

A Qualitative Study on Chinese Academic Returnees at Non-Double First-Class Universities

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Abstract: Based on a qualitative study encompassing 30 early career Chinese academics who have returned from overseas and commenced their employment at non-double first-class universities in Zhejiang province, China, this paper meticulously elucidates the multifaceted challenges encountered by academic returnees. Notably, the investigation delves into the implications of compromised subjectivity at individual, micro, and everyday levels, shedding light on the (re)integration and productivity of returnees, influenced by diverse academic and institutional environments. This comprehensive inquiry offers a unique lens to comprehend the evolving institutional landscape in China and the intricate academic trajectories of returnees. It also provides important implications to inform international talent policies and practices.

Keywords: Academic Returnees; Subjectivity; Integration; Qualitative Studies

1. Introduction

The predominant trend in global migration has been the one from the Global South to the Global North^[1]. However, this uni-directional flow has recently been challenged due to the tightening of immigration policies and the political and economic development. Academic migration has witnessed an increasing trend towards diversity and uncertainty in global migration, leading to the emergence of the flow from the Global North to the Global South. To alleviate the issue to brain drain, many developing countries have actively implemented a range of policies to attract overseas talents and to enhance their influences in the global higher education system. Scholars from the Global South encounter increasing hurdles and challenges in securing stable academic positions and settling in developed countries^[2]. Global academic mobility is now featured by temporary, uncertain, and cyclical trends. To counter the challenges posed by global talent competitiveness and to further internationalize higher education in China, the Chinese government has introduced a series of talent recruitment policies and specialized programs at all levels^[3]. These measures have effectively attracted a significant influx of high-level talents, including scholars, who have chosen to return to their mother country.^[4]

Most of the studies on Chinese returning scholars have been conducted in the context of knowledge economy and talent wars, using human capital as the analytical framework, and considering academic mobility as a key intellectual resource for national development and a mediator connecting domestic and foreign academia, to explore its impact on the internationalization of Chinese higher education and economic development^[5]. This study analyzes the challenges confronted by returning Chinese scholars in their work and life and the intertwining of their compromised subjectivity at the individual, micro and everyday levels.

2. Study design

In-depth semi-structured interviews have been conducted face to face with 30 returning scholars between October 2021 to June 2022. All participants were employed by “shuang fei” universities in Zhejiang Province. “Shuang fei” universities are universities that are not part of the “Double First Class” (“211 Project” and “985 Project”) program. Among the 61 universities in Zhejiang Province, only three are recognized as “Double First Class” universities. Zhejiang Province stands as one of China's economically prosperous regions, situated in the eastern coastal area with a thriving economy and a relatively dense population. All participants were early-career scholars and born in mainland China and received the doctoral degrees from universities in the Global North. Each interview lasted about 1-2 hours.

3. Difficulties and Challenges Faced by Overseas Academic Talents after their return

Participants have successively confronted a multitude of unanticipated issues, subsequently experiencing a sense of cultural, environmental and systematic mismatch, difficulties in assimilation and even encountering insurmountable personal predicaments.

3.1 Time: Efficiency versus Busyness

Returnees commonly expressed that the duration of worktime after returning to their home country far exceeds their previous tenure abroad. However, their research output efficiency is not as good as before. In addition to the overload of teaching time, such discrepancy arises from a substantial portion of their worktime being allocated to attending regular faculty meetings, administrative duties, and other operational commitment. Consequently, this significantly impedes research productivity, particularly in the realm of social science research that necessitates fieldwork, as dedicated time for research pursuits becomes scarce. Moreover, disparities in research management systems between domestic and the Global North universities, particularly regarding the governance and utilization of research funds, present challenges such as cumbersome administrative procedures and intricate bureaucratic processes. Returnees often find themselves lacking the autonomy to independently manage research funds, such as with limited reimbursement options predominantly limited to book purchases and taxi fares, further exacerbating the complexity of the reimbursement process. Confronted with a shifting research landscape, a majority of overseas-educated scholars encounter difficulties adapting to the new system in a timely manner, thereby detrimentally impacting research efficiency and output.

3.2 Income: Main Tasks and Sideline

Compared to universities in other provinces and cities, the remuneration for high-level returned academics in Zhejiang province-affiliated universities is situated at the lower end. Their disposable income-to-cost-of-living ratio is also among the lowest, coupled with the absence of benefits from talent attraction policies and subsidies provided by municipal governments as the universities are province affiliated. Furthermore, it is worth noting that newly recruited returnees do not have access to welfare housing, which leaves them in a state of helplessness when confronted with the soaring real estate prices in Zhejiang province. As a result, they experience substantial financial pressure and grapple with significant challenges in their day-to-day lives.

Besides, the limited allocation of research time leads to reduced research output, resulting in less satisfactory performance-based income directly associated with successful research outcomes. As a consequence, many newly returned scholars rely on family support or engage in sideline occupation to barely achieve a balance between income and expenses, further encroaching on their research time and perpetuating a detrimental cycle.

3.3 Age Barrier: Family and Career Development

There is a conflicting age threshold for returnees when it comes to life and career development. Returnees normally complete their doctoral studies oversea around the age of 30, while domestic research evaluations, national youth research project applications, and talent selections often impose an age limit of 35. Consequently, they are left with a relatively short period - about five years to navigate crucial milestones. Most of the returnees tend to be unmarried in their early 30s. The constrained social networks and limited availability of free time, coupled with lower incomes, the inability to afford housing, and the challenges associated with establishing a stable family life, present substantial barriers to the career progression and family formation of returnees. In addition, female returnees face the additional pressure of potentially missing their optimal childbearing years during this critical stage of career development.

3.4 Research Environment: Transition Period

The macro-oriented nature of the national research projects necessitates a transition in research focus, but universities, faculties, and departments do not provide sufficient transition periods for returnees. The expectation that they should make significant contributions to their disciplines can lead to a negative perception if there is a disparity between the expectations and their actual achievements. Furthermore, the evaluation of researchers increasingly emphasizes their ability to secure research funding and lead research projects, which directly influences the assessment of their research capabilities. This poses a significant challenge for returnees who are unfamiliar with the rigorous requirements and processes involved in research project applications. Needless to say these scholars may have limited influence within the domestic academic network, making it more challenging for them to obtain research grants.

3.5 Research Drives: Interests and Tasks

In contrast to research conducted abroad, which is driven by personal interests and scientific inquiries, research activities in China are primarily task-oriented, driven by assessment requirements. Project proposals in China prioritize addressing national or local government demands rather than solely focusing on scientific questions. This distinction can be attributed to the divergent funding sources prevalent in the research systems of both contexts. While research projects they conducted before often rely on donations as a funding source, enabling researchers to pursue scientific inquiries aligned with their interests and societal issues, in China, research funding predominantly originates from government-funded projects. Chinese researchers tend to prioritize the application for government funding

project as those projects are considered as a key indicator of research capabilities. When determining the allocation of project funding, the government-designated research administrative also considers national and governmental needs as the paramount evaluation criteria.

3.6 Interpersonal Communication: Academic Networks and Integration

Participants encounter challenges regarding the expansion of their academic networks and the cultivation of professional relationships. These aspects are closely intertwined with the success of project applications and the possibility of publishing research papers in the journals listed in the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index. In China, the academic community is characterized by tightly-knit circles, such as generational and mentorship-based relationships, where academic networking and communication predominantly take place. In contrast, their academic networks overseas are often established through participation in international academic conferences. As a result, returnees face the disadvantage of lacking a local academic networking advantage upon their return to China. The absence of a well-established "academic network" in China not only hampers their timely utilization of their professional credentials but also puts them at a disadvantage in terms of collaborative exchanges with domestic scholars. This integration process into the Chinese academic community and immersion in the local academic disciplines presents challenges, impeding their practical implementation of career planning upon their return.

3.7 Academic Resource Conflict: Allocation and Equality

Returnees are also lack of an equitable access to academic resources, as can be seen through the phenomena of "assigned by 'hats' and assigned by 'levels'". In many overseas universities that adopt a tenure-track system, newly recruited faculty members who have obtained their doctoral degrees can supervise doctoral students. Prior to attaining tenure, their teaching and administrative responsibilities are relatively limited, while their prospects for securing internal grants from institutional foundations are prioritized. While in China, the supervision of students is based on the title of the faculty member. Typically, professors are authorized to supervise doctoral students, while associate professors are eligible to supervise postgraduate students and lecturers can only supervise undergraduate students. In practice, returnees are considered fortunate if they are able to collaborate within a specific research group and assist a principal advisor in supervising students. For teaching-oriented universities undergoing a transitional phase and lacking robust disciplinary prominence, these individuals often face a dearth of collaborative support in research. Therefore, their ability to achieve notable research outcomes is impeded, making it challenging to fulfill the requirements for promotion during their probationary period.

3.8 Academic Evaluation: Administration, Relationships, and Favoritism

Despite the implementation of various programs and initiatives by universities affiliated to Zhejiang province to attract and recruit overseas talents, the support systems, services, and research evaluation frameworks are still in need of improvement. Returnees often find it is difficult to adapt to the administrative, relational, and favoritism influences present in the domestic academic evaluation system. They perceive the academic evaluation process to be influenced by personal connections and administrative factors, resulting in a decline in academic standards, fairness, and impartiality. This, in turn, dampens their motivation and adaptability in conducting research. The assessment and evaluation criteria, predominantly based on quantifiable measures, tend to prioritize quantity over the quality of research output, leading to a utilitarian approach to education and academia. A significant issue observed in many universities is the imbalance between research output and teaching and mentoring responsibilities. Returnees, who invest more in teaching and receive positive feedback from students but have fewer research projects, often face unfavorable academic evaluations and limited promotion opportunities. As a result, these teachers have to prioritize research and publication over teaching.

4. Discussion, Conclusion and Practical Implication

This study examines the multi-faceted challenges confronted by Chinese returnees in their professional and personal lives, as well as the intricate intertwining of their compromised subjectivity at the individual, micro, and everyday levels. The dimensions of time, economy, age, environment, and academia shed light on the limitations imposed on their subjectivity, resulting from a combination of structural factors and the accumulation of individual capital^[6]. The desire and ability to establish families and expand local social networks are constrained, hindering the accumulation and transformation of various forms of capital^[7]. Additionally, some returning scholars experience a "reverse cultural shock" after their return, while the absence of social capital contributes to the feelings of isolation and detachment, leading to a sense of emotional displacement^[8,9]. As a result, returnees find themselves caught in a state of "low mobility", "temporariness", or the dilemma of "indefinite waiting" .

Returnees are not merely passive recipients of setbacks encountered after return. Instead, they actively readjust their self-perceptions, perceptions of others, and conceptions of place, while formulating new strategies of mobility to enhance their professional and personal

experiences. Their developmental needs drive them to envision specific forms of mobility, including the selection of the optimal timing for career and life events and the planning of subsequent career and lifestyle trajectories. Returnees often judiciously consider their life course and the institutionalized age thresholds associated with faculty position, the application of talent programs and research project. Regarding professional endeavors, for returnees aspiring to establish long-term careers in China, they strategically cultivate a "multilayered academic citizenship" within transnational contexts to compensate for compromised subjectivity.^[10] At the personal level, returnees consciously adjust their perceptions and expectations of local living and social conventions to alleviate emotional challenges and foster a sense of belonging.

To address the challenges in terms of time, economy, age, environment, and academia mentioned by returnees, it is essential for the government and universities to consider the following practical suggestions. Firstly, proactive assistance should be provided to returnees in solving life difficulties such as low income, housing issue, and children's education. Secondly, A focus on the academic development of returnees is crucial. It is significant to listen to the voices of returned teachers, offer them psychological support, and create an environment conducive to their academic endeavors. This can be achieved through academic support services, such as teaching consultations and guidance on research project applications, fostering a positive academic environment for returnees. Thirdly, it is imperative to establish a comprehensive institutional framework that ensures the effective implementation of policies related to recruitment, training, assessment, and mobility. This includes refining existing research funding management systems, ensuring equitable allocation and efficient management of research funds, and granting higher levels of autonomy to universities and teachers. Policies can transit into a driving force that not only attracts but also effectively retains the talented returnees. The overarching objective should be to establish a sustainable ecosystem that nurtures and maximizes the potential of returnees, fostering their unwavering commitment and loyalty to the institution or nation they have chosen to return to.

Conflict of Interest

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