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# **Integration or Re-mobility: Exploring the Typology of Academic Returnees' Post-return Experiences in Chinese Universities from the Cultural Assimilation Perspective**

## **Abstract**

In this century, Chinese overseas-educated academics have been attracted to return to their homeland to reverse the brain drain trend in China. However, many studies have found that these academic returnees may face difficulty reintegrating upon returning. This study examines the complexity of academic returnees' post-return integration process in Chinese universities via the cultural assimilation theory perspective. Twenty-nine in-depth semi-structured interviews with academic returnees from eight top universities in Shanghai and Guangzhou were conducted. In our analysis, academic returnees perceived two obstacles to their cultural integration after returning: the mismatch in valuing research outputs and the barriers to forming a trustworthy local research community. According to their reactions to perceived challenges and given rationales, we categorized returnees' post-return integration processes into three patterns: integration, enclavement, and self-separation. We suggest that institutionalized practices to cultivate mutual understandings between returnees and local academia regarding overseas-developed academic culture and its distinction with dominant values and norms in the local academic community are imperative to facilitate academic returnees' post-return integration.

**Keywords:** academic returnees, integration, academic mobility, cultural assimilation, higher education, China

## Introduction

As the knowledge-based economy thrives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many countries are now involved in a more interconnected world characterized by a fierce war for global talent (Knight, 2006; Wang et al., 2015). Since the mid-1990s, China's central government and universities have been enticing outbound-mobile talents to return to China and reverse the brain drain. Overseas-educated talents are expected to make significant contributions to higher education in such ways as introducing new methods of teaching and student supervision, maintaining international connections, and presenting China's experience to the global academic community (Liu & Tian, 2019; Ma & Pan, 2015; Ynalvez & Shrum, 2011; Zhu & Zhang, 2017; Zweig et al., 2004). Many universities have designed and implemented global talent recruitment and management policies and strategies (Li & Pu, 2017), resulting in increased career opportunities, abundant research funds, economic incentives, etc., that have become significant pulling forces motivating cross-border academics to return to China (Hao et al., 2017; Tharenou & Seet, 2014; Zweig & Wang, 2013).

However, researchers have argued that returning academics must adapt to institutional, cultural, and social contexts to effectively transfer their knowledge and networks (Altbach, 2004; Velema, 2012; Zweig, 2006). Also, studies on academic mobility in the international context point out that returnees can scarcely avoid facing challenges involving cultural differences and identity reformation related to their geographical relocation (Gill, 2005; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Mathews-Aydinli, 2009; Neiterman & Bourgeault, 2015; Van et al., 2012). For instance, Gu and Schweisfurth (2015) highlighted mobile students' overseas experience as an identity-transforming process towards cosmopolitan and transnational identification. Hence, feelings of dissatisfaction, confusions about cultural and national identity, and a lack of sense

of belonging were common issues for returnees in any country and region (Chiang & Lia, 2008; Gaw, 2000; Mathews-Aydinli, 2009).

As for Chinese academic returnees not only self-perceived differences and difficulties in communicating with their non-overseas-educated colleagues but also felt a certain degree of marginalization in their host institutions for being “less” Chinese (Christou, 2011; Tharenou & Seet, 2014). Moreover, after returning to China, they also had to deal with “reverse cultural shock” in their local institutions, mostly encountering complicated interpersonal relationships, uncertain employment status, fierce peer competition for research grants, and a lack of social connections (Ai, 2019; Li et al., 2014; Lu & Zhang, 2015; Ma & Pan, 2015). Tharenou and Seet (2014) argued that the stresses derived from this reverse cultural shock tend to cause cultural maladjustment among academic returnees, which could lead to their decision to re-expatriate in the future.

Nevertheless, the existing literature primarily examines academic returnees as a homogenous group and situates them as passive recipients in the post-return integration process. There is a lack of discussion about their active agency in reacting towards perceived difficulties in integrating into embedding institutions in the post-return period and how their reactions could be different, which are the focus of this study.

### **Theoretical perspective: Multiple processes of cultural assimilation in migration**

A review of extant studies on academic returnees shows that scholars have primarily focused on returnees’ decision-making process for their return migration via a pull-and-push factor perspective, and explained their post-return experiences, contributions, and challenges in the host higher education institutions from perspectives of human capital theory and social identity theory (Ai, 2019; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Hao et al., 2017; Tharenou & Seet, 2014; Zweig & Wang, 2013). There is an assumption in the existing literature that returnees’ academic culture is a static state developed from their overseas academic experiences. However, as

1 researchers have argued, academic socialization occurs when faculty members embark on their  
2 academic journey towards gaining membership into the profession (Xue et al., 2015; Wu, 2017).  
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4 Austin (2002) also pinpointed that such a socialization process is a *de facto* time-lasting  
5 construction, shaping and reforming one's perception of the academic profession based on  
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7 one's graduate school experience and first faculty position.  
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12 Cultural assimilation theory (Berry, 1997; Portes & Zhou, 1993), primarily adopted in  
13 immigration studies, is utilized as this study's analytic perspective to investigate this academic  
14 socialization process beyond returnees' postgraduate education and emphasize the possible  
15 diversity within this academic returnee group. Portes and Zhou (1993) argued that, beyond  
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17 completely assimilating into the mainstream culture, there are two other possible social  
18 mobility patterns for migrants in the host society: adapting and integrating while preserving a  
19 solid migrant culture or segmented merging into the underclass. Berry's acculturation model  
20 (1997) and Constant and Zimmermann's (2009) study of immigrants' ethnic identity further  
21 suggest a four-pattern typology of migrants' integration process based on their perceptions and  
22 identification with the host society and their origin cultures. This typology, including  
23 assimilation, integration, marginalization, and separation, can also be applied to higher  
24 education field, according to Brotherhood et al.'s (2020) study of foreign scholars in Japanese  
25 universities. Having a strong relationship with the mainstream host society but a weak  
26 identification with the migrant origin culture, migrants display an *assimilation* status; as they  
27 acquire a stronger identification with both sides, they develop an *integration* strategy of  
28 interacting with the host society. Those who maintain a migrant culture and refuse to recognize  
29 the host culture are *separated* from the host society, while the *marginalized* group detaches  
30 from the host society culture and their original culture.  
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56 Assimilation theories above set up important parameters for exploring multiple processes  
57 of academic returnees' cultural integration in their embedding universities during their post-  
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return period. Grounded in the four-typology of migrants' integration and based on cultural assimilation theory, this study seeks to answer the following three research questions: (1) What are the main challenges these returnees have faced in their academic work in the embedding higher education context after returning? (2) Are there different patterns in how academic returnees react towards perceived challenges and become integrated into the host university? and (3) What are the underlying rationales for returnees' diverse cultural integration patterns?

## Methods

The data presented in this article were drawn from a larger study examining the academic returnees' cultural readaptation process in elite universities in China. Double first-class university lists released by the Ministry of Education in 2017 and 2022<sup>i</sup> were referenced for elite university selection. A qualitative research approach with academic returnees was adopted to explore the complexity and dynamics of mutual interactions between academic returnees and their embedding academic culture in universities, involving in-depth semi-structured interviews and university-level and national policy document collection. In this article, we primarily draw on interview data gathered from 29 academic returnees working in eight elite universities in Shanghai and Guangzhou, China, during the 2019-2021 period.

Shanghai, China, is well-recognized as a global city and, more importantly, in 1992 became one of the first cities in China to initiate and develop preferential policies (e.g., household registration, social welfare system, and education policies) to attract overseas talents (Shanghai Municipal Government, 1992). Given their headstart in attracting overseas-educated talents, top universities in Shanghai are expected to possess a relatively high percentage of

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<sup>i</sup> Double First Class (*shuangyiliu*, 双一流) in Chinese higher education refers to a tertiary education

development initiative focusing on global first-class university development and first-class academic discipline construction.

1 overseas-educated scholars in their faculties with good institutional practices for embracing  
2 returnees in their post-return period.  
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4 Additionally, owing to China's central government's recent Greater Bay Area  
5 development strategy, which set significant policy goals for encouraging innovative,  
6 international, and integrated development and collaborations across Guangdong province,  
7 Hong Kong, and Macao, universities in this region have been given valuable opportunities and  
8 flexibility in policy innovations to further regional and international academic mobility. Thus,  
9 after cross-checking the double-first-class list, we included four universities in Guangzhou, the  
10 capital city of Guangdong province.  
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12 Chinese nations who obtained their doctoral degrees from recognized universities outside  
13 Mainland China and worked as full-time faculty members within their first eight years of  
14 returning<sup>ii</sup> (based on academic profiles acquired from universities' official websites) were  
15 selected as potential interviewees. In total, 29 interviewees accepted our invitation to individual  
16 interviews. Each interview last from 1 to 2.5 hours.  
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18 One of these academic returnees obtained their doctorate from a Southeast Asian country  
19 and five from universities in Hong Kong and Macao SAR of China; the others' degrees were  
20 all from Western countries. Most returnees in this study were male researchers (21), and 16 out  
21 of 29 were doing research in soft sciences disciplines. Regarding their academic career stage,  
22 20 of the 29 interviewees had returned to China no longer than six years, with nine having  
23 returned within three years. However, only two were offered a permanent academic position  
24 when they first joined their host university in China; the others' long-term employment was  
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26 <sup>ii</sup> Because conflicts often occur in the early years upon academic returnees' returning, eight  
27 years of returning time was chosen as the time frame to include post-doctoral fellowship and  
28 first full-time faculty position in the university.  
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subject to major performance reviews over the following three to six years. At the time of their interviews, only eight had successfully passed their substantiation.

Information on university-level policies related to faculty members' professional development and research management in the selected universities was collected from the university websites. National policies on higher education and double-first-class university construction were collected from the Ministry of Education website. The names of interviewees and their affiliated universities were anonymized in this paper to protect their identity.

Data collection and analysis were simultaneous in this study, with memos written to help conceptualize texts in interviews into theoretical concepts. Coding and pattern matching was built upon raw data to form charts and diagrams to better categorize data and explain the phenomenon (Yin, 2008). These techniques help to compare and contrast the integration status among multiple returnee cases.

## Findings

### Obstacles to the Integration of Academic Returnees in Chinese Universities

This study's findings show two significant issues academic returnees identified as challenges to their becoming integrated into the embedding universities: a mismatch in understanding research output quality and barriers preventing the formation of a trustworthy research community in the host institution.

#### *The Mismatch in the Understandings of the Quality of Research Outputs*

Almost all returnees in this study expressed that their universities highly emphasized publishing and judged academic competency based on journal rankings and the number of articles published. However, they rarely assessed actual research quality and associated academic contributions.

1 First, Chinese universities did not count all kinds of journals when evaluating faculty  
2 members' performance. In all eight universities in this study, only articles published in journals  
3 included in certain indices (e.g., S/SCI, A&HCI, and CSSCI) were credited for one's academic  
4 promotion. However, most (if not all) academic returnees showed self-efficacy by judging  
5 which journals had the highest reputation in their research areas and which research outputs  
6 were most significant to their disciplines; these judgements did not always correspond to any  
7 particular index and sometimes went against the university's perception:  
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17 There is a person in our faculty (who got promoted) just because they had published some  
18 articles indexed in A&HCI, seemingly journals with a good reputation but truly of poor  
19 quality; the university (related committee) could not distinguish that. (Univ. A Zanna)  
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23 Though most interviewees majoring in hard science disciplines perceived that university- and  
24 departmental-level academic evaluations could generally recognize their academic work  
25 efforts (e.g. Univ. C Len and Univ. G Leopold), mismatches could still exist in these research  
26 fields. For instance, Univ. E Samuel, a science researcher, noted,  
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33 Another problem is that those old faculty members, especially heads of faculties at the  
34 non-double first-class universities, their actual academic ability...is that they knew  
35 nothing; they could not even tell which journals were good or bad. This could be really  
36 troublesome.  
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40 Returnees further explained that some committee members lacked relevant experiences  
41 about getting published internationally and established "ridiculous" academic work regulations  
42 that made it seem "they have no single idea of what the research is like" (Univ. B Yao, Univ.  
43 D Higgins, Univ. A Wilbert) and did not know that "among the SSCI journals there are  
44 differences in quality" (Univ. B Lay, Univ. A Jacqueline, Univ. C Hedy). Returnees were  
45 concerned that those who designed the universities' evaluation standards and academic  
46 committee members with a say in returnees' academic promotion lacked knowledge and  
47 experience in international publications.  
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Even Yao, who perceived herself as highly capable of getting published in international journals—even the top ones on the SSCI list—still felt pressured to publish articles to receive a good mid-term performance evaluation after learning that additional protocols had been added for research outputs, including that only in-print articles with a volume and issue number would be counted in performance evaluations. Higgins and Yasir (Univ. H) also noticed the tendency that one had to publish in both Chinese and English journals to make promotion more secure. These additional protocols made it more stressful for returnees to publish their research and gave them less time to do so.

### *Barriers to the Formation of a Trustworthy Research Community*

Findings also revealed that academic returnees found it challenging to form trustworthy academic communities with colleagues in the embedding departments and universities. Lay, for example, stated that her research could not be advanced because she could not find a good research team at her university and had to rely on her previous connections with foreign collaborators. Yao shared similar concerns, saying casual talks with peer researchers are needed to inspire and collaborate on academic work, which she found lacking in her current university:

Everyone is stressed (about getting published) and too busy to have real communication. The general environment pushes everyone to the point of exhaustion. This is why it is not easy for me to get someone to sit down and chat casually about our recent research ideas.

Besides of high pressure in getting published, another three possible reasons were also highlighted in the interviews. First, Leona (Univ. B) expressed that the evaluation system in her institution saw collaboration as an indication that one could not be an independent researcher, creating a “distrust culture” that damaged the collaborative atmosphere at her university.

Second, the university’s evaluation system also lacks proper recognition of co-authorship. Over half of the returnees in this study reported that they should be careful about initiating

research collaborations with peer researchers, especially with those affiliated with other universities:

I let my friend use their affiliation as the first affiliation [of our co-authored articles]. And when it comes to the time for evaluation [for my promotion], I found all those outputs could not be counted. (Yasir)

In contrast, some academic returnees in our study had positive experiences co-authoring and collaborating with their local faculty peers. Most were from hard science disciplines, such as Frey (Univ. A), Harold (Univ. G), and Fion (Univ. F). They attributed this to international journals' co-first authorship and multiple corresponding authorship schemes, which provide more flexibility for research collaboration in their fields. However, it should be noted that contributions by co-authors other than the first and correspondent ones were still easily ignored in the current university evaluation system, further weakening academics' motivation to form intra-institutional and cross-border collaborations.

The author ranking would influence me in evaluation. The time and effort I invested could be equal in papers I wrote all by myself or listed as the corresponding author. So I would be very cautious about that. But if the team I am working with conducted the experiment, they would not agree to list my affiliation as the first one. Under the current evaluation system, if I worked very hard just for a corresponding author and my university could not be listed as the first affiliation, I have to think about it. (Univ. C Lars)

Third, some domestic-educated colleagues in the host university also had different research ethics and norms that could cause further disputes over academic practices:

Sometimes you communicate with someone about the research ideas, and then on the second day, the one you communicated with just did that experiment. (Yasir)

Hence, academic returnees have become cautious about sharing their ideas with colleagues, preventing them from forming trust-based research collaborations with local colleagues.

### **Three Patterns of Academic Returnees' Post-Return Cultural Integration Processes in Chinese Universities**

1 According to cultural assimilation theories, migrants may experience diverse integration  
2 pathways and outcomes in the host society due to their holding different identifications with  
3 their original migrant culture and the host culture (Berry, 1997; Constant et al., 2009; Portes &  
4 Zhou, 1993). As discussed above, academic returnees in this study had already constructed an  
5 awareness of the differences between overseas-developed and host culture academic beliefs.  
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7 Having different perceptions of and reactions to these differences, the academic returnees in  
8 this study present three main patterns of the integration process in the embedding universities:  
9 integration, enclavement, and self-separation. In the following section, we present several  
10 important returnee cases as examples for each pattern, using supporting material from other  
11 interviewees to explain.  
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#### 14 *The case of integration – Frey*

15 Frey, from University A, is the case for integration pattern in this study because he recognized  
16 that maintaining his overseas-developed academic culture while absorbing the locally-  
17 constructed one was imperative to his future academic career. His joint doctoral program  
18 provided him with nearly two years of academic training in an elite US university. After  
19 graduation, he worked as a post-doc fellow in universities in the US and the Hong Kong and  
20 Macau SARs for almost four years. On the one hand, as he admitted, his overseas academic  
21 experiences afforded him a position in a high-rank talent program at University A. Also, due  
22 to his steady publication pace and advantaged academic competency from being trained abroad,  
23 he confidently foresaw himself receiving an academic promotion, a guaranteed talent title, and  
24 further professional development at his university.  
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27 On the other hand, Frey recognized specific scenarios in his current workplace as different  
28 from and sometimes contradictory to what he had learned in the international academic  
29 community, such as the need of managing interpersonal relationships with well-established  
30 scholars and the blurry boundaries between professional work and personal life. However, Frey  
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seemed to have a relatively high tolerance for these contradictory issues and exercised many active reactions. For instance, he mentioned he would sometimes compromise by taking an extra workload on non-credit, non-academic affairs in exchange for more administrative support and flexibility for his future research plans.

Another integration pattern case—Liam (Univ. H), who received his doctoral degree from a European university—explained his active attitude towards perceived contradictions after returning:

When you spend a certain period abroad, you will have points and corners (an expression indicating a strong personality). However, when you are asked to integrate, it is not like you have to round them up with sandpapers but to find an appropriate way to present them.

The status Liam indicated combines preserving cross-border advantages in research with a good knowledge of navigating the Chinese higher education environment, a pathway to integration status that he and Frey shared.

#### *The case of enclavement – Yao*

The enclaved group in this study refers to those academic returnees who seek strategies to integrate into their embedding universities but still lack the knowledge of how to navigate the dominant cultural norms and values therein. This group of returnees fits in neither the “integration” category nor the “separation” category classified in previous research (Berry, 1997; Constant et al., 2009). They have a temporary status between the two patterns, with the dynamic possibility of heading towards either the integrated or self-separated groups. Academic returnee Yao was chosen as the case for this enclaved group.

Yao, who received her doctoral degree from a UK university, majored in social sciences and worked as a post-doc fellow at University B before officially joining the faculty. Although she appreciated that her overseas-developed academic culture in the UK advantaged her academic promotion in her current affiliation, she emphasized that she was expected to compromise some academic norms to sustain her career development. However, in her opinion,

these compromises were never easy to make. For instance, Yao struggled to get published in Chinese journals:

I would think the research language is different in CSSCI journals... You cannot say the whole system is problematic, and you are right. If you want to get published, you will have to learn it... But I feel reluctant to learn.

Similarly, Jacqueline and Zora (Univ. C) were reluctant to compromise their academic practice norms. While the former was unwilling to shift her original academic research paradigm to the preferred style in grant application in China, the latter insisted on allocating substantial office hours for student supervision (as her doctoral supervisor had), even though no other colleagues in her current faculty saw this as an important duty.

However, this does not mean the enclaved group completely refused to integrate into the local academic community. They have made their compromises. In Yao's case, when she worked as the panel host for an international conference, she found that her colleagues at University B wrote their conference abstracts in Chinese and in a writing style international scholars could scarcely understand even if they were translated into English. Instead of asking her professors-colleagues to revise the abstracts, Yao took a step back and rewrote them herself, tailoring them to the international readership. Because she believed her professor-colleagues would never concern themselves with such "insignificant issues".

But, it should not be ignored that the returnees' compromises were accompanied by confrontation and covert resistance, challenging the current Chinese higher education system. For example, after Lois (Univ. C) felt his ideas had been plagiarized at a conference hosted by a Chinese university, he began to see the local academic circle as unhealthy and less frequently presented new thoughts at domestic conferences.

Along with covertly resisting the local academic community, many overseas-educated returnees who shared the enclaved status relied on their previous academic networks built in the international context. Specifically, Samuel, in his first three years of returning, still

collaborated with peers he knew from his previous doctoral studies to stay current with internationally recognized research outputs, while Yao highly valued her international peers' comments on her research. However, both took slow and cautious steps toward forming a trustworthy local academic community. As such, they were inclined to minimize the possibility that the prevailing contradictory norms in Chinese higher education would govern their daily academic practices. Rather than "playing the game" designed by the university with pleasant and agreements, they try to utilize their advantaged academic capital in international curriculum development, international publication, and overseas research networks in exchange for a comfort zone in their host universities, cutting out an enclave so that they could still pursue their academic career in the way they learned overseas and believed in.

#### *The case of separation – Douglas*

A few returnees in this study attempted but failed to integrate by making compromises, eventually rejecting a compliance strategy and exiling themselves from the current institution. Douglas was a typical case of this self-separated group because, when interviewed, he had already decided to end his academic career in the Chinese context and go aboard again. A doctoral graduate from a North American University in the humanities, Douglas regarded the monograph as a researcher's most important research output. However, he later realized that his affiliated university valued journal articles and nationally or provincially funded projects more. To meet the university's expectations, he made grant applications (which he loathed and perceived as chasing hot topics) and concentrated on writing and publishing articles in journals recognized by his university.

However, he found these efforts, which he considered essential to his further academic promotion but irrelevant to his academic pursuits, left him feeling burned out. As his academic "sparkle was still there", he quit his compliance strategy for integration and self-separated from the local academic community to focus on his research interests, marginalizing himself in his

1 faculty. A similar strategy of tending to withdraw from the traditional path of academic  
2 publication was found in the case of Zanna, who valued public writing more:  
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4       The problem is, there is nearly no one reading academic journals, right? So I wrote many  
5       pieces facing the public (layman in society), and I think that is a real impact.  
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9 Compared with the integrated group, this study's enclaved and self-separated groups rarely  
10 attained the integration expected in their post-return academic life. Nevertheless, they were  
11 aware that, even though they executed their agency in partially or entirely refusing to adapt to  
12 the host culture, their accumulated international academic capital would provide them with  
13 alternatives to their current academic careers, allowing them to mobile elsewhere rather than  
14 abandon their research pursuits altogether.  
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## 24 **Discussions and Conclusion**

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27 Extant studies mostly perceive academic returnees' common cultural traits as their main  
28 obstacles to integration and primarily attribute these obstacles to their overseas-built  
29 professional identities (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Ip, 2006) and the inferiority of the Chinese  
30 higher education system (Acker & Webber, 2017; Li et al., 2015; Lu & Zhang, 2015). However,  
31 neither the reverse cultural shock theory (e.g., Ai, 2019) nor professional identity construction  
32 theory (e.g., Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015) has paid enough attention to the possible complexity  
33 within academic returnees' cultural integration processes in their embedding universities.  
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44       This study proves the academic returnees' active agency in affecting their post-return  
45 integration process by identifying three different and changeable patterns in their strategies for  
46 confronting the perceived distinctions between overseas-developed and locally-dominant  
47 academic cultures. Furthermore, it shows that academic returnees identified two critical  
48 obstacles to their post-return cultural integration: the mismatch in how they and their host  
49 universities value research outputs and barriers to forming trustworthy local research  
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1 Facing such perceived integration obstacles, none of our interviewees replied that they  
2 planned to withdraw from their overseas-developed academic culture or assimilate into the  
3 locally-dominant one. Rather, we found returnees' reactive strategies better fit three other  
4 integration patterns: integrated, enclaved, and self-separated. Like the integration experience  
5 of foreign counterparts reported in Brotherhood et al.'s (2020) study, the integrated group of  
6 returnees in this study actively incorporated their overseas-constructed academic culture into  
7 and balanced it with local academic norms and practices to achieve a bilateral identification.  
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10 However, not all academic returnees willingly absorbed all the mainstream academic  
11 culture in their embedding universities and governed their academic practices accordingly. The  
12 co-existence of the enclaved and self-separated groups implies either failures of doing so or  
13 possible resistance among academic returnees, *de facto* challenging past findings regarding  
14 Chinese academic returnees' collective tacit compliance with performative requirements  
15 (Huang & Xu, 2019). Additionally, with an enclaving status and a long-lasting failure to  
16 embrace their local institution's cultural norms, enclaved returnees who initially attempted to  
17 integrate may actively withdraw from further compromises and negotiations and slide into self-  
18 separation.  
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21 Furthermore, contrary to the notion that the migrant culture is mainly devalued as  
22 producing barriers and inferior contexts in the host society—as discovered in most immigration  
23 studies—the cross-border academic culture held by academic returnees upholds certain cultural  
24 traits that Chinese universities greatly value due to the global pursuit of internationalization in  
25 higher education (Li & Tang, 2019). As some scholars have argued, top universities in China  
26 now focus more on further developing the productivity and careers of talents recruited from  
27 abroad (Dong et al., 2020); hence, certain cross-border cultural traits would be purposefully  
28 included in the university evaluation system (e.g., the high weighting of SSCI journal  
29 publications) (Alba & Nee, 2012; Kartoshikina, 2015). This may prevent returnees who fail to  
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1 integrate into host Chinese universities from eventually leaving academia, as perceived by  
2 interviewees in our study.  
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4 However, this study's findings also suggest that the institutional failure to cultivate mutual  
5 understandings in academic culture between returnees and the locally-developed academic  
6 community should take the main blame for causing returnees' enclavement and possible self-  
7 separation. In addition, as mentioned, the self-separation case (Douglas) previously self-  
8 identified as a member of the enclaved group, actively seeking possible integration into the  
9 local academic community; however, his eventual failure and self-separation move further  
10 indicated that academic returnees' long-term integration could not be solely dependent on their  
11 self-adjustments. In this sense, this study challenges the explanatory power of the reverse  
12 cultural shock perspective, which elaborates on academic returnees' post-return integration as  
13 the period of individual realization and rationalization of the dominant research culture in their  
14 affiliated universities in China. Instead, there should be a two-way adaptation between  
15 returnees and the mainstream host academic community.  
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18 To meet this end, we suggest that institutionalized practices that cultivate returnees' and  
19 local academics' mutual understandings of how overseas-developed academic culture differs  
20 from dominant values and norms of the local academic community are imperative to facilitate  
21 academic returnees' post-return integration. Yet, achieving the goal of mutual-adaptation could  
22 be difficult and much challenging. For instance, returnees reported that most universities in  
23 this study had insufficient library services, and many felt their suggestions to the department  
24 and institution were overlooked in the policy-making process. Addressing these issues would  
25 require policymakers to take the initiative to become more involved in the international  
26 academic community and give returnees a real say in policy-making.  
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29 This article also shows the necessity of rethinking the relationship between  
30 internationalization and higher education regarding the rationales and impacts of higher  
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education institutions' selective adoption of cross-border academic cultural traits. However,  
more in-depth case investigations, especially from the perspectives of university and  
department heads, are needed to capture more detailed mechanisms in future studies.

Preview

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