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Returning “Home”? Exploring the Re-integration Experiences of Internationally Educated Chinese Academic Returnees

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Return migration of internationally educated Chinese academics has been a significant feature of China’s higher education internationalization strategy and a top governmental concern for boosting China’s development in the globalized knowledge economy. However, despite the government’s expectation of returnee academics’ long-term settlement in China, there has been a trend of their re-migration to settle overseas. It is necessary then to explore how their re-integration experiences in China affect their intentions for future migration. This study employs a qualitative case study method to explore the re-integration experiences for internationally educated Chinese academic returnees. Their experiences are interpreted vis-à-vis the institutional and national contexts. The findings indicate that what appears to be personal struggles juggling with different cultures are actually reflective of competing powers of recognition that value cultural knowledges differently in a seemingly uniform process of global higher education internationalization.

Keywords: Academic returnee, re-integration, academic migration, internationalization, case study

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The *return migration* of internationally educated Chinese academics has been seen as an important manifestation of China’s higher education internationalization, and a governmental talent deployment strategy for advancing China’s development in the globalized knowledge economy (Pan, 2016; Wang & Zweig, 2009). Racing to promptly elevate its position internationally in university rankings and research output, China has been sparing no efforts to mobilize “imported” talents in the form of their international experience and research skills. Less attention, however, has been directed to the cultivation of its own domestic academic cultures. Meanwhile, despite the government’s expectation of returnee academics’ long-term settlement in China, there has been a trend of their re-migration to settle overseas (Feng, 2017). Such a trend of talent outflow necessitates the exploration of the interplay between cross-border migration and home country re-integration. In this study, I aimed to explore how transnational academic migration experiences affect returnee academics’ work and learning after their return to China. This paper addresses the question: *How did internationally educated Chinese academic returnees experience re-integration in China?*

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Re-integration is a critical aspect of migration and intercultural studies (Presbitero, 2016), but has been less examined compared to the phenomenon of host-country integration (Gaw, 2000; Jackson, 2004). The difficulties or barriers migrants encounter while crossing cultural borders have, however, been discussed through the lens of culture shock or reverse culture shock. Literature shows that migrants would experience psychological stresses and sociocultural challenges while adapting to unfamiliar environments (Ward & Lin, 2010). The degree to which migrants are able to cope with such adaptation processes affects their sense of identity and life satisfaction, as well as their ability to deal with stresses at work and in society at large (Chiu, Wu, Zhuang, & Hsu, 2009). Nevertheless, such an intercultural framework is prone to be contested as studies from anti-racist and postcolonial perspectives caution against its uncritical inclination toward taking cultures as neutral, fixed, de-politicized, and reduced to symbols like cultural dresses, dances, and food (Gorski, 2008; Nieto, 2010). This study holds a critical stance that situates cultural differences manifested in academic work against the social, political, and historical forces in global and local contexts.

Methodology

This study employs the methodology of a qualitative case study (Stake, 1995). The in-depth exploration of cases, through multiple sources of data and detailed description, allows for an understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon that takes into account important contextual factors (Simmons, 2009). Such features of qualitative case study align with my intentions to interpret participants' re-integration experiences vis-à-vis the institutional and national contexts where they were situated.

Each individual is a case, or unit of analysis, bounded by their lived experience as internationally educated returnee academics. Specifically, they were incumbent Chinese professors in social sciences, and humanities, who had completed their doctoral degrees overseas and maintained social and professional connections with their host countries of doctoral studies. Through purposive and snowball sampling, 12 participants were recruited from three universities labelled as: Universities A, B, and C in Beijing, China. All of these institutions are among the top research universities in China, demonstrating strengths in both the social sciences and humanities. Participants returned to China from a total of nine destination countries or regions, where they had conducted their doctoral studies. Their education and employment profiles are presented in Table 1. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analyses of their academic curriculum vitae and institutional policy documents. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were guided by two probing questions: *What difficulties or barriers have you encountered in workplace re-integration? In what ways have you tried to address those challenges?*

Table 1

Participants' International Education and Current Employment Profile

Name	Employment Institution	Title	Field of Study	Country/Region of Study	Year of Return
Nick	A	Associate Professor	Education	Belgium	2011
Grace	A	Associate Professor	Education	UK	2012
Stella	A	Lecturer	Education	Australia	2012
Barbara	B	Assistant Professor	Journalism	UK	2014
GZ	B	Assistant Professor	Journalism	Holland	2013
Sophie	B	Assistant Professor	Journalism	Hong Kong	2017
Clara	C	Lecturer	Finance	US	2015
Tim	C	Associate Professor	Finance	US	2013
Rick	C	Associate Professor	Economics	US	2013
Liangna	C	Lecturer	French	France	2016
Jasmine	C	Associate Professor	English	Canada	2009
Andy	C	Associate Professor	English	Japan	2006

Note. All names are pseudonyms selected by participants.

Findings

All participants indicated that they experienced various problems in transitioning and adapting to a different academic evaluation system and academic culture when they returned to China after graduation. Many academics believed that the Chinese academic system values efficiency of research output over research quality, and this pushed them to find ways to publish with increasing speed. Professors from University C, for instance, were required to have at least one publication each year. This forced some participants to change their research fields to more practical and applied research. Barbara's statement provides a good illustration:

When I just returned, many people believed that I must have had difficulty applying for projects in China because I told them I was doing cultural studies. In China, people are more concerned about topics like national image building. For the sake of one's academic growth, I think I may have to cater my research topics to the trend in China, but in the UK, there's no problem at all if I basically follow my own academic interests.

This adaptation process was complicated by the concurrent process of identity transition from a student to a knowledge worker. Since teaching and research became part of participants' employment in a professorship, accordingly, they were expected to teach and produce research in order to retain their jobs and gain promotions. However, most of my participants did not have a

single publication before they started their current work. They explained that during their doctoral studies, their research was focused on writing their own dissertations, and many of them considered their PhD programs to be a period for systematic training in theories and methodologies. In spite of these beliefs, they were immediately required to publish upon employment, which led to a sharp increase in their overall anxiety.

Language also presented an issue for participants to regain academic recognition in China. Sophie placed a “language shift” as the foremost issue she encountered since in her institution an English publication was not counted towards work accomplishment. However, she was trained in English and she still believed that her assertions could only be conveyed in English. In contrast, in Universities A and C, publishing in English was an explicit requirement for returnee professors. If they were to publish in English, they could target only SSCI (Social Sciences Citation Index) journals and had to be the lead author in order for their publications to be accepted as work achievement. Another of my participants, Stella, believed that this posed a high publication demand due to the fact that:

foreign scholars can and do publish in non-SSCI journals, and if they are to be the non-first authors, they won't proactively approach Chinese scholars like me as they have many potential research partners right around them who are more competitive in terms of English proficiency and available academic resources.

In addition, some of the newly employed academics mentioned that they had to adapt to a workplace culture that differed from what they had experienced as PhD students. Grace pointed out that the Chinese academic culture is one relating to a “parenting style.” The workplace culture that Grace found herself within relied upon hierarchical power relations and bureaucratic administrations, which exerted pressure on her as communication or cooperation was not that straightforward.

In light of these issues surrounding re-integration, maintaining connections with former supervisors and colleagues became an adaptation strategy for fulfilling work requirements, gaining collective support, and sustaining the confidence to carry on with intellectual interests and pursuits. Such connections helped the participants to gain a sense of recognition and belonging in their transnational academic community. Participants kept approaching their supervisors for mentorship, going to the same conferences, and collaborating on publications and research projects. The most intense form of these types of connection was epitomized by the experience of Sophie. She remained a part of the transnational learning community comprised of her supervisor and her supervisor's former and current students attending weekly reading clubs and other monthly online learning sessions. As Sophie commented:

In our community, everybody is willing to communicate. Perhaps our research is more on critical issues, or on the socially marginalized, we don't feel discriminated [among ourselves]. We feel we are equal. It is a very supportive community and it has formed a mechanism [for communication]. We won't feel disconnected even if we don't get in touch that often for some time. In fact, we keep our connections every day.

The affinity and substantive connections with their host countries led participants to envision or even plan for re-migration. For example, Liangna acknowledged that she would consider a maximum of three years as a reasonable length of time to see if she could re-establish herself academically in China. Frustrated by her publication experiences in China, she envisioned a better career platform for herself in France as she felt professionally and emotionally supported by both of her French supervisors. Their shared interests had gone beyond academics to include a love for

literature, arts, and music, whereas in China, Liangna's humanistic feelings and ideals did not seem to find an echo.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this study conform with literature on reverse culture shock (Adler, 1981; Kim, 2008) but it should be noted that an intercultural perspective ignores the contested implications of culture on education and learning (Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2000). In this study, it is revealed that what appears to be personal struggles juggling with different cultures are actually reflective of competing powers of recognition that value cultural knowledges differently in a seemingly uniform process of global higher education internationalization (see also, Guo & Jamal, 2007). Chinese universities are eager to gain international recognition by pushing internationally educated returnee academics to publish academic papers. At the same time, however, China is disregarding the substantive differences in academic development between the West and its own academic system. The latter has alienated internationally educated academics whose ways of research seem foreign to domestically educated colleagues. Meanwhile, local academic community building seems to be sidelined in the hasty pursuit of international publication, ignoring the necessity for cultivating an academic culture that values democratic dialogue, sharing and caring. Due to the changes and ambivalences in China's own internationalization process, there is actually no fixed "home" for returnee academics to return to. Instead, they make their own academic "home" by connecting and working with those who share their research tradition, support their growth, and recognize their values. Migration is thus the manifestation of their need for recognition.

This study suggests that for sustained academic development, China's higher education internationalization should take the time to work on local academic community building that recognizes and supports returnee academics' ways of knowing and doing. An analysis of results from this study also suggests that there should be more opportunities within Chinese universities for open dialogue and exchange about different ways of conducting research.

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