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International academics in mainland China: what do we know and what do we need to know?

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the trend of academic migration to mainland China. Notably, the most recent literature identified a new cohort of international academics in China, who are non-Chinese academics with long-term and full-time positions. Despite growing research interests, there is a lack of critical and synthesised reviews about the extant studies regarding this group of international academics, in terms of theoretical frameworks, methodologies and empirical findings. This article addresses this research gap by drawing on a critical review of existing scholarship, in combination with three empirical research projects conducted by the authors of this article. The article unpacks conceptual and methodological ambiguities in the existing research and reveals major findings with regards to the profiles, motivations, challenges and work roles related to international academics in China. It also proposes a new typology to define international academics in mainland China and future research agendas in this area.

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1. Introduction

The cross-border mobility of academics is a significant yet under-researched global phenomenon (Rumbley and De Wit 2017). In this article, 'mobility' refers to both a period of movement and long-term migration (Bauder 2020). Research on the international mobility of researchers has been growing since the 1990s (Teichler 1996), with an initial focus on the flow from non-Euro-American systems towards the 'Global West', reflecting the dominance of this pattern on a global scale (e.g. Kim 2010; Munene 2014). This movement has often been associated with notions of 'brain drain' from sending countries and 'brain gain' of the receiving countries. However, more recent discourses such as 'brain circulation' have challenged such zero-sum

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assumptions (Fahey and Kenway 2010). Additionally, the past two decades have also witnessed increasing counter-flows with some non-Western countries attracting both returnee academics (Zweig 2006) and academics originally from Western countries (Kurek-Ochmańska and Luczaj 2021).

Asia, or the broadly conceptualised 'Global East', has developed several attractive destinations in this regard. In the modern era, mobility from the West to Asia started as a result of Western colonial occupation of territories such as India or Hong Kong SAR (Huang and Welch 2021). This trend was followed by returnees moving back to countries previously suffering from 'brain drain', such as mainland China (for brevity, 'China' from now on) and South Korea (Yoon 1992; Zweig 2006). The next stage was represented by international academics moving to new research and education hubs in East Asia, such as South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong SAR, Singapore (Brotherhood, Hammond, and Kim 2020; Huang 2018; Huang and Welch 2021; Knight 2014; Ortiga et al. 2019) and other Asian countries such as Turkey (Nevra Seggie and Calikoglu 2021) and Kazakhstan (Lee and Kuzhabekova 2018).

China has become another magnet for international academics for several reasons. First, since the reform and opening up in 1978, China has implemented a number of national, provincial and institutional-level recruitment policies, offering overseas academics generous working conditions (Li and Xue 2021; Wu and Huang 2018), and thus attracting both Chinese returnees and internationals (Marini and Yang 2021). Second, China has been rising in global science. For instance, it is now the second-largest country for research and development (R&D) expenditures, catching up with the United States. In terms of the publication volume, China's science and engineering publications now rank first in the world in terms of the total number, and second with regards to the top 1% cited publications (US National Science Foundation 2020). Third, under neoliberal globalisation and modernisation, the academic culture and lifestyle in China have become more Westernised than before, particularly in elite institutions and large cities such as Shanghai (Chen and Zhu 2018, 2020a). Finally, bilateral or multi-lateral political, institutional and grassroots research collaboration initiatives, such as between China and the European Union (EU; e.g. AAIIC 2018; European Commission 2012), have facilitated cross-border academic mobility.

Notably, most recent literature has identified two cohorts of international academics in China (Marini and Xu 2021; Huang 2022). The first cohort consisted mainly of foreign university (language) teachers, short-term academic visitors, part-time post holders and honorary affiliates, trailing spouses or ethnic Chinese returnees. However, in recent years, a new group of international academics has emerged, due to the rapid massification and internationalisation of Chinese higher education. More academics of non-Chinese nationality and non-Chinese ethnicity have moved to China for full-time and long-term academic positions. Some work at Sino-foreign institutions, but an increasing number are hired by Chinese public higher education or research institutions. While the previous research largely focused on the first group of academics (e.g. Kim 2015; Zweig 2006; Getty 2011), scholarly attention has been shifting to the new cohort (Marini and Xu 2021; Huang 2022).

Nonetheless, published research on this topic is still marked by a lack of critical and synthesised reviews in terms of theoretical frameworks, methodologies and empirical findings. This article addresses this gap by exploring the following questions:

What are the major themes in the existing research on international academics in China?
What can we learn from the extant research?

The following sections first explain the methodological approach used in this article. It then discusses six major themes identified in our analysis: definitions of international academics in China; disciplinary, theoretical and methodological approaches; demographics; motivations; challenges; and work roles. The article ends with a proposal for future research agendas.

2. Methods

This article draws on a critical review of the existing literature, as well as published and unpublished findings from three research projects conducted by the authors of this article in recent years (Table 1). The review combines the traditional literature review and scoping review approaches. Literature was selected in a traditional manner 'based on a personal selection of materials because the writer believes the original authors have some important contribution to make to current knowledge' (Jesson, Matheson, and Lacey 2011, 15). The purposes and contents of the review are scoping with the aim to clarify key definitions and concepts in the literature, to map the field of knowledge without necessarily being as detailed as in systematic reviews, to identify the research gaps and to potentially act as a precursor to systematic reviews (Arksey and O'Malley 2005; Munn et al. 2018).

Reasons for choosing the combined approach are twofold. First, a wealth of literature was harvested and selected prior to this synthesised review by our three research teams between 2016 and 2021. We considered the selected scholarship to be highly relevant and important to the focus of this article. Second, we found a lack of a consistent definition of 'international academics' in the existing literature, a point to be unpacked in Section 3.1. This terminological ambiguity creates challenges for conducting systematic reviews, an issue also acknowledged in Luczaj and Holy-Luczaj's qualitative meta-analysis of 'international academics in the peripheries' (2022), thus inspiring this quasi-scoping review.

The reviewed literature was harvested from 2016 to 2021 from scholarly databases (Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar and CNKI) and official websites of governments, organisations and institutions. Search terms included: '[(international OR foreign OR overseas OR migra* OR immigra*) AND (academic* OR researcher* OR teacher* OR facult*)] AND [China OR (Chinese universit*) OR (Chinese research institute*)]'. Publications were in English, Chinese and Japanese languages, and included journal articles, book chapters, books and reports. Additional publications were collected by tracing cited sources of identified scholarships, and further recommendations from our academic networks. The final corpus was selected based on our judgement of the identified works' importance to the focus of this article. A thematic analysis of the literature revealed the six major themes that guide Section 3.

The three empirical projects (Table 1), led by the authors of this article and conducted between 2016 and 2021, are among the few empirical studies focusing on the nascent cohort of international academics in China. The three projects have parallels as well as variations in terms of research questions, definitions of 'international academics', methodologies, case institutions, participants and consequently research

Table 1. Information about the three empirical studies.

Projects	Research questions	Methodology	Case institutions	Participants (defined as 'international academics')	Datasets	Data collection periods	Selected publication(s)
Project 1	Demographic profiles, challenges, motivations, main academic activities and expected roles of international academics in China	Demographic profile mapping, survey, semi-structured interviews in China	26 Chinese universities, including national research universities, local public universities and Sino-foreign collaborative universities in various Chinese cities	Academics with foreign nationality or citizenship, full-time employment with fixed contracts for more than one year, excluding full-time international faculty who only teach foreign languages and international doctoral and postdoctoral researchers	Demographic profiles of more than 800 full-time international faculty, valid survey responses from 38 full-time international faculty, interviews with 23 full-time international faculty, interviews with 14 Chinese institutional administrators	2016–early 2020	Huang (2022); Huang and Kim (2022)
Project 2	Motivations, experiences and career prospects of European academics in China	Semi-structured interviews in China and online	16 public Chinese institutions, including Project 985 universities, Project 211 universities, and a research institute outside of the university system	Europeans by citizenship, non-ethnic Chinese (apart from one participant of mixed Chinese-European heritage), full-time based in Chinese public research and higher education institutions, excluding teachers, visitors or part-time academics, doctoral researchers were included based on the EU Commission definition of a researcher (early career)	Interviews with 28 European researchers, interviews with 19 experts, including practitioners, diplomats and academics in China	2017–2018	Braun Střelcová, Cai, and Shen (2022)
Project 3	Motivations and engagements of international academics in China	Demographic profile mapping, survey, semi-structured interviews in China and online, policy analysis	15 research-intensive universities (Double-First Class Universities) in 12 cities in northern, eastern, western, central and southern China	Non-Chinese ethnicity and non-Chinese nationality, excluding ethnic Chinese returnees with foreign nationality, full-time and long-term academic employment, with both research and teaching roles	Demographic profiles of 323 international academics and 43 international postdoctoral researchers, questionnaires responded by 124 international academics, Interviews with 31 academics a collection of university policy documents	2019–2021	Marini and Xu (2021)

findings. Similarities and differences allow space for integration, reflection, comparison and dialogue. All three projects collected extensive and in-depth empirical datasets and covered 26, 16 and 15 higher education and research institutions in China, respectively. Project 1 (Huang 2022; Huang and Kim 2022) combed through more than 800 demographic profiles of full-time international academics, 38 valid survey responses, interviews with 23 full-time international faculty members, and 14 Chinese institutional administrators. In Project 2 (Braun Střelcová, Cai, and Shen 2022), researchers interviewed 28 European researchers and 19 experts (practitioners, diplomats and academics). Project 3 (Marini and Xu 2021) collected and examined the demographic profiles of 323 international academics and 43 international postdoctoral researchers, 124 questionnaire responses, interviews with 31 academics and a collection of university policy documents.

3. Existing research on international academics in China

This article identified six major themes in the research on international academics in China. The following sub-sections reveal commonalities in the extant studies, discuss divergent and seemingly paradoxical findings, and propose future research directions.

3.1. Definitions

The term ‘international academics’ bears ambiguities. Since there is not yet a unified definition, research about international academics can result in divergent methodologies, findings, and policy recommendations. Luczaj and Holy-Luczaj’s (2022) meta-review on the literature about international academics across 15 countries also revealed this terminological challenge, since many alternative terms (e.g. ‘academic migrants’, ‘expatriate academic staff’) refer to the same population. In research outside the Chinese context, ‘international’ can be defined by a foreign-born status – an indicator widely used in the previous literature, although with limitations (Kim, Wolf-Wendel, and Twombly 2011). Internationals are also defined by one or multiple factors, such as nationality, citizenship or degree obtaining country (Huang and Welch 2021; Yudkevich, Altbach, and Rumbley 2017).

In China, the terminological ambiguities are associated with legal, social, political, historical and cultural factors. For instance, policy discourses on international academics have been changing, influencing the definition of this group. According to Huang (2021), the early policy discourses can be traced back to *sulian zhuanjia* (苏联专家), meaning ‘Soviet experts’ invited to China in the 1950s. This was followed by the term *waiguo wenjiao zhuanjia* (外国文教专家, ‘foreign cultural and educational experts’; e.g. MOE 1991), which refers to experts and teachers with foreign nationalities or citizenships. These people were part of the first cohort of international academics in China, as explained above. Next, the term *waiji jiaoshi* (外籍教师, meaning ‘foreign-nationality teachers’; MOE 2020) emerged in the late 1990s, which has largely replaced *waiguo wenjiao zhuanjia* in national policies, although the latter is still used in some provincial and institutional policies. *Waiji jiaoshi* is defined based on the legal status, which refers to teachers with a foreign nationality or citizenship at educational institutions, including higher education institutions. Those granted governmental or institutional ‘talent

programmes' are also often referred to as *waiji rencai* (外籍人才, meaning 'foreign talents'). However, it should be noted that when the term 'international academics' is entangled with discourses about 'foreign talent' or 'foreign expert', it could denote capacity, rarity, exceptionality and supremacy (Marini and Xu 2021).

Changing policies and practices have created complexity in academic discourses. Previous research defined 'internationals' in China by a particular set of characteristics (or their combination), with the most common ones being the place of birth (Postiglione and Xie 2017), nationality (Chen and Zhu 2020b) and ethnicity (Project 2 and Project 3). For instance, Project 1 and Wu and Huang (2018) defined 'international academics' as full-time academics with foreign nationality. As such, their participants included both 'foreign faculty' and 'overseas Chinese faculty' (ethnic Chinese scholars of foreign nationality). A narrower definition requiring both non-Chinese ethnicity and nationality or citizenship was used by Projects 2 and 3, highlighting the differences between Chinese returnees who are culturally and socially closer to the local context than the non-Chinese 'foreign academics'. Notably, no study has been found to use the country where an academic obtained their doctoral degree as the defining factor in the Chinese context. However, Project 3 found a tiny, albeit emerging group, of China-educated international academics and postdoctoral researchers. Their experiences working in China may differ from those who received education outside the country.

Furthermore, research differs in the definition of 'academics', which appears to be used interchangeably with 'researchers', 'scholars', 'faculty', 'talents' and 'academic staff', despite the nuances across these terms. Some research included non-Chinese doctoral and postdoctoral researchers (Larbi and Ashraf 2020; Project 2). Chen and Zhu's (2018, 2020a, 2020b) research, which used the term 'international scholars' to describe the situation of foreigners working in higher education in Shanghai, included both full-time and visiting academics. Other research focused on full-time academics with both research, teaching and administrative roles (Han 2021; Projects 1 and 3). Their professional duties include running laboratories and research groups, carrying out research, publishing their findings, teaching classes, mentoring students and dealing with various administrative tasks (Han 2021). It is important to highlight that most studies focused on those working at higher education and research institutions, rather than researchers in other sectors, such as industry.

The definitional complexity sometimes creates conflicting findings, which will be discussed in Section 3.3. To address the ambiguities, we propose a typological framework for defining 'international academics in China' for future research. The typology highlights the three most relevant defining factors – nationality, ethnicity and job positions – that have been used in the Chinese higher education context to define 'international academics'. The framework places four types of international academics in China on a spectrum, ranging from a narrow to a broad definitional sense (Table 2). More research is needed for the new cohort defined as Type I and within this group, those who obtained their doctoral degrees in China need particular scholarly attention. The typology can also be adapted to define international academics in other contexts, although the importance of various factors can change according to the particular legal, social, political and cultural configurations of the local empirical setting.

Table 2. Typological framework to define ‘international academics in China’

Type	Type I	Type II	Type III	Type IV
Nationality	Non-Chinese nationality	Non-Chinese nationality	Non-Chinese nationality	Non-Chinese nationality
Ethnicity	Non-Chinese ethnicity	Non-Chinese ethnicity	Chinese and non-Chinese ethnicity	Chinese and non-Chinese ethnicity
Job positions	Long-term, full-time academic positions with more than one responsibility in research, teaching and administration	Long-term, full-time academic positions with mainly sole responsibility in research, teaching or administration, part-time or fixed-term faculty members, postdoctoral and doctoral researchers, short-term visiting academics	Long-term, full-time academic positions with more than one responsibility in research, teaching and administration	Long-term, full-time academic positions with mainly sole responsibility in research, teaching or administration, part-time or fixed-term faculty members, postdoctoral and doctoral researchers, short-term visiting academics
Scope of definition	Narrow	↔		Broad

Note: While job positions often refer to those in higher education and research institutions, which have been the focus of studies on international academics in China, it can be expanded to include features relevant to the industry sector. Each type can be further divided based on additional layers of characteristics, such as countries of doctoral education, language(s) spoken, etc. When adapted to contexts outside China, the most relevant defining factors may change.

3.2. Different disciplinary, theoretical and methodological perspectives

Research on international academics in China is interdisciplinary, often benefitting from a mixture of higher education and international migration literature. Braun Střelcová, Cai and Shen (2022, Project 2) categorised the relevant literature into five scholarly fields. First, higher education research, mainly related to internationalisation and mobility, centres on foreign academics’ experiences in working environments such as the Chinese, particularly in relation to the growth of Sino-foreign cooperative universities (Cai and Hall 2016; Wang and Chen 2020). Second, (skilled) migration research has looked mainly at China’s ‘talent attraction’ capacity and evolving policy frameworks (e.g. Liu and Ahl 2018; Zweig, Kang, and Wang 2020). Third, management studies about academic expatriation have highlighted the relative lack of empirical knowledge regarding the expatriation of global academic talents, as opposed to skilled workers in the corporate sector (Froese 2012; Richardson and Zikic 2007). Fourth, China studies scholarship has analysed the experiences of foreign social scientists when, for example, doing fieldwork in China or working with Chinese research partners (Heimer and Thøgersen 2006; Klotzbücher 2014). Finally, non-scholarly reports have appeared in both news media and other publications (Jia 2018; Ma 2014; Mervis 2019).

Grounded in different disciplines, research on this theme has not coalesced into a unified theoretical framework. Nevertheless, some theoretical or analytical tools, including forms of *capital* in line with Bourdieu’s theoretical framework (e.g. Braun Střelcová, Cai, and Shen 2022), *symbolic capital* (Kim 2015), *ethnic capital* (Farrer 2014), the *push-pull model* (Marini and Xu 2021), analysis of *social ties* (Rezaei and Mouritzen 2021) and *cross-cultural adaptation models* (Chen and Zhu 2018; 2020a), have been used more frequently than others. Some studies did not apply such theoretical frameworks (e.g. Han 2021; Huang 2022) largely due to their inductive and explorative methodological designs.

Research on international academics in China has largely employed qualitative approaches, such as interviews and policy analysis (e.g. Larbi and Ashraf 2020; Li and Xue 2021; Project 2) and auto-ethnographical studies (G. Misiaszek 2018; L. Misiaszek 2018). Increasingly, mixed methods research designs are used, coupled with survey questionnaires (e.g. Project 1; Project 3; Rezaei and Mouritzen 2021; Yu 2019). Due to a lack of any comprehensive national dataset regarding all international academics in China, both Projects 1 and 3 used demographic profile mapping and surveys to map out the scale and characteristics of international academics at the selected case universities. Limitations of the mapping method include outdated online information, limitation of case coverage and low response rates. Notably, only a handful of research has applied an international comparative lens (e.g. Project 1).

In sum, research on international academics in China has come from multiple disciplines and research fields. Thus, analytical frameworks based on integrating theoretical insights from different disciplines could be helpful for future research. Larger-scale studies could also be helpful to cover more types of institutions in different Chinese regions, with the possibility of building a national dataset about all international academics. Longitudinal, bibliometric and international comparative studies are also needed.

3.3. Demographics

Different definitions of international academics in China and various methodological approaches have led to different populations being studied and consequently, conflicting findings regarding the demographics of this group. To illustrate the puzzle, we compared four studies (Table 3): Kim (2015), Wu and Huang (2018), Project 1 and Project 3.

The projects revealed overlapping yet different pictures. For instance, Kim (2015) and Project 1 identified more international academics working in social sciences areas, while Wu and Huang (2018) and Project 3 found more academics in the science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) disciplines. Based on the typology proposed in Table 2, participants in Kim (2015), Wu and Huang (2018), Project 1, and Project 3 are respectively Type II, Type III, Type III and Type I international academics in China. Other differentiating factors included types and locations of case institutions, such as the disciplinary differences between research-intensive ones (mainly in STEM) and Sino-foreign collaborative institutions (usually also developing the social sciences and humanities disciplines), year of data collection and research methods.

Despite differences, some common features emerged from the comparison. There is a clear domination of male academics, senior academics and academics with professorial titles, academics with citizenship from or previous residency in North-American/Western-European countries (mainly from the US) and academics with their highest degree from non-Chinese universities (mainly from the US). For future research on these demographics, a nuanced definitional framework of international academics is needed, such as proposed in Table 2.

3.4. Motivations for relocation

The motivations of international academics' mobility to China fall into three categories: professional; cultural; personal and social. Individual academics have reported having

Table 3. Profiles of international academics in China.

Study/project	Kim (2015)	Wu and Huang (2018)	Project 1 (Huang 2016-2022)	Project 3 (Marini and Xu 2021)
<i>Methods</i>				
International academics	41 international 'college-level instructors' (non-Chinese and foreign)	236 full-time international faculty (foreign nationality)	855 full-time international faculty (foreign nationality)	323 full-time international faculty (foreign nationality and ethnicity)
Type of international academics by the definition of this paper (Table 2)	Type II	Type III	Type III	Type I
Case institutions	Universities and colleges	Four leading universities	12 Chinese universities, including 4 research universities, 6 local public universities, and 2 Sino-foreign collaborative universities	15 research-intensive universities
Location	Beijing	Shanghai	Tier 1 cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou	12 Chinese cities in eastern, northern, southern, western and central China
Information source	Snowballing sampling	Official university websites and other publicly available information	Official university websites and other publicly available information; survey questionnaire	Official university websites and other publicly available information
Year of data collection	2012–13	2017	2017	2020
<i>Findings: demographic profiles</i>				
Gender/sex	Men (27) Women (14)	More men/male academics than women/female	Men/male academics (82%) Women/female academics (18%)	Men/male academics (77%) Women/female academics (16%), rest unknown
Disciplines	Ranged widely from social sciences to languages such as Italian, Spanish and Irish. Others included mathematics, statistics, finance and history.	Mainly from STEM fields, followed by the humanities and social sciences, as well medicine	Social Sciences (54.0%) Humanities (48.6%) Engineering (22%) Natural Sciences (17.0%) Medical Sciences (1%)	STEM (47.1%) Life, Medical and Health Sciences (10.5%) Social Sciences (29.7%) Arts and Humanities (12.7%)
Academic rank	N/A	Professors (63.3%) Lecturers (15.7%) Associate Professors (14.4%) Others (6.6%)	Professors (35.3%) Assistant Professors (17.4%) Associate Professors (16.0%) Lecturers (11.1%)	Professors (36%) Associated Professors (31%) Assistant Professors (26%), rest unknown
Nationality/citizenship/residency/home country	41% were from the United States, and 34% were from various Western European countries. Countries include Australia, France, Ireland, Italy, South Korea, Mexico,	US (41.9%), Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan regions of China (15.8%), Canada (9.3%), Germany (5.5%), Japan (4.8%) and the UK (3.6%)	USA (83), Canada (17), Hong Kong SAR (16), Taiwan (14), the UK and Japan (13) and Germany	N/A

(Continued)

Table 3. Continued.

Study/project	Kim (2015)	Wu and Huang (2018)	Project 1 (Huang 2016-2022)	Project 3 (Marini and Xu 2021)
	Singapore, South Africa, Spain, the US and the UK.			
Doctoral/final degree attainment	N/A	Final degrees: 90.4% from universities outside China (46.2% from the US) 9.6% from Chinese universities	Final degrees: 94% from universities outside China 6% from Chinese universities	Doctoral degrees: 73% from OECD countries (mostly from the US) 8% from non-OECD countries (2% from Chinese universities), rest unknown

single or mixed motivations. For instance, some perceived China as the ‘last resort’ due to both more challenging job markets and worse living conditions at home or elsewhere (Kim 2015). Kim’s research also highlighted the relative lack of prestige attached to working in China. However, more recent studies (e.g. Project 3) suggest that since then, the international status of academics working for Chinese institutions has improved.

The primary motivation is professional opportunity, such as permanent or tenured job positions, or opportunities to lead grants as principal investigators (Chen and Zhu 2020a; Farrer 2014; Projects 1, 2 and 3; Yu 2019). Participants of all three projects reported China was expanding its academic labour market, often offering more favourable working conditions than the precarious job markets in the US or Europe. The available opportunities were often marked by higher salaries, better funding, allowances, subsidised housing, dual-career offers and sometimes prestige and recognition. Some participants also expressed other professional motivations, such as to create or expand networks with Chinese institutions, colleagues and students.

The second motivation was cultural connection, often entangled with the professional aspect. Moving to China and conducting research in a culturally interesting country after a PhD (or postdoc) elsewhere could mean a new adventure (Wu and Huang 2018). For example, some participants in Project 1 reported a fondness for Chinese culture. Additionally, both Projects 2 and 3 found that some social sciences and humanities scholars were drawn by the unique opportunities to work with the language, culture, data and research networks in China. Such respondents tended to appreciate local culture, as they were familiar with the country, and often had a previous experience of living or travelling there.

The third motivation was related to personal links. Chen and Zhu (2018, 2020a) and all three projects found that some international academics moved to China for family reasons or social networks. In Project 3, 28% of survey respondents were married to a Chinese national or had a Chinese partner. Having a Chinese spouse may have also influenced their decisions to stay longer in China. Some international academics reported enjoying their lives there, particularly those with high salaries in metropolitan hubs (Chen and Zhu 2018, 2020a; Project 3).

In a nutshell, the major motivation behind moving to China was job-related, namely career development, long-term prospects in academia and research-related links. These

factors were usually coupled with cultural and personal motivations. Notably, academics from different groups demonstrated overlapping though diverse motivations, suggesting a need for nuanced further research.

3.5. Challenges for international academics in China

The existing research revealed that although some international academics in China reported largely satisfactory experiences, there were areas of possible improvement. Two categories of challenges were identified: professional and non-professional.

Professional challenges manifested in five aspects: power relations, professional isolation, research work, administrative work and teaching. Regarding power relations, international academics could experience ‘collective disempowerment’ via tacit institutional power dynamics along with hierarchical approach to management (Han 2021). As a result, although they were highly valued as employees, they were also considered a potential source of stress or conflict for local academics and administrators (Li and Xue 2021).

The second challenge was related to their professional isolation. Chen and Zhu (2020b) argued that many international academics felt like ‘cross-cultural misfits’, due to their misguided anticipation and lack of previous knowledge with regards to living in China. However, such experiences may stem from more than just unfulfilled expectations. For example, participants in Project 3 reported feeling like permanent ‘outsiders’ and ‘guests’, despite their length of stay, living in ‘golden bubbles’ with both privileges (some suggested ‘White privileges’) and restrictive boundaries (such as ‘glass ceilings’). Project 2 found that it was mainly the junior academics and social scientists who reported seclusion. In addition, many Chinese universities (including the Sino-foreign joint institutions) were less aware of the importance of staff induction or long-term professional development, particularly for international academics, which were common in some Western countries. Together with structural differences and cultural challenges, this may have made the adaptation process more challenging (Cai and Hall 2016).

The third professional challenge concerned research. Language barriers became apparent in funding applications, which was one of the main hindrances along with persistent positionality as a ‘stranger’ and the disconnectedness from pivotal administrative functions (Larbi and Ashraf 2020). Such problems were coherent with Project 3’s findings. In particular, several interviewees reported that as non-Chinese nationals, they were ineligible for many prestigious domestic funding schemes, which was detrimental to their long-term careers. Project 2 found that academics in the social sciences and humanities relied more on the access to local data and worked in less internationalised fields. Such academics highlighted their need (and simultaneously, the challenge) of integrating into the local research community. Some participants also perceived shrinking academic freedom across disciplines, and they reported a need to align their research agendas to political priorities (Project 2).

Dealing with administrative issues was the fourth professional challenge. Tight deadlines, frequent duplications and high demand for Chinese language proficiency were the major challenges in this category (Chen and Zhu 2020a, 2020b; Project 1; Wu and Huang 2018).

Teaching was the fifth professional challenge. A lack of active class participation could lead to an ‘unfulfilled pedagogical experience’ for some international academics (Marini

and Xu 2021, Project 3, 31). However, other studies' findings were more uplifting, highlighting the extent to which internationals enjoyed their relative autonomy, shaping new teaching courses or curricula, and diffusing an atmosphere of an open discussion – though admittedly within certain limits (Larbi and Ashraf 2020).

Non-professional challenges mainly included three aspects: cultural integration, legal procedures and living conditions. The first and major challenge was cultural integration, or 'cross-cultural adaptation', as examined in depth from cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions by Chen and Zhu (2018, 2020a). 'Non-effective integration' (Development Solutions and EURAXESS China 2019) of international academics created feelings of exclusion and otherness. The 'golden bubble' identified in Project 3 also applied to social dimensions. European researchers reported challenges in living in what was perceived, in comparison to Europe, as an overly competitive society with prevalent ethnic or gender discrimination (Project 2).

The second challenge was connected to legal and immigration procedures. European researchers in Project 2 complained about legally strict conditions for the residency of academics (and their spouses) and regular, lengthy renewal periods for permits and visas. This is echoed by findings from Projects 1 and 3, as well as other studies that noted the 'still burdensome immigration procedures' (Development Solutions and EURAXESS China 2019), despite the existence of 'fast-track' visa policies for researchers. These have, among others, aimed at facilitating mobility and migration of students and academics from the Belt and Road Initiative's countries (Richter 2020). However, the supply of such policies did not match the universities' growing demand for 'international talents'.

The third challenge concerned financial pressures in terms of housing, healthcare, children's schooling and occasionally also other issues, such as air pollution and internet censorship (Projects 1, 2, and 3). In particular, several participants in Projects 2 and 3 reported Chinese public schooling as unattractive or unavailable and private international schooling as too expensive.

In sum, international academics in China faced common professional and non-professional challenges. However, differences existed across academic groups. Project 2 also highlighted the time sensitivity of such challenges, some of which became visible only after a few years in China. Project 2 reported that since most international researchers would eventually seek to leave China again, there should be a recognition from the sending countries or national funding bodies, e.g. by supporting return migration processes. All in all, the findings denoted a need for more nuanced research on generational differences, and longitudinal studies to trace the pathways of international academics. While some existing research provided policy implications (e.g. Chen and Zhu 2018, 2020a; Yu 2019; Marini and Xu 2021, Project 3), more research is needed to find further solutions.

3.6. Expected roles

Compared to the other themes described above, much less is known about the expected roles of international academics in China. Projects 1, 2 and 3 addressed this issue. A majority of respondents in Project 1 reported that they were expected to enhance the international reputation of their current universities (3.81 out of 5), followed by yielding high research productivity (3.62), being active in carrying out international activities

(3.24), bridging their current universities and universities of their home countries (2.65), organising faculty development activities in their current universities (2.76), recruiting more international students (2.65), undertaking any activities that cannot be accomplished by Chinese colleagues (2.65) and teaching language programmes for students (1.97). Interviews with European researchers (Project 2) echoed the findings that some participants saw themselves as bridge builders, creating links between their Chinese institutions and their global academic networks. Some participants in Project 3 described how they felt as if they were being recruited to improve the university's symbolic prestige, and to build bridges between Chinese and international communities.

The data suggested that the major expectation, as perceived by the new cohort of international academics themselves, was to enhance the international profile and research quality of Chinese universities through their research and international activities. They felt least expected to teach foreign languages. Their expected roles also mirrored the neo-liberal globalisation of higher education in China and the world, which highlighted research productivity and international benchmarking. This could lead to tokenism in recruiting international academics – echoing findings from Japan and South Korea (Brotherhood, Hammond, and Kim 2020; Kim 2016).

4. Conclusion and future research agenda

This article provides an overview of the major themes in the extant literature on international academics in China. It contributes to several areas of research, namely higher education and migration studies, which both pay attention to international academic migration to the Global East. Building on this synthesis, we propose four future research agendas.

Firstly, future research could utilise the typological framework of 'international academics in China' (Table 2) to specify the type of international academics in the research inquiry, and avoid terminological ambiguities. Furthermore, 'international academics' need to be understood as a heterogeneous group in light of 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw 1989) – various implications can be bound by multiple identities. In addition to the 'foreignness' characteristic, other identities, such as one's gender, ethnicity, age, career stage, social group or academic discipline, all deserve further investigation. For instance, given the domination of male international academics and academics from 'Western' countries in China, future research could apply a gender studies lens or critical race theory. Further attention is also needed on academics from outside the 'Global West', such as the Belt and Road countries, or those who have left China – while much has been discussed about international academics' entry to China, less is known about their exit (Huang and Welch 2021).

Second, research on international academics in China is multi-disciplinary and draws on multiple theoretical lenses and methodologies. Developing analytical frameworks drawing on various theoretical insights would be valuable. There is also a need for more mixed-methods studies, larger-scale research at more types of institutions in different regions of China, longitudinal studies, bibliometric studies, international comparative studies and systematic reviews on this topic.

Third, our review revealed that international academics' major motivations to relocate to China were mostly career-related, coupled with cultural and personal motivations.

Their challenges were both professional and non-professional. Their main expected work role was to enhance the international profile and research quality of the Chinese universities. However, differences existed across academic groups, suggesting a need for nuanced further studies. Future studies could also examine international academics' engagement with knowledge circulation and epistemic justice (Morley et al. 2018; Shen, Xu, and Wang 2021); and investigate the mobilisation, effectiveness and impacts of relevant policies across the individual, institutional, national and international scales.

Finally, the landscape of international mobility is quickly changing. For instance, due to various travel and visa restrictions with regard to entering China during different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, the local population of European researchers was reduced by one third (EURAXESS China 2021). In addition to the pandemic and its impact, further foreseeable challenges also include the rise of (neo-)nationalism, ongoing geopolitical tensions between China and the Global West and the consequent politicisation of research. While this article draws on the existing knowledge base up to 2021, the impact of the current situation and future development ought to be traced promptly.

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