

# Re-entry Cultural Adaptation of Foreign-Educated Academics at Chinese Universities

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the re-entry acculturative experiences and challenges facing foreign-educated returnees working at Chinese universities. Fifteen returnees from five universities in a southwestern province of China participated in semi-structured interviews. The study, using the ABC theoretical framework, highlights the acculturative process of returned academics in terms of role expectations, transformed identities, and cultural learning. The process involves challenges and unmet expectations, including low salaries, heavy workloads, unsupportive administrative bureaucracy, political control, and lack of a healthy academic community culture. The findings show that re-entry acculturation is a never-ending process. Returnees need constantly to realign their expectations and to negotiate and reinterpret shifting realities.

**Keywords:** re-entry acculturation, cultural identity, returned academics, cultural integration, knowledge transfer.

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## 1. Introduction

Despite a plethora of literature on cross-cultural transition and adaptation of immigrants and international students in host countries, the theme of cross-cultural re-entry acculturation by high-level returned academics and professionals is unexplored or under-researched. Re-entry acculturation is more psychologically distressing and adjustment is more difficult than in a new culture (Cox 2004, Sussman 2000). Attention needs to be given to the study of academic returnees in their re-entry adjustment in a global community (Ai & Wang 2017, Chen 2017). This study examines the re-entry acculturative experiences and challenges encountered by foreign-educated Chinese returned academics in Chinese universities, using the theoretical framework of re-entry acculturation (Martin & Harrell 2004). The framework consists of the ABC model that includes *affective*, *behavioral*, and *cognitive* dimensions. The affective dimension involves feelings of well-being, satisfaction, and psychological adjustment. The behavioral aspect is concerned with sociocultural adaptation, cultural learning, behavioral change, and functional fitness. The cognitive perspective is about developing, changing, and maintaining intercultural identity (Masgoret & Ward 2006).

This project contributes to the study of re-entry adjustment of foreign-educated returnees with higher degrees from Western universities. It highlights Chinese universities' high ambition in their quest for world-class position as well as the sociocultural, structural, and contextual constraints impacting the re-entry acculturative experiences of returnees. It underscores the fact that contextual factors significantly influence the process of re-entry adjustment. The study contributes to scholarship and debate over the development of Chinese higher education and global talent-management policies, understanding of the unique re-entry

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cultural process of this group of academics, and enrichment of the previous literature on re-entry acculturation.

The study focuses on local conditions by examining the challenges and experiences of returned academics in their re-entry psychological adjustment and reintegration, and diffusion of Western knowledge and international norms in their teaching and research at lesser-known universities in China. Unlike the tiny proportion of returned academics recruited through the 1000 Talent Scheme, who upon return receive a large amount of research money from the government – up to millions of Chinese *yuan* – a high salary comparable to remuneration at Western universities plus other benefits, the academics participating in this study represent a large number of returned academics working at Chinese universities, especially those specialized in liberal arts, humanities, and social sciences. The remuneration levels of these returnees are reported to be “dismal” (Paul 2018: 8). The acculturative adaptation of this unique group of academic returnees in Chinese university internationalization and world-class construction has been largely ignored in intercultural research (Ai & Wang 2017, Chen 2017).

## **2. The need for Chinese universities to employ returned academics**

In internationalization practices, Chinese universities, driven by desires to conform to the “institutional isomorphic pressure” (Li & Ding 2013:506) exerted by the discourse of world-class construction and global university rankings, have pursued internationalization strategies and policies aiming to entice foreign-educated returned academics with experience, knowledge, foreign language and cultural skills, global vision, and international perspective. Internationalizing the faculty is regarded as the core of higher education internationalization (Li & Pu 2017, Liu & Metcalfe 2016, Yang & Welch 2012). The best source of internationalized faculty is believed to be the returned academics as agents of educational, economic, social, cultural, and political transformation (Biao 2011, Cheng 2002). They understand Western culture, norms, rules, and standards. They are called “glocal” talents: high-level people with local cultural knowledge and global vision (Zhao & Jia 2015: 1). These returned academics work in an era of “glonacal” higher education with interconnection between global, national, and local layers of higher education (Marginson *et al.* 2011: 14). As international boundary spanners, their overseas academic and work experience provides them with both knowledge and legitimacy in China’s quest to achieve world-class universities. They bring back not just hard knowledge but soft skills and cross-cultural understanding (Pan 2011, 2016).

However, unlike the first-tier universities in China – such as the 39 universities in the 985 Project and the 112 universities in the 211 Project, where most academics have higher degrees from Western universities – lesser-known second- and third-tier universities have difficulty competing to attract top returnees in terms of working conditions, material incentives, salaries, and other benefits (Ai & Wang 2017, Pan 2016). Senior leaders of these universities are acutely aware of the urgency of recruiting foreign-educated returnees to participate in the internationalization of their universities (Ai & Wang 2017, Li & Pu 2017, Wang 2017). The number of returned academics with foreign degrees at these universities is disproportionately small. They are keen to recruit academics with a doctoral degree from a Western university, hoping to boost the university’s image through internationalization and talent-management initiatives.

## **3. Theoretical foundations**

Re-entry acculturation is defined as “the process of readjusting, re-aculturating, and re-assimilating into one’s own home environment after living in a different culture for a significant period of time” (Gaw 2000: 83-84). MacDonald and Arthur (2005) identify four variables in re-entry adjustment: individual variables that include a person’s values, beliefs,

attitudes, needs, expectations, and personal traits; job variables characterized by the tasks and characteristics of one's job; organizational variables that reflect the culture of the organization; and non-work variables that involve friendships, relationships, and one's general social and cultural environments. Martin and Harrell (2004) developed a theoretical model of re-entry acculturation to conceptualize the acculturation process. This is called the ABC model in the work of Ward (2001) and her colleagues (Ward *et al* 2001). It includes:

- *affective* components in psychological acculturation,
- *behavioral* perspectives in cultural learning, and
- *cognitive* elements highlighted in the expectations model and cultural-identity model.

*The affective* aspect of the acculturation process involves psychological adjustment, emotions, feelings, and levels of satisfaction in response to changes as significant events in one's sociocultural environment, life, and career orientations during the acculturation process (Ward 2001, Ward *et al* 2001, Ward 2004). These changes can cause psychological stress and require coping responses by drawing on adjustive resources to achieve a person-culture fit, person-environment fit, and person-organization fit (Adler 1987, Martin & Harrell, 2004). Re-entry acculturation is believed to present the greatest challenge when returnees return to their home culture, unaware of the fact they themselves have changed during their overseas sojourn even as the home country has experienced sociocultural, political, and environmental transformations (Cox 2004, Ward 2004). Studies have shown psychological acculturation is problematic (Kartoshkina 2015; Sussman 2000).

*The behavioral* aspect of the acculturation process involves cultural learning and functional fitness and acquisition of social skills appropriate to the culture through observation and learning (Cox 2004). Martin (1984) conceptualizes re-entry as new cultural learning. She considers the home culture as a new culture where returnees need to retain old reinforcers acquired from host countries and develop new reinforcers, new interpretations, and new definitions of new verbal and non-verbal symbols in the home culture. In this "new" culture, returnees develop the ability to carry out social and professional activities in the re-entry environment through learning and relearning the home culture's values, appropriate communication patterns, protocols, and norms of interaction (Martin & Harrell 2004, Smith 2002). In the re-entry acculturation process, returnees who have undergone profound personal transformation and internalized the host country's rules of communication and behavioral responses required in the host culture are expected to understand the differences in intercultural communication styles, rules, norms, and conventions, and pay attention to culture-specific knowledge, perceptions, and interpersonal behavior in the home culture (Ward 2004). Cultural learning, together with overseas acculturative experience and adaptation skills, facilitates returnees' re-entry acculturation, adaptation, and familiarity with sets of home cultural norms and behaviors (Black 1992; Smith 2002), and helps them change themselves and their environment to achieve the best organizational fit (Adler 1981).

*The cognitive* aspect of the acculturation process contains the expectations model and cultural-identity model. The expectations model suggests that returnees hold pre-re-entry expectations about the home environment and home culture, life, relationships, career, and impending experience (Martin & Harrell 2004, Szkudlarek 2010). These expectations, fulfilled or unfulfilled, can greatly influence the process of re-entry acculturation and reintegration in the home culture (Szkudlarek 2010). Re-entry shock may occur because what returnees have experienced during the re-entry is unexpected (Martin & Harrell 2004). Research shows that positive rating and satisfaction of the acculturative experience attributable to fulfilled expectations (met or more than met) can lead to smooth adjustment; negative rating and dissatisfaction of the experience resulting from unfulfilled expectations can lead to readjustment difficulties (MacDonald & Arthur 2005). It is the discrepancies

between pre-re-entry expectations held by returning individuals and their actual re-entry experiences that affects their re-entry acculturation and social difficulties (Sussman 2000). Thus, accurate and realistic pre-re-entry and post-re-entry expectations result in higher levels of satisfaction, readjustment, and job performance (Black 1992).

The cultural-identity model focuses on identity change in re-entry adjustment (Martin & Harrell 2004). While in the host country, one is expected to adapt to the host environment and consequently develop an intercultural identity in the process of acculturation and identity transformation (Kim 2001, 2008; Ward 2004). Identity shift influences their sense of belonging, values, beliefs, attitude, and ways of communication (Cox 2004, Szkudlarek 2010). Identity change influences re-entry acculturation (Martin & Harrell 2004, Sussman 2002). Identity alteration becomes salient upon return to the home country and can be a source of distress when there are “identity gaps” that can cause ineffective communication and personal discomfort (White 2015). Re-entry adjustment is likely to be a difficult experience, especially for long-term expatriates having undergone deep identity change to fit into a host culture. Sussman (2010) proposes that when returnees realize there are discrepancies and lack of fit between their cultural self, goals, expectations, and the new cultural milieu, they modify their dormant identity and behavior to accommodate the environmental and contextual demands, to allow them to understand and use the game rules governing social and professional life.

On the basis of the three aspects of the ABC framework and the current literature on returnees, the following two research questions were formulated to elicit answers from returned academics at Chinese universities, to examine their re-entry acculturative experiences:

*RQ1:* How did returnees perceive their re-entry acculturative experiences at Chinese universities?

*RQ2:* What were the challenges that returnees encountered in their re-entry acculturation?

#### 4. Method

The aim of the study is to investigate returned academics’ re-entry acculturative experiences and challenges at Chinese universities, with a focus on how the contextual factors and local layers of conditions impact their experiences in their home-coming journey and the process of knowledge transfer in their pedagogical practice, research, social relationships, and professional activities. This research project was conducted at five universities in a southwestern city of China, from September to December 2017. A qualitative approach was adopted. Fifteen returned academics participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews in Mandarin, each lasting 40 to 60 minutes. Participants held doctoral degrees from five English-speaking countries: the United States (6), the United Kingdom (3), Australia (3), Canada (2), and New Zealand (1). Their length of overseas stay ranged from four to eight years and their length of stay from two to four years (see Table 1).

We approached some returnees through personal networks and, through their introduction, contacted other participants who met the interviewee-selection criteria: holding doctoral degrees from Western countries, currently teaching at Chinese universities, and having returned to work in the university system in the past two to four years. The qualitative approach allowed the researchers to listen to the participants’ narratives in the process of inquiry to have a deeper understanding of the dynamics and complexity of the issues. Narratives provide meaning that is socially constructed between researchers and participants (Goodson & Sikes 2001) and thus ensure “intrinsic study” to “investigate and report the complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships and other factors in a unique instance” (Stake 1995:3). Narrative analysis presents a “‘big picture’ about experiences or events as the participants understand them” (Schutt 2011: 339). It provides data and context for multiple interpretations and knowledge production, while uncovering the

meaning and implications of the issues embedded in the experiences (Dwyer & Emerald 2017).

**Table 1:** Demographic profiles of participants.

Participant	Title	Gender	Highest Degree	Host country	Home university	Length of return
1. LEI Ming	professor	M	PhD linguistics	USA	university 1	4 years
2. YANG Guangying	lecturer	F	PhD education	USA	university 3	2.5 years
3. LIAO Deming	lecturer	F	PhD linguistics	New Zealand	university 2	2 years
4. YAN Yue	assc. prof.	M	PhD economics	Australia	university 2	3 years
5. YUAN Shumin	assc. prof.	M	PhD psychology	USA	university 1	4 years
6. PU Yanhong	lecturer	F	PhD sociology	UK	university 2	2 years
7. LIN Jiamei	assc. prof.	F	PhD communication	Australia	university 4	3.5 years
8. GAO Furui	assc. prof.	M	PhD geography	Canada	university 1	4 years
9. WANG Dianhong	lecturer	M	PhD education	USA	university 4	3 years
10. LONG Xiumei	assc. prof.	F	PhD philosophy	USA	university 5	3.5 years
11. QI Youzhong	lecturer	M	PhD English	UK	university 1	2.5 years
12. LIANG Xiaoming	lecturer	F	PhD economics	Australia	university 5	2 years
13. WU Wei	assc. prof.	M	PhD business	USA	university 5	3 years
14. ZHAO Shumin	assc. prof.	F	PhD English	UK	university 4	3.5 years
15. SHI Haiqin	lecturer	M	PhD history	Canada	university 3	3 years

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The transcripts of this study were thematically classified, coded, and assigned meaning for data analysis, then put into logical categories based on the ABC framework and literature on Chinese returnees, to identify significant thematic structures. The data was analyzed through an inductive approach to let the critical themes emerge, and examined in a holistic fashion (Berg & Lune 2017, Suter 2012). The transcripts were coded according to the major themes and repeated key words, such as “identity”, “expectations”, “challenges”, “teaching”, “research”, and “cultural learning and transformation”. Coding provided a framework for further data analysis to make sense of all the words (Gibbs 2007). The names of participants are pseudonymous. The names of the universities at which they were working, as well as the overseas universities from which they graduated, are not included to protect confidentiality.

## 5. Analysis

The ABC framework is useful to analyze the four interrelated perspectives of re-entry acculturation: psychological adaptation, cultural identity, expectations, and culture learning. Through cultural learning, these returned academics had gone through transformation in personal and intellectual growth as demonstrated in behavioral changes, cultural understanding, pedagogical innovations, and enhanced social cognition. Stress in the process

of psychological adaptation was found to arise from identity changes and mismatched expectations, such as lack of effective *guanxi* networks, barriers to knowledge transfer, low salaries, heavy teaching load, lack of support system, and management *guan* mentality.

### 5.1 Cultural learning and transformed identities

In the re-entry ABC acculturation model, cultural learning refers to behavioral, perceptual, and cognitive changes through learning, re-learning, and internalizing cultural values, norms, hidden rules, and communication protocols in the workplace and society in the process of acculturation. A large number of participants felt they had experienced acculturative stress, frustration, and setbacks as well as joys, gains, personal growth, and identity transformation. They developed social skills, abilities, and functional fitness to carry out professional activities to be well integrated into the academic community through transformation of knowledge and skills. They found their re-entry acculturative experiences rewarding despite the many institutional constraints, environmental stress, and unmet expectations.

Most participants felt that they had, through cultural learning, experienced identity transformation during their intercultural adjustment while pursuing academic degrees as international students in their host countries. They had to adjust to fit into the sociocultural and educational environments and thus they acquired a hybrid identity associated with Western knowledge, research philosophies, higher education standards, and global vision. Many participants found their transformed hybrid identity enabled them to understand their own culture better through comparison and contrast. They used the intellectual tools they developed during their overseas sojourn to enable them to analyze and find solutions to local issues. LIN Jiamei (communication, Australia) said she acquired a new set of identities. Her foreign intercultural experiences facilitated her re-adaptation and reintegration:

My cultural attitudes have changed and I have begun to objectively rather than subjectively view people and things. I have become more open-minded, receptive of different views, values, beliefs, and behavior. I am positive about life and career. I have developed very good relationships with my students, based on the concept of equality. I encourage my students to call me by the first name. This is an important change in a hierarchical society like China where inequality is the norm.

LIANG Xiaoming (economics, Australia) reported that her acculturative experience in Australia formed her intercultural identity:

I thought I had achieved a hybrid identity as an identity capital that would allow me to transcend cultural boundaries, live between cultures, and easily integrate into the home space.

LONG Xiumei (philosophy, USA) said she now could take a balanced view towards the positive and negative sides of her society. She knew much better how to deal with some social issues in China, such as *guanxi* (relational networks) and her relationship to colleagues and senior leaders. She became more accommodating towards diversity and differences in opinions, attitudes, and behavior. YAN Yue (economics, Australia) agreed that he understood much of the rules of the games in the workplace. He could use his cultural knowledge to help him navigate the social and political terrains. WU Wei (business, USA) reasoned that vision and identification with both host and home cultures developed his perceptual acuity and mindset to deal with many emerging problems.

LIN Jiamei noted that her international mobility had expanded her “inner mobility” and the imaginary landscape of the self. She began to understand herself much better than ever before and take an empathetic attitude towards others, identifying with their feelings,

thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes. YAN Yue acknowledged that his social cognition increased in the acculturation process:

Having experienced two cultures, I think I have developed a useful interpretive framework to help me wade through difficult times in the workplace. They are called social skills or emotional intelligence that are essential interpersonal skills in the workplace.

Both LIANG Xiaoming (economics, Australia) and SHI Haiqin (history, Canada) asserted that they had changed their behavior in the process of acculturation. They became adaptable in problem solving workplace issues. In their subjective life, they adopted a positive attitude, tolerant stance, and empathetic understanding of others.

## 5.2 Fulfilling role expectations

The study found that participants tried to fulfil the accountabilities and role expectations set by their universities in association with the identity, obligations, and conduct that their roles defined, with particular focus on internationalization of programs, course and syllabus design, introduction of education philosophies, and development of teaching pedagogies.

LEI Ming (linguistics, USA) reported that his home university expected him to introduce new programs at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, lead a research team, write textbooks, publish articles in high-ranking journals – SSCI journals in particular – and build networks with American universities. In his four years at the university, he had introduced two courses: English literature and communication, and research methods. He said he had fulfilled some of the university's expectations and would meet other expectations in the future. He indicated there was a rough match between his expectations and those of the university.

As expected, many returnees introduced new courses, textbooks, research methods, teaching approaches, and educational philosophies. LIN Jiamei introduced three communication courses, using Western textbooks: cross-cultural communication, media and communication, and business communication. QI Youzhong (English, UK) introduced interactive and student-centered teaching approaches and research methods popular in Western universities:

I have introduced the interactive teaching approach in my class. In my postgraduate class, I organize seminars, group discussions, and group projects. I have also introduced Western research methods. I encourage my students to adopt Western writing styles, structure, organization, and the APA citation style in their writing.

ZHAO Shumin (English, UK) said introduction of Western teaching and research methods was seen as a first step to internationalizing the university. She added that knowledge transfer might not be successful without localization and cultural fit. LIAO Deming (linguistics, NZ) agreed that knowledge transfer involves recontextualization, localization, and transformation into new knowledge. She maintained that Western approaches should not be directly transplanted into the Chinese classroom without localizing them to fit the local cultural expectations. She emphasized that only by embedding Western knowledge into the Chinese cultural context could it effectively be transferred and accepted. She described her pedagogical practice as a balanced, systematic and integrated combination of Western and Chinese traditional teaching approaches.

Another role expectation was high-quality research output in line with universities' goals of achieving high status in global university rankings. These returnees were expected to publish in Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) or Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) journals. Three participants (LEI Ming, YUAN Shumin, and GAO Furui) reported

having published articles in CSSCI journals. Three (ZHAO Shumin, YAN Yue, and WU Wei) were awarded national and provincial government research grants. Some had collaborated with their former supervisors and published journal articles and book chapters outside China. Most participants found that they had experienced high pressure to publish. Research outputs were closely pegged to their academic promotion.

### **5.3 Unmet expectations**

It is obvious that these returnees held various expectations. Not all of their expectations were met. Many environmental and organizational factors contributed to their disappointment, frustration, and stress, and thus hampered their re-entry acculturation process.

#### **5.3.1 Academic returnees perceived as “flower vases”**

Chinese universities are under high pressure to achieve high rankings by recruiting foreign-educated academics, in a belief that these academics from Western universities can help them improve their position through knowledge sharing and transfer. That said, universities seemed more interested in doctorates from Western universities than actual persons and human capital. PU Yanhong (sociology, UK) observed that returned academics were seen as “flower vases” to show to the outside world that their universities had been internationalized in response to the calls of the Chinese central government. She reported:

Nobody cares about you. Colleagues do not care. Senior leaders do not care. The university does not care. We were recruited to save the face of university senior leaders. We are flower vases for window dressing.

GAO Furui (geography, Canada) observed that Chinese universities generally regarded academic returnees as marketable pieces and as numbers in their statistical counts on their webpages promoting the universities’ interests and reputation; returnees were rarely treated as valuable human capital and as individual human beings with their own thinking, ideas, and knowledge that could make positive contributions to transformation of the Chinese educational system. WANG Dianhong (education, USA) said that having worked at his university for three years, he did not find any sense of belonging; instead, he felt marginalized with an invisible boundary between him and his local colleagues. YANG Guangying (education, USA) noted, “I do not want to be a flower vase. I want to do something to bring about changes to teaching and research at the university.” In LONG Xiumei’s view, perceiving returnees as political flower vases manipulated by university senior leaders as face-saving devices and pluses to their scorecards erected a barrier for returnees to communicate and share knowledge with local colleagues, and thus slowed and even prevented them from re-entry acculturation and reintegration. Their strengths and knowledge were not fully used for the benefit of the university. To save face, according to WU Wei, some university senior leaders liked to recruit anyone with a Western doctoral degree, whether there were positions for them or not. He said, “it is a waste of human capital and talent resources! Universities are proud of possessing rather than developing and utilizing these returnees.”

#### **5.3.2 Barriers to knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer**

A knowledge-sharing culture did not seem to exist in these universities in spite of returnees’ strong desire to share and transfer knowledge through formal and informal academic and social activities. LIANG Xiaoming had worked at her university for more than two years, but she had not found any knowledge-sharing activities or social interactions, such as seminars or workshops where colleagues could engage in discussions of teaching, research, social and personal concerns, beyond the long hours of compulsory political studies every week.

WANG Dianhong observed that his university had never established a culture of learning and knowledge sharing. Instead, it was a culture of distrust, competition, and self-protection. PU Yanhong supported the view that instead of a culture of knowledge sharing, there was one of knowledge hiding. Her colleagues tried to protect themselves by hiding any information that might impact their teaching, career advancement, research, or academic promotions. The perceptions of distrust from their colleagues made knowledge sharing and transfer difficult and unlikely. LEI Ming explained that such perceptions might come from the perceived threat to local colleagues in a context where recruitment and academic promotion are pegged to foreign educational experience and credentials, as essential requirements.

In addition, the universities' hierarchical structure and centralized bureaucratic management were found to have contributed to stifling the emergence of a knowledge-sharing climate. QI Youzhong said that a knowledge-sharing culture did not emerge because, at his university, everything was centrally planned and executed: programs, syllabi, assessments, teaching modes and methods, and teaching notes. Textbooks and course content were nationally prescribed. The role of an instructor was to deliver what was in the textbook, and repeat what had been done the previous year.

Another knowledge-transfer barrier was students' resistance to new teaching approaches introduced to the classroom by returnees. These imported teaching approaches were considered incompatible with the local culture. The account by ZHAO Shumin (English, UK) provides a good example of cultural incompatibility of pedagogical innovations:

Initially, I adopted an interactive and learner-centered approach in my undergraduate class teaching. I organized group discussions, group projects, presentations, and tutorials, which are very popular in universities in the UK. However, I realized that my students did not appreciate my teaching. They did not consider group discussions, group projects, and tutorials relevant to their learning.

LEI Ming (linguistics, USA), had a similar experience. His postgraduate students appreciated his Western knowledge and experience, but not the way he delivered his classes, because he did not lecture like other Chinese academics. The students did not feel they learned anything from him. He began to adopt traditional Chinese teaching approaches: lecturing from the first minute to the last, without any participation from the students. Surprisingly, the students evaluated this teaching model highly. However, he had a sense of guilt. To him, what he did was against his beliefs about learning and against his teaching philosophy: one cannot learn from spoon-feeding; active participation and engagement are required. He realized that contextual factors had shaped and restricted his pedagogical practice.

Similarly, WU Wei found it difficult to introduce Western academic knowledge to Chinese students. He believed postgraduate students should develop their information searching and research skills. He introduced the APA citation style. The ability to use citation styles was a basic requirement for undergraduate and postgraduate students in the West. Yet he met strong resistance from the students. They complained that the style restricted their ways of thinking and flow of writing.

### **5.3.3 Low salaries and heavy workloads**

Remuneration and benefit packages reflect how returned academics are positioned and rewarded in the workplace. All participants agreed that their salaries were too low to compensate for their professional skills, knowledge, qualifications, and performance. Low salaries posed a significant challenge, dampening their enthusiasm and placing so huge a stress on them that they struggled to survive, leaving no room to seriously consider teaching innovation or research. This narrative by YANG Guangying is illuminating:

I cannot afford the time to think about research and pedagogical innovations now. My salary is very low, about 70,000 CNY [approximately \$US 10,353] per year. I receive about half of the salary after different sorts of compulsory payments, such as medical insurance, superannuation, etc. I have to survive first, right? Research and teaching innovations are not my priorities at the moment. I want to have a quick payback by teaching extra hours inside and outside the university.

Like her, many other returnees reported that they spent 25 to 30 hours per week on teaching, not to mention hours of moonlighting outside the university. SHI Haiqin gave this account:

Life is extremely tough. I have to work very hard to earn money to pay expensive rent. I am in a dilemma. On the one hand, I have to earn money to survive by teaching as many hours as possible. On the other hand, I am interested in research. There is a high pressure from the university. We are required to publish 2-3 journal articles per year. It is difficult for me to find a balance.

WANG Dianhong reported that the number of students in his university had risen sharply, but the number of lecturers had not risen in proportion. Although the university decided every lecturer was expected to teach six to eight hours per week, a shortage of faculty required them to teach ten to fifteen extra hours at a low pay rate. LIANG Xiaoming noted the teaching loads were so heavy that no one was willing to teach new courses or courses that required lots of preparation.

PU Yanhong recalled her first year at the university. She did not get any pay in the first eight months. The university's ineffective bureaucracy disheartened her. It took the university HR department a long time to process paper work, such as her *hukou* (residence permit) and background and qualification checks.

These returnees were in a dilemma. They had strong interest in pedagogical innovation and research. However, research and quality teaching would not bring them a quick fix to their financial pressures. Low salaries became a huge barrier to their re-entry cultural adjustment in the workplace.

#### **5.3.4 Lack of support and the management *guan* mentality**

Social, professional, and administrative support is critical to returnees in the process of re-entry acculturation and integration. Returnees need support to integrate themselves into the organization's system, to familiarize themselves with its values, norms, conventions, and written and unwritten rules. Such support was found to be missing. Returnees became frustrated with their comparison-induced expectations that they should receive warm support from senior leaders and colleagues as they had witnessed in foreign countries.

YAN Yue said that there were no support systems in his university. All were left to struggle by themselves: sink or swim. There was no service awareness among the leadership or administrative staff. There was an assumption that, as the returnees held the highest foreign degrees, they must know how to cope with their lives, teaching and research, so any support was unnecessary.

In addition, there was a strong *guan* (control, monitoring, supervising) culture and mentality at these universities. There was a perception that universities possess or own their faculty; therefore, *guan* must be in place. Senior leaders and line managers, WANG Dianhong noted, would present themselves as Big Brother, always watching you, "making sure your performance and behavior are politically correct". PU Yanhong, who taught courses in social sciences, reported that she was invited by her university's senior leaders to have a tea talk: a special political terminology offered as severe warning for inappropriate remarks in her teaching, reportedly deviating from orthodox Chinese ideology and the party line. Her students, recruited by university leaders to monitor teachers with "radical" political

views, reported to the authorities that, in her teaching, she discredited Chinese culture and exalted Western culture. QI Youzhong added:

In every classroom, there are cameras. New technology monitoring systems have been introduced to all classrooms to record, monitor, and analyze lecturers' classroom activities in the central control room. Liberal arts, humanities, social sciences subjects, and academic returnees are the main targets. Students are encouraged and mobilized to monitor and report their teachers. Teachers who are found to mislead students and derail from the "correct" path are sacked or kept away from classrooms.

Such a *guan* mentality, in SHI Haiqin's view, suggests that academic returnees have to be very cautious what they say and teach in class, as there is a lack of trust and respect. The organizational culture made it difficult for returnees to integrate themselves into the core of academic circles and professional norms. GAO Furui argued that over-administration, intensified political ideology, political pressure, and cumbersome bureaucratization limited the freedom and autonomy of academics and their flexibility for introducing new programs, curricula, ideas, and pedagogical innovations. The management tried to assert firm hierarchical control over academics' teaching, research, and even private lives under the name of "following international standards", which were not familiar to these foreign-educated returnees. LONG Xiumei asserted that managers' negligence of administrative ethics undermined the morale, confidence, dignity, and enthusiasm of returnees and corrupted the organizational culture.

## 6. Discussion

This study used the ABC theoretical framework proposed by Martin and Harrell (2004) to investigate the affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions of re-entry acculturation, and examine the re-entry acculturative experiences and challenges facing returned scholars at Chinese universities. The three dimensions of the framework are interrelated and reciprocally influence each other. In re-entry cultural adaptation, in spite of their hybrid identities, returnees must relearn their own culture – especially workplace culture, gradually find a person-organization and person-environment fit to achieve psychological equilibrium in response to the dynamics of cultural and organizational changes, and eventually change their behavior. This is a stressful process for returnees who are unaware of the changes in themselves and in the home society during their study in foreign countries.

The favorable public perception and perceived urgency of the Chinese government's drive to construct world-class universities (Yang & Welch 2012) have created an environment to enable returned academics to play their expected roles as agents of transformation in Chinese higher-education internationalization. Their identities and intercultural personhood (Kim 2015) lend credibility and legitimacy to their unique position in the discourse within Chinese universities. They have introduced new ideas, education philosophies, pedagogies, and research standards and scholarships into Chinese universities, aiming to improve teaching and research. Their intercultural experiences have helped them to identify, interpret, and react to situations based on the role expectations and role-appropriate behaviour that their identities entail.

Returnees' negative feelings are related to their experiences and perceptions of their working environments, reward systems, support systems, and relationships. They have encountered many challenges that inhibit their psychological adaptation. Their expectations are inter-crossed with those of the university and those of the students. This study cannot tell what universities' expectations are; but it does provide ample evidence that returnees' expectations have not been met. Returnees expect to be respected and have their participation valued; but they are treated as decorative articles ("flower vases") without substantial value.

This runs counter to the initial goal of recruiting foreign-educated talent to improve educational and research standards. Returnees' knowledge and expertise are under-utilized or ignored. Many have to work more hours than expected, leaving little time for research and pedagogical innovation. They are seen as laborers rather than highly qualified scholars. Their salaries are miserably low, incomparable with their investments in their foreign education and their consequent high qualifications. Their teaching content and classroom delivery are closely scrutinized by their universities. Returnees specializing in humanities, social sciences, or liberal arts fear that they may be invited to "tea talks". The sense of polarization becomes a painful experience when they compare what is happening with what they experienced in Western countries. Their re-entry acculturation is filled with complexity, dilemmas, and frustration in an organizational culture where there are no support systems in place, except the *guan* mentality featuring conformity, control, and micro-management. In such an inhibiting work environment, it is difficult for returnees to apply their knowledge to their teaching and research; access social networks and relationships (*guanxi*); and use their personal agency resources to initiate, execute, and control their actions.

## 7. Conclusions

This study found that returned academics played a role in Chinese higher education internationalization by introducing Western knowledge and educational philosophies along with new courses and programs, teaching pedagogies, research methods and standards. Their human capital was enhanced through international mobility and cultural learning. Their transformed identities and intercultural personhood became highly valued assets that Chinese universities were seeking. Chinese sociocultural, organizational, and contextual factors both facilitated and inhibited their re-entry acculturation and reintegration. In the process of knowledge transfer at Chinese universities, returnees experienced stress and challenges as constraints to their performance in teaching and research, including lack of a supportive organizational culture, lack of a knowledge-sharing climate, low salaries, heavy workloads, and organizational *guan* culture. These environmental constraints were major sources of stress significantly influencing returnees' re-entry acculturation and integration and limiting the fulfilment of their role expectations.

One of the objectives of recruiting returnees is to use their knowledge acquired from the West to serve the internationalization goals and strategies of their home universities through formal and informal activities of knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer, knowledge application and formation of communities of practice (Wenger 1998). To achieve this, it is important to remove knowledge-transfer barriers and create a knowledge-sharing environment by organizing workshops, seminars, conferences, and other discipline-specific research and academic activities where faculty members can share their knowledge; freely discuss pedagogical, research, and social issues; and be highly committed to pedagogical innovation and research agendas.

A world-class university cannot be constructed by faculty who struggle to survive with miserably low salaries and bogged down by complex *guanxi* and heavy workloads. Over-supervision, strict control, conformity, and micro-management in every aspect of academic, social, and research activities prevent academics – returnees and locals alike – from pursuing pedagogical innovation and research-capacity development. A world-class university cannot be built by a few top scholars imported from other countries. It is the collective endeavor and commitment of the faculty along with organizational culture; senior leaders' vision; government support; and socio-cultural, political, and environmental factors that matter.

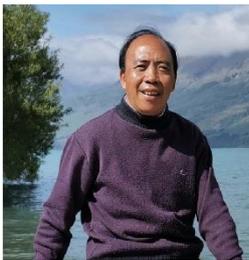
This study suggests that it is important for Chinese universities to address the re-entry acculturative issues facing returnees. They are unlikely to address low salaries that are determined by the labor market, but other supportive strategies can be taken to cushion the

impact of re-adaptation and facilitate re-entry integration. University senior leaders and line managers can carefully listen to their views, recommendations, cases, and stories of challenges and hardships, help them solve their problems in life, teaching, and research, and encourage them to utilize the knowledge and innovations. In addition, returned academics should be allowed to form their own associations or clubs inside and outside the institution to exchange their views, provide mutual support, and identify ways to help them make effective re-adaptation. It is also helpful for universities to treat both local faculty and returnees without biases, and encourage them to socialize, and collaborate in teaching and research.

Both universities and academic returnees should not hold unrealistic expectations concerning university ranking. Global stratification in higher education has shaped global hierarchy of national systems (Marginson 2016) and parameters have been consolidated. It is unlikely for low ranking universities in Chinese provinces to chase the shadow of the “world-class” status by importing some Western-trained academics, although they indeed can help improve teaching and research. Research requires scholarship, experience, time, and financial support. It is unrealistic to expect an academic who teaches 25-30 hours a week in class, earning a salary of less than \$US900 a month, to conduct a reasonably high-quality research project.

Academic returnees should be aware that cultural learning is a long-term process because of the nature of dynamics and changes of culture. Like expatriate’s adaptation, re-entry acculturation is “an ongoing, never-ending process” (Haslberge 2005: 169). When seeking a cultural fit or organizational fit, the relatively stable states should be seen as temporary. Their hybrid identities do not guarantee that they can deal with all emerging problems. They need to develop adaptation skills through constant learning and behavioral changes to match the unimagined and unexpected challenges in the new environment, constantly realign their expectations and behavior with the shifting contexts, negotiate and reinterpret the social and cultural realities.

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