Exploring the Perceptions and Experiences of Returnee Academics' Re-adaptation and Professional Identity (Re-)construction at an Application-oriented University in a Second-tier City in China
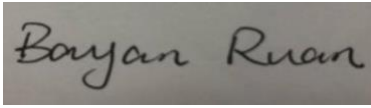
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Declaration

The work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for a degree in any other higher education institution. To my best knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signed: Boyan Ruan   Date: 15 January, 2024

Abstract

As more Chinese individuals choose to pursue their studies abroad, a significant number then return to China to work for Chinese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The re-adaptation of these returnee academics has increasingly garnered research attention. Such teachers' professional identity (TPI) (re-)construction plays a crucial role in their overall satisfaction and the contributions they make to their respective fields. However, the existing research literature focuses mainly on returnee academics based in top universities and first-tier cities in China, with only a limited focus on exploring their TPI reconstruction. To address this gap, this present study investigates the re-adaptation and professional identity (re-)construction of 12 returnee academics in an application-oriented university in a second-tier city in China.

The research adopts case study as the design frame, and utilizes a conceptual theoretical framework which draws on elements of Wenger's Community of Practice theory (CoPT), Bourdieu's Social Practice theory (SPT), and Moscovici's Social Cognition Representation theory (SCRT).

The findings indicate that the returnee academics' separationalist approach to acculturation while abroad, coupled with their decision to work in second-tier cities upon returning to China, may have positive influences on the (re-)construction of their TPI. Such teachers are also shown to exhibit a higher sense of professional self-esteem. However, the findings also suggest that the institutional platform and the macro environment of Chinese HEIs, may exert negative influences on their sense of (re-)constructed identity. The study thus offers several potentially valuable insights for prospective returnees aiming to pursue careers in Chinese HEIs, enabling them to anticipate and proactively prepare for potential challenges. The study also recommends that policymakers implement measures to facilitate the seamless re-adaptation of returnee academics and in so doing strengthen the overall development of Chinese HEIs.

Key words: Chinese Higher Education Institutions (Chinese HEIs), returnee academics, teachers' professional identity (TPI), acculturation overseas, re-adaptation

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I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all the returnee academics who participated in my interviews, for sharing their experiences of studying abroad and re-adapting to life back in China's HEIs. Their participation was crucial to the success of my research.

Reflecting on the past eight years of my doctoral journey, I truly experienced the extremes of life and death. The pain of losing my most beloved mother from a car accident still lingers, and the psychological toll of this sudden loss has been immense. I have endured a great deal on a personal level which cannot be expressed in words...

I also faced the challenges of pregnancy and childbirth soon after, which significantly impacted my physical well-being and further delayed my thesis progress. The arrival of my son, Xiaolongbao, brought a new dimension to my life, and I experienced the profound, selfless love of entering motherhood. However, the period following his birth was far from easy for me. As I was committed to breastfeeding, I endured countless sleepless nights and struggled with issues such as blocked milk ducts and mastitis. Balancing family and work has never been easy, so I am very grateful for the understanding from my family's unconditional support, which allowed me to readjust and continue to complete my thesis.

No matter how challenging the process was, I have persevered and never thought of giving up. And I did it! I'm sure my mom must also be proud of me and happy to see this!

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Key Acronyms

HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
TPI	Teacher's Professional Identity
MOE	Ministry of Education
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
CROPs	Chinese Returned Overseas Professionals
RQ(s)	Research Question(s)
IQ(s)	Interview Question(s)
CoPT	Wengner's Community of Practice Theory
SPT	Bourdieu's Social Practice Theory
SCRT	Moscovoci's Social Cognition Representation Theory
LAH	Liberal Arts and Humanities
SE	Science and Engineering
CSC	China Scholarship Council
CPC	Communist Party of China
TA	Teaching Assistant
RA	Researching Assistant
BA	Bachelor of Arts
MA	Master of Arts
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
UNNC	University of Nottingham Ningbo China

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Chapter 1 Setting the Research in Context

Introduction

1.1 My Motivation for Conducting this Research

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Introduction

The primary purpose of this opening chapter is to establish the research context and provide some general background for the study. I begin by sharing my personal motivation for conducting this research and why I chose this particular topic. Next, I set my research within a wider context and outline the specific research questions I seek to address. Finally, I close the chapter by providing a brief summary of what readers can expect to find in the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

1.1 My Motivation for Conducting this Research

The impetus behind this research originates from my personal journey as a "haigui" (returnee) academic in a Chinese university. I completed my BA through a 2+2 program at UNNC, spending the first two years at the Ningbo campus and the latter two on the UK campus. Subsequently, I pursued my Master's degree at Warwick University in the UK. After graduating, I returned to my hometown as required by my parents and began working at the current university. My experiences have been shaped by the challenges of adapting to the local education system and the intricate process of crafting my professional identity as a university academic. Having navigated the complexities of transitioning from international academic environments to the distinct landscape of Chinese higher education, I am driven to explore and understand the dynamics that underpin the professional landscape for academics like myself.

My aim is to explore the adaptability and potential challenges faced by returnee academics in the Chinese academic environment, seeking to understand if they encounter similar issues and struggles during re-

adaptation. This exploration forms the foundational premise of my research, driving my inquiry into the current research topic.

My overarching goal is to gain a comprehensive understanding of this process and to identify factors that influence returnee academics' re-adaptation and professional identity (re-)construction. My hope is that my research will provide valuable insights for future returnee academics considering full-time positions in China's HEIs and in so doing make a meaningful contribution to the advancement of China's HEIs.

1.2 The Contextual Background to this Study

Currently undergoing rapid socioeconomic transformation, China is witnessing the emergence of a mass higher education system, which is rapidly growing to become one of the largest in the world. With a recent surge in student enrollments, China's integration into the global higher education community is becoming increasingly important, prompting the need for a comprehensive understanding of its educational system.

By collecting information from various sources, including educational statistics, policy texts, government reports, and scholarly literature, many studies have reviewed China's policies and reforms on HEIs, and these major reforms can overall be subsumed within four overarching stages, involving decentralization, stratification, massification, and marketization (Chen and Zhang, 2018; Fleisher, Li and Zhao, 2010; Knight, Deng and Li, 2017; Li and Xing, 2010; Mok and Marginson, 2021; Xiong, Yang and Shen, 2022; Zhu and Lou, 2011). For example, during the first decentralization stage from 1978 to 1998, the government aimed to reduce central government control over HEIs and grant them greater autonomy in key areas. The implementation of Project "211" in 1995 and Project "985" in 1998 aimed to identify specific HEIs and disciplines for further development by providing additional funding support. During the second stratification stage from 1999 to 2009, the Chinese government undertook a significant expansion of university enrollment to stimulate domestic demand and address employment concerns; yet, it is in this second stage concerns arose about potential compromises on educational

quality and the urgent need for robust quality assurance measures within this rapidly expanding system (Trow, 1973; 2006). Hence, the third massification stage spanning from 2010 to 2018 witnessed a heightened focus on quality assurance and improvement in response to the expanding university enrollment. We are currently experiencing the fourth marketization stage (2019 -2035) which aims to achieve substantial modernization of the education system and enhance the competitiveness of higher education. As part of this stage, initiatives will be undertaken to address regional inequality and promote the development of higher education in central and western areas of the country.

The expansion of HEIs in China has resulted in a significant rise in the number of university graduates. However, this has led to a challenging job market, as the planned job allocation system, which assigned jobs to graduates based on their majors and academic performance, was discontinued in the late 1990s (Xiong, Yang and Shen, 2022). To address this issue, China has implemented reforms to align graduates' skills with labor market demands, including the promotion of application-oriented HEIs. These universities prioritize practical skills and industry-relevant knowledge, offering hands-on training and tailored curricula to prepare students for direct entry into the workforce. By focusing on industry-specific training and skill development, application-oriented universities aim to equip graduates to make immediate contributions to their respective fields.

Scholars such as Cai and Yan (2015) and Mok (2010) agree that Chinese universities can be vertically divided into four layers: research, research and teaching, teaching, and application-oriented. The research layer consists mainly of universities from the Project "985", while the research and teaching layer encompasses universities from the Project "211". The teaching layer universities comprises regional HEIs that prioritize teaching activities over research, and the application-oriented layer universities includes a majority of tertiary vocational ones; in other words, teaching layer universities may prioritize theoretical instruction and academic research while application-oriented layer universities tend to focus more

on practical, industry-specific training and skill development (Cai and Yan, 2017; Mok, 2010; Postiglione, 2020). Currently, there are 39 institutions ("985") in the first research layer and 116 ("985" + "211") in the second research and teaching layer, with it important to note that the universities in the research layer also belong to the core universities in the research and teaching layer. The majority of remaining institutions can be attributed to either the teaching or the application-oriented layers, and the distinction between these two layers may not be entirely clear (MOE, 2022). The allocation is shown below in the pyramid adapted from Cai and Yan (2015, p.153).
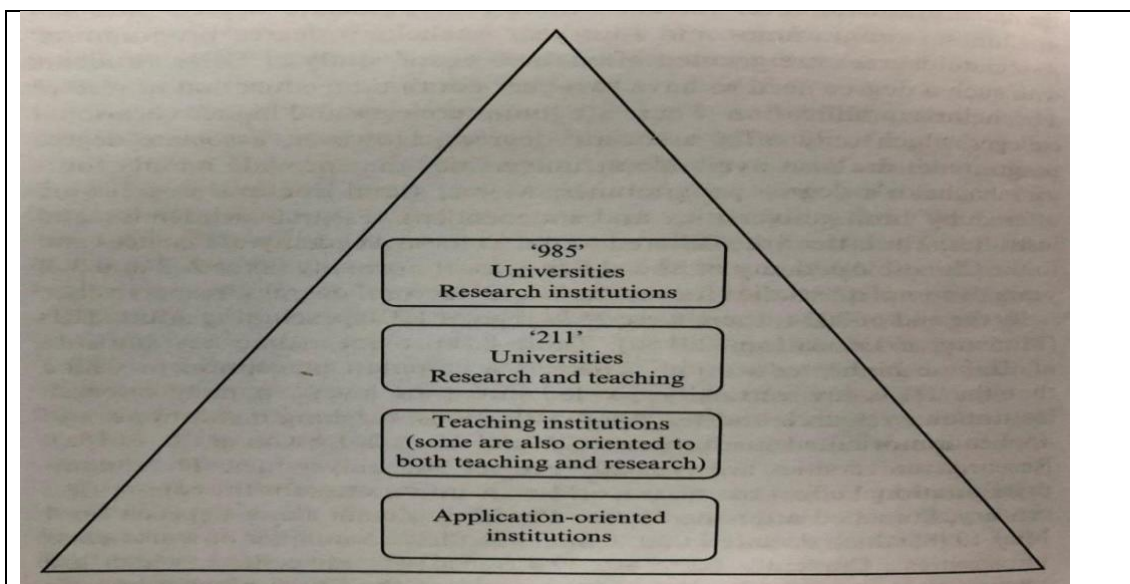
Figure 1.1 Pyramid of Chinese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Source: from Cai and Yan (2015, p. 153)

The promotion of internationalization is a critical factor for the future development of China's HEIs. It serves to enhance the global recognition and reputation of Chinese HEIs, which have not only contributed to the country's economic growth and improved workforce skills (Tight, 2022; Xiong, Yang and Shen, 2022), but also have the potential to contribute to intellectual advancement and the shaping of a common global future (Li and Eryong, 2022).

The internationalization of higher education in China has been the subject of research, consistently raising concerns about its quality and purpose, as well as highlighting reservations regarding the strong association between internationalization and Westernization (Lin, 2019). While many Chinese scholars have criticized the Western-oriented definition of internationalization (e.g., Knight, 2004), some argue that China's engagement with internationalization is still primarily driven by a state-directed effort to enhance international political and academic relations, emphasizing research and development, the establishment of world-class universities, and fostering international partnerships (Lin, 2019; Liu, 2021; Pan, 2013). The centralized structure of Chinese HEIs, controlled by the central government, has been viewed as a limitation to flexibility and autonomy (Shu *et al.*, 2020; Weich and Cai, 2011).

Recently, the regulatory model for China's HEIs has transitioned from a centralized "state control model" to a decentralized "state supervision model" (Mok, 2005). This new model grants more autonomy to universities while still maintaining state supervision. Studies have found that this control or supervision has led to tensions, even in prestigious universities, between university faculty seeking academic freedom and administrative staff appointed by the Communist Party of China (CPC) (Kim *et al.,* 2018; Nonini, 2008; Tian and Lu, 2018). Consequently, Wang (2009) highlighted the need for Chinese HEIs to be more open and increase international exchange.

Scholars emphasize the need to address individuals' roles within universities and advocate for further research into the potential differences in responses by faculty from various disciplines and ranks (Kim *et al.,* 2018; Torres-Olave, 2012). Therefore, it becomes crucial to explore the experiences and perceptions of faculty and scholars, particularly through the perspectives of returnees, who possess broader worldviews and have played integral roles in China's higher education internationalization (Huang, 2007; Wang, 2008; Weich and Cai, 2011; Xu, 2011).

According to the latest data provided by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE), from 2016 to 2019, there has been an increasing trend of returning individuals (MOE, 2022a). These returnees, known as "Haigui [海归]" in Mandarin, are directly translated as sea turtle in English, which means "*someone who was born on a shore, has been across the sea, and is now returning to that same shore again*" (Gill, 2010, p.360). In China, universities, research institutions, and central enterprises have a huge demand for high-level returnee talents; it is reported that approximately 84% of such high-level returnee talents have chosen to work in China's HEIs (Gao and Zhang, 2021). These individual returnees encompass a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences, with some possessing a master's degree or doctorate obtained abroad, and others having spent a limited period abroad as visiting scholars for one or two years; they may be referred to differently in some studies as academics, scholars, or faculty members (Zweig, Chen and Rosen, 2004). The increasing trend of these returnee academics signifies their growing importance in the academic landscape of China, contributing to the talent pool and enhancing the intellectual diversity in China's HEIs (Chen and Li, 2019; Gill, 2007; 2010).

Considering the positive influence that those returnee academics bring to the state's development (Wang and Zweig, 2009; Xu, 2011; Xu, et al., 2014), China has made great efforts in attracting those overseas talents back for the purpose of transitioning from brain drain to brain circulation or brain gain (Weich and Cai, 2011; Welch and Hao, 2016). Yet, there are still challenges in retaining the most accomplished individuals (Cao, 2008; Zweig and Wang, 2013).

While there is a growing body of research on returnee academics in China, including their cultural readjustment and re-adaptation processes (e.g., Chen, 2016; Gao, 2017; Gao and Zhang, 2021; Li, 2014; Li, Cheng and Fang, 2015; Liu, 2010; Ma and Zhang, 2020; Shi, 2017; Shi, 2017a; Yan, 2018; Yan and Fu, 2014) and academic career adjustment (e.g., Ai, 2019; Huang, 2021; Li, 2013; Liu, 2020; Liu et al., 2022; Wang, 2014; Yuan, 2014; Yu, 2017; Zhang and Yuan, 2014; Zhu, 2017), there is a lack of

comprehensive research from the perspective of professional identity (re-)construction. It should also be pointed out that most of the studies arguably have a sampling bias resulting from practical limitations, such as focusing on big cities or prestigious universities in the first and second layers, rather than on second-tier cities in third- or fourth-layer universities in China. This research aims to fill such gaps, as detailed in section 1.3.

1.3 My Specific Research Questions / Aims of the Study

Understanding the (re-)construction of professional identity among returnee academics is vital not only for talent utilization and retention (Gu, 2023; Van Lankveld *et al.,* 2017; Yang, 2017; Yu and Yu, 2023), but also for having a "spillover effect" (Shi, 2017) to influence the decisions of other overseas Chinese to return, making it an important area of study.

This study adopts a qualitative research approach with case study as the design frame, utilizing semi-structured interviews as the primary instrument to thoroughly explore the perceptions and experiences of returnee academics' repatriate adaptation and their professional identity (re-)construction. The context for the research is University Z, an application-oriented university in a second-tier city in China. The specific research questions I seek to answer are:

RQ1. What are returnee academics' perceptions of living and studying overseas?

RQ2. What are returnee academics' perceptions and experiences during their repatriation process?

RQ3. How do returnee academics (re-)construct their professional identity after returning to China?

1.4 Thesis Overview

Following this opening chapter, Chapter 2 of this study reviews the literature on the current situation facing returnee academics in China and proposes a conceptual theoretical framework. Chapter 3 justifies my

choice of research methodology, including the research design, data collection, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presents findings, organized by themes that emerged from data analysis based on the three RQs. Chapter 5 discusses these findings and considers their wider significance. The final chapter of this thesis considers the implications for policy and practice, some limitations of the study, and possible directions for future research.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss a number of topics and issues that I believe provide relevant background to my research, namely, the phenomenon of returnee tide in China, the current situation facing returnee academics in Chinese HEIs, the (re)-construction of teachers' professional identity (TPI), followed by a summary of research gap with research questions, a conceptual framework then will be constructed.

2.1 The Phenomenon of Returnee Tide in China

2.1.1 Demographic Characters

According to the latest data given by Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE), from 2016 to 2019, a total of about 2.5 million Chinese studied abroad, of which 2 million (almost 80%) have chosen to return back to China, and in 2022, the MOE reveals that 80% of Chinese students studying abroad have returned to China in the past decade (MOE, 2022a).

Returnees, referred to as Haigui in Mandarin, often symbolizes individuals born on a shore, crossing the sea, and returning to their place of origin. (Gill, 2010, p.360). Such returnees are usually regarded as a privileged group in China, largely because those who have the ability to go abroad for further study are either self-funded, indicating higher economic position, or are supported by government programmes, demonstrating excellent academic performance. Indeed, current studies have shown that returnees overall have the potential to make important contributions to their home countries as a result of intercultural encounters gained via studying abroad (Gill, 2010; Gu, 2023; Hadis, 2005; Sutton and Rubin, 2004; Wang and Zweig, 2009; Welch and Hao, 2016; Xu, 2011; Yu, 2018).

Over the past decades, many studies have demonstrated that studying abroad experiences have brought significant positive outcomes to the returnees which can be summarized into five categories:

1). Returnees are more open, have empathy, tolerance and adaptability towards other cultures (i.e., Williams, 2005), and have a personality of willingness to deal with change and ambiguity (i.e., Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009; Ting-Toomey, 2009) or self-efficacy (i.e., Petersdotter *et al.*, 2017);

2). Returnees have improved language ability and have communicative ability towards people from various cultural backgrounds, particularly non-English speakers (i.e., Drews and Meyer, 1996; Hadis, 2005), this probably can be called as "communicative behavior" by Gill (2010);

3). Returnees have broadened views towards international affairs with an intercultural perspective and increased knowledge, and a good sense of respecting different cultures and interdependency (i.e., Sutton and Rubin, 2004), as well as reduced gendered bias (i.e., Pritchard, 2011);

4). Returnees have a better understanding of the economic, social and political issues about the host countries (i.e., Hadis, 2005), and show less prejudice and ethnocentrism (i.e., Paige *et al.*, 2009);

5). Returnees have a clearer sense of self and direction (i.e., Lin-Stephens *et al.,* 2015), as well as a stronger sense of intercultural identity (Gill, 2010).

Hence, it can be seen that the process of going overseas to study has been overall positively received. Generally speaking, Chinese returnees have also played key roles in China's development process of internationalization (Wang and Zweig, 2009).

2.1.2 Push and Pull Factors

According to Liu and Morgan (2017), a comprehensive review of the relevant literature was conducted by both foreign and domestic researchers to explore the decision-making factors of Chinese students pursuing higher education abroad. The review excluded "grey" literature sources such as BBC reports. In their study, the authors compare and contrast the research findings and propose a revised push-pull model to explain Chinese students' choices to pursue higher education overseas. From the perspective of the country of origin, the push factors identified by Liu and Morgan (2017) include the insufficient capacity and low quality of higher education, limited access to satisfactory higher education institutions/programs, and the economic, political, and cultural contexts of the country. On the other hand, the pull factors from the perspective of the country of destination are characterized by a reputation for high-quality education, highly ranked institutions/programs, promising employment prospects, English learning environment, shorter program

duration, and safety of the destination country (Liu and Morgan, 2017, p. 462).

This dichotomy of push and pull factors may explain why developed countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada are frequently chosen as destination countries, while developing countries like China and India serve as sending countries (*ibid*). The appeal of these developed countries, with their reputable education systems and favourable conditions, aligns with the aspirations and preferences of Chinese students seeking higher education opportunities abroad. Hence, Liu and Morgan (2017) provide valuable insights into the decision-making process of Chinese students pursuing higher education overseas. Their revised push-pull model highlights the push factors from the country of origin and the corresponding pull factors from the country of destination, shedding light on the choice of destination countries commonly observed among Chinese students.

Hao *et al.* (2017) conducted another systematic analysis of 143 articles published between 2005 and 2015, focusing on the motivations, post-return situation, and overall impact of Chinese returnees. The authors identified two main categories of motivations for returning to China: multiple factor analysis and single factor analysis.

The first category, multiple factor analysis, encompasses push and pull factors at personal, professional, and societal levels. At the personal level, limited educational opportunities for children abroad, the presence of family members in China, and a lack of social connections abroad were identified as push factors (Chen, 2017; Chen and Li, 2019). The dissatisfaction with work culture, excessive political rituals, low income, limited resources, unethical academic practices, restricted research topics, and undesirable institutional leadership were identified as push factors at the professional level (Le Bail and Shen, 2008; Zweig *et al.*, 2004; Zweig and Han, 2010). Differences in cultural values were also cited as a push factor at the societal level. Conversely, pull factors for returning to China included strong family ties, a sense of loneliness experienced abroad at

the personal level (Guo, Porschitz and Alves, 2013; Le Bail and Shen, 2008; Zhang, 2014), more employment opportunities at the professional level, and rapid economic growth in China indicating increased job opportunities domestically at the societal level. Additionally, feelings of nationalism and patriotism, as mentioned by Kellogg (2012) and Li, Chen and Fang (2015), respectively, as well as the alienation caused by cultural impacts experienced abroad and the difficulty of obtaining foreign citizenship, further motivated individuals to return (Hao *et al*., 2017).

The second category identified in this study is single factor analysis, which highlights the influence of group dynamics and social networks on the decision to return. The study found that under the influence of the surrounding social network, individuals tend to choose to return together (Qin, 2011). Furthermore, this category of analysis is predominantly related to policies. The study revealed that government incentives for returnees and the benefits associated with dual citizenship policies played a significant role in motivating individuals to return (Hao *et al.*, 2017).

In China's context, considering the above-mentioned benefits and advantages of returnees, the Chinese government has made great efforts to attract overseas Chinese talents back to work in HEIs. From 1978 to 1992, China's policy has supported native Chinese people to go out to further their studies, meanwhile it has welcomed foreign scholars and experts to China by encouraging foreign language teaching and learning on a national level, especially English language (Xian, 2015). Since 1993 then, with the out flow of Chinese students, scholars and experts, more attention has been paid on how to attract those talents back (Huang, 2003). As Welch and Hao (2016) have indicated, China is ambitious in conducting overseas talent recruitment projects on a national level for knowledge producers and carriers are valuable human capital, such as the "Thousand Talents Programme" [1] . The internationalization trend has

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[1] In **2008**, **Thousand Talents Programme (Recruitment Programme of Global Experts)**, which is responsible by the Organization Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, aims at recruiting 1,000 to 3,000 experts (not older than 55 years old) with PhD degree attained from famous universities abroad mainly in science and technology, finance and economy disciplines to return and work in China for not less than six months a year in order to boost China's innovation capability of key hi-tech industry.

involved in valuing teachers' experiences abroad, which leads to a status quo that a large number of teachers in Chinese HEIs have overseas experiences (Huang, 2007; Wang, 2008). With more and more students going abroad to further their studies, and in turn more of them choosing to return, Weich and Cai (2011) assert that "*China is taking its rightful place as a major centre of intellectual life, albeit now within a modern global knowledge system* (p. 30)." As a result, it is undeniable that those teachers with overseas experiences have generally made great contributions to the internationalization of China's HEIs. However, Cao (2008) argues that the best Chinese scientists have not returned, this has been echoed by Zweig and Wang (2013), they reported that China actually still has not attracted "*the very best of scientists and academics (p.590)" who studied and lived overseas to return full-time*. This suggests that while China has made progress in attracting overseas talent, there are still challenges in retaining the most accomplished individuals. Further research and policy measures may be necessary to address this issue and fully capitalize on the potential contributions of overseas Chinese talents to China's HEIs.

2.2 The Status Quo For Returnee Academics in China's HEIs

In general, the current situation facing returnee academics in China's HEIs can be broadly classified into four main themes.

1) The first major theme explores the political ideological status (i.e., Chen, 2018; Li, 2016; Li *et al.*, 2018a; Wei and Ren, 2014; Zhao and Yu, 2017; Ren, 2022) and the evaluation of management practices among returnee academics (i.e., Dai, 2013; Kuang, 2015; Kuang and Zhang, 2015; Xu, 2010; Wu and Zhu, 2018). Due to its political sensitivity, this theme will not be further expanded upon in this study.

2) The second major theme revolves around the cultural readjustment experienced by returnee academics upon their repatriation, encompassing aspects such as their living conditions (i.e., Li, Cheng and Fang, 2015; Liu, 2010) and re-adaptation processes (i.e., Gao, 2017; Gao and Zhang,

2021; Li, 2014; Ma and Zhang, 2020; Shi, 2017; Yan, 2018; Yan and Fu, 2014).

3) The third major theme primarily addresses the academic career adjustment of returnee academics (i.e., Chen, 2016; Li, 2013; Liu, 2020; Wang, 2014; Yuan, 2014; Yu, 2017; Zhang and Yuan, 2014; Zhu, 2017; Huang, 2021), including their job satisfaction (i.e., Li and Zhu, 2020; Yang, 2016; Yu, 2009; Shen and Tan, 2022) and their effects on internationalization (i.e., Xu, Li and Liu, 2014).

4) The fourth and least represented theme explores identity construction among returnee academics, specifically, university EFL (English as a Foreign Language) returnee academics' professional identity construction (i.e., Yang, 2017; Gu, 2023).

In Chinese HEIs, there is a clear objective to attract overseas returnees back, along with a policy agenda of building world-class universities. However, despite the increasing number of academics returning to China, research on their return moves is still limited (Chen and Li, 2019). Existing studies on academic mobility have primarily focused on outbound moves, pull-push factors, and the experience of being abroad (Gill, 2007; 2010). Insufficient attention has been given to the experiences involved in the process of returning (Chen and Li, 2019). Given the growing number of overseas returnees, there appears to have increasing pressure for them to adapt to China's HEIs, making it an important research topic. Next, in this section, relevant studies both domestic and abroad on returnee academics in China's HEIs will be critically reviewed from two main domain, namely, cultural readjustment experienced by returnee academics in 2.2.1, and academic career adjustment of returnee academics in 2.2.2.

2.2.1 Cultural Readjustment Experienced by Returnee Academics
The concept of readjustment or reentry adaptation emerged in the 1960s and encompasses studies on the experiences and outcomes of individuals

who return to their home country after a period of living or studying abroad (Berry, 2005; Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963; Kim, 2001). This area of study is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing upon cross-cultural communication, sociology, psychology, and human resource management, with a primary objective is to investigate the development, manifestations, and consequences of communication behaviors exhibited by returnees (Berry, 2005; Kim, 2001). By examining the process of reentry adaptation, researchers gain valuable insights into the intricate phenomena and stage-specific characteristics that individuals encounter during their readjustment, thereby facilitating an understanding of the challenges and strategies associated with reintegrating into their home culture.

A number of studies have examined how returnees from overseas sojourns re-adapt to their home countries and the challenges they may have faced in doing so (Gill, 2010; Martin, 1984). This concept has been termed as reverse culture shock and there is now quite an extensive literature dealing with the process that individuals may find themselves going through (Dettweiler *et al*., 2015; Gaw, 2000; Martin, 1986; Yoshida *et al.*, 2009).

Reverse culture shock means "*the process of readjusting, re-acculturating, and re-assimilating into one's own home environment after living in a different culture for a significant period of time*" (Gaw, 2000, p.83-84). This indicates that returnees will experience the well-known U-shape culture shock (which includes four stages, namely, honeymoon, hostility/rejection, negotiation, and lastly adaptation) again until they finally re-adapt to the environment by going back to their previous views or behaviours (Gaw, 2000; Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963; Trifonovitch, 1977). Although reverse culture shock has been challenged by other scholars on the grounds that not all returnees may have to fully go back or re-adapt to their previous views or behaviours again (Ai and Wang, 2017), the concept is still popular and continues to be discussed in the literature dealing with returnees (Yan, 2017). Li (2014) also suggests that there is a need for further research on reverse cultural adaptation and its impact on individuals' cultural identity.

It appears that while current empirical studies on returnees' reentry experiences have been found in many other countries, few have been found in mainland China. Possibly, this is because China relatively has such a short period of opening up period towards the outside world (the year 2018 marked the 40th anniversary of the country's opening up since 1978). Next, a broad overview on returnees' reentry challenges on an empirical literature base both domestically and abroad will be presented below.

A pilot study researching returnee academics in Brazil by Gama and Pedersen (1977) explored 31 returned Brazilian teachers' readjustment problems via in-depth interview over a 16-month period, and they found out that the participants basically have no readjustment problems to re-adapt to their family life except lacking certain degrees of privacy. Those participants in this research studied in the US for about 13 to 46 months after completing either BA, Master or PhD degrees. Another finding of this study indicates that the older the returnees are, the better experience or greater familiarity they have with the current working environment, and the less readjustment problems they have. Gender difference is also found since "*women experienced more administrative red tape, and found value conflicts with their family to be much more of a problem than men did*" (p.54).

Since then, other re-entry challenges which have been found by different researchers in different countries are mainly related to psychological and social adaptation to home culture.

From a psychological aspect, Gaw (2000) and Allison *et al.* (2012) reported that many participants in their studies expressed isolation or loneliness upon return (Gaw's study was 66 US students returned after studying abroad, and Allison *et al.*'s participants were all young British citizens who returned home after expedition in the south-west Greenland). Similarly, Butcher (2002) noted that 55 students from Asian regions (mainly from Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong) who have

studied in New Zealand, expressed grieving of losing experiences and friends from the host countries. Walling *et al.'s* (2006) discovery of anger towards home culture is one of the key emotions among those US college students who have joined in one program of short-term study overseas. This angry emotion is about negative attitudes toward their US native culture, especially its influence on international politics, life pace and sexuality (*ibid.*). Similar findings have been found by Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010) as well, their study reveals that 669 returned American college students have more skepticism towards their US culture compared to those domestic students who have not studied abroad.

In terms of social adaptation aspect, many challenges are from the relationship building with parents and friends. For example, for many returnees the problem about the relationship with their family members appears to be "the norm" (Kartoshkina, 2015, p.359) since many expressed that it was hard to meet parents' expectations and to comply with the family conventions, although some were found to help them appreciate parents more after separation which indicated improved relationships (Butcher, 2002). Likewise, in China, Chang (2010) finds out that mothers have relational contradictions with their returned children since the children have been greatly influenced by the host culture, and thus more open and direct communications which might be useful to resolve the misunderstandings are called for. Moreover, the challenge of communicating with friends appears to be more severe compared with their parents (Martin, 1986; Ward *et al.,* 2001). This may be because that friends are not interested in the exciting studying abroad experiences as they cannot relate the experiences with theirs' (Allison *et al.*, 2012).

Nevertheless, the research findings on psychological and social adaptation to one's home country, as mentioned above, do not always show consistent results. For instance, Pritchard (2011) argues that in Taiwan and Sri Lanka, students (12 from Taiwan, 15 from Sri Lanka) returning from studying in the UK after finishing their master degree in Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) have not been found to have psychological challenges or influences, but do have socio-political

challenges (contradiction between collectivism and individualism, traditionalism and modernism) in adjusting to home culture contexts. Also, by using online survey and focus group interview, Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010) argue that the 669 returned US student-participants do not have social relationship challenges; and compared to those who have not studied abroad, returned students do not have more negative emotions; yet, females were found less able to cope with anxiety.

Therefore, as Brabant *et al.* (1990) reported that the reverse culture shock after re-entry is not universal as not many severe problems were found among their participants (the participants of this study were international students who had studied in the US campus and they were mainly from Lebanon, Venezuela, Nigeria, and Switzerland). Hence, challenges which resulted from psychological and social adaptation experiences to home country need further exploration as these challenges mentioned appear to be general tendencies and the results are inconsistent.

In China, by employing a mixed research methodology that involves the analysis of questionnaire and interview data, Hao *et al.* (2016) investigated Chinese students who gained postgraduate degrees from a prominent Australian university, and they found that possessing an international qualification alone is no longer sufficient for achieving employment success in China's highly competitive labor market. In contrast to earlier cohorts of returnees who secured prestigious positions and immediately contributed to China's development, the current generation of sojourners faces a distinct and intricate set of opportunities and challenges. While a majority of these graduates still possess an advantage in China's densely populated graduate labor market, which means the consolidation and utilization of various forms of intellectual capital are deemed necessary, the overall context has become considerably more competitive. That is to say, nowadays, returnees face a more complex situation which contains both opportunities and challenges. More specifically, the challenges are mainly about a lack of ability to regain a deep understanding of Chinese contemporary culture, domestic

market and environment which have also changed fast; as a result, due to over-confidence and higher expectations in terms of salary, working environment, higher positions, preference for bigger cities rather than small ones, returnees are facing competitors severely from both home and abroad (*ibid.*).

In China's HEIs, Shen, Wang and Jin (2016) point out that the world-class universities often have a relatively higher proportion of international PhD candidates, and also those universities focus more on researching. Indeed, China had its own doctoral education system until the late 1980s; it is possible that recognizing this delayed development, China has incentivized domestic students to pursue doctoral studies overseas. Yet, the returning rate of PhD candidates is still low, which in turn has a negative effect on China's current PhD research training system as a whole (*ibid.*). Besides, in order to change human capital related brain drain into brain gain or brain circulation (talents' flow or mobility among different nations) under a globalized world, in addition to the national policies in attracting the top overseas scholars back, many more universities have started to employ staff with PhD degrees preferably with their PhD degrees received abroad. Given the employment requirement preferably for PhD degree holders attained abroad, it is believed that there will be a certain amount of such PhD returnees working at various universities in all the four layers (mentioned in Figure 1.1) of HEIs in China.

A few studies have been found on investigating the cultural adjustment and reentry experiences of Chinese returnee academics with doctor degrees in China's HEIs context (Gao, 2017; Gao and Zhang, 2021; Li, 2014; Luo, Liu and Zhong, 2017; Ma and Zhang, 2020; Shi, 2017). For example, one of the most cited is Shi's (2017) study on university returnee academics' status of repatriate adaptation. Through an in-depth analysis of interviews conducted with 30 returnee academics (who had been abroad for at least one year and gained either master or doctor degrees abroad) from three universities in Beijing (one "985", one "211" and another one is other regular university possibly from either the third or fourth layer), their repatriation adaptation is explored from the

perspectives of individual factors (include 5 areas, namely, personal traits, communication ability, attitudes towards one's home/foreign culture, expectations and motivations on the re-adaptation process, and demographic factors), organizational factors (various elements within an institution that can impact the re-adaptation) and environmental factors (such as culture, social support and living condition). The results indicate that almost all returnee academics experience varying degrees of repatriation adaptation difficulties upon their return, with issues lessening over time, but often leading to feelings of confusion, dissatisfaction, and anxiety. These emotions not only hinder the psychological, sociocultural, and overall life adaptation, but also significantly impact their job performance. Shi (2017) suggests that in order to ensure the benefits of talent introduction in universities, it is necessary to fully understand the cultural adaptation status, challenges, and needs of this group, and explore effective solutions from multiple perspectives, including government, schools, and individuals.

Similar findings have been found in Luo, Liu and Zhong's (2017) study through in-depth interview with 12 young returnees from universities in Shanghai. They use grounded theory and identify key factors and effects of their adjustment process and propose a model framework to help these individuals successfully transition back to their home country and advance in their careers. Namely, social support is very important for the re-adaptation. This could include providing resources for job placement, networking opportunities, mentorship programs, and support for research projects.

Gao and Zhang (2021) examines the issues surrounding the adaptation and development of high-level overseas returnee academics in Chinese universities in the context of the country's "Double First-Class" strategy. They attempt to systematically analyze the manifestations and causes of the adaptation problems of returnee academics after returning to teach within a unified logical framework. To analyze the adaptation and development issues, this article proposes a marginal binary analysis framework. It argues that overseas returnee academics face marginal

confusion in their adaptation and development, which manifests in conflicts between Eastern and Western cultures, the confrontation between administrative and academic power, and the disparity between ideal and actual compensation. The underlying reasons for these challenges are attributed to cultural, social, and economic factors. While this study has primarily focused on the macro social background and the role conflicts arising from the process of modernization transformation, it offers a fresh perspective by examining the marginal dualistic personality experienced by these teachers, making a valuable contribution to the existing literature by exploring the specific challenges encountered by overseas returnee academics in China within the context of the "Double First-Class" strategy.

In any discussion of Chinese mobility, it is necessary to mention that Chen (2017) delves into the experiences of 52 Chinese academics who pursued doctoral degrees in the United States and subsequently returned to China, securing research positions at prestigious "985" universities located in two prominent cities, namely Shanghai in the east and Xi'an in the west. Through an extensive and comprehensive analysis, the book explores the phenomenon of those academic returnees within the context of globalization, with a specific focus on their motivations, experiences, and the consequential impacts they have had on the academic landscape in China's HEIs. It should be pointed out that the research employs a cultural perspective to investigate the daily experiences of returned scholars, with a particular emphasis on their sense of identity and their methods of fostering connections and instigating changes within their respective work communities. Thus, this study contributes to the broader discourse on transnational academic mobility (TAM), and the role of highly skilled individuals in knowledge transfer and capacity building in China. Moreover, it also underscores the need for future research to delve deeper into these aspects, acknowledging the complexities of mobility in a world that is increasingly globalized yet still segmented by national boundaries.

Regarding these repatriated highly skilled university returnee academics, aside from the aforementioned studies on their social-cultural re-

adaptation, there is also a considerable amount of research on their academic career development within China's HEIs. The following section provides a comprehensive overview of this aspect.

2.2.2 Academic Career Adjustment of Returnee Academics

Recently, Liu *et al.* (2022) used the improved Bronfenbrenner's bioecological Framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), which emphasizes the interaction between an individual and their environment at various levels, to thoroughly explore the academic career development of Chinese returnees who hold overseas PhD degrees, referred to as Chinese Returned Overseas Professionals (CROPs). The central objective of this investigation is to elucidate how CROPs navigate their career trajectories within the Chinese HEIs by examining the interplay between individual attributes and various environmental factors. By adopting a qualitative methodology incorporating semi-structured interviews with a sample of 31 CROPs, the study unravels the complexities and nuances surrounding their professional development.

The content of their research highlights the personal characteristics of the CROPs, including their dispositions (such as a preference for stability in job and living place), demands (such as the need for G*uanxi*, a Chinese term referring to social connections and networks), and resources (such as skills, knowledge, ability and personal networks). These personal characteristics influence the CROPs' career choices and their interactions with the multi-layered ecological systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem) they are a part of. These systems refer to the various levels of influence on an individual, including their immediate environment (microsystem), the broader community and institutions they are a part of (mesosystem), the societal and cultural norms (exosystem), and the wider political and economic contexts (macrosystem). These systems can either support or hinder the CROPs' career development (*ibid.*).

More specifically, the microsystem refers to the direct interactions and relationships that CROPs have within their immediate environment, such as their families and colleagues. The study suggests that interactions with families play a role in their career choices to return to China. Workplace interactions also belong to this microsystem, which involve interactions with senior leaders, line managers, and colleagues, are reported to have negative influences on their everyday work. This negative influence is partly from exploitative line managers who allocate large amounts of work that need to be done overtime and place pressure on those CROPs at early stages of their careers, and thus negatively impact their well-being. Some CROPs are frustrated by their colleagues' academic misconduct, such as plagiarism and misclaiming authorship. At the mesosystem level, the interaction between CROPs' workplace and family plays a significant role in their career decisions. That is, CROPs with children often prioritize working at universities that provide access to quality education in university-affiliated kindergartens, primary, and secondary schools. The exosystem refers to the interactions and connections that CROPs have with their colleagues, particularly those who have obtained their PhDs domestically, and influential figures in Chinese academia. The absence of such influential connections may result in limitations for CROPs in terms of career advancement, paper publication, and project application. This aligns with many other scholars' findings (Li and Xue, 2022; Pham, 2021; Wang *et al.,* 2016). These systems (micro, meso, exo) are further influenced by the macrosystem, which encompasses both broader Chinese cultural values and norms regarding filial piety and traditional gender roles, and the wider Chinese HEIs to establish world-class universities and subjects driven by internationalization, focusing on immediate publications and obtaining research grants, creating a hectic environment.

It appears that Liu *et al.* (2022) offer a novel lens, drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework, to gain insights into the challenges and opportunities encountered by CROPs as they strive for successful academic careers within the landscape of Chinese HEIs during re-acculturation. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that there still exits limitations which can be interpreted in three aspects. First, the framework

used appears to be creative and applicable with four clear levels (micro, meso, exo, and macro), yet there tends to be overlaps especially in the meso- and exo-system levels. For example, workplace interactions and family factors occur in both levels which may cause confusion, and thus a more concise framework appears to be needed, such as to combine these two levels (meso- and exo-) together into one. Second, the participants in this study mainly come from big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou, though the authors claim that their participants come from "*different HEIs across China* (p.4)", and thus results may be overly representative. Third, the absence of investigation into the participants' cities of origin in this study, as the authors themselves admitted in the conclusion that the city of origin may potentially impact the career progression of the CROPs; they therefore recommended that future research endeavors consider this aspect and explore whether it exerts any influence on the career development of the participants.

Indeed, the academic career development of Chinese returnees with overseas doctorate degrees has become an emerging research focus; previous studies have explored various aspects of these returnees' experiences and challenges upon returning to China's HEIs, highlighting the role of personal characteristics, university systems, environmental contexts, and mentorship in shaping their career paths (Ai, 2019; Cao *et al.,* 2019; Jiang and Shen, 2019; Liu *et al.,* 2022). While each study offers unique findings and implications, there may be differences or similarities in the specific contexts, methodologies, and policy implications emphasized. Overall, returnee academics, upon being back in China's HEIs, have been found to positively impact teaching, research, social service, and educational reform (Chao, 2014; Chen, 2016; Shi, 2017).

In a comparative study of 109 returned overseas Chinese scholars and 90 domestic Chinese scholars, Rosen and Zweig (2005) provided evidence that the former outperforms the latter in three aspects: language fluency in second language, publications in international journals, and international collaborations, and the study employs the concept of

"transnational capital" to analyze the uniqueness and advantages of returned overseas scholars, claiming that this form of human capital is based on international knowledge or connections acquired abroad, which are not easily accessible in China.

Similarly, Chen (2017) highlights the importance of such "transnational experience", which is characterized by returnee academics' background of studying or working in foreign countries before returning to China. This experience allows them to bring new knowledge, skills, and perspectives to their teaching practice. For instance, returnee academics who are part of the "Thousand Talents Plan", a program aimed at attracting high-level technical talents back to China, have demonstrated exceptional performance in publishing articles in prestigious journals and garnering high citation rates; this significantly enhances the academic output, discipline development and talent cultivation, and thereby promoting university innovation (Chao, 2014; Li, Yang and Wu, 2018; Meng, 2019). In terms of teaching, returnee academics offer a significant advantage through the introduction and integration of advanced teaching concepts and methods acquired abroad; these teachers actively implement learner-centered teaching philosophies in the classroom and utilize diverse teaching modes such as case analysis, seminars, and classroom presentations (Chen, 2016). Additionally, their overseas education equips them with international perspectives and cross-cultural understanding, enriching the educational experience of students and promoting global competence (Shi, 2017).

In another article, Li, Yang and Wu (2018) searched the basic information about 330 "Thousand Youth Talents Scheme (TYTS)" scholars based on four "985" universities in Shanghai, and conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 of them in order to explore their job satisfaction and working situations in the Chinese academic environment. The study concluded that those TYTS scholars have created advantageous conditions including in uplifting domestic academic communities (mainly by improving academic research atmosphere and paper output) within their affiliated institutions. Meng (2019) also agrees that these returnee

academics contribute to the internationalization of Chinese universities by integrating global academic standards, fostering international collaborations, and promoting a more global outlook in education and research.

However, despite the advantages and contributions of returnee academics, there are also challenges and issues that need to be addressed. For example, Liu (2020) examines the influence of overseas academic qualifications on academic employment among college teachers, utilizing survey data from 2,744 full-time teachers in 28 public universities across China. The findings reveal a dualistic nature of the impact of overseas academic qualifications on the academic profession of teachers. On one hand, overseas academic qualifications allow college teachers to gain access to higher-ranking institutions and disciplines. On the other hand, returnee academics do not demonstrate significant advantages in terms of scientific research productivity and promotion to higher professional ranks, and, in fact, exhibit certain disadvantages in certain aspects (Liu, 2020). As some studies have suggested that the process of re-adapting to the academic system in China is not easy for returnee academics since they may face difficulties in adapting to the academic research norms, teaching methods, and integrating into the local academic community and building professional networks (Li and Xue, 2022; Pham, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2016; Xie, Xu and Wu, 2012; Zhang and Yuan, 2014), local scholars may feel resentful as they perceive that returnees have devalued their degrees, subsequently impeding the returnees' re-adaptation (Chen, 2017; Ma and Pan, 2015).

A number of studies have also explored the problems of Chinese academic environment, especially from returned scholars' perspective, and one of the key issues is the adaptation of overseas-educated teachers to the domestic academic environment. For instance, teaching workload and research funding have been found to impact research output, with increased teaching workload leading to reduced research output and increased research funding improving it; non-policy factors such as discipline background, professional title, and geographical location can

influence academic performance as well (Meng, 2019). Cao (2008) points out that regardless of these personal factors, other more severe and common problems reflected on by them are high cost in progressive career development, rampant frauds in Chinese academic environment, the complex relationship about *Guanxi* (relationship building), and even some taboos or bans in researching. Yi (2011) further points out that returnees from social science and humanities have more cynical towards the environment, whereas those from science and economics are basically satisfied with the environment. According to Ong's (1996) explanation of the self-making process, it has led to two directions: one towards losers (who are usually dissatisfied with their current jobs, salary, and life) and another towards winners (who are satisfied with their current job, salary, and life). Returnees from the social science and humanities appear to belong to what Ong called as "losers", while returnees from science and economics tend to belong to the so called "winners" probably because they are good at selling themselves (*ibid.*). However, it should be pointed out that Yi's (2011) study was mainly done in an elite key university in China, situations in other ordinary universities may be different.

In another study carried out in 6 varied universities in Beijing, it was found that young returnee academics' (under the age of 45 years old, received degrees either in BA, master or PhD abroad) living expectations were lower than anticipation, and their living conditions are not as better as expected while considering pressures from both work and daily life though the overall salary is higher than domestic ones (Li, Chen and Fang, 2015). This study also highlights higher research pressures compared to teaching; male returnee academics have more financial stresses than females in supporting families; returnees from science and engineering areas have suffered more financial pressures from those from arts or social sciences. Again, Li, Chen and Fang's (2015) research is based on the macro quantitative through questionnaire collecting without providing detailed findings about the participants' perceptions via interview results.

Also from macro quantitative perspective, Li and Zhu (2020) analyzed the job satisfaction levels and influencing factors by conducting a

comprehensive questionnaire survey among 541 returnee academics from 48 research-oriented universities (usually the distinguished ones) across China between 1979 and 2017. The study reveals that the overall level of job satisfaction among returnee academics during their initial employment period has been relatively low over the past four decades. Variances were observed in different time intervals, particularly in terms of remuneration packages and cultural adaptation. A discernible decline in satisfaction with aspects such as autonomy, work-related pressures, and engagement in scientific research teams transpired over time. Based on these research outcomes, the study then provides recommendations to enhance returnee academics' autonomy, raise basic salary levels, and establish a stable salary growth mechanism. Especially, the study suggests to foster a sense of professional identity, emphasizing the necessity and increasing importance of developing teachers' professional identity (TPI) for returnee academics in China's HEIs.

2.3 The (Re-)construction of Returnee Academics' Professional Identity

China's strategy of "reinvigorating the country with human resources" emphasizes the importance of attracting highly educated professionals, particularly those who have studied abroad, to return and contribute to the nation's development. This strategy places significant value on the role of HEIs in attracting and integrating these talents. The professional identity of these returnee academics, which is shaped by their experiences abroad and their roles in domestic institutions, is crucial in assessing the effectiveness of this talent acquisition strategy and the impact of related policies. Understanding this professional identity and its influencing factors can provide insights into the actual needs of these returnee academics, thereby informing better management practices and faculty development in universities and colleges.

2.3.1 Key Concepts of Identity

The word "identity" originated from the Latin word "identitas", which is "idem", meaning "same" (*www.oxforddictionaries.com.*). The exact definition of identity seems to be blurred though it has been classified into different categories by using different labels. For example, Hsieh (2006) classifies identity into three levels, namely, self-identity, social identity and personal identity. The first level self-identity refers to the ways individuals perceive and know themselves; the second level social identity is about the social status that is mostly accepted by the general public or some stereotypes that are dominated by the society; and finally personal identity refers to the ways that individuals want to illustrate themselves to the other people (*ibid.*). Quite similarly, identity usually can be analyzed in a three-level framework initiated by Risman (2004), including the individual level (usually refers to how one knows himself/herself), interactional level (often refers to how one is perceived by others on a social base) and institutional level (usually refers to how one shows to others in different contexts such as in HEIs). Risman (2004) claims that age, nation, politics, economy, family, religions, and gender are all social layers that can work in junctions like a systematic stratification to explore one's identity. Jenkins (2004, p. 22) also points out that "*identity is constructed in transactions at and across the boundary [...] a balance is struck between (internal) group identification and (external) categorization by others*". It is true that when (im)migrants or overseas scholars return to their home country, they have to readjust to a social-cultural environment that they used to be familiar with but now are not so familiar with since the home country is changing in the meantime. As a result, misfits may inevitably occur during the process of identity reconstructing.

Further identity-related terms and concepts including national identity, cultural identity, intercultural identity (which also involves hybridity and third space), will be described below.

It appears that national identity is not limited within a person's birth place, it is "*forged, or instilled in individuals growing up in particular places and times*" (Block, 2007, p. 29), and these "*places and times*" will "*affect[s]*

how you behave, your expectations, your relations with others and, more importantly perhaps, other's relations with you" (Eaglestone, 2002, p. 109). Ai and Wang (2017) once added that national identity is also relevant to one's educational, social and cultural experiences.

Especially, in returnees' studies, identity is often found be connected to cultural identity and intercultural identity. Cultural identity refers to "*learning about and accepting the tradition, heritage, language, religion, ancestry, aesthetics, thinking patterns, and social structure of a culture*" (Lustig and Koester, 2010, p.142). In other words, people may shape an identity even by daily communication in a specific cultural context. Some studies have demonstrated the important interplay of both social network environment and individual differences in shaping cultural identity during repatriation (Cox, 2004; Sussman, 2001), yet Mao and Shen (2015) argue that social networks will have more direct influence on cultural identity change as individual can decide to choose their own social networks, and thus the individual is playing a proactive role in the transition of cultural identity. They call for further study in researching other factors that can influence cultural identity change, such as organizational context or host-country context factors (*ibid.*).

When talking about transnational mobility, especially in a globalized world, intercultural identity tends to be more popular. It is perceived as transformed self by Gill (2010) while engaging with various cultures which contain "*qualities, beliefs, values and commitments (p.373)*" and thus has new emerging "*ways of seeing and perceiving the world, values, and (work-related) ethics (p.372)*". This intercultural identity is often associated with the so called "third space" (Kramsch and Uryu, 2012), a context that is different from both home and host contexts. It is a space that usually "*enable participants to make meaning, re-evaluate their sense of self, and to (re)construct their self-identity*" (Gill, 2007, p.176).

Being another crux aspect related to intercultural identity, hybridity is caused by mobility and often means flexibility and multiple identities (Duff, 2015). Ang (2001, p.16) claims that hybridity "*implies a blurring or at*

least a problematizing of boundaries, and as a result, an unsettling of identity." Frello (2015) conceptualizes hybridity as being both blending and displacement. Blending resulted from intensified globalization and involves with not only culture, but also race and ethnicity encounter, then it often leads to enhanced hybrid identities (similar to Duff's notion on multiple identities, as well as to intercultural identity); displacement is understood as dislocation of the ways in which power hierarchies are established or "*cultural relations have habitually been categorized (p.198)*", and thus it usually leads to conflicts or struggles of identity since ideas of one's purity world are disturbed or contaminated and then defence is needed. These two concepts (blending and displacement) are respectively similar to the terms "*strength and vitality*" and "*danger, loss and degeneration*" which are pointed out by Papastergiadis (1997, p. 259).

So far, hybridity, together with third space are then usually used to describe returnee participants in some studies. For example, people with hybridity are feeling comfortable in their third space, such as "*Chinese skin in a British suit*" or "*unaccented English*" in Chinese clothes (Gill, 2010, p.372), which can be seen as blending or enhanced hybrid identities (or intercultural identity). However, in another study, Ai and Wang (2017) did a new teaching model experiment by using these concepts of hybridity and third space in his EFL class teaching in one mainland Chinese university. Via the method of narrative personal reflection and anecdotes, the authors found out that the western student-centred model [2] is meaningful in theory though it is complicated to reform the traditional teacher-centred EFL teaching model in Chinese cultural context in practical (Ai and Wang, 2017). Ai's effort towards EFL teaching in Chinese HEIs context seems to be useless and thus may belong to displacement. Indeed, he himself in the article claims that he has not adapted to his home culture (in this case, the Chinese HEIs) and has been struggling over his identity. It would thus seem that specific contexts need to be considered in order to bv,etter investigate hybridity within third space:

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[2] During the classes, Chinese students are required to imagine that they are in foreign countries where students are usually the center of the classroom, and imagine that they are all foreigners who can only speak English.

whether returnees have gained blending - enhanced hybrid identities/intercultural identity or displacement - degeneration/struggles (Frello, 2015).

Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that empirical and conceptual studies on "*returnees' identities, values and behaviour in the home-country contexts*" are still lacking (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015: p.949).

2.3.2 Influencing Factors of TPI

Earlier in 1995, Beijaard, one of the most cited scholars in the area of TPI, attempted to delineate the TPI of 28 secondary school teachers using three distinct categories: the subject matter taught by the teacher, their relationship with students, and their perceived role or concept of role. Each category is further subdivided into subcategories for which teachers are required to elucidate both their current perceptions and past experiences. The findings suggest that changes in characteristics associated with TPI are shaped by one's experience and background; however, teachers struggle to independently concentrate only on each subcategory (Beijaard, 1995). Later, in order to further investigate teachers' current and prior perceptions of their professional identity, Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt (2000) did a subsequent study by delivering a questionnaire to expanded 80 experienced secondary school teachers to explore the way they see (and saw) themselves. The study suggests that teachers construct their professional identities via self-perception as subject matter experts, didactical experts, and pedagogical experts, though the emphasis placed on each facet varies among teachers.

In 2004, Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop reviewed and synthesized in detail on the research methods, definition and characteristics of TPI, and their review greatly contributed to the development of TPI (Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop, 2004). Since that year, studies abroad on TPI have entered into an increasing but steady processing stage (Izadinia, 2014; Wen and Xu, 2014). Beijaard's perspective on TPI emphasizes the dynamic nature of this concept, suggesting it evolves over time due to interactions with others, events, and experiences. This means that TPI is not static but

continually shaped and reshaped by their environment, including their relationships with students, colleagues, and the broader educational community, as well as their personal experiences within their profession. This perspective underscores the importance of context and experience in shaping how teachers perceive and understand their professional roles and responsibilities.

Accordingly, it appears that the concept of TPI has been examined through two primary lenses in previous research. The first perspective centers on teachers' individual perception, encompassing their self-perception within their profession and their interpretation of their values and experiences (Flores and Day, 2006; Kelchtermans, 2000; Liu and Yu, 2008). The second perspective emphasizes the interplay between teachers and their environment, positing that TPI is molded and transformed over time through their encounters, interactions, and the cultural, social, and institutional contexts in which they are situated (Beijaard, 1995; Cai and Liu, 2010; Izadinia, 2013; Sachs, 2001; Schutz, Nichols and Schwenke, 2018; Van den Berg, 2002). Generally speaking, TPI is a complex concept that involves the dynamic interaction between a teacher's personal sense of self and their surrounding environment. It is influenced by various individual experiences, as well as the social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which teachers operate. The formation of TPI occurs through active engagement with the teaching environment, and its development is influenced by a combination of personal and professional elements (Goodson and Cole, 1994; Sleegers and Kelchtermans, 1999; Van den Berg, 2002; Wei, 2008).

There appears to have an increasing number of studies focus on exploring the factors that contribute to the construction of TPI, and while there are some overlaps in these factors, they are often labelled differently. Three domains could be broadly summarized as follows: individual background factors, personal experience factors, and environmental factors. Next, findings of each domain will be presented below:

1) Individual background factors often include gender, age, marital status, children, parents, family background and educational background and so on. For example, studies suggest that gender can play a role in how teachers perceive their professional identities. Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt (2000) found out that secondary school male teachers perceive themselves more as subject matter experts, while most females see themselves as balanced, excelling in subject matter expert, didactical experts, and pedagogical experts. In China, both Wei (2005) and Yu (2006) find out that female teachers have a higher level of professional identity than male teachers across various dimensions (Wei's study focus on primary and secondary school teachers in Shandong province, and Yu's study focuses on middle school teachers in small cities in Hunan province). In terms of age, some studies suggest that as teachers age, they may lose their motivation and commitment, potentially becoming less serious about their service to students (Bloom, 1988). However, other research, such as those by Wei (2005) and Yu (2006), found no significant difference about the impact of age on TPI. Results done abroad and domestically were also found inconsistent regarding the influence of years of teaching on TPI. Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt (2000) claimed that many secondary teachers initially identify themselves as subject experts at the start of their careers, but as they gain experience, they tend to shift towards a balanced identity, incorporating elements of subject, didactical and pedagogical experts. However, the research by Wei (2005) on Chinese primary and secondary school teachers found no significant difference in the level of professional identity among teachers with different lengths of teaching experience. In terms of different teaching fields, Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt (2000) discussed four academic fields: language, science and math, social sciences and humanities, and arts. The research revealed differences among the teaching fields: language teachers identify as balanced from the start; science and math teachers tend to shift from seeing themselves as subject experts to either pedagogical experts or balanced; social sciences and humanities teachers maintain their identity as subject experts throughout their careers. Overall, the number of teachers from the four academic fields showed a significant increase in being balanced experts.

2) Personal experience factors usually include previous experiences as a student, significant people and events throughout one's life, and teaching experience and so on. Studies have pointed out that teaching and classroom practices of pre-service teachers and new teachers are shaped by their previous experiences as students (Knowles, 1992; Lortie, 1975; Samuel and Stephens, 2000) and crucial role of their former teachers (Koster, Korthagen and Schrijnemakers, 1995). It emphasizes that these individuals do not enter teacher education programs as "blank slates" waiting to be filled with the skills, attitudes, and experiences suitable for first-year teachers, but rather, they have already undergone a lifetime of "teacher education" (Knowles, 1992). In other words, their socialization as teachers begins when they are still young students, easily influenced, and their observations and internalization of specific teaching models they have experienced play a significant role in shaping their identity as teachers. Besides, the significant role of key individuals and critical events in shaping TPI cannot be ignored (Connelly and Clandinin, 1999; Malm, 2004). Key individuals include not only previous teachers who have served as role models, but also parents, relatives, friends, teacher educators, university administrators, mentor teachers during internships, and researchers and so on. Critical events, such as the introduction of a new curriculum, appreciating a new way of treating children, being attracted to a new work method, or even personal life events like divorce, can lead to significant changes in TPI (Malm, 2004). Also, having school-aged children can increase tolerance towards students (Huberman, 1993), indicating that personal private life experiences can profoundly impact a teacher's professional life. Moreover, teachers' teaching experiences can significantly influence their professional identity, as Newman (2000) pointed out that various experiences, such as pre-service professional learning, intern teaching experience, initial teaching experience, and accumulated teaching experience during their career, are crucial sources of this identity.

3) Environmental factors could include classroom atmosphere, school culture, leadership, students, colleagues, social environment, societal

expectations, cultural norms, and national policies. For example, teachers' perceptions of school culture and leadership can either positively or negatively shape their TPI (Flores and Day, 2006). Negative aspects, such as competition among teachers, standardization of teaching practices, and bureaucratic elements, have the potential to impede progress and innovation (*ibid.*). Positive student-teacher relationships are highlighted as a crucial factor in a teacher's decision to continue teaching, as they provide valuable support for teachers (Proweller and Mitchener, 2004). This means that the interactions, experiences, and relationships teachers have with their students can influence how they perceive and develop their professional roles and self-concept as educators.

Later, in addition to the above three domains which focus on objective variables (including gender, age, years of teaching, teaching fields, teaching experience, and teaching environment and so on), Wei (2008) argues to encompass psychological factors, and then she points out two key aspects of psychological variables: professional cognition and professional emotion. Professional cognition is related to the two objects of TPI - the teacher profession itself and the internalized professional role. According to Wei (2008), professional cognition includes two primary factors: professional values (which refer to the teacher's positive understanding and evaluation of the significance and role of the teaching profession) and role values (which reflect about the teacher's positive understanding and evaluation of the importance of the "teacher role" to oneself). On the other hand, professional emotion corresponds to the sense of belonging to the profession and professional self-esteem; the sense of professional belonging reflects on the teacher's positive feelings and experiences about their relationship with their profession (*ibid.*).

Therefore, by examining these factors mentioned so far (individual background factors, personal experience factors, and environmental factors, and psychological factors), researchers could gain a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics that shape TPI.

While there have been numerous studies on TPI in primary and secondary education (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop, 2004; Wei, 2005; Wei, 2008; Wen and Xu, 2014; Yu, 2006), research on university teachers of TPI in the field of HEIs appear still be little. The development of TPI in HEIs settings can differ from that in primary or secondary education due to the multifaceted roles university teachers often undertake. It is widely acknowledged that in addition to their teaching responsibilities, university teachers frequently engage in research or professional practice. This complexity suggests that the process of identity development for university teachers is not only influenced by their pedagogical role but also by their roles as researchers or practitioners, thereby creating a unique intersection of identities that can impact their perception of self and their approach to teaching.

Van Lankveld *et al.* (2017) conducted a comprehensive analysis of 59 studies that were published in English language peer-reviewed journals and specifically focused on university teachers' identity. Through the methodology of thematic synthesis by analyzing and comparing the findings across the selected studies, the review concludes that the majority of the studies included in the analysis utilized qualitative research methods. Findings of this review also suggest that various factors play a significant role in the construction and development of teacher identities in HEIs. This involves examining the contextual factors that either reinforce (strengthening factors) or limit (constraining factors) the development of TPI. For instance, contacting with students and participation in staff development programs are found to be influential factors in strengthening teacher identity. Nevertheless, the broader context of higher education was found to have a constraining effect on the development of teacher identity. The direct work environment was identified as another significant factor, as it could either strengthen or constrain teacher identity depending on the extent to which teaching was valued within the department. Additionally, the review highlights several other factors, including workload, tensions between teaching and research responsibilities, recognition by others, and personal commitment to teaching (Van Lankveld *et al.,* 2017).

It is worth noting that, through conceptual understanding, Van Lankveld *et al.* (2017) identified five psychological processes that shape TPI within the HEIs context, namely, sense of appreciation, sense of connectedness, sense of competence, sense of commitment, and imagined future career trajectory. Sense of appreciation means the level of appreciation they perceive for their teaching role. This appreciation, or lack thereof, directly impacts their self-esteem and sense of academic worth. Sense of connectedness to others is identified as a key factor that strengthens one's teaching identity. Engaging with colleagues, both within and outside their department, through various platforms such as professional networks or staff development activities, fosters a sense of mutual trust and enhanced confidence. Sense of competence or the self-perceived ability to effectively perform teaching duties, is identified as a crucial factor in the formation of TPI. Initially, academics may hesitate to identify as teachers, but as they gain confidence and proficiency in their roles, this self-perception shifts, solidifying their identity as educators. Sense of commitment is often closely tied to a deep-seated desire to educate the next generation. University teachers with strong values, particularly those centered around student welfare, may experience significant identity struggles when these values clash with departmental directives or a neoliberal management culture. Imagined future career trajectory is often facilitated by the presence of senior colleagues who, through their successful teaching careers, serve as role models and provide a tangible representation of potential career progression.

Nevertheless, due to insufficient contextual information provided in the studies themselves, Van Lankveld *et al.*'s (2017) review appears to have limitation in the interpretation of those studies on university teachers. Specifically, the lack of clarity regarding the participants' roles, and the amount of time they dedicated to teaching activities made it challenging to discern whether teachers with varying roles experienced different degrees or types of identity tensions, such as conflicts between roles as researchers and educators (a common issue in academia where research often takes precedence). Besides, the authors themselves acknowledge a

potential bias in their research due to the limitation of sourcing only English articles, which could have resulted in an over-representation of studies from English-speaking countries. This methodological choice may have skewed their findings, as it could have inadvertently excluded diverse perspectives, methodologies, and findings from non-English speaking contexts, thereby influencing the generalizability and applicability of their conclusions. Therefore, situation in China's HEIs context about TPI may be different. Although there are many studies on TPI focusing on primary and secondary schools in China, as mentioned earlier, there is still limited relevant research in its HEIs context.

2.3.3 Conceptual Definition of TPI

Given the fact that teachers have multiple roles or responsibilities in institutional contexts (e.g., teacher, researcher, mentor, supervisor, and administrator), their negotiation and reflection of personal perceptions on professional identities is a dynamic, unique and ongoing process (Clark, Hyde and Drennan, 2013). It appears that the definition of TPI has not been "*operationalized at all*" (Zare-ee and Ghasedi, 2014, p.1992) though it has been interpreted differently among current studies without conformity with some of them trying to explain its construction (Bakhtin, 1981; Coldron and Smith, 1999; Gee, 2001; Volkmann and Anderson, 1998). Due to its complex and multifaceted construct, the main problem in existing research on TPI is the lack of universally unified and accepted definition, and clear conceptual definition or confusion in concept application (Wei, 2008), leading to broad and inconsistent interpretations across various studies (Trede, Macklin and Bridges 2012). Some research even neglects to provide a definition for professional identity, further contributing to the ambiguity surrounding the construct (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004).

This inconsistency in defining TPI underscores the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the concept. This study then will mainly adopt the explanation given by Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) because of its popularity as their article has been widely cited by most studies. According to them, also by referring to the above reviewed

influencing factors on TPI, basically there are four features of TPI which can be clarified below:

1). TPI is an unceasing process of interpretation, negotiation and reflections on the experiences;

2). TPI is the integration of personal perceptions or understandings with expectation from the contextual world;

3). TPI contains several sub-identities (e.g., teacher, researcher, mentor, supervisor, administrator etc.), one of which is always the core;

4). Agency is the key element of TPI, which means teachers' proactive attitude during the development process.

Based on the above four features, this study defines TPI (re-)construction as: *teachers' agency in the integration of personal perceptions within the contextual world, involving identity negotiation and identity reflections of their previous and current experiences*.

Accordingly, dynamic, multiplicity, uniqueness and vulnerability can be summarized as the main characteristics of TPI (Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop, 2004; Day *et al.*, 2006; Farrell, 2011; Wen and Xu, 2014). Dynamic means TPI may change as time goes by since it is an ongoing negotiation process. This characteristic is consistent with the lifelong learning feature of teacher development (Day, 2002). Multiplicity refers to teachers' multiple sub-identities or roles. For example, after investigating the middle school TPI in Canada, Farrell (2011) claimed that ESL teachers' professional identity mainly contains three categories, namely, teachers as managers (roles include decision maker, motivator, task executor, entertainer etc.), teachers as professors (e.g., collaborator, leaner, knowledge carrier), teachers as culture assimilators (e.g., social worker, caregiver). Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) also revealed that teachers regarded themselves as professors or experts in specific knowledge, teaching methods and ethics. Uniqueness emphasizes the

importance of teacher as being an individual, their personal backgrounds, perceptions and negotiations on the relationship between themselves and the context. In terms of vulnerability, some studies have pointed out that the vulnerability is mainly decided by teachers' emotional engagement (Kelchtermans, 2005; Lasky, 2005; O'Connor, 2008). For instance, earlier in the 1990s, through interviewing Belgian primary school teachers, Belgian researcher Kelchtermans (2005) found out that it is inevitable for teachers to have negative emotions as most of them will experience or suffer feelings of helplessness and doubt. Lasky (2005) also added that in order to help secondary school teachers to overcome vulnerability and to be successful teachers, they are suggested to be more open to show their vulnerability to the students and build a harmonious relationship with the students. Thence, the four key features (dynamic, multiplicity, uniqueness and vulnerability) show the complex construction process of TPI.

2.3.4 Research on Returnee Academics' Professional Identity (Re-)construction in China's HEIs

It appears that there have only been three studies on returning Chinese teachers' professional identity construction in China's HEIs so far, indicating that this area is still in its early stages and yet to be further explored. Two studies exist in the Chinese literature: Yang's (2017) doctoral dissertation on Chinese university EFL returnee teachers' professional identity (TPI) construction based on data collected in Shanghai; Gu's (2023) investigation on the challenges faced by returnee academics in Chinese universities regarding their identity recognition and value guidance strategies based on data collected in Dalian. Another study comes from the literature in English, that is, Yu and Yu's (2023) most recent study titled with "a mixed-methods approach on returnee academics' professional identity and its influencing factors in Chinese universities".

Through qualitative interviews with 16 teachers working across 8 universities in Dalian, China, Gu (2023) reveals that while overseas returnee academics bring advanced education concepts and scientific

technology, their exposure to foreign cultures may hinder their ability to integrate with the values upheld by Chinese universities; many interviewed teachers expressed a weak understanding and connection with Chinese socialist values, citing feelings of distance and doubts about China's legal environment and social fairness. As a result, returnee academics often grapple with identity crises caused by economic pressures, career expectations, and conflicts between personal ideals and reality, which can potentially hinder their efficacy as university teachers. Recommendations from the study highlight the urgent need for Chinese universities to implement value-oriented strategies to assist overseas returnee academics in discovering the educational value within their disciplines, establishing a clear role positioning, and enhancing their sense of self-identity; it is suggested that universities employ scientific management practices to strengthen group identification among high-level overseas returnees, fostering a cooperative culture that promotes equality and freedom; efforts should also be made to create a relaxed and harmonious teaching atmosphere that supports the professional growth and integration of these teachers into the Chinese educational system (*ibid.*). Although Gu's (2023) study is typical general description and the overall design and process of the research are relatively rough and not rigorous enough, his findings may still offer certain reference value to our study to some extent.

Through a comprehensive review of the literature on TPI and in-depth narrative interview of four participants from Shanghai distinguished universities, Yang's (2017) doctorate dissertation has gained many citations and thus is much valuable. She concludes that factors influence university returnee EFL teachers' professional identity can be divided into three categories: personal factors, interpersonal factors, and social contextual factors. Personal factors include family background, overseas experiences, personality and motivation; interpersonal factors contain the group that returnee academics often communicate with, and other important people that have significant impacts on them; social contextual factors include government policies, university reform and rules, and faculty or institutional culture (*ibid.*). The findings of Yang's study to some

extent have echoed the research done abroad. For example, Zare-ee and Ghasedi (2014) did a synthesis review of previous studies on the topic of TPI, and then they did their own empirical investigation targeting on 47 student teachers who were preparing to become EFL teachers in Iran. The findings of this research indicated that various factors play a significant role in shaping the TPI of EFL teachers in Iran. These factors encompass historical factors (such as the individual's prior experiences and early teaching encounters), sociological factors (including parental expectations and personal comparisons to native English speakers), psychological factors (such as personal perceptions and constructions of professional identity), and cultural factors (including teachers' perspectives within their local context and the influence of policy makers). In another study, Starks and Nicholars (2017) conducted a pilot study to investigate three Vietnamese EFL teachers' identity construction after their two-year study abroad in Australia, and this study is helpful to understand returnees' reconstruction of their identities in home country through rejecting, adopting, and combining into a new one (*ibid*.).

Interestingly, the three categories of factors being mentioned by Yang (2017) are almost the same but just with different labels and slight differences compared to the factors concluded by Shi (2017) when studying factors influencing university returnee academics' status of repatriate adaptation, a study conducted in Beijing universities by in-depth interviewing 30 returnee academics across different disciplines. As has been mentioned earlier in section 2.2.1, Shi (2017) concludes three re-adaptation factors which are personal factors, organizational factors (support from university/local community) and environmental factors (larger cultural background). Although both of them did not mention about the three-level framework initiated by Risman (2004) in analyzing identity, those factors clarified by Yang (2017) and Shi (2017) actually may be fit into the three levels respectively: individual level, interactional level and institutional level.

It should be noted that both Yang (2017) and Shi (2017) did not cover teachers' emotion, which can also be considered as another important

factor that influences TPI construction (Zare-ee and Ghasedi, 2014). Wei (2008) and Van Lankveld *et al.* (2017) point out that teachers perceive themselves as part of the teaching community and often experiences emotional experiences shared with the teaching profession. As noted by Day (2002), teachers often find themselves obliged to adhere to institutional regulations without any emotional investment, particularly in the context of educational reform. The influence of institutional or school reform on the transformation of their professional identity can evoke a range of emotions, both positive and negative, thereby potentially affecting the construction of TPI (Barrett, 2009; Day and Smethem, 2009; Veen and Lasky, 2005).

Hence, by referring to both previous influencing factors on TPI and Risman's (2004) identity category, it appears that factors being discussed may be roughly summarized into three broad types with reorganized aspects, namely, individual factors (include individual background factors, personal factors, personal experience, and emotional factors or psychological factors), interactional factors (interpersonal and organizational factors), and institutional factors (include social contextual and environmental factors). Nevertheless, considering the complicated and overlapping nature of those factors, more in-depth investigation on returnee academics in non-Beijing or non-Shanghai oriented from other disciplines in addition to EFL are still lacking, and thus this area needs further exploration.

It can be seen that based on current research, TPI is shaped not just by their individual experiences, but also by the broader societal and institutional contexts in which they operate. Yet, there is no unified view on the structure of TPI, making it a weak area in the research field. Most existing studies on this topic are based on literature analysis and theoretical speculation, with few grounded in rigorous statistical analysis (Wei, 2008). Besides, most studies focus on returnee academics tend to explore the size, motivation, factors influencing their return, and strategies for attracting these talents. Considering there is still a lack of focus on the professional development of these returnee academics once

they are back in China, Yu and Yu (2023) did a statistical analysis on the professional identity of university teachers, known as "returnee academics," who were born in mainland China, have engaged in studying abroad for over three years with doctoral degrees gained abroad, and now have returned to work as full-time teachers in China's HEIs. The study seeks to answer two main questions: the current state of these returnee academics' professional identity and the factors influencing their professional identity in the context of China's HEIs.

The study used a mixed-methods approach involving quantitative sampling and qualitative interviews. In the quantitative phase of the study, through using official university websites, 900 valid emails were collected, 900 questionnaires were sent out, and received 198 valid responses. The researchers identified these teachers primarily at higher-level universities across various regions of China. It should be noted that The TPI scale used for measurement in this study is a tool developed by Wei (2008), whose scale is widely applicable for measuring primary and secondary school teachers' professional identity in China. Nevertheless, Yu and Yu (2023) did not provide a whole picture of the questionnaire with clear explanations, and only briefly showed a total of 9 factors used into their questionnaire. These factors are occupational ability, occupational emotion, interpersonal relationship, school system and income level, plus another 4 factors tailored to the unique experiences of returnee academics: returning motivations, career planning, learning and further study, and work pressure. In the qualitative phase, in order to ensure it accurately represented the broader population of returnee academics, representing a range of academic disciplines with various academic qualifications and titles, 6 targeted participants from various regions and universities across China were selected for semi-structured one-on-one interviews, providing deeper insights into the factors affecting their TPI.

The study concludes that these returnee academics generally have a high level of professional identity, particularly in their professional values and professional behavior tendencies, but less so in their role values and sense of professional belonging. Specifically, the research indicates that

positive emotions can enhance their sense of belonging and satisfaction in their profession. In other words, the more positively returnee academics feel about their work, the stronger their professional identity becomes, which can impact their job satisfaction and performance. Moreover, occupational ability, which includes their work abilities and how they manage their workload, significantly impacts their professional identity, or how they perceive their role and value in their profession. The study found that most returnee academics are satisfied with their work abilities and workload, and this satisfaction positively influences their professional identity, making them feel more confident and committed in their roles as educators. Besides, professional expectations, which refer to the goals and aspirations these teachers have for their careers, influenced by their personal circumstances and societal context. The study found a negative correlation between these expectations and professional identity, suggesting that the more ambitious the career expectations, the less these teachers identify with their profession. This could be due to a perceived gap between their current occupational abilities and the demands of their occupational goals.

In terms of the environmental factors, the material conditions, which include salary and resource allocation, significantly correlate with TPI, with many expressing dissatisfactions with their income and resources compared to the effort they put into their work. These dissatisfactions lead to a decrease in their professional identity and work enthusiasm, which becomes a significant issue in the academic field. Interpersonal relationships, such as those between teachers and students, colleagues, and leaders, play a crucial role in shaping TPI, with harmonious relationships leading to higher job satisfaction. The study found that a harmonious interpersonal environment, where teachers feel like part of a supportive "family", enhances the quality of their professional life and strengthens their professional identity. The university system, encompassing the university rules, organizational structure, and evaluation system, also impacts TPI, with dissatisfaction in these areas potentially leading to a decrease in professional identity and job satisfaction. However, the study reveals that returnee academics are

generally dissatisfied with these systems, citing issues such as bureaucracy, overwhelming responsibilities, and lack of support for their career development.

It is true that Yu and Yu's (2023) study fills a gap in the field of returnee academics' professional identity in China's HEIs by using statistical analysis with very comprehensive research findings. However, there are three limitations which need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the utilization of TPI scales was originally developed for primary and secondary school teachers by Wei (2008), which might not be entirely applicable to assess the performance of university teachers, especially those who have returned from studying abroad with doctoral degrees. Hence, the findings of this study can only be interpreted with caution and considered as indicative rather than definitive. Secondly, it is crucial to consider various individual factors in detail, such as the specific places of origin for the returnee academics (Liu *et al.*, 2022), yet Yu and Yu's (2023) study did not provide any detailed information about this. Additionally, TPI itself is a multifaceted construct, and the influence of overseas experiences on its measurement could not be overlooked.

2.4 Gaps in the Existing Literature on Returnee Academics in China's HEIs

In summary, existing studies on returnee academics have explored the returners' intentions, their cultural readjustment, their performance, perceptions and adaptation to the domestic academic environment and system, as well as influencing factors on TPI, and improvement strategies related to the adaptability from various perspectives. Most of the research methods primarily employed qualitative, often used interviews, with some on statistic analysis, and a few using mixed method by combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. The findings reviewed so far have shed light on the current situation of returnee academics in China's HEIs, some factors influence their TPI construction, and highlighted some issues in the academic system and environment in China. The contributions or positive influences that those returnee academics have brought to their

affiliated institutions appear unquestionable, highlighting the increasing demand for this group of teachers and the practical significance of researching their post-return adaptation and development.

Research on the cultural re-adaptation of returnee academics in China's HEIs appears still insufficient, with bias not only on geographic focus in Chinese big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and recently Guangzhou, Tianjin and Nanjing, but also on distinguished universities (usually the first and second layers as mentioned in Figure 1.1) in China. One possible explanation for this obvious geographical bias towards those developed cosmopolitan cities in China could be that universities in these big cities are more economically developed towards internationalization, and thus have attracted more talented returnee academics. This may lead to more participants being available for studying. In terms of the targeted distinguished university institutions being researched are mostly the top ones in China, such as the "985" or "211" universities. Nevertheless, experiences of those PhD-holder returnee academics in the third and fourth layers still remain to be an under researched area. Since the third- and fourth-layer university types take up most in Chinese HEIs, returnee academics' experiences back in those Chinese HEIs are worth exploring for the purpose of improving the whole development of China's higher education system.

Moreover, many existing studies have focused on macro or policy decision-making aspects of the professional lives of returnee academics, in-depth individual investigation of the dynamic processes of their professional identity development appears to be still lacking. For example, based on the "2014 Chinese university faculty survey", Yu (2018) found out that the overseas experiences of the 910 returnee academics (all have their PhD degrees attained abroad, including those who have finished their post-doctoral studies abroad) among the total 4577 academics in 88 Chinese HEIs (including "985" and "211" types) across 13 provinces in China have accumulated their advantages for the internationalization of their academic career, and those academic returnees have promoted the internationalization of China's higher education system. The study also

revealed that the better the universities are, the more returnees have been found. Possibly realizing the positive functions that such returnees have played on the internationalization of the universities, those better universities like "985" and "211", as well as the ordinary ones have made greater efforts in attracting returnee academics. Therefore, although domestic research has made progress compared to similar research abroad, there is a scarcity of research on the readjustment of returnee academics in ordinary universities in second-tier cities and the construction of their teachers' professional identity.

Additionally, while many studies have examined the academic development of returnee academics and their adaptation to the Chinese academic system, there is a dearth of studies specifically investigating the professional identity of returnee academics in China's HEIs. For instance, Chinese domestic scholars Wen and Xu (2014) reviewed literature on TPI based on a search of 114 publications cited by SSCI (social science citation index such as in SAGE, Elsevier, JSTOR, Gale, EBSCO and Wiley Online Libraries), and they point out that targeted teacher participants being researched can generally be categorized into four types: The first type can be divided based on different levels or grades, like teachers from primary schools, middle schools, universities, as well as those teacher trainers; it should be pointed out that the first two categories (primary and middle school teachers) have made up the majority of the total literature, whereas the number of studies on the latter two (university teachers and teacher trainers) is much smaller, accounting for only a small fraction of the total; The second type is divided according to different disciplines such as math teacher, music teacher and EFL teacher and so on, it seems that many have focused on EFL teachers (i.e., Starks and Nicholars, 2017; Yang, 2017; Zare-ee and Ghasedi, 2014); The third type is based on the specific characteristics that teachers have, like homosexual teachers, and teachers with dyslexia and so on; The fourth categorization is divided based on teachers' different development stages, such as practice teacher, novice teacher, expert or experienced teacher and so on, from novice to expert seems to be the main trend among the current literature.

Previous studies examining TPI have revealed its links with various teacher-related factors, including job retention, job burnout, self-efficacy, motivation, commitment, and job satisfaction (Gaziel, 1995; Hofman and Kremer, 1981; Moore and Hofman, 1998). These studies suggest that a strong professional identity can help prevent teachers from leaving their jobs. However, it is important to note that current research on TPI is still in its early stages, particularly on returnee academics' professional identity in China's HEIs context, though many studies focusing on primary and secondary schools' TPI have been reviewed.

According to Yu and Yu's (2023) findings, the most recent study specifically focuses on returnee academics' professional identity (re-)construction in China's HEIs, returnee academics generally have a strong professional identity, particularly in terms of their professional behavior, but they score lower in their sense of professional belonging, although some expressed dissatisfaction with specific aspects of their work. The study also found that both personal factors (such as occupational emotion, ability, and expectation) and environmental factors (like material conditions, interpersonal relationships, and professional environment) influence their professional identity, with material conditions and the professional environment having the most significant impact. However, it is important to note that the results should be interpreted cautiously, as they serve primarily as a reference point. This caution is warranted due to limitations such as the utilization of Wei's (2008) TPI scale, originally developed for primary and secondary school teachers in China, and the lack of detailed participant information regarding overseas experience and place of origin. Thus, more detailed information on returnee academics is needed since detailed participant information may also influence their TPI (re-)construction.

In light of these gaps, this study adopts a qualitative research approach, utilizing semi-structured in-depth interviews as the key method to thoroughly explore perceptions and experiences of returnee academics' repatriate adaptation and their professional identity (re-)construction

under the internationalization of an application-oriented university in a second-tier city in China. This study therefore aims to address some of the limitations in the existing research by focusing on the three research questions (see p.17).

In the following section, I present the theoretical frameworks which have been used to underpin my research.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

Based on the definition of TPI in section 2.3.3, it is proposed that three theoretical constructs can be applied in this study: Wenger's Community of Practice Theory (CoPT) and Bourdieu's social practice theory (SPT) to account for sociocultural perspectives, and Moscovici's social cognition representation theory (SCRT) to represent psychological perspectives, each of which will be explained in more detail below.

2.5.1 Wenger's Community of Practice Theory (CoPT)

The concept of community of practice (CoP) was first pointed out by social anthropologist Jean Lave and computer scientist Etienne Wenger in their work titled with "*Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*" for the purpose of providing a template to analyze and test the participants' learning within certain social interaction (1991). Their work to a large extent has changed the conventional cognitive learning mode (Piaget, 1952) which emphasized learning to be an individual's internal forming process. Instead, Lave and Wenger (1991) point out that learning is dependent on social context, and the best way to learn is to interact within a community which is generated by both professionals or ordinary fellows who share similar perspectives and interests. That is, CoPT mainly focuses on the interaction between the novice and the expert within certain community, and the process of the novices' professional identity construction (Li *et al.*, 2009). In 1998, in the book "*Community of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*", Wenger (1998) further points out that identity construction is the process of practical learning in the community by agents' independent actions. He clarifies that CoP is not necessarily an

organization with clear boundaries, rather, it is an activity system containing participants' mutual engagement, shared knowledge and commonalities (*ibid.*). More specifically, the construction of identity is a dual process, integrating both identification and negotiability (*ibid.*). Identification is the process of being participative and reificative: being participative means the process of identifying something or someone, which mainly refers to an individual's social experience, engagement and self-involvement in social affairs; being reificative mainly refers to the confirmation or recognition of being a certain kind of person or a role through a description or by other physical characteristics (*ibid.*). In terms of negotiability, it refers to the ability or skill to generate meaning and make sense within the community or society legitimately (Wenger, 1998). In other words, by applying their meaning to a new social context, individuals' negotiability can allow them to win cooperation with others and thus confirm their membership within the new social context.

However, it should be pointed out that CoPT has been questioned or challenged by many scholars. Criticisms are mainly about problems such as ambiguities or vagueness of the definition of CoP (Contu and Willmott, 2003; Hughes, Jewson and Unwin, 2007), ignorance of the power dynamics (Lindkvist, 2005), inadequate empirical evidence to support their case without considering political and historical aspects (Roberts, 2006), and questionable likeness of the concept in nowadays digital age (Greenhow, Robelia and Hughes, 2009; Guo and Lei, 2020). For example, Guo and Lei's (2020) focus on Chinese academics who have studied abroad and maintain professional connections with their host countries, aiming to explore the evolution of CoP in a transnational context. The authors examined the phenomenon of transnational mobility, which refers to the movement of individuals across different countries for work or study. This movement challenges the traditional notion of a CoP being confined within a specific geographic boundary, emphasizing that physical boundaries are becoming less significant in shaping work, learning, and identities in today's interconnected world. Specifically, Clarke (2008) argued that although peaceful coexistence, interpersonal mutual help and trust within the community do not necessarily exist, conflicts and

resistances during the process of identity construction in the CoP have not been fully explained; CoPT appears to have not explained sufficiently on how to deal with those individuals who are marginalized, and on what factors are influencing identity construction (*ibid.*).

In order to clarify the definition of CoPT, Wenger and Wenger-Traynor (2015) try to define it as a collective of individuals whose commonality stems from a shared concern or passion regarding a specific domain to which they dedicate their efforts. This community engages in regular interactions, thereby facilitating their mutual learning and improvement in the respective area of interest. Accordingly, three critical characteristics of CoPT could be outlined. The first characteristic is "domain" which entails that members possess a common interest, targeting a specific field or subject matter (*ibid.*). This implies that individuals within the community foster a shared understanding of the domain, which serves as a foundation for their interactions and collective pursuit. The second characteristic is "community" which emphasizes the development of a cohesive social unit, wherein individuals actively participate in communal activities on a regular basis (*ibid.*). This consistent engagement facilitates the establishment of a sense of belonging and encourages the exchange of ideas, experiences, and insights among group members. The third characteristic is "practice" which denotes that through the ongoing and collaborative activities undertaken within the community, participants progressively acquire novel knowledge, skills, and competencies that are directly relevant to their shared interest (Wenger, 1998; Wenger *et al.*, 2002; Wenger and Wenger-Traynor, 2015). This dynamic process of mutual engagement and learning enables community members to enhance their abilities, refine their expertise, and further develop their collective understanding in relation to the domain of interest.

It is worth noting that CoPT is still regarded by many researchers as one of the most useful theories to study teachers' identity construction (Bian, 2013; Li and Qui, 2016; Trent, 2013; Tsui, 2007; Yang, 2017). For instance, Tsui (2007) maintains that this theory explained the mutual interaction nature between individuals and the community in which

individual participated actively. Bian (2013) also supports that this theory revealed the multidimensional aspects of identity, including sociocultural dimension, space-time dimension and political dimension. Moreover, on the basis of summarizing current research on teachers' identity construction, Li and Qiu (2016) admit that CoPT provides a new perspective to understand the dynamic nature of TPI as this theory more or less helps to explain the concrete construction process of TPI in the context of school community. What is more, since learning as a social practice is the process of identity construction in CoP, and the construction of TPI then is also about the process of teachers' self-reflection and self-learning, then CoPT is very helpful in analyzing TPI construction (Yang, 2017). Therefore, I will use Wenger's CoPT as one of the key analytical theories to refer to in this study.

2.5.2 Bourdieu's Social Practice Theory (SPT)

Bourdieu's (1977) social practice theory (SPT), which consists of concepts such as capital, field and habitus, has also been influential in social sciences (Maggio, 2017), as well as in understanding identity study (Yang, 2017). Bourdieu (1984, p. 101) designed a formula about the three interdependent and relational concepts, which indicates that one's behavioural practice is the result of the interaction of one's habitus and capital within a certain field:

$$(habitus)(capital) + field = practice$$

Capital basically can be divided into three forms -- social capital, economic capital and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977). Social capital refers to social connections and networks; economic capital means resources, such as assets or money, that can be converted to the other two capitals (cultural and social); cultural capital is defined as "*long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body*" and "*external wealth converted into an integral part of the person, into a habitus*" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 82-83); it not only refers to cognitive skills, involving with officially accredited degrees, technical competence or skills (i.e., human capital), relevant knowledge or linguistic

skills, but also refers to non-cognitive skills, which are intangible or internalized embodies, such as social-behavioural competence (i.e., adaptive ability to be familiar with relevant contexts). These three capitals are mutually convertible or constitutive. This means, for example, the investment of economic capital can provide abundant time and money spent on one's education, which is conducive to the development of cultural capital, this in turn again, can enhance one's other capitals, such as contributing to the accumulation of economic capital and broader social networks.

Social and cultural capitals are frequently categorized as symbolic capital, a concept that Bourdieu (1986) highlights in his article "The Forms of Capital". Bourdieu emphasizes that symbolic capital, often intangible, encompasses resources such as honours, reputation, or titles that an individual receives based on the recognition of their prestige by others. In his works (Bourdieu, 1977; 1986), Bourdieu argues that an individual's power is not solely derived from economic capital but also from symbolic capitals, which can be converted into economic capital.

Field is a relatively independent space without clear boundaries between each space, and within each has its own rules and logic (Bourdieu, 1977). Field can exist and even overlap at different levels, like "*with smaller fields (e.g., family) nested in larger fields (e.g., educational field, economic field)*" (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014, p. 195). Considering this aspect, it seems that field tends to be quite similar to Wenger's (1998) concept of community (CoP), but according to Bourdieu (1977), field is a space full of competition, and it needs to be considered from relational perspective since the boundaries between each field are not clear. Take the field of a social society as an example, social agents within the field can occupy either dominant position or sub-dominant position depending on the capitals that the social agents possess. That is, the developmental strategy that social agents selected within one field and how they perceive the field are based on their position and investments of different capitals (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Thus, the field is full of conflicts and struggles. In education area, Edgerton and Roberts (2014) point out that

"*all fields fall within the overarching field of power (social space), which is structured by two competing principles of social hierarchy: the distribution of economic capital and the distribution of cultural capital*" (p. 195).

Habitus is the key concept in SPT. Bourdieu (1977) calls it "*socialized subjectivity*" and defines it as "*a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks*" (p. 82-83). Edgerton and Roberts (2014) define habitus as "*a set of acquired dispositions, the internalized interpretive framework, rooted in family upbringing and conditioned by one's position in the social structure, through which one perceives the social world and one's prospects within it*" (p.198). Habitus could be both structured or structuring as it is durable and transferable, which often include one's "*schemata or structures of perception, conception and action (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 27)*" and methods of "*standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 70)*" that formed continuously by one's changing circumstances and experiences.

It is true that the congruence between habitus and field is important. The relationship between habitus and field can be like in the case of "fish in water", in which Bourdieu explains that "*the world encompasses me but I comprehend it precisely because it comprises me. It is because this world has produced me, because it has produced the categories of thoughts that I apply to it, that it appears to me as self-evident*" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.128). This indicates that change is unlikely under the condition that the habitus of the fish and the condition of a particular field of water align well, and vice versa. This observation highlights the significance of the alignment between a fish's habitus and the specific conditions of its aquatic environment in determining the likelihood of change. A strong congruence between the innate tendencies and traits of the fish and the suitability of its habitus limits the potential for adaptation or transformation. Conversely, when the habitus and environmental conditions are misaligned, the fish may face difficulties in adaptation and

may need to modify their behaviours or seek out more compatible environments.

In a related vein, Bourdieu (1990) point out that "*No two individual histories are identical, so no two individual habituses are identical*" (p.46). He posits that individual habituses are inherently distinct due to the individuality of personal histories, and thus no two individuals share identical life experiences, leading to variations in their habituses. This acknowledgment underscores the historical sedimentation and innovative nature of habitus, which are shaped by the complex interplay of personal trajectories and sociocultural influences. Furthermore, it is important to note that an individual's social destination cannot be solely determined by their social origins. While social origins undoubtedly play a role, the influence of other factors and individual agency should not be overlooked. For example, it could be widely accepted that one social agent's first habitus is produced from family, and schools may result in their second habitus. The cultural capital acknowledged by the dominant classes can also be widely embodied in school curriculum, and thus Bourdieu believes that schools reproduce the initial class inequality.

However, Bourdieu's habitus theory has faced criticism for its biased focus on objectivism and failure to clarify the duality of subjectivity and objectivity (King, 2000). Additionally, it has been criticized for emphasizing continuity rather than change (Maggio, 2017). Bourdieu's concept of habitus seems to unify individuals and confine them within a closed system of dispositions. However, Bourdieu (1990a) argues that habitus is not devoid of choice but rather limited by social structures. Individual actors can transform their habitus according to their own expectations and aspirations, implementing specific practices. In other words, habitus can be consciously controlled through individuals' reflexive awareness of the working environment within human society.

Despite its historical and changeable nature, habitus serves as a framework to explain and account for individual practices (Bourdieu, 2006). It is required by the field and internalized in an individual's practice,

shaping and constraining their thinking and behavior within the field. Consequently, habitus tends to steer individuals towards choosing behaviours that align with their past experiences, which have proven to be successful.

It may be true that after long time studying, teaching or researching abroad, returnee academics will form their own habitus of teaching behavior or beliefs which have been gradually internalized from their previous foreign universities' system or rules. As Gu and Schweisfurth (2017) claims that upon students returning home country "*the identification of self as an outsider often becomes a quiet, internalized conversation that is mixed with nostalgia for their past international mobility experience. [...] The attendant exposure to new and different ways of life and of living 'makes the familiar strange' and can serve as a platform for a reflexive process (*p. 480)". Such internalized habitus can to some extent influence those teachers' practical teaching or researching after their return. Individuals can obtain a beneficial position when negotiating a new identity by both investing different capitals (e.g., economic, social, and cultural) within a field or context and meanwhile updating their habitus in the process of adapting to the new field or context (Yang, 2017). In other words, habitus can affect individual's identity unconsciously through influencing the capital that individuals have obtained during practical communication. In this study then, Bourdieu's SPT is adopted to analyze TPI (re-)construction, especially the concepts of habitus and capital are used to probe into university returnee academics' repatriate adaptation status quo via participants' experiences.

2.5.3 Moscovici's Social Cognition Representation Theory (SCRT)

Moscovici's (2000) social cognition representation theory (SCRT) is also useful in this study as a means to guide the investigation on returnee academics' perceptions from a social psychological perspective in constructing their teaching identity. According to Moscovici (2000), social cognition can be classified into four categories: rule-based identity (people with this type of identity will obey the social or context rules), cue-based

identity (people with this type of identity will regard themselves differently to the social entities, and are often regarded themselves as heroines or heroes), exemplar-based identity (people with this type of identity will imitate or follow their ideal model teacher), and finally schema-based identity (people with this type of identity are more flexible and will respond to various situations or contexts).

By using Moscovici's (2000) SCRT, Xu (2012) once did a three years' longitudinal case study on the transformation of professional identities of four novice ESL teachers working either in primary or middle schools in China. Xu (2012) finds out that the four novice ESL teachers' identities have changed from either cue-based or exemplar-based identities to schema-based or rule-based identities respectively. This means all the four participants' professional identities have transformed from imagined identity into practiced one. By combining the explanations from Anderson (1991) and Norton (2001), Xu (2012) defined the former imagined identity as being "*constructed in the imagination about relationships between oneself and other people and about things in the same time and space with which the individual nevertheless has virtually no direct interaction (p. 569);* The latter practiced identity is constructed in the communities of practice (CoP) via interaction from the real world. It can be seen then that imagined identity is contrary to practiced identity. Pressures from the institutions are the main cause for the identity changes, as a result, Xu (2012) calls for more training sessions to guide novice teachers before they start to teach in real practice. As for this study, most university teachers with PhD degrees gained abroad are novice teachers working in University Z, and there will be an unavoidable social cognition process. Therefore, SCRT can be a useful theory specifically when interpreting returnee academics' professional identity (re-)construction via their personal perceptions and experiences.

2.5.4 Conceptual Framework for This Study

Varghese *et al.* (2005) have argued that no one single theory could adequately and clearly explain the complexity of teacher identity, and

they thus call for multiple theoretical framework methods. On the basis of reviewing and analyzing existing research and theories on returnee academics and their TPI, this paper proposes the conceptual framework depicted in Figure 2.1 below:
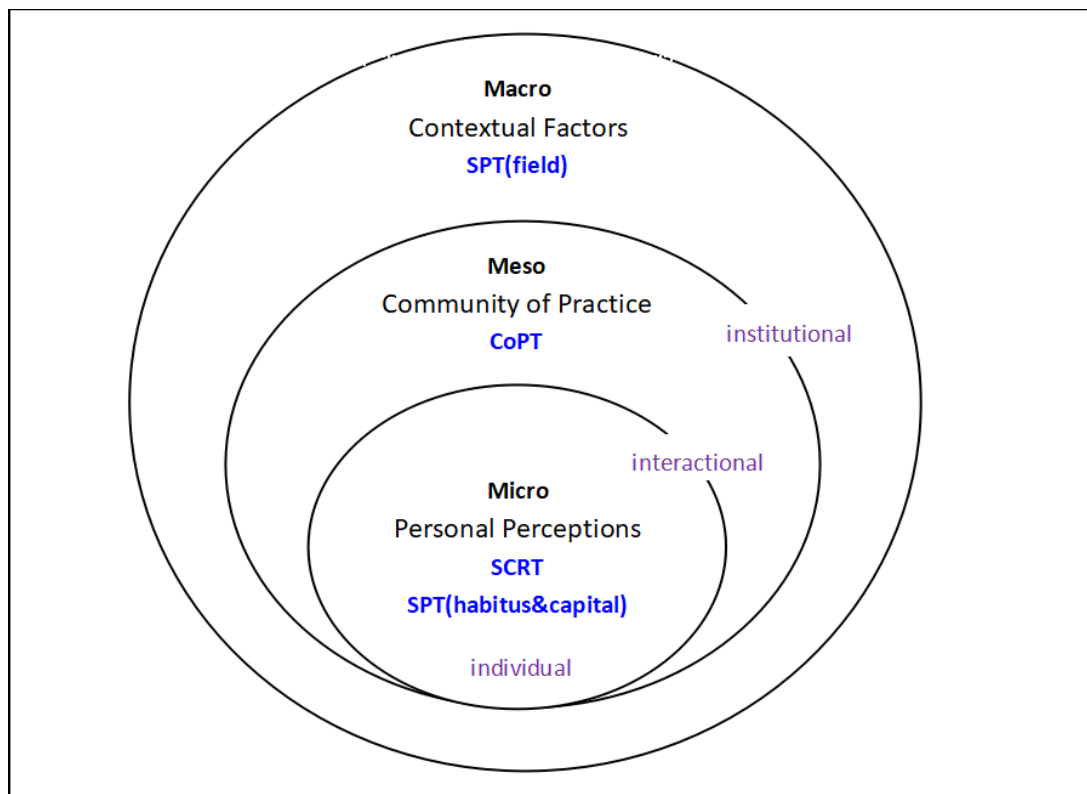
Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework for This Study

Figure 2.1 above shows a three-level relationship, which is congruent with Risman's (2004) three-level framework in analyzing identity: from micro in the middle on individual level (personal perceptions), to meso on interactional level (CoP), and to the outer circle macro on institutional level (contextual factors). As has been summarised earlier in this study (p.55) interactional factors often include interpersonal and organizational factors, and institutional factors include social contextual and environmental factors, but the boundaries are not exactly clear. Hence, 'interactional' and 'institutional' are shown as boundaries in different levels. Current theories and literature have generally revealed that individual is the core and main agency during the process of identity construction, so I put personal perceptions in the middle of the three circles. SCRT is the potential guiding theory in this micro circle, together with two key factors

from SPT (capitals - include social, cultural, and economic investment; habitus - through directly connecting to individual's reflection). CoPT is put in the second meso circle since every individual can be part of different communities (e.g., family, friends, disciplines, faculty, different community groups), within which an individual can have self-reflection and self-learning. Contextual factors which may cover a variety of broader factors (e.g., field - internationalization of China's HEIs, and in this special case, field could refer to University Z or even the whole HEIs, reflecting about broader social cultural values) are put in the third circle as the macro level. The three circles can influence each other mainly via individual's identity negotiation and identity reflection. Especially, both contextual factors (macro) and CoP (meso) can influence personal perceptions (micro) directly, and vice versa. It is also worth noting that this conceptual framework aligns with the conceptual definition of TPI (re-)construction well in section 2.3.3, namely, *teachers' agency in the integration of personal perceptions within the contextual world, involving identity negotiation and identity reflections of their previous and current experiences* (see p. 51).

Chapter summary

This chapter has reviewed the current literature on returnee academics in China's HEIs. As I hope to have shown the existing studies appear to focus primarily on cultural readjustment experienced by returnee academics and their academic career adjustment. Returnee academics evidently play a significant role in various aspects of academia, bringing advanced teaching concepts, promoting global competence, and contributing to the internationalization of Chinese universities. Understanding the unique findings and implications of each study, as well as considering contextual factors, enhanced our understanding of the academic contributions of returnee academics, though problems as expressed by these returnee academics such as re-entry or re-adaptive challenges exist (Chao, 2014; Chen, 2016; Shi, 2017).

My review has also considered the construct of Teachers' Professional Identity (TPI). As I hope to have shown, to date there has been a dearth of research on returnee academics' professional identity (re-)construction in China's HEIs, with most of the literature on TPI focusing on Primary and Secondary school contexts rather than tertiary education. Filling this gap in the extant literature is therefore one of the aims of this current study. In the following chapter, I will outline and justify the approaches I have taken to my research methodology.

Chapter 3 Research Methodology

Introduction

This chapter discusses the research methodology which has been employed in my study. It begins by discussing my approaches to ontology and epistemology and how these have influenced the overall research design. I then discuss my choice of an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm, leading to an exploration of my research questions and aims. The chapter then continues with a consideration of the specific methods and processes I followed when gathering my data. I close the chapter with a discussion of ethical issues.

3.1 Ontological and Epistemological Considerations

The selection of an appropriate research methodology is often influenced by a researcher's ontological and epistemological assumptions. These

philosophical concepts provide researchers with a foundation for understanding and approaching the world and in so doing, shape their choices in research methodology (Cohen *et al.,* 2007). Ontology concerns the nature of reality and what exists by seeking to understand the fundamental categories of existence and the relationships between them; epistemology, on the other hand, deals with how knowledge is acquired by examining the nature of truth, belief, and justification, and investigates the criteria for determining what constitutes knowledge (*ibid*.).

Very often, quantitative research as the name suggests, leans more towards the empirical study of quantifiable aspects, answering questions such as "how much", whereas qualitative research is more about gaining a deeper understanding of interpretations and feelings, answering questions such as "what" and "how". In this study, as my research questions aim to address the "what" rather than the "how much" question, a qualitative method will be adopted by employing an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm.

3.1.1 Interpretivist/Constructivist Paradigm

Interpretivists often regard "*humans as actors in the social world rather than as simply reacting as objects in the natural world* (O'Reilly, 2005, p.53)", and some interpretivists also point out that "*human behaviour needs to be understood in the context of their particular society or culture*" (*ibid.*). Therefore, compared to the positivist paradigm which focuses more on scientific numbers or facts, the interpretivist paradigm is more about subjective, naturalistic, and qualitative data as the reality is socially constructed and variables are complex and interwoven. In other words, the interpretivist paradigm focuses on humanistic ontology and epistemology (Cohen *et al.,* 2007). This paradigm posits that reality is socially constructed and shaped by human interactions and interpretations, acknowledging the subjective and context-dependent nature of knowledge and focusing on understanding the meanings and interpretations individuals assign to their experiences.

Previous empirical studies on the professional identity of returnee academics have often adopted an interpretivist position and have utilized qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews (Beijaard, Weijer, and Verloop, 2004; Wen and Xu, 2014a). This study aligns itself with these interpretivist positions, and also employs a qualitative, interview-based approach, focusing on subjective, naturalistic data.

In the next section, I will explain why semi-structured interviews were deemed suitable for my research objectives and how these have helped me to gather rich, detailed information about the participants' perceptions and experiences.

3.1.2 General Research Design

In this study, the primary research design frame is a case study, focusing on the perceptions and experiences of returnee academics' re-adaptation and TPI (re-)construction at Z University (an anonymised name), an application-oriented university located in Ningbo, a second-tier city in China. The case study approach is particularly well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena within their natural settings (Yin, 2018). This design enables an in-depth examination of the specific context and experiences of returnee academics within the unique institutional and cultural environment of University Z.

In terms of the research instrument, interviews can be a useful tool when investigating how people see themselves and make sense of their experiences, as they allow for the free expression of ideas and feelings. As a methodological approach, interviews themselves can take various forms. They can be highly structured, in which case their format may be little different to a questionnaire, or they can be completely open, in which case the resulting data may become more of a narrative. A middle ground between these two extremes is to adopt a semi-structured format which arguably allows the researcher to have the best of both worlds. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer has some control over the questions that are being asked, but there is also enough in-built flexibility for both the interviewer and the interviewees to depart from the script as and

when needed. This allows for the exploration of additional topics or delving deeper into specific areas of interest (Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Braun and Clarke, 2013).

I therefore find the semi-structured interview method to be particularly suitable for my own purposes in exploring the perceptions and experiences of returnee academics' re-adaptation and their TPI (re)construction. As I discussed in Chapter 2, returnee academics are likely to have complex and multifaceted experiences. The utilization of semi-structured interviews allows for the creation of a safe and open space in which teachers can express their thoughts and feelings, allowing for the exploration of emergent themes and ideas (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

3.2 Research Sample

Purposive sampling is a non-random sampling technique where participants are selected based on specific characteristics relevant to the research study (Morse, 2016; Patton, 2002). This sampling method is useful in this study as it allows for the targeted selections of both research site and participants required by the purpose of this study. Morse (2016) emphasizes that purposive sampling is particularly beneficial for studies aiming to capture diverse perspectives and experiences within a specific context. Next, I explain and provide the information about my selections of research site and participants.

3.2.1 Research Site

There are three main reasons why I decided to choose University Z as the site of this research. The first reason simply has to do with practicality: it was convenient for me to collect data from University Z since I am working here, and am thus more familiar with the environment. A second reason is that my university is located in Ningbo, a second-tier city which fills one of the research gaps I mentioned in Chapter 2, namely, that research on returnee academics' repatriation or TPI has rarely been carried out in such locations. Thirdly, University Z can be classed as an

application-oriented university (see Figure 1.1), which also represents a different research focus since previous studies on returnee academics have mostly been in distinguished universities belonging to the first and second layers, such as projects "985" and "211".

3.2.2 Selection of Participants

A core requirement for returnee academics to participate in this study was that they had to be Chinese-born nationals who had completed their undergraduate education in China, then obtained their doctorate degrees abroad (outside of mainland China). Another requirement was that after graduating from their doctorate, the teachers should have returned to China's HEIs and currently be working as full-time teachers at University Z.

After carefully searching the university official website, initially, 21 potential participants were identified. There are 9 academic schools at University Z, with returnee academics represented in every discipline except the School of Law and Politics. The returnee academics I identified in the remaining 8 schools were (up to May, 2019) as follows:

School of Engineering and Architecture (6),
Business School (3),
School of Foreign Language (3),
School of Media and Design (3),
School of Information Science and Engineering (3),
School of Computer and Data (1),
School of Mechanical Engineering (1),
School of Biological and Chemical Engineering (1).

I was fortunate in knowing 5 returnee academics already, so I informally contacted these potential research participants first: 3 from my own school, 1 from the School of Media and Design and 1 from the School of Computer and Data. They all agreed with no hesitation, and confirmed their willingness to take part in my research.

I next contacted the remaining 16 returnee academics, first of all introducing myself briefly, then telling them my research purpose and asking if they would like to participate. Meanwhile, I used a snowball

sampling method, namely, I asked the returnee academics that I already knew to introduce me to any other returnee academics they might be aware of, just in case the university website had not been fully updated. From this group of 16 returnees, I received a positive response from 9 of them, expressing their willingness to become participants. At this stage, I had a total of 14 participants who had accepted my invitation. When looking at my respondents, I felt that it would be better if I could have one from each school. However, I did not receive any response from the only one from School of Biological and Chemical Engineering. While I was almost considering to give up choosing from that school, I was so lucky that I met one teacher during an exam invigilation session, and he introduced me to one recently returned teacher from that school. With his help, the teacher agreed to be interviewed. As a result, I had 15 potential participants with at least one from each school, thus covering as many disciplines as possible. Meanwhile, all 15 participants signed a formal consent form that I had sent them, an example of which has been included in Appendix a.1.

It should be mentioned that among the 15 participants, one interviewee decided to pull out just the day before the interview by giving me the reason that my interview might contain too many private issues and she did not want to be interviewed. Another teacher had originally promised to take part, but she always seemed very busy, and we could not find a suitable time to carry out the interview. Later, due to the outbreak of COVID-19, I was not able to interview her until very late, even though she had agreed to be a participant. Ultimately, I decided not to go ahead with that interview. From the now remaining 13 participants, I selected one to be used as a pilot. This meant that for the final research, I would be gathering my data from 12 interviewees. Their profiles (using pseudonyms to protect their identity) are detailed in Table 3.1 below:

Table 3.1 Participants' Basic Information

Name	G	Born	Overseas destination	Years spent abroad	Years since return	Title	School of
Leo	M	1980s	Australia	6	<3	L	Foreign Language
Henna	F	1980s	Japan	4	<3	L	Foreign Language
Frank	M	1980s	New Zealand	5	>3	AP	Media and Design
Zoe	F	1980s	Australia	6	>3	AP	Media and Design
Lisa	F	1970s	Japan	4	>3	AP	Business
Will	M	1980s	UK	6	<3	L	Engineering and Architecture
Mike	M	1980s	Singapore	5	<3	L	Engineering and Architecture
Hugo	M	1960s	Canada	5	>3	Prof.	Information Science and Engineering
Zack	M	1960s	US	8	>3	Prof.	Information Science and Engineering
Peter	M	1960s	Australia	23	>3	Prof.	Computer and Data
Colin	M	1980s	UK	4	<3	L	Mechanical Engineering
Charles	M	1980s	Australia	14	<3	Prof.	Biological and Chemical Engineering

*Note:
G = Gender (M = Male, F = Female)
L = lecturer; Prof. = Professor; AP= Associate Professor

As this table shows, male returnee academics took up the majority of my respondents. The age range of the participants ranged from those born in the 1960s through to the 1980s, although most of them were born in the 1980s. Their overseas destinations were all developed countries, including Australia (4), Japan (2), UK (2), US (1), Canada (1), New Zealand (1), Singapore (1), which show a variety of host destinations. The length of staying abroad ranges from 4 years to 23 years. Six of them returned before 2016, and six after 2016. I selected the year 2016 as the dividing line due to the typical minimum duration of three years for doctoral

programs undertaken abroad, coupled with the commencement of my research in 2019. The year 2016 was deemed suitable as a dividing line to facilitate more effective data organization. At that time, 4 of the returnees were ranked as professors, 3 as associate professors and 5 as lecturers. Regarding their academic disciplines, 5 participants belonged to the field of Liberal Arts and Humanities (LAH), while 7 were affiliated with Science and Engineering (SE). Notably, despite both Will and Mike originating from the School of Engineering and Architecture, Will was specifically assigned to the Department of City Planning. This department was subsequently established as a separate entity with a focus more aligned with LAH disciplines. Consequently, the study comprises 6 participants from LAH and 6 from SE, ensuring a balanced distribution for effective data management.

Following the successful completion of the pilot study (more of which below), I carried out the remaining 12 interviews one by one between June 2019 and November 2019. Prior to each interview, the interview questions were shared with the participants to allow them time to think about their responses. The interviews themselves were conducted face-to-face (F-F) in private spaces, with priority given to the convenience of the interviewees. The participants were very cooperative and provided extensive information, resulting in interview duration ranging from a minimum of 60 minutes to a maximum of approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes. Kvale (2007) points out three key quality criteria that determine the effectiveness of a good interview: the richness of the interviewee's responses, the length of relevant answers, and the clarity of the interviewee's statements. Based on these criteria, I believe the interviews conducted in this study were of a high quality. Detailed information regarding the order of the interviews and the specific dates, duration, and locations can be found below in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 Order, Timing and Place of Interviews

Order	Interviewee	Gender	Date	Duration	Format & Place
1	Henna	F	2019.6.10	1hr40mins	F-F, empty classroom
2	Leo	M	2019.6.12	2hrs	F-F, meeting room
3	Hugo	M	2019.7.23	1hr40mins	F-F, his office
4	Charles	M	2019.7.25	1hr43mins	F-F, one office
5	Will	M	2019.7.25	2hrs30mins	F-F, one office
6	Colin	M	2019.8.12	1hr30mins	F-F, one office
7	Zack	M	2019.10.14	1hr40mins	F-F, meeting room
8	Lisa	F	2019.10.9	1hr55mins	F-F, empty classroom
9	Mike	M	2019.10.15	1hr	F-F, his office
10	Peter	M	2019.10.28	1hr30mins	F-F, his office
11	Zoe	F	2019.10.28	1hr30mins	F-F, her office
12	Frank	M	2019.11.4	1hr30mins	F-F, his office

3.3 Development of Interview Questions

The interview questions were designed based on a 7-stage sequence, which was then tested and refined via a process of piloting. The following section will firstly review the pilot study, and then discuss the design of the interview questions.

3.3.1 Pilot Study

Pilot studies are often seen as being crucial in the research process as they allow researchers to test the feasibility and effectiveness of their chosen methods (Seidman, 2013). In qualitative interviewing, a pilot study can enable researchers to refine their interview questions and

techniques, ensuring that they are clear, relevant, and able to elicit comprehensive responses from participants (Creswell, 2012).

In the case of my own piloting, I selected a participant from my school, whose basic information is provided in Table 3.4. The pilot interview was conducted in early June 2019, lasting approximately one hour. Subsequent to the interview, the data was transcribed and translated into English.

Table 3.3 Participant's Basic Information of Pilot Study

Name	G	Born	Overseas destination	Years spent abroad	Years since return	Title	School of
Nina	F	1980s	Japan	10	>3	L	Foreign Language

*Note:
G = Gender (M = Male, F = Female)
L = Lecturer*

Fortunately, the pilot study progressed smoothly, and the final compilation of interview questions only required minimal modifications or clarifications. As a result of these minor changes, the number of the interview questions was extended from 30 to 33.

For example, one more question about adaptation related training was added in the second stage (see IQ 9 in Appendix B) in the timeline of after returning back to China. I also added another question (See IQ 28 in Appendix B) to find out more about the returnee academics' social communities

A further change involved some re-wording of IQ 29 to provide scope for more probing. For example, if participants gave a satisfaction rating of 80%, I decided that I would probe to ask them for more detail on the remaining 20%.

Finally, a question about whether they felt they had been treated differently as returnees was added (see IQ 30 in Appendix B) as this

would then allow me to explore issues around any perceived discrimination.

In sum, the pilot study underscored the importance of using probing and follow-up questions. I believe that the resulting modifications I made have enhanced the overall quality and depth of my data collection.

3.3.2 Design of 7 Stages of Interview Questions

As discussed in my Literature Review chapter the factors which influence returnee academics' repatriate re-adaptation and TPI are multifaceted, covering not only personal background information, but also contextual environmental information. Therefore, the interview questions designed for this study needed to capture as much information as possible. As a result, each interview consisted of a total of 33 questions (See Appendix B) which were divided into 7 different stages covering an investigation at individual, interactional and institutional levels. Table 3.3 below shows the 7 different stages of my interview questions.

Table 3.4 Simplified 7 Stages of Interview Questions

Stage 1	*PARTICIPANTS' BACKGROUND*	Interview Questions 1-2
Stage 2	*PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE ABROAD*	Interview Questions 3-9
Stage 3	*THE SPECIFICS OF THE EXPERIENCE ABROAD*	Interview Questions 10-17
Stage 4	*PREPARING TO RETURN HOME*	Interview Questions 18-19
Stage 5	*THE ACTUAL RETURN HOME (INITIAL STAGE)*	Interview Questions 20-23
Stage 6	*THE ACTUAL RETURN HOME (LATER STAGES AND RE-ASSIMILATION PROCESS)*	Interview Questions 24-27
Stage 7	*THE PRESENT SITUATION AND THE FUTURE*	Interview Questions 28-33

The main purpose of the interview questions was to probe and explore the experiences or perceptions of the returnees during their time spent overseas and then the different stages of their return. As my chosen interview format was semi-structured, the questions themselves were designed to be open-ended, aiming at encouraging participants to reflect more on their previous experiences. As Seidman (2013, p.87) has explained: "*an open-ended question, unlike a leading question, establishes the territory to be explored while allowing the participants to take any direction he or she wants. It does not presume an answer*". The

semi-structured nature of my interviews thus allowed for flexibility and adaptability. This flexibility enabled a deeper exploration of the participants' perspectives and a more nuanced understanding of their experiences (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

This section provides an overview of the data collection and analysis procedures used in the study. It mainly explores my data analysis techniques, focusing on thematic coding analysis. I also discuss my use of Nvivo software which was a useful tool in organizing and analyzing the data.

3.4.1 Data Collection

Chinese was the language used during each interview, as it is the participants' native language and allowed for more accurate responses. The iFlytek Smart Recording Pen SR701 was utilized as the audio-recording tool throughout the interviews, offering convenient data transcription capabilities. After each interview, the data was transferred immediately to my computer using the recording pen, streamlining the process. The transcriptions were double checked by myself line by line to ensure the accuracy. I then shared the transcriptions with the interviewees for their review, and they expressed no issues with the accuracy of the transcriptions. I chose to do all of the 12 transcriptions and translations myself because I felt this would give me a closer relationship with my data. Although the translation and transcription process was time-consuming and arduous, the benefit was that it provided me with a more comprehensive and profound understanding of the interview material.

3.4.2 Data Analysis

Researchers have highlighted the ongoing, unpredictable, and dynamic nature of data analysis in qualitative research, emphasizing the benefit of starting analysis early (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Maxwell, 2005). Following this recommendation, I promptly transcribed verbal data after

each interview and conducted initial analysis through repeated readings, ensuring a close and timely engagement with the research material.

As for the grouping, from the beginning I divided my 12 interviewees into TWO groups, one to represent those who had returned pre-2016, and the other representing returnees post-2016. Within each group, based on their schools and disciplines, I further divided the participants into 4 sub-categories representing Liberal Arts and Humanities (LAH) and Science and Engineering (SE). These divisions are illustrated in Table 3.5 below:

Table 3.5 Grouping of the 12 Interviewees

Group	Disciplines	Sub-group Names	Interviewees
1	Liberal Arts & Humanities (LAH)	Pre-2016-LAH	Frank, Zoe, Lisa
	Science & Engineering (SE)	Pre-2016-SE	Peter, Zack, Hugo
2	Liberal Arts & Humanities (LAH)	Post-2016-LAH	Leo, Henna, Will
	Science & Engineering (SE)	Post-2016-SE	Mike, Colin, Charles

3.4.2i Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis in qualitative research involves systematically examining data to identify commonalities, relationships, and differences, as well as organizing data into themes (Gibson and Brown, 2009). Thematic coding assigns codes to represent concepts within the interview data, which are then grouped into broader themes to capture patterns and meanings (Clarke and Braun, 2017).

I found thematic coding to be particularly suitable for my study for several reasons. Firstly, thematic coding allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the rich and diverse experiences and perspectives of the participants. By systematically identifying and categorizing themes, the study was able to capture the nuances and complexities of returnee academics' adaptation and their professional identity (re-)construction. Secondly, the method enabled me to organize and structure the data in a meaningful way. By assigning codes to different segments of data, for example, I was

able to identify commonalities and differences across participants, facilitating the identification of overarching themes which cut across individual experiences. This process helped me to uncover patterns and trends within the data, providing a coherent and organized framework for analysis and interpretation. Thematic coding also provided the flexibility and adaptability required to explore emergent themes.

When writing about codes, Gibson and Brown (2009, p.133) differentiate between two specific types: a priori codes and empirical codes. A priori codes function as general categories derived from the researcher's interests and serve as an initial framework for preliminary data categorization. These codes are predetermined before data examination and may require adjustments to focus on specific topics based on the research design. On the other hand, empirical codes emerge during the actual analysis of the data and may either derive from an apriori category or manifest as entirely new concepts which were unforeseen in the original research formulation (*ibid.*). In my study, the interview questions were structured using a 7-stage grid format, which aligns to some extent with the notion of a priori codes. The empirical codes, on the other hand, were generated from my analysis of the interview transcripts and these were then assigned to the relevant stages.

By systematically identifying and categorizing themes within the data, I was able to capture the richness and complexity of the participants' experiences, organize the data in a meaningful way, and still remain open to emergent themes. I believe that this approach facilitated a rigorous and in-depth analysis, contributing to the overall validity and reliability of the study's findings.

The data analysis process for this study encompassed 10 sequential steps, as illustrated in Table 3.6 below. The initial step involved transcribing all the interviews conducted in Chinese, which took place concurrently with the interviews from June to November 2019. Subsequently, the interview transcripts were translated into English between June 2019 and February 2020.

Table 3.6: Step by Step Approach to Dealing with Interview Data

Steps	Procedures	Finished dates
Step 1	Transcribe each interview in as much detail as possible. Translate each interview truly based on the original transcriptions	2020.1
Step 2	Read through each interview transcript line by line noting any points of interest. (double check English Translation as well)	2020.2
Step 3	Group and sort your individual interview questions into discrete categories.	2020.3
Step 4	Plot these categories on a series of A4 landscape grids with category headings on the left and space for your comments on the right. Create one grid for each person that you interview.	2020.4
Step 5	On each grid, record a summary of each participant's responses to each category. As far as possible, use direct quotations as supporting evidence for your comments. Put these quotations in a different font colour so that they stand out.	2020.4
Step 6	Code (i.e., create a label for) the different data listed under each category.--code based on the printed griddings (mainly based on Chinese and double check the English translated versions)	2020.5
Step 7	Look back at the notes from step 2 and cross-reference with the findings thus far: is there anything not accounted for? --code based on the original interviews (mainly based on Chinese and double check the English translated version again) + mark light blue without underline as indication for those unaccounted ones	2020.5
Step 8	Create new codes for any unaccounted for data emerging from step 7. -- mark different colors on relevant codes and quotations for clarify	2020.6
Step 9	Transfer the codes and data summaries for individual interviewees to new and larger grids to allow for comparisons across groups.	2020.7
Step 10	Look for any emerging trends and themes. Use these as a basis from which to start drawing conclusions or findings. "Commonality/Differences/Relationships"	2020.8

Following the translation phase, a thorough examination of each original Chinese transcript was undertaken, with specific points of interest noted and consistent translations of expressions ensured. It should be noted that my initial analysis was mainly focused on Chinese, but then always

double checked in the English version. Although this translation work was very time consuming, it helped me to be closer to my data, so that I did not miss or leave out any important information.

This meticulous review process primarily occurred in February 2020. Once the transcripts were thoroughly reviewed, the individual interview questions were organized and categorized into seven distinct stages. This categorization process primarily took place in March 2020. Subsequently, these categories were visually represented on landscape-format A4 size grids, with the seven stages listed on the left side and corresponding comments and quotes on the right side. Each named interview participant was assigned a grid. This gridding process was conducted between March and April 2020.

In Step 6, a detailed re-examination of the original Chinese transcripts was carried out, with the intention of utilizing the participants' exact words whenever possible. Simultaneously, the English translated versions were cross-checked. This involved the identification of specific codes related to broader themes. Following this, in May 2020, another comprehensive review and revision of all the transcripts in their original language were conducted, with any unaccounted transcripts marked in light blue. The preceding steps primarily involved repeated readings of the original data to familiarize myself with its content.

In step 8 of the research process, new codes were generated to account for any previously unaddressed data which had emerged from step 7. These codes were visually differentiated by using various colors and were applied to relevant codes and quotations to enhance clarity. This step primarily focused on the analysis of English translated versions of the data. For example, codes marked in red were used to represent personal background information, while codes highlighted in dark blue were assigned to specific experiences abroad and academic-related content. The color purple denoted adaptive problems, such as culture shock, green shading indicated content related to social networks both abroad and back home, yellow shading represented participants' perceptions of changes

reflected on in themselves, and brown shading identified codes used to signify *Guanxi* or relationship-related information.

It is also worth pointing out that my coding took place on both a surface and deeper level. In the case of the former, some of the information could be categorized exactly as it was, but other information required a deeper level of interpretation and some reading between the lines. For example, if a respondent said that their parents were university teachers, then a deeper reading of this would indicate a certain social class background. This could then be compared and contrasted with what other respondents said. These codes were then organized into a potential theme, such as "family", which was placed in the first stage of the gridding format under the category of "participants' background". This categorization aligns with the micro circle of the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter 2.

The final steps of the research process entailed conducting comparisons between individuals based on their year of return (before 2016 or after) and their respective disciplines. The objective here was to summarize commonalities, differences, and relationships among participants, identify any emerging trends and themes, and draw broader conclusions based on the data analysis. These will be discussed more fully in Chapter 5.

Given the substantial amount of data sources and the large number of codes involved, I utilized Nvivo software to better organize the coded data. The Nvivo software was particularly useful in steps 9 and 10 of the data analysis process. The section below provides a detailed explanation of how exactly Nvivo software was employed to enhance data organization.

3.4.2ii Using Nvivo Software for Better Data Organization

Developed by QSR International, Nvivo offers a range of features and functionalities designed to facilitate the systematic analysis and exploration of qualitative data (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). The software allows researchers not only to import various types of data, including interview transcripts, audio files, images, and documents, and provides tools for coding, categorizing, and searching these data sources; but also

to create visual representations of their data, such as concept maps and network diagrams, to aid in the identification of patterns and relationships within the data (*ibid.*). The utilization of Nvivo software in organizing interview data provides researchers with a convenient and efficient means of locating codes (which are called "nodes" in the software) containing relevant quotes. By importing interview transcripts into Nvivo, in this case, the translated English versions, I found that I could better organize codes, allowing for easy retrieval and analysis of data related to specific themes or topics. Nvivo also offers powerful search and query tools, which enabled me to quickly locate specific quotes or segments of text within their data set. This functionality greatly enhanced the efficiency and effectiveness of my data analysis, as I was more easily able to identify and analyze patterns, trends, and relationships within the interview data.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

In the pursuit of this study, it was imperative to address ethical considerations in order to safeguard the rights of participants and uphold the integrity of the research process. Ethical issues are "*concerned with respecting research participants throughout each project, partly by using agreed standards* (Alderson and Morrow 2004, p.11)." Therefore, prior to conducting the interviews, the study obtained approval from the university, and the document of "Research Ethics Checklist for Staff and Research Students" was used to give approval. Informed consent, which included a clear explanation of the purpose and nature of the study, was also obtained from participants prior to the commencement of data collection (refer to Appendix a.2). Participants were informed of their right to withdraw or refuse participation in the study at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly assured, and pseudonyms were used for individuals, communities, and institutions to ensure anonymity and prevent identification by the public.

The issue of my personal acquaintance with participants is also an important ethical consideration. While familiarity with participants may have facilitated access and rapport during data collection, I must

acknowledge that it may also now raise some concerns regarding potential bias and subjectivity. As both the researcher and interviewer, I tried to keep this in mind and made an effort to remain objective and impartial throughout, ensuring that the personal relationship dimension did not unduly influence my data collection, analysis, or interpretation. One of the specific ways in which I took steps to mitigate potential bias and maintain objectivity was by adhering to a rigorous research design and analysis process. An additional consideration is that being a colleague in the same institution also presents additional threats to participant wellbeing and privacy. To address this threat, as I have already shown in section 3.2.2, I asked the interviewees' preference before each interview, and conducted all the interviews face-to-face privately. Overall, I am confident that my study has adhered to ethical principles and practices in ensuring the protection of participants' rights and maintaining the integrity of the research process.

Chapter summary

This chapter has provided an account of the research design, data collection, and data analysis processes employed in this study. It has also acknowledged several of the ethical concerns which were considered. In the following chapter, I will present my research findings.

Chapter 4 Research Findings

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Chapter Summary

Introduction

This chapter reports on the main findings from my research. These have been framed using my 3 main Research Questions (see p.17), each of which is then linked to specific interview questions (see appendix B) matching the different interview stages.

4a Pre-2016

In this first section, I will focus on the results gathered from the Pre-2016 group of interviewees. As I have outlined before, the interviewees themselves were divided into 2 sub-groups: three (Peter, Zack and Hugo) belonging to the SE discipline, and three (Frank, Lisa and Zoe) belonging to LAH.

4a1 Pre-2016-SE Group

The pre-2016-SE group of returnees were all male professors born in the 1960s. They are all middle class and come from well-educated family backgrounds. Their wives all accompanied them abroad soon after they left China, and their children are all still abroad now. Among them, one interviewee, Hugo, had half a year's previous overseas experience (Japan) before going to Canada while another, Peter, had no previous university teacher experience before going to Australia. The table below provides a brief vignette of each interviewee. In each case, pseudonyms have been assigned to protect the interviewees' identity:

Peter	Peter was born in Hebei and had always wanted to study abroad since his BA graduation. He was finally admitted to Melbourne University after several applications in 1991. He became a university teacher due to his deep interest in doing research after returning.
Zack	Zack was born in Changchun, Jilin. He was a university teacher in Jilin for 7 years before going abroad from 1994-2001. He chose to go to the US for his doctoral degree based on two main considerations: on the one hand, many of his classmates had also been there; on the other, he thought the US might offer more employment opportunities.

Hugo	Hugo was born in Ninghai (a rural town not far from Ningbo). He chose to become a university teacher because he thought that it would be easier than the work he had previously been doing in Shenzhen. Following the general trend of going abroad in the 1990s in China, he applied to Alberta University in Canada. Thanks to his distinguished academic performance, Hugo had already had 6 months' overseas experience in Japan to attend a teacher training program in 1998.

RQ1:
What are returnee academics' perceptions of living and studying overseas?

4a1.1 Preconceptions and Perceptions
(The results under this section relate to interview questions 6, 10 and 12- see Appendix B)

All of the participants reported that they had no great preconceptions about going abroad, other than simply wanting to survive the experience and be awarded their degrees. However, their first impression after arriving abroad was the sharp gap between rich (overseas) and poor (China), specifically the differences that this might cause in terms of the physical environment. Common descriptions of the overseas environment included phrases such as "*clean*" or "*fresh air*".

However, overall, their life overseas was not always very easy because in addition to their studies, they also had to take care of their children without the customary support from parents and in-laws, even though their wives all followed them abroad soon after their departure. This was quite a big difference compared to what things would have been like had they simply remained in China. As Peter said below:

"It all depended on yourself when you were abroad, no one else could help. It was really tiring. If I drove, I would fall asleep even when I parked there for a while, it was this kind of tiredness, due to pressure from both studies and the family financial burden. It was much harder than domestically. We looked after our kids totally on our own without my parents' help."

Following a more rule-based life was one of their most common perceptions during their time abroad. This meant that things abroad had to be accomplished by following accepted rules and procedures. As Zack reflected on below:

"In China, especially in the northeast, you have to find someone you know to deal with things, right? Well, after arriving in the US, if you went to the government to do something, whatever you should do, you had to follow the rules -- queuing and waiting until it's your turn. It's useless for you to find anyone you know, because everything operates in accordance with the rules."

Peter echoed Zack's thoughts on the importance of rules when he compared the differences in seeing a doctor abroad and in China:

"You could make an appointment, right? You do what you should do when you go to the hospital. It was very simple. There was no need to find acquaintances like here in China. Yes, it was very simple, just follow the rules."

4a1.2 Relevant Training and Level of Acculturation

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14 and 15- see Appendix B)

None of the participants received any pre-departure training before going overseas except language training, nor did they engage in any training for re-adaptation after they had returned to China.

Good English language skills were a prerequisite for going abroad, and all of them showed good English language self-learning ability. However, although they had all registered for language courses before going abroad, Zack and Hugo reported that they seldom attended such training as they thought they could just learn by themselves. By contrast, before going abroad, Peter participated in a 3-month intensive English language programme in Shanghai which he later claimed was very useful. It seems that with such higher English fluency and higher motivation and self-regulation, Peter in particular would have no problem for simple daily communications abroad.

However, despite their abilities in English, all of the respondents reported that they had experienced different levels of communication difficulty, especially when it came to interacting with native speakers. Among the three, Zack stood out as having the most difficulty in this regard, as he reporting finding it challenging when listening to non-native speakers with "*heavy accents*", such as Indians. Hugo also pointed out some daily expressions and English usages which he found to be quite different from what he had learned back in China:

"I was told [by his native friend abroad] that 'good night' should be only said before you going to bed. Hahaha, we often used to say 'good evening' [the expression he learned back in China], and they said that it was ok, but they hardly used it. Small things like this"

Peter reflected on that he did not have communication difficulties of this nature, but he noticed many English language communication barriers or misunderstandings in daily life with other Chinese who came abroad much later than him, and he often helped them clarify. As he recalled below:

"Sometimes in the evening, the Westerners played music on weekends. [...] The next day, [one young westerner asked:] 'Mike (the English name of one visiting scholar that Peter knew), I played music last night and didn't know whether you mind or not'. Later, the visiting scholar said yes, yes. I said 'wait a minute'. I pulled him aside and explained that the young man was asking like: 'do you mind, if you really mind…' so, I translated it for the scholar, and he said: 'well, I should say no, right? That is to say, has he been disturbed?' His English was not good, so he got the meaning of that person all wrong. There were many things like this."
"My English wasn't good, but I was thick-skinned and dared to speak. I never cared about making mistakes. Perhaps, I didn't realize my own mistakes…anyway, I would never make a mistake like them."

Regardless of the different lengths of staying abroad, it appears that each of the respondents did not fully acculturate to local life, as their overall social circles were small and simple. This is because they spent more of their time on studying with very few contacts from the world outside of campus. After working, they also still mainly socialized with other Chinese. The simple contacts that they had with non-Chinese or English-speaking

natives were developed with the intention of improving their English. Hugo, for example, found church a good place for not only knowing more helpful people, but also learning English. Even though he lived at a native speaker's home, Hugo claimed that "*there existed estrangement*" because the topics they discussed tended to be limited and the coverage was usually not in depth.

Peter reported that he had encountered lots of interesting and independent people, and said that he had generally had good relationships with the natives, yet, he felt happy spending his spare time by gathering and having meals once a week with other Chinese visiting scholars. As he explained:

"When I first came, with more Australians. […] At that time, I had not met many Chinese. Actually, we were purposeful to learn English [...] Later, overall, I was more in contact with the Chinese people. I think it's because the cultural background is the same, which is in the bones. […] Sometimes it can't be explained."

From the memories that they shared, it seems clear that the interviewees generally adopted a separationalist approach and tended to remain within their own cultural circles, rather than trying to integrate with the locals. Even so, Zack still seemed to be the least settled member of the group as he complained a lot about his life in the US. In addition to different eating and drinking habits which he did not adapt to well, he mainly disliked the lack of intimate communication, even among his Chinese friends who had been in the US much longer than him. Zack found that these people had already changed some of their behavioral patterns in order to fit in better with the new cultural environment, and thus for him "*communication among friends was not very convenient and lively".* When I probed to ask him why this was, Zack explained below:

"Let's take two simple examples. One is that I went to California to find a job. My classmates took me for dinner. Four people invited me to have dinner. One person paid the bill. I saw that he paid the bill. Then, for example, he spent 44 US dollars in total, and the other three people each paid 11 US dollars to him. There was another thing: that friend (his best friend) I met in the supermarket after three months, after I began to work, he once told me that he wanted to buy a house, and he might not be able to turn around the money recently. Then

he asked me to lend him some money. I said our money was useless anyway these days, so you just take it. He said no and insisted on writing me a cheque, indicating he would return the money within half a year. This happened with another friend of mine too.I told him that I would not lend him money if he wanted to talk about the interest, but he still insisted on paying me the interest rate just the same as the bank. These cases, you would feel that the way of communication was totally different from that in China. In China, for example, if you want to have dinner with your friends, you just take turns to pay the bill. When friends have meals together, we don't follow this system of going Dutch. I did not feel very used to it. I felt it's better to come back at that time."

RQ2:
What are returnee academics' perceptions and experiences during their repatriation process?

4a1.3 Reasons for and Process of Returning to China
(The results under this section relate to interview questions 18, 19, 20 and 21-see Appendix B)

There were probably as many reasons for returning to China as there were participants who returned. It was a highly individual decision. Yet it can be said that two large forces --filial piety and relationship (*Guanxi*) -- provided the chief motives for the return. In the case of filial piety, all three participants mentioned that they had returned partly for "*taking care of their older parents,*" or at least that being back in China would be much closer to their parents than being abroad.

Hugo never thought of staying abroad, so he first used the relationship of his supervisor by following him to Shenzhen, and then later back to his hometown, Ningbo. Zack also preferred to live in China. He chose to return to Ningbo rather than to his hometown Jilin province for two considerations: on the one hand, Ningbo is a relatively economic developed city; on the other hand, he knew leaders or had the so-called "relationship (*Guanxi*)" at his current university. This indicates the importance of having a social net in China and the need for *Guanxi* in order to operate well within society. As Zack revealed:

"Because I knew someone here, and tried to get some information from here. I would not go back to the Northeast after balancing the quality of life and friends. Because the economy of the Northeast was not good at that time. The Dean of our college of Jilin University also wanted me to go back after he heard that I was back. [...] I did not know anyone when I was in the US. In China, especially in the Northeast, you have to find someone you know to deal with things"

Peter also returned based on relationship (*Guanxi*) using the help of other domestic teachers he had remained in contact with while abroad：

"Because I've been to so many places, including several cities in China before going abroad, and also many cities in Australia for reasons such as work and moving houses, when I came back, I basically had no specific requirements for cities. [...] I was awarded the title of the Program of Global Experts of Zhejiang Province (PGEZP), which was applied for me by the university teachers here. [...] Later, they suggested that I apply for the "Provincial Thousand Talents Plan," and I went ahead with the application. They assisted me with that, and as a result, I was invited to be here."

In terms of their initial impression on re-entry, all interviewees reflected on that China had developed greatly upon their re-entry. Both Hugo and Zack appeared to re-adapt to China quite well. Peter's initial impression after comparing people abroad though was that people in China are not so trusting of strangers:

"Once when I was asking for directions, there was this man and he said he would take me there directly. At first, I thought what's the matter with this man. You just don't see that here, do you? In our country nobody dares to do it. [...] On another occasion, when I was running near the university, a little girl looked at me and said that I looked tired, and then she gave me a glass of water. Everyone was like this! By comparison, I feel we are very cautious here. People in China don't believe in each other very much. [...] I feel our defensive line is too high, making others difficult to communicate with you."

Nonetheless, Peter still feels confident about China's future development. As he explained, "*I thought it had changed a lot. I'm sure it will develop even better, and indeed it has gotten better and better*."

RQ3:

How do returnee academics (re-)construct their professional identity after returning to China?

4a1.4 Overall Evaluation of Overseas Study Experience; Pros and Cons
(The results under this section relate to interview questions 16, 22, 23, 24 and 31-see appendix B)

Participants' comments of HEIs environment abroad were all positive, including a good academic atmosphere with rigorous requirements for students for graduation. They all reflected on that they gained a lot from their doctoral study, although the thesis writing was tough. Peter mentioned that students abroad in good universities were more active in learning with strong practical and comprehensive abilities and thus were much better compared to the students in his current university in China. As he explained:

"Studying for PhD in domestic universities can get the degree, but the elimination rate there [abroad] can up to 60%. In domestic universities, you don't need to choose to research any topic, the supervisor will give it to you, which means I don't have to use my wits; while abroad, it's not the same."

Apart from the strict entrance exam Gaokao and maths education throughout the Chinese system from elementary to university, the other comments that they made about Chinese HEIs were all negative. For example, they complained about there being too much of a focus on graduation rates and employment rates, which are "*inversely proportional to teaching quality* (Zack)". They also commented on there being too

many administrative chores, too many formalities such as meetings and continual reforms around teaching. They regarded these as putting heavy pressure on university teachers. Such pressure tends to mean that university teachers do not devote themselves to cultivating their students, but pay more attention to just obeying the rules. Peter, for instance, criticized that domestic university students are not only "*inactive in learning*", but also "*too vulnerable, willful, sensitive and even selfish*"; university teachers in China as well, are "*vulnerable*", "*too money-oriented*" and "*materialistic*". As Zack admitted below:

"I feel that we have a lot of formalities in China. We may pay more attention to some index figures or rates or assessment things without a set of things of our own, right? In American universities, I don't think I've heard that a president can only serve two terms, because they don't have this problem. What about us? If a president can only serve two terms, where is the continuity? Right?"

It should be pointed out that with their previous experience of being university teachers in China before going abroad, both Hugo and Zack felt that Chinese universities in the old days were much better compared to now. For example, they noted that universities in China used to be stricter on students about graduation requirements, putting teaching first and then interest-oriented research. They felt that back then, university teachers used to be more relaxed but the teaching quality was high without so many administrative chores. They felt that students also had better learning motivation.

Despite these criticisms, Hugo and Zack felt that there are almost no negatives of being returnee university teachers. Indeed, data revealed by the pre-2016-SE group that the positive influence of being returnee university teachers was far more than the negative influence (15 positive codes vs. 4 negative codes). Some common positives include improved professional knowledge, broadened horizon and being more inclusive and critical. Hugo pointed out that he knows "*excellent friends abroad and can organize high level lectures*", and he has "*qualified degree with improved professional techniques*". Zack admitted that "*with a doctor degree, I can work in domestic colleges and universities. [...] That is, without a doctor's*

degree, I can't enter any universities in China, that's the most direct benefit."

Nevertheless, Peter was the only one among the three who expressed negative influences of being returnee university teacher. He claimed that he did "*not know domestic situation and rules*" before being university teacher domestically, and both his Chinese and English have been degraded, since sometimes he could mix the usage of both languages and could not express himself clearly. Even so, Peter reflected about some positive influences, as he said below:

"*We should have opposing views. Without differing opinions, you won't grow and can't move forward. [...] both your body and mind may become more broad, allowing you to be more tolerant of others and not be too narrow-minded. [...] You must understand that different people have varying backgrounds that influence their ways of thinking.*"

4a1.5 Changes to Personal Outlook and Current Sense of Self

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 17, 25, 26, 27 and 28 - see Appendix B)

Although the three mentioned that their relatively older age while abroad made them difficult to change, as Peter said "*it's hard to change the bone of that kind of thing* (it means a short time spent overseas cannot completely cancel out a more deeply-engrained set of cultural values and beliefs)", data revealed that they more or less had been influenced and changed by overseas experience in a positive way. Such overseas experiences not only helped to improve their professional knowledge, making them more rigorous as academics and stricter in teaching, but also makes them more inclusive and less narrow-minded, and more willing to help others. For example, Hugo reflected that he had been influenced to become "more rule-based" by Japan, and "more honest and integral" by Canada. He also admitted that he is now "*more open and inclusive*" and "*willing to know about different religions*", he said:

"In the past, my knowledge of such things might be more basic. Now, after several years of learning, it has become more comprehensive."

Zack echoed that his academic English language ability had improved, as he said below:

"I feel I changed a lot. For example, one is language ability. [...] like learning and researching, you needed to read dozens of papers in order to write up one, and I had not received such kind of training before. […] Another was that the habits of doing research have changed. [...] Now writing a paper, I may need to look up a lot of things. [...] That is to say, my working habits are very different from the past. [...] Including sometimes I will help others translate their papers into English, or I will help others to slightly modify when they have done the translations."

All of the interviewees claimed that compared with other domestic teachers, their views towards foreign countries are more comprehensive and critical, namely, they tend to have more critical thinking towards things. As Zack confirmed:

"Basically, I think it's mainly in the understanding of foreign countries. What I have seen may be more comprehensive. They [domestic teachers] may be more one-sided."

4a1.6 Re-acculturation, Satisfaction and Future Orientation

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 29, 30, 31 and 32 - see appendix B)

The extent of the interviewees' re-acculturation falls in line with their levels of career satisfaction and the overall rates seemed to be high among all four groups except Peter. Hugo felt he had achieved 85% re-adaptation, the only difficult part being his age, as he reflected on that it is too late for him to do research now. Zack saw his re-adaptation as being around 80%. In terms of the areas in which his adaptation has been poor, he mentioned that he felt tired to take the responsibility by himself alone since his team members could not meet his strict need of doing horizontal projects (projects dealing with enterprises). By contrast, with his sense of only having achieved around 60% re-adaptation, Peter

reflected on that the other 40% was to do with the difficulties he sees in Chinese HEIs, such as poor research conditions, too much assessment of teachers, too much emphasis on students' graduation or employment rates. Peter especially dislikes teachers who are too utilitarian (such as "*money-oriented*" and "*materialistic*") in their outlook.

Hugo's career satisfaction rate is the highest among the three, as he prefers to have a simple life and is content with what he has achieved. Zack ranks the second among the three, and he not only criticized his low salary (a point raised by all the participants in this study) but also expressed his disappointment about the university not solving his housing problem as they had promised. This latter point had also been mentioned by Peter. Peter seems to be the one who has the lowest satisfaction rate among all the pre-2016 group. While admitting that being a university teacher represents a "*sacred profession with overall good environment including nice and supportive colleagues*", he complained that some domestic teachers are too indirect for "*when they were talking about A, actually they want B*". Despite these criticisms, Peter reflected on that he generally has no communication barrier at work.

It is worth noting that both Hugo and Zack mentioned "adulation" as one form of discrimination created by their domestic colleagues, As Zack pointed out:

"*I think it's a kind of verbal discrimination. Sometimes, for example, in a meeting, when I was introduced, people would introduce me as a returnee. In fact, from my personal feeling, maybe I am recognized by some of the individuals from their hearts; but it's just a topic to discuss for most other people. It's just in words.*"

Considering their age limitations, both Hugo and Zack will remain at their current institutions since they will be retiring soon, and neither of them have plans to go abroad again for the longer term. Peter is less sure about what the future holds as his family are still in Australia, but he is confident that he will continue to make contributions to science.

Based on their responses, it seems likely that all three returnees will stay where they are.

4a2 Pre-2016-LAH Group

The pre-2016-LAH group of returnees all started to be university teachers at their current institution after returning. None of them had previous overseas experience. The table below provides a short personal vignette of each interviewee:

Frank	Frank was born in Shandong Province. He met his current wife during their doctoral study in Auckland. His wife and twin daughter and son are now in New Zealand, and he has brought his parents to live in Ningbo. After about 18 months of doctoral study in Shanghai, he finally chose to go to New Zealand in 2009 because his then Chinese supervisor had a good relationship with the professor there. Frank became a university teacher based on his deep interest in doing research.
Lisa	Lisa was from Huzhou, Zhejiang. After graduating from a Masters in Agricultural Economic Management at Zhejiang University she applied and was admitted for doctoral study at Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology. After returning from Japan, she decided to follow the trend and become a university teacher.
Zoe	Zoe was from Zhoushan. She originally graduated from Zhejiang University of Technology and majored in Journalism. After her BA, she worked for 3 months in Hangzhou but found the experience boring and restrictive. With her mother's support, in 2007 she chose to follow a Masters programme at Sydney University in Australia. Due to her excellent academic performance, she upgraded from her MA to a PhD. She then continued as a Post Doc in New South Wales University, during which she followed her supervisor to Leeds University in the UK for three months. Although she was once quite idealistic about the role of university teachers, seeing them as literati she now feels that working in Higher Education is basically just a job the same as any other.

RQ1:

What are returnee academics' perceptions of living and studying overseas?

4a2.1 Preconceptions and Perceptions

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 6, 10 and 12 - see Appendix B)

It seems that each of the interviewees had no expectations about what life would be like abroad. Frank used the word *"blind"* when he initially went abroad. Zoe just wanted to experience more about the outside world. Lisa had thought that she would easily adapt to the life in Japan as she had so many senior colleagues there already. Common first impressions when the interviewees first arrived abroad were "*clean roads, fresh air, blue sky, white clouds*".

In terms of the most impressive things during abroad, they all reflected on that the overall whole process was simple and happy. As Lisa and Zoe in particular commented：

"I think I adapted immediately, life in Japan is very simple. […] everyone was on their own, that's why I think that overseas study was very simple. […] Now I think that I was really happy during the overseas doctoral study period, nothing to worry about. The only thing troubled me was my language since I had to write my dissertation. Besides, I had nothing to worry about. […] I could go back home to learn Japanese language via watching Japanese TV programs. That's really happy. Nothing to be frustrated or annoyed." (Lisa)

"The most impressive aspect overall was that I was very happy; it felt like a kind of luxury. Firstly, I did not have an economic burden because I had my own income, and even if it was not enough, my mom would always support me by giving me money. Secondly, my purpose was very pure, that is, to do research. [...] I did not feel social pressure, and of course, we did socialize, but not solely to expand my network. Overall, it was a wonderful time in my life. [...] my impression of that time is that I felt very happy and relaxed." (Zoe)

4a2.2 Relevant Training and Level of Acculturation

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14 and 15 - see Appendix B)

Language appeared to be one of the key requirements for them before going abroad. Zoe took IELTS classes together with her then boyfriend; Lisa had deliberately taken a Japanese language course outside campus. However, it should be noted that Frank did not receive any language related training before going abroad.

Although they received no re-adaptation training when returned to China, they all received training after arriving abroad which they thought was

very useful. For example, Frank attended the language training course to improve his academic English writing which he thought was very helpful. Lisa received six months of Japanese language training at the beginning. Even though Zoe did not have to take the language course as she had already met the language requirement, she chose to participate in the 4-week English language training in order to smoothly move to overseas study mode. She regarded the course as a good way of building her social community. Indeed, she was happy to meet many international friends there, and they have remained in contact up to now.

For each of the interviewees, their circle of friends while overseas was small and limited. Both Zoe and Lisa reported no communication difficulties and felt no culture shock, although each had experienced quite different situations. Zoe seemingly had the best level of acculturation, which can be shown in two aspects. Firstly, she revealed that she was popular among students and was selected as being the student representative. As a result of this, she had the chance to meet different international students, including her then white native boyfriend. By sharing similar emotional feelings, Zoe was able to build closer friendships with such international students.

By contrast, Lisa's life in Japan was very simple without much communication with others. In this regard, at the beginning, she had relatively more contact with Chinese speakers, who helped her in adapting to the Japanese environment. She reflected on that to communicate with the Japanese in depth was difficult, and communication with other non-native students was limited to academics, especially during the half year's language course. As Lisa explained below:

"the Japanese [...] all had to take part-time job in order to support themselves. This is quite normal for university students and doctors there. [...] it was not convenient; the Japanese also would not invite me to go shopping with them, and then I would not do that as well. Anyway, we were all used to this [...] One reason was shyness; another one was that [...] more in-depth communication would be required if you wanted to buy clothes together with the Japanese [...] they stayed separate and were very independent. Everyone would just go back home after the meetings or seminars"

Similarly, Frank also communicated more with Chinese people. For example, he communicated more with his then girlfriend who is now his wife. He also built a very good relationship with his Chinese supervisor in New Zealand and kept in close contact with his domestic Chinese supervisor via email while abroad.

However, it is worth mentioning that Frank is the only one among the three who admitted communication difficulties, claiming that he had lots of communication barriers due to his poor English language ability. At the beginning, he could not understand different English accents. He even moved his office and house in order to have more communication opportunities with the locals. He had some communication with his non-native classmates and they helped him in study, but he reflected on that the communication with other foreigners was limited. Frank suggested the following reasons for this:

"mainly because of culture for things we discuss are different. Yeah, that's quite normal. [...] Nothing special, very natural. [...] It is not about English language but about something related to life problem. [...] nothing more in depth. Because they are not interested in what you are interested in, or you are only interested in a little on what they are interested in, the conversation then cannot be carried on. [...] I was born in 1981, they were all born in 1988, 1989 or 1990. We had a generation gap. We cannot communicate because of the generation gap."

RQ2:

What are returnee academics' perceptions and experiences during their repatriation process?

4a2.3 Reasons for and Process of Returning to China

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 18, 19, 20 and 21 - see Appendix B)

The reasons given by the interviewees for returning to China were all different. Lisa, for example, had already made her decision to return to be

a university teacher with a doctorate degree. She did not want to go back to her hometown due to the underdeveloped economic situation there. After having contacted many universities, she finally chose to go to Ningbo – a city which she thought as the second-best city in Zhejiang Province. She chose her current workplace because this university was the first to offer her an interview.

Frank was required by the CSC (China Scholarship Council) program to return and serve the nation for at least two years. However, he admitted that he also returned because of his interest in doing research:

"mainly for doing academics, because I could not find the resources there, I am doing research, I don't have to deal with the politics. I can also publish my own papers, I don't write papers in Chinese."

In the quote, "*I don't have to deal with the politics*," Frank is most likely referring to the institutional "office politics" that can often be present in academic and research settings. By mentioning this, he is indicating that by returning to China, he can focus more on his research work without being entangled in the internal dynamics and power struggles that can sometimes affect the research environment. When Frank mentions, "*I can also publish my own papers, I don't write papers in Chinese*," he is highlighting the advantage of being able to publish research papers in English, which is the dominant language in academic publishing. This allows for greater visibility and impact of his research on a global scale. By returning to China, where he can conduct research in English and publish internationally, Frank is able to enhance his academic profile and reach a wider audience, which can be a significant motivation for researchers seeking to advance their careers.

Thanks to his Guanxi connections -- his Chinese supervisor knew the current Dean of the school, Frank was introduced to work at his current university.

Zoe's choice was more flexible, and she could still find jobs abroad if she continued to do so but she didn't. This is because she felt that life in

Australia was "*boring and inconvenient*", especially the racial intolerance and discrimination she had encountered due to its "*serious anti-China national strategy*". As she explained below:

"*I was feeling like migrant farmers working in the cities. The feeling of strangers of the migrant farmers is mainly caused by different social classes, right? But the feeling of strangers of me in Australia was more due to different races. Therefore, I was not brave enough to stay there, and I did not want to contribute to that society. Besides, life there was really boring, after work, I was not living in the city but in between the rural place and the city. I had to take trains in order to go to the city. It was just so so. It was mainly due to its national strategy, and I already knew this since I read news every day, right? I think Australia's anti-China is actually even serious than the US, at least in the US you can see fighting against the racism, the race discrimination in Australia was very normal and kind of daily routine. [...] after staying there for a long time, international students around me all had encountered various racist attacks and discrimination."*

"*I don't think I particularly like Australia, I'm not talking about the individual people there. I'm talking about the overall political strategy.. This strategy cannot be changed and I was so bored to stay there."*

When I asked Zoe about why she perceived there to be racial discrimination, she provided several examples:

"*Some scholars have said that Australia is a schizophrenic society, because it leans towards the US politically. There is a so called five-nation alliance, but economically, it still relies on China very much. I have been to many meetings and have heard many people in those meetings saying that they should not do business with China because China has no human rights. Their officials would persuade them that they still need to do business with China, but meanwhile to follow the US strategically."*

"*Once, my friend Norman and I were shopping in the central station after watching a film. And this one person suddenly started being racially abusive.[...] it was very clear since you can tell from Norman's appearance that he is Muslim, because he's from Malaysia, and his beard and skin color are very much Muslim style. [...] Sometimes, we would share and analyze the different racial discrimination experiences that we encountered, so I could feel this discrimination did cause a certain level of harm to Norman."*

"*Another time, my boyfriend and I were waiting for the bus to go back home. Then, a car drove past and one man in the car was shouting abuse at us, [...] My boyfriend is white, so that man must have been against me. There were so many such kinds of discrimination"*

As illustrated by her comments, Zoe was not willing to remain in Australia. Later, invited by her BA supervisor, who then was the Dean of her current workplace, she was given an Associate Professor title directly without any interview or formal application.

In terms of their initial impressions when they first returned, both Frank and Lisa noticed no big changes since they had been back quite often, especially Lisa, who felt as if she "*had not left China before*". Zoe, on the other hand, commented on the rapid pace of development in China. In particular, she noticed that the soaring housing prices were not in accordance with her low salary.

RQ3:

How do returnee academics (re-)construct their professional identity after returning to China?

4a2.4 Overall Evaluation of Overseas Study Experience; Pros and Cons

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 16, 22, 23, 24 and 31 - see Appendix B)

The three participants appeared to have more negative impression towards China's HEIs, especially Frank, who felt especially dispirited about it. From Frank's perspective, on the one hand, the academic routine is not systematic, rigorous or standardized in Chinese HEIs, and thus many domestic cultivated doctors are very impetuous on researching, and students are lacking independence; on the other hand, there is a problem with excessive bureaucracy -- As Frank discussed, certain key speakers have taken the discourse power for decades, and those who are currently dominating China's academic discourse are not open enough to connect to the world:

"maybe it is the problem of being too official-oriented. Yes, this is the problem. [...] if you are an official, you will have a lot of academic resources. Another one is that everything is decided by the leaders, it is not about university management by professors [...] they set up the so-called Chinese Film School, which school? What school? How can you set up one thing without connecting up with the world? You have to communicate with the world fully, and then produce the uniqueness of your own [...] Those people who are dominating the academic discourses, first, they do not read English papers; second, they cannot publish papers in English. They are not recognized by the international journals. What's the point of being self-confident by closing the door? The doctors here, at least in Film studies, don't know how to do research, or use different ways to do research, and to connect things in the whole academic area worldwide, how to find their position, how to do the breakthrough, it's still difficult for them. I do think this has been the most important issue that domestic academic community has to face, not enough norms, not standardized enough. This is very important."

Lisa further added that relationships (*Guanxi*) are still needed for publishing papers and applying for projects in China, and she calls for reforms in the way that all of this should be assessed. Yet, even by introducing such reforms, there may still be some contradictions. On the one hand, Lisa was against the idea of introducing a strict assessment system because of the stress that this would cause for university teachers; on the other hand, it should be acknowledged that nationally speaking, there would be no good results achieved on national research without the introduction of such strict assessments. In this sense, Lisa appeared to be quite helpless and could only passively accept her status quo.

Compared to Frank's extremely negative comments and Lisa's helpless acceptance, Zoe's comments towards China's HEIs tended to be more thoughtful or balanced. She pointed out that the university she is now working for and the universities where she did her degrees abroad "*are universities from totally different levels*" and thus are actually incomparable. *She also feels* that the politically influenced international knowledge system is having a negative impact on China's HEIs. As she observed below:

"Internationally, it's about the knowledge system, which has been influenced by the political policies. Therefore, we will hear lots of criticisms about China's human rights. Many periodicals such as SSCI, AHCI, are anti-China. Many members of these acting board are educated in the western style, and hence, they naturally have some kinds of beliefs about democracy of the western capitalism. It's not good for China."

By contrast, comments from the pre-2016-LAH group about HEIs abroad were all positive. Those common positive comments included "*systematic, rigorous and standardized academic routine, much better office equipment, freer and relaxed style of supervision, and better assessment system*". As Zoe pointed out, "a *good university with a good platform and good library resource and facilities, will not focus on students' employment rates, and instead do have passion in their own area, such as liberal arts*". This suggested that Zoe feels her current department in China, which belongs to Liberal Arts and Humanities (LAH), is neglected by the university. This point is similar to Frank's criticism of his current university's biased emphasis on Science and Engineering (SE) rather than on liberal arts.

Despite such issues, it seems that the positive influences of being university returnee academics still outweigh the negatives (14 codes vs. 8 codes). For example, both Frank and Zoe claimed that their English proficiency had vastly improved though it was still not good enough to be classed as mother tongue level. However, Lisa felt that her English language abilities had receded; she also opined that this has a negative effect on bilingual education (which means university course being taught in English by Chinese returnee academics). Lisa holds the view that Chinese teachers who have returned from English-speaking environments do not possess the same level of English language expertise as those who are native speakers, as she said below:

"To be honest, from my point of view, it's not good to promote bilingual teaching. [...] no matter how good the teachers' spoken English are, it's impossible to be as good as native speakers even though they are returnee teachers".

4a2.5 Changes to Personal Outlook and Current Sense of Self

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 17, 25, 26, 27 and 28 - see Appendix B)

In terms of changes to personal outlook and current sense of self, answers revealed by the pre-2016-LAH group indicated that they feel themselves to have changed in several positive ways. In addition to the previously mentioned critical thinking and broadened horizons, their academic rigour, language and other living habits or values have also been improved. Being more willing to trust others after returning was also mentioned by Lisa:

> "After going to Japan, this aspect has been strengthened. This is because life in Japan was very simple. For example, if I left my bag on the bicycle and went to the supermarket, my bicycle and bag would be still there. I could always find my lost purse in the same place where I lost it if I knew where I lost it. Hence, shouldn't the relationship among everyone be like this? I do still think so after being in Japan, I felt that there is nothing wrong with trusting others. In Japan, relatively speaking, I think they are better in terms of credibility and quality of people. "

Supervisors also play important roles in influencing them. For instance, after overseas study, Frank has changed to put family first and value his wife's opinion. He has become calmer and less competitive. As he explained below:

> "Another one is that my supervisor is kind of family first [...] I used not to put family in the first priority, I wanted to do academics, family did not matter to me. [...] I was cultivated from New Zealand that I have to compromise for my family. Mainly influenced by the environment and my supervisor, what my supervisor said may not a hundred percent correct, I do have my own thoughts, but more or less I have been influenced by him. He told me that he was always family first, he could go to better universities, but he did not. His idea has made a big difference on me."

Frank also revealed that compared to other domestic Chinese, his way of thinking is now more critical, particularly on issues such as patriotism and nationalism. As he explained below:

"They (domestic Chinese) have a strong sense of their own identity. For example, for a united nation, for nationalism, or for patriotism, which are infiltrated into the bone. When I was studying overseas, this point would pop out, that is, you would not think from this angle, your sense of nationalism was not so strong. You would understand that this nationalism [...] they do have their own meanings, but they also have their negative influences, not for the political power of the whole nation, it's different."

"Chinese people like to combine themselves with macro patriotism on constructing the nation, but they never think about why, right? They will react immediately by saying, damn you, how dare you not love your own country, right? But they never think about the question on why I have to be patriotic. It is just personal emotion, why do I have to be patriotic, and why can't we be unpatriotic? They never think about this question, [...] Being a scholar, you have to think, one's thinking has no boundaries, right?"

"Being a scholar, you certainly need to have this critical thinking, right? I think this is the difference, and yes, this is the very important difference. This difference can lead to different views on researching."

Zoe's sense of self appears to have not changed much, for she feels that she has been changing all the time by keeping curious and open to meet various people and explore diverse cultures either domestically or abroad. It is worth mentioning that Zoe further added that social class difference outweighs others such as gender or nationality. As she described below:

"I think the biggest difference is from different classes, not the country [...] when we are studying gender differences, we often talk about the differences between men and women, but actually we find out later that such differences have become the secondary contradiction for they have been completely covered by the differences of social classes. Therefore, now I would say that the influence of the gap between the rich and the poor has already outweighed the distinctions of nationalities and gender. [...] You'll find that it's very difficult to break the boundaries among different social classes."

4a2.6 Re-acculturation, Satisfaction and Future Orientation

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 29, 30, 31 and 32 - see Appendix B)

The degree of re-acculturation among this category of returnees is overall the highest among the four groups. For example, Lisa said that she has been 100% re-adapted to China, and even feels as if she "*had not left China before*". Frank said 90% re-adaptation, and reflected on that he

could automatically change back to his Chinese identity since he used to live in China for a longer time and he's originally Chinese; the only 10% not adapted part is about his current work placement.

Zoe has relatively less re-adapted to the environment with a rate of 80%. For example, Zoe is satisfied with her current life for she feels so lucky and happy to have supportive boyfriend who's open and inclusive. She also has good small community at her work placement, especially with returnee colleagues. The 20% not adapted parts are mainly about her work at Ningbo city. For instance, she reflected on that she suffered heavy working pressure after returning back to China, and now she has no academic career passion and ambition due to the reason of "*not good university platform*". As a result, she felt no need to build good relationship with the university administration, indicating if she wants to be promoted at work, then relationship building is needed.

Their overall satisfaction rates towards their career are lower compared to their re-adaptation rates. Teaching was the most frequently mentioned area of satisfaction, and the dissatisfaction parts included low salary and the fact that strict requirements around the assessment of teachers made them feel stressed.

It is worth mentioning that Lisa's satisfaction rate is relatively higher among the three for she now prefers to be family-oriented and pursues moderation in work performance. The satisfaction rates of Zoe and Frank are similar with about 70%, which is still relatively low when compared to Lisa's 80%. Zoe complained about the not very good university platform, which reduces her passion or motivation to improve academically, especially on researching. This makes her feel ashamed for giving up on academia, especially when she has been guided by top supervisors in her area.

Unlike the female scholars (Zoe and Lisa, who now are pursuing more on life comfort), Frank appears to put more efforts on his academic work, yet he admitted that his self-discipline and motivation have been weakened

due to aging. In addition to previously mentioned average university platform and problem of bureaucracy, he also feels that the evaluation system of the university is problematic; the ideology influence from the members of the CPC is strong; what is worse, he reported that he is always been disturbed by chores while writing papers. He also admitted that he has too little time spent on his nuclear family due to long distance, as he complained below:

"I have no life already now, what life? So, I come here to work, and that's the job. [...] I don't have a life."

Participants from pre-2016-LAH are all not sure about their future career plan, such as whether to go abroad again or not.

Zoe is the one who has the least certainty about future among the three, but she feels that she will remain in her current position for about 3 or 4 years. This is because on the one hand, she values her small social community with her current colleagues, as well as her nice Dean; on the other hand, she likes the longer holidays of being a university teacher. She reveals that she pursues inner happiness, and prefers learning things rather than teaching others. At the moment, she is making sporadic preparations for an uncertain future, such as learning Spanish.

Frank claimed that he has always been thinking to job hop to other better universities abroad, but has failed to achieve this goal because he is not competitive enough compared to other distinguished university degree holders. He now plans to stay where he is for doing research and publishing papers in English, and then hopefully be promoted to full professor. He admitted that he has now become too lazy to adapt to a new working environment again, indicating he is very likely to stay at his current university.

Lisa appears to have decided to stay at her current university. Preferring to follow her husband, she said that both of them like Ningbo and consider the city to be very suitability for living. She is also not willing to live too

far away from her parents. She hopes to do better in research so that she can be promoted with an increased salary at her current university.

4b Post-2016

This section will focus on the Post-2016 group of interviewees. The interviewees themselves will be divided into 2 sub-groups: three (Mike, Colin and Charles) belonging to the discipline of Science and Engineering (SE) and three (Will, Leo and Henna) belonging to Liberal Arts and Humanities (LAH). As before, the interview results for each group will be framed using the order of the 3 main RQs under sub-headings linked to the relevant questions matching each of the interview stages.

4b1 Post-2016-SE Group

The post-2016-SE group were all male professors born in the 1980s. They are all only children with no siblings, and all of them have relatively well-educated parents. Colin is just newly married with his primary school classmate who is now working in Hangzhou. Mike has a stable relationship with his girlfriend who is also working in Hangzhou and they recently got married. They furthered their studies abroad partly by following the trend of going abroad at that time in China. Among them, only Charles had no overseas experience before going abroad; Mike had travelled to developing countries several times and each for just several days; Colin had been to Japan many times for academic purposes since his supervisor had cooperation with a professor in Japan. The table below provides a short personal vignette of each interviewee:

Mike	Mike was born in Ningbo. His BA was from Southwest Jiaotong University majoring in Civil Engineering. Encouraged by his parents, who are also university teachers, he decided to go straight for a doctoral degree directly in Singapore with a scholarship. He chose to become a university teacher after graduating from his doctorate, thinking that this would allow him more of his own time to do the things he is interested in.

Colin	Colin was born in Henan Province. He received his BA degree in North China University of Water Resources and Electric Power, and master degree in Zhengzhou University. He then continued with doctoral study at Huazhong University of Science and Technology in Wuhan. In July 2013, during his first year in Wuhan, introduced by his supervisor, he went to Loughborough University, which was a talent exchange program of an EU project funded by a Madame Curie fellowship. Colin thus gained a double degree after he returned from the UK. He chose to be university teacher thinking that this would represent stable employment.
Charles	Charles was born in Tongxiang, Zhejiang. After graduating with a BA from Wuhan University of Technology, he went abroad in 2004 to study for a Master degree at Monash University in Australia. He later continued his studies with a doctoral degree at Melbourne. He completed his Post Doc work at Newcastle University carried out a further period as a Post Doc in Japan in 2016-2018. Charles enjoys being a university teacher as it allows him to both teach and carry out research.

RQ1:

What are returnee academics' perceptions of living and studying overseas?

4b1.1 Preconceptions and Perceptions

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 6, 10 and 12 - see Appendix B)

Participants from the post-2016-SE group had various preconceptions prior to their departure. For example, Colin reported that the UK had turned out to be not as developed as he had thought it would be, although the study aspect matched what he had expected. For his part, Charles had expected to have a better environment for improving English language, more contacts with native people and culture and more communication opportunities with people from different cultural backgrounds. His overseas experience largely met this expectation. Mike initially had no idea about what overseas life would be like, but everything turned out to be within his tolerance, claiming that he could "*solve any problem once encountered*".

As with the other three groups, fresh and clean air, as well as the politeness of people were these interviewees' first main impressions after they had arrived abroad.

Being trusted or respected, and following a comfortable, independent life with an emphasis on privacy were the interviewees' most impressive perceptions abroad. For example, Colin reflected about those British students had a very clear separation between work and life. As an example of this, he noticed that an arranged football game would not be disturbed by a supervisor's sudden interruption. He recalled below:

"The way they consider a question was still different from us, especially in terms of focusing on privacy. [...] if they have planned to play football at three o'clock this afternoon, the experiment won't finish until half past three, then sorry, they will not continue the experiment in the last half hour even the previous three hours have important influence, they just leave. Their private life should not be influenced. For example, the first time when I was there, I had to find a technician in order to do an experiment, he was out and was not there [...] I asked his mobile phone from the colleagues nearby, they laughed awkwardly and won't give me his mobile phone number, no, not for private phone number. That's it, basically."

Charles also recalled experiencing something similar in Australia:

"Without doubt Australian culture may pay more attention to personal privacy, that is, it will not interfere in your own affairs, but it is also very inclusive, that is, respect you, they are in a relatively loose way. [...] So I think Australian kids are very independent."

The existence of racial discrimination was also noteworthy for Charles, who had been abroad much longer and had held many part-time jobs outside campus. For example, as Charles said below:

"because racial discrimination in Australia is considered to against the law, no one would say it directly as discrimination. But when an employer was looking for a person, a white and a Chinese, even if the Chinese might be better, it was sure he would choose their own people. To be honest, this happens not only in Australia, but also in China. For example, local people are easier in finding jobs than outsiders. Because first of all, employers would think that you might be more easily integrated into their cultural circle. Only when the local people are not able to meet his demands, would he look for some foreigners. So, it was difficult in this respect, and it was hard for you to really integrate into their local circle."

When asking Charles why he could not integrate into the local culture after staying there for such a long time, he explained:

"there existed great differences. For example, they prefer to go out and drink a lot, but sometimes we prefer to cook at home and tried to invite friends home to have fun. They seldom do that, more often, they prefer to go out to have parties. They liked to go to bars while we seldom went to. So... our life circles were different. And another important problem maybe ... for example, we still cared about domestic news while abroad, but they cared about something else. They cared about different things. And they cared about different sports. For example, they like Australian football while we like Chinese football or table tennis and badminton and so on. So... unless you grew up in that cultural background you could try to understand it, otherwise I thought it was very difficult. Sometimes you couldn't understand their slang while they might laugh happily. For example, when we told Chinese jokes, even if they understood the English version, they might not laugh, so there'd be a clash ... it was very difficult."

The rule-based society abroad vs. the relationship-based society in China was another common perception of this group. For example, Colin felt a sharp difference when comparing complicated relationships in China, and reflected on that more attention is needed on building good working relationships here. By contrast, "*things done abroad were more based on rules*". Charles also reflected on the rule-based nature of life overseas, saying that the curriculum and policies abroad were more fixed and harder to modify since "*everyone follows the rules that are not easy to be changed*".

4b1.2 Relevant Training and Level of Acculturation

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14 and 15 - see Appendix B)

None of the participants had re-adaptation training after returning, nor did they have pre-departure training before going abroad.

English language, namely, IELTS score, was a key requirement before going abroad. Among the three, Mike's English level was the best as he had passed both IELTS and GRE. Hence, he went to study directly after arriving abroad without taking any additional language training. Charles, however, had to take the language training course for about three months in order to pass the IELTS test again after arriving abroad before studying formally. Colin only received a three-month laboratory entrance training which aimed at letting him be familiar with the rules on how to use the laboratory.

With focusing on doing experiments in labs and studying only, the participants from this group had very limited social circles while abroad, and they all reflected on that they communicated more with Chinese. For example, Colin socialized mostly with his previous Chinese university colleagues, and said that "*it was wasting time and useless to communicate with non-Chinese whose English was not even as good as mine*". Although Mike had not limited his communication with Chinese only, he claimed that none of the non-Chinese was "*worth spending time to make friends with*" since on the one hand, he thought that his time was very precious and making friends costs time, while on the other hand, he could not find anyone that "*shared similar interests*" with him. Charles had tried living with a native English-speaking family. He recalled that this presented no problem for daily simple communication and yet he still felt it was difficult to communicate with them in depth:

"Even if you spoke English language a lot, due to the cultural and other factors, it was still very rare to really go into the locals… generally speaking, it was impossible. [...] Just like they couldn't integrate into ours. [...] As for the Chinese, we all adapted to each other because of common hobbies and same language." (Charles)

Colin and Mike shared similar comments:

"We just stayed together with Chinese people. There were no communication barriers among Chinese, and it's much easier to stay with Chinese." (Colin)

"That was definitely because we grew up in the same culture, so we had a lot of common topics, this was the most important. And we had quite similar eating habit, you didn't have to be afraid of anyone who couldn't eat pork or cattle or something else, it was convenient to communicate with them." (Mike)

It seemed clear from their responses that the participants felt it was difficult to integrate with the natives or other foreigners, and English communication with other non-Chinese was limited to the academic working environment. All of the participants had done part-time jobs, such as Research Assistant (RA) or Teaching Assistant (TA), and they reflected no communication barriers. Colin reported that he had had no communication barriers being an RA in guiding his two non-Chinese BA students -- one a Spanish girl and the other a British boy. Mike claimed to have enjoyed being a TA and teaching active students abroad. For his part, Charles worked as not only an RA and a TA, but also held other part-time jobs outside campus in order to make a living, practice his English, and gain relevant teaching experience. Charles did not have communication barriers while doing these part-time jobs, although he noticed some racial discrimination as I have already detailed above.

As a result of their experiences, the participants in this group adopted a separationalist approach and remained within their own cultural circles. Perhaps, this is the reason that they reflected about no culture shock or communication barriers while abroad and only noticed some relatively superficial cultural differences, such as different eating habits, views on valuing privacy and so on.

RQ2:

What are returnee academics' perceptions and experiences during their repatriation process?

4b1.3 Reasons for and Process of Returning to China

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 18, 19, 20 and 21 - see Appendix B)

The reasons for returning to China turned out to be highly individual decisions. However, as with the respondents from other groups, one of the common overlapping reasons was filial piety, especially for Mike and Colin, who had decided to return due to them being the only child at home. Charles returned primarily for career planning purposes in order to get a stable job since the vacancies in Australian universities were rare and highly competitive. All of the participants applied for their current work placements by themselves, and the university promised them relatively higher salaries.

As for choosing Ningbo city, being near their hometown was the first priority for Mike and Charles, and finding an economically developed city with a comfortable life was Colin's main concern. As Colin explained below:

"I do not like southwest China for the society is very messy and noisy. ... It's too stressful to stay in Shanghai. [...] if stay in the west, the economic base determines the upper structure, and then further determines the quality of people in the society. I feel uncomfortable if I choose to go there. Here, though the platform is just so so, life here is more comfortable."

In terms of their first impressions upon re-entry to China, they all noticed the rapid pace of development with improved life convenience and high efficiency.

In societal terms, it is worth noting that although they noticed some improvements in Chinese behavioral politeness (Mike, for example, noted that "*it's good to see some small things, like everyone to be more polite*"), they felt no superiority of being returnees when compared with other domestic people who hadn't been abroad. Mike and Colin both thought that their overseas experience would not necessarily bring them "*closer to truth*", but that it would provide them with one more angle to view the world. As Colin explained:

"It depends on how you see the differences. If you come from totally different social classes, the difference can offset the difference between before you go abroad and return. For example, you are from middle- or high-income group, your annual salary is a million, his annual salary is about 50,000 to 60,000 a year, then the differences include life habits, ways of dealing with things, [...] it does not matter whether you have been abroad or not."

For this group, it seemed that the differences they perceived between them as returnees and other domestic Chinese was not as important a factor as different social classes.

RQ3:

How do returnee academics (re-)construct their professional identity after returning to China?

4b1.4 Overall Evaluation of Overseas Study Experience; Pros and Cons
(The results under this section relate to interview questions 16, 22, 23, 24 and 31 - see Appendix B)

As with the other groups, the comments on HEIs environment abroad were generally very positive, such as a more rigorous and systematic academic training, better equipment and research conditions, more emphasis on practical knowledge application, more independent and self-motivated learning mode, stricter graduation requirements on students

and excellent students with high level practical abilities.

By contrast, and also in keeping with the findings from the other groups, there were more negative comments on China's HEIs environment, such as the lack of rigorous academic training, poor research conditions with poor instruments and equipment, more emphasis on theory rather than practicality in teaching, and hierarchical relationships. Charles reflected on that he felt it was very competitive to carry out research domestically since getting projects outside of campus was difficult. He explained that this is because most typically, a relationship (*Guanxi*) is needed in order to bid for projects successfully, but he himself knew very few people and had no such relationships. Charles also mentioned many other negatives about China's current HEIs such as the emphasis on formality and administrative chores*,* students' "*blindness in choosing university majors*", and "*easily changed university policies in order to pursue hot areas in the modern market*".

Furthermore, Mike complained about the low salary, as well as the ignorance of Liberal Arts. His suggestion was that Chinese HEIs need to make more of an investment in improving university teachers' lives, since the research work can "*be both time and energy consuming*".

By contrast, Colin argued that it is unreasonable to discuss the advantages or disadvantages of different educational systems considering factors such as time, region and culture, claiming that these points should only be seen as differences. For him, the biggest problem facing Chinese HEIs is due to the wealth gap. Thus, similar to Mike's suggestion of economic investment, Colin pointed out that "*developing the economy is the only solution*" for China's HEIs.

Despite several negative influences, such as "*disjunction with domestic academic environment*" (Charles) and "s*mall domestic academic circle without interpersonal relationship which will be convenient for projects application*" (Mike), the participants from this group generally believed that the positive influences of being returnee university teachers far

outweigh the negative influences. For example, all participants reflected on that they have received relatively higher salaries at their current university, have learned advanced professional knowledge abroad, and are more rigorous with improved self-motivation in doing research. Mike and Charles both said that their English has improved and that they can now publish papers in English abroad. Colin also revealed that he has "*more projects application opportunities*" domestically thanks to his returnee title.

4b1.5 Changes to Personal Outlook and Current Sense of Self

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 17, 25, 26, 27 and 28 - see Appendix B)

Although the participants tended to regard overseas study as just another life experience which will not change them "*from deep inside*", the data in fact revealed that they have all experienced changes in a positive way. For example, in addition to having improved professional knowledge, being more rigorous in academia and giving more autonomy to their students by encouraging them to innovate and think critically, they all reflected on that they have become more open with broadened views. They are also now more inclusive towards criticisms or different opinions and have started to pay more attention to privacy, with a clearer separation between work and life. As shown by their comments below:

"I pay more attention to privacy, private time [...] I think that I may value more on nuclear family." (Colin)

"I will not interfere with their own private life. That is to say, when you are having a rest, I will not interfere with you, but when you are working, I may ask you to do what you need to do well."(Charles)

"I divide class on and off clearly, I finish class on time and never postpone the class, never..." (Mike)

Mike even reflected on that he has become more patriotic, as he explained below:

"When being abroad, you could always see something that is anti the Chinese government, such as criticizing the one-party autocracy. After seeing all these, you would think that China is a better country, and then you would be more patriotic. [...] I am more patriotic for sure."

It appears from their responses that the three male participants have changed to put more value on equality -- not only on gender equality by valuing on nuclear family and wives' views, but also on aspiring for equal relationships among leaders, teachers and students. Especially Charles, after staying more than ten years abroad, reflected on that almost every aspect of his life had been influenced by Australia, including life and working modes -- respecting privacy and independence, clearer work and life separation, and focusing more on interest-oriented research.

From their responses, it seems that supervisors abroad also played a crucial role in influencing the participants. As Colin claimed:

"I did not deny that teachers I met during my master or doctor study period in China are all good teachers, but I valued more from my distinguished teachers overseas, including emphasizing on practicing, academic spirit, innovative thinking and so on."

4b1.6 Re-acculturation, Satisfaction and Future Orientation

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 29, 30, 31 and 32 - see Appendix B)

Participants' re-acculturation rates are in accordance with their satisfaction rates towards careers, with Colin 90%, Charles 80% and Mike 70%.

Colin has adapted to the current simple campus life very well, and reflected on that he is very satisfied with his personal experience and excellent academic achievements so far, and tends to be very confident about himself in his professional area.

Charles reflected on that he is now satisfied with achieving a good balance between work and life, but admitted that he had felt like an outsider at

the very beginning. However, he justified this as needing some time to adapt to his current environment.

Having the lowest re-acculturation and satisfaction rates among the three, Mike said that he chose to be an outsider on campus, partly because of the age gap with his colleagues and partly because of not being satisfied with his current university platform. He complained that nowadays, with such low salary, "*university teachers have high social status in name only*".

It may be true that for those with a small but high-quality social circle, no communication barriers were reported upon returning. However, the participants in this group all reflected on that they had experienced some stress with regard to an identity change. As Colin commented:

"For me, the most obvious change is identity change, from a student or research assistant to a formal teacher [...] In the old days, supervisor will do the arrangement, or my own initiative to arrange some experiments, do some research and so on; but now, I have to apply for some projects actively, to cooperate with some enterprises, to think about my own development route. It's more about a change from passive to active."

Charles also reflected on that facing his leaders' higher expectations on achieving certain academic goals, such as publishing more papers and winning project applications, added to his sense of stress.

In closing, it should be noted that the participants from this post-2016-SE group all reflected on that they are not sure about the future. All of them indicated that they might be prepared to job hop if they are presented with any better opportunities, such as being paid a higher salary (Mike), or living closer to his wife (Charles). However, returning to work overseas seems impossible for both Colin and Mike, except for short term visits.

4b2 Post-2016-LAH Group

The post-2016-LAH group all officially started in their roles as university teachers after returning to China. Will is the only child in his family, Leo has an older sister and Henna has a younger brother, both of whom are

working in local government institutions. In the cases of Leo and Henna's parents, both of their fathers are the main breadwinners -- Henna's father works as a high school teacher and Leo's father is a civil servant. Both of their mothers are now retired, but each held non-academic jobs before doing so. All of the post-2016 LAH interviewees graduated from relatively good universities in China, except Will who graduated from a non-distinguished university. They all had previous overseas experience before going abroad but only stayed for short periods, except Will who had been to the US for half a year to take part in an exchange programme organized by his BA university. The table below provides a short personal vignette of each interviewee:

Will	Will comes from Zhoushan, Zhejiang. His mother worked as a member of the Human Resource department in a bank and his father is the manager of a company. He and his wife, who graduated from the same high school as him, got married when Will finished his doctoral degree. They now have a three year old child. Will failed to enter a distinguished Chinese university for his Master degree, but eager for self-improvement, he decided to further his study in the UK, and then continued with a doctoral degree there. He became a university teacher so that he could be near his family.
Leo	Leo is from Tongxiang, Zhejiang. His parents tried their best to let him go to better schools by moving from the countryside to the town. After graduating from a BA programme at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC), Leo participated in a Ningbo government funded volunteer master program in Australia. He later decided to complete his doctorate there.. Leo became a university teacher because it allows him to focus on research.
Henna	Henna was originally from Huangshi, Hubei. She went to a top university in Wuhan for her BA and Master degrees majoring in Japanese. She was then accepted by a university in Japan, the one with the supervisor who she had been assistant with.

RQ1:

What are returnee academics' perceptions of living and studying overseas?

4b2.1 Preconceptions and Perceptions

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 6, 10 and 12 - see Appendix B)

As all of the interviewees in this group had travelled overseas before, their pre-departure expectations were largely coloured by their earlier experiences. Will had no specific expectations of life in the UK, but thought that it would probably be similar to what he had experienced in the US. His experience of Britain was indeed quite similar except for the cloudy weather which he felt to be very different. Leo had thought that life in Australia would be very simple, and thanks to his English Medium study experience at UNNC, he felt there was no great difference in living in Australia. As for Henna, thanks to her prior experience of traveling in Japan, she found that her overseas sojourn generally met her expectations which were that it would be very relaxed and happy.

In terms of the most impressive things they noticed during their time abroad, they made mention of independence, a full and busy schedule, a rule-based system and superficial politeness. As Will noted:

"what impressed me was that British people attach much importance to superficial politeness, they will give you a very friendly and kind impression. [...] For example, the two who do not know each other will say hi in the elevator, [...] things like helping each other hold the door, say 'thank you' to the driver and so on."

For her part, Henna noticed that "*it's very normal for many women to still be single even over thirty years old. Late marriage phenomena in Japan is now very* common". This clearly left a deep impression on her which later may have become a barrier[3] in her private life after returning to China.

4b2.2 Relevant Training and Level of Acculturation

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14 and 15 - see Appendix B)

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[3] Family issues arose for Henna when, at the behest of her parents, she married shortly after returning to China in her late twenties. However, the marriage ended in divorce not long after.

Despite there being no re-adaptation training when they returned to China, the training these participants had received before going abroad was mainly language related, and so their language ability had generally been good. Among them, only Leo received cultural training from the Ningbo government but he felt it was largely useless, as he reflects on below:

"The training [...] was from Chinese perspective on westerners. The contents trained, including teaching and things like how to play golf, were useless [...] We were also required to prepare a suit, but when we arrived there [...] they just wear a pair of jeans or a shirt or something to attend academic conferences. It's not going to work."

By contrast, Leo felt that the training he received after arriving in Australia was very useful, as not only teaching techniques were included, but also cultural related topics. As Leo reflected on below:

"when we arrived there, we went to teach directly, and meanwhile took part in the training. They mainly taught us how to teach, and something cultural related would be inserted, such as food, cookies and so on. These were quite useful [...] I feel that such kind of culture may influence my current views or attitudes towards my students. Because there was one professor, he would drive a bus full of about more than ten people, driving us to the beach. This was the first time that I felt the distance between students and professors was so short."

The participants all expressed different levels of communication difficulties caused by not having good enough language skills, especially for in-depth complicated topics with natives. These difficulties were caused by different practical usages, cultures, history and slang related. Such communication difficulties made Leo felt "*an estrangement*" with the natives. As he said:

"But there was no communication barriers in daily life or no problem except some in-depths in culture which cannot be touched or not willing to touch. [...] we cannot communicate with them in Chinese way, or the so called very heart-to-heart, or very close."

It should be pointed out that they all had part-time jobs outside campuses (Leo and Will working in Chinese restaurants, and Henna in Japanese supermarket serving for Chinese clients specifically), but they all seemed

to have no obvious culture shock. Yet only Leo mentioned that he had experienced serious racial discrimination in Australia, and said that "*Australians are only superficially polite towards Asians especially towards Chinese".* Leo framed this a*s "friendly racism".* Despite the superficial levels of politeness, he felt that in reality, Chinese students abroad like himself were disdained by the local administrative staff. As Leo said below:

"They give you a smile or are polite to you but are actually despised you from inner side as yellow people, especially Chinese, they think Chinese people seem to be not well educated. Once during my graduate study, our toilets were staff toilet since we all had our own offices, and thus we shared the toilet with them. Gradually, they posted Chinese words in the toilet "please flush the toilet", [...] In fact, their toilets were dirty and messy as well, but they would first of all think that it was a group of Chinese students who used the toilets, so they used Chinese words."

But Leo seemed not to care so much about such matters, since what he really valued was the pursuit of knowledge and focusing on his studies.

Will also mentioned the superficial politeness of non-Chinese, as he said:

"It's very hard for you to communicate with them in depth. For example, now, I still have kept relatively good friendship with my foreign classmates, and I have intimate relationship with my boss [his supervisor], but for other normal [white natives] people, it's very hard for you to make friends with them. They just show you politeness superficially. If you want to achieve the intimacy like with your other Chinese friends, it's hard."

When asking Will to elaborate on what allows for this intimacy he is describing above, he further explained that although he did keep an open attitude by communicating with both Chinese and non-Chinese, he mentioned that language is one factor, but that it also comes down to having a shared culture or history, as he relates below:

"No problem for basic communication, but in terms of their own culture, you have no idea about what they are talking about. For example, some wars, strategies, or special internet words, or some words in certain context, you will not understand them without experiencing their culture. This is definitely an obstacle. [...]For instance, what impressed me most was during my master study, we had a lecture, and a picture of Henry VIII was shown. Chinese students had no response at all, British students could immediately recognize him, that's simple, it's their Emperor, we didn't know. But if we put up the picture of Mao Zedong, they might not know that he is a Chinese political leader, but we know immediately that's Old Mao. That's the difference, I think, it is a cultural barrier. Without a long time of being immersed there, you cannot understand these things".

This may be the reason about why they all communicated more with Chinese during abroad. For example, Leo even felt more easier to communicate with those nonnatives, as Leo explained below about forming teams while playing football:

"I felt a bit difficult to communicate with the native white people like when we had dinner together, possibly because of the limited English ability or something else, I would be afraid of cooling the atmosphere, possibly because of different hobbies or interests... people would try to look for each others' interests, and even football would be very difficult to talk about for it's not a topic liked by the natives. When with nonnative people, people from other countries, the distance is not as far as with the natives. Because those people would not feel as westerners that they are ... superiors. Those nonnatives are better."

RQ2:

What are returnee academics' perceptions and experiences during their repatriation process?

4b2.3 Reasons for and Process of Returning to China

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 18, 19, 20 and 21 - see Appendix B)

Each of the interviewees had different reasons for returning to China. Family considerations appeared to be the main motive for Will and Leo.

Will was clear that he prefers to live in China, and initially he returned through participating in a cooperation program recommended by his supervisor. Although Will had many other job opportunities with a higher salary after graduating from his doctorate, his family considerations outweighed economic income. Will's parents bought a house for him in Ningbo, a city near their hometown so that he could be close to them. Will also received a warm welcome from his current university, especially from the leader there who promised him a bright future for his professional development.

Similarly, Leo returned based on his own personal preferences, and those of his wife, and he chose Ningbo not only because it is close to his wife's home, but also because he did his BA in Ningbo. Without a network of connections and relationships (*Guanxi*), Leo revealed that he had been refused by other colleges in Ningbo due to the fact that his education major did not match their requirements. Leo was finally accepted by his current university and he guessed that this might have been to do with him being an alumnus, since the Dean of the school had graduated from the same university as he did in Australia.

As for Henna, it was hard for her to find a full-time lectureship in a Japanese university. Her initial intention of staying in Wuhan at universities where she did her BA and Master degrees failed due to her lack of *Guanxi* relationships. She chose Ningbo mainly based on the city's better economic development, as she "*refused to go to less developed northwest China for disliking the bureaucratic atmosphere and dry weather there.*" She duly applied to three universities in Ningbo, but only received a response from her current institution.

In terms of their initial impressions after re-entry, the participants tended to feel the return was nothing special because they had often returned during their overseas study period. However, overall, they were happy and perceived that there had been better developments in China. For example, Will noticed the improved politeness of the Chinese he encountered, a faster life tempo, and a more convenient life.

Despite these positive observations, Leo noticed what he felt to be rather poor behaviour from some Chinese such as speaking loudly in public or driving very aggressively and not following the traffic rules. As he explained below:

"I think we Chinese are more selfish. Say, educational resources, people may all think that these resources are scare and thus they are going to get it [...] more bad habits can be reflected or seen in driving behavior, such as changing lanes recklessly [...] or playing mobile phones and then the road is blocked. Very selfish."

RQ3:

How do returnee academics (re-)construct their professional identity after returning to China?

4b2.4 Overall Evaluation of Overseas Study Experience; Pros and Cons

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 16, 22, 23, 24 and 31 - see Appendix B)

The participants evaluated the overseas institutions very positively, agreeing that they offered a better research and academic atmosphere with rigorous and systematic academic training, interest-oriented research and a student-centered mode of teaching, which put more emphasis on the development of applying practical knowledge. They were also impressed with what they perceived as self-motivated and hard-working independent students.

In terms of the Chinese HEI environment, as with the other groups, the participants all made mention of several negative sides. Common negative comments included the lack of academic rigorousness, a poor research atmosphere, poor facilities and research conditions, too much emphasis

on graduation or employment rates, the need for relationships (*Guanxi*) in paper publishing or applying for project applications, the low quality of domestic journals, and endless administrative chores which would place an additional burden on teachers.

As Leo lamented, "*domestic colleagues even don't know how to search for references on the university website*", and complained that his "*current schedule is so full*" that he is "*very disappointed at the endless chores*" expected of him. Leo also complained that "*the number of papers published is much more valued than teaching*", and thus claimed that "*the real practical teaching system is not matching the national standard objectives*". Will, for his part, complained about the low salaries which put university teachers under financial pressure and also pointed out that the assessment system on teachers is utilitarian and "*too one-size-fit-all*" though he could understand the need for such simple quantitative assessment in modern China. Will also criticized the problem of serious bureaucracy, explaining that "*the assessment rules are made by the administrators without considering disciplinary differences*."

The data for the post-2016-LAH group suggested that the negative influences of being university returnees slightly outweighed the positives (20 codes vs. 17 codes). The positives were about professional improvement (such as received more rigorous and systematic academic training), and personal development (such as being more inclusive and open). Leo's interest-oriented style in researching was also "*stimulated via overseas study*". Will reflected on that he had been pushed to be "*independent in learning abroad and has been very good at time management*".

Despite these pluses, all of the participants complained that they find it hard to write and publish papers in Chinese, as they are not familiar with domestic academic assessment system and have a limited domestic academic social circle. As Will elaborated:

"The disadvantage is that I may not adapt well to the academic circle here. I cannot write papers in Chinese very well. [...] I think I can write in English better, comparatively, for I am trained to write in English academically. So I am more adaptable to British writing system, including the whole structure and so on. Now, with the Chinese I have written, sometimes the grammar is very strange."

Leo reflected on that he even feels it hard to publish papers both abroad in English and domestically in Chinese, as he said below:

"To publish papers abroad is difficult, and so are domestic publications if you cannot integrate into Chinese domestic academic circle. Then you cannot do well on both sides, that's really embarrassing."

Yet, with improved English language levels, it appears that returnee academics do help to promote the internalization of the whole academic development of the department. As Will claimed:

"One advantage is that I can complete the whole English paper and publish in SCI [Science Citation Index]. In our discipline, I published the first SCI paper, including the first paper on SSCI [Social Sciences Citation Index]. No one else. Other teachers have not published, for they did not have the academic atmosphere to do this thing. Similarly, referring to project applications, maybe language is an advantage, for I can finish SCI paper independently."

4b2.5 Changes to Personal Outlook and Current Sense of Self

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 17, 25, 26, 27 and 28 - see Appendix B)

In terms of changes to their personal outlook, participants from the post-2016-LAH group all said that they have changed a lot positively, general common changes include being more rigorous academically and professionally, more independent and inclusive, more rule-based way of doing things, keeping some good habits in daily life (such as eating habits, civilized behavior or politeness), and being more objective and having a better understanding towards China.

For example, Leo said that the overseas study stimulated not only his interest-oriented style in researching, but also his realization of the importance of self-reflection in teaching. He will focus more on students' feelings by engaging more with them, and treat the relationship between teachers and students more equally.

Will said that he has changed to be more objective, calm and maturer in dealing with things. He also still keeps some habits from the UK in terms of etiquette and manners. As he explained:

"Some very polite ones, like opening or holding the door for others, I will have brought some western etiquettes. [...] I will more obey some rules. Some living habits in daily life more or less have been influenced after all I have lived there for some time, and I am the type of person who is very easily influenced by the environment."

"my biggest change during this period is that I have become more open-minded, not panic when encountering things. [...] and I am very inclusive in different values. [...] I think that the world is diverse, different people will have different understandings towards the world."

"Things from abroad are not always the best, they are just more suitable to that social culture in the western context. [...] you cannot take a one sided approach to the problem and think everything abroad is good. I think this is the difference, after being abroad, I am more objective. "

It should also be noted that participants have been heavily influenced by their supervisors. For example, Henna said that "*I want to be my students' idol, just like my supervisor*", indicating high admiration on her supervisor's patient and rigorous style in guiding students. Leo learned a lot from his supervisor on teaching in self-reflection which emphasized more on students' feelings. Interestingly, Leo noticed that it can be hard to balance work and life for university teachers abroad, which is exactly what happened to him when he returned to China. He felt that he spent too little time staying with his nuclear family since most of his effort has been put into his work. As Leo explained:

"Many successful professors abroad do not have family lives. [...] their hearts are all putting on work [...] there is another Chinese teacher [abroad], from Hunan province, he has a very happy family life, two children – one boy and one girl, but he lost his job, and he also did not renew his post-doctoral job successfully. Because he has no papers, his English is not so good".

Henna's pursuit of gender equality, and her views towards marriage have been deeply influenced by her overseas study in Japan, as she outlined[4]:

"Before I studied abroad, I thought I should get married and have a family, but I don't think so after I studied abroad. I don't feel quite so guilty if I don't get married at the age of 30 or 40 [...] people usually use some words which I even can't accept, for example, like 'Gold Miss' and 'Destroy Nun'. I don't like people make such comments on those women. [...] I think those people just don't have enough education, less tolerance and low qualities. [...] I think my thoughts are correct and it's me who shows one kind of value [...] each person is an independent individual. [...] they are just involved in too many traditional codes of conduct."

"I think I have actually become more inclusive and diversified. [...] During that overseas period, I have learned a lot […] there are also positive influences on my mental thinking and personal habits."

Partly due to their majors in Liberal Arts and Humanities (LAH) perhaps, the participants of the post-2016-LAH group seemed to value their changes and treat such developments positively.

4b2.6 Re-acculturation, Satisfaction and Future Orientation

(The results under this section relate to interview questions 29, 30, 31 and 32 - see Appendix B)

The participants' levels of re-acculturation and satisfaction toward their career are similar and both are relatively lower compared to other three groups, with Henna 70%, Leo 70% and Will the lowest at 55%. Although they appear to have adapted well to their lives in China, the areas of

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[4] In Chinese slang, "Gold Miss" refers to a successful and independent career woman who prioritizes her work over romantic relationships or marriage. On the other hand, "Destroy Nun" is a term used to describe a woman who intentionally ruins or sabotages romantic relationships, often due to personal issues or negative experiences.

dissatisfaction are mainly work related. Participants said that they had undergone not only an identity change from being students to being teachers, but were also experiencing an imbalanced time management between work and life. With endless administrative chores delivered to them, their working schedules are already so full that they have not enough time for researching.

In the case of Leo, for example, his strong sense of pursuing knowledge makes him think that he should put more effort on his work than on his family. As he explained:

"I do have a sense of belonging to my family, but the big problem is that this sense of belonging may impact my career. [...] I think I should spend more time on my work. That is, I am not feeling very down to earth when at home sometimes, I just feel that I contribute too little to my family, including my daughter... I think it is too luxurious."
"I prefer to stand at the threshold, and I don't like to be involved into the system at the university. Or I like observing. Similarly, when I was abroad, I did not like to be integrated into that place. Therefore, it seems that I don't have a suitable foothold."

Will also complained about lacking regular timetable:

"Even though I feel much more open-minded, I still feel very anxious. For instance, I have to have classes this semester [...] Sounds not so many, but for a new teacher, these are all new classes to me. I still feel this is a challenge to me to a certain degree [...] I haven't finished preparing the lessons, for there are many other things waiting me to do first. [...] I have owed many papers to others, [...] but I only have one title written, yet not start to write it."

Participants of this group said that their current social communities are generally small, and they often do not have much communication with older colleagues. As Will said, he often socializes with younger colleagues since he has "*fewer common topics with older teachers*". Henna also explained that topics discussed by her current colleagues are not academic related professionally but always "*about the trivial things in daily life".* Such discussion topics make Henna feel that those colleagues have no dreams or ambitions in life, and in professional terms anyway, are quite superficial.

Unlike Will, both Leo and Henna said that they have communication barriers with their family members. For example, Leo clashes with his older sister on individual independence, with his parents on personal space or privacy, and with his friend from his hometown about respecting ways of invitation. He thinks that he is now more direct in communication whereas his parents and older sister are not. The high level of control he perceives from his parents make him feel there is a lack of trust and respect, and thus he disagrees with the tradition filial piety to obey the older generation. As he explained:

"I do have difficulties in communicating with my parents, but I still will try my best to communicate with them for I am the type of communication person. Nevertheless, I have come across setbacks again and again."

"Because my mom or my family are very controlling, a highly controlling family. [...] I think this is kind of lacking trust or respect [...] they have a strong traditional sense of raising children in order to take care of them when they grow old. [...] Therefore, the more they want me to go back to my hometown, the more I feel suffocating about this kind of atmosphere, or I don't have a personal space."

"I think every people are independent, we should not live for other people, kind of thought like this, and which made my sister cry [...] She might think how can she has such a younger brother, or so self-centered. This is a generation problem. My family members have struggled a lot, and even now we are still struggling."

"I would like to view things openly, let's just talk about it directly, but their way of thinking is that you should not argue or quarrel with your mom, you should turn big problems into small ones, and small problems into no problems at all."

In contrast to these parental issues, it is worth noting that the participants of this group all felt they have received "adulation" from others. Although it sounds like something positive, this could be regarded as a form of discrimination since such "adulation" makes them feel stressed. As Henna explained:

"Before we are returnee teachers, we are human beings first of all [...] when I argued with someone (actually it was her husband), he would say that, how could you be so impolite, it ... just because I'm a doctoral returnee, which means I can't argue, can't speak loudly. It's totally a prejudice. [...] When you are unhappy or angry and you show these feelings, they will think that you are impolite. [...] you would be regarded as impolite and be given a negation to your personality."

As a result of his returnee status, Leo has been given lots of additional work to do:

"No discrimination, but maybe, as being a returnee teacher, they may think that you are capable of doing things well, and thus I am given lots of things to do."

Will summed things up even more abruptly:

"Adulation is one type of discrimination. That is, they say you are able to do anything as being a returnee doctor and so on. Isn't it a kind of discrimination? [...] But if you do not do well, they discuss about you in the back, things like, well, you are just so so. This is what I mean adulation is a kind of discrimination in China, not just formally discriminate you."

Accordingly, based on the comments above, it seems to boil down to the fact that if one has studied overseas, then the expectations on his or her ability are going to be higher than if one had simply remained in China.

When asked about their future career plans, the participants did not rule out the possibility of job hopping. However, familial considerations seem to be the main concern of Leo and Will, indicating that the two males of this group place more value on their wives' opinions. For Henna, following the breakup of her marriage, filial piety may now be her main consideration if she decides to change jobs.

It is interesting to note that although Will has the lowest re-acculturation and satisfaction rates, he appears to be confident about his future professionally, as he reflected on how confident he felt about his academic achievements and ability. With the idea of to be "*a big fish in a small pond",* Will said that he will "*play with the domestic rules*" if he stays in current university, and he firmly believes that "*each industry will have some places to let me earn bread home."*

Chapter Summary

As the results I have shared in this chapter suggest, there are not only some distinct differences between the pre-2016 and post-2016 groups, but also several disciplinary differences between SE and LAH. In the following chapter, I will consider the wider implications of these findings and what they might suggest for the re-assimilation of returnees in the future.

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Chapter Summary

Introduction

In this chapter, I will categorize and discuss the key points that have emerged from my study based on the original 3 RQs. These will be considered in turn under sections 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3, with a consideration of how these findings compare and contrast with the findings of the authors whose work I examined in Chapter 2.

5.1 Returnee Experiences and Perceptions of Living and Studying Overseas

For the most part, all of the returnees reported positive experiences during their time spent overseas. That said, rather than actively trying to integrate with their host cultures, most of them deliberately adopted separationalist approaches to acculturation. In the sub-sections which follow, I will try to account for why this phenomenon occurred, and also report on some of the specific cultural features that the returnees noticed were different while they were studying and living overseas.

5.1.1 Separationalist Approaches to Acculturation

The literature generally positions acculturation as being either integrative or separationalist (i.e., Berry, 2005; Chen, Sun and Zhu, 2022). While integrative acculturation tends to involve maintaining one's original cultural identity while seeking to engage with the host culture, separationalist acculturation appears to emphasize the preservation of the original culture and minimal interaction with the host culture (*ibid.*). Most of the participants in my study chose the latter. This section discusses the factors contributing to this choice, including linguistic ability, instrumental motivation, social convenience, an underlying sense of superiority, and disciplinary influences.

a) Linguistic ability

Linguistic ability is a crucial factor that shapes acculturation strategies for international students abroad (Gao, 2010; Ward *et al.,* 2001; Yeh and

Inose, 2003). Even participants with high language proficiency may encounter challenges due to cultural differences impacting language interpretation and expression. As language reflects on culture, these differences can still hinder effective communication and cultural integration, underscoring the ongoing significance of cultural barriers for those returnee academics, regardless of their language proficiency level. Although they expressed no barriers in academic or professional contexts and simple daily communication with non-Chinese, the results revealed that such culture related language barriers pose challenges for those returnee academics to engage in more in-depth communications and relationships building with natives. Perhaps this is why many participants in this study reflected about that there existed "*estrangement"* and a lack of "*in-depth"* communication with the natives abroad.

Consequently, most participants in this study may find it more comfortable to interact with fellow Chinese who share their language and cultural background, thus favouring separationalist acculturation approaches.

b) Instrumental (as opposed to integrative) Motivation

Instrumental motivation, which involves a practical desire to achieve specific goals, can influence acculturation strategies (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). It was found in this study that most participants were driven by instrumental motives to go abroad, such as obtaining a doctorate degree for career promotion or acquiring specific skills like researching, rather than integrating into the host culture. As a result, most participants chose to adopt separationalist approaches to acculturation, prioritizing their personal academic success over cultural integration.

c) Social Convenience (lots of other Chinese)

The presence of a large Chinese community in the host country can provide social support and a sense of familiarity, making it more convenient for Chinese students to maintain separationalist acculturation strategies. This is partly because in recent years, the number of Chinese

students studying abroad has largely increased (Liu and Morgan, 2017; MOE, 2022a). For example, as participants recalled that "*there were a large number of Chinese international students* (Will)" and "*Chinese students represented the majority* (Lisa)". The availability of Chinese social networks and cultural enclaves can reduce the perceived need for extensive interaction with the host culture, leading to a preference for separationalist approaches.

d) Remaining Aloof and an Inherent Sense of Superiority

Some of the participants exhibited a sense of superiority regarding their own culture or personal ability, leading them to maintain separationalist acculturation strategies (Ward *et al.,* 2001). This was particularly apparent in the cases of Colin and Mike. For example, Colin expressed that "*I didn't meet a Singaporean or a foreigner who I thought were worth making friends with, if I met such people, I would definitely try to break the estrangement*". Colin also said that "*I had to spend some of my energy trying to understand what they were talking about since many of them, such as from Bulgaria or Spain, were not fluent in speaking English language. Then, after communicating with them, I found out that their academic level was no better than mine*". Accordingly, they felt that such communications were not worth their precious time and even felt "*it was a wasting of time to do the useless social thing* (Colin)". Therefore, some participants chose to remain aloof from the host culture, perceiving it as inferior or less worthy of engagement.

5.1.2 Life in Rule-Based Cultures

The rule-based system prevalent abroad emerged as the most impressive aspect of the returnee academics' overseas experiences. The rule-based system refers to the strict adherence to rules and regulations in various aspects of life, including academic, professional, and social domains.

The returnee academics' exposure to the rule-based system in foreign developed countries led to a profound impact on their perceptions and experiences. The strict adherence to rules and regulations, which were not as prevalent in China, required the returnee academics to adapt and

adjust their behavior and mindset. For example, Colin and Charles discussed the stringent regulations they encountered overseas compared to their experiences in China. Colin remarked on the lax laboratory management rules in Chinese universities, where individuals handled toxic materials without proper safety gear. He contrasted this with the UK's strict safety protocols, requiring individuals to wear appropriate safety attire while in the laboratory. Charles highlighted the stability of curriculum settings abroad, noting that policies once established were resistant to change due to strict adherence to rules that were not easily modified.

This rule-based approach contrasts with the prevailing practice in China, where personal relationships or *Guanxi* play a vital role in resolving matters. For instance, Zack mentioned that in China, especially in the northeast, one had to find someone they knew to deal with things; however, after arriving in the United States, if one went to the government to do something, they had to follow the rules - queuing and waiting until it was their turn. Peter also noted that when going to the hospital, one should do what they were supposed to do by following the rules, and there was no need to find acquaintances like in China.

Hence, the cultural disparity in approaches to handling affairs, based on rules versus personal connections, could impact the extent to which Chinese individuals were able to fully assimilate and integrate into the host society.

The rule-based system could be explained through the concept of a contractual spirit in foreign countries, which is rooted in the development of legal systems that prioritize written agreements and the enforcement of contractual obligations (Hall and Soskice, 2001). This contractual spirit is deeply embedded in the social fabric of many developed nations and has significant implications for governance, business transactions, and interpersonal interactions. According to Hall and Soskice (2001), in these countries, adherence to rules and regulations is a fundamental aspect of societal functioning, and the rule-based approach ensures fairness, transparency, and accountability.

Such rule-based systems establish a predictable and stable environment which fosters trust and facilitates cooperation among individuals and institutions. For example, Peter reflected on the issue of trust by mentioning that as a consultant, he earned over sixty Australian dollars per hour and typically worked twelve hours a day. He highlighted that it was his responsibility to track the hours he worked, and his foreign boss trusted him. When I probed to ask Peter to explain further, Peter explained the differences he perceived between his experiences in Australia and China. He expressed his observation that people in China lacked trust in each other, leading to a high level of nervousness. He noted the difficulty in communication due to a defensive attitude prevalent in Chinese individual interactions. Peter contrasted this with instances abroad where he witnessed individuals distributing beverages as acts of kindness, a gesture he found uncommon in China.

The World Values Survey (WVS, 2024) has identified significant cross-national value variations, with survival values and self-expression values being a major dimension of cross-cultural variation according to the Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map. Survival values prioritize economic and physical security, ethnocentrism, and traditional gender roles, while self-expression values emphasize environmental protection, tolerance, and individual autonomy (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). This dichotomy highlights how cultural, historical, and political factors shape a society's predominant values. Accordingly, China tends to be often associated with survival values due to historical authoritarianism and societal focus on stability; in contrast, many developed English-speaking countries tend to align more with self-expression values, reflecting liberal democratic traditions, emphasis on individual rights, and progressive social norms. Inglehart and Welzel (2005) further discuss how postindustrial societies with high existential security tend to prioritize self-expression values, which are associated with well-being, trust, environmental protection, gender equality, and opposition to authoritarianism; while societies marked by insecurity emphasize economic and physical security, leading to intolerance and authoritarianism.

Studies have highlighted the significance of complete social contracts, transparency, and the rule of law in fostering trust in public institutions (Cunningham, Saich and Turiel, 2020; Ratigan and Rabin, 2020). Trust in public and political institutions in China has shown fluctuations, with a notable increase during Xi Jinping's tenure attributed to anti-corruption efforts (Li, 2021; Zhong, 2018). Wu, Araral and Huang (2024) point out that interpersonal trust in China is influenced by socio-political dynamics and economic factors, with the impact of the Communist system on trust in family members and strangers being a subject of inquiry. While post-Communist experiences often lead to cautious interactions with strangers, anecdotal evidence suggests a trend in China towards increased engagement with unfamiliar individuals (*ibid.*). For instance, despite some literature suggesting an overestimation of generalized trust in China, survey data indicates a substantial increase in interpersonal trust over the examined period, with a 13.03 percent rise (from 52.41 percent in 2007 to 65.44 percent in 2018); the rise in trust towards strangers, individuals of different religions, and nationalities in China over the past decade reflects broader societal shifts influenced by factors such as urbanization and governmental regulations aimed at enhancing social trust (*ibid.*).

Yet, further research is needed to explore the complexities of trust measurement and the impact of authoritarianism on trust dynamics in Chinese society (Wu, Araral and Huang, 2024; Zhong, 2018).

5.1.3 Encountering Racial Discrimination

It is noteworthy that three interviewees from host nation Australia reported encountering instances of racial discrimination during their overseas experiences.

Charles noted facing preferential treatment of white individuals over those with Asian backgrounds in job opportunities, revealing a bias in the selection process. He remarked that when an employer had to choose between a white and a Chinese candidate, even if the Chinese candidate

was more qualified, the employer would typically choose the white candidate.

Leo pointed out the use of the Chinese language for restroom notices, indicating a lack of inclusivity and potential discriminatory practices within the academic setting. He recalled an incident during his graduate studies where Chinese words were posted in the restroom instructing users to flush the toilet. Leo explained that despite the dirty state of the native students' toilets, they assumed it was Chinese students who had used them, leading to the use of Chinese language in the notices. Besides, Leo further highlighted that international students "naturally" formed groups together in playing football games, while white natives formed a separate group, attributing this to a closer connection with non-natives for not feeling inferior as westerners.

Similarly, Zoe and her international friends encountered repeated incidents of racial discrimination during their time abroad in Australia, significantly affecting their overall experiences. Zoe expressed feeling like "*migrant farmers working in the cities*", attributing the sense of alienation in Australia more to racial differences than social class distinctions. She described race discrimination in Australia as a common or even "*daily routine*".

Therefore, these encounters undoubtedly had a detrimental effect on the individuals, potentially contributing to their ultimate decision to repatriate. It sheds light on the complex interplay between international experiences and post-return adjustment.

5.2 Returnee Experiences and Perceptions During Repatriation

In this section I will discuss some of the factors which made the returnees want to go back to China and the early stages of their repatriation process.

5.2.1 Filial Piety and/or Family Considerations as a Driver for Return

The decision to return to China in this study was found to be largely attributed to the motivation of filial piety as this was mentioned by the majority of the interviewees.

Filial piety is a core virtue deeply rooted in the macro social environment of Chinese culture (Ho, 1996). This fundamental moral value, considered a cornerstone of Chinese culture due to its significant cultural and historical significance in emphasizing respect and care for parents and ancestors, exerts influence on various aspects of individuals' lives, including their decision to return to their home country.

The origin of filial piety could be traced back to ancient Chinese philosophical and ethical teachings, particularly those of Confucianism. Confucius, a prominent Chinese philosopher during the Spring and Autumn period, emphasized the importance of maintaining harmonious relationships within the family, with filial piety being a central virtue (Yao, 2000; Zhang, 2017). According to Confucian teachings, individuals have a moral obligation to honour and care for their parents, as they have given them life and nurtured them; and this duty extends beyond the parents' lifetime and includes the responsibility to carry on their family lineage and ancestral traditions (*ibid*.). In other words, filial piety is deeply intertwined with notions of familial loyalty, obedience, and gratitude; and by fulfilling one's filial duties, individuals not only bring honour to their parents but also contribute to the overall harmony and stability of the family and society (Ho, 1996; Yao, 2000). This emphasis on filial piety reflects on the Confucian ideal of a well-ordered society, where individuals prioritize the needs and well-being of their parents and ancestors over their own.

Introduced in 1979, the one-child policy aimed to control population growth and alleviate socio-economic pressures; and many Chinese families at that time only had one child, who then became the sole bearer of their parents' hopes, dreams, and expectations (Greenhalgh, 2008; Zhang, 2017). The one-child policy intensifies the pressure on the single

child to fulfill their filial duties, as they are responsible for the well-being and support of their aging parents (*ibid*.). Hence, the expectation for the single child to ensure their parents' well-being strongly influenced the decision of some interviewees (i.e., Mike and Colin) to return to their home country.

It was also evident that in the case of some returnees, the decision to go back to China was based on a consideration of their own nuclear family, particularly wanting to stay with their wives (i.e., Will, Leo and Zack).

Therefore, the emphasis on filial piety shows Confucian ideals of familial loyalty and gratitude, and the implementation of the one-child policy in turn intensifies the pressure on the single child to fulfill their filial duties within a well-ordered society. The significant influence of familial ties and the prioritization of family unity thus serves as another motivating factor for the participants' return.

5.2.2 The Deliberate Targeting of Second-Tier Cities

The decision of returnee academics to choose a second-tier city Ningbo can be attributed to various factors, as expressed by the interviewees. These factors can be analyzed from both individual and contextual perspectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of the motivations behind their choice.

From an individual perspective, one reason mentioned by interviewees is the proximity of Ningbo to their hometown (i.e., Mike, Will, Charles, Hugo, Zoe and Leo). For those whose hometowns are near or in Ningbo, choosing to return to this city is driven by the consideration of being closer to their families and familiar surroundings. This proximity allows them to maintain stronger connections with their roots and continue fulfilling their filial duties towards their parents (Li and Guo, 2022; Yang and Wen, 2021; Zhang, 2017). The cultural value of filial piety, as has been discussed above, deeply ingrained in Chinese society, plays a significant role in their decision-making process.

Another individual factor influencing the choice of Ningbo is economic development. For returnee academics whose hometowns are in northern or inland regions of China (i.e., Lisa, Colin, Henna, Zack and Frank), Ningbo represents a city with robust economic growth and opportunities. The economic development of Ningbo, as a major port city and industrial hub, attracts individuals seeking better career prospects and financial stability. Choosing Ningbo allows them to benefit from the city's flourishing economy and potentially achieve higher standards of living for themselves and their families.

From a contextual perspective, the preference for second-tier city Ningbo can be attributed to the stress and pressure associated with larger metropolises such as Shanghai, Beijing and Shenzhen. In contrast to earlier cohorts of returnees who swiftly secured esteemed positions and made notable contributions to China's progress, present-day returnees have been reported to encounter a multifaceted array of opportunities and challenges (Hao, Wen and Welch, 2016). Although a considerable number of them still possess a competitive edge in China's saturated job market, the overarching milieu is characterized by intensified contextual competition (*ibid.*). In other words, compared to previous generations of overseas returnees, the advantages of those who return to China are not as pronounced, and they actually face more competition, especially in cosmopolitan cities. Therefore, in order to avoid intense competition and pressure, it seems that overseas returnees are opting for second-tier cities, as they believe that the pressure will be relatively less in these locations. Many interviewees in this study mentioned that staying in these big cities can be overwhelming and mentally taxing (i.e., Lisa, Colin, Hugo, Mike, Will, Henna). For example, Mike pointed out that the salary of a university teacher was not substantial, making it difficult to afford a house in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Hence, he thought that it was "*no meaning*" to spend his time in such cosmopolitan cities, rendering the prospect of living there meaningless.

The fast-paced lifestyle, intense competition, and high cost of living in China's large urban cities can lead to increased stress levels and a

diminished quality of life (Yang and Wen, 2021). In contrast, second-tier cities like Ningbo offer a more relaxed and balanced living environment, with less congestion and a lower cost of living. This appeals to returnee academics seeking a more manageable and less stressful lifestyle.

Moreover, the selection of the relatively economically developed city of Ningbo, located in the eastern coastal region, highlights the unequal or unfair phenomenon among different regions in China's HEIs. China's higher education system has undergone a process of decentralization, which involved granting universities greater autonomy in various aspects such as enrollment, teaching, research, and finance (Xiong *et al.,* 2022). This shift towards decentralization has resulted in both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, it has diversified funding sources for universities. On the other hand, however, it has also led to widening regional disparities in terms of financial support and resources. For example, the eastern provinces of China have emerged as having a distinct advantage in higher education compared to other regions. This is evident in the distribution of higher education institutions across the country, with more located in the eastern and coastal provinces and less in other regions. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC), as of September 2021, the eastern and coastal provinces of China have approximately 37.62% of the total 3012 higher education institutions; the central areas account for 25.86%, the northeast for 10.23%, and the western regions for 26.29% (NBSC, 2023). This distribution highlights the uneven access to higher education resources across different geographic areas in China. Additionally, the decentralization has inadvertently contributed to regional disparities between economically prosperous provinces and impoverished regions. This is primarily due to variations in each province's financial capacity to support their universities and colleges. For instance, in 2018, the wealthiest universities in Guangdong province had budgets twice as large as those in Hubei province and 5.2 times larger than those in Gansu province (Zha, 2020). These regional disparities are further exacerbated by the current concentration of higher education institutions in the eastern and coastal provinces compared to other regions (Zha, 2020). This

indicates that the education inequality prevalent in China due to uneven regional economic development, where equal access to quality education is denied (Wang, Tang and Li, 2015). For instance, Colin mentioned that he had applied to some 211 universities in the western parts of China and had been admitted to those universities. Yet, he still chose to stay in eastern coastal cities by acknowledging the influence of economic conditions on societal structures and the quality of individuals in a society. Therefore, despite the average quality of university platform, he found life more comfortable in his current location working in Ningbo.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the level of teachers' professional identity (TPI) may vary among teachers in different regions. Although there is a lack of relevant research specifically focusing on the TPI of university teachers, studies on primary and secondary school teachers have revealed regional variations in TPI. For example, Wei's (2008) dissertation highlights these variations, showing that urban school teachers in China generally demonstrate higher levels of professional identity compared to teachers in town schools, who, in turn, exhibit higher levels compared to teachers in rural schools. This disparity in professional identity levels can be attributed to factors such as uneven attention and investment in urban and rural schools, as well as cultural and social differences between these areas. Accordingly, the preference of returnee academics to select second-tier coastal cities in eastern China indirectly suggests that their levels of TPI maybe higher than those in less economically developed cities in the inland or northern regions, but lower than those in first-tier developed areas such as Beijing and Shanghai. Overall, these regional variations in TPI indicate the influence of resource allocation, cultural influences, and social disparities.

5.2.3 The Role of Connections and *Guanxi*
In the context of China, a complex network of personal connections and relationships, commonly referred to as *Guanxi*, hold significant influence over various aspects of social life, including employment opportunities. *Guanxi* is deeply ingrained in Chinese culture and exerts a profound impact on social interactions, decision-making processes, and resource

allocation (Chen and Chen, 2004). The empirical evidence indicates that possessing an international qualification alone is inadequate to thrive in the highly competitive employment landscape of China; instead, the consolidation and effective utilization of diverse forms of social capital are imperative (Hao, Wen and Welch, 2016). Within the specific context of these returnee academics in China, the importance of personal connections from interactional perspective becomes evident in their ability to secure university teaching positions back in China.

Bourdieu's social practice theory (SPT) provides a useful framework for understanding the function of personal connections in employment outcomes. According to Bourdieu, social practice is shaped by the interplay of various forms of capital, including economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Particularly, social capital refers to the resources embedded within social networks that individuals can access and mobilize to achieve their goals (*ibid.*). In the context of employment, social capital can manifest in the form of personal connections, reputation, and access to influential individuals or organizations. Possessing strong social capital, such as personal connections or *Guanxi*, provides individuals with advantages and opportunities which may not be available to those without such connections.

The interviews conducted for this study revealed that personal connections can be categorized into four main types, each demonstrating the influence of *Guanxi* in the employment outcomes of these returnee academics.

The first type involves establishing relationships through domestic supervisors (in cases of Colin, Frank, Zoe), where their supervisors directly assisted them in securing their current positions. This highlights the influential role that supervisors can play in facilitating career opportunities. Supervisors, through their own established networks and reputation, can leverage their social capital to open doors for their supervisees. As articulated by several participants, Frank, for instance, recounted how his supervisor's acquaintance with the current dean of Z

University led to an offer at a tertiary institution in Ningbo. Frank described the warm reception and eventual appointment as an associate professor at the university. Similarly, through continuous academic collaboration with her supervisor from her undergraduate studies, Zoe was also offered a position with associate professor in Z University directly without the need for any interviews, attributing her placement directly to the connection with her former domestic supervisor in China.

The second type involves knowing someone already working at the institution, as indicated by Zack, who mentioned having connections with the so-called leaders at the current workplace, which facilitated his appointment. This demonstrates how personal connections can provide insider knowledge, recommendations, and potentially increase the likelihood of being hired. The existence of these connections can create a sense of familiarity and trust, which can positively influence the hiring decision (Chen and Chen, 2004; Granovetter, 1973).

The third type involves leveraging the accumulated cultural capital and human capital (professional knowledge) from their time abroad, as in the case of Peter, who gained recognition in China and then received assistance from acquaintances to return to his current university through national programs such as the "Thousand Talents Plan". This exemplifies how personal connections can provide access to resources, opportunities, and influential individuals who can support their career transitions. Through their personal connections, these returnee academics were able to tap into networks that offered them opportunities for career advancement and recognition.

The fourth type involves instances where during interviews, it was discovered by Leo that "*the dean [interviewer] had graduated from the same doctoral institution as mine*", potentially influencing the hiring decision. This highlights the significance of shared educational backgrounds and the potential for personal connections to create a sense of affinity and trust, leading to favourable outcomes in the hiring process. This aligns with Granovetter's concept of "strength of weak ties", which

suggests that connections to individuals outside one's immediate network can provide valuable information and opportunities (Granovetter, 1973).

From the above, it can be concluded that personal connections or *Guanxi* play a crucial role in the employment outcomes of returnee academics in China. Drawing on Bourdieu's SPT, particularly the concept of social capital, it becomes evident that personal connections serve as a form of social capital, providing individuals with access to resources, opportunities, and influential individuals. These connections then enable returnee academics to navigate the complex landscape of employment in China, leveraging their social capital to secure positions within relevant universities. Understanding the dynamics of *Guanxi* and its implications for employment outcomes can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of social mobility and equality in Chinese society.

5.2.4 The Relatively Subjective Value of Overseas Experience

The findings of this study indicate that returnee academics experienced overall positive changes in their personal outlook and current sense of self. These positive changes align with previous research that has consistently shown the positive outcomes of studying abroad experiences for returnees. Specifically, from micro individual perspective, returnee academics mentioned that studying abroad has made them more "*inclusive*", "*open-minded*", and "*willing to help others*"; they have also developed "*broader perspectives*", enhanced "*critical thinking*" skills, and adopted "*healthier habits such as regular exercise and healthier dietary choices*" (i.e., Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009; Sutton and Rubin, 2004; Ting-Toomey, 2009; Williams, 2005), as well as overall improved language ability (i.e., Drews and Meyer, 1996; Gill, 2010; Hadis, 2005).

5.3 (Re-)construction of Returnee Academics' Professional Identity

The (re-)construction of teachers' professional identity (TPI) concerns both positive and negative aspects. I will discuss these features in turn under sections **a** and **b** below.

a. Positive Features

5.3.1 A Higher Sense of Professional Self-Esteem

A higher sense of professional self-esteem can be well shown in returnee academics' sense of improved occupational abilities, as has been pointed out by Yu and Yu (2023) in which they revealed in their qualitative findings part that returnee academics interviewed were mostly satisfied with their occupational abilities; these occupational abilities include interviewees' professional working ability. These occupational abilities appear to be similar to the results from the Western literature, which refers to as the sense of competence/commitment or professional values (Van Lankveld *et al.,* 2017).

Such improved occupational abilities of the returnee academics can be elucidated through Bourdieu's concept of "capital". Bourdieu defined capital as a resource that individuals possess and can draw upon to gain advantages in social interactions and institutions (Bourdieu, 1986). In the context of this study, the rigorous and systematic academic training experienced by the returnee academics during their study abroad can be considered as a form of cultural capital. This training equipped them with the necessary knowledge, skills and competencies to excel in their respective fields, contributing to the development of the returnee academics' academic habitus, which refers to the internalized dispositions and attitudes towards academic pursuits (*ibid.*). In other words, the returnee academics' improved occupational abilities can be seen as a form of cultural capital, which refers to the knowledge, skills, and competencies that individuals acquire through overseas education and cultural experiences, enabling them to develop practical knowledge application abilities (*ibid.*).

For instance, Hugo mentioned the evolution of his professional knowledge from basic to comprehensive after years of learning overseas, particularly in areas such as devices and techniques, indicating a deeper and more thorough understanding. Another participant Zack highlighted substantial

personal growth, citing improvements in English language proficiency and research skills acquired through extensive reading and training, leading to a shift in research habits and working methodologies. Additionally, Will emphasized the advantage of being able to independently complete and publish English papers in prestigious journals, noting pioneering contributions within his discipline compared to his peers who lacked the conducive academic environment for such achievements.

Therefore, the improved occupational abilities of the returnee academics can well be understood through Bourdieu's concept of capital, especially cultural capital. The rigorous academic training, stricter graduation requirements, and positive evaluations of the academic atmosphere and students encountered abroad contribute to the acquisition of cultural capital, which in turn enhance the returnee academics' occupational abilities and position them favourably in their professional endeavours.

5.3.2 An Increased Awareness of Gender Equality

This study has also identified an interesting gender difference trend. In earlier years, it was predominantly the wives who followed their husbands overseas for living and studying, as observed in the male participants such as Peter, Hugo, and Zack from the pre-2016 group. However, in more recent years, it has been observed that males are becoming more likely to follow their wives, as seen in the male returnee academics Leo and Will from the post-2016 group, who also mentioned consideration of their wives' opinions in their future career orientations. Specifically, Frank's emphasis on his family was influenced by his overseas supervisor, who prioritized family over academia. Consequently, Frank consulted his wife's opinions in choosing his current university vocation, which he would not have done otherwise. Frank's example highlights the influence of supervisors or role models on returnee academics' values and decisions. Frank's increasing prioritization of family demonstrates the significance of personal experiences and guidance from supervisors in shaping returnee academics' perspectives and choices.

The post-2016 group further claimed that their awareness of equality had been improved after returning. This heightened awareness was not only expressed in terms of equality among leaders, colleagues, and students, but also in terms of gender. As Henna expressed that "*it's very normal for many women to still be single even over thirty years old. Late marriage phenomena in Japan is very common*". Even though Henna had obeyed her parents by getting married soon after returning, the increasing awareness of such gender equality gained by her immersion in the Japanese contextual culture may be the core reason for her later choosing to divorce her husband.

Therefore, the findings of this study suggest a shift in gender dynamics among returnee academics, with more males now following and respecting their wives. This trend to some extent may indicate changing societal norms and an increasing emphasis on gender equality.

It should also be pointed out that this study revealed gendered differences in time management between work and life, and career aspirations. Female returnee academics, represented by Zoe, Lisa, and Henna, seem to prioritize family and personal life over an academic career. For example, although the discussion mentions several times how participants prefer to live and work in a second-tier city rather than a busier city like Shanghai. In Zoe's case, she works in Ningbo (mainly for teaching duties without any research pursuits) but spends most of her time living in Shanghai. This is because her current boyfriend (not married) is living and working in Shanghai. Thus, she chooses to live in Shanghai for family reasons, with family ties being another important theme. Zoe's situation also indicates that she has an imbalance in time management between work (as a university teacher) and personal life, with the latter far outweighing the former, demonstrating her low career aspirations as a university academic, especially in research pursuits. Lisa, for her part, gave up the opportunity of going abroad based on family considerations, and she herself expressed directly that she did not want to pursue her career very much.

These findings suggest that the influence of traditional gender roles in Chinese culture on the career development of female returnee academics are a significant factor for consideration. Traditional gender roles are deeply ingrained in Chinese society and can pose significant obstacles for female returnee academics within China's HEIs (Baykara-Krumme and Platt, 2018; King and Lulle, 2022; Liu and Morgan, 2016; 2020; Tang and Horta, 2021). The influence of traditional gender roles needs to be understood within the broader contextual institution of Chinese higher education and society, which encompasses cultural, social, and political values and norms that shape individuals' interactions with others (Liu *et al.,* 2022). This cultural aspect creates additional challenges and constraints for female returnee academics, limiting their opportunities for career advancement. Similar findings could be found in Wang's (2014) study, where she found that gender roles and family identity have a significant impact on the academic career development of female returnee academics, with the traditional role of being a "good wife and mother" placing additional responsibilities on them. Female returnee academics face the dual evaluation of their gender and professional identity, leading to increased pressure and confusion (Wang, 2014). These findings suggest that implicit gender differences within the academic environment have both visible and hidden impacts on female returnee academics, warranting further consideration.

5.3.3 Positive Influence of Meso Interactional Students

The interaction between returnee academics and students has emerged as a significant factor in shaping the teachers' satisfaction and professional fulfillment. The findings from the interviews indicate that returnee academics exhibit a preference for engaging with students, which positively influences their overall satisfaction and commitment to the university teaching profession. This observation is consistent with prior research, as I discussed in Chapter 2, which has highlighted the constructive impact of student interactions on the (re-)construction of university academics' TPI (Liu *et al.*, 2022; Van Lankveld *et al*., 2017; Yu and Yu, 2023). For instance, one interviewee, Lisa, expressed that staying together with students makes her "*feel young and happy*", attributing it to

the sense of youthfulness and happiness it brings her. This underscores the significance of meso-level interactions with students in shaping the professional identity and job satisfaction of returnee academics.

5.3.4 Core Identity of Teaching

The results of this study suggest that returnee academics are generally satisfied with teaching but less so with research, and they find administrative chores burdensome. These findings are consistent with prior research that has identified positive professional behavior with respect to teaching and negative professional behavior with respect to research (Li, Chen and Fang, 2015; Liu *et al.*, 2022; Shi, 2017; van Lankveld *et al.*, 2017; Yang, 2017; Yu and Yu, 2023).

It is true that this finding is influenced not only by the macro/institutional level but also by the meso/interactional level. In this context, the former refers to the participants' affiliation with their current application-oriented university, which typically prioritizes teaching over researching. The latter refers to the interaction between teachers and students, with students serving as a positive influence on the (re-)construction of returnee academics' TPI. As mentioned earlier in the findings chapter, returnee academics consistently expressed their dedication to lesson planning and teaching, despite their perceived shortcomings in research and paper writing. They mentioned that their diligent teaching approach was well-received and appreciated by their students, contributing to their overall satisfaction with the professional identity of being university teachers.

However, participants also voiced complaints about the perceived greater importance of researching in terms of promotion and tenure within their academic careers. This finding tends to align with previous research by Ylijoki and Henriksson (2017), who proposed the concept of "teaching-oriented good citizens" and "research-oriented elites", highlighting the challenge of establishing a teacher identity within universities where research is often emphasized. Those returnee academics in this study who satisfied with their teaching may belong to the "good citizen"; and under their affiliated application-oriented university, being such "good citizen"

largely contribute to the positive impact of their TPI construction. However, many of the participants are not yet to be the "research-oriented elites" since they are not so satisfied with their researching. Skelton (2012) argues that a challenge in constructing the identity of university teachers lies in the lack of recognition for teaching, which raises the question of who would willingly position themselves as teachers. Korhonen and Törmä (2016) also agree by emphasizing the importance of teaching for the professional development of academics, despite the lower status of teaching.

Additionally, the perception of returnee academics regarding the emphasis on teaching at their affiliated university raises questions about the alignment of institutional policies and actual practices. Although universities are recognizing the importance of teaching, it remains unknown whether such recognition systems, if integrated into institutional promotion and tenure structures, could positively influence teachers' identity, potentially impacting their commitment, job satisfaction, and overall performance in their roles (Van Lankveld *et al.*, 2017). Future research could explore the implementation of teaching recognition systems and the alignment of institutional policies with actual practices to facilitate the construction of a positive teacher identity among university teachers.

5.3.5 Influence of Participants' Place of Origin

This study found that the overall re-acculturation and satisfaction levels of returnee academics indicated a generally positive sentiment. However, this finding appears somewhat inconsistent with prior research. For instance, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, section 2.2.2, Li and Zhu (2020) conducted a comprehensive questionnaire survey among 541 returnee academics from 48 research-oriented universities across China between 1979 and 2017, revealing relatively low levels of job satisfaction among returnee academics during their initial employment period over the past four decades.

A significant contributing factor to this shift could be the previous gap in the literature pertaining to the place of origin of returnee academics (Liu *et al.*, 2022). This study fills this gap by revealing that the choice of a second-tier city seems to have a relatively positive impact on the Teachers' Professional Identity (TPI) of these returnee academics.

Indeed, the decision to return to China is influenced by a mix of factors, underscoring the multifaceted nature of return decisions, such as stable employment opportunities, family and social ties, government talent incentives, and China's rapid economic growth, which align with previous studies (Chen and Li, 2019; Chen, 2017; Guo, Porschitz and Alves, 2013; Le Bail and Shen, 2008; Zhang, 2014; Hao *et al.,* 2017; Xiong and Mok, 2020). Unlike previous literature emphasizing nostalgia, nationalism and patriotism as reasons for returning (Chen, 2017; Kellogg, 2012; Li, Chen and Fang, 2015; Hao *et al.,* 2017; Xu, 2011), only one participant, Peter, mentioned this aspect, indicating a shift towards more individualized or personal returning motivations, with a diminishing emphasis on broader nationalistic sentiments.

As I have already discussed, this study has revealed that family, particularly filial piety, is the most commonly cited reason for returning among participants. For returnee academics whose hometowns are in or near Ningbo, returning to their hometown means being closer to their parents and family, naturally increasing their satisfaction levels. On the other hand, for non-native returnee academics from northern and northwestern regions, the consideration of the relatively strong economy and lower pressure in second-tier cities in coastal provinces of southeastern China led them to choose these locations for their return. In other words, these teachers are more focused on the advantages of the relatively strong economy and lower pressure in second-tier cities, rather than their birthplace. This indicates that their decisions are more influenced by the conditions of the destination rather than their birthplaces or origins. The allure of a less stressful lifestyle in second-tier cities was a significant factor in their decision-making process.

5.3.6 Influence of Participants' Overseas Experiences

This study presents a novel finding regarding the influence of overseas experiences on the readjustment and TPI (re-)construction of returnee academics, a dimension not extensively explored in prior research (i.e., Liu *et al.*, 2022, Yu and Yu, 2023). Particularly, the separationalist approach to acculturation abroad appears to have a positive impact on their overall readjustment in life upon returning, thereby contributing to a positive influence on TPI (re-)construction.

The research findings reveal a significant association between participants' adaptation to their foreign environment and their subsequent readjustment upon returning to their home country. Notably, participants who encountered challenges in adapting or had limited interaction with local individuals while abroad exhibited a relatively smoother readjustment process upon their return, for example, in cases of Colin, Zack, Frank and Lisa, who expressed higher level of re-acculturaltion rates in life. On the contrary, those (i.e., Peter, Will and Zoe) who adapted well abroad showed comparatively lower level of re-acculturation rates in overall life.

It is also worth noting that these returnee academics, during their time abroad, dedicated a substantial amount of time to academic pursuits. Over time, they may have been influenced or developed a habitus of adhering to the rules and regulations in the host country, especially at work, as I discussed in section 5.1.2. The contrast between the more flexible and less rule-oriented approach prevalent in China's HEIs and their newly acquired adherence to rules and regulations may pose challenges in their readjustment process in working at their current university platform, impacting their overall satisfaction rates. This dissonance between their overseas experiences and the cultural norms in China presented challenges for their adaptation upon returning, as evidenced by their struggles with impromptu meetings, changes in plans, continuous revisions of regulations, and vague time control, aligning with previous research on returnee academics' academic adaptation (Ai, 2019; Cao *et al.,* 2019; Gao, 2017; Jiang and Shen, 2019; Liu *et al.,* 2022).

Consequently, returnee academics needed to navigate the tension between their assimilated rule-based mindset and the prevailing cultural expectations upon returning to their home institution.

While the adaptation to the rule-based system abroad enhanced their understanding of the importance of clear guidelines and accountability (Hofstede, 1991; Gao and Zhang, 2021), the in-adaptation experienced upon their return to China highlighted the challenges in reconciling their assimilated rule-based mindset with the prevailing cultural norms in China's HEIs. Therefore, understanding and addressing these challenges are crucial for facilitating the successful readjustment and professional identity (re-)construction of returnee academics in the Chinese university context.

b. Negative Features

5.3.7 The Sense of Having Become an Outsider/Lost Connections

One of the most interesting findings was that the interviewees, to varying degrees, have experienced the sense of having become outsiders. As some of the participants commented. Reflecting on this aspect, participants expressed their sentiments regarding their sense of detachment within the university environment. For instance, Leo articulated a preference for maintaining a distance and standing at the periphery, indicating a reluctance to fully integrate into the current university system. Similarly, Colin described his initial feelings of being an outsider upon entering the environment, noting the presence of established social circles and clubs among his colleagues, which contributed to his sense of alienation. This phenomenon may be explained from two perspectives: first, the negative impact of the current university platform; and second, the lack of academic networks in China upon their return.

a) The Negative Impact of the Current University Platform

The observed disparity between the universities where the interviewees completed their studies abroad and their current workplaces in China is noteworthy. The former institutions, located in developed countries, are renowned, while the latter, situated in a second-tier city in a developing nation, are considered ordinary within China's tertiary education system. This contrast encompasses significant disparities in faculty, infrastructure, academic resources, and overall environment. The interviewees, having experienced these distinct institutional settings, expressed dissatisfaction with their current workplace.

From a meso perspective, Lave and Wenger's (1991) Community of Practice Theory (CoPT) offers a pertinent means of understanding the social and cognitive processes influencing individuals' learning and identity formation within communities of practice. CoPT emphasizes that learning is a social process occurring within communities where individuals engage in shared activities, develop shared meanings, and negotiate their identities. The positive evaluations of their overseas study experiences by returnee academics can be linked to the community of practice they were part of abroad, where they acquired valued knowledge, skills, and perspectives. Conversely, their negative evaluations of China's HEIs can be attributed to their disconnection from the community of practice they were part of during their study abroad, leading to misalignment with the values and practices of the domestic educational system. This disconnect often hinders their ability to effectively navigate both international and domestic academic spheres, as highlighted by Leo's observation that he "*cannot do well on both sides, that's really embarrassing*".

From a macro perspective, Bourdieu's Social Practice Theory (SPT) provides a framework through the concept of "field" to elucidate the contrasting comments made by returnee academics. According to Bourdieu, "field" represents distinct social domains where individuals and groups compete for resources, power, and recognition (Bourdieu, 1984; 1986). Returnee academics' positive evaluations of their overseas study experience can be understood within the international education field, which prioritizes Western education systems and values. Conversely, their

negative comments about China's universities can be linked to the domestic education field, where different rules, hierarchies, and forms of capital prevail. These evaluations are influenced by the returnee academics' positioning within the international education field, where Western education systems are often esteemed. Will, for instance, acknowledged his struggles in adapting to the domestic academic environment, particularly in terms of writing proficiency in Chinese compared to English. He attributed his greater comfort with academic writing in English to his formal training in that language, emphasizing the challenges he faces in aligning with the Chinese academic conventions.

b) The Lack of Academic Networks in China upon Return

The interviewees initially maintained contact with their foreign supervisors and acquaintances upon returning, but over time, these connections appear to have been weakened.

This phenomenon is articulated by Will, who noted that while affiliating with a prominent supervisor abroad can yield opportunities, the strength of these ties diminishes upon repatriation, falling short of initial expectations. Similarly, Zoe expressed a sense of estrangement from her supervisors due to perceived academic underperformance and a perceived failure to meet their expectations, leading to a reluctance to engage with them. She acknowledged their expertise and accomplishments, which further exacerbated her feelings of inadequacy. Lisa also reminisced about the camaraderie she shared with peers from various countries during her overseas study, including her native supervisor. However, she lamented the loss of contact with these individuals upon her return to China, underscoring the fading of these once-close relationships.

The concept of social capital of Bourdieu's Social Practice Theory (SPT) can provide insights into the changes in academic networking among returnee academics (Bourdieu, 1986). Initially, their overseas contacts represented a form of social capital, offering academic benefits and international exchange opportunities (Chen and Li, 2019). However, as

their focus shifted to teaching rather than researching, their engagement with these networks declined due to the context-specific nature of social capital. It should be noted that the current university's emphasis on teaching within the application-oriented layer of China's HEIs to some extent may influence returnee academics' priorities, leading to reduced value in maintaining strong ties with their academic networks abroad, potentially impacting their professional identity (re-)construction.

Additionally, many returnee academics perceive their domestic academic networks as weaker compared to their accumulated social capital from abroad, impacting their professional identity (re-)construction. Mike and Will highlighted the challenges posed by limited domestic academic connections, which hinder project applications and publication endeavors due to a lack of "*interpersonal relationships* (Mike)" within the local academic community. Will elaborated on the difficulties of integrating into the domestic academic system, emphasizing the necessity of establishing relationships for successful project applications and academic pursuits, contrasting the perceived advantages of overseas networks with the need for readjustment within the domestic academic context.

5.3.8 The Feeling of Somehow Being Taken Advantage Of

The sense of them feeling that they are somehow being taken advantage of can manifest in the form of returnee academics being assigned excessive workloads. The interviewees revealed that they faced higher expectations from their leaders, resulting in significant workloads, including student affairs and administrative responsibilities. This placed a considerable amount of work pressure on them. For example, Leo complained about being given numerous tasks since "*they may think that you are capable of doing things well*". Similarly, Will pointed out directly that "*Adulation is one type of discrimination. That is, they say you are able to do anything because of you being a returnee doctor and so on. [...] But if you do not do well, they talk about you behind your back.*" Hugo's experience is also illustrative, where his colleagues called him "Dr. Hugo" to his face, but he privately doubted whether they in fact genuinely thought very highly of him.

This situation highlights the unique challenges faced by returnee academics, where their colleagues or leaders place heightened expectations on them due to their perceived superior skills and abilities accrued from their international experience. This perception can result in an increased workload and pressure, leading to stress and fear of scrutiny. These findings are consistent with previous research on the experiences of returnees in professional settings (Chen and Li, 2019; Wang, Tang and Li, 2015).

5.3.9 Pressure from Student to Teacher Identity Change

The findings revealed that the transition from student to teacher identity can create pressure for returnee academics, potentially contributing to relatively lower satisfaction levels, especially among the post-2016 group. During their doctoral studies, returnee academics had guidance from supervisors and colleagues, but upon returning, they had to handle teaching tasks independently and find their own research direction, which some found very challenging. This unfamiliarity can lead to feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty, which aligns with the lack of security experienced by new teachers, particularly in their first years.

One participant, Henna, emphasized that the challenge lies not in adapting to China specifically but rather in the ability to swiftly shift roles from being a student to assuming the responsibilities of a teacher.

Another participant, Colin, articulated that the most significant change for him was the shift in identity from being a student or research assistant to an official teacher. He noted that while supervisors used to help him handle arrangements in the past, he now has to actively engage in project applications, collaborations with external partners, and strategic career planning, marking a transition from a passive to an active role.

Similarly, Mike expressed that transitioning from a student to a teacher entailed inherent changes in responsibilities. He clarified that this shift

was not directly linked to his status as a returnee but rather represented a broader transformation from "studying to working".

Moscovici's Social Cognition Representation Theory (SCRT) could provide a lens to analyze this transition (2000). It is worth mentioning that the pre-2016 group underwent a similar transition as that described in Xu's 2012 study, shifting from cue-based (viewing themselves as heroines or heroes) or exemplar-based identities (imitating an ideal model teacher) to schema-based (more flexible and adaptable) or rule-based identities (adhering to contextual rules). However, the post-2016 group showed some discrepancies with Xu's findings, revealing two categories of identity change. In the post-2016-LAH group (Will, Henna, Leo) for example, the participants appear to have shifted from imagined to practical identities, whereas in the post-2016-SE group (Colin, Mike, Charles) they seem to have remained in imagined identities.

These divergent findings may stem from two factors. Firstly, due to relatively brief return periods (such as Charles' recent transition to a university teaching role for only six months), they may still be in an imagined identity phase. Secondly, their relatively high confidence in their professional abilities may also contribute, as evidenced by their strong self-assurance when discussing their future plans. However, it is important to note that the boundary between imagined and practical identities may not be so rigid, and returnee academics might still need to conform to contextual rules or make adaptable changes to effectively acclimate to the domestic university environment.

5.3.10 The Feeling of Poor Returns on Their Investment

The study's findings resonate with prior research, as the majority of participants voiced discontent with their salary, consistent with existing literature (Gao and Zhang, 2021; Yu and Yu, 2023). Yu and Yu (2023) define "material condition" for returnee academics as encompassing their salary and university-provided resources, which significantly shape the teachers' professional identity and satisfaction, directly impacting their quality of life and job performance.

Many returnee academics evidently feel that there is a mismatch between their income and the effort they have to put into their work. As emphasized by several participants, the demanding nature of their work schedules often leaves little time for personal activities.

For example, Leo expressed feeling overwhelmed by his busy schedule, to the extent that even cooking at home induced feelings of nervousness or anxiety.

Frank articulated a sense of dissatisfaction with his current work-life balance, highlighting the lack of personal time due to the demanding job requirements. He expressed concerns about the inadequacy of his salary, which he described as insufficient to meet the needs of his family. Frank noted that his monthly salary, slightly exceeding 10,000 RMB, did not provide enough financial support for his family.

Similarly, Mike voiced concerns about the disparity between his salary and the intensity of his workload. He lamented the relatively low monthly salary of 9,000 RMB, which he compared unfavorably to the stipend he received during his overseas scholarship. Mike remarked on the perceived discrepancy between the status associated with being a Chinese teacher and the financial remuneration provided.

Will also expressed dissatisfaction with the salary structure, noting that it did not adequately reflect the intensity of his work. He mentioned the challenges of affording housing in Ningbo on his salary and highlighted the disparity between his current earnings and the housing costs in the area. In addition, Will reflected on the ambiguous benefits of attaining the status of being an associate professor, questioning whether it was a matter of "*honour or vanity*", given the limited impact on his salary.

This may indicate that the economic capital which often related to assets and money (Bourdieu, 1984; 1986) has not been smoothly conversed, leading to perceived unfairness in salary relative to their educational

achievements and acquired knowledge and skills. This discontent may also stem from their perception of inequitable salary levels and resource allocation within academic institutions, ultimately impacting their sense of value, belonging, and engagement with their profession (Gao and Zhang, 2021). It should be pointed out that such dissatisfaction with salary can be attributed to the macro and institutional environment influences. It is worth noting that not only the 12 respondents of this thesis who have reported low salary; it appears that the average income of university faculty members in China is indeed at a modest level. This to some extent contributes to their dissatisfaction and perception of unfair compensation relative to their work commitment.

5.3.11 A Comparative Lack of Academic Esprit de Corps

The study identified a comparative lack of academic esprit de corps among the interviewees. This is well expressed in their challenges in integrating with their domestic colleagues.

Returnee academics in this study expressed difficulty in establishing strong relationships with their domestic colleagues at their current university, citing differences in conversational topics. Notably, those in the post-2016 group highlighted an age gap that created a generational divide, leading to challenges in interaction. They perceived their domestic colleagues' conversations as representing "*trivial things in daily life* (Henna)", lacking academic or research-related content, which clashed with their professional expectations. This limited interactional community with domestic colleagues may negatively impact the returnee academics' TPI (re-)construction.

This finding is consistent with previous studies (Chen, 2017; Chen and Li, 2019; Ma and Pan, 2015). For example, Chen and Li's (2019) comparative study on returnee academics from South and West universities in China, where resistance from local colleagues in the West university was reported as a challenging factor influencing the reintegration of returnee academics. However, in contrast to Chen and Li's findings, this study reveals that the resistance primarily originates from the returnee academics themselves,

who appear reluctant to integrate with their domestic colleagues. They expressed dissatisfaction with their colleagues' occupational capabilities, suggesting a lack of research and scholarly competence within their departments.

The comparative lack of academic esprit de corps among returnee academics in this study is therefore another factor reflecting on the challenges and adaptations encountered during their reintegration into the Chinese higher education system.

5.3.12 Negative Impact of Macro Institutional HEIs

Overall, the findings of this study, under the context of second-tier cities and third-layer universities in China, indicate that the factors influencing returnee academics' returning experiences and TPI (re-)construction are similar to those found in larger cities and prestigious universities; upon their return, these returnee academics have all experienced varying degrees of discomfort (Pham, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2016; Xie, Xu and Wu, 2012; Zhang and Yuan, 2014).

From an institutional perspective, the negative assessments provided by the interviewees regarding their current university can be interpreted as indicative of the adverse impact of contextual factors on their (re)construction of TPI. These negative assessments of their current university are in line with earlier research findings about returnee academics' critical appraisals of Chinese HEIs as a whole (Chen, 2017; Liu *et al.*, 2022; Van Lankveld *et al.*, 2017; Yu and Yu, 2023).

For instance, as I discussed in Chapter 2, section 2.3.4, Yu and Yu (2023) conducted a mixed-method study involving qualitative interviews with six participants, highlighting the negative influence of environmental or external factors, such as the university system, on the TPI of returnee academics. This negative impact was consistently emphasized as a predominant factor in their research findings. Their study revealed that returnee academics' satisfaction with school management and evaluation systems was average, and issues such as bureaucracy, overwhelming

responsibilities, and non-voluntary administrative work negatively affected their professional identity.

In another study by Liu *et al.* (2022), as I discussed in Chapter 2, section 2.3.2, the study found that dysfunctionality within China's higher education system, or negative evaluations of environmental contexts, has a detrimental impact on the academic career development of Chinese returnees with overseas PhD degrees (CROPs). The interactions within the workplace microsystem also reflect on recent changes in the macrosystem of Chinese higher education, driven by the political goal of establishing world-class universities and subjects in response to marketization and globalization trends in international higher education (Song *et al.*, 2021). This political goal has created a highly competitive and stressful working environment for CROPs, who face intense competition in areas such as journal publications and securing funding (Liu *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, the prevalence of hierarchical academic relationships and localized research networks, known as *Guanxi*, further marginalizes CROPs and hinders their academic career progression. These influences are shaped by the wider hectic Chinese academic culture characterized by rigid and quantified evaluation criteria that prioritize immediate publications and obtaining research grants, reflecting on an impetuous research culture (Wang *et al.*, 2016; Huang, 2021).

5.3.13 General Higher Re-acculturation and Satisfaction Rates of SE than LAH

This study has found that overall re-acculturation and satisfaction rates among participants from SE is relatively higher than LAH. This finding to some extent may align with previous research in prestigious universities, such as Yi (2011), as I mentioned in Chapter 2, Yi (2011) found that returnees from social science and humanities at a first layer university in China held more cynical views towards the HE environment, whereas those from science and economics were generally satisfied with their environment.

The observed disparity in satisfaction levels between SE and LAH can be attributed to macro institutional differences across disciplines, indicating a biased focus on SE over LAH. These disciplinary variations may influence working conditions, expectations, and rewards associated with different subject areas, thereby impacting the overall satisfaction levels of returnee academics in China's HEIs. Interview results in this study reveal that negative evaluations of their current working university are more prevalent in LAH disciplines. Returnee academics in LAH disciplines may face challenges related to limited resources and recognition, which may impact their satisfaction levels. In contrast, returnee academics in SE disciplines may have access to better facilities and research opportunities, leading to relatively higher satisfaction levels. As participants from LAH complained "*the assessment rules are made by the administrators without considering disciplinary differences*. *(Will)*"

5.3.14 Professional Apathy and a General Lack of Ambition

In terms of future career plans, the majority of the participants in this study exhibited a certain sense of professional apathy and a general lack of ambition.

Wei (2008) categorizes teachers' intention to leave their profession into two distinct types: "transfer intention", which involves staying in the teaching profession but switching to a different university platform, and "career change intention", which entails leaving the teaching profession altogether to pursue alternative career paths (p. 96).

This study's findings revealed that, except for Lisa, who expressed her intention to follow her husband and thus exhibited a low likelihood of leaving her current workplace, and Hugo and Zack, who are nearing retirement and have no plans for career change, the majority of the other participants expressed a "transfer intention". The decision to leave is not solely determined by teachers' assessment of the value and meaning of their work but is also influenced by their perception of the internalized teacher role, specifically professional value and their professional behavioral tendencies (Wei, 2008, p. 100).

However, it is noteworthy that only Zoe directly expressed a "career change intention" and is actively preparing to transition to a different career. This may be attributed to her perception of low professional value in the university teaching profession. She observes that being a university teacher no longer holds the noble essence of being valued as a "*literati*" but is "*merely a job that provides a salary*." Despite enjoying being with her students, she dislikes the professional behavior of teaching and would prefer to focus on studying and learning.

Overall, the returnee academics in this study considered various factors, including work-life balance, salary, and personal fulfillment, when contemplating future job changes. The findings suggest that returnee academics are increasingly open to breaking away from the traditional notion of job security and embracing more flexible career paths. It should be noted that their overall average re-acculturation and satisfaction rate is 73.3%, suggesting that participants generally endorse or acknowledge their professional identity as university academics. Yet, their willingness to take risks and explore new opportunities may indicate a shift in their future orientation while acknowledging their professional identity as university academics.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have considered and discussed the main findings which have emerged from my research. In the next and final chapter of my thesis, I will examine the wider significance of my results and consider what the implications of these might be moving forward.

Chapter 6 Implications and Conclusion

Introduction

This concluding chapter provides an overview of the implications, strengths, limitations, and future research directions suggested by my study. Each of these will be discussed in turn below.

6.1 Implications

6.1.1 Implications for Chinese Returnee Academics

The implications for returnee academics, particularly those who have obtained a doctoral degree overseas and seek to return to China to pursue academic careers in application-oriented institutions in second-tier cities, offer valuable insights to inform their decision-making process and provide foresight. This study reveals that while possessing a doctoral degree is a fundamental requirement, if not a threshold, for aspiring to teach at application-oriented institutions in second-tier cities, all returnees will face challenges and that future sojourners need to be aware of this before leaving to go overseas. This research underscores the importance of proactive preparation for the challenges that may be encountered when seeking teaching positions in second-tier cities. Despite the relative scarcity of doctoral degree holders in these cities compared to larger urban centers, returnee academics should be aware of potential

challenges such as comparatively lower salaries and the need for research and publication for career advancement in application-oriented universities, which may lack a strong academic environment.

This study reveals that current higher education institution highlights the significant role of teaching in the professional identity construction of returnee academics, while also acknowledging the status quo of superior importance of researching in the identity construction of university teachers as a whole. Notably, the interviews conducted in this study reveal that teaching significantly contributes to the (re-)construction of returnee academics' professional identity in a positive manner. However, most returnee academics expressed dissatisfaction with their research abilities upon returning to China, indicating a compelling need for enhancement in this domain. This dissatisfaction could be attributed to the lack of academic esprit de corps as mentioned in the discussion chapter which could potentially impact their professional apathy gradually, as well as the substantial administrative responsibilities assigned to returnee academics, which tend to encroach upon the time they could allocate to research activities.

The aforementioned challenges and dissatisfactions underscore the necessity for returnee academics contemplating employment in application-oriented universities of second-tier cities in China to anticipate and prepare for these difficulties. For instance, in anticipation of the challenge posed by the lack of academic esprit de corps upon their return, it may be advisable for returnee academics to aware the importance of proactively establishing academic connections in China during their overseas studies. Several practical ways could be advised below:

1). Utilize Online Platforms: Encourage returnee academics to use academic networking platforms such as ResearchGate, LinkedIn, or academic forums to connect with researchers and educators in China. These platforms can facilitate communication and collaboration despite geographical distances.

2). Attend Virtual Conferences and Workshops: Participating in online academic conferences, workshops, and webinars hosted by Chinese institutions can help establish connections with academics in China. This allows for networking opportunities and knowledge exchange.

3). Collaborate on Research Projects: Seek opportunities to collaborate on research projects with Chinese researchers while still overseas (as in cases of Colin and Zoe who kept collaborating with their domestic supervisors while abroad). This can involve joint publications, sharing resources, and participating in joint research initiatives to build relationships.

4). Engage with Chinese Alumni Networks: Connect with alumni associations or networks of Chinese universities or academic institutions. Alumni can provide valuable insights, introductions, and support in establishing academic connections in China.

5). Seek Mentorship: Identify mentors or advisors in China who can provide guidance and support during their overseas studies. Building a mentor-mentee relationship can lead to valuable academic connections and opportunities for collaboration.

By implementing these practical strategies, returnee academics could proactively lay the groundwork for familiarizing themselves with the academic landscape in China, thereby facilitating a smoother transition and integration upon their return. This proactive approach can enable returnee academics to cultivate valuable professional networks and gain insights into the prevailing academic practices and expectations in the Chinese HEIs context. Moreover, by establishing these connections early, returnee academics could potentially identify opportunities for collaboration, research partnerships, and knowledge exchange, thereby enriching their academic experience and enhancing their research capabilities.

Given the situation where returnee academics reflected on struggling to maintain ties with their supervisors abroad once back in China, the five practical methods listed above for maintaining connections domestically are equally applicable for them to stay connected with the international academic community while in China.

Furthermore, the identified challenges also prompt a need for returnee academics to consider strategies for effectively balancing administrative responsibilities and research commitments upon their return to China's HEIs. This may involve proactive discussions with university administrators to negotiate workload distribution, seeking mentorship or support from experienced colleagues, or exploring opportunities for professional development in research methodologies and scholarly pursuits. By proactively addressing these challenges and preparing for the potential obstacles they may encounter upon their return, returnee academics could better position themselves to navigate the complexities of the academic environment and make meaningful contributions to their professional development and the advancement of their respective institutions.

Therefore, as Van Lankveld *et al.* (2017) highlight, returnee academics can more effectively handle pressures by potentially restoring a more balanced relationship between research and teaching and by actively asserting their agency. This, in turn, can strengthen their professional identity and effectiveness in their roles as educators. By recognizing and addressing these challenges, returnee academics can position themselves for success and contribute meaningfully to the academic landscape in China.

6.1.2 Implications for China's Higher Education Institutions

To enhance the adaptability of returnee academics, it is necessary for China's Higher Education Institutions to assist with their readjustment, familiarizing them with relevant systems, actively integrating them into the academic environment, and continuously improving their own systems to create a good academic atmosphere (Zhu, 2017).

For academic administrators in particular, it is imperative to explore effective strategies to support the integration of returnee academics into the university setting. This may include the establishment of support mechanisms such as returnee teacher communities or social activities tailored to their needs, as well as guidance on navigating the academic publishing norms in China.

Moreover, the study suggests that universities should prioritize providing emotional and organizational support to returnee academics. This can be achieved through the creation of platforms for open dialogue, where returnee academics can express their concerns and seek solutions. Additionally, organizing lectures and social events specifically designed to facilitate their adaptation can be beneficial. Furthermore, offering guidance to aid their understanding and integration into the domestic academic environment is crucial.

In addition to emotional and organizational support, the study emphasizes the importance of cultivating a conducive working environment for returnee academics. This includes creating a relaxed and free atmosphere, minimizing administrative intervention, and establishing fair and transparent evaluation mechanisms that value the individual productivity and characteristics of the teachers. These measures are essential in promoting a positive and supportive work environment that encourages the successful integration and professional development of returnee academics within the domestic academic landscape.

The study further suggests that gaining a better understanding of identity, both in general and specifically in relation to teachers, can be beneficial for teacher education programs. The research conducted by Beauchamp and Thomas (2006; 2007) highlights the importance of addressing identity during the transition from being a student teacher to becoming a practicing teacher. The research emphasizes the need for teacher education programs to effectively incorporate identity development as a significant aspect. By doing so, these programs can better prepare

prospective teachers for the challenges they will face in their professional roles.

6.1.3 Implications for China's Policy Makers

The findings presented in this study bear significant implications for policy makers, particularly those at the national level in China. The developmental trajectory of Chinese higher education has been delineated into four distinct stages, with the current phase being characterized as the fourth stage, focusing on addressing regional disparities. However, the responses from interviewees indicate that within second-tier cities in third layer universities, there still needs to be a focus on enhancing the quality of higher education. This misalignment is underscored by the discontent expressed by returnee academics regarding their career development within the existing academic ecology. The concept of academic ecology, as elucidated by Tong, Meng, and Guo (2014), denotes the environmental and contextual factors influencing the scholarly pursuits and innovations of university teachers. It is posited that a favorable academic ecology can cultivate an environment conducive to creativity and innovation among faculty members, thereby fostering the establishment of robust academic innovation and sustainable development systems (Yu and Yu, 2023). As Chen (2017) emphasizes, professional opportunities and the establishment of an open and equitable academic environment are more influential than financial incentives or specific talent programs, particularly for younger university teachers, suggesting that these elements should be central to long-term national talent strategies. This suggests that policy makers should prioritize creating an inclusive and supportive academic environment to attract and retain talent in the long term. As such, policy makers are urged to consider these disparities and the need for a more supportive academic ecology in their strategic planning for the advancement of higher education in China.

Furthermore, in light of the increasingly stringent requirements for entry into the university teaching profession, policy makers must consider raising the overall income level of Chinese university teachers to enable them to achieve a basic standard of living while pursuing their research.

As suggested by the interviewee Mike "*to invest more money to first of all guarantee university teachers' life since sometimes the research work is both time and energy consuming*." This implies that the state and educational administration must provide material support to teachers, particularly returnee academics, who face challenges such as uneven distribution of educational resources and high housing prices upon their return to China. The government should provide adequate and reasonable material guarantees to help these talents quickly settle down and fully engage in their work. For example, to address housing issues, the government could provide stable transitional housing or facilitate the application for price-capped or self-occupied housing through fast-track procedures or policy guarantees.

In addition, the study indicates that interviewees are considering choosing second-tier universities in economically developed coastal areas rather than first-tier universities in inland areas. This suggests that the phenomenon of uneven distribution of regional educational resources within China is still prevalent. This finding is consistent with Wei's (2008) dissertation, which reveals that teachers' professional identity (TPI) of primary and secondary school teachers varies across different regions in China, with urban school teachers exhibiting higher levels of TPI compared to town school teachers, who in turn exhibit higher levels compared to rural school teachers. This disparity may be attributed to uneven attention and investment in urban and rural schools. Wei's (2008) study highlights the need for government and educational management departments to provide special support for teachers in rural areas. Similarly, in the context of HEIs, Shan and Guo (2014) underscore the importance of addressing equity and access issues, particularly bridging gaps between rural-urban disparities and socioeconomic inequalities. Therefore, policy makers should prioritize addressing these regional disparities and providing targeted support to ensure equitable opportunities for all educators.

Overall, to ensure the continued role of higher education in future development, policymakers, institutions, and society should collaborate to

alleviate burdens on higher education and empower universities and colleges to take on more responsibilities and self-governance (Xiong, Yang and Shen, 2022).

6.2 Research Significances

One of the significances of this study is its use of qualitative research methods with case study as the research design, specifically semi-structured in-depth interviews. Qualitative research allows for a deep exploration of participants' experiences, perspectives, and subjective interpretations (Creswell, 2012). The utilization of case study (University Z) largely represents Application-oriented universities in Second-tier Cities. By employing in-depth interviews, this study was able to capture the nuanced and complex nature of returnee academics' repatriate adaptation and their teachers' professional identity (re-)construction. The use of open-ended questions in the interviews facilitated rich and detailed responses, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Another significance of this study lies in its attempt to address the gaps identified in previous literature reviews. Specifically, the research explores the experiences of returnee academics during their time abroad, focusing on their "separationalist approach to acculturation" which, to some extent, facilitates their re-adaptation upon returning to China. This novel approach fills a gap in prior research by shedding light on the re-adaptation process of returnee academics and the role their experiences abroad play in this transition.

Additionally, the study innovatively addresses the previously overlooked aspect of returnee academics' choices of second-tier cities upon their return to China. While the factors influencing the (re-)construction of returnee academics' professional identities after their return align with findings from previous studies conducted in first-tier cities and top-tier universities, such as the overall negative impact of the domestic academic environment on their professional identity development (i.e., Liu *et al.,* 2022; Shi, 2017; Van Lankveld *et al.,* 2017; Yang, 2017; Yu and Yu,

2023), the choice of second-tier cities appears to have a relatively positive impact on this process. As revealed by many interviewees in this study, the high pressure experienced in first-tier cities contrasts with the relatively lower intensity of pressure in second-tier cities, creating an environment where returnee academics can be "*big fish in a small pond*". Accordingly, this suggests that the relatively lower pressure experienced in second-tier cities could positively influence their re-adaptation and professional identity (re-)construction upon returning to China.

6.3 Research Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is the small sample size. Due to practical considerations, the study only involved 12 participants, and the second-tier city included in the research was limited to Ningbo, with the non-distinguished university being represented by only one institution. The small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of returnee academics, and the focus on a single second-tier city and one university may not fully capture the diversity of experiences and perspectives among returnee academics in different regions and institutions.

Another limitation pertains to the dynamic nature of teachers' professional identity (TPI) itself, as previously discussed in the Literature Review chapter. TPI is a process that is subject to change over time, making it more suitable for long-term tracking and investigation. However, due to the constraints of completing this doctoral dissertation, a long-term study was not feasible. The dynamic nature of TPI suggests that the snapshot provided by this study may not fully capture the ongoing development and evolution of professional identity (re-)construction among returnee academics.

These limitations should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results and may warrant further research with larger and more diverse samples, as well as longitudinal studies to track the long-term adaptation and professional growth of returnee academics.

6.4 Insights for Future Studies

During the course of this study, several potential avenues for further investigation emerged. In light of the aforementioned limitations, it is pertinent to propose suggestions for future research on the (re-)construction of returnee academics' professional identity within China's HEIs.

Firstly, a follow-up study involving the same cohort of returnee academics who participated in the initial research could yield valuable insights. Conducting a second round of semi-structured, in-depth interviews to inquire about their current repatriation situation and potential changes in their professional identity would provide a longitudinal perspective on their adaptation and development within the academic environment. This follow-up study has the potential to shed light on the evolving nature of returnee academics' professional identities over time, offering a deeper understanding of their experiences and challenges in the context of non-distinguished universities within second-tier cities in China.

Secondly, this study underscores the complex interplay between gender, professional identity, and work-life balance among returnee academics. However, the disproportionate gender distribution of male (9) and female (3) participants may limit the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, it emphasizes the necessity for ongoing research and interventions aimed at rectifying gender imbalances and advancing gender equality in the academic domain. Future studies could strive to achieve a more balanced representation of male and female participants, enabling a comprehensive comparison of their repatriation experiences and (re-)construction of teachers' professional identity (TPI). This approach would facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the gender-specific dynamics at play in the context of repatriation and professional identity development among returnee academics.

In addition, in light of recent global developments, it is essential for future studies in this field to consider the evolving landscape that has emerged since the data collection period of this study (the very end of the 2010s).

Events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, shifts in China's relations with English-speaking countries, the rise of populism, and the implementation of anti-immigration policies have the potential to significantly impact Chinese overseas students and returnee academics. These factors may influence their professional identities and experiences in ways that were not fully captured in the current study. Therefore, future research may aim to explore the implications of these recent developments on the experiences and identities of Chinese individuals studying abroad, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their challenges and opportunities in an ever-changing global context.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, I believe that my study makes a valuable contribution by addressing a gap in the existing literature on the readjustment experiences of returnee academics in second-tier cities and their process of (re-)constructing their identity as educators within application-oriented universities in China. The existing body of research predominantly focuses on the experiences of returnee academics in top-tier cities or distinguished universities, thereby neglecting the unique challenges and opportunities faced by returnee academics in smaller urban centers and other not so distinguished universities. By shedding light on this under-explored aspect, the study enriches the academic discourse on the experiences of returnee academics, particularly within the context of China's HEIs. This contribution is important for advancing scholarly understanding of the complexities involved in the reintegration and TPI (re-)construction of returnee academics within the specific milieu of second-tier cities and application-oriented universities.

This research also holds implications for prospective returnee academics, policymakers involved in facilitating the integration of returnee academics into Chinese HEIs, and future research endeavors examining the experiences and challenges of this unique cohort. By comprehensively exploring the multi-faceted aspects of returnee academics' re-adaptation

and their (re-)construction of professional identity, this study enriches the existing knowledge base and sets the stage for further inquiry into related areas. The findings of this study are pertinent not only to academia but also to the broader societal and policy considerations surrounding the repatriation and professional development of returnee academics in China's educational landscape. As such, this research serves as a foundation for continued exploration and understanding of the experiences and needs of returnee academics, contributing to the ongoing discourse on their role in shaping the future of Chinese higher education.

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Appendices

A. Research Ethics Proformas

a.1 Participant Consent Form

<div align="center">

Participant Consent Form
</div>

Project title: Exploring perceptions and experiences of returnee teachers' re-adaptation and professional identity (re-)construction at an application-oriented university in a second-tier city in China.

Researcher's name: Bayan Ruan

Supervisor's name: Professor Douglas Bell, Professor Anwei Feng

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.

- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.

- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.

- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal results will remain confidential.

- I understand that the interview/data collection will be recorded/filmed .

- I understand that data will be stored in accordance with data protection laws.

- I understand that I may contact the researcher or supervisor if I require more information about the research, and that I may contact the Research Ethics Sub-Committee of the University of Nottingham, Ningbo, if I wish to make a complaint related to my involvement in the research.

Signed ……………………………………………………………………… (participant)

Print name………………………………………………………………....

Date ………………………………...............................

a.2 Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview in connection with my degree of Doctor of Education at the University of Nottingham Ningbo. The project is a study of exploring perceptions and experiences of returnee teachers' re-adaptation and professional identity (re-)construction at an application-oriented university in a second-tier city in China.

Your participation in the interview is voluntary. You are able to withdraw from the interview at any time and to request that the information you have provided is not used in the project. Any information provided will be confidential. Your identity will not be disclosed in any use of the information you have supplied during the interview.

The research project has been reviewed according to the ethical review processes in place in the University of Nottingham Ningbo. These processes are governed by the University's Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics. Should you have any question now or in the future, please contact me or my supervisor. Should you have concerns related to my conduct of the interview or research ethics, please contact my supervisor or the University's Ethics Committee.

Yours truly,

Bayan Ruan

Contact details:

Student Researcher: Bayan Ruan and zx23104@nottingham.edu.cn

Supervisor: Douglas Bell and Douglas.Bell@nottingham.edu.cn

University Research Ethics Committee Coordinator, Ms Theresa Zhang

(Theresa.zhang@nottingham.edu.cn)

B. List of Interview Stages and Questions

Interview Stages and Questions

60 - 90 minutes or so

STAGE 1: PARTICIPANTS' BACKGROUND

1. Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research and for allowing me to have this interview with you today. As you know, I'm interested in investigating the experiences of Chinese who have studied overseas but then returned to work at universities such as Z.

So… just to get us started, could you perhaps begin by telling me a little bit about yourself? For example, your age, your hometown, family background (i.e. parents\spouse\children), educational background in China, or the subject(s) that you currently teach.

2. How long have you been teaching at the university now? When did you first get started on university teaching as a career, and why? Was this a proactive and conscious decision or something that just happened to your think? What are your views on university teacher?

STAGE 2: PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE ABROAD

3. If we can move now to consider the period when you first went overseas to study, when exactly was that? What timeframe, I mean? Can you recall your original motivation for wanting to study overseas at that time (especially for PhD)? or What were the main drivers that made you want to have that experience?

4. Had you ever travelled overseas before that point? Where? When? For what purpose?

5. Where did you actually go in the end and what made you choose that particular destination over others?

6. Thinking back to that time, what prior expectations did you have? I mean, did you have any preconceptions of what studying in XXX would be like? What about the reality, did your real experience there match your expectation? Please share those with me.

7. About adaptation training, did you undergo any kind of preparatory training before leaving for XXX? If so, how useful do you think that was?

8. When you actually arrived in XXX, did you receive any orientation or acclimatization training? How useful do you think that was?

9. When return back to China, did you have any adaptation training then? How useful do you think that was?

STAGE 3: THE SPECIFICS OF THE EXPERIENCE ABROAD

10. Now I'd like us to talk about the actual specifics of your time abroad and the different things that you felt and experienced at that time.

Thinking back to when you first arrived in XXX, can you remember what jumped out at you most? What were the main differences that you encountered? How did these make you feel?

11. Were you aware of feeling any culture shock or going through a process of adaptation? What were some of those experiences like? What did you do to cope?

12. In terms of the overseas teaching and study environment, did you notice any differences between the way that things were done there and what you had experienced as a student in China? Conversely, was anything broadly similar?

13. Did you experience any communication difficulties? Can you think of any specific examples? What do you think caused those difficulties?

14. Who were your main friends and confidantes at that time? Did you socialize with native speakers or mostly hang out with fellow Chinese? Why?

15. Did you work while you were in XXX? For example, did you have any experience of being a teaching assistant or research assistant? If so, how was that?

16. What were the things that most impressed you about your experience of living and studying in XXX? What were the things that most frustrated or annoyed you about your experience of living and studying in XXX?

17. Do you feel that you yourself changed during your period in XXX? If so, in what ways?

STAGE 4: PREPARING TO RETURN HOME

18. Now I'd like us to focus on the period when you were getting ready to come back to China.

If I can ask you to think back to that time, what were the main drivers behind your decision to return? When you were first thinking of coming back, did you already have a particular destination and career location or pathway in mind?

19. What were some of the processes that you went through in preparation for your return? Who did you contact at that time? How did your re-entry process work? Why did you specifically choose to return to Ningbo/Z? Why?

STAGE 5: THE ACTUAL RETURN HOME (INITIAL STAGE)

20. For my next set of questions, I'd like us to focus on your feelings and experiences after you very first returned to China.

　　If you think back to that time, generally speaking, how did you feel? Were you happy to be back or did it feel strange?

21. Can you remember noticing anything that seemed very different to what you had become used to in XXX, How did that make you feel? Did you find yourself making any favourable or unfavourable comparisons between XXX and China? If so, what were these?

22. Can you remember noticing anything that seemed very different to what you had become used to in China before you went abroad? If so, what were these?

23. In terms of your own attitude to China and other Chinese, did you feel different in any way? Did you have any sense that by going overseas and having the experience that you did, that you yourself were different compared to those who haven't been abroad in some way?

STAGE 6: THE ACTUAL RETURN HOME (LATER STAGES AND RE-ASSIMILATION PROCESS)

24. My next questions are going to focus on the later stages of your return to China, or here in Ningbo, or more specifically in University Z, and the extent to which you feel you have successfully readjusted and re-assimilated.

　　Having now experienced an academic environment in XXX and the academic environment in China, If I asked you to compare the higher education system in XXX with the system here in China, for example, from your experiences of sampling both, what do you think are the good and bad points? What (if any) are the things that you think most need to change here? What do you see as being the main challenges currently facing Chinese HEIs? How might these challenges be resolved?

25. How do you feel about yourself now, and that you yourself are now viewed by yourself, your Chinese co-workers\superiors\students as an overseas returnee? Do you feel that you have been fully re-accepted or that you have become an outsider? Why and how?

26. Do you feel that your period of studying overseas has changed your way of thinking and your general or educational ideology as being university teacher? If so, in what ways and how does this now make you feel? (for example, your views on university teacher before and after)

27. Has your experience of studying overseas changed your actual behavior in any way? Are there any things that you do now that you probably wouldn't have done before?

STAGE 7: THE PRESENT SITUATION AND THE FUTURE

28. Do you still communicate/contact with the friends or professors that you knew abroad? Can you please talk about your current social communities, including colleagues at work, friends in life, family etc.. Have you got any communication barriers with your colleagues\friends\family? how and why?

29. Are you generally satisfied or dissatisfied with your current situation in terms of career (university teacher)/balance between work and life (including teaching, academic, salary etc)?

30. Are you treated any differently as being a returnee teacher? Have you ever been discriminated as being a returnee teacher or returnee (or Haigui)? What do you think are the positive or negative influences in being a returnee teacher, or returnee (Haigui)?

31. Has the experience of studying abroad (specifically PhD) benefitted you in the way that you perhaps first hoped or expected it would? If not, why not? Why do you think this is?

32. What are your future career plans and aspirations? Do you think you will remain in your current situation? Could you ever see yourself going overseas again for example?

33. Finally, is there anything that you would like to tell me about the experience of having studied abroad and then returned to China that we haven't yet covered in my questions today?