

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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International Faculty in Chinese Higher Education: Characteristics and Positionality

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Research Domain: Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract: This paper presents findings from a project funded by SRHE about international faculty in mainland Chinese universities – an issue not yet extensively explored in the literature. The project explores the characteristics, motivations, and engagement of international faculty in Chinese higher education, who work on long-term or permanent contracts.

The study draws on four datasets collected between 2019 and 2022, including (1) Information of 323 international academics at the 15 universities, and 43 international post-doctoral researchers at three universities; (2) questionnaires responded by 124 international academics; (3) in-depth interviews with 31 international academics; and (4) relevant institutional policy documents.

The presentation focuses on the characteristics and positionality of international faculty in China. The prevailing positionality include “distinguished guests”, “foreign employees” and “cultural bridges”. The study provides new empirical findings and theorisation about academic mobility from the ‘Global West’ to the ‘Global East’. It also discusses the cultural engagement with international faculty in China and beyond.

Paper: Introduction

This paper presents findings from a project funded by SRHE, on international faculty in mainland Chinese universities – an issue not yet extensively explored in the literature.

International academic mobility is an important issue in the internationalisation of higher education (Rumley & De Wit, 2017). Previous literature on the topic has been constructed predominantly through Euro-American lenses, investigating academic mobility from the ‘peripheries’ to the ‘centre’, or within ‘centres’ (e.g. Kim, 2010; Marini 2019). However, the changing international academic profession calls for a reframing of the narrative (Huang & Welch, 2021).

Against the backdrop of fast-growing science and emerging world-class universities, China is a rising magnet for international academics. But the proportion of foreign academics working on long-term contracts is still tiny (Yu, 2019). Only few studies have examined international faculty in Chinese universities in certain cities like Shanghai (e.g. Wu & Huang, 2018), highlighting a need for further investigation on this issue.

Research questions and approaches

This project addresses the following questions:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of international faculty in China?

RQ2: What are the motivations for international faculty to move to China?

RQ3: How do international faculty engage with Chinese higher education?

This project collected four sets of data collected from 15 research-intensive universities in 16 mainland Chinese cities, during 2019 and 2022:

(1) Publicly available information of 323 international academics at the 15 universities, and 43 international post-doctoral researchers at three universities, collected from universities' websites;

(2) Questionnaires responded by 124 international academics identified in the mapping;

(3) Interviews with 31 academics among the survey respondents;

(4) University policy documents relevant to the recruitment, management, and support for international faculty.

Findings

This presentation will focus on findings about the characteristics and positionality of international faculty in China.

(1) Characteristics

Most long-term international faculty in China are male professors, working in STEM areas, with higher education degrees from OECD countries, particularly from the US; they joined their current institution from OECD countries quite recently (roughly after 2015), currently located in eastern, southern and northern China. They typically work in the research-intensive universities. However, the study also identified a trend of growing China-educated international academics.

(2) Positionality

Based on interviews, this study identified three types of positionality of international faculty in China: "distinguished guests", "foreign employees" and "cultural bridges". They are not necessarily mutually exclusive in describing single individuals.

(1) “Distinguished guests”

The meaning of “distinguished guests” is two-fold: the identity as a guest, and the status of being highly valued. Being a guest means being invited, staying relatively temporarily despite with long-term contracts, enjoying good hospitality and very good employment packages, but being treated as an outsider. The status of being a guest relates to their “foreignness”. “Foreignness” is a double-edged sword here. It isolates international academics in China, while also acting as a token for special privileges. The special treatments, in turn, reinforces a sense of being a guest.

Many participants reported that they feel being respected and valued, but sometimes up to the point to feel even flattered or uneasy about some privileges they enjoy. Some question these “perverse privileges” and associate them with Western supremacy.

(2) “Foreign employees”

Some international academics view their position simply as an employee at a university that happens to be in China. They argue that they are contributing to Chinese higher education and research, rather than simply being “guests” who come to visit and enjoy what the host may offer.

However, those academics are still “foreign” and to some extent an “outsider”. The perception of being an “employee” also denotes a utilitarian or practical understanding of their job. Culturally, their identity does not change much after relocating to China.

(3) “Cultural bridges”

A few academics see themselves as bridges between China and places they have connections with – culturally and professionally. Some see this as their institutions’ expectation on them, which they may agree with or not. Some academics refused to be seen as representing any specific culture. They see themselves as genuinely engaged with a long-term and precious job of intellectual and cultural mutual appreciation. Some do not see themselves as capable to represent certain cultures as expected, such as when White-Western academics are supposed to represent “internationality” and are seen, for instance, as contact points to international students of colour.

Concluding remarks

This research provides new empirical findings and theorisation about academic mobility from the ‘Global West’ to the ‘Global East’, a topic with growing importance in researching global academic mobility. Based on the findings, we reflect on the cultural engagement with international faculty in China. We also try to glimpse how China is processing a nascent generation of Western academics truly and deeply committed to the Chinese institutions.

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