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]).[1] 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.[2]

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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[1]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/.

[2]For details, see "A returnee from Zhejiang University committed suicide" [zheda yi haigui boshi zisha]" (October 23, 2009), Retrieved from http://scitech.people.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 across 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)[3] and by introducing the

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[3]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)[4] style underlying the slogan of "building world-class universities"

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[4]*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 it's 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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