

Foreign Academics in China

Yuzhuo Cai, Andrea Braun Střelcová, Giulio Marini, Futao Huang, and Xin Xu

A major global science and technology player, mainland China has also become a destination for international academics. In this regard, the Chinese government's policy has shifted from primarily encouraging overseas Chinese to return to also attracting foreign-born academics to China. Over recent years, the composition of the latter group has evolved. The "old" cohort in this category consisted mainly of university (language) teachers, short-term academic visitors, part-time-post holders and honorary affiliates, trailing spouses, or Chinese returnees. They have been joined by a "new" cohort, foreign nationals moving to China for full-time, long-term academic positions. The authors of this article have recently conducted comprehensive investigations on this emerging phenomenon, and report on the key findings below.

Who Are the Foreign Academics in China?

The term—foreign or international academics in China—has been frequently used without a univocal definition. In China, policy discourses on foreign academics have evolved from *sulian zhuanjia* (Soviet experts) in the 1950s, to *waiguo wenjiao zhuanjia* (foreign cultural and educational experts) and *waiji jiaoshi* (foreign-nationality teachers) in the 1990s, and *waiji rencai* (foreign talents), the term used in recent talent programs at national and local levels. The current policies focus on attracting researchers with a foreign nationality to work in China. In many universities, further priority is given to those of non-Chinese ethnicity, primarily white foreigners from the Global West. Although most accurate, up-to-date data is missing, the 2019 ministry of education's data indicates that there are more than 18,000 foreign academics in China. Recent studies, including the authors' works, show that foreign academics in China do not constitute a homogenous group. They can be differentiated according to various attributes, such as scientific disciplines, career stage, gender, nationality, ethnicity, country of previous work experience, educational background, and more.

Recent studies have revealed some interesting additional findings. First, the most sought-after foreign academics in Chinese universities are established researchers in engineering and natural sciences from the Global West. Second, there is a prevalence of academics who are male, senior, and have citizenship, work experience, and degrees from Western countries. Finally, an emerging group of foreign-born academics, who stayed in China after receiving their doctoral degrees there, has appeared. Naturally, the group's heterogeneity is reflected in the diversity of their experiences.

What Motivates Foreign Academics to Work in China?

Foreign academics come to China for a combination of professional, cultural, social, and personal reasons. The most common primary motivation is career development, as the change of location is expected to bring better opportunities than staying in one's previous country of residence. The prospects also concern salaries, allowances, research funding, subsidized housing, dual career offers to accommodate spouses, and overall recognition of one's track record. The second motivation is opportunities for cultural and social connections, often combined with the professional aspect. Academics from social sciences and humanities, in particular, are attracted by the opportunity to work in a unique cultural environment. For some of them, having strong networks in China is essential to their research. The third motivation is related to personal reasons, such as having a Chinese spouse.

Abstract

This article examines the experience of international academics in mainland China. The emerging trend of foreign academics moving into long-term, full-time positions in Chinese universities is an underreported phenomenon in research. This article discusses the following questions: Who are the foreign academics in China? What motivates them to go and work there? What are their expected roles in local academia? Are they satisfied with their jobs? Are they going to stay in China?

The expectations of Chinese institutions with regard to foreign academics are closely connected to the effort of building world-class universities.

Yuzhuo Cai is senior lecturer at the Higher Education Group, Faculty of Management and Business, Tampere University, Finland. Email: yuzhuo.cai@tuni.fi.

Andrea Braun Střelcová is a predoctoral fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin, and a PhD student at Tampere University, Finland. Email: astrelcova@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de.

Giulio Marini is lecturer (teaching) at the Social Research Institute, Faculty of Education and Society, University College London, UK. Email: g.marini@ucl.ac.uk.

Futao Huang is professor at the Research Institute for Higher Education, Hiroshima University, Japan. Email: futao@hiroshima-u.ac.jp.

Xin Xu is a research fellow at the Department of Education, University of Oxford, UK. Email: xin.xu@education.ox.ac.uk.

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What Are Their Expected Roles in Chinese Academia?

The expectations of Chinese institutions with regard to foreign academics are closely connected to the effort of building world-class universities. When hiring foreign academics, universities and research institutes seek to enhance their international reputation, increase research productivity, promote international collaboration, support faculty development, and attract international students. This is in significant contrast with the 1990s, when international staff was hired mainly for teaching. According to the foreign academics themselves, they are primarily recruited to boost their institutions' research performance and international reputation. Nonetheless, they also feel that they are confined to "bubbles" and are less integrated in their workplaces than their Chinese colleagues. Many believe that they could play more important roles in building links between their affiliated institutions and global academic networks.

Are They Satisfied with Their Jobs?

To various degrees, foreign academics are overall satisfied with their working conditions. In most cases, those in engineering and natural sciences are happier with their jobs than those in social sciences and humanities, who are more prone to feeling frustrated, especially if they are junior researchers. Nonetheless, all foreign academics see challenges in both the professional and nonprofessional aspects of their lives, especially after a few years. First, they perceive themselves as being viewed as a possible source of conflict by domestic academics and administrators. Second, they often feel seen as guests and isolated from the rest of the institution. Third, most of them believe that there are language barriers, for instance when applying for research funding. Fourth, shrinking academic freedom is a concern, particularly to some social sciences researchers. Fifth, most find it hard to adapt to the local research administration system. And finally, non-professional challenges mainly include cultural integration (e.g., conflicting value systems), legal procedures (e.g., lengthy visa and residence permit applications), and living conditions (e.g., expensive healthcare, children's schooling).

Will Foreign Academics Stay in China?

Regarding long-term stays, there are significant differences among academics according to their circumstances. A recent study on European academics in Chinese public universities, for instance, shows that their job satisfaction tends to decrease with time, as they gradually identify further challenges related to their institutions as well as to society at large. On the other hand, since many accept offers in China that include a higher academic rank at a relatively younger age, it is logical for them to consider relocating elsewhere at a later stage. Their work experience in China becomes an essential stepping stone to increase their competitiveness in the global academic labor market.

Concluding Remarks

The world is currently experiencing extraordinary crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the US–China decoupling, and Russia's war against Ukraine. Shifting geopolitical dynamics are likely to dramatically influence the landscape of international mobility of academics. Due to the pandemic travel restrictions in China, the country's foreign population has already shrunk. For instance, the number of European academics in China has decreased by one-third. In view of that, the evolving flows of international migration to China, including the movements of foreign academics, should be closely monitored and continuously traced. ▲