

East-West Crosscurrents in Higher Education

Qiongqiong Chen

# Globalization and Transnational Academic Mobility

The Experiences Of Chinese Academic  
Returnees

*The Silk Road*



Higher Education Press



Springer

# **East-West Crosscurrents in Higher Education**

**Series editor**

Ruth Hayhoe, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

This book series focuses on higher education crosscurrents between Asia and the West, including traditional comprehensive universities, normal universities for teachers, higher vocational institutions, community colleges, distance and on-line universities and all the differing approaches to higher education emerging under processes of massification and diversification. It gives attention to the ways in which the Asian context shapes the internationalization of higher education and the response to globalization differently from that of the West, as well as new phenomena that are arising in the interface between these two broad regions, such as higher education hubs and regional networks of collaboration. Lastly, it will highlight the growing reciprocity between these two regions, whose higher education systems have grown from such deeply different historical roots.

Higher Education has deep roots in the cultures and civilizations of diverse regions of the world, but perhaps the most influential models shaping contemporary globalization come from Europe and China. Universities established in Europe in the Middle Ages have developed into what is now described as the “global research university,” a model profoundly shaped by 19th century Germany and 20th century America, and spread around the world both through colonization and the emulation of its scientific achievements and contribution to nation building. A millennium earlier China spawned another influential model, characterized by close integration within a meritocratic bureaucracy that entrusted governance to those who could demonstrate their knowledge through written examinations. The Chinese model was greatly admired in Europe from the time it was introduced in the 16th century, and one can see its contours in what Burton Clark described as the “continental model” in contradistinction to the “Anglo-American model” epitomized in the global research university.

What has become clear in the maelstrom of globalization, which has stimulated the growth of a global knowledge economy and created circumstances where nations consider higher education as crucial to remaining competitive, is that the integration of core features from both models would be optimal: from Asia, a tradition of strong state support for and involvement in higher education, which is crucial for good governance and social advancement; and from Europe and North America, the ideas of university autonomy and academic freedom, which are essential to promoting scientific creativity and innovation.

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# Foreword

A topic of continuing interest is how comparative and international higher education relates to student mobility. Therefore, this book has much to contribute to our understanding of East–West cross-currents in higher education. A long time concern about the imbalance in movement between the developed and developing world, expressed in the emotive term “brain drain,” has recently given way to considerable research on patterns of “brain circulation” and “brain gain.” One of the countries that has captured attention is Chinese Mainland because it had a huge and persisting outflow of students at all levels from the time it opened up to world under Deng Xiaoping in 1978. Recently, however, this flow began to reverse itself, and interesting research done by Pan Suyan (2011) and Ma Yuping and Pan Suyan (2015) explore the strategies used by the Chinese government to bring back talented scientists, scholars, and entrepreneurs.

This volume gives a human face to this movement of highly qualified scientists and scholars from the United States back to China. It examines the motivation for return and the experience of reintegration and adjustment through the voices of more than 50 academic interviewees across a range of knowledge fields. Of particular interest is the contrast between those who returned to universities and research institutes close to the city of Xi’an in China’s Northwest and those who came back to the more cosmopolitan city of Shanghai on China’s East Coast. These differing contexts made a considerable difference to several dimensions of their reintegration experience. For each scholar, the decision to return and reconnect was far more than a purely rational choice based on career interests or economic motivation. Considerations of family, cultural connection, and national identity also played a role as evident in the sensitive and thought-provoking analysis of the personal and professional transformations they underwent. Readers will find this a compelling account of a group of scholars who are making highly significant contributions to the development of world-class universities in China, which are beginning to have a global influence.

Toronto, Canada

Ruth Hayhoe

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# Contents

<b>1 Introduction</b> . . . . .	1
1.1 An Introduction to the Book and the Context . . . . .	2
1.2 Objectives of the Book. . . . .	5
1.3 Outline of the Book. . . . .	8
References . . . . .	9
<b>2 Higher Education Transition and Academic Mobility in China</b> . . . . .	13
2.1 The Changing Landscape of Global Higher Education . . . . .	13
2.2 Higher Education Transition in China . . . . .	15
2.3 Return Academic Mobility in China. . . . .	20
2.3.1 China's Post-1978 Policies Toward Study Abroad and Return Mobility . . . . .	20
2.3.2 Studies of China's Academic Returnees . . . . .	27
References . . . . .	29
<b>3 Theorizing Academic Mobility</b> . . . . .	33
3.1 Debates on Brain Drain, Gain, and Circulation . . . . .	33
3.2 An Alternative Approach to Academic Mobility . . . . .	35
3.3 Conceptualizing Academic Mobility. . . . .	38
References . . . . .	40
<b>4 Return Mobility, Motivations, and Driving Factors: Negotiating the Process of Return.</b> . . . . .	43
4.1 Policy Matters: The Role of the State and Institutions in Return Mobility . . . . .	44
4.1.1 The Role of State Policies . . . . .	44
4.1.2 The Role of Institutional Policies . . . . .	47
4.1.3 Comments on Talent Policies . . . . .	50

4.2	Rational Calculations: Improved Research Conditions and Career Maneuvers . . . . .	51
4.2.1	Established Scholars . . . . .	51
4.2.2	Recent PhD Returnees . . . . .	53
4.2.3	Postdoctoral Fellows . . . . .	54
4.3	A Nostalgic Feeling Toward Home: Cultural Belonging and Family Responsibility . . . . .	56
4.3.1	Cultural Belonging . . . . .	56
4.3.2	Family Reasons . . . . .	58
4.4	Conclusion . . . . .	61
	References . . . . .	63
<b>5</b>	<b>Reintegration, Challenges, and Structural Constraints:</b>	
	<b>A Reflection on China's Academic System . . . . .</b>	<b>65</b>
5.1	Institutional Constraints . . . . .	66
5.1.1	Bureaucratic and Hierarchical Governance Structures . . . . .	66
5.1.2	Local Politics and the Absence of an Invisible College . . . . .	70
5.2	Critique of China's Academic System . . . . .	74
5.2.1	A Hectic and Materialistic Mentality . . . . .	75
5.2.2	Quantity, Quality, and Assessment . . . . .	76
5.2.3	The Funding System and Academic Corruption . . . . .	78
5.3	World-Class Universities? Returnees' Comparative Perspectives . . . . .	81
5.4	Conclusion . . . . .	85
	References . . . . .	87
<b>6</b>	<b>Learning, Knowledge Transfer, and Institutional Innovation:</b>	
	<b>The Impact of Academic Mobility . . . . .</b>	<b>89</b>
6.1	Learning and Knowledge Transfer Experiences Abroad . . . . .	90
6.1.1	Academic Training . . . . .	90
6.1.2	Personal Growth and Cultural Gains . . . . .	92
6.2	Experiences of Knowledge Transfer Upon Return . . . . .	95
6.2.1	The Ways of Teaching . . . . .	96
6.2.2	Publications and Transnational Collaboration . . . . .	100
6.2.3	Promoting Internationalization and Institutional Building . . . . .	102
6.3	The Consequence of Mobility on Institutional Innovation . . . . .	105
6.4	Conclusion . . . . .	109
	References . . . . .	109
<b>7</b>	<b>Concluding Reflections . . . . .</b>	<b>113</b>
7.1	Globalization and the Changing Academic Profession . . . . .	113
7.2	Internal Differentiations . . . . .	115

7.3 Professional Remaking . . . . .	118
7.4 Implication and Further Studies . . . . .	120
References . . . . .	121
<b>Appendix A: Methodology and Methods . . . . .</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>Appendix B: Characteristics of the Qualitative Sample . . . . .</b>	<b>141</b>

# List of Figure

Figure 2.1	Gross Enrollment Rate in Higher Education in China from 1990 to 2012 .....	16
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# List of Tables

Table 2.1	Numbers of Chinese Students and Scholars Leaving for and Returning from Overseas Studies 1978–2013 . . . . .	21
Table 2.2	China’s Overseas Talent Recruitment Programs . . . . .	24
Table A.1	Demographic Information of the Participants . . . . .	128

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Cross-border movement of students and scholars is not a new phenomenon in the history of higher education. Ever since their medieval inception, European universities have formed a loose network in which wandering scholars from Europe have played a key role in spreading ideas and knowledge (Barnett and Phipps 2005). What appears new today, however, is that the “previously sporadic, exceptional and limited international academic links have become increasingly systematic, dense, multiple and transnational” (Kim 2010, p. 400) due to the process of globalization. Moreover, the interactions of open global dealings (e.g., WTO) on higher education and the increasingly interconnected networks of universities and academic associations have further contributed to creating the new patterns of academic mobility. These new national and super-national policies and practices have been not only changing the ways in which academics mobilize and operate, they are also transforming the landscapes of higher education on the global scale.

The discussion of academic mobility, in the literature and policy documents, is largely from an economic perspective framed by the concepts of “brain drain,” “brain gain,” and “brain circulation.” Early research informed by this perspective has been focused on the debates of brain drain, which is defined as a one-way flow of qualified human resources and capital from one country to another (Shorrocks 2008). For example, the movement of international students from less to more developed countries is often perceived as a major form of brain drain. It is assumed that this loss of talent could have negative effects on countries of origin over the long term because they have made an educational investment in students who ultimately leave their home countries (Pan 2011; Solimano 2008). This view, however, is challenged by recent research on knowledge diaspora and returnees, which considers the potential benefits that these people might bring back to their country of origin, thus contributing to its economic development as a new form of brain gain (Brown 2002). It is also argued that the flow of these highly skilled people can be a powerful vehicle for enhancing knowledge exchange and global

connectivity, which in turn boosts international cooperation and development (Fullilove and Flutter 2004; Solimano 2008).

While the notion of brain circulation has provided insights on transnational connectivity and diasporic networks, there continue to be strong economic and human capital accounts that barely move beyond the nation-state frameworks (Cantwell 2011; Rizvi 2005; Tomlinson 1999). As Robertson (2010) pointed out, what is missing in these accounts “are ways of thinking about subjects as active social and political agents, negotiating, interpreting, contesting their social worlds by mobilising and materialising the knowledges (hence knowledge as plural) through which that social world is constituted” (p. 644). Thus, a more critical scrutiny is needed to understand academic mobility that is not only economic and political but also social and cultural within individual and situated contexts (Cantwell 2011). In response, this book takes up a social-cultural analysis on academic mobility by tracing the trajectories and experiences of returning Chinese academics within the context of China’s higher education internationalization.

## 1.1 An Introduction to the Book and the Context

This book presents the results of a qualitative study on the transnational experiences of returned Chinese scholars and the role they played in China’s higher education internationalization. The study went beyond economic accounts of academic mobility and placed the investigation in a broader frame of social and cultural analysis in order to go deep into the everyday experiences of returning scholars around issues of their sense of identity as well as their ways of connecting and bringing about changes in their work communities. It shed light on scholarly debates about transnational academic mobility and internationalization of higher education in China.

China is an important example of a nation that has sought to entice highly skilled nationals to bring back their skills to contribute to domestic development. For a significant period of time, China has been regarded as suffering severe brain drain as its brightest students and scholars emigrated to other countries. Data reveal that of the 3,058,600 students and scholars (also called *liuxue ren yuan*) who went abroad for study during the period from 1978 to 2013, a total of 1,144,800 returned, accounting for 37.43 % (Ministry of Education of People’s Republic of China [MOE] 2014). Those who do not return contribute to what has been identified as China’s massive brain drain or “talent loss” (Hayhoe and Zhong 1995). However, during recent years, China has begun to exert a reverse pull, and as a result a significant “reverse brain drain” has emerged (Pan 2011; Zweig 2006). In 2013 alone, 353,500 scholars returned compared with 413,900 leaving for overseas studies, thus resulting in an increased return rate of 30 % compared with 2012 (MOE 2014).

In order to lure more talent back, the Chinese government has adopted various strategies to transform brain drain into brain gain or brain circulation such as the



Hundred Talents Program (*bairen jihua*), Chunhui Scholar Program (*chunhui xuezhe jihua*), Program of Introducing Discipline-Based Talent to Universities (also called 111 Project) (*yinzhi jihua*), Project of Thousand Talents (*qianren jihua*), and Project of Thousand Youth Talents (*qingnian qianren jihua*). These programs are aimed at stimulating the return of overseas scientists, scholars, and high-tech entrepreneurs by providing favorable conditions and incentives. Incentives include start-up funding, a competitive salary package, high-level positions in universities or research institutes, housing subsidy, children's education, spouse employment, favorable taxation, and special policy for *hukou* (a household registration system in China)<sup>1</sup> or long-term residency permits for those with foreign citizenship (Cao 2008; Jonkers 2010; Zweig 2006).

At the institutional level, universities have been aggressively recruiting faculty who have been educated overseas or sending faculty aboard for short visits as strategies to promote internationalization and the quest for world-class university status. For instance, most of the 985 Project member universities<sup>2</sup> have adopted new recruitment policies and measures of faculty recruitment. Among the first-tier 985 universities (called C9 League universities),<sup>3</sup> it is required that at least 50 % of newly hired faculty be foreign-trained (Pella and Wang 2013). As a result, a substantial number of leaders and professors in China's research universities now have some international experience. For example, 78 % of university presidents and 63 % of PhD supervisors<sup>4</sup> in institutions directly overseen by the Ministry of Education are academic returnees.<sup>5</sup> Seventy-two percent of the directors of key national and provincial laboratories have studied abroad. In addition, 81 % of academicians at the Chinese Academy of Sciences and 54 % of academicians at the Chinese Academy of Engineering are returnees (Li 2004; Wang 2013; Welch and Hao 2013).

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<sup>1</sup>*Hukou* is a household registration system in China that identifies a person as a resident of an area. A *hukou* document is required for education, marriage, employment, and so on. It serves as an important basis of assigning jobs, benefits, resources, and other life changes including children's educational opportunities.

<sup>2</sup>Project 985, named after the date it was launched (May 5, 1998), aims to contribute a significant amount of funding to up to 39 top universities in order to build world-class universities. It marks an important step in stimulating the excellence of universities in order to compete effectively in global standing.

<sup>3</sup>The C9 League is an alliance of nine top universities on the Chinese Mainland that includes Tsinghua University, Peking University, Harbin Institute of Technology, University of Science and Technology of China, Fudan University, Zhejiang University, Nanjing University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and Xi'an Jiao Tong University.

<sup>4</sup>"PhD supervisor" is a special term among the academic ranks in China. It is the highest ranking that a university teacher can obtain. PhD supervisors are promoted from full professors, and only those with the title of PhD supervisor can supervise PhD students.

<sup>5</sup>Here, "academic returnee" is a broad term that refers to both diploma students who received their undergraduate or graduate degrees abroad and visiting scholars who spent at least 1 year abroad doing research-related work.

These returned academics are usually given a nickname of *haigui*,<sup>6</sup> a pun on “sea turtle” (a homonym for “returnee” in Mandarin Chinese) because sea turtles swim to their home shore to lay eggs. Collectively, they are called *haigui-pai* (Yang and Tan 2006). According to Li (2004), the *haigui-pai* has shifted from “being silent” to “becoming mature,” with an increasing representation of *haigui* in academic leadership in higher education institutions. Given their possession of advanced knowledge and skills, as well as their international qualifications and networks, these *haigui-pai* are regarded as a unique-talent group that could potentially take China’s academics from its domestic playing ground into the global arena.

However, amidst the current tidal wave of returnees in academia, some negative cases and related problems have been cited in both scholarly research and media reports. Recent news of the suicide of a Harvard-educated returnee at Renmin University of China in March 2012 cast a dark shadow on the “return fever.” Dr. Cao, a professor and dean of the chemistry department, was reported to have jumped to his death from a school building. It is rumored that the main contributors to his death were work pressure and relationships with colleagues in his department.<sup>7</sup> Although this is an extreme case, it reflects some long-standing problems in China’s higher education and talent programs. Among the few studies on the experiences of returned academics in Chinese universities (Feng and Feng 2009; Yi 2011; Zweig 2006; Zweig et al. 2004, 2008), the challenge of readjustment is a perpetual theme. Zweig (1997, 2006), who has had a long-term interest in the mobility of Chinese academics, pointed out that many returnees faced difficulties in making connections with academic culture in China, in which *guanxi*<sup>8</sup> (personal connections) still matters significantly to academic work and the government’s intervention is still strong in universities. Moreover, preferential policies have stimulated resentment and controversy from domestic-educated scholars who feel that their degrees are devalued and their positions threatened by the influx of a large number of returnees (Zweig et al. 2004). This has further complicated the academic politics in Chinese universities and hampered the integration of returned scholars into the academic community.

Thus, the following questions are pressing: To what extent can the return of overseas-educated academics bring potential change to China’s academic culture? To what extent can their participation disrupt the traditional structure in Chinese universities? At the policy level, is simply luring more overseas-educated academics back enough? More importantly, how can China create an environment that

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<sup>6</sup>The term *haigui* is used to describe overseas students, scholars, and professionals who return to the Chinese Mainland to work. For details, see Yang and Tan (2006). And also see Wang et al. (2006).

<sup>7</sup>For details of related news, see [http://sh.sina.com.cn/citylink/jk/t\\_xa/2012-03-22/112259269.html](http://sh.sina.com.cn/citylink/jk/t_xa/2012-03-22/112259269.html).

<sup>8</sup>*Guanxi* is a Chinese term that literally means interpersonal connections, relationships, or networks. However, *guanxi* is more than the sum of interpersonal ties. It also refers to the benefits and powers gained from social connections and the moral obligations to maintain such connections. *Guanxi* performs a critical “lubricating” function in Chinese society as well as among the Chinese diaspora. For details, see Gold et al. (2002).

is welcoming and conducive to academic development? All of these issues have yet to be adequately analyzed. This research explored these urgent issues in the context of China's heavy investment in higher education reform and the vital intellectual debates about how we understand the consequences of academic mobility on returnees and their working communities.

## 1.2 Objectives of the Book

This book examines the way U.S.-returned academics negotiate their academic identities and professional practices at China's research universities in the context of higher education internationalization. The inquiry was guided by the following three sets of research questions. First, why do overseas PhD students and scholars return? What are their motivations and driving factors? Second, how do returnees reflect on their overseas experiences? What are their major gains through studying and working in the US? Third, how do the returnees narrate their reintegration experiences into China's academic world? What are the major challenges and opportunities they encounter after returning? How do they perceive their environment and their potential roles in China's higher education innovation?

To answer these questions, a qualitative interview-based research investigation was conducted with 52 U.S. doctoral recipients from different disciplines at five research institutions in Shanghai (a city in China's East Coast) and Xi'an (a city in China's Northwest). U.S. doctoral recipients in this research was defined as Chinese-born scholars who completed at least their college education in their home country and then obtained their doctorate degrees in the US and who subsequently returned to Chinese universities on graduation or after several years of work experience in U.S. research institutions. The reason that the US-returned scholars were selected was partly due to the dominant role of U.S. higher education in global research communities in terms of its research capacity, numbers of world-leading universities, and top-tier journals (Marginson and van der Wende 2007) and partly due to its large global doctorate market and extensive share of Chinese doctorate students.<sup>9</sup> The selection of research universities was due to the availability of returned academics and their leading role in the process of higher education internationalization in China. Because these research universities were better financed under the projects of 211 and 985 striving for world-class university status, they were in a better position to attract those who considered a return to China than were most regular universities.

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<sup>9</sup>The United States is one of the most popular destinations for Chinese students to study abroad. During the academic year 2012/2013, 235,596 Chinese students were studying in the US, accounting for 28.7 % of all international students, thus making China the largest sending country. Data were retrieved from the Institute of International Education, <http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students/Leading-Places-of-Origin/2011-13>.

This study employed in-depth interviews (Seidman 2006) as the primary method of data collection. Each interview lasted 1–2 h. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and were recorded (except for two) with the participants' permission. All audio data were transcribed into texts; pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants. Other methods, such as nonparticipatory observation, informal conversation, and documentary analysis, were also used to complement the interview data. An inductive analysis approach was used to generate codes, categories, and themes from the raw data (Marshall and Rossman 2011). This process was aided by both manual coding strategies as well as a computer-assisted program called Nvivo 10. I acknowledge that my subjectivity influenced the way in which I conducted the research. My status as an international student from the Chinese Mainland completing a PhD at a U.S. research university with plans to return to China made it easier for me to access potential participants and build rapport. I have been judicious in my best efforts to capture the subjective experiences of the participants and to assess how they interpret and understand their own experience in the broader social and cultural context of transnational academic mobility and internationalization of higher education (for details of the methods and methodology of the study, see Appendix A).

This study of the experiences of China's returned academics is significant for several reasons. First, for a long time, China has been regarded as suffering severe brain drain, but recently there has been a shift in this overall trend with a large number of overseas talent returning to participate in China's national development. This is partly due to China's rapid economic growth and its particular policies for bringing back "home" overseas Chinese talent including university academics. Despite growing attention on this return wave, the discourse is overwhelmingly concerned with brain drain or gain debates (Cao 2008; Pan 2011; Zweig 2006), which can be too nationalistic to account for the ways in which people and ideas travel. As knowledge carriers and producers, these returning academics are regarded as the basis of technological innovation and academic excellence in China as well as cultural mediators who integrate the global with local through transnational connections (Wang 2013). However, their stories have not yet been adequately explored. In fact, we have limited ways of understanding of what is entailed in the process of leaving and returning, particularly their motivations, experiences, struggles, and possibilities.

Second, a close investigation on the reintegration experiences of returning scholars will shed some light on China's talent policies and its quest for creating world-class universities. China, in recent years, has aggressively moved to advance its higher education through building world-class universities. Among the strategies, one important policy is to mobilize more overseas intellectuals (Zhu 2009; Pella and Wang 2013; Welch and Hao 2013). Although the government has made great efforts to entice overseas Chinese intellectuals to return, less attention has been paid to the outcomes of the return mobility. It can be argued that it is relatively easy for the government to publicize a policy for attracting overseas talent, but far more difficult to alter the institutional culture to make it not only welcoming to returnees but also conducive to their growth. Therefore, it is necessary for policy

makers and university administrators to learn specific perspectives of the returned academics, as well as hear their difficulties, needs, and suggestions, in order to better incorporate them and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of current talent policies.

Furthermore, this book is valuable to researchers who are interested in transnational process and the global movement of talent. Although scholarship on transnationalism has opened up a new conceptual framework for understanding “social as mobilities” (Urry 2000, p. 2), which indicates the stretching out of social relations beyond the boundaries of nation-states, discourses on academic mobility remain locked in under a nationally bounded space by focusing extensively on the logic of human capital and national economic growth and competitiveness. Less attention has been paid to the qualitative nature of the experiences of academic mobility including people’s sense of self, their ways of transnational connecting, their agencies of change, as well as the epistemological and ethical issues associated with mobility, knowledge production, and global talent policies (Fahey and Kenway 2010). As the boundaries of our world and higher education become more fluid, as the possibilities of transnationality—including transnational space, global imagination, and new subjectivity—have become better understood (Appadurai 1996, 2001; Beck 2008; Clifford 1997; Kenway and Fahey 2006; Ong 1999; Urry 2000), more nuanced analyses are needed to understand the ways that mobile scholars, as active social actors, negotiate their academic identities, social professional networks, and the boundaries of higher education within a fluid globalized world.

This research has important methodological implications. Among the studies on academic mobility, many are based on quantitative, large-scale surveys and focus mainly on the physical characteristics of movement such as the numbers and push/pull factors in sending and receiving countries. These approaches are largely locked into a form of methodological nationalism and fail to understand mobility within individual and situated contexts (Kenway and Fahey 2006; Cantwell 2011). In this sense, this study brings together anthropological sensibilities and sociological inquiry to capture the dynamics and complex nature of mobility. In doing so, I embed the analysis on both the macro level of structural contexts and the micro level of an individual’s life course (King 2002). A combination of these two dimensions can not only provide insights on the individual narratives of movement and mediations of that returnee’s experiences, it also bring forms of collective action, as well as emergent institution building, into view.

Finally, in addition to the benefits to policy makers, practitioners, and researchers, this book will be of interest to overseas Chinese students and scholars. As Mills (2000) stated, “the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances” (p. 5). For those who are debating about whether or not to return, the findings from this empirical research might provide them with some valuable information on the conditions in the current academic world in China. In addition,

learning the experiences from their peers might enable them to make better decisions regarding their professional and life choices.

### 1.3 Outline of the Book

This book is comprised of seven chapters. This chapter gives an introduction to the research including background, research objectives, methods, and significance of the study. Chapter 2 discusses the issues of higher education globalization and academic returnees within a wider context of China. It shows how China pursues a program of reform to revitalize its higher education system against the backdrop of global higher education transition as well as how China adopts new policies to mobilize overseas talents. Chapter 3 reviews the literature on transnational academic mobility from economic, sociological, and anthropological perspectives. It challenges the economic and political approaches to mobility and theorizes academic mobility under social and cultural frameworks. It argues that the debates regarding brain drain, gain, or circulation are insufficient to capture the complexity and dynamics of transnational academic mobility. A more critical investigation is required to understand mobility as a way to negotiate identities, social connections, and various aspects of globalization.

The subsequent three chapters present the major findings of the research: negotiating the process of return (Chap. 4), structural constraints and challenges of integration (Chap. 5), and the impact of academic mobility (Chap. 6). Chapter 4 examines the returnees' motivations and the larger forces that shape their decisions for return. It challenges the official discourse on the patriotism of the returnees and argues that the decision to return is much more often motivated by China's rapid economic and social development, policy initiatives on mobilizing return moves, and better career opportunities provided by the improved academic system. However, returnees do not move solely for occupational reasons; they also move for social and cultural reasons including social attachment, cultural belonging, self-realization, and family considerations. This suggests that the act of returning is a complex process that involves both personal choices and negotiations of various conditions and regions—family, workplace, and the nation-state.

Chapter 5 explores the daily experiences of returned scholars as they re-enter into the local academic community; it focuses on the challenges and dilemmas they encounter in their workplace. It finds that the integration of returnees into Chinese universities is not always a linear process. Their integration experiences can be constrained by the existing university structures and power relations. These include the bureaucracies of university administration, local politics, and complicated interpersonal relationships, the problematic evaluation and funding system, and a lack of an effective academic culture that consistently supports high-quality teaching and research. This chapter also addresses the topic of China's agenda of building world-class universities by drawing from the lens of the returnees' comparative views.

Chapter 6 focuses on knowledge transfer and the impact of academic mobility on individuals and organizations. This chapter demonstrates the various ways in which the returnees act as active social actors as they participate in the process of development and internationalization of higher education in China. It argues that the returnees are not passively adapting to the existing university rules and structures. Instead, they are strategically drawing upon and using part of their transnational gains and advantages to create a new space for their professional careers and China's higher education innovation.

The last chapter revisits the issue of professional “remaking” in China by discussing the dynamics of how globalization and local forces work together in forming the academic lives of returned Chinese scholars. It concludes with the implications of the study and suggestions for further research.

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## Chapter 2

# Higher Education Transition and Academic Mobility in China

It is widely recognized that globalization is transforming higher education worldwide including the case of China. During the past decade, the Chinese government has been vigorously reforming its higher education system to make it more internationally oriented. This chapter gives a detailed discussion of global higher education transition and academic mobility within a wider context of China.

### 2.1 The Changing Landscape of Global Higher Education

The global transition of higher education is characterized by increasing flows of institutions, programs, students, and scholars as well as the changing relations between universities, governments, and the market (Marginson and van der Wende 2007; Altbach et al. 2009). According to Altbach et al. (2009), there are more than 2.5 million international students around the world, and this number is estimated to reach 7 million by 2020. Although there is no specific number of mobile university researchers and scholars, the scale of their movement has become more intense than ever before (Marginson and van der Wende 2007). In addition to the flow of people, other forms of mobility are also taking place with unprecedented speed and frequency. These involve short-term academic travel (i.e., lecturing, attending conferences and seminars), research collaborations, joint degree programs, off-shore campuses, and distance-education programs.

All of these forms of flows have intensified global academic networks and shaped a common space, which Marginson and van der Wende (2007) described as “global higher education ‘landscape’” (p. 16). To them, this landscape is shared by international, regional, and national agencies, educational corporations, non-governmental organizations, and other individuals with active interests in cross-border relations. They argued that the global higher education landscape, in which these encounters take place, is not stable or fixed but is always in a process of changing and being reshaped under the influences of different national and local

practices. In turn, the global forces are disturbing the boundaries of nationally located higher education systems and affecting the daily practices of individual institutions and the actors working within them. Thus, the work of higher education, as historically anchored in a national space, is currently being remade as the global flows touch down and as local actors reach out (Sassen 1996) through shared relations and networks in the global landscape.

However, the global flows in higher education are by no means smooth. Expansion of the English language-based research community has contributed to concentrating the ownership of publishers, databases, and other key resources in the hands of a few Anglo-American countries (Altbach et al. 2009), thus putting non-English speaking countries, especially those in the developing world, at a disadvantage. Meanwhile, the development of global ranking systems, such as the Academic Ranking of World Universities by Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU), have further intensified the tension because they place emphasis on Nobel Prizes, international publications, and citations, all in the English language. This is evident in the latest Academic Ranking of World Universities 2013 by SJTU: Among the world's top 20 research universities, 17 are from the US, and two are from the UK.<sup>1</sup> As a result, universities in English-speaking countries are in a better position to allocate resources and attract the best academics globally.

The popularity of global university ranking reflects the recent trend of competitiveness and marketization in higher education promoted by the expansion of knowledge economy (Deem et al. 2008; Margison and van der Wende 2007). This has great effects on the way in which higher education is defined and operates in national economy. Universities are seen as a key driver of economic development; it is believed that the ability of a country to compete globally largely relies on the production of higher value-added products and services, which in turn depends on knowledge and innovation (Naidoo 2007). This view is widely accepted among nations, especially in developing countries, which regard quality higher education as a central means of economic productivity and technological innovation as well as a way to improve their position and competitiveness in the global arena. As a consequence, higher education institutions are encouraged to promote reforms toward human capital agenda and education's economic goals including developing links with industry and business (Rizvi and Lingard 2010; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Olssen and Peters 2005). There are common themes across nations related to individual betterment such as self-sufficiency, greater accountability, and greater market efficiency (Altbach et al. 2009).

Furthermore, the agenda of knowledge economy becomes highly influential in shaping how universities are performing (Deem et al. 2008). This is evident in the emergence of entrepreneurial universities (Clark 1998) or a new academic capitalism in higher education (Slaughter and Leslie 1997). According to Slaughter and Leslie (1997), universities today are becoming increasingly engaged in market-like

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<sup>1</sup>For details about Academic Ranking of World Universities 2013, see <http://www.shanghairanking.com/ARWU2013.html>.

behaviors and viewing themselves as if they were for-profit businesses. They presented convincing evidence, through their case study on universities in the USA, Australia, Canada, and the UK, that this market-oriented thinking has driven universities and academics toward more entrepreneurial activities and thus fundamentally changed the public purposes and academic workforce of the university. This form of academic capitalism is traveling around the world, thus affecting the work of universities and individual academics globally.

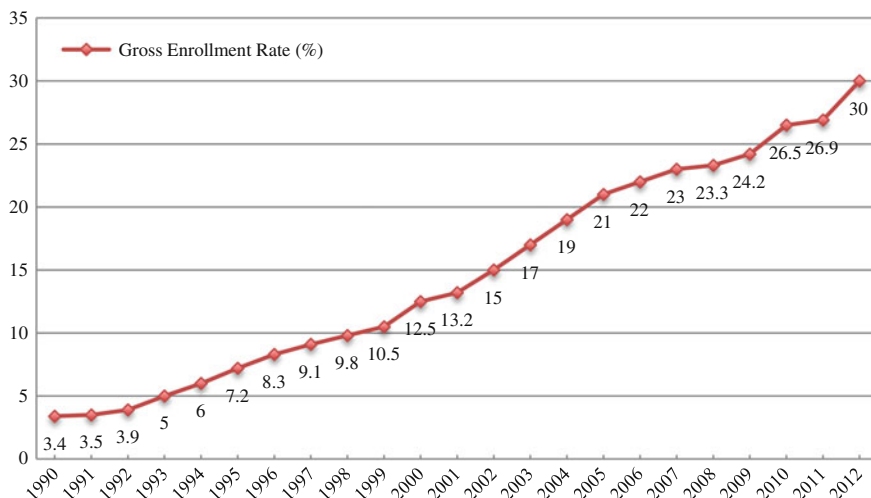
## 2.2 Higher Education Transition in China

Under the influences of knowledge economy, China has restructured its higher education system against a backdrop of its emergence as a powerful economic force in the global arena (Mok and Lo 2007). There is a strong political desire for the Chinese government to develop its higher education system to meet both the internal need to transit to a market economy and external pressure to be globally competitive (Zha 2011). Therefore, a state-driven reform of higher education is underway in China through policies of expansion, internationalization, and reform in governance and finance (Huang 2007; Li and Chen 2011; Mok and Chan 2008; Yang 2002). Specifically, these reforms include decentralizing university governance; diversifying funding sources; intensifying the relations between production, teaching, and research (*chan-xue-yan jiehe*); and promoting university internationalization through collaboration and mobility (Li and Chen 2011; Zha 2011). In terms of financing, China used to have a tradition of total state support for its higher education. However, current data show that state funds declined to 47.6 % by the year 2008 (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China 2010). The shrinkage of public funding on higher education has driven universities to derive operating funds from tuitions and fees (the ratio was 33.7 % in 2008), research grants, university-run businesses, and other service provisions. These changes reflect the global trends toward market efficiency and the circulation of academic capitalism, thus emphasizing the links between universities and industry as well as commercializing programs to meet the needs of the market.

As a result, China has expanded its higher education system; the gross enrollment rate increased from 3.4 % in 1990 to 30 % in 2012 (see Fig. 2.1), indicating that China moved from elite to mass higher education.<sup>2</sup> By the year 2012, the total number of students enrolled reached 33.25 million (MOE 2013), which made China the world's largest tertiary system according to absolute student numbers.

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<sup>2</sup>According to Martin Trow (1972), there are three stages of higher education: elite, mass, and universal education. The elite-education stage refers to gross enrollment rate less than 15 %; the mass-education stage refers to a rate between 15 and 50 %; and the universal-education stage refers to a rate more than 50 %.



**Fig. 2.1** Gross Enrollment Rate in Higher Education in China from 1990 to 2012. *Sources* Data of 1990–2010 are from China Education Statistics (2010). Gross enrollment rate of schools by level. Retrieved from <http://www.stats.edu.cn/sjcx.aspx#>. Data of 2011–2012 are from Ministry of Education of People’s Republic of China [MOE] (2013)

However, the expansion in China is mainly taking place in provincial institutions and short-cycle higher vocational colleges. Their student enrollment increased from 1.79 million in 1997 to 11.89 million in 2005. The expansion in elite universities is relatively small; their enrollment numbers increased from 1.36 million to only 1.63 million during the same period (Zha 2011). This expansion pattern is steered by a deliberate policy of creating a hierarchical structure of higher education with the national elite universities (i.e. those in Project 211 and Project 985, see below) at the top; provincial universities, independent colleges,<sup>3</sup> and some private universities in the middle; and higher vocational colleges and non-degree private colleges at the bottom. This institutional stratification enables China to maintain the world’s largest higher education system while at the same time strive for elite standing of its top universities at a global level (idem 2011). Here I focus on the case of China not because China is an exception in regard to implications of massification of higher education. Instead, the institutional stratification, as one of the noteworthy characteristics of higher education, is going on worldwide (Marginson and van der Wende 2007). What I want to highlight is how China takes this on in very particular ways in the form of building world-class universities through specific policies.

<sup>3</sup>Independent college is a new type of higher education institution in China. It is attached to a state-owned university but invested by non-governmental organizations and individuals. The first independent college was founded in 1999. As of 2010, there were a total of 323 independent colleges in China.

Project 211 and Project 985<sup>4</sup> are the two major programs to stimulate excellence of the elite universities in China, through which the Chinese government concentrates a considerable amount of funding on a small number of selected universities or disciplines to ensure high quality in teaching and research (Li and Chen 2011). Project 211,<sup>5</sup> launched in 1993, is the Chinese government's great endeavor to strengthen approximately 100 higher education institutions and key disciplinary areas as a national priority for the twenty-first century. During the period of 1995–2011, the central government invested a total of 18.75 billion RMB (approximately \$3 billion)<sup>6</sup> to 112 universities admitted to this project (MOE 2008). In 1998, China further concentrated its efforts to promote the development of its elite universities by launching Project 985, named after the date it was launched (May 5, 1998) when the former president Jiang Zemin asserted that China must have several first-rate universities at the international level (MOE 1999). Project 985 marks a second step in stimulating excellence of universities so that they can compete effectively in global standing (Mok and Chan 2008).

In the initial stage of Project 985, only nine top universities (called “C9 League universities”)<sup>7</sup> were selected to be intensively funded by the government. By the year 2010, a total of 39 universities were included in the list of world-class universities. This project prioritizes a strategy that concentrates limited resources on a small number of institutions with the greatest potential for success in the international academic arena (Li and Chen 2011). To achieve this goal, the central government and local governments at various levels allocated significant additional funding to 985 member universities. For example, the total financial support from the central government for Project 985 universities was 14.0 billion RMB (approximately \$2.25 billion) and 18.9 billion RMB (approximately \$3.04 billion) during the two phases of 1999–2001 and 2004–2007, respectively (Wang et al. 2011). In addition to improving infrastructures and developing disciplines, much of the 985 funding has been used to build international networks including holding international conferences, attracting world-renowned faculty and visiting scholars,

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<sup>4</sup>In June 2016, the Ministry of Education of China announced that the Project 211 and Project 985 are no longer valid. The invalidation of these two projects has been interpreted as bringing to an end of a national plan of establishing a few world class universities and colleges in China. The national plan for higher education now focuses on deepening reform in a comprehensive way, through implementing measures to establish world first-class universities and world first-class disciplines, also called double first-class (“shuang yiliu”). Supporting measures are in progress.

<sup>5</sup>The figures of 21 and 1 within the name 211 comes from an abbreviation of the twenty-first century and approximately 100 universities.

<sup>6</sup>Throughout this study, the currency exchange rate used was 1 Chinese Yuan  $\approx$  0.16 US dollars as per the exchange rate on March 1, 2014.

<sup>7</sup>The C9 League is an alliance of nine top universities in Chinese Mainland including Tsinghua University, Peking University, Harbin Institute of Technology, University of Science and Technology of China, Fudan University, Zhejiang University, Nanjing University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and Xi'an Jiao Tong University.

and supporting students and faculty to study or attend conferences abroad (Mok and Chan 2008). Undoubtedly, the 985 member universities have benefited from the project. Their institutional capacity for teaching and research has improved, and their competitive edge in advanced areas has sharpened (Li and Chen 2011). They are also in a better position to attract global talent and to explore ways to partner with top universities worldwide.

Furthermore, China has also been remarkably open in its approach to internationalizing its higher education institutions. Universities, especially those under Project 211 and Project 985, have been actively promoting internationalization via such practices as encouraging transnational research collaboration and joint-degree programs, recruiting international students, hiring global talent and overseas returnees, internationalizing curriculum through study-abroad programs, and using English as a medium of instruction (Huang 2007; Li and Chen 2011). These processes have been further accelerated under the stimulation of global university rankings, which place national higher education systems and individual institutions in the global competition arena. Although once satisfied to be the best at the domestic level, today the top universities in China are using international standards (or Western standards, to be exact) to define excellence (Mohrman 2005). Thus, many top universities are mimicking what American universities do by providing better resources, encouraging research and publications, and introducing the ideas of efficiency, competition, and accountability of faculty performance. In this way, the Western model of higher education is greatly influencing the direction of university reforms in China.

Moreover, pressures for global competition have also changed the academic professions in China. Contrary to the previous metaphor of “iron rice bowl” (a lifetime job with guaranteed security and benefits)<sup>8</sup> used for faculty jobs, many universities are adopting recruitment policies based on contracts with “up or out” practices to make their academic performance accountable (Yi 2011). Faculty are encouraged to publish in international journals, particularly those under the catalogues of SCI (Science Citation Index) or SSCI (Social Science Citation Index) journals. Publishing successes are directly linked to generous cash rewards and/or honorable titles from the institutions (idem 2011). The increased emphasis on research and publication also pushes academics, particularly those in natural science and engineering, to turn to applied research topics in order to gain more outside funding and achieve quick results.

For better or worse, under the influence of the changing landscape of global higher education, China’s higher education system has placed great emphasis on accountability, transparency, competition, and more decentralized decision making (Mohrman 2005; Yi 2011). Many institutions have adopted new rules, paradigms, and some so-called “good practices” (Deem et al. 2008, p. 93) identified from the Western model of higher education for institutional innovation. These, to a great

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<sup>8</sup>“Iron rice bowl” is a Chinese term used to refer to a government-funded job with steady income and benefits and guaranteed job security.

extent, have improved the efficiency and quality of education in Chinese universities. Despite the improvements, this more market-oriented higher education system has been criticized as promoting individualism and market benefits, which leads to poor morale among many faculty (Yang 2005). It is also criticized as increasing the gap between the “have” and “have not” universities, departments, and programs (Mohrman 2005; Mok and Lo 2007) and thus turning higher education into a more business-like sector rather than a learning center.

It is worth noting that the market forces in Chinese higher education do not operate in the same way as those in many western countries such as the US. The central government still holds substantial control on its universities from internal governance (manifested by the dual-leadership system of university governance<sup>9</sup>) to important decision making (i.e., student admission, the quota of students for each institution and program, the quota of faculty, university president appointment, and awarding of degrees) (Yi 2011). For example, in terms of student enrollment, although American universities compete to attract the best students, the admissions of Chinese universities are based solely on students’ points scored in the National College Entrance Examination (*Gaokao*)<sup>10</sup> organized by the MOE. Because the demands for access to higher education are so great and the competition to enter into the top universities is so fierce, there is no real need for universities to offer something unique to attract students (Mohrman 2005). From this perspective, market forces appear to be less significant in China’s higher education system.

As a result, there is a lack of diversity within different levels of institutions because they need follow the basic guidelines and suggestions proposed by the MOE in their major reform programs. Perhaps this is why there is a greater homogeneity among the top universities in China because they are reforming in similar ways of questing for world-class university status. As Mohrman (2005) commented, “... a market system in which institutions tout their unique features has not yet formed in Chinese higher education. The Ministry of Education may be letting a thousand flowers bloom but they are all of the same species” (p. 232). Therefore, it can be argued that although market forces have been influencing China’s higher education system from a state-planning model to a more market-based system, it will never operate the same way as that the ones in many Western countries.

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<sup>9</sup>Chinese universities adopt a dual-leadership governance structure. That is, the university Communist Party Committee, directed by the Party Secretary, works in parallel with the administrative system led by the university president in internal governance. Both the party secretary and the president are appointed by the Chinese government.

<sup>10</sup>*Gaokao* is a Chinese term for the national college entrance examination, which is a prerequisite for entrance into almost all higher-education institutions in China. It takes place only once per year in early June (June 7–June 8 or 9) and spreads over 2–3 days. All high school graduates throughout the country sit the exams during the same period. As this exam is essentially the only criterion for college admission, it is understandable that students become extremely stressed before the exam. Given the numbers, the repercussions, and the stress involved, *gaokao* has been described as one of the most pressure-paced examinations in the world.



## 2.3 Return Academic Mobility in China

This section focuses on studies on return mobility of Chinese academics in higher education. The history of study abroad in China can be traced back to as early as the 1860s when the Qing government decided to send a group of school-age students to study in the US. Although they were subsequently recalled before finishing their study, the returnees made great contributions to the transition of the imperial to modern China (Li 2005; Welch and Hao 2013). Later study-abroad movements were then represented by the waves of “Japan fever” (1896–1911), “studying in the US with the Boxer Indemnity Funds” (1896–1911), “the work-study program in France” (1911–1924), “political study in the Soviet Union” (1921–1930), and “studying in socialist countries” (1950–1965) (Li 2005).<sup>11</sup> These movements served as catalytic forces in the development of the new China toward modernization.

The current study-abroad movement was initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 and represents the largest study-abroad movement in Chinese history (Li 2005; Zhu 2009). According to MOE’s statistic data, during the period from 1978 to 2013 (see Table 2.1) a total of 3,058,600 Chinese students and scholars (also called *liuxue ren yuan*) went abroad for overseas studies; 1,144,800 returned, accounting for 37.43 %. Although the return rate is small compared with the total number of *liuxue ren yuan* abroad, the latest data shows that the number of returnees has increased dramatically since 2008.

### 2.3.1 China’s Post-1978 Policies Toward Study Abroad and Return Mobility

In 1978, after a decade of isolation from the international academic community, Deng Xiaoping decided to send a large number of *liuxue ren yuan* (Chinese students and scholars) to study abroad to learn advanced Western knowledge and practices in order to make up the years of lost from the Cultural Revolution<sup>12</sup> (Li 2005). This sending of *liuxue ren yuan* abroad is often regarded as the beginning of China’s opening up to the outside world (Cao 2008). From 1978 to 1980, a total of 4,761 *liuxue ren yuan* were studying abroad, and most of them were supported by public funds. In 1981, the State Council issued a document *Interim Provisions for Study Abroad with Self-Funding*, which permitted students to study abroad at their own expense. Since then the number of self-funded students has increased dramatically.

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<sup>11</sup>For details of the study abroad movements before 1978, see Li’s (2005) study on “Coming home to teach: Status and mobility of returnees in China’s higher education,” in *Bridging Minds across the Pacific: U.S. China Educational Exchanges*, p. 72.

<sup>12</sup>The Cultural Revolution is a 10-year period of turmoil in China from 1966 to 1976. During this period, students and scientists were sent to the countryside for hard physical labor when research and higher education were virtually halted.

**Table 2.1** Numbers of Chinese Students and Scholars Leaving for and Returning from Overseas Studies 1978–2013

Year	Number leaving	Number returning
1978	860	248
1980	2124	162
1982	2326	2116
1984	3073	2920
1986	4676	1388
1988	3786	3000
1990	2950	1593
1992	6540	3611
1994	19,071	4230
1996	20,905	6570
1998	17,622	7379
2000	38,989	9121
2001	83,973	12,243
2002	125,179	17,945
2003	117,307	20,152
2004	114,682	24,726
2005	118,515	34,987
2006	134,000	42,000
2007	144,000	44,000
2008	179,800	69,300
2009	229,300	108,300
2010	284,700	134,800
2011	339,700	186,200
2012	399,600	272,900
2013	413,900	353,500

*Sources* Data from 1978 to 2006 are from Cao (2008)

Data from 2006 to 2013 are based on annual report on overseas studies from various years (2006–2013), from the website of the Ministry of Education, <http://www.moe.gov.cn/>

During the period from 1984 to 1988, the number of students who were self-sponsored was nearly the same as those who were state/institution-sponsored. Since 1990, self-sponsored students accounted for a majority of China's *liuxue ren yuan*. In 2013, for example, of 413,900 students who went overseas to study, 16,300 were state-sponsored (3.9 %), 13,300 were institution-sponsored (3.2 %), and 384,300 (92.8 %) were self-funded (MOE 2014).

In the early 1980s, most Chinese *liuxue ren yuan* returned to China because approximately 80 % of them were state/institution-sponsored visiting scholars and there were legal requirements for them to return (Zhu 2009). Since the mid-1980s, as more self-sponsored students went abroad for graduate studies, the number of returnees began to decrease. However, the large amount of brain drain did not

happen until 1989 when the Tiananmen Incident<sup>13</sup> marked a watershed for the return of Chinese nationals (Cao 2008). Afterward, the US government passed the *Chinese Student Protections Act* in 1992, which allowed Chinese students and scholars to stay and work in the US, Canada and Australia, as well as other western countries, also issued similar protection acts, which granted the students permanent resident status or extended their stay. As a result, approximately 50,000 Chinese students in the US, 10,000 in Canada, and more than 20,000 in Australia chose to stay in their host countries (Li 2005). This represents “the first large unexpected exodus” (Cao 2008, p. 333) of highly educated Chinese who were expected to return to China to make a contribution to the development of China’s science and technology.

Consequently, the Chinese government adopted more conservative policies of study abroad and deliberately decreased the number of state- or institution-sponsored students (Zhu 2009). A major policy restriction was that those who wanted to go abroad as self-funded students must serve in China for a certain number of years (5 years for undergraduates and 7 years for graduate students), or they would have to pay back to the government the tuition cost of their higher education in order to leave China.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the policy restrictions, the Chinese government did not close the door on overseas studies. In 1992, during his “Southern Tour,”<sup>15</sup> Deng Xiaoping reaffirmed the importance of overseas study by stating that “China should not stop sending students abroad just because few have returned, and that even if half of the overseas students do not return, the remaining half would help the country” (Cao 2008, p. 333). Later that year, the central government issued *A Circulation on Studying Abroad*, which loosened many restrictions (i.e., service period) on going overseas (Keren et al. 2003). In 1993, a guiding policy regarding studying abroad, “supporting overseas studies, encouraging return, and securing free movement” (*zhichi liuxue, guli huiguo, lai qu ziyou*), was proposed. Since then, the policies regarding study abroad have been stabilized (Zhu 2009), and the number of students leaving for overseas studies has increased dramatically with a large proportion of them self-sponsored.

Meanwhile, with the advancement of the market economy and the increasing emphasis of the role of human capital in national competitiveness, China’s needs for talent became more clear and urgent. In 1997, Jiang Zeming, president of China at that time, accounted a new policy of “revitalizing the nation through science and education” (*ke jiao xing guo*) to highlight the vital role of education and science in China’s economic development. As part of this effort, Project 211 was announced

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<sup>13</sup>The Tiananmen Incident was student-led popular demonstrations in Beijing in spring 1989 to protest for greater democracy.

<sup>14</sup>Traditionally, Chinese universities were tuition free. The government provided stipends for students that covered most of the costs of accommodations, books, and living expenses. In 1994, some universities began to charge tuitions. Since 1997, all students have to pay tuitions and fees.

<sup>15</sup>Southern Tour: In early 1992, the former leader Deng Xiaoping paid a tour to a few cities in the south of China, including Shenzhen. During the tour, he stressed the importance of developing a market economy in China and urged the Chinese people to further emancipate their minds, opening up to the outside world.

to support 100 top universities with extra funding. Later, in 1998, Project 985 was initiated to further concentrate resources for 39 top universities in order to help them become world-class universities. To meet this goal, both the government and the institutions were aggressively recruiting scholars from overseas, aiming to raise China's research capacity to international standards. For example, approximately 20 % of the funding given to 985 universities went to hiring foreign-trained academics.

Furthermore, the Chinese government launched various programs—including the Hundred Talents Program (*bairen jihua*), Chunhui Scholar Program (*chunhui xuezhe jihua*), Program of Introducing Discipline-Based Talent to Universities (also called 111 Project" (*yinzhi jihua*), Project of Thousand Talents (*qianren jihua*), and Project of Thousand Youth Talents (*qingnian qianren jihua*)—to entice overseas talent back to participate in China's economic development (for details, see Table 2.2).

The two programs that are of greatest importance to this study are the Thousand Talents Program and Project of Thousand Youth Talents. Project of Thousand Talents was launched in 2008 as a way of attracting top overseas Chinese academics (those who have an academic title equivalent to full professorship in world-renowned universities), managing staff (those who work as a senior manager within a well-known company), and entrepreneurs (those who have developed technologies, obtained patents, and owned their own business). This program offers a relocation package of 1 million RMB (\$160,000) for living allowance and a minimum of 10 million RMB (\$1,600,000) as a one-time, start-up funding for setting up laboratories.<sup>16</sup> Compared with earlier talent programs, this new scheme sets both the bar higher and the net wider. It is also the first talent program under the direction of the General Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. This indicates how seriously China wants talent. By the year 2013, it had drawn back more than 2000 top-notch overseas Chinese, over half of whom were academics.

Due to its success, a follow-up strategy, the Project of Thousand Youth Talents, was launched in 2011. This program lowers its bar to "rising stars" that are younger than 40 years old. It targets those who have obtained a doctoral degree from a world-renowned university and have at least 3 years of overseas research experience. In terms of monetary incentives, it offers 0.5 million RMB (\$80,000) living allowance and research funds of up to 3 million RMB (\$480,000) over 3 years. These two programs have achieved notable success in luring some of the best foreign-educated Chinese people.

In addition to the central government, local governments have also shown considerable interest in attracting those with foreign education or work experience. Many local governments set up their own talent schemes that are independent from, and in some cases, ahead of central initiatives. Shanghai is one of the most successful cities in encouraging the return of overseas Chinese. It is also one of the first cities to issue permanent residence visas for returnees with foreign passports (Zweig 2006). From 2008 onward, the Shanghai government issued and implemented the Eastern

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<sup>16</sup>For details see <http://www.1000plan.org/>.

Table 2.2 China's Overseas Talent-Recruitment Programs

Name	Responsible authority	Aim	Benefits	Eligibility	Disciplinary range
1 Hundred Talents Program (1994)	China Academy of Sciences (CAS)	To recruit about 100 outstanding scholars (primarily from abroad) to CAS by the end of the twentieth century	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a budget of 2–3 million RMB for a period of 3 years to establish laboratories in CAS institutes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Younger than 40 years old (can extend to 45 years old for those who hold an assistant professorship or above in a renowned university abroad);</li> <li>• At least 4 years' research experience</li> </ul>	Mathematics, physics, chemistry, life sciences, medical sciences, earth sciences, information sciences, technological sciences
2 Chunhui Scholar Program (1996)	Ministry of Education (MOE)	To support short-term returnees to work in China for China's economic and social development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide generous salary (5–8 times more than domestic professors in an equivalent position);</li> <li>• Free accommodation, round-trip airfare, and insurance during their short-term work in China</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hold an associate professorship or above at a renowned university or in a key discipline abroad</li> </ul>	Natural Science, engineering, agriculture, medical sciences, life sciences, law, economics, and management
3 Program of Introducing Discipline-Based Talent to	Ministry of Education (MOE) and the State Administration	To establish 100 world-leading disciplinary innovation bases by gathering 1000 overseas talent from the top 100	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MOE and SAFEA allocated at least 600 million RMB for the years 2006–</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hold a professorship at a top 100 world-class university or in an equivalent international research institution;</li> </ul>	Mainly science and engineering but also management

(continued)

Table 2.2 (continued)

Name	Responsible authority	Aim	Benefits	Eligibility	Disciplinary range
Universities (111 Project) (2006)	of Foreign Experts Affairs (SAFEA)	universities or research institutions worldwide to enhance the innovation capability and overall competitiveness of China's universities at global level	2010 for the program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Younger than 50 years old (can extend to 70 years old for world-renowned scholars);</li> <li>• Required to work at least 3 months per year in China (at least 1 month in the case of world-renowned scholars).</li> </ul>	
4 Thousand Talents Program Long-term (2008)	The General Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party	To attract high-level talent from overseas to work in China to boost its innovation capability, make key technology breakthroughs, develop hi-tech industry, initiate new disciplines, and promote the integration of industry and research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desirable living and working conditions;</li> <li>• 1 million RMB living allowance;</li> <li>• At least 10 million RMB start-up research funding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hold a professorship at a renowned university abroad or in an equivalent international research institution;</li> <li>• Should return to China full-time;</li> <li>• Younger than 55 years old</li> </ul>	Mainly science and engineering but also finance and economy

(continued)

Table 2.2 (continued)

	Name	Responsible authority	Aim	Benefits	Eligibility	Disciplinary range
5	Thousand Talents Program Short-term (2008)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desirable living and working conditions;</li> <li>• 0.5 million RMB living allowance;</li> <li>• At least 5 million RMB start-up research funding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hold a professorship at a renowned university abroad or in an equivalent research institution;</li> <li>• Should work in China for a minimum of 2 months per academic year under a 3-year work contract;</li> <li>• Younger than 55 years old</li> </ul>	
6	Thousand Youth Talents Program (2011)		To attract high-caliber young talent from overseas to work on key areas to promote science and technology innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desirable living and working conditions;</li> <li>• 0.5 million RMB living allowance;</li> <li>• 1–3 million RMB of 3-year research funding.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holds a doctoral degree from a renowned university abroad;</li> <li>• Has at least 3 years of overseas teaching or research experience;</li> <li>• Should return to China full-time;</li> <li>• Younger than 40 years</li> </ul>	Mainly sciences and engineering

Sources: Welch, A., & Hao, J. (2013). "Hai gui" and "Hai dai": The job-seeking experiences of high-skilled returnees to China. In K-H. Mok & K-M. Yu (Eds.), *Internationalization of higher education in East Asia: Trends of student mobility and impact on education governance* (pp. 90–114). New York: Routledge.

Also from the website of recruitment program of global experts [qianren jithua wang]. <http://www.1000plan.org/>. Assembled and tabulated by the author.

Scholars Program (*dongfang xuezhe jihua*) in which it sponsored universities and research institutions to attract 50 overseas scholars each year to work in Shanghai.<sup>17</sup> Along with the policy initiatives, there is a growing interest in the role of China's academic returnees in its higher education, which is the focus of the next section.

### 2.3.2 *Studies of China's Academic Returnees*

Ruth Hayhoe was one of the early scholars interested in China's study-abroad movement and the role of returnees in China's democracy movement in 1980s. In her study on foreign-returned intellectuals in seven universities in Shanghai during the period of Tiananmen Incident, Hayhoe (1988, 1990) found that the study-abroad movement has both reflected and contributed to curricular changes in selected universities. However, with special reference to the experience of those in the humanities and social science, she argued that although Western ideas mattered, it was the involvement of the State in the internal exchanges that played a role in the construction of knowledge. In this sense, the study-abroad movement has provided channels for ideas to travel, but it cannot be credited or blamed for the democracy movement. As is discussed in the policy section, the 1989 Tiananmen Incident was a watershed event for the return of overseas Chinese intellectuals, after which the number of returnees decreased significantly.

In response to the "brain drain" phenomenon, Zweig et al. (1995) conducted a survey of 273 Chinese students and scholars in the US concerning their intention to return to China. Their research was influenced by two major historical events: the opportunities for many of the participants to apply for permanent residence status in the US under the *Chinese Student Protection Act* after the Tiananmen Incident, and Deng Xiaoping's famous "Southern Tour" in 1992, which triggered a more liberal economic and cultural climate in China. In their initial finding, they argued that political instability and lack of political freedom were the major reasons that people did not return. These were followed by reasons of lack of quality equipment, difficult conditions at work, and the inability to develop their own career. However, in his follow-up studies of return intentions of Chinese scientists a decade later, Zweig (2006) found that many of the above concerns had been addressed, if not resolved, by the Chinese government. Of responses to the questions of why academics returned to China, the top three selected answers were "China's rapid economic development" (58 %), "good government policy," (47 %), and "good opportunity to develop new technologies in China" (42 %). Clearly, the Chinese government had achieved some success in creating a favorable atmosphere to attract back overseas talent (Zweig 2006), and political stability was no longer the top concern among overseas Chinese compared with 10 years before. In a more recent study on China's

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<sup>17</sup>For details, see <http://www.shanghai.gov.cn/shanghai/node2314/node2319/node12344/userobject26ai18845.html>.



returned scientists, Jonkers (2010) pointed out that the increasing funds invested in science research, the institutional transformation, and the visibility of China's research system are the major reasons behind the new wave of return migration.

Despite the improvement of China's political, economic, and cultural climate, and the preferential policies toward returnees, a large number of the top academics and scientists are still hesitating to return (Cao 2008). In discussing why government policies have failed to attract first-rate academics, Cao (2008) pointed out that low salaries and problems of children's education are the common reasons. More important are institutional factors including the complicated *guanxi*, rampant misconduct in science, and taboos in social science research. He concluded that unless the research culture becomes conducive to first-rate research, China is unlikely to see a large return migration of the best and brightest academics.

In addition to return motivations, some studies have deeply examined the state of returnees in China's higher education including the status, distribution, professional and personal adjustments, and reintegration as well as their self-evaluated contributions to higher education in China (Chen and Yan 2000a, b; Li 2005; Rosen and Zweig 2005; Xu 2009; Yi 2011; Choi and Lu 2012; Welch and Hao 2013). In his quantitative studies of the status and mobility of returnees in China's higher education based on two large databases (one contains data on 850 senior administrators of China's top 100 universities, and the other contains data on 2100 returnees at the top 25 universities), Li (2005) found that (1) there were more visiting scholars (61 %) than degree candidates (30 %) among returned scholars in Chinese universities; (2) there were unbalanced academic fields with a dominance of engineering and natural sciences in overseas studies; and (3) there was uneven regional distribution regarding the prominence of returnees in Shanghai and Beijing. By citing the case of recent reform at Peking University, he also found a strong tension over resources and power between returnees and locals due to the preferential policies to returnees. The assumption behind the preferential policies is that the returnees are "better" than the locals. To test this hypothesis, Rosen and Zweig (2005) conducted a research with 109 returnees and 90 local academics. Their data revealed that the returnees have "won" over the locals in terms of their "transnational capital," a term used to refer to human capital based on knowledge, networks, and resources accumulated overseas that is not available in China. They emphasized the importance of overseas experience in reshaping the power and status of the faculty in the process of internationalization in China. However, from their interview data with the local scholars, most believed that the government "overemphasized" the returnees because they felt that many overseas returnees were not especially talented or "better" than the locals. The conflicts between the returnees and the locals have created challenges for the returnees to better integrate into the local community.

Other challenges faced by returnees include longstanding notions of hierarchy, bureaucracy, respect for seniority, and complicated *guanxi* (Yi 2011; Welch and Hao 2013). Despite the challenges, some studies showed that the returnees play a crucial role in organizational changes and the process of building world-class universities. In their study on foreign-trained academics in 41 business schools in China, Choi and Lu (2012) found that there was a strong relation between returnee

faculty members and the diversification of curricula: Business schools with more returnees tend to provide more diversified curricula. They argued that valuable resources and networks embodied in the returnees helped business schools adopt more international and diverse courses. Moreover, returned scholars are also regarded as a bridge between China and the international academic community who help to improve China's research productivity and competitiveness through "the direct transfer of knowledge and the indirect benefits brought by overseas professional and trade networks" (Welch and Hao 2013, p. 110). This is evident in Jonkers and Tijssen's (2008) research on 76 returnees in the field of plant molecular life sciences. Through a quantitative analysis, they found that there was a positive correlation between foreign experience and the number of SCI publications and international co-publications: Researchers with a higher international visibility tended to be more likely to copublish internationally and have higher SCI publications. They highlighted the importance of transnational scientific linkages within this rapidly emerging and globalizing research field.

In conclusion, the literature reviewed in this chapter created a broader context for the study on academic mobility of Chinese returned scholars. The next chapter turns to a theoretical debate on transnational academic mobility. It draws upon theories from cultural studies to shape the conceptual framework of the study.

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## Chapter 3

# Theorizing Academic Mobility

Transnational academic mobility, as an emerging field of study, has received heightened attention from researchers and policy makers. It is regarded to be a crucial part of higher education internationalization because universities today are increasingly located within a global research community (Kim 2009). In the literature, there are two major approaches to academic mobility: one is from an economic perspective on the international movements of students and scholars based on the debates of brain drain, gain, and circulation, and the other comes from anthropological and cultural understandings of global flows drawing from the concepts of transnationalism and global connectivity. Although the former is still dominant in policy discourses, the latter is gradually growing as social theorists (i.e., Beck 2008; Urry 2000) begin to think about society and theory beyond the boundaries of nation-state.

### 3.1 Debates on Brain Drain, Gain, and Circulation

As an important part of global flows in higher education, the mobility of academics has become more dense and systematic due to the intensified linkages between human capital, higher education, and knowledge economy (Kim 2009, 2010; Naidoo 2007). There is a pro-academic mobility agenda among regional and national policy frameworks, which stresses the need for the circulation of knowledge and human resources to achieve a reciprocal global engagement (Marginson 2007; Robertson 2010). It is viewed that academic mobility can not only increase research cooperation and enhance the quality of research, it also helps to solve the capacity weakness in developing countries that are unable to support the development of all research fields (Marginson and van der Wende 2007). In practice, however, the flows of academics are fundamentally uneven and asymmetrical in terms of both scale and intensity (idem 2007). In his study on the global labor market, Marginson (2007) claimed that the direction of academic mobility is deeply

shaped by “an Anglo-American linguistic and cultural hegemony in higher education” (p. 308). He believed that there is a pulling power of the US and European academic labor market, largely an extension of their doctoral market, which draws the brightest minds from all over the world. For example, there are signs that the proportion of international students within the total doctoral cohort in the US is increasing, and the stay rate of doctoral graduates is rising as well (Marginson 2007). This effective way of storing global talent from other countries, mainly India and China, has been recognized as one of America’s strategic and economic advantages (National Research Council 2005), while at the same time it is criticized as contributing to other countries’ brain drain.

Most of the recent debates about brain drain in higher education have centered on the unequal flows of international students from developing to developed countries. According to OECD (2013) data, among the 4.5 million students who studied abroad in 2011, 75 % of them enrolled in OECD countries with the US (17 %), UK (13 %), Australia (6 %), Germany (6 %), and France (6 %) representing the top 5 destinations for international students. The statistic data also revealed that the stay rate of students after the completion of their degree in OECD countries was up to 25 % and that the largest number of these students were from China and India. In their long-term study on international mobility of Chinese students, Zhang and Li (2001) found that the return rate of Chinese students who studied in the US during the period 1978–2001 was 14.1 %. Another study shows that the proportion of Chinese and Indian doctoral students who intended to stay in the US after graduation in 2001–2003 was more than 80 % (Tremblay 2005). These data suggest that international education has now become a major channel for students from developing countries to get a “ticket to migration” (Rizvi 2005, p. 177) to developed countries.

Much of the recent debate on brain drain focuses on the relation between education, migration, and national development (Rizvi 2005). Because human-capital accumulation through education is widely regarded as the main driver of a nation’s economic growth, it is argued that the emigration of highly educated students from less to more developed countries has negative effects on the source countries, which have made an educational investment in students who ultimately leave their home countries (Solimano 2008). A report from The World Bank Group (2002) outlined concerns about the rapidly increasing rates of brain drain in developing countries and highlighted fears that the large emigration of people with high levels of human capital will ultimately delay the economic growth of these sending countries.

This view, however, has been challenged by recent studies on “brain gain” and “brain circulation,” which focus on the potential benefits that overseas students and highly skilled people might bring back to their country of origin (Brown 2002; Solimano 2008; Welch and Zhang 2008). It is argued that temporary emigration can increase the average level of productivity of sending countries (Brown 2002). It is also argued that flow of global talent can be a powerful vehicle for enhancing knowledge exchange and global connectivity, which in turn boosts international cooperation and development.

Many developing countries have adopted policies to attract global talent or draw back emigrant nationals to contribute to domestic economic growth. South Korea and Chinese Taiwan are successful examples of exerting reverse academic mobility through particular brain-gain policies (Luo and Wang 2002; Lee and Kim 2010). Another policy initiative is the construction of diasporic networks, which enable emigrants to transfer their skills and expertise to their home country without necessarily returning permanently (Brown 2002; Fullilove and Flutter 2004). China, for instance, represents an important example of reaching out to its overseas intellectuals to entice them back, even if temporarily, by deploying diasporic options (Zweig 2006; Zhu 2009; Cai 2012; Welch and Hao 2013). Many US-based Chinese academics are extending their diasporic network with China and are working as visiting professors or research counselors in Chinese universities during summer or winter terms (Cai 2012; Chen and Koyama 2013; Welch and Hao 2013). This dual-appointment model is regarded as a feasible solution to reducing the massive brain drain of scientists and scholars that China is currently facing (Yang and Tan 2006). It is clear that the current academic mobility is becoming more complex, dispersed, and multi-directional, which can no longer be explained as a solely uni-directional movement. As Kim (2009) observed, what is going on is neither brain drain or gain in a particular geographical location; it is more like brain transfer or circulation in an interconnected space.

Although the notion of brain circulation is increasingly accepted in talent policies, the discourse of academic mobility is still overwhelmingly, in economic, capital, and nationalistic-oriented frameworks, a condition that leads Tomlinson (1999) to argue that research on talent mobility has barely moved beyond a “political ‘power container’” (p. 104) of the nation-state. Similarly, Rizvi (2005) claimed that the concept of brain circulation continues to ignore the more fundamental issue that the space in which mobility takes place is not a neutral one: Rather it involves unequal power relations, specific discursive articulation, and the negotiation of identity and identification. In this sense, global flows of academics are not merely taking place in a global economic and political space but also locate in a cultural space that involves peoples’ sense of themselves, their connections, and their global research imaginations (Appadurai 2001). However, our research and understanding on mobility “as an object of intellectual inquiry has been much slower off the mark” (Robertson 2010, p. 643). This requires a more critical investigation of the complexity and dynamics of transnational academic mobility.

## 3.2 An Alternative Approach to Academic Mobility

There is an expanding body of literature in sociology, anthropology, and education that begins to challenge economic accounts on mobility and brings human agency and global connectivity to the fore. In their introduction to a special issue on academic mobility, Fahey and Kenway (2010a) argued that earlier paradigms, associated with the debates of brain drain, gain, or circulation, are insufficient to

capture the social and cultural dynamics of movement such as the issues of identity, obligations, and responsibility. They suggested considering the complexity of academic mobility on the epistemological (the links between knowledge and mobility), ontological (the effects of mobility on the lives of individual scholars), and ethical (the assumptions underlying academic mobility policies) levels. This is echoed by Robertson (2010) in the same special issue, which encouraged scholars to (1) consider mobility as a social and political project for the academy and situate it in spatial and temporal moorings that shape mobilities; (2) think of alternative concepts that move beyond simple human capital accounts and overly romantic engagements with movement; and (3) consider ethical and social justice issues entailed in the power geometries of everyday realities.

In a similar but different vein, Barnett and Phipps (2005) conceptualized academic mobility from “travel” literature that speaks to the spatial and temporal dimensions of traveling and travellers. They analyzed academic travel into three forms: “geographical, where academics as bodies move in space...; epistemological, where academics move into new knowledge homes...; [and] ontological, where the academic takes on a new or a widened sense of herself” (pp. 6–7). They believed these three forms intersect each other. For example, physical travel might present challenges of academic identity epistemologically and self-reflection ontologically. Furthermore, changes in one’s self-understanding may prompt another physical movement or an epistemological move across the boundaries of fields or paradigms of knowing. According to them, there can neither be maps nor compasses for academic travel. Instead, “academic travel is a form of exploration which itself brings into view spaces and locations that are a result of the travel itself” (p. 14). They further argued that the time—pace compression through travel makes it possible to traverse different knowledge forms and intellectual domains as well as craft new academic identities.

Among empirical studies, an important work is Kenway and Fahey’s project “mobile scholars and moving ideas” (2006), which concentrates on the shifting terrain of mobile researchers and the cultural connections with their movement. They pointed out that discussions of brain mobility are on the wrong track and fail to “acknowledge the complexities and specificities of the scales, spaces and subjects of globalization” (idem, p. 17). Instead, they brought analyses of mobility into global ethnographic frames and anthropological considerations of cultural globalization, conceptualizing the configurations of mobility, knowledge, and connection through their longitudinal global ethnography. In their book *Globalizing Research Imagination*, Kenway and Fahey (2009) followed a series of detailed interviews with six world leading globalization theorists—Arjun Appadurai, Raewyn Connell, Doreen Massey, Aihwa Ong, Fazal Rizvi, and Saskia Sassen—to explore “what it might mean to globalise the research imagination” (p. 1). Their work provided insights about how best to globalize research methodologies, practices, and communities performed by way of globalization.

Additionally, there are other important qualitative studies that focus on the everyday experiences and practices of mobile academics. Kim (2010) employed a concept of “transnational identity capital” to explore the experiences of mobile



scholars in the UK, particularly the relations of academic intellectuals and their spatial knowledge through transnational flows. Inspired by Simmel's (1971, as cited in Kim 2010) sociology of space and the notion of "stranger," Kim highlighted the potential contribution of traveling academics as both insider and outsider to create new paradigms of knowledge and academic work. In his research on international postdoctoral researchers in the US and UK, Cantwell (2011) adopted epistemological methods in the Foucauldian tradition of discourse and governmentality to examine how policy discourse and technologies both empower and limit scientists' employment arrangements across national boundaries. He argued that mobility is circumstantial, which is "not a singular or universal process, but rather is best understood as situated and multi-faceted" (p. 429).

In a more focused study of Chinese mobile scholars, Yang and Welch (2010) looked at the everyday experiences of Chinese academics in a prestigious Australian university through in-depth interviews. They found that Australian-based Chinese scholars were not bound to their workplace but were engaging actively in a transnational space through their diasporic networks and research collaborations. Yang and Welch's work offered a complex picture of the two-way flows of knowledge among Chinese intellectual diasporas and their multiple identities and identifications across national space. In a related vein, Chen and Koyama (2013) sought to understand the relations of academic mobility, knowledge circulation, and identity formation based on their US samples of Chinese mobile scholars. Drawing from interview data on scholars' experiences of transnational intellectual networks, they argued "their movement is not simply a transfer from one place to another, but constitutes a new space of transnational engagement and subjectivity building" (pp. 24–25). They suggested considering the transnational implications of local agency on global connectivity and the emergence of new mobile subjects in the globalized world.

Because the above literature focuses on intellectual diasporas, a few studies begin to shed light on return academic mobility. As Gill (2005) commented, despite increased attention to talent mobility, return moves have been relatively sidelined in research. To explore the myth of "coming home," Gill contextualized her investigation on Italian scientists in the condition of an enlarging European Research Area. Drawing from interview data, she detailed the success and barriers involved in academics' return moves as well as their suggestions for their national system to change. Return mobility is not just a European phenomenon. Within Asia and Latin America and among other regions, it has become an essential force for the promotion of balanced growth (Gill 2005) in a world full of people on the move. For example, in their studies on US doctoral recipients returning to South Korea, Lee and Kim (2010) found that the economic account might help to explain the academic migration of Korean scholars in the US but fails to fully capture their decisions to return. They pointed out that cultural reasons, such as family ties, transcended reasons related to economic mobility. Matus's (2009) work focused on female Chilean academics who received their graduate degrees abroad and returned to their home country. Informed by postcolonial theories, she rejected a linear, predictable, and unproblematized way of understanding their experiences of leaving

and returning. Rather, she focused on the discussion of time in order to explore how these women's experiences of movement, displacement, and replacement disrupted issues of knowledge production and circulation in curriculum practices.

This alternative approach to academic mobility situates the inquiry into larger cultural frames of globalization, which turns their lenses away from a place-based field to interactional spaces through which global discourses circulate.

### 3.3 Conceptualizing Academic Mobility

The critical approach to academic mobility was informed by the theories of cultural globalization, which include the constructs of global scapes (Appadurai 1990, 1996), third space and hybridity (Bhabha 1994; Hall 1996a), dwelling-in-travel (Clifford 1997), the diasporic intellectual (Said 1994; Hall 1996a; Bauman 1997), and global assemblages and imagination (Collier and Ong 2005; Sassen 2006; Kenway and Fahey 2009). These concepts challenge the place-bound notion of a pre-global social science (Chen and Koyama 2013) and pave the way for new theoretical discourses on globalization, connectivity, and the emergence of new subjectivities.

Appadurai (1990, 1996, 2001) opened up the dialogue about the cultural dimensions of globalization. In his seminal piece, *Modernity at Large* (1996), he oriented us to the cultural politics of deterritorialization, the tensions of nation-state, the production of locality, the emergence of new modernity, and the work of global imagination. He rejected the dominant neo-liberal narratives on globalization and argued that the story of globalization is not just economic but also social, cultural, and political, and it involves people's sense of themselves, their connections to the rest of the world, and their desires, fears, dreams, and aspirations. As he observed, the rapid global flows of people, goods, images, monies, and technologies have subverted the hyphen that links the nation and the state and created the notion of a national culture under siege. Thus, the new global organization of culture can no longer be understood in the frames of nation-state or the binaries of center/periphery as societies around the world become increasingly diverse and hybrid. He suggested that we "think ourselves beyond the nation" (Appadurai 1996, p. 158) by imagining a new form of translocality—a new social formation created by the interconnections of mobile people, ideas, and objects. In this perspective, he connected space, culture, subjectivity, and agency together, and it is these conceptual concerns that nourish the global imagination.

Following a similar but different track, Clifford (1997) rethought culture in terms of travel in order to question the place-bound assumption of culture as a pure and authentic thing. He understood travel as "a complex and pervasive spectrum of human experiences" (p. 3) and used it as a metaphor of cultural comparison in order to theorize the diverse practices of border crossing, tactics of translation, and experiences of multiple "belongings." To him, "practices of displacement might emerge as constitutive of cultural meaning rather than as their simple transfer or

extension” (p. 3). He argued that “cultural action, the making and remaking of identities, takes place in the contact zones” (p. 7), which creates a space of exchange, interpretation, and negotiations between different inscriptions, places, and histories and thus offers the possibilities of new expressions and the constructions of new identities. In this understanding, he offered a new model for ethnographic analysis, that is, exploring fieldwork as a series of travel encounters, a mixture of traveling and dwelling. He suggested that anthropologists follow the route rather than root, because, for him, the field is not a bounded site but rather a range of fluid networks and encounters with different people, cultural experiences, and knowledge exchanges. Clifford’s theory of traveling culture allows us to recognize new types of agency and subjectivity in this increasingly interconnected but not homogeneous world.

Some postcolonial theorists, especially intellectuals of the diaspora—such as Said (1994), Hall (1996b), and Bauman (1997)—have also used the metaphor of travel to reflect on their own experience of displacement and strive to theorize new conditions of possibilities in the new social space. For example, Said (1994) developed his notion of the critical intellectual in exile. To him, the sense of exile is a sense of being both an insider and outsider, indifference and involvement, and inclusion and exclusion, which fashions a new way of criticality. Similarly, Hall (1996b) acknowledged the benefits of travel as a condition to rethink the nature of intellectual practices. He pointed out that it is the diasporic experience, “far away enough to experience the sense of exile and loss, close enough to understand the enigma of an always-postponed ‘arrival’” (p. 492), that nourishes his critical intellectual work. The biographies of those intellectuals who “travel between edge and empires” (Fahey and Kenway 2010b, p. 630) indicate that their movement is not simply a form of displacement but also involves the emergence of new subjectivities.

Moreover, some cultural studies theorize that culture and identity in the concepts of fluidity and hybridity and are concerned with how people negotiate identity through social, cultural, and spatial interactions. The work of Bhabha (1994) and Hall (1996a) is important here. As Hall (1996a) argued, the meaning of culture and identity is neither fixed nor tied permanently; it bears the traces of other meanings or discourses. To him, the negotiation of identity is a discursive positioning that is never complete or stable and is always in the process of changing and becoming. Likewise, as Bhabha (1994) put it, “it is the ‘inter’—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (p. 38). This in-between space gives rise to a new area of representation as well as new subjectivities. The understanding of hybrid identity implies that one is constantly attaching oneself to different articulations between discourse and practice, which in turn leads to multiple identifications in different conditions.

The above scholarship situates cultural patterns associated with globalization as openings in a complex modernity. According to Kenway and Fahey (2006), the theoretical and methodological implications of studies on cultural globalization are that special considerations should be given to transformations of space, place, time,

and identity as well as their complex and contradictory experiences of, reactions to, and engagements with various aspects of globalization.

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## Chapter 4

# Return Mobility, Motivations, and Driving Factors: Negotiating the Process of Return

Dr. Yigong Shi, a world-renowned molecular biologist at Princeton University, declined a \$10 million grant from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and moved back to China to head the Life Sciences Department at Tsinghua University after two decades abroad. Dr. Shi's decision surprised his colleagues in the US. "I felt I owned my country a lot," he stated in his blog, "Before I returned, I was an observer of China's big changes and occasionally rolled up my sleeves for limited help; but now I am a participator, an actor of change."<sup>1</sup> In an interview with *China Daily* of the reasons for his return, he said, "In a way, I don't feel that my return to China is unusual. There's nothing special about it. ... Returnees don't need a reason to return. Think about a child's obligation to the family. That's a Chinese value" (Tung 2011).

Dr. Shi, who is not a study participant, is arguably the most-known name in a growing group of China's returning academics. Dr. Shi was labeled by the media as a patriotic academic star who gave up a high salary and a comfortable life in the US in order to contribute to his motherland. However, for many returned scholars, at least those in my research, discursive patriotism was not necessarily the major motivation that brought them back. Instead, this study finds that the respondents' return considerations stemmed from a combination of their hope for a better career prospect, a concern for their families, a desire for social recognition, and a nostalgic feeling toward home.

However, return is not merely a personal decision; it is also linked to broader social, political, and economic conditions. Many studies on transnational academic mobility (Ackers and Gill 2008; Byram and Dervin 2008; Cantwell 2011; Dervin 2011; Favell et al. 2006; King 2002) have revealed that a purely micro-level analysis on individual motivations for moves is insufficient to explain the magnitude and dynamics of academic mobility without considering the macro conditions.

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<sup>1</sup>From Yigong Shi's blog "guilai ba, wo de pengyou men" [Come home, my friends]. Retrieved from <http://blog.sciencenet.cn/home.php?mod=space&uid=46212&do=blog&id=387684>.

They suggested providing a systematic analysis by situating the individual's everyday reality within broader structural contexts.

This chapter follows the suggestion of adopting the approach of “double embeddedness” (King 2002, p. 101) of migration, that is, embedding mobility in both the macro level of structural contexts and the micro level of an individual's life course. According to Ackers and Gill (2008), a combination of these two dimensions makes a significant contribution to understanding return mobility as a phenomenon in general as well as the temporal nature involved in the process of mobility in particular. In doing so, this chapter examines not only the individuals' motivations and aspirations for return but also identifies the new forces that shape the patterns and dynamics of mobility within the specific context of China. The following chapter presents the major motivations and driving factors that affect individuals' return decisions from macro national-level policies to professional concerns to personal, cultural, and family orientations.

## **4.1 Policy Matters: The Role of the State and Institutions in Return Mobility**

As stated in the first chapter, in recent years China has witnessed a new tidal wave of return migration. The reasons behind this new wave are multiple and complex. China's rapid economic growth, the improved sociopolitical conditions, the development of its higher education, the increasing visibility of its research system, various government policy initiatives, and the shrinking of research funding and full-time job positions in the US are key factors contributing to the new tide of return moves (Li 2005; Zweig 2006; Jonkers 2010). Obviously, Chinese society and research system have changed dramatically in the last 20 years. Factors such as political instability, lack of political freedom, and poor research conditions, which were the major reasons that kept people abroad during the 1980s and early 1990s, are no longer the concerns of this new generation of returnees (Zweig 1997, 2006). Instead, new policy initiatives and improved research conditions stand out as two of the most important driving factors that stimulate overseas scholars to return (Jonkers 2010). This section focuses particularly on the state and institutional policies in return mobility.

### ***4.1.1 The Role of State Policies***

As China has gradually integrated into the global economy, the Chinese government has adopted various policies to promote and facilitate the return of overseas talent. Since the early 1990s, the MOE, the SAFEA, the Ministry of Personnel (MOP), and some regional governments have set up a whole range of programs (for



details, see Table 2.2 in Chap. 2) to attract highly skilled overseas Chinese. Incentives to promote return include seed-funding money, competitive salary packages, positions in universities or research institutes, housing subsidies, education for their children, favorable taxation, and special policies for *hukou* registration or long-term residency permits for those with foreign citizenship (Cao 2008; Zweig 2006; Jonkers 2010). These programs play an important role in driving overseas scholars back, especially established scholars. For example, among the study participants, 12 senior returnees and 5 postdoctoral fellows were selected for these prestigious programs on returning. Among the individuals who returned to Xi'an, 75 % of the respondents (including recent PhD graduates) received funding from one or several talent schemes promoted by either a regional government or their institutions.

The programs that are most popular among recent returnees are the Project of Thousand Talents and Project of Thousand Youth Talents, launched in 2008 and 2009, respectively, by the General Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Compared with earlier talent programs, these two programs set the bar higher and the net wider and have achieved notable success in luring back some top-notch scholars. In my sample, two were granted the title of Thousand Talents Scholar, and four were titled Thousand Youth Talent Scholar. All of them acknowledged that they would not have returned had there were no such programs. For example, Dr. Kong, a senior professor in physics, is one of the recipients of the prestigious Thousand Talents Program. He had been working as a scientist in both Canada and the US for almost 30 years. He shared that he was approached by the president of East C University and did not start to consider returning seriously until their first meeting at a conference. When asked how much his decisions were influenced by the Thousand Talents Program, he answered: “[this program is] very important. I don’t think I’ll return if there’s no such funding and logistic support.” He further explained that the title of Thousand Talents Scholar brought him something more than material incentives.

Sometimes, it has more symbolic meanings. When you have certain titles, people might assume that you are better than others. Of course, I think statistically this is true because sometimes a title is kind of a symbol to prove yourself. However, it is over-emphasized in China. I think this is a cultural difference. In the US, although a title means something, it matters more what you are doing rather than who you are. There [in the US] even a Nobel Prize winner might fail to get funding, but you can’t imagine this in China. (Interview, November 7, 2012)

Like Dr. Kong, Dr. Gao, a professor in material science, also acknowledged that the implementation of the talent programs was an extremely important motivation for him to return. He had been working as a postdoctoral fellow for 7 years in both the US and Europe and then returned to China with the title of Thousand Youth Talents Scholar. “I’m grateful to the government. If not because of these special policies, I believe many people like me might be still drifting abroad,” he stated. In reflecting the dilemma of leaving or staying, he made a convincing comment on how the special policies have affected his decision-making. Here I quote him at length:

I know many people who want to come back, but they just can't. The supporting system is terrible if you return without any title. So if you are not in any of the special programs, you'd better stay because no one cares about you. ...So the key issue here is not *return or not*, but *whether you can return or not* [emphasized by the author]. Among my friends, those who can return have come back already. Many haven't because they don't dare to do so without getting any special treatment. ... It's a new time now, a time of returning. Like our generation, when we were young, we were desperate to go abroad, but now we all strive to come back. This is particularly true after the launch of the Thousand and Project of Thousand Youth Talents. No one knows how long these policies will last, so the earlier the better; otherwise, it'll be too late to get a good position. (Interview, October 23, 2012).

Dr. Kong and Dr. Gao's narratives exposed some of the ways in which talent policies and special programs play a driving force when intervening in this brain circulation of top overseas Chinese. These policy initiatives are critical to determining whether a return becomes possible and under what conditions (Oxford and Long 2004). Even some of those who had returned without support from special policies acknowledged that the talent programs at least pass the message of how seriously matters of talent are being taken in China today.

However, most of the recent state programs set their bars high toward top-class scholars and have limited influences on promising young scholars. Junior returnees, particularly those from Shanghai, considered their return to be more of personal choices and less related to policies. Dr. Liu, an assistant professor in international relations, shared the following statement.

I don't think my return decision has anything to do with special policies, and of course I don't think there's any policy support for us. What attracts me back is my calling to be a teacher at home. I'm grateful to work at my alma mater, one of the best universities in China. To be honest, this is my dream job; I appreciate it. Even though I'm not quite successful so far, I still think coming home is a wise decision. (Interview, October 15, 2012)

Like Dr. Liu, young, fresh PhDs who returned without any titles were subject to less favorable conditions in getting funding or other external resources. Thus, a typical recommendation from senior returnees for fresh PhD graduates was to come back with some "accumulations" instead of returning "naked." As Dr. Gao suggested,

If you really want to come back and make a difference, you'd better work in the US for a few years to accumulate some experience. Returning with certain titles can make your conditions at home totally different. However, don't stay too long; otherwise, you might lose your *guanxi* at home. (Interview, October 23, 2012)

Dr. Gao's comment pointed to a "better" career path for young foreign-educated graduates. Despite the fact that the academic labor market in China is increasingly internationalized, title and *guanxi* continue to matter to professional advancement. "It all depends on who you are and whom you know," said Dr. Gao. While these two elements are important everywhere, they are particularly important in Chinese society where academic opportunities are sometimes not based on meritocracy but rather on personal connections (*guanxi*), seniority, or authority. In such a context, junior returnees encountered more challenges as they re-entered into their

workplace and had limited agency in bringing changes to the existing system, which remains hierarchical and bureaucratic (Zhu 2009; Yi 2011). More details on this topic will be discussed in Chap. 5.

### ***4.1.2 The Role of Institutional Policies***

In addition to state intervention, individual institutions develop their own ways to interpret and manage such policies. Sometimes, they may get incentives from the government to recruit overseas scholars. At other times, they compete with each other to attract researchers who have strength in publishing in international journals in order to move up the ranking (Li 2005). To this extent, different universities may launch their own recruitment schemes that suit their specific needs and geographical situations.

The five universities in my research represented different institutional approaches in recruiting overseas talent. Among them, West B University, which is located in a remote area in Xi' an, provided the most favorable incentives. Its relocation packages included not only a house subsidy, set-up funding, and spouse employment, but, more attractively, the title of full professor for selected candidates who received their doctoral degrees abroad. This special policy was adopted as part of West B University's scheme for internationalization and also used to compensate for its geographical disadvantages. Six out of seven participants from West B University were granted full professorships including the recent PhD recipients. Dr. Ma, a young professor in food science, admitted that he was attracted to West B University largely due to its favorable relocation package. He said:

... I was debating if I should return to Shanghai or here. I had a campus interview at S University [pseudonym] in Shanghai and was given an offer as an assistant professor. Basically, there were few incentives for young returnees, and there was little room to negotiate salary and a relocation package, but it is in Shanghai. It is quite different here. The president [of West B University] called me in person to invite me to join his university and promised to offer me full professorship if I accept the offer. I was quite flattered by his sincere invitation and appreciated all the favorable conditions such as start-up funding, house subsidy, my wife's job arrangement, and, most important, the title as a full professor. I know it'll take at least seven or ten years to be promoted to a full professor at S University. And also the house there [in Shanghai] is incredibly expensive. I don't think it's possible for me to buy a house with the low salary. So after several days' consideration, I decided to come here. (Interview, November 14, 2012)

However, this new policy was not without controversy when it first came out at West B University. "It encountered resistance from local faculty who felt that the university overemphasized the role of returnees and devaluated their contributions to the university," explained Dr. Yang, a professor in management, who was also appointed as a full professor right after he completed his degree. Dr. Yang's rapid promotion (in his term, "jet-setting" promotion) to become a full professor on the one hand gave him greater autonomy in his teaching and research activities, while

on the other hand it hindered him from integrating into the local community. “Sometimes I’m frustrated because people here are noncooperative. They treat me as an outsider and even an invader,” he said. This feeling of marginalization was not uncommon among other respondents from the same university. All the seven participants, except one, mentioned certain degrees of isolation or resistance from their local colleagues. During the time when the fieldwork was conducted, the special policy of offering full professorship was canceled because the pool of overseas applicants increased. As Dr. Yang commented, “It takes time. When return becomes a normal phenomenon, you don’t need any special treatment to attract returnees.” This is true as is evident from the cases in Shanghai where universities are increasingly moving toward equity in the hiring process.

Compared with West B University, West A University, another research university in Xi’an, adopted a different talent strategy to become more competitive. In addition to offering favorable relocation packages, West A University created several “special academic zones” (SAZs) to attract and retain overseas scholars. The SAZs, as the name implies, enjoy special policies and autonomies that allow the returnees to escape from certain constraints underlying the traditional higher education system. They refer to the American experience for institutional innovation and set up their management style according to international standards. Due to their international features, they have become attractive hubs for overseas returnees.

Through Web site research, I noticed that most of the returnees at West A University were located in SAZs, which serve as an enclave of geographical concentration of returnees. This is also reflected in the sample of my study that shows 9 out of 10 participants were from these special zones. For instance, Dr. Zhu, a professor in material science, confessed that it was this center, instead of the university itself, that attracted him to relocate to Xi’an. He expressed his thoughts as follows:

This center is very international and open. Our director is a prominent scholar who is well known across the world in the field. And also, all of the faculty here were trained abroad. We have lots of similarities and good ideas to share. I know this decision won’t be wrong. (Interview, September 27, 2012).

Similar to Dr. Zhu’s case, all the other centers under the SAZs were directed by senior returnees who led a group of junior returnees. These centers distinguished themselves from traditional systems not only in infrastructure and faculty body but also in policy innovations. They adopted an American-style tenure system and PI (principal investigator) system with regard to faculty recruitment, promotion, and governance. All the respondents from the SAZs expressed their appreciation of the opportunities that this new type of governance created for them. More details on institutional innovations and new practices in the special academic zones will be discussed in Chap. 6.

Unlike the universities in Xi'an, the three institutions in Shanghai were gradually giving up special treatments to returnees and moving toward equity on new faculty hiring and promoting. Returnees looking for positions in research universities in Shanghai now must compete in the hiring pool with domestic PhD graduates, although the chance for a domestically trained scholar to work at a 985 university is slim today (Pella and Wang 2013). "The threshold is higher now. If you returned as a fresh PhD, you won't get any special treatment," said Dr. Liu, whom I mentioned earlier. Dr. Liu returned to East A University in 2007 and was still on the way to get an associate professorship. Obviously, young, fresh PhDs who returned to Shanghai were under less favorable conditions and policy support compared with their colleagues in Xi'an. They could hardly expect to receive relocation subsidies or be promoted on a fast track.

Despite few policy incentives toward individual junior returnees in Shanghai, most institutions have carried out significant internal innovations in order to create an organizational culture that is more conducive to attracting overseas scholars. For instance, some proactive schools or departments have adopted dual-track systems to manage returnees and the local trained faculty differently in terms of salary packages, performance expectations, and promotion requirements. Business schools (including some departments of economics or management) were one of the earliest institutes that introduced the dual-track system as a way to reform internal personnel governance in order to promote internationalization. This dual system uses US-style tenure terms and a "quasi-market-based package" (Xu 2009, p. 28) to manage foreign-trained scholars, whereas the local trained scholars remain under the old ways of promotion and salary packages. Compared with the locals, returnees enjoy higher salaries but are under greater pressures to publish. Those who fail to pass the tenure reviews might run the risk of being asked to leave. This new system, to some extent, helps to alleviate some internal tensions between the returnees and the locals. As Dr. Wang, an associate professor in economics, explained, the two tracks are not completely separate from each other, and people are able to move from one line to the other.

A local trained PhD is able to jump to the tenure track so long as he or she is willing to take the challenge of "publishing or leaving." But so far, no one I know was silly enough to do so because the local people understand that higher salary means higher pressure and a higher risk of being kicked out. (Interview, October 29, 2012)

To Dr. Wang, this personnel reform plays a crucial role in promoting internationalization at the faculty level in the School of Business. Thanks to the high salary and new policies of faculty governance, it has successfully attracted a group of returnees during the past 5 years. Among all schools across the five institutions in the study, the School of Business, in general, provides the highest salary package, which is comparable, if not higher, to US pay levels. They also enjoy the highest level of internationalization in terms of faculty body, internal management, and student training. Following the same track, some schools in applied science have adopted a similar agenda for institutional innovation.

### 4.1.3 *Comments on Talent Policies*

The above-mentioned programs and policies have played a crucial role in attracting overseas academics to China's higher education system. However, the programs are not without their critics. The Thousand Talents Program and Youth Thousand Talents Program are examples: Although they have achieved some success in enticing some of the "brightest and best" scholars, including Dr. Yigong Shi, whom I introduced in the beginning, they are criticized as targeting established scholars but offering little support to promising young scholars. As Dr. Kong pointed out: "From long-term consideration, China should adjust the selection standards to attract 'rising stars' but not just 'shining stars' because the years between the 30s and 40s is one's most productive period in research." He further suggested that it is crucial for China to have overseas researchers, but what is more important is to nourish a generation of young domestic scientists who can lead China's scientific and technological innovations.

Another set of criticisms from the participants is the abuse of the talent programs. It is not uncommon for some part-time professors to take the resources without returning permanently (Jonkers 2010). Dr. Dai, a professor in computer science, considered this as a waste of resources if the recipients do not stay full-time and commit to the long-term development of China's scientific sector and nurturing of future PhD students. "Of course, I don't mean that all the part-time returnees are abusing the system. But I do know some people who took resources but did not actually contribute to research and teaching here [in China]," said Dr. Dai. Another issue Dr. Dai raised is "time discrimination," that is, the Thousand Talents Program rewards those who came back later than those who came back before 2008. He believed that it is unfair if the program does not put those who returned earlier into the existing funding networks. "Are those who returned later necessarily better than the earlier?" he asked. He suggested the government focus more on a candidate's potentials and academic records rather than on age and return time.

Some scholars claimed that the talent policies favor those who are engaged in natural science, engineering, and management but seldom include those in social science and humanities. This is evident in Table 2.2 (in Chap. 2): None of the programs target social science scholars. "I think China needs to attract more social scientists back to participate in its social and economic development," said Dr. Lin, a professor in biology. "I believe social scientists can have a deeper influence on social development than we biologists are. ... As a biologist, our contribution is, at most, publishing some numbers or diagrams. Rarely can our research really impact the social system." From Dr. Lin's perspective, China cannot achieve sustainable social development without the participation of social thinkers and public intellectuals. Moreover, other participants suggested that the government should create a matching scheme for domestic talent and create a new research culture in which all scholars, both overseas and domestically trained, have the opportunity to make full use of their values.

The discussion in this section provides a particular implication of how the state plays a role as one of the driving forces in steering the movement of highly skilled individuals. It can be argued that although current discourse promotes the idea of a free market and a decline of state power in controlling the movement of people, the role of the state does continue to pose a crucial influence on the patterns and dynamics of global talent mobility (Favell et al. 2006). However, state policies are not necessarily the most important deciding factors. Other more individual factors, such as one's career prospect, social attachment, cultural belonging, and family responsibility, are as influential as state interventions, if not more, in a returnee's decision-making process.

## **4.2 Rational Calculations: Improved Research Conditions and Career Maneuvers**

Another important driving factor stimulating the recent return tide of overseas scholars is the improvement of China's research system. Respondents who recently returned pointed out that the growing investment in research, updated facilities, and increasingly internationalized research environment in China are the major reasons that attracted them to return. More than two thirds of the interviewees believed that they could have better career prospects in China than if they had stayed in the US; this was prominent as a primary return motivation. This is also evident in Jonkers's (2010) research on Chinese returned scientists that "the better career prospects the Chinese research system offered them" (p. 115) was an extremely important motivation for their returning. In this section, I explore how different groups of returnees—established scholars, recent PhD graduates, and postdoctoral fellows—negotiate their career prospects in the context of China's higher education transformation.

### **4.2.1 *Established Scholars***

An established scholar in this study is defined as one who either worked as a tenured/tenure-track professor in academia or as a senior director/researcher in industry in the US for at least 5 years. There are 19 respondents in this category. I use the cases of Dr. Zhang (a professor in neuroscience), Dr. Wu (a professor in computer science), and Dr. Shen (a professor in literature) to illustrate why some well-established scholars gave up their stable jobs in the US and chose to start a new career in China.

Dr. Zhang, a professor in neuroscience, had been living in the US for 14 years before he returned. He had a successful career as a research manager in a drug-development company in the US, but he was easily bored with merely

applying his skills. He had always wanted to become a scholar in academia. However, “switching from a private-sector job to an academic one would have been difficult in the States,” he claimed. Dr. Zhang returned when opportunities presented—He was invited to join a neuroscience research center in East A University in Shanghai by a former colleague who had returned a few years before. After a visit to the center, he was amazed at the international-quality infrastructures and “earth-shaking changes” (in his language) in his field in China. “Everything goes up so quick. It’s completely different from when I left,” he said. Dr. Zhang viewed China’s development as a historical moment that he could not miss and happily accepted the offer to be a professor at East A University.

If Dr. Zhang’s move created a possibility of transition from industry to academia, Dr. Wu’s move enabled him to shift from one discipline to another. Dr. Wu is a professor in computer science who used to be a biologist in a medical school, but his current research interests shifted to bioinformatics. He had been living in the US for more than 20 years and had received tenure at a prestigious university. Asked why he gave up his good career and moved back to Shanghai, he answered that his motivation was complex.

I felt I somewhat hit a bottleneck in my career and wanted to do something different. ... I wanted to challenge myself and have a new experience. I had always been thinking of doing some interdisciplinary research, and East C University provides a good platform to do that. ...And also I wanted to bring some good ideas to China, to students here. ...I wish I could contribute something, a little something, to China’s modernization. (Interview, December 30, 2011).

Like Dr. Wu, many established returnees acknowledged that life in the US was too easy and comfortable and that they lost their ambitious tendencies. Dr. Shen, a female professor in English literature, used the term “midlife crisis” to describe why she and her husband returned. They had a stable life in the US with a big house, two kids, and two tenured jobs in academia. Talking about their return stories, she shared:

Both of us were in our 40s, and we felt kind of a midlife crisis. It seems that life was too stable, too predictable, and too secure; we could see the path of the rest of our career course. My husband had a stronger desire to move back than I had at that time. ...We arranged a long family trip to China during our sabbatical year and worked at a university in Shanghai as guest lecturers. ... One day, my husband told me, “I think I’ll stay. There are so many things to do here. I feel I can have a job in the US, but here I can realize my career ambition.” I agreed. ... And our US friends who visited Shanghai also told us “If I were you, I would stay. So exciting.” Yes, we stayed and it has been more than 10 years. (Interview, January 27, 2012)

Dr. Shen relocated to her alma mater. After she went to the US, she had maintained connections with her friends and colleagues at her home university. When she expressed her desire to return, she was welcomed. Unlike Dr. Zhang, who was approached by his former colleague, and also unlike Dr. Wu, who had extensive research collaborations with universities in China, Dr. Shen’s initial contact was established through informal friendship relations. However, in these



three cases, the diasporic connections played an important role in their decision-making process to return. According to Lu (2012), such connections not only act as a conduit for information about positions, they also direct them to places where they are easily accepted. Recent studies on Chinese intellectual diasporas also confirmed the importance of social networking in promoting transnational engagement of overseas Chinese (Chen and Koyama 2013; Cai 2012; Zhu 2009).

### 4.2.2 *Recent PhD Returnees*

Unlike a decade ago, when graduates were desperate to find jobs that would allow them to stay in the US, increasingly more PhD graduates look for opportunities to work in China's higher education system. For young graduates, the research universities in China have become a more attractive place for career expansion, especially when employment opportunities are not available in equivalent institutions abroad. Due to economic stagnation and the shrinking of research funding in the US, many graduates have faced settlement difficulties, particularly those who want to continue with a career in academia. For instance, Dr. Hu, an associate professor in computer science, explained that returning immediately after graduation actually was not his initial plan. He attempted to work in the US for a few years and then return with "something." However, the economic recession and a decreased number of academic job openings in the US forced him to bring his plan forward. Dr. Hu further claimed that he did not target China specifically. Instead, he was open to the job market worldwide and coming to China just turned out to be a "more rational" choice (Lu 2012).

Indisputably, the lack of career prospects in the US serves as a push factor for return moves. Yet, it is not necessarily the single deciding factor. Respondents acknowledged that they might not have returned if there were not so many changes in academia in China. The improved research conditions and increasingly internationalized work environment have served as an important pull factor in attracting young and ambitious scholars back home (Zweig 2006; Wang 2011). "I made a wise decision to return right after graduation. It turned out that the earlier, the better," Dr. Hu explained. To him, research universities are becoming increasingly selective and just having a foreign degree is not enough now to get a position in such universities. "The change is so obvious and so quick these years. You need to either graduate from a prestigious university abroad, say, a top 100 world-class university or have a very strong records of publication," he said. Dr. Hu had made good on his plan and was promoted to an associate professor within 3 years. He could not have made this move by remaining abroad. In some special cases, like those who returned to Xi'an, some newly graduated PhDs could even attain the rank of full professor—an opportunity few, if any, of the respondents expected to have had they stayed in the US.

Despite the shrinking job markets in the US, some PhD graduates admitted that they could look forward to a permanent position if they do want to stay. They weighed their career opportunities by comparing locations, resources, and capacities in order to get “a better job” rather than “a job itself.” Dr. Xia, an assistant professor in anthropology, expressed the sense that he did not want to stay in the US for the sake of staying. “Had I happened to find a faculty position in a research university in the US, I would stay. If not, I don’t mind returning.” To him, a career with a great potential for success was more important than having just “a job” that enabled him to stay. Reflecting his return decision, Dr. Xia illustrated:

It’s very competitive to find a faculty position in my field in the US. If I insisted on staying, I might have ended up working in a tier-three university or a liberal arts college in some remote area in the middle of nowhere. However, if I return, the chance to work at a first-rate university in big cities like Shanghai or Beijing is great. The research universities are going up very quickly now; they are keen on building cutting-edge research centers and partnering with the world’s best educational institutions, like Harvard and Stanford. I think now is a good time to return. (Interview, December 5, 2011)

When it came to the choice of leaving or staying, Dr. Xia chose to leave and work at a prestigious research university in China instead of staying in the US and working at a second- or third-rate institution. He believed the improved internationalization of social science research in China allowed him to keep active in an international academic community.

### **4.2.3 *Postdoctoral Fellows***

Another new group that China has been able to attract is postdoctoral fellows. The mobility within this group echoes the grim picture of the postdoctoral career in the changing global academic labor market. There is increasing research on “academic capitalism,” i.e., that the increasing market orientation in higher education has changed the nature of academic work and its labor market (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Marginson 2007). As Kim (2010) claimed, the entrepreneurial style of university management has created both market opportunities and job insecurity. More and more young scientists are now appointed as “contract researchers” (Kim 2010, p. 579) on short- and fixed-term contracts that are linked with specific research projects. In addition, the fiercer competition and the shrinking of full-time academic jobs have made people work as postdoctoral fellows for longer periods of time (Ackers 2008; Cantwell 2011) before they will—or will not—transit to a faculty position. Against this backdrop, many Chinese postdoctoral researchers, at least those in my study, chose to move back and take faculty positions in China.

Among the participating scholars, 15 had 2 to 9 years' research experience as a postdoctoral fellow. Most of them admitted to the difficulty of getting a tenure-track faculty position due to the shrinking academic job market in the US. Dr. Hao, a professor in biology, came back after 9 years of working as a postdoctoral researcher in America. He stated that he had held the status of a postdoctoral fellow too long. Although he wanted to be an independent PI and direct his own laboratory, the opportunities did not come.

When I started my first [postdoctoral fellowship] appointment, I thought this was just a temporary position, at most for three years. But by the time I left, I was in my third appointment. ...I was so tired of moving from one lab to another, city to city, and worrying about my immigrant status if I didn't get the next contract. Last year, when the Project of Thousand Youth Talents came out, I applied. Luckily, I got it. Anyway, it's so good to come back and to be active again. I mean you are in charge of your own lab and in control of the direction of your own research. (Interview, October 6, 2012)

Like Dr. Hao, several postdoctoral fellows were introduced under special policies, and some were offered the opportunity to set up their own research laboratories. Compared with fresh PhD graduates, they were in a better situation in the academic job market in China since most of them had accumulated years of research experience and had several publications. "I feel I'm more active here. ... I can work on my own research interests rather than someone else," said Dr. Bai, an associate professor in environmental science. Dr. Bai had 3 years of work experience as a postdoctoral researcher in a key national laboratory in the US. His primary motivation for returning was the better career prospect that China's improved research system could offer him. To him, the research conditions in his field in China were as good as those in the US, which enabled him to continue to do high-quality research upon his return. However, the shortcoming was that he had to take at least a fifty percent pay cut in his annual income<sup>2</sup> because the salary for academic jobs is relative low in China. Although a few research institutes at key universities in China could offer comparable salaries, if not better, to a few distinguished scholars, the average faculty salary in China is four to five times less than that it is in the US.

Although moving back did not enable Dr. Bai to earn more, it did offer him a certain degree of professional stability and job satisfaction. This is echoed by other postdoctoral participants who shared that they would rather work for stable pay at home than to hold a risky career in the US. Their narratives challenged the neo-classical approach to international migration that people move for higher earnings (Todaro 1969, cited from Cassarino 2004). This study suggests that knowledge migrants may not necessarily be motivated to move for economic benefits. Professional prospects sometimes have a larger impact on their migration decisions.

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<sup>2</sup>An average annual salary for postdoctoral fellowship in the US is approximately \$30,000 or more. However, the average annual salary for a faculty job in China is between \$10,000 and \$15,000.

### 4.3 A Nostalgic Feeling Toward Home: Cultural Belonging and Family Responsibility

Certainly, a better career prospect is crucial to returnees' decision-making processes as a result of rational calculations. People, however, do not move around solely for reasons relating to their occupations but also for social and cultural reasons (Carlson 2011). For some returnees, their motivation is nothing more than the need to be closer to their family or society. There is evidence from the interview data that a general sense of belonging and social attachment play a prominent, if not primary, role in influencing people's decisions to return.

#### 4.3.1 Cultural Belonging

Among those who left China in the late 1980s or early 1990s, cultural belonging was a motivational factor for return. Compared with younger returnees, this group of people had a stronger sentiment toward Chinese society and a desire to make China a better China. Thus, the wish to best utilize their ability to contribute to China's development was a common aspiration for them.

According to interview data, most of the senior scholars had gone through an extremely difficult time with "down to the countryside movement" (*shangshan xiexiang*)<sup>3</sup> during the Cultural Revolution, and then experienced New Enlightenment (*xin sixiang jiefang yundong*)<sup>4</sup> in the 1980s when Western ideas of freedom and emancipation streamed into China. "I have experienced the ups and lows of Chinese society. These memories have been part of my life that tied me strongly to the society. This kind of intimacy and attachment had never stopped drawing me back home," expressed Dr. Li. Dr. Li is a professor in history who went to the US in the early 1990s and stayed there for a decade. When I asked him what brought him back after many years living abroad, he gave a personal answer:

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<sup>3</sup>The "down to the countryside" movement started in 1968 when millions of educated urban youth, consisting of high school graduates and students, were forced to leave schools and sent "up to the mountains and down to the villages" (*shangshan xiexiang*, i.e., to remote areas of China) in order to learn from the farmers and poor conditions there. These urban youth had experienced an extremely hard time living and working in the rural villages for years until the Cultural Revolution ended when they were finally able to be transferred back to the cities. For a detailed study on this topic, see Jian et al. (2006).

<sup>4</sup>After the Cultural Revolution, China reopened its door to the outside world to seek new ways of economic reform and social growth. Since early 1980s, China began to experience a new cultural effervescence, which was called "New Enlightenment." It was a time that people had generally been in favor of science, freedom, democracy, and rationality. For a detailed study of the 1980s period of new enlightenment, see Chen and Jin (1997).

There's no simple answer. I have been perplexed by this question for a long time. Fundamentally, I don't think America is my country. Although I didn't feel a strong sense of alienation from the US society, I just couldn't completely settle down there because coming home was always on my mind. This might be different for a scientist. As a humanist, I had always been thinking of my homeland, even when I was reading Plato. I think this is the fate of a humanist. ... I don't want to boost it as something lofty, like patriotism. It was just simply a kind of concern that was unique to my generation. I mean for those who, like me, experienced the New Enlightenment and protest in Tiananmen Square in 1980s. These experiences constituted the days of our youth. So when I located in the US physically, my heart was with China, continuously entangled. I'll say this is the reason that I returned. (Interview, November 7, 2012)

Similarly, Dr. Chen, a professor in chemistry, expressed that the longer he lived abroad, the stronger the feeling he had toward home. Dr. Chen went to the US in 1988 and had been living there for 20 years. Unlike some of his Chinese friends who claimed American citizenship, Dr. Chen kept his Chinese passport and only applied for a green card. "It's easier for me to travel back and forth between China and the US with a green card. Otherwise, I need to apply for a visa in order to visit China every time," said Dr. Chen. During his stay in the US, Dr. Chen had close connections with China's academia and had been working as a visiting professor at a Chinese university for almost 10 years before he returned permanently. When I asked what encouraged him to keep constant connections with China even when he was in the US, he answered that it was his Chinese heart. He explained:

I always see myself as a Chinese, even though I have lived in America for almost two decades. In other people's eyes, I can be counted as a successful immigrant with a full professorship in a prominent university and a decent income. But so what? I'm at most a researcher with a small lab and have three or four students working there. There were many times I felt that my life was lacking something. ... Every time after I came back from China, I kept on asking myself, should I return? When to return? Do I really want to return? This feeling becomes stronger as I'm getting older. ... When the opportunity came, I quit my job without hesitation and joined East C University. And also at that time, my son went to college, and I knew it was my time to come home. (Interview, December 10, 2012)

Dr. Chen returned with a prestigious title as a distinguished returnee and enjoyed the favorable conditions conferred by this title. He is now the director of a key national science research center and leading a team of specialists in a cutting-edge research area. To him, returning to China enabled him to enlarge his social value through research and teach the next generation of young Chinese students. "As a foreign scholar in the US, I feel that we [Chinese] have limited social impact and recognition; but whatever we do here [in China], the impact can be probably tenfold, or even more," said Dr. Chen.

In Dr. Chen's case, this nostalgic feeling toward home was at the same time mingled with feeling a lack of belonging to the host society. In comparing the life in the US with that in China, Dr. Chen cited a popular saying in the Internet among the *haigui* circle that "*hao shan, hao shui, hao jimo; hao zang, hao luan, hao kuaihuo*" which literally means "America has beautiful mountain and water yet filled with boredom; China can be dirty, messy, yet joyful." Many of the other participants agreed when I mentioned this during the interviews. Although the majority of

respondents did not strongly feel being marginalized or experiencing difficulties in integrating in the host country, some did mention being more at home in China.

Generally speaking, compared with natural scientists, social scientists, particularly those whose research has a focus on China, appeared to have a stronger feeling toward Chinese society. They believed that they could do better research at home because their knowledge is more reliant on societal contexts. As Dr. Xia, a cultural anthropologist elaborated:

On the one hand, living in China allows me to be closer to the society, the site, so that I can have a deeper observation and understanding of the everyday life in today's China. On the other hand, although America is a culturally rich country, this culture is not as close as to my life experience. I always felt myself as an outsider in the US. I don't want to be an outsider forever. I want to be an insider, a participator who can be at the heart of the action. (Interview, December 5, 2011)

As an anthropologist, Dr. Xia's major motivation to return was being close to where the action is. He believed that physical access to the research subjects—Chinese society and people inside the country—is crucial for understanding today's China and bringing about potential changes. Dr. Xia believed that he could have a larger social impact doing research in China than staying in the US. This is confirmed by Dr. Sun, a professor in philosophy, whose research interests are in traditional Chinese culture and political science. Dr. Sun also believed that as a social scientist, he had a larger academic stage to play on in China than in the US. He explained:

The US society is relatively stable and it's almost impossible for me, as a non-native, to participate in its social changes. However, in China, everything is undergoing big changes. There are many opportunities and possibilities. As a political philosopher, I believe it's more likely for me to apply theories into practice and make an impact on the political system as well as on the whole society. (Interview, October 9, 2012)

When asked about the issues of political obstacles and academic freedom in China, Dr. Sun answered that, "as long as you aren't touching upon the legitimacy of the communist party publically, you can exercise academic freedom to a very great degree." To him, the restrictions on social science research have lessened, and the consequences are at least not as serious as they were in the 1980s and early 1990s. This is different from what Zweig (1997) found in his research, i.e., that political control over research in China was an important factor that prevented overseas scholars from returning. This difference in findings reflects the changing social and cultural conditions in China's history.

### 4.3.2 *Family Reasons*

In addition to social attachment and impact, the sense of duty toward family is another crucial factor in the emotional field underlying one's decision-making process. In several cases, the motivation to "taking care of aging parents" stood out

as the most important triggering factor. For example, Dr. Cao, an associate professor in biology, stated, “Coming home has always been in my mind, but it was postponed year after year until one day I received a phone call that my father was sick.” Dr. Cao worked as a postdoctoral fellow in the US for 3 years. During the duration of his fellowship, he had been debating about whether or not to return until his decision was triggered by his father’s sickness. As an only child, Dr. Cao moved back with the whole family. He claimed that it was his responsibility to take care of his aging parents. Similarly, Dr. Yu, a professor in physics, also returned in part to be closer with his parents. He admitted that he was reluctant to return if not for his aging parents.

I could have done well just staying in the US, but I can’t leave my aging parents back in China. I did invite them to live with me permanently in the US, but they refused to do so after several visits. They were bored of being ‘locked’ at home since they don’t drive, don’t speak English, and don’t have any friends there. To be honest, I don’t think it’s fair to ask them to give up their whole life in China and relocate there [in the US] in their old age. Yes, it’s unfair. (Interview, November 11, 2011)

Dr. Yu emphasized that his parents meant a lot to him, and he was willing to sacrifice his career in the US and move back to take care of them. Dr. Yu’s dilemma was faced by many young overseas Chinese who are their parents’ only child as a result of China’s one-child policy.<sup>5</sup> This study suggests that the high cultural value of family may extend beyond economic forces and market logics (Lee and Kim 2010) in understanding new patterns of academic mobility in China’s context.

Furthermore, family obligations can become more complex for young couples, especially for those whose spouse prefers to live in China. This is the case of most female returnees. Among the married female participants, all returned due to the fact that their husband moved back. Although the role of gender was not my primary focus, it is important to note that family-related reasons play a more significant role than career aspirations for female returnees. This is consistent with previous research on gender bias in academic mobility. Studies (e.g., Ackers 2004; Leung 2013) on mobile researchers in Europe have shown that female researchers largely move as “‘tied’ movers” (Leung 2013, p. 2654) and many have to make compromises either by leaving the job or forgoing the chance of career progression in order to support their husband’s career. The role of “follower” is evident in this study. For example, Dr. Jiang, an associate professor in computer science, returned because her husband wanted to pursue his career in China. At that time, she just started her career as an assistant professor in a university for 1 year. She was content with her job and believed that she would do better had she stayed in the US.

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<sup>5</sup>To combat overpopulation, the Chinese government introduced a strict “one-child policy” in the early 1980s, which decrees that couples should only have one child. A second child would bring about monetary penalties and may possibly result in being denied job opportunities at the parents’ workplace. However, after more than 30 years implementation of the One-Child Policy, the problems of a lack of labor and an aging society have become severe in China. In October 2015, the Chinese government launched a new population policy, called Second-Child Policy, allowing couples to have two children.

“I don’t regret because family matters a lot to me. ... Sometimes you have to make a compromise for family’s good,” she said. For all married couples, return is not an individual decision but a result of negotiation for the benefit of the whole family.

Regarding family, children’s education is another factor that influences people’s return decisions. Among my participants, only two returned when their children were of secondary-school age. For others, they either moved back before their children started elementary school or after they entered college because they were afraid that their children would have difficulty in both language and academic preparation to survive in China’s education system if they returned at their school age. Many agreed that the school age of 6 or 7 was a threshold because it was a critical time for them to consider returning or not. “Those who have kids older than eight or so had difficulty of returning,” said Dr. Huang, an assistant professor in sociology. Dr. Huang moved back when her son was 7 years old. In recalling of how she and her husband made up their mind to return, she stated,

My husband felt that he could not completely settle down in the US and was waiting for opportunities to return. Although I preferred the American lifestyle, nothing is more important than being together with the family. We didn’t make our decision until our son was seven, because we knew it was the last chance for us to make the decision. Once he went to grade three or higher, it would be almost impossible for us to make a move. (Interview, September 25, 2012).

This critical school age was confirmed by Dr. Chen who missed “the last chance” of return and postponed his plan until his children went to college. As I mentioned before, Dr. Chen left China to pursue a PhD in the US in the late 1980s and then started his faculty career in a research university after graduation. He intended to return after he got tenure. However, 7 years and two school-age kids later, he found he got “stuck” in the US. “Once you delayed the decision beyond a certain point, it would be hard to take your children out of there,” he noted. To him, he did not really make a decision to stay in the US for such a long time, but conditions came about that made him decide to stay. In their study on immigrant faculty in the US, Manrique and Manrique (1999) used the term “Generation X + 1” to describe the cases like that of Dr. Chen. They found that many immigrants intended to stay only until the end of a certain year (X) and that they planned to return to their home country the following year (X + 1). In fact, they kept postponing their intended last year in the US until it was too late to do so. Therefore, their nondecision became the decision to stay.

Dr. Chen moved back to China by himself and left his family in the US because his wife preferred to stay. He had been flying back and forth between China and the US to meet both work and family obligations. Dr. Chen was not alone. There are many returnees who have found ways to raise a family in the US and build their career in China (Tremblay 2005). They are given the nickname *hai’ou* (seagulls), which that is used to describe those who travel frequently across the Pacific Ocean. The form of this “split living” arrangement (Ackers and Gill 2008) reflects increasing levels of “shuttle migration” of the highly skilled personnel under the present conditions of globalization. Although this high degree of flexibility and



circulation may not apply to everyone, several respondents acknowledged that return was not an irreversible process. They were not necessarily “locked into” China once they returned. It remains possible for them to maintain their mobility as long as they keep writing for international publications, which are seen as internationally transferable assets (Xu 2009). In fact, publication in international refereed journals is encouraged and rewarded with a high cash value by universities in China (Yi 2011) because research has become one of the major yardsticks in measuring performance.

Although cultural purposes alone were seldom the dominant driver that instigates most migration, it does count as an important component in one’s decision to return. The topics of home and belonging have been widely discussed in migration studies (Oxford and Long 2004), but these are seldom the themes of investigation in the literature of global talent mobility. Too often, the mobility of the highly skilled is interpreted under economic frameworks with a focus on human capital, national economic growth, and global competitiveness. Little attention has been paid to cultural and emotional dimensions of attachment to the home country. In this study, I argue that people do not move only for rational calculations; they are also influenced by emotional aspirations such as the feeling of being more at ease with Chinese culture and society, a hope to contribute to China’s development, a desire to gain higher social status or impose a larger social impact, or simply a desire to be with one’s family. These aspects are often not linked to socioeconomic conditions.

## 4.4 Conclusion

The findings from this study indicate that the return decision is situated in individual contexts, yet at the same time the individual’s choice is shaped by economic, political, social, and cultural conditions. Undoubtedly, the traditional push–pull factors remain the dominant drivers that instigate the new pattern of return moves of Chinese academics. Without the push factors of the economic recession and shrinking funding in the US, as well as the pull factors of the economic boom and policy initiatives in China, many return movements probably would not happen.

In the case of China, state policies are critical to encourage returns of overseas talent for China’s economic development and technological innovation. It can be argued that the state power has taken a “driver’s role” instead of a “backseat role” (Lu 2012) in directing its labor circulation globally. This challenges the viewpoint that the nation-state has been gradually decreasing its power regarding control over movement of the population, something seen as the coming of a new “age of migration” (Castles and Miller 2003). This study indicates that despite market forces, the control functions of the state do continue to pose influences on the directions and patterns of transnational academic mobility. Here, state policies clearly matter.

Moreover, return academic mobility is not immune to the underlying processes and pressures of globalization. There is evidence that the changing landscape of global higher education has facilitated the increased mobility of academics

(Marginson and van der Wende 2007). Traditionally, institutions in the US and European countries have been attractive hubs for global talent, but new players, such as China, have entered the global talent competition. With a strong intention to promote the competitiveness of its higher education globally, the Chinese government has implemented various reform measures to concentrate state funding to a few research institutions to build world-class universities (Li and Chen 2011; Mok and Chan 2008; Wang et al. 2011). This has resulted in an improvement of basic infrastructures and research resources as well as institutional innovations to international standards. The progressive internationalization of research universities in China has created new options for academics with international backgrounds. This can be seen as a new pull-driver of return mobility of Chinese academics.

Although the contextual factors outlined previously shape the framework within which return takes place, it is important to remember that returnees are “human beings with personalities and families” (Ackers and Gill 2008, p. 14). In this sense, research on mobility should watch for more factors than just political economic conditions and re-embed the movements in a wider life-course of the actors (King 2002; Carlson 2011). Focusing on the individual level can help to identify different opportunities and agencies involved in the process of mobility.

The findings from this study demonstrate that the respondents’ return motivations are differentiated by age, career stage, discipline, gender, and family conditions. It finds that occupational-related considerations are one of the key reasons for the return of most young academics. For well-established senior scholars, although professional prospects remain highly influential in their decision-making process, they are also motivated by a strong emotional feeling toward home, which includes a wish to contribute to China’s development, a feeling of being more at ease within Chinese society and culture, and a desire for social recognition and “the dream of self realization” (King 2002, p. 95). Moreover, there are gender disparities among male and female participants. Female scholars are less likely to return unless they desire to be with the family. Also, single researchers are more “footloose” (Ackers 2004) than those with partners and/or children.

However, none of the academics returned for one single reason. As Teo (2011) points out, return is a complex process that involves personal choices, negotiations, as well as rationales and emotions underlying the very concept of return. In this chapter, I unpack this complex process and identify new motivations, new time–space flexibilities, and new global–local forces from the narratives of this group of Chinese academic returnees.

I argue that, first, rarely is return wholly due to rational calculations or emotional feelings, nor is it determined solely by one external factor. It is a result of negotiation of various conditions and regions: family, workplace, and the nation-state. Second, the new motivations and new global and local realities identified in this chapter may shed some light on the new and more diverse modalities of global academic mobility. Finally, a close examination of why and how those scholars return is critical to understanding the consequences of their mobility, including the reintegration processes, as they re-enter into the academic system in China and the impact they may have on China’s higher education innovation.

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## Chapter 5

# Reintegration, Challenges, and Structural Constraints: A Reflection on China's Academic System

On September 17, 2009, a 32-year-old returnee, Dr. Tu, at Zhejiang University, jumped to his death 3 months after he returned. In his death note, he wrote, "At this moment, I think my original decision was made too rashly. ... The reality of the China's academic circles is cruel, faithless and heartless, although I overlooked all of these because of my self-righteousness" (The Death of an Overseas Returnee [2009]).<sup>1</sup> Rumors on the Internet said that Zhejiang University had promised to offer him a good salary and an associate professor title but failed to fulfill its promise when he formally returned. However, the university denied the rumors.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Tu's death shocked the returnees' circle, which instigated bitter criticism of the "chilly" academic climate encountered by returned scholars as they re-enter the Chinese academic system. Although the above case is extreme, to some extent it reflects the problems underlying China's higher education system and its talent policies. Despite the advantages and opportunities that the returnees have, as I discussed in the previous chapter, many of them have found that the journey home is harder than they anticipated. The participating scholars in my study typically cited the bureaucratic and hierarchical governance structures, local power relations, and the unhealthy academic culture as major barriers to reintegration. These include a lack of like-minded colleagues, institutional constraints to transferring their skills and knowledge acquired abroad, and a utilitarian academic environment associated with corruption, misconduct, and distorted competition.

This chapter addresses the challenges and structural constraints that returnees encounter as they reintegrate into the local academic community. My intention here is not only to display the dilemmas and challenges the returnees face upon return, but, more fundamentally, to identify the logics behind their dilemmas and the institutional constraints. I am especially interested in how these returnees reflect

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<sup>1</sup>Citation from "The Death of an Overseas Returnee" (October 28, 2009), *China Hush*. Retrieved from <http://www.chinahush.com/2009/10/29/the-death-of-overseas-returnee/>.

<sup>2</sup>For details, see "A returnee from Zhejiang University committed suicide" [zheda yi haigui boshi zishal] (October 23, 2009), Retrieved from <http://scitech.people.com.cn/GB/10245965.html>.

recent changes in China's higher education, particularly the processes of higher education internationalization and world-class university building agenda, from their comparative lens. It assumes that returned academics, given their experience and knowledge of both domestic and Western higher education systems, can provide an excellent window to reflect some of the invisible issues underlying China's higher education system (Yi 2011). Thus, this chapter inevitably results in some comparison between academic systems in China and the US, the systems that are most relevant to this group of people.

The following chapter is comprised of three parts: the returnees' perceptions of their work environment, their comments on the broader academic culture, and their reflections on China's quest for establishing world-class universities. Because this chapter focuses on institutional constraints, much of the following is respondents' critique on the way the academic system operates in China. However, it is important to point out that being critical is not the thing that matters most to the respondents. What they have been truly concerned about is to understand and interpret the gap between China's best universities and their counterparts in the US so as to better identify the underlying problems.

## 5.1 Institutional Constraints

Although most of the participating scholars appreciated the new opportunities that the improved academic system offered them, they also encountered challenges posed by the existing power structures and traditional practices as they re-entered the system. In general, the returnees faced conflicts with the nature of the institutional environment in two major aspects: One is the bureaucratic and hierarchical governance structure, and the other is the complicated local power relations and politics. This section scrutinizes these conflicts by looking into the daily interactions between the returnees and their direct work environment.

### 5.1.1 *Bureaucratic and Hierarchical Governance Structures*

A great number of the respondents attributed the source of their frustrations to lack of a well-developed academic support system in their work environment. To them, the rigid bureaucratic administration created an inefficient system that was not conducive to exemplary scientific research and teaching. A general complaint was that they did not have time to do serious research because most of their time was wasted on *zashi* (literally "chores") such as *hukou* (residential permit), irrelevant meetings, reimbursement, and various kinds of formalities.

For example, Dr. Jiang, an associate professor in computer science, complained that it took more than half a year for her to get her *hukou* settled. Due to the slow process of *hukou* settling, she was unable to get her paycheck in the first few

months. “This is unimaginable in the US that you don’t get paid for your work. That violates the labor law,” said Dr. Jiang. Before returning, Dr. Jiang worked as an assistant professor in an American university for 1 year. As mentioned in the previous chapter, she returned because her husband received an attractive job offer in Shanghai. Her experiences as a new faculty in both China and the US provided some insightful comparisons between the two systems. She explained:

When I started my first job in the US, I found the mentorship program extremely helpful. Like my mentor, she was a senior professor in my department who gave me lots of useful tips on how to start a faculty career, like how to apply for grants, how to deal with students and also campus politics. ...Logically, I was supposed to run into more challenges on a US campus as a foreigner, right? Well, in fact, I found it was actually easier for me to manage my job there than it is in China because there were clear procedures to follow. However, here, the regulations and rules are very confusing. There were many times when I ran into problems, and I had no one to turn to for help. I mean I didn’t know whom to ask. For example, since my degree was not obtained from China, I needed to get it accredited from the Ministry of Education. In order to do that, I needed first to contact the secretary of my department, then the school level, then the institutional level. I waited for four weeks but didn’t hear anything from them. Again, I had to contact different levels of offices to track my documents, and then I was told that my file was incomplete. So, what would have happened if I didn’t ask? (Interview, December 15, 2011)

Dr. Jiang attributed the low efficiency of university management to the lack of a clear labor division in the administration and a lack of service awareness of the administrative staff. She used the word *guan* (literally “control over”) to describe the function of administration in Chinese universities. “Unlike the administration in Western universities, which functions to serve the faculty and students to work or learn more effectively, the administrative staff here identify themselves as leaders acting to control the faculty and students,” she complained.

This *guan* mentality was confirmed by Dr. Sun, a professor in philosophy. Having been tenured in the US, Dr. Sun is one of the few senior returnees in philosophy. He returned due to his research interest in traditional Chinese culture and political philosophy and also because of the opportunities to lead an international research center for promoting Chinese culture. When I asked him to reflect on his experience after returning, he joked, “What I have achieved most is that I have filled out piles of forms.” Dr. Sun called himself an expert at “form-filling” because he had to spend a great amount of time on filling out forms required by different administrative offices. He was particularly dissatisfied with the inefficient funding-management system, specifically the funding reimbursement. He lamented:

What frets me most is the reimbursement process. Sometimes, you have to wait a whole day in the financial office just for filing receipts and getting paperwork done. So far I have one more grant in my hand and still have lots of forms to fill out. You know, it’s relatively easier for me to get grants because of the titles that I have. However, the more grants I receive, the more hatred I have toward the granters (laugh). (Interview, October 9, 2012)

Dr. Sun further criticized the over-control of administrative offices on academic affairs, which he believed greatly hindered academic freedom and autonomy. Here I quote one of his comments at length:

From my experience in the US, what courses to teach are decided by the individual department. However, here it has to be approved by *jiaowu chu* (Academic Affairs Office), which has the power to make final decisions. This doesn't make any sense to me at all. Say, the administrators don't have any teaching experience, let alone knowledge of specific courses. How can they make such decisions? Besides, to open a new course, you are required to fill out tons of forms for checking a syllabus and course review. They pay close attention to the formalities of your documents, but as to the quality of the course itself, I don't think they really care about that. They said they're following international standards to do so. International standards? I taught in the US for so many years and never heard about such standards. What they did, in fact, limited the flexibility of the curriculum. ... I'll say the real obstacles for academic freedom in China is not the so-called ideological oppressions but all these cumbersome procedures and various kinds of nonacademic distractions. (Interview, October 9, 2012)

To Dr. Sun, the recent reform of internationalization on campus did not touch the university administration substantially. It seemed as if the administrators embraced international elements in their work, but in fact they just used the so-called international standards to assert their control.

Another interesting point Dr. Sun raised was the topic of academic freedom. From his perspective, academic freedom in China was restricted not in the Western sense of lacking freedom of inquiry, but lacking a supportive academic system that allows scholars to work effectively. "I don't strongly feel constrained by a lack of academic freedom here. I can do pretty much whatever I'm interested in," he conceded. To Dr. Sun, the biggest obstacle to create a real world-class university in China is its inefficient and bureaucratic administrative mechanisms, that is, over-controlling of academic matters but less functional regarding administrative affairs.

According to Jiang (2011), a root cause of the bureaucratic governance of Chinese universities is a strong influence of the party-state on universities. He explained that the relations between universities and the Communist Party remain deeply embedded in the sector of higher education. This is especially evident in the dual-leadership of university governance in China where the party secretaries (representatives of the Communist Party) sit alongside the presidents. More importantly, the top university administrators (i.e., presidents, party secretaries, heads of administrative affairs, and deans) hold substantive academic authority in universities as well as control important academic resources. In contrast, university professors, especially lower-ranked professors, have limited autonomy and independence in the academy (Jiang 2011).

However, it is worth noting that the top administrators often hold professorships as well. Compared with others, these faculty-administrators are more likely to secure academic resources including competing for research grants and awards. However, the downside comes when they become submerged in administrative affairs (Cao 2008). Hence, some leaders might abuse their power by having their students or junior faculty do the work for which they take credit. This academic corruption is not uncommon in the higher education system. Such academic culture puts the returnees in the situation of whether or not they should be more involved in administrative affairs. On the one hand, they know that taking administrative



positions can secure important resources and have substantive power in making a difference; on the other hand, they are afraid that they might be dragged into endless nonacademic duties and complicated local politics. “Some returnees come back with good wishes of bringing changes, but they may quickly fall into line within the system and forget about their initial good will,” said Dr. Tu, an assistant professor in nuclear science. Although none of the participating scholars identified themselves as one of such category of returnees, several did mention that they knew someone who ended up with authoritarian behaviors once they were appointed to powerful positions.

Obviously, the longstanding notions of hierarchy, respect for authority, and seniority in Chinese society have greatly limited more effective engagement of returning scholars, particularly junior returnees (Welch and Hao 2013). A good example is Dr. Tu, a recent PhD graduate in nuclear science. He was critical of the incredible hierarchical structure in his workplace. “People here are very conscious of hierarchy, say, the differences between senior professors and junior professors, between professors and graduate students. To many people, it is important, but to me, it’s against the spirit of equality,” he commented. To Dr. Tu, the major issue that prevented him from integrating was the lack of autonomy as a junior professor. As he explained, in China’s academic system, assistant professors are usually not eligible to formally supervise graduate students and lead a laboratory independently until they obtain an associate professorship or above. “This sounds unreasonable to me,” he complained:

In the US, even assistant professors can supervise PhD students and develop their own research lines. But here, as an assistant professor, basically, you can’t really stand on your own, at least in my field. The local rule is that you have to join a big professor’s team; he (or she) is usually responsible for getting funding, and you are expected to do most of the work and then share authorship of publications. Well, the problem here is that, in such a big team, you are at most a smart attachment but not actually an independent researcher. You have to do whatever your boss [full professor] tells you to do, even though it may be beyond your expertise. In this situation, it’s almost impossible for you to work on some original ideas because people may just want you to help them but not necessarily to disturb them. (Interview, October 25, 2012)

Here, the dilemma faced by junior returnees, especially those who were in natural science and engineering, was whether or not they should follow the local rules to join a large team or stand on their own. Generally speaking, it was relatively easier for them to integrate into the scientific world under the “protection” of some “big” professors. However, they might run into the risk of losing freedom to work on their own topics of interests.

Likewise, Dr. Zhou, an assistant professor in biochemistry, also expressed her frustration about not being able to make full use of her expertise because her boss (a full professor) asked her to work on a new research topic that was completely different from her research areas. “To be honest, as a junior faculty, the reality is not as good as I expected,” said Dr. Zhou. “When I first returned, I was keen to introduce good ideas and hoped to make a difference, but in reality there are countless people telling you that you are too naïve to think so.” Dr. Zhou was also

dissatisfied with the limited participation of junior faculty in the decision-making process as the following passage illustrates:

... my voice is barely heard. ... The system here is a top-down approach. Although there are several committees in my department, as a new faculty I am too junior to participate in their decision-making. We often receive a notification afterwards of the agreed agenda, but we have no idea how the decisions were made. I'm relatively an assertive person. I voiced my opinions when I saw something unreasonable. But so what? They went unheard, and things remained the same as they had always been. (Interview, November 15, 2012)

Compared with junior returnees, established returnees were in a relatively independent situation. However, some of them mentioned that they were unaccustomed to the hierarchical structure of authority in Chinese universities, particularly the power of high-level administrators (i.e., chair, dean, or the party secretary) over faculty, which they believed was a major barrier to academic freedom at Chinese universities.

Overall, the hierarchical and bureaucratic administrative structures, intertwined with politicization in university governance, have made Chinese universities more like a political bureaucracy rather than an academic organization (Jiang 2011). As the above mentioned participants agreed, if this internal governance structure continues it will be almost impossible for China to succeed in its quest for world-class universities let alone build a strong higher education system.

### 5.1.2 *Local Politics and the Absence of an Invisible College*

In addition to the constraints of university governance structures, the returned scholars reported difficulties adjusting to the local institutional culture. First, a general frustration expressed by the respondents was the complicated *guanxi* (interpersonal connections) on campus. According to Cao (2008), China is more or less a *guanxi* society—success in a career may well depend upon who you are and whom you know rather than just how well you perform. This put returnees in a disadvantaged situation because many lost their *guanxi* after an extended period of time abroad. Because most of the participants had spent 5–20 years abroad, it was likely that their connections with the local academic community became weak. As a result, they lost strong professional and personal networks for support for their career development, at least during the initial period of returning. This is well illustrated in the comments of Dr. Qian, an associate professor in law.

One of the difficulties that I faced after returning was the lack of *renmai guanxi* (a network of relationship). You know, *guanxi* is very important here, from grant application, publication, to promotion; sometimes it is even more important than your work itself. Unlike the local PhDs who have their own circles and relations, we returnees usually don't have *guanxi*, to be exact, up-to-date *guanxi*, since we left the circle for many years. And also, many of us, I believe, are not good at, or not trained to, flatter others to get resources or be promoted. However, the reality is that, here you need to learn to please people a lot. (Interview, October 24, 2012)

Rebuilding *guanxi* can take a long period of time, and may prove frustrating for returnees because many of them are not involved, or willing to get involved, in the complex *guanxi* relations in the local community. Therefore, they might seem off-putting to their local colleagues, thus giving them an air of “otherness” (Dodwell-Groves 2013). Dr. Wu, a prominent professor in computer science, illustrated his observation on *guanxi* culture in China by drawing this comparison with the US.

In China, only doing good research is not enough; you need to have good *guanxi*. It is particularly important to keep good *guanxi* with your superior, say, your department chair, dean, or administrative office heads. This is very different from what occurs in the US. In the US, they are your colleagues, and your relationship with them is relatively based on professional ties. But here, the relations of administrators with faculty are based on supervision and control. They are your boss and have absolute authority over you. Sometimes you feel very uncomfortable about this unequal relationship because you feel you may lose something, say, your dignity. So, if you are not used to this, you might not feel very happy working here. Of course, if you don't care about that, that's totally fine. (Interview, December 30, 2011)

Dr. Wu confessed that he had difficulties integrating into the core of the academic circle in China because he didn't want to play *guanxi* for more resources and career advancement. In Chinese society, *guanxi* is not just a form of interpersonal relationships; it is also strongly connected to the idea of trust, obligation, inclusion, and exclusion (Lu 2012). The emphasis of particular relationships often leads to the development of a clear boundary between in-group and out-group members. This “we-feeling” (Gu 1992) plays an important role in China's *guanxi* culture. However, sometimes, to become an in-group member might involve unspoken rules (i.e., back-door deals) or subtle power relations. In the case of Dr. Wu, he regarded himself as an out-group member who did not want to be involved too much into complicated *guanxi* relations (“local politics” in his own language). Although he enjoyed working with his Chinese students, whom he complimented as self-motivated and hardworking, he decided to move back to the US and resume his earlier life there since he realized that the chance for the career advancement was slim if he did not play well with the local politics.

The second problem related to the institutional culture was the absence of an “invisible college” “in which scholars who share common paradigms exchange information and ideas to advance scientific knowledge, on how to conduct research and to seek help when needed” (Cao 2008, p. 341). Several returnees reported that they had difficulties finding an academic community with a continuing exchange of ideas or scholarly debates. This problem was more serious to the returnees in social science and humanities, such as history, literature, and education, where scholars work with ideas, people, and societies (Yi 2011). For example, Dr. Tang, an assistant professor in history, conceded that she felt lonely working in China because there was a lack of intellectual communication in her workplace.

It seems that people here are not interested in sharing ideas. I mean there's a lack of a culture that encourages exchange of ideas and scholarly debates. I remember while I was in the US, my department had a tradition of encouraging discussion on a variety of issues. ...I often felt the need to interact and to share with others. However, such dialogue doesn't exist here. It seems that people here are too busy to communicate. They are busy thinking about how to get more papers published, how to get more resources, and how to get promoted. Basically, there's little dialogue, and a lack of a mechanism to promote dialogue. (Interview, October 26, 2012)

Dr. Shen, a professor in literature, also expressed her experience of being rejected by her colleagues. She attributed this to the competitive mentality in China's academy. She illustrated:

At first, I couldn't understand well why people here were so mean in terms of sharing ideas. ...I think I have the answer now, because everyone wants to be the first one, the best in a certain sense, but not necessarily the unique one. Diversity and uniqueness are not really part of the culture here. ... People compete for the quota of promotion, the amount of funding, and also high-quality students. It's all about competition and not cooperation. (Interview, November 11, 2011)

There are several reasons to explain this noncooperative culture. First, some people worry that sharing their work might run the risk of having it stolen. This mistrust between colleagues can be attributed to the rampant misconduct in science including plagiarism and intellectual-property theft. Second, there is a lack of tradition regarding the encouragement of free academic debate in Chinese culture. As Yi (2011) explained, disagreement or debate "tends to be regarded as an insult, challenge or threat even if no direct competition for resources is involved" (p. 510). Thus, many senior scholars reject communication in order to protect their "face" and authority. Third, the evaluation system in China only considers first-author publications (Pella and Wang 2013), which seriously discourages collaboration among scholars in China.

This noncooperative culture can be more serious between returnees and their locally trained counterparts. According to some participants who were working in relatively traditional institutions and/or departments, their local colleagues were reluctant to cooperate with them let alone support their work. Some even reported being excluded from the local circles. This was evident in the case of three returnees (Dr. Jin, Dr. Yang, and Dr. Mao) from West B University. As a member of 985 university, West B University was under the pressure to build a more internationally oriented faculty. Due to its geographical restrictions, the university was in a disadvantaged position with regard to attracting overseas scholars. To compensate for its geographic disadvantages, it adopted favorable policies such as granting full-professorship titles, housing subsidies, and other economic benefits. However, such policies turned out to hurt collegiality amongst colleagues as the following two quotations show:

Actually, I am the most excluded here. Our previous president visited my lab frequently, and later I learned that he did this for the purpose of quelling other people's resistance towards me. The university leaders do have the vision and determination to bring in talent, but in practice, many strong candidates are blocked at the departmental levels. I call this a

glass-house phenomenon since the obstacles are invisible. You know, there are some academic overlords on campus who control most of the resources. They are afraid that the newcomers might threaten their authority and positions, so they don't want the returnees to join their departments. These academic overlords are usually the "think tank" of the university, and their opinions are crucial to top administrators. (Interview with Dr. Jin, November 19, 2012)

While the university policies favor overseas returnees, some departmental heads are sensitive to these policies. Although they might not resist openly, they often pose some "soft nails" [barriers] to restrict one's progression. . . . In my case, some local people are resentful of the fact that I was entitled to full professorship as a start-up faculty. They questioned our president who granted such treatment. Our president answered that "considering the location of our university [West B University], if there's no such policies, the returnees won't come here. If you also obtained a doctorate degree from a prestigious university abroad or published articles in top international journals, I'll give you the same title as well." I was deeply moved by our president's support. I knew he was under great pressure adopting this favorable policy. If I don't work hard and accomplish certain achievements, I'll feel guilty failing and not meeting his expectation. (Interview with Dr. Yang, November 13, 2012)

Both Dr. Jin and Dr. Yang pointed out that there was a mismatch between the intention of talent policy at the university's level and the response from sub-organizations. To them, the local resistances, caused by jealousies, resentments, and competition, had greatly hampered their integration and limited their career opportunities. However, thanks to the full-professor titles, they gained a certain degree of respect for doing their research and supervising students in their own ways. Compared with them, the situation was worse in Dr. Mao's case, who is an associate professor in chemistry. She used the word "miserable" to describe her experience at West B University. She explained, "I made a mistake to return and come here. I've suffered psychologically. If I had to choose again, I would never come back." Dr. Mao was drawn to West B University by an attractive offer of a high salary and research opportunities as well as the university's sincere intention to recruit talent. "I thought I could have a career here, but I was wrong. I can barely survive, let alone reach my aspirations," she said. Dr. Mao worked in a big research team under the supervision of a senior professor. She was not only pushed to work overtime in the laboratory, she was also excluded by her local team members who tried to have her removed. When asked about her future plans, she admitted considering the possibility of terminating the contract and leaving West B University for good.

The tensions between returnees and local nationals have caught the attention of some scholars (Antal and Wang 2006; Cao 2008; Yi 2011; Zweig et al. 2008). Yi (2011) argued that many local scholars feel vulnerable when confronting their foreign-trained colleagues because they are afraid that their authority and "face" might be challenged by those returnees. This tension is particularly apparent between senior domestic scholars and young returnees. To secure their potential interest, many local scholars, largely senior ones, employed "a protective screen" (Yi 2011, p. 510) by rejecting new knowledge and research methodologies introduced by the returnees. However, returnees usually have a desire to bring in new

ideas from abroad and to foster a robust intellectual environment in China. This strong urge to transfer “foreign” knowledge, and probably the arrogant attitude of some returnees, may further generate resentment if the locals feel insecure or subject to implicit criticisms (Antal and Wang 2006). Furthermore, some local nationals are upset by the unequal treatment between domestic and foreign-trained PhDs and consider it unfair that the government policies favor “outsiders” who may have a foreign degree but who are not necessarily as capable as they are (Zweig et al. 2008). These mixed reactions—admiration, jealousy, worry, and resentment—of local nationals toward returnees may intensify the “us versus them” mentality on either or both sides.

Because local nationals are still in charge of most of the important positions in Chinese universities, the returnees are usually the victims of local politics. However, the tensions between the two groups are relatively moderate in the institutions in Shanghai where respondents seldom raised the issues of local resistance or “bad blood” with their colleagues. A possible explanation is that the fever of returnees is cooling down in big cities like Shanghai. This is partially due to the increased number of returned scholars who gradually produce a critical mass on campus. Moreover, as the universities become more internationalized, and turn out more high-quality publications, the emphasis on foreign knowledge and experience might be decreased.

## 5.2 Critique of China’s Academic System

According to the interview data, the obstacles encountered by the returnees were not only related to institutional constraints but also to the broader academic system in China such as problematic evaluation mechanisms, nontransparent funding systems, and various kinds of academic misconduct and corruption. Although parts of the problems are the residuals of the traditional academic structure (i.e., centralization, bureaucracy, and paternalism), others are caused by the new forces of marketization and the influences of neoliberal ideology (accountability) on higher education in China. As Yi (2011) argued, the two forces of bureaucracy and market “serve as the respective foundation for each other whilst reinforcing each other in the process of their alliance” (p. 512). At the same time, China’s leaders are eager to promote its higher education system of international stature and move toward Western patterns as role models. However, the core values of the ideas of Western universities have not been well embedded within China’s academic community, which results in an overemphasis on accountability and instant economic benefits (Yang 2002). In this section, I explore returnees’ critical comments on the broader academic system in China with a focus on assessment, funding, and academic corruption.

### 5.2.1 *A Hectic and Materialistic Mentality*

The returnees consistently used the word *fuzao* (hectic or frivolous) to describe current academic culture in China. Government agencies, institutional administration, department heads, and researchers all tend to place great emphasis on instant economic benefits and immediate success of research, which pushes academics away from the pursuit of knowledge, a basic goal of universities. This is clearly articulated by Dr. Xie (a professor in history and gender studies), Dr. Tu (an assistant professor in nuclear science), and Dr. Yu (a professor in physics). Dr. Xie is a full professor in Chinese history who earned tenure in the US and returned with an expectation of developing the area of women studies in China. She observed:

Overall, the whole society is hectic, including the universities. From professors to students, no one can concentrate entirely on research. So in terms of scholarly research, the environment here is definitely not as good as that in the US. Many of our scholars do not take research seriously, and our students seem to have no interest in or enthusiasm for research. ... And also, the universities usually have unreasonable expectations on returnees. They expect you to do research today and have outcomes tomorrow. (Interview, October 31, 2012).

Dr. Tu (an assistant professor in nuclear science) added that the evaluation system hindered researchers from doing original research, which requires deep and long-term investigations. He expressed his sense that “people here are rushing everything. Very few can sit down and concentrate on research. They are more likely to be driven by economic values or simply following-up on the latest trend, the so-called hot topics.” To him, this was not a problem of individuals; rather, it is a problem with the system—“The whole system is driven by a hectic mentality.” What Dr. Tu criticized is not specific to the Chinese context. It is also the case in the US and other countries where researchers are pushed to engage in more and more market related activities under the influence of the circulation of academic capitalism (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004).

However, some respondents argued that the emphasis on economic benefits and outcomes goes further in China and is reinforced by China's bureaucratic system. Some university administrators and government officers are keen to require quick results as part of their political achievements rather than sustainable development of the higher education system. This is well illustrated in Dr. Yu's (a professor in applied physics) criticisms of universities' talent policies. He commented:

People always use the word *fuzao* (hectic) to describe Chinese society. I have had a similar feeling during my time here. When I first returned, a friend of mine told me that China doesn't need to cultivate you, but she needs you, as a flower, to be presented here. I couldn't understand this sentence well at first. But later, I began to understand why China couldn't cultivate me. Doing research needs a supportive mechanism and environment; however, China still lacks a healthy academic culture. ... Although the government is keen to attract overseas talent, some university administrators only care about the number of prominent returnees affiliated with their organization and how it makes them look good. This way of transplanting is problematic because you can't simply cut flowers from one society and arrange them in the soil of another society. In fact, you need a whole ecology

for them to grow and to flourish. Otherwise, the flowers will die shortly; or they are at most artificial flowers, which look good on the surface but lack vitality. (Interview, November 11, 2011)

Such hectic culture has been manifested in the forms of *duan, ping, kuai* (instant, straight-ward, and quick) (Zhu 2009, p. 196) in the current academic world in China. That is, from top to bottom, the whole system attempts to place undue stress on the immediate success of one's research. This is reflected by the annual faculty evaluations adopted by many institutions, which heavily emphasize publications. Under such an evaluation system, many professors experience the pressure to publish every year and have to turn from time-consuming basic research to inquiries that achieve quick success (Mohrman et al. 2011). As a result, some returnees simply continue their previous projects from the US, instead of exploring new areas, which might take long-term investigation and not generate immediate results. What's worse, this may also result in misconduct in science such as plagiarism, falsification, and fabrication of data (Cao 2008).

Furthermore, the new changes in higher education under the influence of marketization have promoted the pursuit of commercial values over academic values (Yang 2005; Zhu 2009). Although the market ideology has provided the Chinese academic community with more freedom and autonomy, it has at the same time marginalized the traditional academic values in favor of the pursuit of money (Mohrman 2005; Zhu 2009). Moreover, due to the low salary for academic work, some faculty members neglect basic teaching and research work and concentrate on quick payback research (Zhu 2009). It is argued by Zhu (2009) that universities and the whole society at large take the risk of going too far in responding to market needs, which has changed the orientation of the academic community to some extent into profit-making enterprises.

### 5.2.2 *Quantity, Quality, and Assessment*

As part of the push to become world-class, universities, particularly the elite ones, are adopting a new evaluation system for "making academic performance accountable" (Yi 2011, p. 507). The major indicators measuring academic performance are research productivity, including the numbers of publications and grants, particularly publications in such international indices as the Science Citation Index (SCI) the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) and the Arts & Humanities Citation Index (AHCI). Such indicators of educational attainments are directly linked to faculty annual performance as well as promotions. According to the respondents, to get a paper published in premier international journals, the author(s) would receive approximately 20,000 RMB (\$3200) to 30,000 RMB (\$4800) cash awards from their institutes. One business school even paid up to 100,000 RMB (\$16,000) for one top-ranked journal publication.



Although this new evaluation system can improve the efficiency of higher education to some extent, it is criticized by most of the respondents as moving too far toward a kind of accountability that will eventually erode the academic ethos. Dr. Bai, an associate professor in environment science, embraced a critical stance on the number-oriented evaluation culture. He said:

The top administrators of the university don't care if you have grants, lab space, or graduate students, and if your research helps to promote the advancement of a discipline. What they care about is how many grants you can get, how many papers you can publish and in what journal? ...The university evaluates its faculty every year, and your performance is directly connected to cash awards. Hence, here, faculty members, no matter returnees or domestic scholars, are under great pressure to write grant proposals and publish results including some immature primary results. (Interview, October 10, 2012)

Dr. Bai further pointed out that many institutions adopted a scoring system to evaluate faculty. "Say, if you publish an article in a SCI journal, you will get, for example, five points. But if you publish an article in an equivalent Chinese journal, you might only get one or two points," he explained. To him, this over-quantifying of publications, particularly SCI articles, have caused much "academic foam" and hindered the practical applications of scientific research in the society.

Those who were working in more indigenous-based fields held more severely critical views of the SCI/SSCI-oriented evaluation culture. "The system is over-emphasizing international publications. This might be good for some fields, but not good for all," said Dr. Liang, an assistant professor in sociology. Dr. Liang criticized the evaluation criteria as showing an over-reliance on international standards and marginalizing indigenous research. He illustrated:

For some indigenous research, do you really need a SSCI journal to tell you if your topic and findings are significant? I doubt it. However, now in China, everything is linked with publications, and there are restrictions for that. For example, how many papers have you published? Which journal do you publish in? Are you the first author? Where is your affiliation? This is too utilitarian to me. Even people in the US, I believe, don't evaluate scholars in such a way. (Interview, September 20, 2012)

Dr. Liang interpreted the acronym SCI or SSCI as "stupid Chinese ideas" or "super-stupid Chinese ideas." To him, it is nonsense to refer to SCI/SSCI as standards for evaluating a scholar's performance. Instead, he suggested that what China can learn from the international journals is their peer-review system. Unfortunately, such a core value of evaluation has not been well embedded in Chinese academy: It is usually not peers but some outsiders, mainly administrators, granters, or journal editors, who evaluate the work. Dr. Liang further criticized the hidden-publication rules in domestic journals. That is, for some of the journals, the authors have to pay *banmian fei* (pages-fees) to get a paper published. This national wide corruption, or bribery, of academic journals has greatly impeded academic development as a whole in China.

Under such a publication-oriented culture, teaching has become insignificant because no obvious credit is associated with the quality of teaching in the evaluation system, and the criteria for teaching are based solely on the number of classroom hours (Yi 2011). This invited serious criticism from my participants because many saw teaching as a priority for the work of faculty. Dr. Wu, a professor in computer science, claimed that there is a lack of a sense of responsibility for teaching in China.

The system has increasingly become publication-oriented. This is problematic. The result is that professors have to make every effort to please the system, right? Their concern is to fulfill the official requirement, but not to care much about quality of research, let alone putting efforts toward teaching. This is a vicious cycle. If you don't do good research, how can you do good teaching? Teaching and research should complement each other. Only when you combine your research with teaching can you teach uniquely. Otherwise, students will feel that they just read the books or slides. You can't teach anything beyond what the textbooks have actually given to you. However, many professors in China don't want to teach, or are unwilling to make efforts to teach, because teaching is a time-consuming task and not directly linked to instant benefits. This is a big difference between Chinese and American universities. In the US, even the Nobel Prize winners have to teach. So, I'll say, teaching in China is a task of one's conscience. (Interview, December 30, 2011)

Obviously, teaching is suffering under this new evaluation system because the universities prize research, basically publications, above all other factors in promotions. Because the task of teaching receives few rewards, teaching is usually labeled as “load,” and to teach is simply to meet a standard of quantity (Yi 2011). Despite this, most of the returnees in my study regarded teaching as equally important as research and took great responsibility for teaching well. This is the case because the participants shared that they had benefited from the high teaching quality from their studies in the US and would like to pass on what they gained to their Chinese students (for more details on this topic, see Chap. 6).

### ***5.2.3 The Funding System and Academic Corruption***

Although the evaluation system was accused of misappropriating the Western values of accountability, the funding system, on the contrary, was criticized as being too centralized and lacking transparency. According to Dr. Xie (a professor in history), there is a lack of diversity in the sources of funding because most of the research projects in China are funded by the government. “If the research is directed by government funding only, how can you be really critical of the government?” said Dr. Xie. This is echoed by Yi (2011) who argued that it would be difficult for social science researchers to obtain funding if they do not “adjust or even totally shift their research to suit the ideological line of the party-state” (p. 511). Hence, some adopted a strategy of “self-censorship” (idem, p. 512) to avoid working on too-sensitive research topics. However, when I raised the issue of academic freedom, Dr. Xie gave a slightly different answer: “Actually it's much better than many people assumed in the West. I think they over-exaggerate the issue of censorship in

academia. In fact, as long as you don't cross the red line [too-sensitive areas], it's fine." Dr. Xie was not alone. Several other returnees also conceded that they could exercise academic freedom to a very great degree.

The major criticism of respondents in the fields of natural science and engineering was targeted to the areas of lack of transparency, abuse of power, and misuse of funding as problematic. As Dr. Guo, a professor in computer science, revealed, the funding system in China was not truly merit-based but rather determined largely by one's status, title, and connections. He complained that most of the funding in China was monopolized by a few powerful scholars.

From a research perspective, the major problem in China is the over-concentration of resources. If you are a member of CAS (China's Academy of Science) or a prominent faculty-administrator, it is relatively easier to get resources. However, if you are an ordinary researcher and don't have much *guanxi*, the chance to win a big grant is slim. This is very different from that in the US where a member of NAS (National Academy of Science) is just a title and doesn't carry any substantial power. Even a Nobel Prize winner might fail to earn a grant if his (or her) proposal is not good enough. This is unimaginable in China. If you are a Nobel Prize winner, you don't have to apply for funding; you'll be certain to be automatically funded. What I mean is that status and titles are very important here. (Interview, September 24, 2012)

Dr. Guo summarized the current grant system as "icing on the cake" rather than timely assistance, that is, the "haves" (established professors) can secure more funding, and the "have-nots" (start-up researchers) are lacking seed money. "If China only supports senior researchers and ignores its young people, the academic world will eventually become dull and lack vitality," he said.

As Cao (2008) argued, China's structures favor seniority over innovation. Generally speaking, it is easier for senior researchers to get grants than junior ones because in many areas the grant-review process is not based on a peer-review system but on one's status and connection. In this sense, it is crucial for returnees, particularly young returnees, to build up personal relationships to strengthen their chance of winning a grant. Dr. Fu, a professor in botanical science, confirmed the importance of *guanxi* in grant application as he explained:

My personal experience is that *guanxi* is very important in China. I'll say that sometimes local PhDs, especially the students of some academic overlords, are more likely to get funding than us [the returnees] since they are more familiar with the system and have better relations. Sometimes I feel that applying for grants is like buying a lottery because you can't control the process. (Interview, November 12, 2012)

Turning to the comparison with the US, Dr. Fu continued:

Although the scientific system there [in the US] is very competitive, and the chance to win grants is small, you can have a somewhat basic sense if you can win it or not. As an English saying goes, "As you sow, so as you will reap." However, in China, you just can't predict it, even though you have put a great effort in it. I mean you just can't control your own destiny. (Interview, November 12, 2012)

The theme of *guanxi* appeared again and again during the interviews. This is consistent with what Shi and Rao (2010) argued in their article in *Science*, i.e., that

the current distribution of funding in China is determined more by personalized networks than by academic ability. They divulged that, “to obtain major grants in China, it is an open secret that doing good research is not as important as schmoozing with powerful bureaucrats and their favorite experts” (p. 1128). This may explain why so many people in China have a stronger desire in taking administrative positions than doing good research because such status can bring power, which can be used in exchange for resources and money.

Another related issue to the abuse of power is the misuse of funding and academic corruption. Dr. Guo, a professor in physics, claimed that a great amount of research funding was lost to corruption. He said:

The funding management is just chaotic. There is no strict regulation on how the funds can be used. As I discovered, a large amount of funding is spent on meetings, travel, transportation, banquets, or office supplies, and some goes directly into the researchers’ own pockets. I mean you can easily reimburse the cost of many personal expenses from a research project. (Interview, November 13, 2012)

It is worth noting that in China it is an “open secret” that researchers supplement their annual income by “earning” money through conducting funded projects (Yang 2005). Dr. Guo attributed the misuse of funding to a systematic problem instead of an individual one. “You can’t blame them. The salary is too low to make a living,” he said. “Think about the professors in the US. Do they have a higher moral ethics than us? They don’t do that because their salary is high enough for them to lead a decent life.” Although some institutions have offered comparable salaries to attract renowned scholars, the salaries on average remain very low, particularly for lower-rank academics. In their cross-national studies on faculty salary in 28 countries, Altbach and his team (2012) found that in terms of purchasing power, newly hired academics in China were paid worst (\$259 per month). Dr. Guo claimed that without financial security, scholars could hardly make a long-term commitment to do good science and teaching.

Arguably, there is no way of knowing if academic corruption is in fact more serious now than before, yet it is certainly drawing more attention as higher education in China becomes increasingly commercialized. As Yang (2005) argued, the corruption of accountability procedures in China is as much the result of a convergence between Western managerial mechanisms (accountability) and traditional modes of bureaucracy in China. Because Western and traditional models operate under different sets of mentalities, the tensions between the two models have created unprecedented pressures on Chinese academe (Yang 2005; Yi 2011).

However, it is important to point out that the situation is changing. China has made great efforts to improve its research environment, for example, by establishing the National Science Foundation of China (NSFC)<sup>3</sup> and by introducing the

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<sup>3</sup>The National Science Foundation of China (NSFC), founded in 1986, is an institution for the management of the National Science Fund. Modeled on the US National Science Foundation, the NSFC allocates funding on a competitive basis through adopting an open-bid process for proposals and a peer-review system (Jonkers 2010).

peer-review system (Cao 2008). Several respondents mentioned that NSFC was their first choice when they applied for grants because the review procedures are based somewhat on a fair competitive bias and subject to a peer-review process.

### 5.3 World-Class Universities? Returnees' Comparative Perspectives

Building world-class universities has long been the goal of the Chinese government and its academic communities. In recent years, China has deliberately selected a small number of universities for intensive investment and development under the projects of 211 and 985 (Deem et al. 2008; Yang and Welch 2012). Research universities, backed by the massive funding under these two projects, have made significant achievements in improving academic facilities and infrastructures, attracting top overseas Chinese and foreign scholars, increasing numbers of international publications, partnering with the world's leading universities, and developing new programs taught in English (Li and Chen 2011; Mohrman et al. 2011; Rhoads and Hu 2012; Yang and Welch 2012). Despite these accomplishments, the questions raised here is whether or not these universities have already reached world-class quality and standards. Or, more simply, does China have a world-class university now?

The respondents in my study unanimously expressed the view that China does not have a world-class university at the moment. To them, there is still a wide gap between China's best universities and world-class universities in advanced Western countries. Drawing on their experiences of studying and working in the US, the returnees identified a few obstacles that prevent China's universities from achieving world-class status.

First, there is a lack of an academic culture that promotes excellent research. "We have improved our hardware noticeably, like new buildings, up-to-date labs, and libraries, but it is always the case in China that the software is still left behind," said Dr. Xiang, an associate professor in education. According to him, sufficient funding is essential for research universities, but simply building more laboratories, buying more equipment, and pushing for more publications cannot guarantee the creation of a world-class university. "We need other aspects to make outstanding teaching and research possible. Say, whether we have supportive academic services; whether we have a free academic environment to do research; whether we have a system that is based on meritocracy rather than on seniority or political favoritism," he shared. Like other participants, Dr. Xiang was critical of the *dayuejin* (Great Leap Forward)<sup>4</sup> style underlying the slogan of "building world-class universities"

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<sup>4</sup>*Dayuejin* (Great Leap Forward) was an economic and social campaign led by Mao Zedong from 1958 to 1961. It aimed to rapidly develop China's economy, through industrialization, that could rival America's economy in a short time. This unrealistic goal of the campaign resulted in tens of millions of deaths, which was regarded as a disaster in Chinese history. In the interview, Dr. Xiang used this negative term to criticize some people's unrealistic expectations to build world-class universities in a short period of time.

by saying “everyone is pushed to achieve immediate success in research, to publish as many papers as possible, but research has its own cycle and takes time to do.” This *dayuejin* mentality has resulted in a series of problems including academic misconduct and corruption. This also hinders the development of basic and original research that requires deep and long-term investigations. As Li and Chen (2011) argued, it is unrealistic to expect to build a world-class university overnight. It takes a long time to create an academic culture where academics can pursue their intellectual interests in a supportive and open environment.

Second, there is a lack of university autonomy and academic freedom in Chinese universities. The respondents argued that the most obvious difference between Chinese universities and their US counterparts is their bureaucratic and hierarchical administrative systems, which result from strong regulation and authority of the government over universities. Obviously, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in China still holds a number of important decisions centrally from funding, student admission, and the quota of students for each institution and program to the quota of faculty, university president appointment, and awarding of degrees (Yi 2011). This is evident in Li and Chen’s (2011) research on China’s research universities. They argued that the Chinese government keeps strong control over its universities politically, financially, and administratively: “Politically the academic work of universities must follow the Party’s fundamental line; financially, universities become more dependent on the government with the increase of the central government budget; and administratively, the decisions of universities are under control from government” (pp. 251–252). As a result, there is a lack of diversity within different levels of institutions because they need follow the basic guidelines and suggestions proposed by the MOE in their major reform programs. Dr. Cheng, a professor in pharmaceutical science, commented that all the research universities in China can be called “The National University of China, XX campus” because these universities share a similar development path under close supervision of the MOE. According to Altbach (2004), a world-class university should have relative independence from the government where professors and students are free to pursue knowledge without being controlled by external authorities. In this sense, China’s universities are far from the idea of world class in terms of autonomy and academic freedom.

However, interestingly, a few returnees acknowledged that what restricted their academic freedom was not the so-called ideological or political oppression but the cumbersome administrative system and the bureaucratic governance in Chinese universities. Dr. Sun provided a compelling comment on this argument: The real constraint of his academic freedom did not come from political restrictions in the sense of free inquiry on knowledge; instead, it was from the cumbersome procedures and other nonacademic distractions resulting from the inefficient administrative system in Chinese universities, i.e., the over-control of academic matters and poor support on academic service. Several other participants agreed that China’s bureaucratic administration, along with its dual-leadership internal governance (party secretaries sit alongside the presidents and deans), might have created large obstacles to prevent Chinese universities from reaching world-class standards.

Academic freedom in current Chinese universities is a “mixed picture.” For many participants, free inquires are possible as long as certain topics are avoided. Scholars in China are all clear that some lines cannot be crossed. The restrictions are significant in politically or ideologically sensitive fields, especially social science. In other fields, such as science and engineering, researchers have relatively greater degrees of freedom. Generally speaking, returnees in social science and the humanities faced more difficulties getting fund or publishing due to the censorship imposed on research (Yi 2011). The government makes research fund available to those whose research suits the ideological line of the party-state. Those who do not follow the official policy and doctrines would have difficulties of obtaining fund and publishing. In order to compete for more resources and get papers published, scholars use a strategy of self-censorship to avoid working on too-sensitive research topics.

There has been a huge change in academic freedom in China compared with three decades ago when one could get fired or even jailed for writing unacceptable views. The danger now is not that one will get punished but only that one will not get published (Plafker 1999). Despite the changes, many Western scholars argued that the process has hardly been progressive because open public criticism or debate against the government is still restricted in China (He 2002). It is true that China has never enjoyed the Western tradition of academic freedom in terms of freedom to teach and research without concern of retribution. However, we cannot simply adapt Western norms and values of academic freedom to Chinese universities. As Marginson (2014) reminded us, we must consider the variations in state traditions and political cultures as well as those in university–state and university–society relations when academic freedom is discussed. Unlike Western systems, where scholars have the tradition of open public criticism of the state, scholars in the Confucian tradition have a larger responsibility and more positive role for managing the state (Zha 2010). That is, intellectuals in China are responsible for the good order and stability of the society. In this sense, they take positions on behalf of government, not against it (Marginson 2014). Given the differences, more discussions on the topic of academic freedom are needed with a consideration of context-specific elements.

Third, there is a lack of sustainable planning of building world-class universities. “China uses Project 211, Project 985 to develop its research universities. Obviously, this is an engineering mentality, which regards education as something like a machine,” said Dr. Tu. He used the metaphor of machinery to criticize China’s engineering mentality regarding higher education planning. He argued:

It is fundamentally wrong to construct education as a project. ... To me, education is more agricultural-based. It is a process of cultivating, which needs fertile soils and also nurturing. There are periods of growth, and there are periods of cessation. You can’t simply force a plant to grow. I mean, you shouldn’t attempt to hasten the process and hope for quick success. Otherwise, it will ruin the whole education system. This is what we Chinese say *bamiao zhuzhang* [making the rice shoots grow by pulling them up] or in an English idiom, ‘haste makes waste.’ (Interview, October 25, 2012)

Likewise, Dr. Wu, a professor in computer science, criticized China's world-class university policy as "starving the bottom to feed the top" (Altbach and Wang 2012, p. 46). To him, to concentrate substantial funding on a few elite universities may raise China's image with a few highlighted projects or publications, but the cost is that "it creates further inequality not only among different regions, different levels of universities, but also among different schools, different disciplines, and different research areas," said Dr. Wu. Therefore, he suggested that China should plan its higher education with an ecosystem mind to nurture a sustainable and fair mechanism for open competition, which would allow more diverse institutions to benefit from government resources rather than designate the list of institutions under the so-called projects.

Finally, there is a lack of a creative version of a world-class university based on specific cultural and social contexts. In questing for world-class universities, research universities in China usually follow the lead of top institutions in advanced Western countries from curriculum to new management structures (Mohrman 2005; Yang and Welch 2012). However, such imitative practices were criticized by some returnees as copying instead of learning. This is well illustrated in Dr. Tu's comments on his institution's "shopping around" practices of curriculum reform. He stated:

In recent curriculum reform, what our school did was shopping around and bringing in curricular fragments from several top institutions in the US: some from Berkeley, some from Purdue, and some from Michigan. We teachers were asked to change the curriculum completely with reference to their practices. ... Personally, I am not against learning good practices from the West, but the question is whether or not to abandon our own academic traditions. A good program takes a long time to build and has its own history, accumulation, and long tradition of scholarship. We cannot simply copy elements from Harvard today and Princeton tomorrow and expect them to flourish overnight in China. (Interview, October 25, 2012)

According to Dr. Tu, simply copying the model of top-notch institutions does not guarantee the successful building of world-class universities in China. Some higher education researchers (Mohrman 2005; Mok and Chan 2008; Li and Chen 2011) also remind us that copying Western norms of academics could potentially undermine local cultures, values, and traditions, which might result in reinforcing a Western hegemony and creating a new culture of dependency.

However, a few returnees held a different viewpoint toward copying and learning practices. As Dr. Zheng, a professor in Chemistry, expressed it:

... I don't think this is a problem. Dating back to the 1930s, all chemists across the world were learning German, because at that time chemistry research from Germany ranked among the world's best. ... We can't deny that we're still lagging behind major Western countries in science and technologies, right? If you want to overtake them, you have to catch up to them first. So you first need to learn their language, practices, and know what they are doing. (Interview, September 25, 2012)

In contrast to Dr. Tu who was cautious of "taking-all-in," Dr. Zheng was more open to the "copying" processes and believed that it provides impetus for Chinese universities to learn from the common-good practices from the West to become the real sense of world-classness.



These two cases give rise to the debates about how to strike a balance between dominant Western models and carrying forward China's own tradition. Although there is not yet an consensual answer to this question, the returnees generally expressed their optimism about the future of China's higher education despite their harsh criticisms of the existing problems underlying the system. To many of them, building world-class universities is not an end itself but more of a means to an end. As a result, they proposed several suggestions to improve the quality of China's higher education through the quest for world-class universities.

First and foremost, it is urgent for China to build an advanced academic culture based on fair competition, meritocratic advancement, and academic integrity rather than on seniority, authority, and connections. Second, it is important to de-bureaucratize the internal governance structures and improve the efficiency of the supporting academic service system within universities. Third, a world-class university needs a certain distance from the government. One suggestion is to remove the party-secretary system from the university and leave universities a certain distance from the political system. Finally, simply copying the Western model cannot guarantee the success of building a world-class university in China. Although it is important to learn good practices from the leading Western universities, China must adapt these practices in order to fit them into specific local contexts. Thus, as Mohrman (2005) stated, "it would be quite interesting to learn of a new definition of a world-class university that is not simply an imitation of Harvard but a creative blend of the best of East and West" (p. 22). This is also the participating scholars' expectation of Chinese universities.

## 5.4 Conclusion

This chapter illustrates the challenges and dilemmas encountered by the returned scholars by examining the everyday interactions between individuals and their environment. It finds that the integration of returnees into Chinese universities is not always a linear and beneficial process (Delicado 2011). Their integration experience can be constrained by the existing university structures and power relations, which include the bureaucracies of university administration, local politics and complicated interpersonal relationships, the problematic system of evaluation and funding, and lack of an effective academic culture that consistently supports high-quality teaching and research.

It is worth noting here that in addressing the issues underlying China's higher education system, participating scholars used the US as a counterpart for comparison purposes. However, this does not mean that some of the issues raised by the returnees (i.e., local politics, invisible colleges, hectic mentality in research, and number-oriented evaluation system) do not exist in the US. The increasing corporatization and commercialization create tensions for Western universities as well (Altbach et al. 2009; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). In many ways, these are

challenging times for the academic profession worldwide, but it seems that the issues appear to be more obvious and serious in China during its higher education transition.

Under such conditions, the returnees face three major dilemmas. First, should they publish more in Chinese journals or concentrate their efforts on international publications? Chinese journals usually have short publication cycles and a larger readership of domestic scholars, so to publish in these outlets may help to build their reputation in local academic circle and also enhance their research impact on policy making. However, if they consider the possibilities of moving back to the US or other places outside of the Chinese Mainland, they must keep a good record of international publications because it is the only guarantee for international mobility (Xu 2009). Second, should the returnees be more involved in administrative duties and locally embedded relations, or should they concentrate on their research work? They know that administrative positions may secure more resources, but they might be submerged in administration and distracted from doing serious research. Third, should returnees, especially young returnees, follow the local rules of joining an influential professor's team or stand on their own? It is relatively easier for them to build *guanxi* and get resources under the protection of a "big" professor. The cost for doing so is that they might have to give up their own areas of interest and become essentially academic workers in their boss's laboratory.

Facing the structural constraints, some returnees, especially the junior professors who are in relatively traditional departments, felt frustrated not being able to make full use of the knowledge and skills they had acquired abroad. In contrast, those who are working in highly internationalized environments are more likely to maximize what they have learned overseas and have a higher level of satisfaction and productivity, which I will discuss in the next chapter. This study argues that it is essential to show how the characteristics of one's direct work environment, also called *xiao huanjing* (literally "small environment"), affect returnees' capacity to adjust and innovate. Thus, attempts to change organizational behavior and attitudes may be more effective when first directed at work groups rather than at the overall institutional level.

Although the structural approach to return mobility captures the influences of contextual factors on returnees, it is insufficient to explain the complexities and dynamics of the agencies of the returnees who actively negotiate their places in their host institutions through mobilizing their transnational resources and networks. Realizing this, the next chapter moves beyond the structural stance and views the individual returnees as active social agencies who can have certain positive influences (Jonkers 2010) on the transformation of China's higher education system.

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## Chapter 6

# Learning, Knowledge Transfer, and Institutional Innovation: The Impact of Academic Mobility

Dr. Yi Rao, a world prominent neurobiologist, left Northwestern University in the US and returned to China to serve as the dean of the School of Life Science in Peking University in 2007. His return, together with that of Dr. Yigong Shi (see Chap. 4), was regarded by the media as a sign of China's return wave. Dr. Rao has a reputation for his high profile, outspoken views, and reform actions. Under his leadership, the School of Life Science went through a series of reforms in student training, research, and internal governance by introducing Western models of management with the aim to create a world-class research and learning environment. Dr. Rao is also known for his writings on China's academic corruption as well as its centralized and bureaucratic scientific institutions. He called for a fundamental transition from rule-by-man to rule-by-merit for China's scientific reform in one of his best-known articles published in *Nature*.<sup>1</sup> In an interview with *China Daily*, Dr. Rao called himself a "critical constructor": "Intellectuals should have a clear mind on social issues and make due contributions by speaking out and taking action" (Gong 2009).<sup>2</sup> He was labeled by the media as a man on a mission.

Apparently, Dr. Rao did not return solely as a researcher but also as an innovator who actively engages in China's scientific and social changes. Although not every returnee in my study was as influential as Dr. Rao, they have, more or less, acted as "carriers of change" (Cassarino 2004, p. 258) either by bringing in new knowledge, skills, resources, and experiences they accumulated abroad at an individual level or by calling for institutional changes at the organizational level. The participating scholars acknowledged that international mobility provided a significant conduit of

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<sup>1</sup>For details, see Rao et al. (2004). Zhongguo keji xuyao de genben zhuanbian: Cong chuantong renzhi dao jingzheng yousheng tizhi—zhong changqi guihua jiang liuxia youxiu yichan, haishi cuoshi liangji [A fundamental transition from rule-by-man to rule-by-merit: What will be the legacy of the mid-to-long term plan of science and technology?]. *Nature*, Vol. 432, China Voices II, pp. A12–A17.

<sup>2</sup>For details, see Gong (2009, October 14). Man on a mission. *China Daily*. Retrieved from [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2009-10/14/content\\_8789826.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2009-10/14/content_8789826.htm).

learning and knowledge transfer. They were also overwhelmingly positive about how mobility experiences had influenced their work after returning.

From transnational aspects, return is not the end of the migration cycle (Oxfeld and Long 2004). It is part of a circular system of social networks and exchanges, facilitating the reintegration of the returnees while they transform their knowledge, skills, and expertise (Cassarino 2004). In this sense, return may lead to the emergence of new transnational identities and subjectivities that shape the behaviors and performance of the returnees (Cassarino 2004; Portes 2001). Following this line, this chapter explores the relations between overseas studies, knowledge transfer, and the emergence of new identities and practices. It aims to look beyond the structural approach to return mobility and brings the notions of agency, changes, mobility, and transnational connection into the discussion.

In doing so, this chapter conceptualizes returnees as agents of social change who have a certain amount of positive impact on China's higher education development and internationalization through their actions (Jonkers 2010). In what follows, I first examine the ways in which Western doctoral education affects the formation of new identities and professional practices of the participating scholars. I then discuss how returnees mediate their transnational gains and experiences in their daily practices in teaching, research, and institutional building on their return. Finally, I focus on the effects of return mobility on institutional changes by drawing upon the example of special academic zones (SAZs).

## **6.1 Learning and Knowledge Transfer Experiences Abroad**

This study finds a strong relation between academic travel, knowledge transfer, and the emergence of new subjectivities. The participating scholars unanimously agreed that international mobility was a significant source of learning and knowledge transfer. They spoke of how, through academic travel, they gained new knowledge, fresh thoughts, different perspectives, and self-reflexivity.

### ***6.1.1 Academic Training***

The participants were overwhelmingly positive about their academic training experiences in the US. Their academic gains included the acquisition of solid knowledge, new skills, a new scientific worldview, different ways of thinking and performing research, and different approaches to both academic freedom and research ethics. Some also emphasized the valuable experience in research and teaching through the appointments of teaching assistant or research assistant, which had positive effects on their career development.

The returnees unanimously attributed their academic gains to the systematic and rigorous doctoral-training programs in the US, which they believed was the major strength of American higher education. They gave credit to the advance of research and technology in the US, especially in the fields of basic and applied science. To some science students, studying in American universities was a way to get into the center of their research fields and get access to experts, facilities, and resources that might not be available in China. “I don’t think I would have learned much had I stayed [in China], because at that time [in early 1990s] my field [integrated circuit] was almost a blank in China, but it was quite well-developed in the US,” said Dr. Wen, a professor in electric engineering. Dr. Wen went to the US in early 1990s and had lived there for more than 10 years before he returned. To him, it was the rigorous and hands-on training in American universities that nourished his expertise and research mentality. He stated:

I have to admit that the study load in the US is far heavier than that in Chinese universities. I remember while I was in college [in China], taking seven or eight courses a semester was not a big deal. But there [in the US], taking two or three courses coupled with teaching assistant tasks, you barely have time to breathe and eat, let alone sleep. Say, for a 3-credit hour class, you have to spend at least 15 hours per week to prepare for the class. There’re also heavy homework, regular quizzes, mid-term and final exams. If you don’t work hard, you just can’t survive in the class. That’s why many people joke that doing a PhD in the US is like shedding a layer of skin. You must have the same feeling, right? It’s really hard. (Interview, November 15, 2012)

Dr. Wen was not alone. Most of the respondents agreed that their doctoral training experience in the US was “really hard.” However, at the same time they admitted that the experience was rewarding, through which they gained solid knowledge and skills and became more innovative and more scientifically prepared. Dr. Fu, a professor in biology, indicated that what he gained most was not merely knowledge and skills, but more importantly, the attitude and commitment to do science. He explained:

I remember, when I started my PhD program, my boss asked what I want to learn from the program. I said that I wanted to learn advanced technologies and techniques. He said, “No problem and you’ll definitely get that.” On the day I defended my thesis, he asked me again what I had learned. I said, “I have developed a real interest in science now. I love exploring new problems and the internal logic behind these problems. I think this is more important than acquiring techniques themselves.” My boss said, “Congrats, you can graduate now.” (Interview, November 15, 2012)

Another important point the respondents made is how pursuing knowledge in the US is perceived as an open, creative, and transformative experience. For example, both Dr. Zhang (an associate professor in neurobiology) and Dr. Li (a professor in history) stated that the American system taught them how to think creatively and critically. Here I cited their comments, respectively:

In China, we are not taught to think critically, but taught to memorize the only standard right answer, at least when I was in school. However, in the US, everyone is encouraged and stimulated to think. No matter whether your answer is right or wrong, you are encouraged to think in your own way. No one will tell you what is the only and standard

answer. ... This has had a great impact on me and now I always tell my students that there is more than one possible answer. (Interview with Dr. Zhang, October 3, 2011)

I think I can distinguish myself from the local PhDs [who were educated in Chinese universities] regarding my academic visions and thinking styles. I'll say these advantages are a result of my doctoral training in the US because the system there pays special attention to cultivating the skills of critical thinking. For example, what is an effective question? What is effective query? What is effective evidence? And what is effective ways to argue? Of course, concrete knowledge is important, but the ways of thinking and inquiry, I think, is more important than knowledge itself. (Interview with Dr. Li, November 7, 2012)

Both Dr. Zhang and Dr. Li highlighted the importance of critical thinking in their scholarly work and believed that certain “tactic knowledge” (Kim 2010) gained from international learning added distinction to their scholarship. This echoes Kim’s (2010) argument that, “The types of knowledge carried by mobile academics are not just *Wissenschaft* but also a way of thinking and the *overall orientation toward life and epistemic paradigms*” (p. 584). This tactic knowledge, together with other gains such as language skills, academic norms, rules of international publications, and professional networks, are regarded as added values of returnees’ transnational experiences, which Rosen and Zweig (2005) defined as a form of transnational capital.

According to Rosen and Zweig (2005), this transnational capital is “based on international knowledge or linkages accumulated overseas that are not readily available in China” (p. 111). In their survey comparing foreign-trained PhDs and local PhDs, they found that returnees possess a greater degree of transnational capital than the locals, and these human and social capitals give returnees serious advantages in China’s expanding linkages to international academic communities and its agenda of building world-class universities.

### 6.1.2 *Personal Growth and Cultural Gains*

In addition to academic gains and professional development, the respondents were unanimously positive about their social- and cultural-related gains through international mobility. They reported that they were becoming, more or less, “open-minded,” “mature and independent,” “tolerant,” “better understanding of culture,” “internationally aware,” and “critical toward certain issues.” These gains are socially situated and institutionally specific, which Williams and Baláz (2008) conceptualized as encultured and embedded knowledge. To them, such knowledge is place specific as well as grounded in particular settings and in socialization processes.

According to Gu et al. (2009), overseas and intercultural experience can be a transformative learning process that leads to a journey of personal growth and maturity. This is confirmed by some of the returnees who shared that they had become more mature, independent, and self-confident by living and learning abroad. Here I quote passages from Dr. Zheng and Dr. Bo, respectively, as examples.

I think I became more independent and self-confident. Before I came to the US, I rarely travelled alone and had lots of worries about my first trip to the US. However, now, no



matter where you place me, no matter how foreign that place is to me, I don't think I'll feel that scared. What I mean is that geographical distance is no longer a restriction to my activities. Once you realize that, you actually extend your inner universe and your vision as well. ... You won't be like a frog in a well, thinking the sky is as big as the top of the well; you'll think big as you see the whole sky. (Interview, Dr. Zheng, a professor in material science, September 26, 2012)

It sounds cliché to say that studying abroad changed my life. Although you may not know it, but yes, it did. I met different people, saw different things, experienced different cultures, and adopted more Western styles. My English improved a lot, so have my cultural awareness and horizons. ... I'm not that narrow-minded and most importantly, I learned how to think in another person's shoes and not take my own stance for granted. ... As an old Chinese proverb says, "traveling thousands of miles is better than reading thousands of books." I think this can't be truer. (Interview with Dr. Bo, an associate professor in economics, October 24, 2012)

Both Dr. Zheng and Dr. Bo went to the US right after they completed college in China. To them, the period of studying and living abroad was a critical stage for their personal maturation and shaped their character and attitude toward life. As Dr. Zheng stated, mobility not only enlarged his geographical maps of travelling, but more importantly it broadened his inner universe and visions. This illustrates something of what Taylor (1989) called "inner mobility," which he described as "what is coming to the fore is the inner mobility of an individual's own life, for which coming and going, being both here and there across frontiers at the same time, has become the normal thing" (p. 75). In this sense, increased mobility has the effect of increasing one's imaginary landscapes of self and the world at a more subjective level.

The improvement of cultural awareness and international understanding is another common topic raised by the participants. For example, Dr. Zhou, an assistant professor in biochemistry, highlighted the importance of overseas experience on improving her cultural sensitivity and international consciousness. To Dr. Zhou, time in the US exposed her to a rich cultural environment that made her more open to different cultural values and behaviors. She shared:

It [living in the US] was a very rich cultural experience. I learned many things about how to be open-minded, to accept other cultures, and to respect people who are different from you. ... What I benefited most from this experience is that I realize that people are all the same, if we get rid of the label of nationality. ... I like the English word, empathy. I think it's the foundation of human being. (Interview, November 5, 2012)

Arguably, Dr. Zhou's narratives of global empathy had much to do with the ideas of cosmopolitan sensibilities, although she did not express that explicitly.

If we understand a cosmopolitan person as someone who is open to other cultures and not tied to any national prejudices, Dr. Dai's case provides some implications. Dr. Dai, a professor in computer science, had worked in both Europe and the US for several years before he returned to China. He saw himself as a citizen of the world who viewed the whole world as his polity by stating:

I believe that after so many years abroad, I no longer have strong national identities. Yes, I'm Chinese, but I look at myself more as a citizen of the world. To me, moving to China is

more like changing a work place. I won't care too much whether I should follow Chinese or American or European ways of doing things. I pick up the good sides of each system and blend them together. ... Now I'm working in China but I don't just expect China to be good, but also the US to be good, the UK to be good, and the whole world to be good. I believe many people who have several years abroad may have the similar feeling as I do. (Interview, October 31, 2012)

Dr. Dai's comments indicated that there are some connections between mobility and the production of cosmopolitan identities (Rizvi 2005). However, his case was very marginal in my sample because not every participant understood cosmopolitanism as a sense of belonging to the world as a whole. In most cases, the participating scholars claimed a strong feeling of national identity that coexists with a strong interest in cultural diversity.

Along with the increased cultural and international awareness, the respondents also acknowledged that living abroad provided them with a new understanding of their own culture and a possibility to compare, question, and perhaps change certain realities. For instance, Dr. Xia, an assistant professor in anthropology, expressed that he gained better understanding of his home cultures after he left China. He adopted a comparative discourse in discussing his experience and gains of overseas studies. He expressed:

During these years in the US, I think I developed a deeper understanding of American society and its culture through constantly comparing the differences between China and the US. When I see or do something completely new [in the US], I just can't help to think about this happening in China. How would people respond to it? In that way, I do see people and things at home differently since I have a more concrete reference to compare. (Interview, December 5, 2011).

To Dr. Xia, this overseas experience provided him with opportunities to act as a participant-observer of at least two different cultures and social systems, which in turn helped him to gain a better understanding of his own culture. This is confirmed by Schweisfurth (2012) who argued that the factors that shape one's experience most profoundly are likely to be those that are different from one's life experience and are likely to shape one's comparative lens. But are all sojourners natural comparativists? The data from my study indicates that those who are in social science and humanities tend to have the disposition to learn more about different cultures and peoples and are more likely to have reflective comparisons on both social and cultural issues.

Furthermore, as a cultural anthropologist, Dr. Xia provided rich insights as to the effects of intercultural experience on the development of a new self by introducing scholarly terms such as "hybridity," "identity," and "subjectivity" during the conversation. To him, the 10 years between his 20s and 30s in the US was a critical stage in his life. "I'm no longer who I was when I left China. I've changed a lot after these years living abroad. This is a long process of self-exploration," he said. Dr. Xia understood overseas studies as not merely a process of negotiation between different cultures but a journey of self-reflection and self-reorientation (Gu et al.

2009). His accounts echo a postcolonial discourse on mobility and the transformation of one's social and cultural identities.

This postcolonial discourse was more explicitly expressed in Dr. Shen's narratives. Dr. Shen is a professor in literature who had lived in the US for almost 20 years before returning to China. Although she shifted her base to a Chinese university, she still kept her connections in the US and frequently travelled back and forth between the two countries. In reflecting on the role of mobility in her scholarship, Dr. Shen's answer was quite postmodern. She said:

I feel I'm marginalized through travelling... No matter here or there, I always feel myself acting as a stranger... I think it is the constant state of jet-lag by flying back and forth, not only physical, but also emotional and intellectual, that gives me a sense of post-modernism, I mean, a third eye to see the world. ... I always feel myself kind of marginalized from the social circuit of my colleagues no matter in China or in the US. It doesn't mean I refuse to integrate; actually, I think I am integrating quite well. ... I just don't see the world from the same angles as my colleagues. I think this is an advantage and I enjoy this state of flowing because I know that I am not bounded to any fixed place. (Interview, January 16, 2012).

As Dr. Shen noted, transnational experience granted her a "third eye" to see the world, and it is this interaction of back-and-forth, of give-and-take, that nourishes her critical intellectual work.

The relationship of mobility and new-identity formation has been widely discussed in cultural studies. The literature in this area provides a nuanced perspective for critically considering the experiences of mobile scholars and the consequences of their academic travels. Clifford (1997) used the term "dwelling in travel" to theorize the diverse practices of border crossing and the experiences of multiple belongings. He argued that cultural action—the making and remaking of identities—takes place in the contact zones that creates a space of exchange, interpretation, and negotiations between different inscriptions and offers the possibilities of constructing new identities. In this sense, Clifford's arguments are useful in order to capture the complexities found in the study.

In a sum, all interviewees shared something positive in their learning experiences abroad. Compared with their domestically trained colleagues, they generally perceived their advantages as the solid knowledge systems, research mentalities, global connections, and intercultural competences they gained abroad. All of these are key factors for returnees to succeed against the backdrop of China's efforts to promote internationalization in its higher education.

## 6.2 Experiences of Knowledge Transfer Upon Return

In terms of knowledge transfer at home, the participating scholars acknowledged that mobility experiences informed their work after returning to China. There were positive stories about how returnees drew on their advantages of mobility and transferred what they learned abroad to home institutions through introducing new

ways of teaching, research, and organizational building. It should be noted that “knowledge transfer” here not only refers to the transfer of codified knowledge, it also includes the transfer of tacit knowledge—encultured and embedded knowledge and particular ways of doing.

### 6.2.1 *The Ways of Teaching*

In general, the respondents were satisfied with their teaching experiences in China. Most of them acknowledged that they felt more fulfilled teaching high-quality Chinese students in these elite universities<sup>3</sup> by their level of respect for teachers. Interacting with brilliant and highly motivated students was regarded as a major source of satisfaction.

Despite this, the returnees expressed their concerns about the quality of teaching in Chinese universities. Many criticized the university education in China as lacking rigorous academic challenge compared with their academic training in the US. Dr. Bai, an associate professor in environmental science, described China’s college experience as “narrow admission and wide exit.” He explained:

Chinese students have to work extremely hard to excel in *gaokao* [National College Entrance Examination] to gain college admittance. Once they get into colleges, they have a relatively carefree four years. However, in the US, it’s relatively easy to enter into college but hard to graduate due to a more rigorous academic experience. ...I feel sad that we have the brightest students when they enter into college, but many don’t learn much during college. (Interview, October 10, 2012)

Dr. Bai attributed the lack of academic challenge to the low quality of college education. To him, most teachers do not invest enough in teaching: “The course designs often lack organization; the course contents mostly are not up to date, and there is a lack of an effective evaluation system to monitor the students’ learning process except for the final exam,” he complained.

Facing this discouraging scenario, Dr. Bai stressed that he regarded teaching as the priority of his academic work and was willing to devote a great deal of his time to teaching although it is not rewarded. During our interview, he showed me a syllabus and explained that his classes were organized in a rigorous way—with clear guidelines, reading lists, heavy loads of homework, projects, regular quizzes, mid and final exams, and frequent classroom interactions, all reflecting to his educational experience in the US. He said,

Many students complained about the heavy course load, and I know many even cursed me at midnight while they were doing my homework [laugh]. But they admitted afterwards that they learned most in my class. ...Actually this is also a heavy load to me because I have to grade all the homework and quizzes by myself. I complained once to the dean that we should have a TA system. But guess what? I was told that I don’t have to do this and

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<sup>3</sup>Project 985 universities are highly selective with admission rates less than 2 % across the country (Ministry of Education of China, 2012).

actually a final grade is enough. ... We usually blame our students don't study hard enough but I think the fundamental problem is that our universities don't regard teaching seriously enough, and our teachers don't teach enough. (Interview, October 10, 2012)

Dr. Bai raised a critical issue in today's university education in China that students are not being challenged enough during their college time. As he stated, it was out of his reach to solve this big issue, but he believed that he could at least do something to act differently, and to him, this area is teaching. However, Dr. Bai also admitted that he was stressed out trying to balance teaching and research tasks since both are time-consuming and require great effort. The phenomenon of job burnout is not uncommon among young faculty because they have to teach considerably more than senior faculty and they are also required to publish more in order to be promoted (Mohrman et al. 2011).

As to the modes of instruction, a large number of the participants shared that they preferred "learner-centered" to the traditional "teacher-centered" ways of teaching. To them, there are too many lectures in Chinese universities but not enough seminars, which they believed to be more effective in promoting students' active learning and critical thinking. Therefore, many adopted the form of seminar as a part of teaching innovation, aiming to create a different learning environment that encourages interactive and problem-based learning. For example, Dr. Xie, a professor in history who returned in the early 2000s, was the first person who introduced the seminar into her department. "Our department didn't have seminars before I returned, but now more than half of the graduate classes are seminars," she expressed. Dr. Xie emphasized the importance of active learning in university education. To her, the university students were too used to accepting points from teachers to think actively and independently. "They are not naturally passive learners. As long as you create a liberal environment and respect them as active learners, I believe many of them are willing to express their ideas and can do very well in participating in classroom discussions," said Dr. Xie.

Likewise, Dr. Xia, an assistant professor in anthropology, is also a strong advocate of interactive learning and equal teacher-student relationships. He shared that overseas experiences had positive effects on his way of teaching and interacting with students.

I prefer the American way of teacher-student relationship, that is, professors are acting as equal friends with their students rather than acting as parents... I am trying very hard to change the stereotypical professor-student relationship in Chinese universities because I believe no one would like to see a professor with no expression... I use a seminar-like style of teaching and work hard to create a climate of friendship, equality, and lively conversation in the classroom... I find that students actually appreciate this kind of classroom where they feel more comfortable, more relaxed, and more willing to express their ideas. (Interview, December 5, 2011).

Although seminar teaching has been widely used by returnees, it is not always popular among students. Dr. Mei, an assistant professor in management, encountered some resistance from her students when she implemented this form of interactive teaching. She shared,

I taught several years in the US as a TA. So I referred to my previous experience when I started teaching here [in China]. I prepared a pile of handouts and tons of cases for the classroom discussion. I tried to create a flexible learning environment to encourage students to bring their experiences into the classroom and share with each other, but I failed. After the first three classes, I was told by the dean that some students complained about my teaching style and expected me to lecture more rather than have them talk. This is very different from my teaching experience in the US. If you didn't raise questions or facilitate discussions, students would write in the evaluation that "your class is boring because you read from slide to slide, or whatever." ... Here, I made many efforts to try a different teaching style, but apparently it seems that students didn't appreciate my efforts. I made some adjustments, but still I didn't get good feedback. Finally, I gave up and continued to lecture. Guess what? It worked. (Interview, September 23, 2012)

Although student resistance was not a common theme that emerged from the interview data, the case of Dr. Mei, in one aspect, demonstrates some cultural differences between Chinese and Western classrooms, especially in terms of student behaviors. Generally speaking, many Chinese students are relatively quiet and reluctant to communicate in the classroom. They have been accustomed to the passive ways of learning since kindergarten, that is, to sit up straight, obey discipline, and listen attentively (Wu 2009). Despite this, many returnees argued that Chinese students are not born communication-inhibited and that they are not naturally passive learners. Referring to their own learning experiences in the US, the respondents believed that students can be stimulated to engage actively in the class so long as they are involved in a flexible and stimulating atmosphere. There is evidence from the data that most scholars have achieved success by adopting the approach of interactive pedagogy, except in the case of Dr. Mei.

It is worth noting here that the returnees' participation in teaching innovation is further enabled by the recent policies of world-class university building and higher education internationalization in China. They are encouraged to develop new courses and try new teaching methods, especially using English as a medium of instruction. According to Li and Chen (2011), the discussion of internationalization of curriculum at most Chinese universities is linked to the use of English, particularly the introduction of English textbooks and the promotion of English instruction. At most leading universities, the portion of English-based curriculum has accounted for 5–10 % of the entire curricula (Huang 2007). To encourage its faculty to engage in English instruction, the institutions usually provide additional financial support and other incentives or rewards. For instance, for teaching a course in English, a faculty will gain double credit for their teaching hours and also certain cash awards. According to the respondents, the new policies on promoting English-medium teaching created opportunities for them because compared with their domestic colleagues, they have advantages in English language skills and the capability of developing an English-based curriculum. Furthermore, they were given more freedom to design, organize, and teach new courses in their subject areas.

Initially, the returnees were expected to teach English-immersive courses. However, in practice, more than two thirds of them conceded that they changed to bilingual instruction instead because they believed the core of those international courses is not simply to improve students' language proficiency but to raise their

international perspectives and awareness in their areas of study. As Dr. Tang, an assistant professor in history, argued, “This is, after all, not an English language course. I don’t think it is worth it to have students spend ten times more on digesting the original English materials. And many students, I believe, still couldn’t understand the materials well even if they devoted the amount of time.” Therefore, in her world history class, Dr. Tang’s strategy was to choose good Chinese-translation materials for course readings and organize the discussion in English. By contrast, Dr. Wen, a professor in electronic engineering, designed his bilingual course in a contrary way: He prepared all of the reading materials, lecture slides, and homework in English but delivered the course in both Chinese and English. He noted:

I was required to open the course in English as part of the university’s strategy of internationalizing its curriculum. I agree that it’s important to cultivate students’ international perspectives and habits of reading English papers. This is especially important in my field because most of the influential papers are published in English and major Western countries are still the powerhouse of research on electrical circuit. However, as for lectures, I didn’t follow the rule of “only English,” although the university requires me to do so. Sometimes I feel it’s more effective for me to deliver the key points in Chinese rather than in English. And also, I’m a humorous person and I like to teach the class in a fun way, but my humor becomes discounted while I speak in English. So I created a mixed way of instruction that combines both Chinese and English. (Interview, November 2, 2012)

The strategy of adopting bilingual teaching is an alternative to the policy initiatives on English-only instruction. It can be argued that the returnees do not passively accept all university policies. Instead, they are actively engaging in exploring new practices of teaching that is more suitable for the Chinese context. This adjusted way of instruction is being gradually promoted by the universities as a new form of teaching innovation.

In addition to classroom teaching, another commonly mentioned area is student supervision. The participants emphasized the importance of establishing an equal relationship with students. Some even asked their students to call them by their first name instead of their family name as a way of shortening the traditional distances between professors and students. “I’m trying a different way of approaching students. I want to pass the message to them that we are equal and they can challenge my ideas and authorities whenever they can. So why not have them call me by my first name?” said Dr. Zhu, a young professor in chemistry. Similarly, Dr. Yu, a prestigious professor in physics, is also a strong advocate of an equal teacher–student relationship. He stated, “I treat my graduate students as colleagues, and independent researchers, rather than immature learners.” Unlike many senior professors in China who are busy at administrative affairs or big projects and do not have time to supervise students, Dr. Yu was generous with his time in mentoring his students. When asked what made him do so, he answered, “I just followed the same way of what my advisor did with me when I was a doctoral student [in the US].” Dr. Yu attributed a great part of his achievements to the mentoring he received in the US and was willing to pass on what he gained from his US advisor to his Chinese students.

As the above-mentioned data confirm, most of the respondents have a pleasant experience in the area of teaching. They believe that they are empowered in the classroom, and it is where they can find their way through their agency to have direct influences on students, curriculum, and certain structural arrangements as well.

## 6.2.2 *Publications and Transnational Collaboration*

International publications and transnational collaboration are two of the most obvious advantages mentioned by the participating scholars. Most of them admitted that they had advantages publishing in English journals due to the rigorous doctoral training in the US, their English language skills, and familiarity with the norms and standards of the international journals. According to Jonkers and Tijssen (2008), there are positive correlations for the Chinese researchers who worked abroad and their output and international publications. For instance, Dr. Zhai, a junior professor in engineering, illustrated that what distinguished him from his local colleagues was his strong research performance.

I have far more publications than they do. I think this is due to my strong capacity for doing research, better English academic writing skills, and good social networks in the academic circle abroad. All these together make a difference. I have published six or so SCI papers during the past two years, but many people don't have even one paper. The difference is quite obvious. (Interview, November 25, 2011)

To Dr. Zhai, the success in publication is connected to the acquisition of English language skills and scientific writing skills he gained abroad, a byproduct of overseas studies.

The emphasis on publications in peer-reviewed international journals, especially those included in the Thomson ISI's citation indexes, such as the SCI (Science Citation Index), SSCI (Social Science Citation Index), or A&HCI (the Arts and Humanities Citation Index), has permeated China's academe. Both individual academics and universities are under pressure to publish in the so-called SCI or SSCI-orientated journals because the number of publications is used as a major criterion for promotion, university ranking, and funding from the government (Mohrman et al. 2011; Yang and Welch 2012). As a result, universities compete in recruiting overseas scholars who have a large number of publications or who have the potential to publish in top international journals because it is assumed that overseas-trained researchers have a better capacity to publish internationally (Pella and Wang 2013). Moreover, many universities have required their schools to implement their own reward policies to encourage faculty to publish in SCI- or SSCI-indexed journals (Yang and Welch 2012). For example, in some science departments, to get a paper published in a top-tier international journal, the author(s) could be awarded up to 30,000 RMB (\$4800), which is almost equivalent to a half-year salary of a newly hired faculty. In some business schools, the award can be raised to 100,000 RMB (\$16,000) for a top publication.



Admittedly, although such emphasis on international publications has some negative effects (for more details see Chap. 5), it can be seen as beneficial to the Western-trained academics due to their relative adaptability to an international scholarly community. There is evidence in some research that the returnees surpassed their domestic colleagues in both quantity and quality of international publications (Jonkers and Tijssen 2008; Zweig et al. 2004; Welch and Hao 2013). In some fields, like nanotechnology, the returnees lead China's research innovation to keep abreast with the latest international development. Take one nanotechnology research center in my study as an example. It has world-class laboratories, and all of its researchers were trained abroad. The director told me that his center is one of the major contributors of SCI publications for its university including the university's first paper in the journal of *Nature*. In turn, the center received sustainable funding from the university and the government to support its research needs.

In addition to publication proficiency, the returnees also played a key role in linking China to the international academic community (Cai 2012) through transferring their global connections. They not only brought back cutting-edge knowledge, skills, and methodologies, they also took China from its domestic playing field to the international stage. Dr. Xie, a senior professor in history and women studies and whom I mentioned before in this chapter, is a good example. As a historian and a leading feminist scholar in China, Dr. Xie has made great efforts to promote feminist scholarship in history research in China, which has long been dominated by male scholars. She established a new research center on women's history and modern Chinese culture, organized workshops and seminars on women's studies, and invited several world-known feminist scholars to China to give lectures. "Students were impressed by those talks. They said, 'We don't know that history can be studied in such an interesting way; we don't know that a feminist perspective can bring a fresh angle to history studies,'" said Dr. Xie. In addition, she was actively publishing both Chinese and English articles. She expected that her work would be read more widely among Chinese audiences to promote the area of women's history domestically. She also wanted to introduce the latest research from China to the world through her English publications. "While people from China see me as an international scholar, I see myself as a Chinese scholar first, because my work represents parts of China's research level," she stated. Like Dr. Xie, the returnees are serving as mediators who connect China and the international scholarly world through their transnational intellectual networks.

This study finds strong connections between mobility and international research collaborations. Almost half of the respondents shared that they either conducted cooperative projects or cowrote papers with their overseas colleagues. Dr. Jiang, a recent returnee in computer science, is one of the participants who maintain intensive collaborations with colleagues at her former institutions in the US.

So far, most of my work has been with my former colleagues and PhD supervisor in the US. I think it's easier to obtain achievements through such kind of collaborations, since we had been working together for a long time and know each other quite well... Actually, I haven't started to collaborate with my colleagues here. I'm not ready to do that yet. It seems to me

that the collaborative relationship here is quite complicated regarding the amount of work, the allocation of funds, and the interpersonal relations. I think I still need more time to become familiar with the rules here. (Interview, December 15, 2011).

To Dr. Jiang, collaborating with overseas scholars provided an easier way to do research before she found someone who shares a similar research mentality in China. This is echoed by Dr. Yang, a professor in management, who expressed explicitly that it was relatively easier for him to collaborate at international rather than domestic levels. Dr. Yang admitted that his local colleagues were not keen to share their work, let alone collaborate with him. “There’s a lack of collaborative culture. It seems that people like to work behind closed doors. I don’t know why. Sometimes, I feel lonely here, I mean, academically,” he said. Reviewing Dr. Yang’s CV, I noticed that most of his work included collaborations with overseas scholars and some were in highly ranked journals such as SSCI journals. Having SSCI publications gave him credit for progressing and recognition in the academic circles in China. Dr. Yang’s strategy provides a good example of how transnational linkages enable him to circumvent certain limitations and open up a new space for professional development at home.

However, not everyone has maintained the formal transnational ties of conducting joint research or coauthoring papers. In many cases, informal contacts were more common than actual partnerships. As Dr. Zhang, a professor in neurobiology, remarked, “One good thing I have kept from the US is the good friends there. Although we don’t have substantial collaborations, we exchange ideas and information constantly. This helps to keep and sharpen my academic sensibility.” This informal contact allows the returnees to continue maintaining their international networks and the possibility of further research collaborations.

Despite the formal and informal ways, transnational networks, in the forms of coauthoring, conducting joint research, co-organizing workshops, and also maintaining informal contact, are regarded as particular means for knowledge distribution and transformation (Ackers and Gill 2008; Chen and Koyama 2013; Gill 2005; Jonkers and Tijssen 2008). Moreover, the increasing density of the advancement of information and communication of technological innovation has made such connections possible. This suggests that the ongoing transnational activities via academic mobility have changed the role of academics and their engagement with knowledge in the era of globalization (Ackers and Gill 2008) resulting in the promotion of internationalization of higher education.

### ***6.2.3 Promoting Internationalization and Institutional Building***

In addition to teaching and research, there are many ways in which the returned scholars used their transnational gains to promote internationalization and institutional building. Among the participants, one third of them had taken or were taking administrative positions ranging from center directors to office heads to deans.

Several interviewees shared that during their terms one of their best achievements was promoting institutional internationalization through facilitating international communications, boosting staff visiting and student-exchange programs, and establishing collaborative partnerships. For instance, Dr. Qian, an associate professor in the Law School, had been in charge of foreign affairs at the school for 6 years. Under her term, she had successfully promoted international cooperative programs at her school. She shared,

Six years ago, foreign affairs were not really on the agenda at the Law School. However, these days, academic exchanges and international programs have become a key part of the school. We opened international classes, targeting international students. We also established several exchange programs to send students abroad. During the past six years, I was the major person in charge of these programs. Now it's time to hand over them to others. It's hard, you know; it's like giving your baby away. However, I need to do so because this work took too much of my time and energy. I'm a scholar after all. (Interview, October 24, 2012)

According to Dr. Qian, international practices required broader expertise in both language and cultural understanding. Sometimes, misunderstandings may arise due to a lack of cultural awareness and not merely a language issue. "I know some of my colleagues speak good English, but the way they approach and negotiate with foreign partners is quite Chinese. This might cause some misunderstandings or miscommunications," she said. The cultural knowledge and communication skills that Dr. Qian accumulated during her stay abroad placed her in a better position to mediate between local and international communities.

Unlike Dr. Qian, who was in charge of fostering formal collaborative partnerships at the organizational level, Dr. Shen, a professor in literacy, is the one who is more involved at the academic level in promoting internationalization. Under her efforts, Dr. Shen and her colleagues successfully promoted a winter institute program that drew professors from top American universities to give lectures to students in Shanghai during the winter break. The winter program was called *Performing Shanghai*: All of the lectures, seminars, and final performance were organized under this theme, to interpret the city of Shanghai from different perspectives. "This is a big theme and a bold try. I don't think it can be made if you don't have such an international vision and networks. One of my colleague from Yale told me, 'Ah, it's just wonderful! You know, it's incredible,'" Dr. Shen shared proudly. She believed that the students benefited most through this international program because they had lectures with professors from the Ivy League schools such as Harvard and Yale without leaving China. Dr. Shen also mentioned that the increasing visibility of the Chinese academic system in the world has made Chinese universities more attractive potential partners for foreign institutions and professors.

Although Dr. Shen's winter program made a sensation in her field, for many other returnees their engagement in academic exchanges were less formal and usually based on their personal international ties. These activities mainly include inviting former PhD supervisors or colleagues visiting abroad to give lectures, writing recommendation letters for students, or introducing them to someone they know abroad for further studies. These informal academic exchanges and

communications can be considered as important bottom-up forces promoting the internationalization of China's higher education.

Another contribution the returnees made is to introduce new management models to their home system, but this is limited to those who took up leadership positions in organizations such as center directors, chairs, or deans. Among them, those who lead newly established institutes or centers were most likely to promote institutional changes due to less resistance of traditional power relations. This is well illustrated in the case of Dr. Fei who is the director of a new institute on social science research. As a well-known scholar in sociology, Dr. Fei was initially recruited by his institution in the US to take up the position as a dean at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. He was ambitious to exert reforms to the school and lead it in a new direction toward internationalization. However, he soon realized that the resistance of the traditional forces was too strong to implement reforms. Instead of fighting with the longstanding traditions, Dr. Fei proposed to establish a new institute affiliated with the School of Humanities and Social Sciences while at the same time he was given a certain degree of autonomy in terms of internal governance. Fortunately, his proposal was approved by the president, and he was granted great autonomy to use his insights and expertise to promote institutional innovation.

In the new institute, Dr. Fei introduced a series of new policies and practices similar to those in American universities. He hired a full-time secretary to assist with administrative work and recruited a group of young returnees. For him, those who had been socialized in Western research systems were more likely to support him to facilitate institutional innovations toward the system in which they had previously worked. When asked about the uniqueness of his newly established institute, he answered:

We have a flexible work environment, extensive international networks, and a high-level research team. What we don't have is the long-term accumulated local politics. This is a new thing outside of the existing system. It's a new baby and I want to raise the baby in a new academic environment, an environment that promotes academic freedom and autonomy. ... Most of the faculty here are trained overseas, but we also welcome local professors as long as they don't bring in the so-called local politics. ... I know I can't shake the traditional structures overnight, but I hope this new institute can serve as a good example where changes begin and then radiate out. (Interview, September 27, 2012)

Dr. Fei's institute has been promoted as a role model in his university, and has had a positive radiating effect at the university level. However, the role of a returnee in driving institutional change is largely limited by one's status, title, and relationships with the decision makers. For most returnees, especially junior ones, they see organizational change as something that is not within reach.

Despite the fact that some junior returnees consider themselves to have limited power on organizational changes, knowledge transfer was still possible whether in codified or tacit forms or whether involving minor changes within the existing systems or reforming the system through institutional building. The interview data provided some evidence that the returned scholars have made significant impacts on China's academic development in the forms of knowledge transformation,

international collaboration, curriculum changes, and organizational building. In this sense, it can be argued that the returnees do not passively adapt to the existing rules and cultures. Rather, they play an active role in making and remaking the institutional culture through their daily practices.

### 6.3 The Consequence of Mobility on Institutional Innovation

Beyond the individual level, this study finds examples of team mobility, whereby the majority of the research team members are returned academics who work collectively in promoting institutional internationalization and innovation. This is more common in newly established institutes or centers in natural and applied sciences where returnees bring back the Western academic cultures and rules such as the PI system, tenure system, and new management models. This is best manifested in the case of SAZs, a new policy initiative to promote institutional innovations through the team mobility of returnees.

The idea of SAZ is borrowed from “special economic zones,”<sup>4</sup> a Chinese initiative designed to pilot legal reforms within a planned policy framework and serve as a testing ground for innovation. The establishment of SAZs on campus allows some research centers to enjoy a great deal of autonomy to promote organizational innovation and internationalization while at the same time enjoy freedom from the constraints of certain centralized policies and established rules and routines. Innovation Institute (a pseudonym), a recently established multidisciplinary international research institute, is one of the most successful examples of SAZs in China. The institute is led and managed by returnees, and more than 90 % of its faculty were trained outside of the Chinese Mainland. A few of its top scientists are transnational scholars who work full-time at overseas institutions and at the same time undertake a joint appointment at Innovation Institute. This dual appointment across the borders is increasingly common among overseas Chinese as China adopts a policy of diaspora options that allows for transferring knowledge and skills back home without returning permanently (Zweig et al. 2008; Yang and Welch 2010; Cai 2012; Chen and Koyama 2013; Welch and Hao 2013). Because I did not get a chance to interview any of those transnational scholars, further research is needed to explore this increasing phenomenon because more Chinese knowledge diasporas are participating in the development of higher education in China.

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<sup>4</sup>Special economic zones were created after Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms in 1980, which include the coastal cities such as Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen. The special zones are areas that enjoy special economic policies and flexible governmental measures. The policies include special tax incentives for foreign investments, greater independence on international trade activities, and more autonomy from national planning. These new policies allow the special economic zones to utilize a new economic system that is more attractive to doing business than in the rest parts of the Chinese Mainland.

In my research, I interviewed four US-educated returnees: One of them is the executive dean (Dr. Lu), and the other three are PIs (Dr. Guo, Dr. Zheng, and Dr. Bian). Based on the interview data, I found that Innovation Institute is “special” in three major aspects.

First, it adopted a new management model—tenure-track and PI systems—which is similar to most American universities. In contrast to the old policy of the “iron rice bowl” (referring to a permanent job with steady income and benefits), new faculty at Innovation Institute are hired under contract rather than on a permanent basis. The benefit of this new policy is that faculty receive an annual salary three to four times higher than the traditional level; however, at the same time they are under more pressure to publish and secure grants. Dr. Lu, the executive dean of Innovation Institute, described this new policy as “high risk and high return.” She used the metaphor of “china bowl with delicacies” to replace the “iron rice bowl” by saying, “the up side [of delicacies] is that the faculty are paid much more for their work. However, they are running the risk of being kicked out if they fail to get tenure and this is the down side [of a china bowl which breaks easily].” This personnel reform challenges the faculty promotion-and-reward system by the fact that it is based on academic performance rather than seniority or other nonacademic factors.

Another innovative policy is the adoption of a PI system that promotes the idea of flat organization rather than the hierarchical structure of research teams. Within the traditional framework, junior researchers are not allowed to set up their own laboratory and supervise graduate students. They have to join a senior professor’s team to do research until they become associate professors. In contrast, this flat organization allows young researchers an opportunity to fully extend their potential in pursuing original research without being closely supervised by senior researchers. The PI system is beneficial to young scientists because it gives them more freedom and autonomy in pursuing knowledge, thus enabling them to display their talent at an earlier age. Dr. Zheng, a young professor in chemistry, is a beneficiary of this PI system. He explained:

This is both a challenging and rewarding experience. You are no longer part of other people’s teams, being sheltered by some big professors. Instead, you are your own boss and work on your own project. ... This requires you to be an all-around professor, not only a researcher but also an entrepreneur who should know how to manage money, how to network with people, and how to organize projects. This is a quick grow-up process, and it is quite challenging as well. I know many of my colleagues who came to school early in the morning and didn’t leave until 11 pm. It’s common to see people here work more than 12 hours a day. Sometimes, we joked that we work overtime until after 11 pm. (Interview, September 25, 2012)

Dr. Zheng’s comment, in some respects, reflects the changing role of faculty in China; it is more entrepreneurial and performance-based (Beach 2013). It can be argued that the new personnel policies of tenure and PI systems, on the one hand, increase institutional autonomy and efficiency, while on the other hand they enhance the idea of academic capitalism of higher education that emphasizes competition and market-style management of faculty as “research workers” (Kim 2010). This is perhaps one of the most obvious changes in the academic profession in China.

The second characteristic of Innovation Institute is its interdisciplinary nature. It has 14 research centers covering the fields of mathematics, physics, chemistry, bio/life science, and material science. The centers are organized as small research units in order to achieve a high quality of interdisciplinary research with biological and technical science and the effective use of the equipment. This multi-disciplinary organization has created conditions for collaborations across different disciplines and research areas. Dr. Bian, a young professor in applied physics, expressed the point that her favorite part of Innovation Institute is the high level of concentration of scientists from different academic backgrounds. She stated:

This is an international and diverse place. People from different disciplinary backgrounds are working together. We have lots of communications and interactions with each other. I love this open collaborative environment. Sometimes, you get a good idea and someone else can just help you to test it. ... Plus, most of my colleagues are young returnees of my generation. We have many commonalities and good ideas to share. I feel very comfortable working here. (Interview, September 25, 2012)

Dr. Bian's comments were confirmed by the other three participants who also used the words "openness," "diversity," and "collaboration" to describe the academic culture of Innovation Institute. Due to its international feature and autonomous research role inside the university, Innovation Institute has become an attractive hub for young and capable returnees from different fields in science. Their performance has distinguished the institute from other traditional schools and/or departments by the number and quality of publications in top international journals including *Nature*, *Science*, and *Physical Review Letters*.

The third characteristic of Innovation Institute is the promotion of high-quality teaching at an international level. It uses English as the main teaching and working language. Most of the courses are taught in English or are bilingual (both Chinese and English), and they are sometimes taught by distinguished scholars invited from top institutions worldwide. In order to improve students' capabilities and mobility, the institute creates every possibility to send them abroad for short-term studies, or to attend international conferences, either through CSC's (China Scholarship Council)<sup>5</sup> study-abroad programs or its faculty's own international networks. Dr. Zheng's team is an example: All the students had at least 2 weeks' experience staying abroad. "Seeing is believing. We encourage our students to go out and have a first-hand experience of world-class teaching and research," Dr. Zheng explained. To him, this strategy effectively stimulated students' motivations and engagement in international scholarship.

As for student supervision, Innovation Institute borrows the concepts of advisory and thesis committees from American universities to replace the traditional one-on-one doctoral training system. A PhD student in the traditional system is

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<sup>5</sup>The China Scholarship Council (CSC) launched the *State-Sponsored Graduate Scholarship Program for Building High-Level Universities* in 2007. This program, with funds from the central government, aims to send excellent students to study in world-class universities either through joint PhD programs or regular PhD programs (Li and Chen 2011).

bound to one supervisor who is regarded as an authority figure and to challenge him/her is unacceptable (Cao 2008). Traditionally, the student usually takes on the supervisor's research as thesis project and seldom has the chance to interact with other faculty members (here refers particularly to the fields in natural science). Unlike this closed way of doctoral training, the new committee system adopted by the Innovation Institute encourages doctoral students to choose their own research topics and allows them to recruit three to five faculty members to their committee to supervise their thesis projects.

It is worth noting that the design of Innovation Institute's building is based on American models. When I visited the building, I felt as if I were visiting an American campus. I noticed that all the posters on the bulletin boards were written in English. There were also language-learning labs in the building to help students improve their English language skills. What impressed me most were the fancy lounge rooms filled with sofas, coffee machines, refrigerators, and microwaves, on each floor, which is not typical of the traditional Chinese campus at all. All four interviewees from the institute expressed their satisfaction working in such an internationalized environment. As Dr. Guo stated,

There are some moments when I feel I'm in the US. ... This is a young place and everything is new here. We have world-class facilities and research conditions, and most importantly, there's not much accumulated local politics. ... What I like most is the liberal academic culture here. I know many of my colleagues in other departments don't have such freedom and autonomy as I enjoy here. (Interview, September 24, 2012)

Compared with their counterparts in the traditional departments, professors at Innovation Institute have more freedom and autonomy, more funding for research, and more exciting intellectual challenges to pursue. However, at the same time, they are under greater pressures to publish and may identify themselves more as a research employee rather than a traditional university professor.

As a testing ground for institutional initiatives, the model of Innovation Institute provides a snapshot of China's higher education reform toward internationalization through the collective efforts of returning academics. According to Williams et al. (2004), return is "more likely to be innovative where there was critical mass in the level of return" (p. 36). In that sense, SAZs, serving as an enclave of geographical concentration of returnees, can be regarded as a successful example of how a critical mass of returnees acts as social agents for bringing forms of collective action to transform the cultural landscape of the academic environment in China.

The model of SAZs is not limited only to newly established centers and/or institutes. It has been implemented more widely in some proactive departments across Chinese universities as strategies for promoting internationalization. The commonality shared by them is this: There is a high concentration of returnees, and they follow the lead of American institutions from curriculum to new governance structures. These new structures create a space for returnees that enables them to pursue their academic interests at home institutions while escaping from certain constraints of the conventional rules and cultures embedded in the national structures of higher education in China.



One may wonder if the influences originating from major Western countries, such as the US, are necessarily all positive in the direction of China's higher education development (Jonkers 2010). This goes back to the debates of westernization or internationalization in China's higher education. Although it is out of the scope of this study to provide an answer, it is clear that the reforms of SAZs have helped to increase international exchange, research efficiency, and educational qualities in their organizations.

## 6.4 Conclusion

The data presented in this chapter demonstrate that mobility can be an important means of knowledge transfer, which has significant impact on both individual scholars and organizations. At the individual level, a high level of international mobility has noticeable influences on one's personal, cultural, and professional development. To be specific, the returnees acquire significant intellectual human capital including advanced knowledge, specialized skills, bilingual ability, and value-added international working experiences. At the same time, they also gain important intercultural experiences, which make them more open-minded, internationally aware, and more accepting of different values and behaviors. All these gains are regarded as key success factors for the returnees, thus giving them advantages in China's agenda for higher education internationalization and world-class university building.

In terms of institutional engagement, the analysis in this chapter indicates that the returnees bring back not only knowledge and skills, but also philosophies and practices, to improve China's academic environment and its international competitiveness through mobilizing their transnational gains and resources. In this sense, returnees can be viewed as social actors who actively participate in institutional innovations through introducing new ways of teaching, research, and organizational building. It can be argued that the returned scholars are not passively adapting to the existing university rules and structures. Instead, they are strategically drawing upon and using part of their transnational knowledge, skills, and networks to challenge the existing status quo and also to create a new space for their own professional development and higher education innovation in China.

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## Chapter 7

# Concluding Reflections

By looking into the everyday interactions between the returned scholars and the work environment, the previous three data chapters (Chaps. 4–6) discussed the complexities of return decisions, the major challenges and opportunities encountered by the returnees after returning to China, and the impact of mobility on both individual scholars and institutional-building. Together, these chapters illustrate the impact of transnational mobility on returnees and the way these returnees reconstruct professional identities, practices, and a moral compass as they renegotiate the university rules and academic culture in the context of the higher education transition in China.

In concluding this dissertation, I am compelled to revisit the issue of professional remaking—the nature and processes of higher education transition that inform the returned scholars, their work, and identity. Such processes have taken particular forms in China and are likely to be changing dramatically given China’s current investment and global strategy based on knowledge building through the expansion and internationalization of higher education. As a result, it would be helpful to reflect on the dynamics of how globalization and local forces work together in forming the academic lives of returned Chinese professors.

### 7.1 Globalization and the Changing Academic Profession

Perhaps one of the most remarkable changes in China’s higher education is its gradual integration and participation in international academic communities. This is driven by China’s heavy investment in its research and development (R&D) system, policy initiatives of building world-class universities, and other efforts promoting international cooperation and exchanges in higher education. This integration process involves the transfer of institutions from Western research systems by adopting a new management governance based on the notions of

competition, efficiency, cooperation, and quality control (Jonkers 2010). It has resulted in significant changes in the way research is organized, evaluated, and rewarded.

At the institutional level, Chinese universities, once operating behind closed doors without much attention to international peers, now have embraced a larger international sense of competitiveness and excellence (Yang and Welch 2012). One of the most obvious changes is the introduction of a new assessment system to make the academic performance accountable (Yi 2011). Compared with the previous policy of “iron rice bowl,” many universities, particularly the top layer, have replaced life-long employment with contracts, which are initially based on 3- or 5-year terms. They also carry out a credit system to quantify faculty’s work at the end of each academic year. The credits one accumulates are directly linked to cash rewards and promotions (idem 2011). This performance-based evaluation system is expected to create a more fair and transparent academic culture that can lessen some longstanding factors, such as seniority and *guanxi*, in faculty appointments and promotions.

Some other reforms, such as the introduction of competitive project-based funding and the use of internal cost centers within a single organization, have to some extent changed the control of central planning and the work unit system on sub organizational and individual levels (Jonkers 2010). A good example is the case of SAZs, which I have discussed in Chap. 6. The decentralization of internal governance has resulted in great competition between organizations or sub organizations. Increasingly, these organizations compete for resources and highly qualified scholars. Many adopt active recruitment strategies to attract researchers from overseas in order to become more competitive in the international arena.

Despite the recent reforms and efforts toward a more efficient and transparent system, in practice there are still gaps between the official policy for internationalization and actual institutional practices. Instead of providing a more supportive community for academic excellence, the university administration uses the approach of management governance as a new way to assert control and evaluate faculty’s performance primarily on quantified aspects. They overemphasize the importance of accountability—the number of SCI or SSCI publications, the number of world-renowned scholars, and the place of their institutions in the rankings. As Yi (2011) commented, what university administrators are most concerned nowadays is whether they look good rather than whether the research and teaching quality are really good. This “looking good” idea drives universities to pay closer attention to numbers, staged performance, or formalism (Yi 2011) rather than promote a real sense of academic excellence.

The convergence of administrative intervention and the new assessment system has created unprecedented pressures on Chinese academics regarding publications and short-term outcomes. This pushes them away from serious teaching and basic research work because neither of these generates immediate success with publications. This is why China is now the second-largest producer of research articles in terms of numbers, but the share of citations outside the country is still relatively low (Liu 2014). What’s worse, this publication-oriented culture may also result in

various forms of misconduct, corruption, and even suicide in some extreme cases, as I discussed in Chap. 5.

Although this is a hard time for the academic profession, compared with the domestically trained scholars, the returnees are in a relatively better position in terms of professional progress because their foreign degrees give them advantages in China's agenda of world-class university building. There are at least three major opportunities, or rather expectations, for the returned academics. First, they are expected to take China from its domestic playing ground to the international stage through the process of knowledge transfer and intellectual contacts. Second, they are expected to open new courses by using English as a medium of instruction in order to attract more international students and to internationalize the curriculum. The last task is international publications, which is now used as one of the major indicators used to evaluate a faculty's work and a university's performance. This may be the main reason that the universities are keen to attract overseas scholars: They are seen as contributing to measurable research outcomes of their institutions due to their rigorous doctoral training in the West, English language skills, and familiarity of the norms and standards of the international journals.

As I discussed in Chap. 4, most of the returnees have recognized these changes and opportunities to make such a move. The data reveal that the participating researchers' decision to return was much more often motivated by China's rapid economic and social development, policy initiatives on mobilizing return moves, cultural shift within science, and better career opportunities provided by the improved academic system. However, it is worth noting that returnees did not move solely for occupational but also for social and cultural reasons. For some participants, return was nothing more than the need to be closer to their family or society. Whatever the return motivations—career prospect, cultural belongings, or family reasons—this study finds that returnees shared a strong mandate to China's development and the integration of China in the global system.

## 7.2 Internal Differentiations

The high value placed on foreign degrees has shaken up the academic job market in China (Pella and Wang 2013). Most of the elite universities are now targeting returnees, especially those who graduated from the top 100 world-class universities, in their new faculty recruitment. For domestically trained PhDs, the chance for them to work in top-level universities in China is slim, and most of them end up in lower-ranked provincial universities. Moreover, preferential policies toward overseas scholars and international publications have resulted in divisions between the returnees and the locals. The returnees are one group who attempt to introduce new ideas from abroad and to foster a robust intellectual environment, while the locals are left in the other group attempting to maintain the status quo in order to protect their own interests. Some local scholars may feel vulnerable when confronting their foreign-trained colleagues because they are afraid that their authority might be

challenged by these returnees. Others may feel angry that the government policies favor “outsiders,” which undervalues their own degrees (Rosen and Zweig 2005; Zweig 2006). The tension between the two groups does hurt collegiality and also creates obstacles for returnees who want to better integrate into the local academic community.

Despite the divisions between the returnees and the locals, even among the returnees themselves, there is not a single academic profession. The returnees experience the local environment in very different ways. Irrespective of individual diligence, their integration experiences differ with regard to geographical location, academic subject, and work unit (also called *xiao huanjing*, literally “small work environment”). In general, those who returned to Shanghai were more satisfied with their work conditions compared with those from Xi’an, particularly in the aspect of local acceptance and collegiality. As I demonstrated in Chap. 5, almost all of the participants from West B University experienced certain degrees of local resistance and exclusion. This was less obvious in West A University because all of the participants, except for one, were working in SAZs, which served as an enclave of geographical concentration for the returnees. Although the separation of returnees from the locals can protect them from certain local politics, it might create further division between the two groups in the long term.

The situation was better in the three institutions in Shanghai where the respondents seldom raised the issue of local resistance or resentment from their colleagues. This is partly because the returnees had reinvigorated the institutes with the gradual introduction of a large number of overseas trained scholars and more openness of the academic system. Unlike those in Xi’an, very few of the participants from Shanghai (except for the Project of Thousand Talents and Thousand Youth Talents scholars) were recruited under special policies or enjoyed favorable treatments. A possible explanation is that “returnee fever” is cooling down in big cities like Shanghai because most institutions are moving toward equity in faculty recruitment and promotion. Hence, as the universities are becoming more internationalized and accepting more people with foreign experience, the differences, or tensions, between the returnees and the locals will most likely be ironed out. This geographical differences between Shanghai and Xi’an reflect a long-term trend of change toward internationalization in China starting from more advanced coastal areas to relatively less-developed western regions.

Looking across disciplines, this study finds clear disparities among different academic subjects. In general, returnees in the sciences and economics appear to be more satisfied with their work conditions than those in the social science and humanities. They tend to enjoy more financial support, have more transnational collaborations and international publications, and receive higher salaries (some from cash awards from international publications or bonuses from research projects). This finding echoes the overall picture of unbalanced development of disciplines in China. Compared with the social science and humanities, academics in disciplines like the sciences and economics are more likely to obtain substantial support from the government; these subjects are seen as producing “instrumental knowledge” (Yi 2011) that is vital for China’s economic growth in its market

economy. Realizing the importance of knowledge and innovation in a new global economy, China has been rapidly increasing its research and development intensity by investing heavily in science and technology, which accounted for 1.98 % of the GDP in 2012 (Liu 2014). China is now performing a large amount of research and development; it leads the world in certain areas of biological, physical, atmospheric, ocean, and agricultural sciences. This indicates that China not only integrates systematically but also becomes more visible in the international academic community in the areas of science and technology.

In the social science and humanities, in contrast, there is a large gap between Chinese and the predominant Western scholarship. One obvious barrier is due to different ideologies, paradigms, and discourses inherent in these areas as well as higher dependency on linguistic-, social-, and culturally related meanings (Yang 2005). Another barrier is that the Chinese government restricts the development of certain areas of social science research through censorship or limited funding support (Yang 2005; Yi 2011). This pushes researchers to adjust or shift their research interests and agenda to meet the ideological line of the party-state (Yi 2011). Hence, their choices of research topics are often limited to certain “safe” areas with domestic perspectives and references, which might not be of interest to Western scholars.

These disciplinary disparities have a direct effect on the academic lives of returned scholars. Among the participants, returnees from natural science and engineering tended to enjoy a more open and international work environment, tended to orient themselves more to the international communities, and tended to be more able to make full use of their knowledge and skills acquired abroad. Subsequently, they had greater satisfaction with their work environment and productivity in their academic performance. Because academic performance, particularly international publications, is directly connected to cash rewards, reputable titles, or other extra resources, those in the science and economics are more likely to earn a higher salary and get promoted than their counterparts in the social science and humanities.

However, being a returnee in a prioritized discipline is not adequate for successful integration (Yi 2011). A returnee’s reintegration experience is also related to his or her immediate work environment, i.e., whether one’s department (or center) is internationally oriented and whether one’s superior is supportive. Irrespective of academic subjects, those who are working in a highly internationalized environment and have a superior who shares a similar academic vision appear to have a higher level of satisfaction. Among the participants, several had a superior who was also a returned scholar and who was able to create a shelter for his/her junior colleagues to protect them from outside “harassment” (idem 2011). Returnees in such “safe zones” usually claimed to be more likely to concentrate on research and make full use of their knowledge and skills acquired abroad.

Disciplinary characteristics may result in specific types of department climate. In general, the departments of economics, management, material science, computer science, and applied physics enjoy a high level of internationalization. They share the common characteristics of adopting a more liberal internal governance, which



includes changing styles of leadership in management, a new division of academic labor, a high proportion of returnees, and intensive international exchanges. This organizational climate is thought to be more agreeable for returnees who seek a fair and more collegial environment suitable for research innovation.

By contrast, those who are working in a relatively less internationally oriented department, or who have a domestically trained superior who is reluctant to accept new ideas, tend to encounter more difficulties of integration. These departments include education, history, literature, and law, where the longstanding notions of hierarchy, bureaucracy, and seniority still play important roles in governing faculty life. Under such conditions, this study finds that life would be easier for those who had good *guanxi* to their current superior or senior colleagues. However, most returnees did not have strong *guanxi* for support of their career development, and many ended up being disengaged or marginalized from their work environment.

Looking across the nonprofessional factors—geographical locations, disciplines, and small work environment (*xiao huanjing*)—the results of this study suggest that integration is not necessarily institutional but rather specific to particular academic units. One's integration is largely dependent on sub organizational climate and manifests in different ways in different work environments. Therefore, attempts to change organizational behavior and attitudes may be more effective when first directed at a small work unit rather than at the overall institutional level.

### 7.3 Professional Remaking

Insofar as we can see, the convergence of globalization and the continuing state intervention in Chinese higher education have created new conditions for returned scholars. Under such conditions, being a returnee is both an advantage and a challenge. On one hand, the time abroad gives the returned scholars value-added “transnational capital” (including new knowledge, skills, international networks, and intercultural competences) and new identity attributes (including how they see themselves, their work, and the world); these put them in a good position to navigate the local and the international academic communities. On the other hand, the time abroad also prevents returnees from fully integrating into local academic communities. They are usually perceived as an outsider—not quite a foreigner but not quite a Chinese either (Dodwell-Groves 2013). This feeling of disconnection and otherness has led to not only initial difficulties of settling in but also to tensions with their local colleagues. Therefore, for returnees, there are places of innovation as well as frustration because their reintegration experience is not always a linear and beneficial process and is constrained by existing power relations and established structures, especially the longstanding notions of bureaucracy, hierarchy, seniority, and authority.

Reconciling between international and local academic communities, this study finds that the returned scholars harbored allegiance to both cultural frameworks. As part of a global intellectual community, they used international standards to guide

their academic work, and many tended to be more identified with their respective disciplinary globally. However, the returnees were not simply securing the supremacy of one value system. As members of the Chinese academic community, they adjusted their scholarship to meet local needs through transferring and applying knowledge. They also reconstructed what it means to be and become a “Chinese professor” through the dual process of being-made and self-making (Ong 1999). In this sense, the results of this study argue that returned scholars do not passively accept ascribed roles and norms in China’s academia. Instead, they are understood as socially embedded individuals who actively negotiate new educational spaces, identities, and practices through the processes of movement, displacement, and resettlement.

This study challenges the structural approach on return mobility, which argues that returnees are unlikely to be actors of change due to the resilience of power relations and traditional structures (Cassarino 2004). Instead, it brings the notions of agency and change to the fore of analysis by conceptualizing the returnees as active social actors who exert positive impacts on China’s academic community (Jonkers 2010). This is especially true when they obtain influential positions in the system (as evident in the case of some senior returnees in leadership positions) and when they reach a critical mass (as in the case of SAZs and newly established centers).

The evidence provided in Chap. 6 suggests that returnees have played important roles in promoting international interactions through their transnational connections and resources as well as triggered changes in their organization and on the broader system through daily activities. In many cases, they can be regarded as a driving force for change either by introducing new teaching and research practices at the operational level or calling for organizational changes by taking up leadership positions at the institutional level.

However, it is important to note that we cannot overemphasize the role of returnees in China’s higher education internationalization because the field itself is changing. Although the returnees are considered important agents of change in the research culture, their agency cannot be fully exerted without policy and top-level support of promoting internationalization. As Mohrman (2005) noted, it is hard “to determine the path of causation” (p. 222), i.e., which part of change is the achievement of returned scholars, which is generated from universities, and which is imposed by national policies. It is most likely a combination of all factors. Therefore, in discussing agency in the academic work practices, we should also consider the forces and conditions that enable and/or inhibit the exercise of such agency.

As more returned scholars join China’s academic world, along with China’s desire for internationalization, it is undoubtedly true that China’s higher education will become more open and more competitive on the global stage. However, this research does not aim to propagandize the idea that the returnees are necessarily “better” than the local scholars, and no data from the study proves this premise. It aims, however, to capture the flexibility and agency of the returnees as a unique group of talented people who are contributing to China’s higher education with regard to internationalization and transformation.

One may ask why the returned scholars are so interested in devoting themselves to China’s development and educational reformation. One possible explanation is

that the Maoist notions of loyalty, social responsibility, and service to the nation remain strong among Chinese nationals irrespective of whether such individuals remain abroad or not (Hoffman 2006; Welch and Hao 2013). In China, there is a strong state ideology in education and society that promotes feelings of nationalism—a sense of responsibility to the state and to the Chinese nation (Hoffman 2006). This affects the life choices of Chinese people including those who went abroad later. For the participating scholars, seeking knowledge, skills, and life styles in a new country that promotes the values of self-interest and individualism does not mean that they self-identified as being separate from the nation. Indeed, all of the participants held strong sentiments about China, such as supporting the nation, although most returned for the major reason of self-development.

Despite the extensive privatization and marketization in current China, the notions of social responsibility, solidarity, and nationalism are still strong in the era of the market economy. As Hoffman (2006) argued, there is a combination of ideas of self-managed development and expressions of social responsibility and care for the country in the new China. One can drink coffee and use English as a work language while also standing up for their country on the world stage.

## 7.4 Implication and Further Studies

This book presents the result of an in-depth qualitative study on the lived experiences of Chinese returned academics at five research universities in the contexts of internationalization of Chinese higher education. It can be used as a window to understand the changing institutional environment and the academic lives of Chinese scholars in general and returned academics in particular. This book can be helpful to overseas Chinese scholars who are considering their career path and debating whether they should or would want to return to China.

The topic on return academic mobility can also be transited beyond China. An increasing number of countries—such as India, South Korea, South Africa—are focusing on the repatriation of their talents working abroad and some are implementing new programs to attract them back. China is an example of a nation that has succeeded in drawing back its overseas nationals by way of specific policies. The finding of this research highlights that it is relatively easy for a government to publicize a policy for attracting overseas talent, but it is far more difficult to alter the institutional culture to make it not only welcoming to returnees but also conducive to their growth. Therefore, it is important to improve the institutional conditions in order to gain the benefits of this kind of mobility.

From the perspectives of the participating scholars, the creation of an open, fair, and transparent academic climate is more important than the actual level of financial support. To them, the government and universities should pay more attention to cultivating promising young researchers rather than targeting only “shinning stars.” Moreover, the policies should balance the distribution of resources between scholars educated at home and abroad and also between well-established returnees

and new graduates. Therefore, the policy implication of this book is that although academic mobility should continue to be encouraged by specific policies, it is even more important to pay attention to the outcomes of mobility.

The theoretical implication is that this study looks beyond the conventional account of academic mobility based on the notions of brain drain, brain gain, and brain circulation, which is largely informed by the political economy framework on globalization and mobility. In line with the critical scholarship on academic mobility, this study focuses on the lived experiences of the actors involved in the process of movement, displacement, and resettlement. By examining the biographies of the returning scholars, it argues that the whole set of mobility-related experiences—the act of moving abroad, the decisions of returning, settling in and adjusting to the local communities—is not simply a linear process but entwined with a new space of identity negotiation and professional remaking. This study encourages researchers who are interested in transnational mobility to consider the “human face” (Favell et al. 2006)—the ways that people negotiate, interpret, and contest the social world—involved in the process of mobility.

Despite the significance of the study, it also has several limitations. First, it focuses on a limited number of returnees who are working in top-tier research universities in China. Today, increasingly more returnees are working in tier-two or -three universities; their experiences are not included. It might be interesting to compare different groups from various institutions. Moreover, this study does not include the experiences of short-term returnees who have their work base in other countries while at the same time enjoying joint appointments at Chinese institutions. This group within the Chinese knowledge diaspora has become an important part of China’s new generation of returnees whose experiences will provide significant implications in understanding the new form of global academic mobility. Third, it does not contain a comparative study of the factors underlying the differences between the returnees from the US as apposed to other countries, nor does it provide a comparative study between returnees and the local professors. It might be interesting to include the voices from local faculty as well as university administrators in order to more accurately assess the consequences of mobility. Finally, there is a lack of a dedicated analysis on the role of gender in transnational academic mobility in this study. Further research is needed to explore how mobility interacts with gender roles and relations.

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## Appendix A

# Methodology and Methods

This study employed qualitative research methodology in order to examine the everyday experiences of returning academics in China's research universities. The strength of qualitative research, as Marshall and Rossman (2011) commented, is that it explores the complexity of social interactions in daily life and the meanings that participants themselves attribute to the interactions. They listed three major genres of qualitative research: ethnographic approaches (a focus on society and culture), phenomenological approaches (a focus on individual lived experience), and sociolinguistic approaches (a focus on talk and text). Because my purpose was to develop a better understanding of the lived experience of returned scholars and the meaning they make of that experience, I followed the phenomenological genre, primarily, to explore the individual's lived world and the contexts in which they are situated.

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), in qualitative inquiry, "phenomenology is a term that points to an interest in understanding social phenomena from the actors' own perspectives and describing the world as experienced by the subjects, with the assumption that the important reality is what people perceive it to be" (p. 26). In this sense, a qualitative research interview is an ideal approach to obtain people's perspectives and perceptions of their social world (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009; Seidman 2006). As Silverman (2010) noted, interviews provide access to the meanings people make of their experiences and social worlds. Unlike the knowledge produced by positivism, which are regarded as facts to be quantified, the knowledge produced by interviewing is "a conversational relation," which is "intersubjective and social, involving interviewer and interviewee as co-constructors of knowledge" (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, p. 18). From this perspective, the major advantage of the interviewing approach is that it allows researchers to bring their own experience into research, combined with those of the participants, to co-construct the meaning of the qualitative human world.

Because this study aims to explore returnees' perceptions on their overseas experiences, current work environments, and self-evaluation of their potential contributions, I used in-depth interviews as the primary data-collection method to

study subjective experiences directly. Other methods, such as nonparticipatory observation, informal conversation, and documentary analysis, were also used to complement the interview data. The design of the study was guided by the theories and practices of qualitative methodologists (i.e., Marshall and Rossman 2011; Neuman 2006; Silverman 2010) and was also refined by my pilot study with nine returned scholars in two research universities in Shanghai conducted from September 2011 to January 2012. I found the pilot study useful because it not only helped me understand myself as a researcher, it also allowed me to foreshadow research problems and questions before data collection and to reflect on significant issues such as research validity, ethics, and representations when designing this study (Sampson 2004). In what follows, I first introduce the research design, including the selection of sites and participants and methods of data collection. Then I explain the process of data analysis, i.e., how I recorded, managed, analyzed, interpreted, and reported data. Finally, I discuss my reflectivity and position as a researcher in the study.

## Research Design

### *The Selection of Settings* (斜体)

Given my interest in exploring the experiences of academic returnees in higher education sectors in China, I chose those who had worked or obtained their doctorate degrees in the US and are currently working in research universities in specific regions in China. There are three reasons that I focused on US doctoral recipients. First, American higher education has a good reputation in terms of its research capacity, learning facilities, and quality of its education. It has been the most popular destination among China's best students who look for graduate studies overseas. Second, America has a large global doctorate market and a large share of Chinese doctoral students. Among the recent PhD returnees, there are more US doctoral recipients than from any other country.<sup>1</sup> Third, in general, a doctoral degree from an American institution is highly valued in China. This is particularly true in academia because China's best universities now follow the lead of American universities for institutional innovation.

The selection of research universities, 985 member universities to be exact, is because they have benefited from significant funding from the central and local governments to strive for world-class quality (Chen and Li 2013; Hayhoe 2011; Yang and Welch 2012). As discussed in the literature section, a large part of the 985

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<sup>1</sup>Data were retrieved from China News Web site. “*haigui huiguo dajun yuji jiang chao qunian, gaoduan rencai bili xiajiang*” [The number of returnees is expected to surpass last year and the percentage of top level returnees is declining], <http://www.chinanews.com/edu/2013/11-05/5463836.shtml>.

project funding has been used to build new research centers, international networks, and a high concentration of talent. Undoubtedly, these institutions are better financed and in a better position of attracting overseas-educated Chinese talent and making connections with scholars and institutions across the globe. Of course, not all universities are research universities in China, but the norms and practices of these leading institutions filter down through the whole system (Mohrman 2008). Thus, a focus on research universities can better capture the process of internationalization in China's higher education system and the role that the returnees have played, and continue to play, in the process.

Another consideration of selecting sites is that of geography. In the case of China, location is tremendously important to institutions of higher education because China's increasingly regional economic disparities between the highly developed eastern coastal area and the underdeveloped west interior have resulted in significant regional disparities in its higher education system (Hayhoe 2011; Zha 2011). The uneven distribution of locations in which the returnees now work across the country is even more significant (Li 2005). According to the latest *Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Returnees* (Wang and Miao 2013), 70.6 % of the returnees had settled in the cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Jiangsu. Although these data are not specific to academic returnees, to some extent it reflects the general trend. Returnees who are natives of Shanghai, Beijing, or other large cities are unwilling to work in western regions (Li 2005). Those who are originally from inland or western regions would like to take the advantages of special policies towards returnees to get their *hukou* (household registration) settled down in big cities. In China, *hukou* identifies a person as a resident of an area, which is directly related to health care, children's education, and other resources. For many returnees, their choices to go to large cities are not just because of better living conditions or resources but also because of opportunities for their children's education.

Among the existing literature on China's academic returnees, almost all of them focus on large cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, or Guangzhou. Little is known about the experiences of those who returned to the inner western region of China. To capture the diversity of the new returnees, I decided to include those from the western region in my study as well.

Initially, I was overly ambitious in selecting samples from four cities in China, Beijing (northern region), Shanghai (eastern region), Xi'an (western region), and Wuhan (central region) to represent different regions. However, due to financial and time considerations, I narrowed down the study to two cities—Shanghai (in a highly developed eastern region) and Xi'an (in a less-developed western region)—as sites to conduct fieldwork. I selected these two cities because of their significant roles as economic, cultural, and educational centers in the eastern and western regions of China, respectively. Shanghai, China's most cosmopolitan city, plays a major role in attracting returning scholars. It has nine universities within the categories of Project 211, among which 4 are 985 member universities. Xi'an, a regional hub of western China, has the greatest concentration of research universities in the western area with 6 Project 211 member universities including three



985 universities.<sup>2</sup> However, compared with their counterparts in eastern regions, these universities are disadvantaged in terms of available financial support because they rely increasingly on the local economy for resources as well as attracting highly qualified students and scholars. Although the two selected cities do not represent the whole picture, to some extent they reflect a wider range of eastern coastal and western hinterland regions in China. I also assume that such similarities and differences of research universities in the eastern and western areas would allow for regional comparisons.

At the university levels, I selected three 985 Project member universities (out of four) in Shanghai and two 985 universities (out of three) in Xi'an. Due to the small number of 985 universities in both cities and also based on the request of the participants, I did not provide a detailed description of each university in order to avoid the risk of breaching confidentiality. Although each of the above selected universities has its own characteristics, in general they are more alike than different in terms of faculty recruitment policies, strategies of internationalization, and other reform programs, particularly those in the same city. Based on the above considerations, I did not especially distinguish the universities in the same city from one another. However, for presentation purposes, I chose to give each university a pseudonym. I named the three institutions in Shanghai as East A, East B, and East C universities, respectively, and the two in Xi'an as West A and West B universities, respectively.

## *The Selection of Participants* (斜体)

When recruiting participating scholars, I attempted to achieve a balanced distribution of participants in terms of their discipline, age, gender, academic rank, length of stay abroad, and the time of their return to China. The purposive sampling method was used to recruit research participants to ensure the selection of participants in a strategic way that was relevant to my research purpose. Purposive sampling, also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, is a method that relies on the judgment of the researcher when it comes to selecting the participants (Seidman 2006). The goal of this sampling is not to randomly select a representative sample with the intention of making generalization. As Alasuutari (1995, as cited in Silverman 2010) suggested, “generalization” is an inappropriate word for qualitative research; “what can be analyzed instead is how the researcher demonstrates that the analysis relates to things beyond the material at hand ... extrapolation better captures the typical procedure in qualitative research (p. 157).” Therefore, the participants in this study were not selected as a representative

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<sup>2</sup>The selection of universities for the elite 985 Project is not only based on academic standing but also on the issue of balance between regions (Yi 2011). Thus, the membership of 985 Project involves negotiation between the central government, local government, and universities.

sample. Rather, they were chosen to ensure a variety of disciplines as well as on the basis of their profile, and whether or not their background was likely to illuminate the issues of academic mobility and transnational connections.

The participants were recruited through a variety of ways. Online searching was the predominant method I used to obtain a pool of potential participants. For the universities in Shanghai, the updated profiles of faculty members are available on universities' Web sites. By reviewing a faculty profile online, it is easy to obtain detailed information including their full name, field, educational background, publications, achievements, contact information, and other research activities. Although it is time consuming to review the faculty's profiles one by one, it is the most efficient way to identify those who received their doctoral degrees from the US. The information for most of the potential participating scholars in Shanghai was obtained using this approach. Through a general Web site research and maximum-variation sampling method, approximately 22 US doctoral recipients from East A University, 31 from East B University, and 36 from East C University were identified as potential participants based on a wide range of variables, disciplines, age, gender, academic ranks, and work experiences.

Initially, I planned to use the same method to select potential participants in the two universities in Xi'an. But after searching the Web site, I noticed that many departments did not provide detailed profiles of their faculty members other than their names. Even for the departments with linkages to faculty members' profiles, I did not find many overseas PhDs let alone those from the US. This was particularly obvious in West B University which is in a relatively rural area. Therefore, it was difficult for me to obtain a large pool of potential participants through this approach. At that point, I contacted the universities' personnel office for assistance. In West A University, an officer told me that they did introduce more than 30 overseas scholars during the last 3 years under special policies and that most of them are concentrated in three newly established centers. With this information, I searched the Web site of these centers and found that 90 % of the faculty members had received their PhDs outside of China and almost half of them had graduated from American universities. With the consideration of different variables (age, gender, and academic rank), I selected a total of 14 US returnees as potential participants.

I was less lucky in West B University. The director of the personnel office refused my request because he felt strongly that supplying this information conflicted with the faculty's privacy. Failing to get official assistance, I then tried to use social networking to ask my previous schoolmates and friends who are working in the higher education system in China to connect me to anyone they knew at West B University. Finally, I was introduced to a high-level administrator at West B University, and with his assistance I successfully obtained a list of names and contact information of those who had received their doctoral training in the US in the past 5 years. I searched each of them online; some information was available from West B University's Web site and some from Google search. After reading their profiles or CVs, I finally selected 10 out of 13 as the potential participants.

Once the contact information was obtained, an invitation email was sent to potential participating scholars. A total of 89 scholars at universities in Shanghai

were invited by way of email to participate in this research. Thirty-five scholars replied, and 26 agreed to participate in my study. The major reason for rejection was inconvenient schedules, but most expressed an interest in the research. In Xi'an, 7 of 14 potential participating scholars from West A University and 6 of 10 scholars from West B University agreed to participate. Obviously, there was a higher response rate in Xi'an than in Shanghai. To recruit more participants in Xi'an, at the end of each interview I requested the interviewed scholars to introduce me to any of their returnee colleagues who fit the criteria of this research. By using this snowball approach, I recruited three more participants from West A University and one from West B University. In the final study, the sample comprised 35 returnees (plus 9 more from pilot study) in Shanghai and 17 returnees in Xi'an.

Table A.1 provides a detailed distribution of the participants by discipline, academic rank, age range, and return status. For detailed information about each participant, see Appendix B. Among the participating scholars, 37 are male, and 15 are female. As for disciplines, 32 are from natural science and engineering including biology, physics, chemistry, material science, computer science, botanical science, food science, and pharmaceutical sciences whereas 14 are from humanities and social sciences including sociology, education, literature, anthropology, law, and philosophy; and 6 are from economics and management. As to academic ranks, 30 of them are full professors, 8 are associate professors, and 14 are assistant professors. In terms of work experience, 19 returned with several years work experience in the US either as faculty members or in equivalent positions in research institutes or companies; 15 returned with several years' postdoctorate

**Table A.1** Demographic Information of the Participants

Name	Category		
Gender	Male		Female
	37		15
Region	Shanghai		Xi'an
	35		17
Age	30–40	41–50	Older than 50
	26	16	10
Field	Social science and humanities	Natural sciences and engineering	Business and management
	14	32	6
Work experience	Established returnees <sup>1</sup>	Postdocs	PhD graduates <sup>2</sup>
	19	15	18
Rank	Professor	Associate professor	Assistant professor
	30	8	14

*Notes*

<sup>1</sup>“Established returnees” refers to those who worked either as a tenured/tenure-track professor in academia or as a senior director/researcher in industry in the US for at least 5 years.

<sup>2</sup>The category of PhD graduates includes both recent PhD graduates and those who have less than 2 years' work experience in nonacademic sectors in the US.

experience; and 18 returned right after they completed their doctoral training in the US. Approximately 77 % of them had returned in the last 5 years (after 2006), and they ranged in age from early 30s to early 60s. It is worth noting that although I attempted to achieve a balanced distribution of participants in terms of region, gender, and disciplines, there are still much more male participants than females, more from Shanghai than Xi'an, and more in the fields of natural science and engineering. This is particularly obvious in West B University where six out of seven participants are in natural Science and only one of the participants is female.

## *Data Collection* (斜体)

The fieldwork was conducted during the fall semester of 2012 from September to December. I spent 2 months in Shanghai and Xi'an, respectively. At each institute, I lived on campus, which allowed for informal observation and also gave me a better sense of the participants' workplace. According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), informal participant observation is a useful way to get naturalistic context data, which is an essential element of all qualitative studies, because the involvement on site allows the researcher to hear, see, feel, and experience social reality as the participants do. By living on campus, I was able to participate in campus life and talk to students and faculty in order to understand their perspectives on return academic mobility and the process of internationalization on campus.

Another form of data collection is document analysis. I collected and reviewed documents from archival research through government documents, university newsletters, Web sites, newspaper reports, and blogs as supplementary data. These resources provide valuable background and context information that complement and contrast the interview data. As Bowen (2009) argued, one of the advantages of using document analysis is that it can be used as a means of tracking changes and development of events in the larger social context, especially when events can no longer be observed in the setting. Therefore, the document data not only serve as the backdrop of the study, they also situate the discussion in a wider context.

In addition to observations and document analysis, in-depth interview was the primary method I used to collect data. Even though I wanted the research participants to talk as openly as possible of their lived experience, I developed an interview protocol to guide the interview process. The goal was to have the participants reconstruct their experiences within the topic of the study. The interview protocol followed Seidman's (2006) three in-depth interview components: life history, present experiences, and reflection on the meaning of the individual's essential experience with the phenomenon. Specifically, it included three sets of questions around the topics of (1) the trajectories of academic travel, (2) the experiences of teaching and research in home institutions, and (3) self-evaluation of their potential contribution to China's higher education. Once a scholar agreed to participate in the research and the interview time was scheduled, an interview guide and a consent form were sent out by way of email. This approach allows the participants to know

the interview questions and their rights as a participant in advance. Before each interview, I reviewed the participant's profile (including the curriculum vita) and other information available online to get an overall sense of the interviewee.

The interviews were conducted at the places and times most suitable for the participants. Most of the interviews were conducted in the interviewees' offices, but some were conducted in cafés near the campus. At the start of each interview, I briefly introduced the purpose of the study and the strategies to ensure the confidentiality of the data. After that, I asked if the participant had any questions about the research and the consent form if he or she agreed to be interviewed and audio taped. I also informed the participant that he or she would have a chance to review the interview transcript after I transcribed the audio data. This approach of member checking is useful in obtaining the interviewee's trust and in establishing rapport during the conversation.

All interviews, except two, were recorded with the participants' permission. For the two interviews that were not recorded, notes were taken. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, and occasionally the participants used English to explain or emphasize their perspectives. Usually, the interviews lasted 1–2 h. In the cases (5 out of 52 interviews) when I could not finish in 2 h, follow-up interviews were scheduled with the participants.

During the interviews, I used the interview protocol as a guide, but I did not follow the interview questions one by one. Instead, in most cases, I asked the participants four general questions: Why did they return to China? How did they reflect on their teaching and research experience in Chinese universities? How did their current work relate to their overseas experiences? How did they perceive local academic environment? The conversations were relatively open-ended and allowed the participants to formulate their perspectives and responses as part of an interactive process. However, in case where the participants were not talkative, follow-up questions were used to fill in any questions in the protocol that may not have been directly addressed in the participants' narratives of their overseas and return experiences. This open-ended interview strategy allowed the discussion to flow more naturally and for themes to emerge from the conversations rather than from preidentified categories.

The interviews went more smoothly than I had expected. Although some of the participants emphasized before the interview that they could not spend more than 1 h with me, they agreed to continue the conversation when the time ended. Approximately 10 participants invited me to dinner or lunch afterward. They talked more about their personal feelings of return and their perspectives on China's academy. Some also gave me advice on how to conduct this research in a more interesting way as well as some career suggestions about whether or not to return. These informational conversations provided rich complementary data to the research.

All of the audio data were transcribed into Mandarin Chinese, and I alone transcribed and reviewed the data. This was due to my limited resources but also because I wanted to capture more sensitive details with transcription. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), transcription is already a form of interpretivist

construction that decontextualizes the interview from its natural setting. Because the transcripts do not include information about body language, gestures, facial expressions, and setting, I took notes right after each interview, recording in detail whatever I had observed, interviewed, or simply reflected. I separated field notes into two sections—observations and personal reflections. In the observation section, I wrote down the elements that recordings cannot capture such as dress, gestures, and facial expressions of the interviewees as well as the setting characteristics (i.e., what are on the walls and bulletin boards, the decorations, and furniture arrangement) in as much detail as possible. Mason (2002) suggested that gestures and facial expressions are equally valuable resources to access the feelings and thoughts of interviewees. In the reflection section, I wrote down my own impressions, assumptions, and feelings during the interviews and in the field as well as my reflections on the process, problems, and patterns of the study. These field notes help to summarize the information obtained and capture my ongoing preliminary analysis of the data.

## Data Analysis and Presentation

### *Data Analysis* (斜体)

Data analysis began during the process of data collection. I wrote field notes describing what I observed, thought, and reflected immediately after the fieldwork. In addition, I transcribed the audio recording as soon as the interviews were completed. I used pseudonyms to protect the identities of the interview subjects. The transcripts were sent back to the participants by way of email for corrections and comments. This process of note taking and transcribing helped me interpret the information obtained and capture emerging concepts that needed to be investigated. For example, after analyzing the first nine interviews at East A University, I noticed that the characteristics of one's work unit, especially the level of internationalization, directly affects the returnees' reintegration process. In the following interviews and observations, I paid careful attention to work environments (i.e., who is the leader? How many returnees? What are on the walls and bulletin boards? What activities are going on?) and how it related to the individual returnee, which were not considered in the initial design. As the report on empirical social science research by American Educational Research Association (AERA 2006) suggested, "early analyses can help inform subsequent data collection by, for instance, identifying categories of events, actions, or people for further analysis within the ongoing study or for further study" (p. 37). Thus, this initial analysis enabled me to interact with the data and gradually refine my research focus.

After initial analysis, a detailed data analysis was conducted after the completion of all the interviews aided by both manual-coding strategies and a computer-assisted program called Nvivo10. I started with a systematic reorganization of the

field data (interview transcripts, field notes, related documents, and memos) by logging data according to date, place, institutions, and people to make them retrievable. I then printed out all the field data for reading and manual coding.

It is worth noting here that all of the raw text data were in Mandarin Chinese. I did not translate the text from Chinese to English because the participants' perspectives might possibly be distorted by translation. This choice created methodological challenges in the study. The dilemma was that the use of Chinese could capture the richness of their life stories and deepen the comprehension of issues; however, in the process of converting and transforming data into English research text, inevitably a part of the meaning and cultural flavor would be lost in translation. Therefore, I decided to use the Chinese transcripts for data analysis and only translated the quotations for the purpose of reporting.

Simply reading the data was an important step in the analytic process. I started with the strategy of "open coding," a process through which "concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in the data" (Strauss and Corbin 1998, p. 101). I read and re-read the data by marking sections to identify important statements and jotted tentative ideas for codes, topics, and noticeable patterns. According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), coding data is tough intellectual work that involves "the formal representation of analytic thinking" (p. 212). They suggested that codes can come from various sources: the literature review, actual words from the data, and insights of the researcher. In their guidelines for qualitative data analysis, Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003) listed two ways of coding or categorizing data: preset categories (using preconceived categories from the literature review to analyze data) and emergent categories (allowing the code or categories to emerge from the raw data). In the manual coding process, I combined them by starting with preset categories to code the raw data and then added other categories as new themes emerged. For example, the codes named "transnational capital," "international collaboration," and "cultural belonging" are preset categories from the literature review and initial impression of the data. Those named "dilemma of global or local," "paradox of power and change," "invisible college," and "special zones" are codes that emerged from the raw data. As coding progressed, some code groups or patterns emerged, and I wrote a memo to record main themes, subclusters, or larger clusters that came to mind. After categorizing the raw data, 235 preliminary codes emerged in the codebook.

I then followed the strategy of "axial coding" to code subcategories and sort them into groups, with the aid of the memo, until I identified all relevant themes. Through this process, I focused more on the initial coded themes than on the data (Neuman 2006). For instance, the codes named "cultural belonging," "higher social status," and "family reason" were grouped under the larger code such as "personal consideration;" the codes "attractive job offer," "better career capacity," and "special policy" were grouped under "professional consideration." Both of the larger codes—"personal consideration" and "professional consideration"—were put under the category of "motivation of returning." After this step, the preliminary codes were revised and combined into 52 categories.

After the stage of manual coding, I computerized the work with the assistance of the qualitative analysis software Nvivo10. Nvivo was chosen because it is able to work with Mandarin Chinese, and it is relatively simple to use. It is possible to import documents directly from a word-processing package and code them easily on screen. It is also possible to write memos and link these memos to relevant pieces of text in different documents. In addition, it allows aggregating all of the coding references from the child codes (nodes) at the parent code (node). Compared with manual coding, the major advantage of using data-analysis software is that it helps to carry out administrative tasks of organizing and retrieving data in a more efficient way. It is easier and quicker to sort, file, search, and retrieve data than to manually cut and paste different pieces of text onto pieces of paper. With the assistance of Nvivo, I reorganized the data around categories and themes across the interviews and further refined the codes into 45 categories.

I then reviewed the corpus of reorganized data to compare the similarities or differences across data, to discern the relationships between and within categories, and to discover potential patterns. As Marshall and Rossman (2011) put it, this is the most challenging stage of data analysis, in which the researcher engages in “identifying salient themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief that link people and settings together” (p. 214). This is also one of the most crucial stages of qualitative interviewing study because “the reason an interviewer spends so much time talking to participants is to find out what *their* experience is and the meaning *they* make of it, and then to make connections among the experiences of people who share the same structure” (Seidman 2006, p. 128). Through this process, three large themes emerged: negotiating the process of return, structural constraints of integration, and agencies of changes. These themes provide an adequate framework for presenting the findings in detail in the three data chapters.

Moving to the stage of data interpretation, I followed the *Standards for Reporting on Empirical Social Research in AERA Publications* (2006) “to review the corpus of available data to locate all relevant instances to support the claims, to search for confirming and disconfirming evidence, and to try out alternative interpretations” (p. 38). During this process, I kept asking myself what I had learned from the field data. What were the connections among the experiences of people? What confirmed my previous instincts? What surprises have there been? How are the interviews consistent with the literature? What are the gaps? In answering these questions, I contextualized the findings in a larger social context instead of simply listing the major findings. This process of interpretation, as Patton (2002) explained, “means attaching significance to what was found, making sense of the findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings, and otherwise imposing order” (p. 480). Therefore, interpretation was not just reformulating the subject’s self-understanding, but, more importantly, reflecting that understanding to larger social phenomenon.

In doing so, I followed what Fine and Weis (2005) called “compositional studies” in educational research “in which analyses of public and private institutions, groups, and lives are lodged in relation to key social and economic structure” (p. 65). As they explained, the negotiation and interpretation of the social world are



constrained and enabled by specific historic movements and social, cultural, and economic conditions. Thus, people's experiences cannot be fully understood without situating and relating them to deeper structural formations. Informed by Fine and Weis's "theory of method," I drew possible explanatory connections between the narrative stories of the participants (returned scholars) and a broader range of global and local forces that shape their everyday life.

The final issue focuses on how to link the findings from this research to other bodies of literature and the audience at large. Because the purpose of qualitative research is not to find a typical individual, or try to arrive at a generalizable truth, this study does not make any claims to the generalization of findings to a specified larger population. As a qualitative researcher, I am more interested in the applicability of the findings "based on how the nature and processes involved in experiences generalize" (Fossey et al. 2002, p. 730). Therefore, I wrote detailed descriptions of the research settings, findings, and interpretations in the final report, also termed "thick description" (Marshall and Rossman 2011, p. 11), in order to have the audience determine the applicability of the findings to their own settings.

## ***Reliability and Validity Issues (斜体)***

Debate on the concepts of reliability and validity in qualitative research has been undertaken for many years. Some researchers refused to use these terms in qualitative research because they argued that there is no single truth in interpreting the world, and different researchers may get different results. They suggested we use terms such as "trustworthiness," "authenticity," or "quality" of data instead (Neuman 2006; Creswell 2012). According to Kirk and Miller (1986), validity in qualitative research is a "question of whether the researcher sees what he or she thinks he or she sees" (p. 21). Neuman (2006) proposed a similar approach, which he referred to as "authenticity." For him, authenticity "means giving a fair, honest, and balanced account of social life from the viewpoint of someone who lives it every day" (p. 197). To ensure the authenticity of the data, I employed several strategies to make sure that the data-analysis process was carried out in a thorough and transparent manner.

First, data triangulation was employed by using more than one data source to assess the credibility, dependability, and transferability of the result (Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2008). As Bowen (2009) put it, triangulation helps the researcher corroborate findings across different data sources and thus reduce the potential biases that can exist in a single method or a single source. In this study, data were collected from multiple sources. Although a majority of the field data were obtained from the interviews, other sources—including scholars' CV, publications, blogs, news reports, and policy documents—were collected as a complementary data in support of methodological triangulation.

Second, member checking was employed to enhance internal validity. After transcribing the audio recording, I sent the transcripts to the participants by way of

email and had them check whether I had recorded what they had said or meant in the interviews. Approximately half of the participants sent back feedback with typos and misunderstandings corrected, and some made comments to clarify their points. This review process largely increased the internal validity of the data. However, three participants seemed uneasy about what they said during the interviews and asked me to cross out some of their harsh comments on certain sensitive topics, which I found especially important to reveal problems in China's academic community. Facing this dilemma, I restated in the email that all information was confidential and what they said was entirely anonymous. Finally, they allowed me to use the entire interview with the condition of some light editing.

Third, peer examination was used to provide an external check of the research process. I asked a colleague from China who is an expert in Chinese higher education to comment on the findings. I also had her check the interview quotations that I translated from Chinese to English to make sure that I did not distort the participants' perspectives through translation.

Finally, the researcher's own reflexivity is crucial because his or her potential bias and inclination may greatly influence the accuracy of the qualitative research outcomes (Marshall and Rossman 2011). Although no data are totally value free, it is important for the researcher to make an effort to maintain the level of objectivity in the study. In the last section of this chapter, I discuss in detail my position and reflexivity in the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

## *Ethical Issues* (糸斗本)

In qualitative research, ethical concerns are woven through the entire process (Ely et al. 2002). In their book, *Doing Qualitative Research: Circles within Circles*, Ely et al. (2002) stated:

Qualitative research is an ethical endeavor. ... striving to be faithful to another's viewpoint is striving to be ethical. Striving to maintain confidentiality is striving to be ethical. Striving to be trustworthy is striving to be ethical. It is impossible to confine ethical considerations to a chapter or a section. Actually, they are present from the beginning and are woven throughout every step of the methodology. (p. 218)

As stated in the quotation, it is impossible to discuss ethical issues in a section because it waves through every aspect of the research. Here, I want to focus on three most frequently raised concerns—consent, confidentiality, and trust (Ryen 2011)—in the research.

“Consent,” also “informed consent,” means that research subjects have the right to know that they are being studied, the right to be informed about the purpose of the research, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time (Ryen 2011). Although oral consent was acceptable while doing research in China, I followed the Western research ethical guidelines and had all of the participants sign an informed consent form approved by the Social Sciences Institutional Review Board (SSIRB).

Before starting each interview, I explicitly explained the purpose of the study, method of data collection, and further use of the data. I gave each research participant a consent form that outlined any possible risks, benefits, and responsibilities as detailed as possible. The interview was only recorded with the participant's consent. Moreover, I respected the interviewees' decisions of accepting or refusing invitations or withdrawing from the study. In addition, I valued their responses and respected if they refused to answer any question.

Confidentiality, the second concern, is founded on the principle of respect for anonymity. That is, the researchers have the obligation to protect the research subjects' identity; the identifiable information about participants will not be disclosed without permission. To protect confidentiality, I presented confidentiality agreements at the beginning of the interviews and clearly stated that all identifying characteristics would be changed. After each interview, I transcribed the audio recording by myself and erased the record after the completion of the transcript. All the names (i.e., people's name, universities' name) were replaced with pseudonyms. In data presentation, I also considered carefully whether the specific quotations I presented could lead to the risk of breaching confidentiality.

Trust, the third concern, is the key to good relations between the researcher and the participants and also applies to the report for presenting the work as trustworthy (Ryen 2011). According to Ely et al. (2002), being trustworthy means "that the processes of the research are carried out fairly, that the products represent as closely as possible the experiences of the people who are studied" (p. 93). During the course of the research, I made serious efforts to follow the ethical principles of how data were collected, analyzed, and presented. As I noted in the preceding section, I adopted several strategies of data triangulation, member checking, and peer review to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

## *Reflexivity* (无需斜体)

As Ely et al. (2002) asserted, "doing qualitative research is by nature a reflective and recursive process." (p. 179). Because the researcher is the primary instrument of qualitative research (Marshall and Rossman 2011), his or her reflexivity is essential to the methodology. This is particularly important to qualitative interviewing study because interview knowledge is produced socially through the interaction of interviewer and interviewees (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Seidman (2006) understood interviewing as both a research methodology and a social relationship. He argued that the interviewing relationship "is a reflection of the personalities of the participant and the interviewer and the ways they interact. The relationship is also a reflection of the purpose, structure, and method of in-depth interviewing" (p. 95). In this sense, the researcher is not an objective data collector who maintains a stance of "empathic neutrality" (Patton 2002, p. 49). Instead, he or she is part of the meaning-making process and constructs the interviewing knowledge together with the participants.

Because the quality of interviewing often depends exclusively on the relationship between interviewer and interviewees, the researcher is required to be skillful enough to manage the distance between participants, that is, to be close enough but not too close. Facing this challenge, Seidman (2006) suggested creating an “I–thou” relationship (p. 95), a concept that acknowledges the role of the interviewer as part of the conversation and at the same time reminds the researcher to keep enough distance to allow participants to fashion their own responses independently.

In this regard, my in-between status as an international student from the Chinese Mainland completing a PhD at a US research university, with plans to return to China, creates an ethnographic positioning as both an insider and an outsider in the study. The common experiences of movement, displacement, and considerations of returning and being at “home” made it easier for me to access potential participants and build rapport. For example, one participant stated in the email that “I usually don’t participate in such kind of research, but when I read your CV, I decided to participate and support your study. I had gone through your stage and I know how hard it is to pursue a PhD in the US.” Moreover, during the conversations, several participants occasionally used expressions like “You must have the same feeling, right?” and “I bet you know what I mean.” They regarded me as part of them (returnees) and were willing to be open to my questions as if we share the same “membership” (Miller and Glassner 2011). In this sense, my potential role as a “returnee” enabled me to gain trust from the participants and delve deeply into their lived world.

However, I did not perceive my role as representing their culture or developing assumptions of understanding. Instead, I was aware of my position as a qualitative researcher and opened to learn their stories and interpretations of what it means to be a returning scholar in China’s academia. Furthermore, my outsider status as a PhD student who has never worked in academia in China allowed me to keep the position of not “too close.”

This outsider status can be a benefit, but it can also be a challenge when a student interviews professors, especially those with prestigious titles or in powerful positions. To “interview up,” as discussed by qualitative methodologists (Desmond 2004; Hertz and Imber 1995), is to conduct “elite interviews,” a concept that refers to interviewing people who are in positions of power and authority in the interview space. It has been argued that it is more difficult to interview elite groups than other groups because they are more sophisticated in managing the interview processes, are better equipped in protecting themselves, and are better positioned to manipulate research results (Desmond 2004). Reflecting on my interview experience, I met the expected problems of being disempowered, more or less, in “controlling” the interviews, because I felt that the interviewees were sometimes either too expressive to take charge of the process or too cautious to express their viewpoints. Despite these pressures and complexities relative to “researching up,” I learned a great deal regarding how to conduct elite interviews and how to deal with power relations in the interview space. I also obtained valuable information and inspiration from professors’ responses toward the broader issues of higher education globalization, the circulation of academics, and talent policies in China. Some participants

discussed the design and outline of my study with me. I was even given personal advice of career choice after graduation including the issue of whether or not to return.

It was fascinating for me to find that someone else's experiences, in some aspects, had paralleled my own. However, at the same time, the question of trustworthiness kept bothering me. Because I was researching a topic that was close to me, I continued asking myself if I had dealt with my subjectivity in a way that lead to a trustworthy project. I found Reason's (1988) writing helpful in thinking about subjectivity in the course of research. He described critical subjectivity as "... a quality of awareness in which we do not suppress our primary experience; nor do we allow ourselves to be swept away and overwhelmed by it; rather we raise it to consciousness and use it as part of the inquiry process" (as cited in Maxwell 2012, p. 45). Through reading and writing reflection memos, I began to regard my subjectivity as an asset rather than a weakness that reduces the trustworthiness. My own experiences of living and studying in more than two countries, along with my training in comparative and international education, have provided me with invaluable insights as an insider-outsider researcher and the abilities to understand and interpret the participants' perspectives, or subjective experiences, of transnational mobility in the context of higher education internationalization.

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## Appendix B

### Characteristics of the Qualitative Sample

No.	Pseudonym	University	Age (range)	Gender	Discipline	Academic rank	Position in the US	Years (range) of stay abroad
1	Dr. Xie	East A Univ.	51–60	F	History	Prof.	Assoc. Prof.	16–20
2	Dr. Zhang	East A Univ.	41–50	M	Neuroscience	Prof.	Senior director	11–15
3	Dr. Shen	East A Univ.	51–60	F	Literature	Prof.	Assoc. Prof.	11–15
4	Dr. Xiang	East A Univ.	35–40	M	Education	Assoc.	Assist. Prof.	11–15
5	Dr. Xia	East A Univ.	35–40	M	Anthropology	Assist.	PhD graduate	6–10
6	Dr. Li	East A Univ.	51–60	M	History	Prof.	Adjunct Prof.	11–15
7	Dr. Tang	East A Univ.	35–40	F	History	Assist.	PhD graduate	6–10
8	Dr. Meng	East A Univ.	Over 60	M	Engineering	Prof.	Senior director	11–15
9	Dr. Fan	East A Univ.	35–40	M	Finance	Assoc.	Postdoc	6–10
10	Dr. Yan	East A Univ.	41–50	M	Biochemistry	Prof.	Senior director	16–20
11	Dr. Sun	East B Univ.	41–50	M	Philosophy	Prof.	Assoc.	11–15
12	Dr. Hou	East B Univ.	35–40	F	Chemistry	Assist.	PhD graduate	6–10
13	Dr. Gao	East B Univ.	41–50	M	Material science	Prof.	Postdoc	11–15
14	Dr. Yu	East B Univ.	41–50	M	Physics	Prof.	Postdoc	8–10
15	Dr. Qian	East B Univ.	41–50	F	Law	Assoc.	PhD graduate	Less than 6

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No.	Pseudonym	University	Age (range)	Gender	Discipline	Academic rank	Position in the US	Years (range) of stay abroad
16	Dr. Bo	East B Univ.	Under 35	F	Economics	Assoc.	PhD graduate	Less than 6
17	Dr. Liu	East B Univ.	35–40	M	International relations	Assist.	PhD graduate	6–10
18	Dr. Tang	East B Univ.	35–40	M	Management	Assist.	PhD graduate	6–10
19	Dr. Pan	East B Univ.	35–40	F	Sociology	Assist.	PhD graduate	11–15
20	Dr. Peng	East B Univ.	Under 35	M	Physics	Prof.	Postdoc	6–10
21	Dr. Bai	East B Univ.	Under 35	M	Environmental science	Assoc.	Postdoc	6–10
22	Dr. Hao	East B Univ.	35–40	M	Biology	Prof.	Postdoc	6–10
23	Dr. Wang	East C Univ.	35–40	M	Economics	Assoc.	PhD graduate	6–10
24	Dr. Zhai	East C Univ.	Under 35	M	Engineering	Assist.	PhD graduate	Less than 5
25	Dr. Hu	East C Univ.	Under 35	M	Computer science	Assoc.	Postdoc	6–10
26	Dr. Wu	East C Univ.	51–60	M	Computer science	Prof.	Assoc. Prof.	More than 20
27	Dr. Wen	East C Univ.	41–50	M	Electronic engineering	Prof.	Senior director	More than 20
28	Dr. Tu	East C Univ.	35–40	M	Nuclear science	Assist.	PhD graduate	6–10
29	Dr. Kong	East C Univ.	51–60	M	Physics	Prof.	Prof.	More than 20
30	Dr. Zhou	East C Univ.	35–40	F	Biochemistry	Assist.	Postdoc	6–10
31	Dr. Dai	East C Univ.	51–60	M	Computer science	Prof.	Assoc. Prof.	More than 20
32	Dr. Cheng	East C Univ.	41–50	F	Pharmaceutical sciences	Prof.	Senior director	6–10
33	Dr. Chen	East C Univ.	51–60	M	Chemistry	Prof.	Prof.	15–20
34	Dr. Jiang	East C Univ.	Under 35	F	Computer science	Assist.	Assist. Prof.	Less than 6
35	Dr. Fen	East C Univ.	41–50	M	Biomedical science	Prof.	Assist. Prof.	6–10
36	Dr. Fei	West A Univ.	51–60	M	Sociology	Prof.	Prof.	11–15
37	Dr. Bian	West A Univ.	Under 35	F	Chemistry	Prof.	PhD graduate	6–10
38	Dr. Liang	West A Univ.	Under 35	M	Sociology	Assist.	PhD graduate	6–10

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No.	Pseudonym	University	Age (range)	Gender	Discipline	Academic rank	Position in the US	Years (range) of stay abroad
39	Dr. Zha	West A Univ.	41–50	F	Sociology	Assist.	PhD graduate	6–10
40	Dr. Mei	West A Univ.	Under 35	F	Management	Assist.	PhD graduate	6–10
41	Dr. Huang	West A Univ.	35–40	F	Sociology	Assist.	PhD graduate	6–10
42	Dr. Zhu	West A Univ.	Under 35	M	Material science	Prof.	Postdoc	6–10
43	Dr. Han	West A Univ.	41–50	M	Material science	Prof.	Senior director	6–10
44	Dr. Guo	West A Univ.	Under 35	M	Physics	Prof.	Postdoc	6–10
45	Dr. Zheng	West A Univ.	Under 35	M	Material science	Prof.	PhD graduate	6–10
46	Dr. Fu	West B Univ.	41–50	M	Biology	Prof.	Postdoc	6–10
47	Dr. Lin	West B Univ.	41–50	M	Biology	Prof.	Postdoc	6–10
48	Dr. Jin	West B Univ.	41–50	M	Biology	Prof.	Postdoc	6–10
49	Dr. Cao	West B Univ.	41–50	M	Biology	Prof.	Postdoc	6–10
50	Dr. Ma	West B Univ.	Under 35	M	Food science	Prof.	PhD graduate	Less than 6
51	Dr. Yang	West B Univ.	51–60	M	Economics	Prof.	PhD graduate	11–15
52	Dr. Mao	West B Univ.	Under 35	F	Biology	Assoc.	Postdoc	6–10