky, 1999). This may be of help in our understanding the whole picture.

**Elkonin and Davydov.** After the 1960s, drawing from Vygotsky's ideas and by applying Leont'ev' activity theory, Elkonin systematically put forward a stage theory on child mental development. The stage theory emphasizes the consistency between the dominant forms of activities and child mental development, and the development of personality in particular (Z. X. Zhu, & Lin, 1988). His student Davydov was an active promoter, and developed further the theory.

### ***Critical Issues***

The way the basic concepts, principles and critical issues are understood and expressed may vary when comparing Chinese and English literature. Some concepts and principles from the Vygotskian school are particularly emphasized in both Chinese and English literature. They are, for instance, the principle of historicity, the concept of mediation, the zone of proximal development. Some seem to be more emphasized in Chinese literature, and others more in English literature. For instance, the principle of unifying consciousness with activity, the principle of the interaction between the internal and external activities are more emphasized in Chinese literature and activity system as the prime unit of analysis, multi-voicedness of activity systems, and the dialectic principle of contradiction and development derived from Ilyenkov are more emphasized in English literature. This may indicate the different interests and focuses of different researchers, also reflect to a certain extent the unique context in which the key concepts and principles are developed within a particular research community or country.

On the basic understanding of role of culture and activity, in Chinese literature it is more understood as the significant cultural influence on mental development. The typical expression is very much concerned with the leading role of formal education and the doctrine of the dialectic relation between the internal and external factors, that is, "the external works only through the internal". In some other case, when cultural determinism is claimed, it remains often at an abstract or nearly philosophical level. While in English literature, the role of sociocultural influence is typically stated as cultural facilitating mental development. When the cultural determinism is claimed, the significant role of language known as linguistic relativity (e.g., Vygotsky; Whorf) and the determinant of formal education (e.g., Vygotsky; also activity relativity developed by Peter Tulviste) are explicitly explored and examined in cross-cultural settings (e.g., central Asia) at a more empirical and systematic level.



### ***Significant Contributions and Limitations of Activity Theory***

There is no consensus among Chinese scholars what are the most significant contributions and what are the limitations. Below are some thoughts reflected in the literature. The main contributions of AT recognized by Chinese researchers can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The expansion and application of the principle of unifying activity with consciousness in activity theory: prior to AT, the principle was put forward, but remained to a large extent at a theoretical level. Leont'ev's work made it possible to be concrete with rich research content (X. Li, 1979).
- 2) The introduction of the historicity principle into psychology: This tradition started from Vygotsky who was the first scholar to introduce the historicity principle into the studies of various psychological issues and topics. The basic idea proposed by Leont'ev is that the subject's activity is subject to the features of the object of activity in which the subject is involved, and object itself is enriched with social and cultural content, it is therefore (individual) activity that is the social and cultural process by nature. Activity plays an important role in the formation of the human mind and consciousness primarily can be seen in this way (Gong, 2001; X. Li, 1979).
- 3) Activity / activity system as an object (and unit) of analysis: shared activities are considered a significant unit of study, in which the shared activity serves as the base for the development of a class collectivity as well as the development of an individual's personality (Gong, 2001).
- 4) The shift of psychological study from the strictly controlled lab experiments to natural life situations. This shows a direction particularly for those who are involved in the research of social psychology (Chen Li's key message to the first NVEA seminar, NVRA, 1999) As S. Y. Zhang (1985) commented that the activity theory is useful for avoiding the tendencies of naturalism and biology in psychological studies.

The limitations indicated by Chinese researchers:

- 1) The intrinsic shortcomings of the internalization approach: mechanic separation of internal and external activities; ignoring the constrain of subjective factors while overstressing the determinant of the external activity (X. Li, 1979).
- 2) Giving too much prominence to the activity scope: the bias is connected to the tendency of activity researchers to replace the whole areas of psychological studies with the study of activity (S. Y. Zhang, 1985; Chen, 1986).

The above discussion and evaluation is mainly associated with Leont'ev's and early AT work. More recent work and the work going beyond the Russian school have rarely been connected. AT itself as it is now is very much under construction in a wide global context and it expands rapidly all the time. We believe the evaluation is appropriate only when it points to the recent process and development.

Quite recently some meaningful work and its development has been seen in connection with Chinese research and practice. Part of the current and important works of Vygotskian research and activity theory developed in the West have for the first time caught the attention of Chinese scholars. They have been introduced and cited in some of recent Chinese literature (Liu et al, 2005; J. F. Zhang, et al., 2003; T. N. Zheng, 2005; W. Zheng & D. W. Wang, 2005). They include, for instance, *Learning by expanding* (Engeström, 1987); *Social cultural studies of mind* (Wertsch et al., 1995) (Eds.); *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline* (Cole, 1996); *Context and consciousness: Activity theory and human-computer interaction* (Nordi, 1996); *Perspective on activity theory* (Engeström et al., 1999) (Eds.); *Vygotsky and pedagogy* (Daniels, 2001); *The culture of education* (Bruner, 2001). Among those first attempts, potential for modern Chinese applications have been aimed and the addressed issues and discussions are wide and in several areas of applications such as education reform, education technology, teaching and learning designs, and even in product development. Profound work and development, however, does not refer to only a partial and segmented introduction and citation, but a more serious and systemic plan for the translation work, critical introduction and review and integrations that is meaningful for China's ongoing economic, educational and social activities and development.

### **Focal Areas and Limitations in Application**

The application of the activity theory in China is mainly in school settings, including preschool education. Some empirical studies and experiments in this context are particularly worth noting. Already in 1983, Gong and his colleagues started a series of educational experiments on the building of student class community in a natural school setting (Gong, 2001; Gong & Huang, 1999). The research places a special stress on the shared activity of participants in the class community through which both collective classes and individual participants develop. Such experiments have been expanded to schools in more than 20 cities. Elsewhere, Gao and his colleagues conducted a series of studies on the design of instruction in school education and its reformation (Gao, 1999a, 1999b; W. J. Wang, 2000a, 2000b). In these studies, strategies for designing activities (the construction of the dominated type of activity, the design of learning activity) and co-construction of social situations play a key role in forming new ways of teaching and learning.

Studies in organizational and management settings are emerging, which have been conducted with Chinese scholars abroad or with collaboration with foreign universities and researchers (Hong, 2000; Hong & Engeström, 2004; Wu, 2002).

Hong et al. (2000, 2004) conducted a series of follow-up studies in Chinese and international work organizations operating in South China, focusing on learning, expertise, and innovation of work organizations undergoing transfor-

mation. The studies are in the same line of *developmental work research approach* based on cultural-historical activity theory, in which the cultural-historical context of work and the construction of object-oriented activity systems are particularly concerned.

Wu (2002) conducted an investigation of a teacher initiated curriculum change that happened at Zhejiang Teachers' University, China, with particular focus on the reconstruction of teachers' personal understanding through their exploratory practice. The research used activity theory as a further step to understand the teachers' learning process in terms of a development zone.

So far, the research and application of the activity theory is limited to the school settings only, new development going beyond the school settings is called for.

## **Different Generations of Activity Theory**

### ***The New Generation of Activity Theory***

Cultural-historical activity has evolved through three generations of research. According to Engeström (2001), the first generation, centered around Vygotsky, created the idea of *mediation*. Vygotsky's idea of cultural mediation of actions is commonly expressed as the triad of subject, object and mediating artifact.

The second generation of activity theory derived its inspiration largely from Leont'ev's work. In his famous example of "primeval collective hunt", Leont'ev explicated the crucial difference between an individual's action and a *collective activity* (Leont'ev, 1981). As the research developed, Vygotsky's original triangle model has been expanded into a model of a *collective activity system*, in which complex interrelations between the individual subject and his or her community, self-renewal of the system and cultural diversity become the focus of study (Engeström, 1987; Cole, 1988).

When activity theory went global with a tremendous diversity of its applications in different countries and domains, questions of "diversity and dialogues between different traditions and perspectives became increasingly serious challenges" (Engeström, 2001, p. 135). The third generation of activity theory needs to develop conceptual tools to understand dialogue, multiple perspectives, and networks of *interacting activity systems*. New challenges of learning are ahead of us and the door is open for the formation of a new generation of activity theory.

The distinction of the three generation theories outlined above is in a relative sense depending on the researchers' perception and understanding of the theory and their specific interest and focus in research. In particular, we need to point out that the connection of the first and second generation theories is based more on research tradition and the teacher-student relationship. In the first generation theory, the concept of activity is alive, but has not yet become the central concept as it is in the second and third generations.

### ***The Progress of Chinese Research***

As reviewed above, the distinction between individual action and collective activity is the watershed to differ the first from the second generations of AT. In Chinese research, the new development of activity theory has been noted but in a weak form. In most cases, the concept connects individual psychological phenomenon, and the research limited only at an individual level has been pointed to by X. Li (1982):

In psychology, till now, activity conventionally refers to individual activity ... psychology needs to study not only individual activity, but also common activity that people share. This issue is particularly protruding in the disciplines such as social psychology and managerial psychology. This also addresses a new and actual issue in psychology. (p. 17).

The mainstream of Chinese research is concerned with the first generation theory, and new developments concerning the second and third generation theories have yet to develop. In recent Chinese literature, three generation theories have been noted and introduced by some authors, and the development of a new generation of AT and its application in China is particularly discussed (Xiang & Lai, 2005; T. N. Zheng, 2005; W. Zheng & D. W. Wang, 2005).

### **Emerging Trend and Future Prospect**

As reviewed, the Chinese activity theoretical research has advanced rapidly within a short time. Nevertheless, the research is currently limited to the treatise of the Russian school, and new development going beyond this situation is called for; the application of the theory is limited to the school setting only, and new development going beyond the school domain is necessary; and development of the activity theory as a whole is limited to the first generation of research and new development in the second and third generation theories is needed.

Drawing from the above review and analysis, we propose that new developments of the cultural-historical activity theory can be achieved only if we are open to new opportunities and challenges. First, we need to pay sufficient attention to the introduction of the new development of the activity theory and recent research conducted globally in a more profound and systematic way. As Zheng and Ye (2003) have observed, the Vygotskian research is even flourishing more in Western psychology than its Russian home. This implies that we have plenty of new opportunities for our learning and development.

Second, the Chinese activity research needs to pay special attention not only to the application exploration types of discussion (as we have reviewed and defined in this paper), but also to the actual research and practice at an empirical level. To combine theory with practice, it appears that we need a new generation of activity theory that stresses dynamics of culture and interacting

networks of activity systems. It implies that we need to expand the existing versions of the theory through actual and local applications and modifications and create our own version of the theory that applies most to the Chinese context.

Finally, we need to facilitate more the international communication and collaboration at a new level. By this, we mean to emphasize two-way communication and collaboration between the broader international community and China with respect to the development of the theory and its applications. More specifically, the practical actions, for instance, could be: 1) participating actively in international academic activities - one good forum which is important but currently ignored by the Chinese research community is in connection with *the International Society for Cultural and Activity Research* (ISCAR, formerly it known as the International Society for Cultural Research and Activity Theory); 2) establishing academic associations (e.g., ISCAR branch, the NVRA which has already been established in China) as well as research institutions (like *the Center for Human Activity Theory* in Japan) which are able to play leading roles in academic exchange and communication in various forms (e.g., exchange of ideas regularly, common email list, discussion forum through internet, video conference, collaboration in teaching and research, etc.) – in this respect, multiplicity of academic organization and research should be emphasized; 3) planned translation work from different and international academic sources; 4) holding the international symposium like the New Learning Challenges symposiums we have already had at Kansai University (e.g., Asian Conference on Vygotskian Research & AT, China); and 5) establishing specific journals that promote the nation's cultural and activity research and facilitates the exchange of ideas and communication internationally.

### **Concluding Remark**

The development of activity theory in China is still in its infant stage compared with the one developed in the broader international context. The development is bound to Vygotsky's and Leon'ev's early work and mostly linked to Russian studies. Only quite recently have we seen some emerging work in introducing and applying the current work and findings of activity theory developed elsewhere and it seems to be engaging and promising. For the future construction and development of activity theory and its more fruitful applications in China, we argue for a new generation of activity theory that stresses the dynamics of culture and integrating networks of self-renewing activity systems. We believe it is important to develop a version of the theory which is applicable in a Chinese context (e.g., long cultural-historical tradition, specific social and educational conditions, and dramatic political/ideological changes and economic reformations) and is useful for the nation's current social, economic and educational transformations and ongoing learning activities.

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### **Appendix 1: Papers presented and discussed in the fourth seminar of the National Vygotsky Research Association (2001)**

- Gong, H. R.: Vygotsky's thoughts of scientific psychology in China (keynote).
- Gong, H. R.: On play and the child mental development.
- Fang, G.: The influence of cultural factors on children's school adaptability.
- Liu, H. S.: The contributions of Vygotsky to educational psychology.
- Fang, F. X.: Theoretical and experimental research on the new trend of dynamic measurement for assessing children's intelligence.
- Yang, X. H.: Inspiration from Vygotsky's research on psychological techniques.
- Wang, G. R.: Vygotsky and modern psychological science.
- Cai, H. S.: Theoretical exploration into the expansion of the concept "ZoPD".
- Qiang, Z. J.: Vygotskian research in Japan.

### **Appendix 2: A List of Translated Books**

#### **Vygotsky**

- Vygotsky: *Selected Works of Vygotsky in Education* (translated by Zhengqiu Yu, People's Education Press, 1994)
- Vygotsky: *Thought and Language* (translated by Wei Li, Zhejiang Education Press, 1998)
- Educational Psychology: Book Series of the National Vygotskian Research Association (2)* (translated by Haoran Gong, Guoyu Xu, Shaodian Pan, & Huashan Liu, Zhejiang Education Press, 2003)



**Leont'ev**

Leont'ev: *Historical Perspective on Human Psychological Research*, Russian Psychological Science, Vol.1 (translated by Ye Sun, Science Press, 1962)

Leont'ev: *Activity, Consciousness, and Personality* (Russian version 1977, translated by Li Xi et al, Shanghai Translation Press, 1979).

Leont'ev: The domain of activity in modern psychology, in Zhao, B. R. (Ed.)(1982), *Fundamental theoretical Issues in the Development of Modern Psychology*. Beijing: China Social Science Press.