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“The Golden Guests”? International Faculty in Mainland Chinese Universities

Research Report

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Executive Summary

This report 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 investigates the characteristics, motivations, and engagement of international faculty in China, working on long-term academic contracts. Four sets of data were collected from 15 research-intensive universities in 12 Chinese cities, during 2019 and 2021:

- (1) Publicly available information of 323 international academics at these 15 universities, and 43 international post-doctoral researchers at three universities, collected from universities' websites;
- (2) Questionnaires responded by 124 international academics out of 323 international academics mentioned above (response rate: around 38%);
- (3) In-depth interviews with 31 academics among the survey respondents;
- (4) University policy documents relevant to the recruitment, management, and support for international faculty.

Research findings are outlined as follows:

- A quick sketch of the majority of long-term international faculty in China is: 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 recently (after 2015), currently located in the most developed parts of Mainland China, namely the eastern, southern and northern China.
- An emerging pattern is the growth of China-educated international academics. A similar pattern exists for the 43 international postdoctoral researchers identified from three sample universities. They are predominantly non-OECD Asian citizens. It is uncertain if they would or could stay in China after the postdoctoral period. The possibility of establishing an academic career following their education in China is uncertain.
- International academics reported various motivations to move to China, including job security and career prospect; China-related research focus and pre-existent research ties with China; the “Chinese century” factor; industry and government links in applied sciences. Many have family links (e.g., a pre-existing Chinese partner).
- International academics reported different ways they position themselves in Chinese higher education, which are related to, albeit not always in line with, how Chinese universities position them. The three most prevailing types of positionalities are “distinguished guests”, “foreign employees” and “cultural bridges”.
- International academics' positive experiences in China are mostly related to job security, working conditions and good career development.
- International academics' negative and challenging experiences in China are largely in the cultural domain, particularly about the difficulty in integrating into the academic, administrative and bureaucratic cultural spheres. Other major challenges include the education of children.

Based on the findings, this report proposes several theoretical and practical implications:

- The study outlines a theoretical lens beyond the “push and pull” framework, that foregrounds academics' agency in mobility decisions, and goes beyond the binary understanding of influential factors in mobility.
- The project finds a common identity for many international faculty in China: “golden guests”. This identity creates both “golden bubbles” with privileges, and boundaries and “glass ceilings”.

- International faculty in China experience frequently a co-existence and a mostly frictionless dynamic between Chinese academic culture from one side, and the portion of one's original academic culture that is coherent with the academic Chinese itself. In other words, foreigners self-adapt themselves by focusing on the most congenial part of their assumptions and values with their wider context – this being ascribable to *type h* cultural acculturation as termed by Rudmin (2003). As a result, this acculturation pattern can be found in a sincere feeling of respecting a different country, coupled with the condition that they can carry on what they are and what they are for in China. This is a tale of *assimilation* and *integration* at the same time.
- The future of international academic mobility to China is still unfolding. This report closes with policy suggestions to institutions in their recruitment and engagement with international academics.

I Introduction and Literature Review

The study explores the motivation and engagement of international faculty in mainland Chinese universities. The following section outlines the research context, reviews the most relevant literature to this project, and presents the research questions.

The mobility of international faculty

In this globalised and globalising world, the trait of the mobile faculty in universities arose as a quintessential win-win dynamic: for the international academics themselves from one side, and for the recipient institutions/countries (and respective societies and economies) on the other side (Welch 1997). The sending country, on the other side, is believed to suffer from “brain drain”. They lose academics, or talents, usually after many years of education spent in their homeland. Notwithstanding, a growing counterpoint against the “brain drain” is that academic diasporas continue to contribute to their home countries even when they do not return (Fahey & Kenway, 2010).

For some countries and universities, the intake of international academics is seen as an index of scientific leadership. This is even more important if one takes into account that international academics usually outscore locals in performativity (Kim et al. 2011). For some countries that are trying to improve their level of internationalisation, the pull-in strategy is often based on career prospects, primarily meant as high salaries. Nevertheless, this may fall short. The case of Kazakhstan demonstrates that academic quality and scholarly density also play a role (Lee & Kuzhabekova 2018). To attract international faculty for a long stay, especially for entire stints of their careers, is more difficult.

The win-win globalising world appears to have found its stalemate these days. Geopolitical tensions are heightened in the world, as largely exemplified between the US and China. Physical mobility faces difficulties and uncertainties created by the COVID-19 pandemic. All these factors pose challenges to international academic mobility. The future destiny of this topic has just started to unveil (Welch & Huang 2021).

Research on international faculty

International academics are powerful agents in the internationalisation of higher education, yet they are often overlooked in research on academic mobility, which casts much limelight on international students (Teichler, 2015). Previous literature on the topic of international academic mobility has been constructed predominantly through western/Euro-American lenses, investigating academic mobility from the normative academic “peripheries” to the “centre” or within “centres” (e.g., Kim, 2010; Munene, 2014; Walker, 2015). However, the changing international academic profession calls for a reframing of the narrative. Studies on international faculty in countries outside the western “centres” are emerging. Examples include Kazakhstan (Kuzhabekova & Lee, 2018; Lee & Kuzhabekova, 2018) and Poland (Kurek-Ochmańska & Luczaj, 2021), as well as central countries like Japan (Brotherhood, Hammond, & Kim, 2019; Huang, 2019).

The existing literature has mainly discussed the mobility pattern of international faculty, the number of stocks and the changing fluxes, the pull and push dynamics of mobility. All are important topics, but they do not present the whole picture of international academic mobility. What is yet understudied is the relationship between international academics and the local contexts. International academics are –

technically speaking – immigrants like many others. Although the issue of visas might be facilitated for those deemed as “international talents”, the issue is not only administrative. How do they integrate into their new context? Can international academics really deploy all their potential regardless of the cultural dimensions within and outside universities? In comparison to other economically and socially disadvantaged immigrants, international faculties are a sub-group with their own resources, including the cultural, intellectual, economic, and networking possibilities. These possibilities bring international academics additional opportunities, but also pose challenges to their long-term engagement with the local contexts. On the other side, the local contexts may have influences brought by international academics. Since international academics are more likely to be to some extent demanding and precious labour force, it is crucial to understand the interactions between them and the local culture.

The cross-cultural perspective in international academic mobility deserves more attention. By and large, international faculties are more likely the harbinger of a “transnational identity capital” (Kim 2010). For instance, in the UK, recent pre-Brexit discourse appeared to be nurtured by inter-culturality (Kim 2009). Munene (2014) highlights a competitive and aggressive context in the US instead, conveying a more problematic scene for the integration of international academics. Australia, as the main Anglophone country located in Australasia, also offers a gloomy picture of what does mean to work in higher education as an international (Maadad 2014). Fresh evidence from Japan suggests another not so optimistic tale: tokenism prevails on full integration, ending with scarce involvement in academic affairs (Brotherhood et al. 2020). Kim (2016) found that Westerners getting an academic job in South Korea might be not so excellent themselves in terms of productivity and, at the same time, not so more than an excuse for Korean institutions to claim “internationality” and “Western window dressing”. Recent literature also looks at transnational campuses, exploring the strategic importance of staffing in balancing cultures (Shams & Huisman 2016), and the balance between retention, prestige and quality of staff, together with tailored practices to manage the talents (Neri & Wilkins 2019). However, the question raised by Altbach and Yudkevich (2016) about academic cultural integration remains as important yet still unsolved.

International faculty in China

In terms of brain circulation, China is a case of stopping being only the sender of brains. In recent years, it started to receive many Chinese nationals who are willing to return (Mok & Ong 2014). As a country with rising aspirations in global higher education and research, the attractiveness to foreigners is important. Chinese government and universities have been launching “talent programmes” with generous funding support, to attract both Chinese returnees and international faculty to work in China (Wu & Huang, 2018). Nevertheless, this appears to be still at an early stage of development. The proportion of foreign academics working on long-term contracts in Chinese universities is still tiny (Yu, 2019). Despite its rise in science and global university standings, Mainland China has a much lower proportion of international faculty in its higher education system, as compared to the established leading countries like the US (Webber & Yang 2014) or the UK (Locke & Marini 2021).

In China, the notion of “international academics” can be ambiguous. They can refer to Chinese nationals (often of Han ethnicity) who came back to the Mainland after having obtained education and citizenship abroad, usually in leading Global West universities (Wu & Huang 2018). The previous generation of international academics also mainly worked on short-term visiting contracts or as foreign language teachers (Wu & Huang, 2021). The outlook for the growth of international academics (predominantly returnees rather than non-Chinese nationals) in the Mainland was reckoned recently with an optimistic stance (Postiglione & Xie 2017), albeit acknowledging difficulties in cultural integration for the few international

academics analysed. This is worth being underlined as the cultural differences are mainly academic ones, rather than anthropological.

The growing trend of non-Chinese international faculty working on long-term contracts in Chinese universities draws increasing academic attention. Studies focusing on this new generation of international faculty are emerging, examining their motivation of mobility, cross-cultural adaptations, empowerment and disempowerment experiences (e.g., Chen & Zhu, 2020; Han, 2021; Wu & Huang, 2021; Yu, 2019). But most studies are based on case studies in certain areas in China, thus highlighting the need for larger-scale research and further understandings of this phenomenon.

In particular, the cultural aspect needs further scrutinisation and discussion. Evidence from Shanghai found that international academics experience false anticipation, as well as ups and downs in the process of cultural adaptation (Chen & Zhu, 2020). It is useful to note the empirical and theoretical lenses developed by Jiang et al. (2010) in investigating the opposite problem: Chinese nationals trying to integrate into the UK academic system. Although the UK higher education system is by far more used to diversity by nationality, ethnicity and other features, and although many Chinese academics working in UK universities were educated in the Global West (often in the UK itself), the study found challenges for Chinese academics in their engagement with the UK system (Jiang et al., 2010). This finding reasserts that the differences between Chinese culture and the “Western” ones are not easy to merge seamlessly. The fact that older academic Chinese generations have their cultural tensions with Chinese “international” returnees unveils a more complex, fluid, and changing context (Song 2018).

The project

This project focuses on the international faculty working on long-term contracts in mainland Chinese universities, a new generation of international academics in Chinese higher education. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of international faculty in Chinese higher education?

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

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

II Methodology

This project examines international faculty in mainland China, with data collected at 15 research-intensive universities in 12 cities. During 2019 and 2021, we have collected and analysed four original sets of data:

- (1) Publicly available information of 323 international academics at the 15 universities, and 43 international post-doctoral researchers at three universities, collected from universities' official websites;
- (2) Questionnaires responded by 124 international academics identified in the mapping;
- (3) Interviews with 31 academics among the survey respondents (recruited from those who expressed a willingness to be interviewed in the survey);
- (4) University policy documents relevant to the recruitment, management, and support for international faculty.

Definition of “international faculty”

The current study defines “international faculty” as academics employed by universities outside their home countries (as defined by nationality and ethnicity), on a long-term or permanent academic contract, working with research and teaching roles. Both “international faculty” and “foreign academics” are used in the existing literature; in this project, we apply the two terms interchangeably.

Defining “international” or “foreign” is not an easy task, particularly in the Chinese context. A Chinese identity is multi-layered, which can be related to Chinese (including Greater China) nationality, ethnicity (with “Han” as the dominant ethnic group in China), ancestry, family, birthplace, diaspora status, or ideologies and cultures (Xu, 2021). Consequently, a “non-Chinese” identity can be equally ambivalent. In a recent Chinese national policy requesting comments, “foreign faculty” is defined as faculty of foreign nationality (*wai ji*, 外籍) (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, such a definition included ethnic Chinese faculty who migrated to foreign countries but are returning to China (as also discussed in Huang & Welch, 2021). This latter case nevertheless excludes academics of foreign ethnicity who have obtained Chinese citizenship.

In the current study, we define international academics based on both their nationality and ethnicity. “International academics” refer to those of non-Chinese ethnicity, regardless of their citizenship status. “Chinese academics” refer to those of Chinese ethnicity, having Chinese citizenship from mainland China. Chinese ethnic academics without Chinese citizenship are referred to as “overseas/returnee Chinese academics”. In our study, “China” refers to mainland China. “Chinese ethnicity” includes all ethnic groups in mainland China, but it excludes Chinese ethnic groups outside mainland China (for instance Chinese ethnics in South-Eastern Asia). Table 1 below shows the working definitions used in this study. This is a novel application to this topic, as much of the literature focuses on returnees (Yang & Marini 2019; Marini & Yang 2021a; Marini & Yang 2021b; Cao et al. 2020), assuming that internationality is represented from having received some education, typically a PhD, in another country.

Table 1 Definitions of international and Chinese academics

Definition in this study	Ethnicity	Nationality/Citizenship
International academic	Non-Chinese	Chinese
International academic	Non-Chinese	Non-Chinese
Chinese academic	Chinese	Chinese
Overseas/Returnee Chinese academic	Chinese	Non-Chinese

For “academics” we need to apply a strict definition as well. This study focuses on academic faculty employed by higher education institutions, on a long-term or permanent contract, with research and teaching roles as their major job responsibilities. This definition excluded several groups: doctoral researchers, post-doctoral researchers, language teachers without research responsibilities, part-time or short-term teaching-only personnel, honorary professors who are not relocated in China, short-term visiting international academics, or any non-academic personnel.

In the English language, the term “international faculty” is used interchangeably with other terms like “international academics”, “foreign faculty”, “foreign academics”, “international academic staff”, or “foreign academic staff”. In the Chinese context, there are various terms about international faculty: “foreign teachers” (*wai ji jiao shi* 外籍教师, or *wai guo jiao shi* 外国教师), “international scholars” or “foreign scholars” (*guo ji xue zhe* 国际学者, or *wai guo xue zhe* 外国学者), “foreign talents” (*wai ji ren cai* 外籍人才 or *wai guo ren cai* 外国人才), “foreign experts” (*wai guo zhuan jia* 外国专家 or *wai ji zhuan jia* 外籍专家). While all terms refer to international faculty, they have different connotations. The last two terms (“talents” and “experts”), in particular, reflect that Chinese universities perceive or assume “international faculty” as knowledgeable and of high-status. The nuances will be discussed in the Findings section “The positionality of international faculty in China”.

Selection of case universities

This project selected 15 universities in mainland China as case universities. All case universities are high-profile research-intensive universities in China. They are all enrolled in the Double-First Class University Programme, which is an influential national programme in Chinese higher education, implemented in the 2010s as the successor for the previous Project 985 and Project 211 to continue enhancing the quality of higher education in China. Universities selected to participate in the Double-First Class University Programme are research-intensive institutions, with generous funding governmental support and a relatively high level of internationalisation. All 15 universities are comprehensive universities that have research institutions in: arts and humanities; social sciences; STEM (Science, Technology Engineering, and Mathematics); and life, health and medical sciences.

We focused on research-intensive universities due to the following reasons: (1) A review of the literature and a pilot mapping show that Chinese universities that are not research-intensive do not have many international faculty as per the definition of this study. While there could be international language teachers working on short-term contracts or honorary professors who visit the universities periodically, those academics are not the “international faculty” defined by this project. (2) Another group of universities with a noticeable presence of international faculty is Sino-foreign universities (or transnational institutions). However, since the governance, management, administration, and culture of such transnational universities differ largely from Chinese universities, international academics working there experience differently as compared to those identified in this project. (3) High-profile research-intensive universities in China tend to

be more internationalised than locally oriented universities, thus attracting a larger proportion of international faculty.

The 15 universities have campuses in 12 cities (one university has a branch campus in a different city), located in northern, eastern, southern, western, and central China. Chinese society, economy and higher education are geographically stratified. In higher education, the stratification is reflected in the number of research-intensive universities in different regions, as well as a varying level of funding support, internationalisation, research intensity, and education quality. In general, northern (notably Beijing), eastern, and southern areas have more resources and a higher level of development, as compared to the western and central parts of China. Our selection of the universities thus intends to reflect and cover such geographical variation.

To protect the anonymity of our participants, we anonymised the names of the universities, their specific location except for the broad region, and academics' specific disciplines under the broad disciplinary categories. This is due to the overall sparse presence of international academics at research-intensive universities in Mainland China, as the Findings section will illustrate further.

University policy documents

To access information from the institutional perspectives, we searched in the official websites of these 15 selected universities in Chinese and English, searching specifically for university-level policy documents about international faculty. By 19th June 2021, we have collected 18 relevant documents from 12 universities. We acknowledge that some universities may have published documents that are not available online. Documents collected were analysed thematically and will be discussed in the Findings section.

Mapping of international faculty

Since no systematic information about international faculty at Chinese universities is available, we browsed through the official websites of 15 of the most research-intensive universities to find individual identities of international faculty in China. We manually scanned the staff or faculty directorates from all departments or schools within the university. Some universities have both Chinese and English websites, which contained slightly different information about international academics – for some, the English versions are more up-to-date; vice versa for some others. In both cases, we have checked both the Chinese and English websites.

We identified international academics through the following measures:

- (1) Checking the job titles to exclude academics outside the scope of our study, such as faculty listed as “visiting academics” on some departments' websites;
- (2) Checking the names and photos of the academics. Most of the websites listed academics with both their names and profile photos. There were three scenarios for the display of names at different institutions:
 - International academics' names were displayed in Latin alphabets, whereas Chinese academics' were in Chinese;
 - All academics' names were shown in Chinese. International academics' names were displayed in Chinese characters, either as translations of the Romanised names (such as English names) or as the character formats (such as Korean and Japanese names);
 - All academics' names were displayed in Romanised formats, with Chinese names in pinyin and non-Chinese names in Latin alphabets.

We mainly relied on names to pick out international academics in the first case scenario, and double-checked against other information such as their photos, profiles, and CVs. In the second and third case scenarios, we identified international academics based on both the names and photos, and double-checked against other information.

For each international academic, we collected the following information: university, department or school affiliation, job title (converted to only three levels: assistant professor, associate professor, and professor), name, email address, countries for their bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees, gender (listed on the websites or indicated by the pronouns in their profiles), the year they joined the current university, last country they worked at before joining the current university. Official websites did not contain all this information for each person. Therefore, we also double-checked against individual academics' other profile pages (e.g., personal websites).

In total, we identified 323 international academics working at these 15 research-intensive universities in China. All of the above-mentioned information was analysed and will be presented in the Findings section.

Notably, at the beginning of the mapping we were piloting our working definition of “international faculty”. At that stage, we encountered 43 international post-doctoral researchers at three universities and collected their information. We later decided to exclude post-doctoral researchers in our definition of “international faculty”, thus excluding them from the surveys and interviews. Nevertheless, the dataset about post-doctoral researchers had interesting implications for future research. It will be explained further in the Findings section.

Survey

After the mapping of international academics, we sent email invitations to all the international academics identified, to fill in a short questionnaire hosted at UCL Opinio. The survey asked for information such as nationality, gender, country and institution of degree attainment, broad academic disciplines, years of living in China, marital status and childcare responsibilities. The survey also asked questions about their motivations to work in China and the current institution, and their likelihood to stay in China in the next five years.

The final question of the survey was an invitation to a follow-up interview. As the survey was anonymous and did not collect contact information, academics who were willing to participate in the interviews left their email address after selecting the positive option for the final question.

We received 124 responses in total. Due to the limitation of space, major findings of the survey are summarised in the Appendix.

Interviews

We conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 31 participants. The interviews were about international academics' motivations to move to mainland China, their experiences of academic job applications, experiences of working in China, and the prospect of future career steps.

Interviews took place between December 2019 and April 2020, mostly via video calls or audio calls due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Some participants were based in places outside China when being interviewed. Interviews took place during times that suited both each interviewee's time zone and our working hours in the UK. While we contacted all survey respondents who had expressed willingness to be interviewed, not all were available for the follow-up interview.

Participants have given informed consent before the interview started. We prepared for each interview beforehand, via checking interviewees' responses to the survey, CVs, and research profiles. The interview questions were semi-structured, meaning although there were general questions for each interviewee, specific questions were personalised. Interviews were audio-recorded upon participants' consent. The average duration of interviews was around one hour. All interviews were transcribed and then analysed with NVivo 12.

Table 2 summarises the anonymised profiles of these 31 interviewees. In line with the profile of the 323 international academics we identified (to be discussed in Findings), interviewees are predominantly males and from OECD countries. More than half of them stayed in China for five years or less, with four of them living in China for more than 10 years. In terms of age, 16 of them are 30-39 years old, seven are 40-49, another seven are 50-59. Among the 31 participants, five were at the assistant professor level, 18 were associate professors, and eight were professors. Two of them held departmental leadership roles. For disciplines, six were from arts and humanities, one from life, medical and health sciences, 13 from social sciences, and 11 from STEM areas. We do not list each participant's discipline or job title in Table 2, so that they would be less identifiable. Among all interviewees, 15 of them stated they are recipients of specific funding schemes for international talents. Less than half of them obtained a doctoral degree from institutions ranking top 100 on the 2020 Shanghai Jiaotong Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU). Nine are married with Chinese nationals (eight with women Chinese partners).

In the survey, they expressed on average a positive likelihood of remaining in China in the next five years. On average, the relevant influencing factors listed in the survey were ranked as such: career opportunities in China (average 4.26 out of 5), career opportunities at the current institution (4.23), funding support (3.74), poor opportunities in home country (3.58), salary (3.45), interests in Chinese related issues (3.29), scientific excellence in one's field in China (3.10), study or work experiences in China (2.97), and family or personal relationship (2.97).

Table 2 List of interviewees

Length of stay in China	Country of origin	Ranking of PhD awarding institution (ARWU 2020)	Recipient of specific scheme for international	Age	Gender	Married to Chinese	Child/ren	Likelihood to remain in China (5= very likely; 1 very unlikely)	ID
5 y.	OECD	1-50	No	30-39	M	Yes	Yes	3	A1
1 or less	OECD	51-100	Yes	30-39	M	No	No	2	A2
1 y.	non-OECD	non-1000	No	40-49	M	No	Yes	5	A3
10+ y.	OECD	201-300	Yes	40-49	M	Yes	Yes	4	A4
2 y.	OECD	51-100	Yes	30-39	M	Yes	Yes	5	A5
4 y.	OECD	101-150	Yes	40-49	F	No	No	3	A6
10+ y.	OECD	51-100	No	40-49	F	Yes	Yes	4	A7
1 y.	non-OECD	1-50	N/A	N/A	M	No	Yes	N/A	A8
3 y.	non-OECD	101-150	Yes	30-39	M	No	No	3	B1
1 or less	OECD	101-150	Yes	30-39	M	No	No	5	B2
4 y.	OECD	201-300	Yes	50-59	M	No	Yes	5	B3
N/A	OECD	1-50	N/A	30-39	M	No	No	N/A	C1
8 y.	OECD	1-50	Yes	50-59	M	No	No	4	D1
10+ y.	OECD	201-300	No	30-39	F	No	No	4	E1
6 y.	OECD	non-1000	No	30-39	M	No	No	4	E2
8 y.	OECD	101-150	Yes	40-49	M	Yes	No	5	F1
8 y.	OECD	1-50	N/A	50-59	M	No	Yes	N/A	F2
8 y.	OECD	1-50	Yes	50-59	M	No	Yes	5	F3
3 y.	OECD	101-150	Yes	30-39	M	Yes	No	5	G1
9 y.	OECD	501-600	Yes	30-39	F	No	Yes	4	G2
1 or less	OECD	1-50	No	30-39	F	No	No	4	G3
4 y.	OECD	N/A	Yes	40-49	M	N/A	N/A	5	G4
7 y.	OECD	N/A	Yes	30-39	M	Yes	Yes	5	G5
1 or less	OECD	201-300	No	30-39	M	No	No	5	G6
3 y.	OECD	201-300	No	40-49	M	No	No	4	G7
9 y.	OECD	1-50	No	50-59	M	No	Yes	1	H1
10+ y.	OECD	1-50	No	50-59	M	No	Yes	N/A	H2
9 y.	OECD	101-150	No	30-39	M	Yes	Yes	3	H3
1 y.	OECD	301-400	No	50-59	M	No	Yes	5	I1
5 y.	OECD	201-300	No	30-39	M	Yes	No	5	L1
7 y.	OECD	1-50	Yes	30-39	N/A	No	No	3	M1

Ethics and limitations

This project has been granted ethical approval from the Institute of Education at University College London. We followed the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from participants for the interviews and audio-recording. We are mindful of keeping the participants' anonymity, as well as considering the impacts of the pandemic on participants when conducting interviews.

We acknowledge some limitations of the online mapping strategy. Firstly, not all institutional policy documents or international academics' information is available on the official university websites. In addition, despite our efforts to cross-check international academics' information whenever possible, there was missing information for some of them. Occasionally, academics outside our research targets (for instance visiting scholars) may have been listed on the university websites without further clarification. Some academics may have left the institutions, but their information was still listed on the websites when we harvested the dataset, and vice versa some recently appointed staff might have been not yet listed (in the latter case experiences would have been shorter).

III Findings

This section synthetically reports major findings from the mapping of international faculty, analysis of institutional policy documents and interviews. It starts with a summary of the characteristics of international faculty in China, followed by the major motivations for international academics to move to China, their positionality, and their experiences in Chinese higher education. Due to space constraints, interview quotes will be presented in future outputs and are omitted in this report.

Characteristics of international faculty in China

Based on the mapping of information of 323 international academics at 15 research-intensive universities in 12 Chinese cities, this section reports the characteristics of international faculty working on long-term contracts in China. The following sections report their gender, job title, disciplines, educational background, geographical distribution.

A quick sketch of the majority of long-term international faculty in China is as follows: male, professors, working in STEM areas, with higher education degrees from OECD countries, particularly the US; they joined their current institution from OECD countries and after 2015, currently located in eastern, southern and northern China.

Academic rank, sex, discipline

In the sample of this study, the majority of international faculty in China is male academics with professorial rank. As shown in Table 3, 77 per cent of international faculty identified are men, while only 16 per cent are women academics. This pattern of international faculty being male-dominated corresponds to other studies on international faculty in China and other countries (e.g. Huang 2018; Wu & Huang 2018).

For academic ranks, male professors constitute one-third of international academics. In total, 36 per cent of international academics are professors, 31 per cent are professors, with the majority being male. Another 31 per cent of them are associate professors, and 26 per cent are assistant professors. The number of male academics is higher than female counterparts for every job rank.

The majority of international faculty in China work in STEM areas (47 per cent), followed by Social Sciences (30 per cent), Life, Medical and Health Sciences (11 per cent), Arts and Humanities (13 per cent). International academics working in different disciplines appear to be in different career stages. International academics working in STEM, Life, Medical, and Health Sciences tend to be more established, with the majority of them being professors or associate professors. For social sciences academics, 41 per cent are assistant professors, indicating an early or mid-career status. Arts and Humanities disciplines also see a larger ratio of early or mid-career academics, with an assistant or associate professor title.

Table 3 Characteristics of international faculty by academic rank, sex, discipline

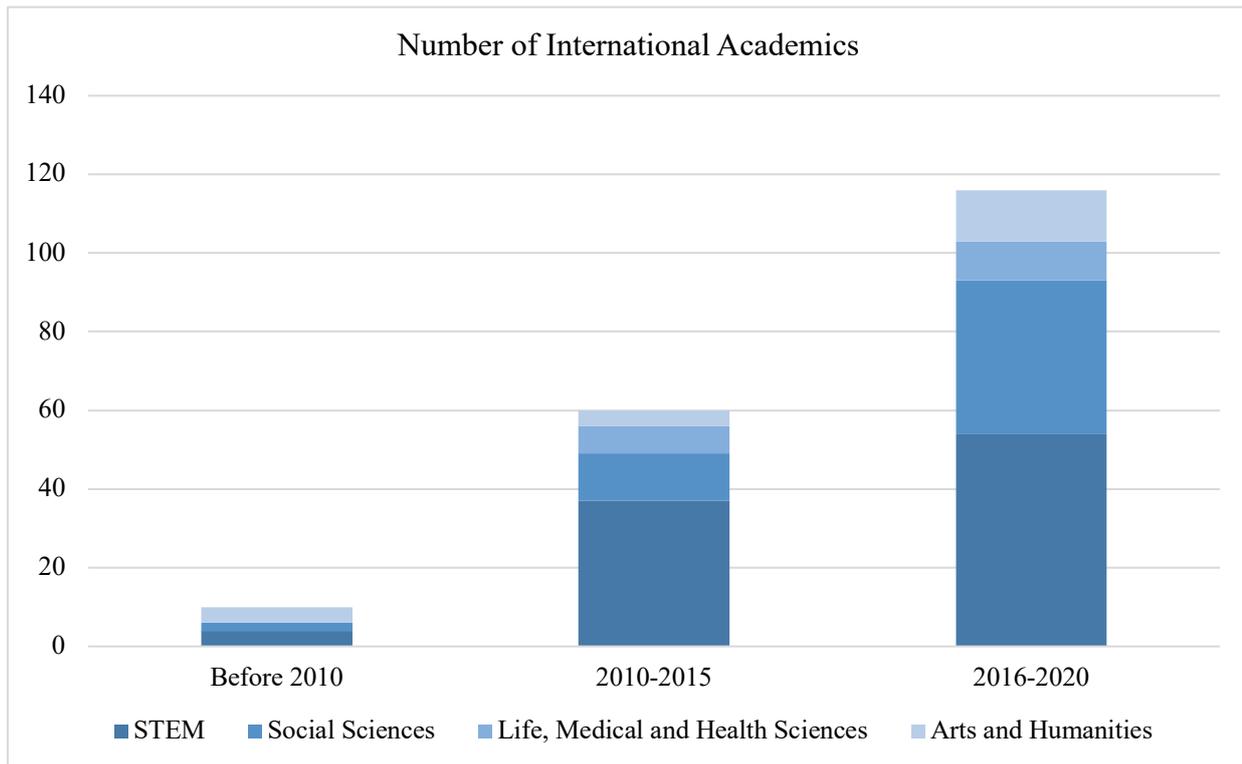
	Assistant Professor		Associate Professor		Professor		N/A	Total	
Female	14	16.9%	22	21.8%	11	9.4%	6	53	16.4%
Male	64	77.1%	72	71.3%	101	86.3%	13	250	77.4%
N/A	5	6.0%	7	6.9%	5	4.3%	3	20	6.2%
Total	83	100.0%	101	100.0%	117	100.0%	22	323	100.0%
Discipline									
STEM	30	36.1%	53	52.5%	61	52.1%	8	152	47.1%
Life, Medical and Health Sciences	3	3.6%	8	7.9%	20	17.1%	3	34	10.5%
Social Sciences	40	48.2%	26	25.7%	28	23.9%	2	96	29.7%
Arts and Humanities	10	12.0%	14	13.9%	8	6.8%	9	41	12.7%
Total	83	100.0%	101	100.0%	117	100.0%	22	323	100.0%

In terms of timeline, most of the international academics joined the current institution after the year 2015 (Figure 1). The development can be divided into three periods: before 2020 (while the earliest year known from this sample is 2004), 2010-2015, and 2016-2020. As shown in Figure 1, for all international faculty where this information was available, the number increased rapidly between 2010 and 2015, and more drastically after 2015. In each period, STEM disciplines have drawn the largest proportion of international academics. The number of social sciences international academics tripled from 2010-2015 to 2016-2020. The trend corresponds with the survey result. Among all 111 answers about the length of staying in China, 71 per cent of respondents have lived in China for five years or less (Table A5).

Information about the last country of work is known for 123 academics, which was specified in their profiles or CVs. Among them, 70 per cent (87 out of 123) worked in OECD countries before moving to the current university in China. More specifically, 30 academics moved from the US, 13 from Germany, seven from South Korea, five from Canada, UK, and Japan respectively. Mobility can also be domestic. Among the 36 academics who had last worked at non-OECD countries or regions, 21 of them moved from another mainland Chinese university to the current one: one moved before 2010; five moved between 2010-2015; all the other 15 moved between 2016-2020.

Mobility pattern over time is associated with the following changes: national strategies to attract international faculty in the 2010s, the enhancement of Chinese research and higher education since the 2010s, and the institutional strategies to attract international faculty after 2015. This is evidenced by our analysis of institutional policy documents. The desk analysis about institutional policies found that most of the case universities issued their policy about international faculty recruitment and management after 2015, corresponding to the period of domestic movement of international academics.

Figure 1 International academics by discipline and year of joining



Geographical distribution

International academics in China are concentrated in eastern, southern and northern China (shown in Table 4). In terms of the average number per university, universities in eastern China again have the highest average number of international academics per institution. Southern China and northern China follows eastern China in terms of the average number of international faculty per university. Universities in western and central China have fewer international faculty on average.

The geographical disparity corresponds to the stratification of higher education and disparities in the overall economic development. There are more research-intensive universities in eastern and northern China as compared to other regions. Eastern, northern, and southern China are also more economically advanced than central and western areas, where universities also enjoy more funding privileges. Culturally, eastern and southern China, particularly the coastal areas, are more outward-looking. Universities have more active international partnerships, exchanges, and collaborations in those areas. Furthermore, culture and society are more internationalised and diversified in comparison to the landlocked western and central China. All these factors contribute to the geographical concentration of international academics in eastern, southern and northern China.

To strengthen the anonymity of interviewees' identity, the coding of case universities in the following table does not correspond to the coding of institutions in Table 2. One university has a campus in a different region, hence is counted as two institutions in the following table.

Table 4 Geographical distribution of international academics in China

Region and university	Number of International Academics	Number of Universities	Average number per university
Eastern China	156	5	31
UNI-E1	7		
UNI-E2	18		
UNI-E3	54		
UNI-E4	27		
UNI-E5	50		
Southern China	47	2	24
UNI-S1	30		
UNI-S2	17		
Northern China	75	4	19
UNI-N1	9		
UNI-N2	17		
UNI-N3	20		
UNI-N4	29		
Western China	36	4	9
UNI-W1	5		
UNI-W2	3		
UNI-W3	4		
UNI-W4	24		
Central China	9	1	9
Uni-C	9		
Total	323	16	20

Educational background

Most of the international faculty identified in this study received their higher education and research degrees from OECD countries, particularly from the US. Among all the 323 international faculty, 73 per cent of them received their doctoral degree from OECD countries, 47 per cent had a master's degree from OECD countries, and 56 per cent had a bachelor's degree from OECD countries¹. The most frequent countries interviewees obtained their education from are: the US, UK, Germany, France, Italy, Japan, and South Korea. The US occupies by large the top position as degree granting country for international faculty in China, with one-third of them having a US doctoral degree.

Due to transnational education, countries of degree obtainment do not equal nationality, and information about nationality was also not available through the mapping process. But in the survey, among all respondents who disclosed their nationality, the majority of international academics are again nationals of OECD countries, with the US, Germany and Italy being the top three countries of origins (see Table A1).

¹ Since we have almost 20% of missing values about the country of PhD attainment (see Table 5), the share of those having received this from any OECD Country is likely to be higher.

Table 5 Countries of degree obtainment

Country	Country of BA	Ratio	Count of MA	Ratio	Country of PhD	Ratio
OECD	181	56%	152	47%	236	73%
US	64		50		107	
SK	31		17		7	
DE	12		8		20	
UK	12		23		23	
IT	10		10		13	
FR	10		12		13	
JP	8		9		25	
Non-OECD	34	11%	30	9%	25	8%
CN	1		2		8	
N/A	108	33%	141	44%	62	19%

The pattern of the attractiveness of Chinese higher education as a workplace showcases multiple influences. Similar to other regions, cultural and geographical proximity is influential. For instance, South Africa attracts mostly international academics from the African continent and Europe, the latter relating to colonial ties (Schoole et al 2019). The UK attracts most international academics from Europe (Locke & Marini, 2021). South Korea and Japan, the close neighbouring countries that share proximity of the East Asian culture and geographical distance with China, also constitute the top degree-granting countries for international academics in China.

Another influential dimension is the pre-existing hierarchical relationship in global research and doctoral education. The dominance of US-educated academics also reflects US dominance in world doctoral education and the value associated with academic credentials from the US. Another exemplar of the US dominance in doctoral education is the case of South Korea as exposed in Table 5. There are 31 academics who obtained their bachelor’s degrees from South Korea, who all appear to be Korean nationals according to their names. Most of them ended up getting a doctoral degree in the US. Unlike some other countries in the “Global South”, China is not restricted in the neighbouring areas. China, although just for the last years and with a large potential yet to unleash, is attracting its first generation of academic talent pools who got a degree and/or are nationals from the “Global West”. This pattern, however, showcases both the global asymmetry in research, and the Western imprints and related supremacy in Chinese higher education (Marginson & Xu, forthcoming).

Countries of one’s education also correspond to science collaboration ties. The US is the top collaborator for Chinese science, measured by publication volumes, over the past two decades (Zhu, et al., 2021). Germany, France, South Korea and Japan are top collaborators with China in science too (Nature Index, 2021). All countries are among the top degree-granting countries for international faculty in China.

A still statistically negligible, though nascent pattern, is that of China-educated international academics. There is one international academic with a bachelor’s degree from China, two with a master’s degree from China, and eight with a doctoral degree from China. Among the eight academics with a doctoral degree in China, many of them joined the current institution after 2015, either upon graduation or after one round of post-doctoral research experience in China. Five are assistant professors and three are associate professors. All of them appear to be at the early to mid-career stage. A similar pattern exists for the 43 international postdoctoral researchers identified from three universities: most of the postdoctoral researchers had a doctoral degree from China, followed by India, Japan, Egypt and other Western countries (e.g., UK, France and Germany). It is uncertain if they would or could stay in China after the postdoctoral research, but it showcases the possibility of establishing an academic career following their education in China.

The aspect of home-educated international academics, despite seeming trivial, may signal an important trend for Chinese higher education and global research: along with Chinese enhancement of its higher education and doctoral education quality and respective potential to attract internationals, there may be more international academics staying in China after educated in China. It may be of interest to future research, to investigate postdoctoral researchers in Chinese universities, and the rise of home-educated international academics in China.

Motivations of international faculties to move to China

This section summarises the major motivations of international academics to move to China. Findings are based on the survey responded by 124 international academics and interviews with 31 international faculty in China.

Job security and career prospect

Especially for those who are younger, China is seen by many participants as an emergent academic job market, with higher degrees of job security and career prospect than the US or European systems, where many of them came from or obtained their PhDs. As our sample of international faculty shows, many international academics in China are recruited at the associate professor or professor levels. Both in the survey and interviews, many participants explained that they have permanent or fixed-term positions that are tenure-track-like. In recent years, Chinese universities are reforming the academic promotion systems, namely the tenure-track system. Therefore, the fixed-term option does not necessarily equal a low prestige position, in academic terms. However, the overall packages offered in Chinese universities for such positions are equivalent to, or even better, than some tenured positions in the West.

Examples for these more comfortable conditions include: special research grants and allowances; generous salary (at parity of purchase power); leadership role in labs (especially for STEM, but not always); right to supervise doctoral students; academic recognition such as associate professorship ranks or other more prestigious academic titles in comparison to those appointments each academic might have realistically aspired to in home country or other Western countries. Another widespread plus is a much-reduced teaching load in comparison to equivalent alternatives in Global West universities. In other words, the Chinese system offers to international academics more developmental conditions that are currently neglected in the Global West, which requires academics to work under more stressful and precarious circumstances. Similar situations can be found in other contexts such as the UAE (Austin et al. 2014; Sanderson 2014). Academic job security fosters productivity and development. Overall, the sense of job security is considered as a relief by many interviewees, especially for early or mid-career academics. Almost all interviewees are genuinely committed to meeting their goals in terms of research and publishing, and have been capable to achieve relevant quality productivity in their fields since the time they have been hired in China.

Not only are the job packages better than their Western counterparts, but appointments are also less competitive. As the survey results show (Table A8), the top reasons for academics moving to China are career opportunities at the university they work in and in China overall, funding support, and salary. In contrast, the poor opportunities in their home countries is also a factor for having them opted for China. Academic job markets are more competitive and precarious in Global West systems. Some interviewees explained that while they need to be the “top of the top” to enjoy the most generous academic job conditions in the West, they can be just “good enough” for the same or better level of packages in China. Particularly for academics without tenured positions in their previous working countries, the secure and comfortable working conditions in China appear as the most important attractive factor. For some established academics, their job packages are not only better than what they could achieve in the West, but also better than their Chinese counterparts. For instance, one university specified in their policy document that the salary for international faculty could be 20 to 30 per cent higher than that for Chinese faculty at the same academic rank. Such exceptional salary arrangements can be made for “special high-level international talents”, supported by national, provincial or institutional funding schemes for talents’

recruitment. A few interviewees were also aware of their privileges as an international academic in China, as compared to their Chinese colleagues.

In addition, all universities in our case sampling are high-profile research-intensive universities, not only within China, but also among the globally prominent or recognised community. Notably, the degree of internationalisation and level of research differ across universities, probably due to the same stratification process triggered by excellence policies. Universities in Eastern, Northern, and Southern China tend to be more internationalised and highly-regarded than others. By and large, participants were largely satisfied with their institution's profile, level of worldwide recognition – this including opportunities for international collaborations.

One academic recalled that when they first moved to China many years ago the access to the Internet was limited, chances to stay connected with global academia and scholarly discussion were also limited. Today the picture is different. For whoever moved to China in more recent years, Internet access is shown as a tiny annoying problem that can be overcome quite easily on campus – many institutions provide institutional VPN access for academic purposes. None is completely isolated from the global research community, although as some participants reported, some extra job is sometimes required to benefit from full access to resources.

China-related research and research ties

For some academics, China per se is their intellectual focus of attention. These academics are predominantly in the humanities and social sciences, but not necessarily specialising in Chinese studies. Some academics in the STEM areas also have a research focus on China. Before deciding to relocate to China, most China-related researchers have had a high level of familiarity with, and often fondness of, China and Chinese culture; close ties and active networks with Chinese universities; some if not high proficiency in Chinese Mandarin; and experiences of academic visits, conferences, or fieldwork in China. In terms of academic jobs, those having academic interests in China are exposed to more frequent job opportunities from China. In fact, some initiated their career in China from informal invitations of Chinese colleagues and universities.

Overall, for China-related researchers, their intellectual and personal connections with China represent a strong pull-in vector. This factor is nevertheless not surprising for any country-related disciplinary field. It also did not come as a prevailing factor in the interviews. Possible explanations are the following: many Chinese universities have visiting opportunities for international academics to stay in China for a short period of time. Academics with interests in China could have spent shorter stays in China to “test the ground” although having no previous interest in China per se, rather than relocating here for a longer term in the first place. In sum, relocation decisions are simply not determined by the single factor of research focus.

The “Chinese century” factor

The idea that China is the place where things happen, and more increasingly will happen, is another strong motivation for international academics to choose and stay in China, even regardless of their research focus. Interviewees have various understandings of the position of China in their research field. Many understand that the Chinese system is very heterogeneous, with heterogeneity or stratification also occurring within their own department or university. The idea interviewees have about science and research in China is also a driver to sticking to endeavouring an academic career in China. For some participants, China leads their

specific research field in the world; for others, it is not yet the case – top American or European universities still dominate the field. Even for the latter group, China is reckoned to be strong and stronger, in prospect.

As a country, China has obtained increasing visibility in the world. International academics learn about China through teaching Chinese students, collaborating with Chinese colleagues, engaging with research from China, and reading about China in publications and on the Internet. The increased global presence of China provides bases for international academics to learn more about China, and to feed curiosity about China even if they have never visited the country before. The interactions and information about China also influence one's reassumptions about the country before having moved there.

Despite disciplinary disparities, there is a wide optimism for China's development in higher education and research. The "Chinese Dream" is unneglectable. In line with the optimistic sense, China and Chinese top universities are seen as a privileged venue for observing the rapid development in action. It is also an opportunity to immerse oneself in a future-oriented and forward-looking context, to join an expanding and rising system, to participate in and benefiting from the largess in funding and development. In sum, it is exciting to be in "the room where it happens", to be part of the future, and to witness China from within.

Industry and government links in applied sciences

Both academics from STEM and social science disciplines understand that the Chinese system is nowadays particularly munificent in assuring not only resources for research per se, but also, if not especially, for applied research. The pattern of emphasising applied research brings along some consequences for the organisation of academics, as already reported by Lai (2013).

The links with industrial parks for cutting edge projects is a leading factor for some academics, especially in STEM disciplines, in endeavouring some projects. This feature has a double sword effect. The more research is intertwined with political agenda, the less foreigners will have a strategic role in those projects. In addition, while many international academics can survive academic environments in China without speaking fluent Chinese, proficiency in Mandarin Chinese becomes more important when one intends to have further entrepreneurship involvement. The language ability thus hinders foreigners' further engagement in the business setting, particularly in a society that values interpersonal relationships (*ren qin*, 人情 or *guan xi*, 关系) that often stems in informal contexts.

The family link

Family link is another reason to relocate in China. According to the survey, 28 per cent of the respondents are married to or in a relationship with a Chinese national. A common pattern identified in the interviews for families with a Chinese spouse is a Western man and a Chinese woman. Very often the Chinese partner is her/himself another academic. Some participants met their Chinese partners outside China, some in China. The decision to move to or stay in China was not entirely imposed by the Chinese spouse. Sometimes the Westerner is as fascinated by China as well as the Chinese is fascinated by the Western way of life, being hence the former to push for living in China, rather than the latter. The possibility to benefit from the links with the Chinese family for caring for children, or to take care of the elder family members in China are some of the main considerations for those families. The family links are of great help for international academics in navigating the Chinese system. They are not only more familiar with the Chinese language, but also more exposed to cultural norms and assumptions in academic settings, which sometimes can be too subtle to handle for "just" foreigners.

The positionality of international faculty in China

International academics reported different ways they position themselves in Chinese higher education, which are related to, though not always in line with, how Chinese universities position them. The following section outlines the three most prevailing types of positionalities: “distinguished guests”, “foreign employees” and “cultural bridges”. These three types are not mutually exclusive in describing individual academics, but we believe these three labels well identify the most relevant positionalities. Some academics explained that they see themselves as having multiple positionalities, that cannot be simplified as one label.

“Distinguished guests”

Many international academics see themselves being treated by Chinese universities as “distinguished or high-esteemed guests”. Some of them echo such a perception with synonyms, while some confirmed this feeling, adding a touch of personal discomfort. The meaning of “distinguished guests” is two-fold: the identity of being a guest, and the status of being highly valued.

For international faculty in China, being a “guest” means being invited, staying temporarily, enjoying the hospitality, and being treated as an “outsider”. Some international academics knew they will not stay in China for life. This point particularly concerns those who started their career in China for more than ten years. Since China was not recruiting a wide range of international faculty before the 2010s, those who came before 2010 were often senior academics invited by Chinese universities with special “talent programmes”. They work at high-profile positions in Chinese universities with the understanding that although China may be their final career stop, but probably not their life destination. Their academic and personal life were well-established and deeply rooted outside China. Therefore, they would rather return to their home country after retirement. For instance, some of their partners or children were staying in their home country, not moving with them to China. Their pension and health insurance were also in their home country. Some of them held “visiting professorship” at Chinese universities before moving here to take up longer appointments. For them, working in China now is like an extended “sabbatical” from their home country. They know they will leave China, someday and eventually.

Being a “guest” also means being an outsider. In China, one’s “foreignness” is difficult to hide. The “foreignness” comes with one’s ethnicity, appearance, spoken language, passport, visa and residence permit, and all other aspects that may cause challenges to everyday life. China does not have a strong tradition of hosting international immigration. International academics in China thus face sharply different conditions as compared in countries like the US (Foote et al, 2008), where immigration is a more common phenomenon and the whole country was built on heterogeneous immigration fluxes minting a brand new nation.

Many of our participants only speak limited Chinese. They can handle the academic teaching and research environment on campus, as more and more Chinese colleagues and students are fluent in English and are familiar with Western cultures. However, their professional experience and personal life are restricted in the English-speaking bubbles. While some highly internationalised institutions, such as the British ones, have a higher proportion of international academics, with also international faculty holding top leadership positions, the current situation in China is different. Many institutions in China only have a handful of international academics working on long-term contracts within their ranks. Consequently, it is difficult for them to attend administrative meetings, which are mostly in Chinese. Similarly, some administrative tasks are difficult to handle, as the documents often come in Chinese without English translations. They would need secretaries or Chinese-speaking family members to help them with the translation. Their peer

international colleagues not only come in small numbers, but they have come and gone on a short-term basis, making it hard to develop long-term collegiality with them. Furthermore, key helpers would lie within the Chinese colleagues, and only some internationals manage to navigate the academic Chinese culture which combines bureaucracy and informal dynamics.

International academics reported the efforts from universities and other Chinese colleagues to make them more integrated and feel welcomed. But all these efforts again made them feel like being an “outsider” who need to be taken special care of. Outside universities, the proportion of Chinese people who speak English is lower. Taking a taxi, for example, can become a difficult task for foreigners. International academics hence find it tricky to make real connections with Chinese society, outside the comfort zones with foreigners or English-speaking Chinese.

The “foreignness” also manifests in cultural differences. Chinese higher education is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, despite being influenced by the Western models in the contemporary era. Academics from East Asia, such as South Korea and Japan, may find it easier to understand the Chinese culture, due to common grounds shared across the Sinic cultural zone. Such academics are also often educated in the Western systems, thus familiar with aspects shaped by Western influence. But the largest proportion of international faculty in China come from Western countries. For them, the fundamental cultural differences between the East and the West are not straightforward to comprehend and navigate through. While some of them make efforts to understand and accustom to China, cultural conflicts exist both in academic settings (e.g., understanding internal governance), and in everyday life like ordering deliveries. Some aspects of the academic culture confuse international faculty, such as the intertwined bureaucratic and political culture, the hard-working culture and consequent work-life imbalance, and the much heightened importance of *guanxi* and social relationships. In teaching, they find Chinese students’ learning habits different from those they are familiar with. Some participants felt it too difficult to penetrate Chinese (academic) culture, hence feeling like a permanent “outsider” despite being inside the system for many years. A senior academic noted that for international academics, while “the floor” is higher than their Chinese counterparts, “the ceiling” is lower – despite the basic privileges they may enjoy, there are limitations when it comes to talking about the highest position a foreigner can reach in the Chinese system.

“Foreignness” is a double-edged sword. We use this term to underline a sense of undesired aloofness perceived by international academics in China, while also to highlight tokenism and access to special privileges. The special treatments also reinforce a sense of being the “guests”, although a “distinguished” type. Special treatments are often related to “talent programmes” as explained in the previous section “Job security and career prospect”. Many participants reported that they feel being respected and valued, but sometimes up to the point to feel flattered or uneasy about some privileges they enjoy. This perception is common among senior (often established) academics and those selected for “talent programmes”. Some participants understand that hospitality and being polite to guests are part of Chinese culture. Some see themselves as making irreplaceable contributions to their institutions with their international connections and reputation, thus deserving such special treatment. Some interviewees question these “perverse privileges” and associate them with Western supremacy, which is rooted in the legacy of coloniality, but also still visible in Chinese higher education and society today. It is a reflection of the persisting “*chong yang mei wai*” (崇洋媚外, meaning “worship the foreign and fawn over foreigners”) mentality in China, as an interviewee commented.

Chinese terminologies about international faculty also reflect their “distinguished” status. For Chinese universities, “international faculty” is often equivalent to “foreign experts” or “foreign talents”. The discourses of “foreign experts” and “foreign talents” exist in the recruitment advertisements launched by universities. It is visible also in employment contracts of some international faculty, in how some

international academics introduced themselves. Participants also reported encountering those terms in some daily languages, such as during academic meetings or conferences. As noted in the previous section “Definition of ‘international faculty’”, these terms differ from “international academics” or “international faculty”. “Experts” and “talents” denote a status of primacy, exceptionality, capacity, and rarity. Although there are also “talent programmes” for Chinese academics, when used together with “international/foreign” adjectives, the combination indicates that being “international/foreign” equals stronger capabilities. Since all these terms are used interchangeably with more neutral terms like “international faculty”, an assumption is created that all international academics must be “experts” and “talents” – people who are capable knowers and consequently that should be respected and treated specially. In practice, work contracts as “foreign experts” or “foreign talents” lead to higher-profile titles, higher salaries, and more special benefits (e.g., accommodation allowances). Some international academics also reported being *unnecessarily* highly regarded as “experts” by their institutions, peer colleagues and students.

“Foreign employees”

Some international academics view their position simply as an employee at a university that happens to be in China. Some of them are early-career academics not involved in “talent programmes”, thus experiencing conditions similar to Chinese academics. These conditions can be actually worse than those for locals, as the challenges of being a foreign academic (language, visa and residence permit, administration, funding application restrictions) persist. Nevertheless, participants also explained that they do not feel like being a temporary guest in China, because their life, career, friends or family are in China now. Some do not feel like a complete “outsider”. They argue that they are actively 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 “foreigners” and to some extent “outsiders”, similar to what have been discussed about being “distinguished guests”. China is home to them, but only at this stage of their life and concerning their micro-environment. Whether they will feel completely at home in China, and forever at home here, remains a question. 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. As one non-British participant commented, working and staying in China does not make them Chinese, just like working in the UK does not make them British.

“Cultural bridges”

A few academics see themselves as bridges between China and places they have connections with, culturally and professionally. Some interviewees see this cultural and intellectual dimension as an expectation Chinese universities have about them. If this expectation is fully met, and how such exchange would close in actual terms are both uncertain.

A few academics expressed the willingness to facilitate cross-cultural communications and cooperation between China and their home country or institution. At institutions where international academics are rare, a few also reported a sense of responsibility to be the “bridge” to bring in international connections and resources, and to represent the China-side when going out. A few interviewees said they were put in a dilemma in front of the deteriorated relationships between China and the US, as well as its Western allies. They found themselves in a role of “mitigating ambassador” for both sides, for instance when attending international conferences.

Notwithstanding, the role of representation can be controversial. Some academics refused to be seen as representing any culture or as a cultural ambassador. Some do not see themselves as capable to represent

certain cultures as expected. For instance, there were comments that very few international academics of colour are working in China, but an increasing number of international students in China are non-White (such as from Africa). Because of their shared “foreignness”, White international academics, the predominant group of international faculty in China, can thus be seen as the contact point to international students of colour. Although all being “international”, some White academics found this perception and practice problematic. They felt they cannot represent the wide range of cultures that are non-Chinese, particularly when facing students from very different backgrounds, such as from different geographical areas, social and ethnic groups. Furthermore, the misperception of “the White represents the international” could reinforce the “White privilege” that some White academics are aware and/or critical of.

International faculty’s experiences with Chinese higher education

The positive side

In general, international academics live a positive experience and feel valued in China. A comparison with other contexts (Green & Myatt 2010) suggests this is not to be given for granted. For some international faculty, the package offered by Chinese universities was simply the best offer they could have obtained. Regarding social life as a whole, some degree of isolation in the Chinese context appears to be balanced by overall good quality of life in China.

The most satisfactory factors are related to job security, overall working condition, and career development. In terms of academic research, although the Chinese system is no escape from the neoliberal agenda and “publish or perish” syndrome that prevail in global academia (Chou & Chan 2017), international academics in China are not particularly disadvantaged by the publishing pressure. In Chinese higher education like in many other contexts, a strong orientation on publishing internationally and in English emerged in recent times, replacing the once upon a time standard of publishing domestically and in Chinese (Xu, Rose & Oancea 2021) – most international academics have been carrying out the former practice by all means.

Moreover, international academics in China often benefit from a research-oriented working condition and from the research culture at top universities. They also enjoy lighter teaching loads as compared to the most realistic job offers they would have received in other systems. Yet, they usually have tiny if not zero administrative duties (with exception of the management of one’s research grants). A widespread small teaching load is related to the fact that most international faculty teach English-spoken courses, which are still in development and much fewer than Chinese-spoken courses. Not all international academics are allowed to supervise doctoral students, since certain accreditation and qualification are needed for anyone to start supervising. If they cannot supervise doctoral students, this is reckoned as a minus by many interviewees. Many of them supervise both Chinese and international students, while others are usually assigned only with international students. As explained, international academics are often exempted from administrative duties because of their “outsider” status. The limited teaching and administrative roles free up time to write both individually and with other colleagues, the latter being either with international academics, colleagues at the institution, or one’s PhD students.

As a result, the majority of interviewees are research-focused, and ahead of one’s plans in terms of publication productivity (typically the pipeline against the minimal requirement for promotion to the next rank). The issue of quality of productivity is almost entirely required in any top Chinese institution today, not to mention proficiency in English which is given for granted. Only in few cases in some disciplines only, institutions are still requiring the quantity regardless of the quest for quality, which is aligned with

recent policy recommendations regarding detrimental outcomes of quantified research evaluation (Li et al. 2019).

From a materialistic point of view, international academics' living standards in China are generally above the threshold of decency. Although academic salaries in China are not equivalent to some countries in absolute terms, the cost of living is not as high. This is critically ameliorated when one has generous side offers like: universities paying half of the price for renting houses nearby campuses, which are usually modern flats; subsidising flights for returning to home countries for holidays; annual allowances or extra research funding; and/or possibly other benefits. All these benefits make the overall experience a more than acceptable one. All the side offers may change considerably according to specific schemes international academics might have been recruited by. There are various levels and types of schemes, run by the Chinese national government, provincial or city-level governments, universities, or even department/school. Universities or departments/schools have a large degree of autonomy in deciding the recipients for their own schemes, and also nominating those for the city, provincial or national schemes. It is important to note that the better different parties understand each other at the moment of developing an offer, the happier the international academic, and arguably also the institutional side, appear to be. To try to change things afterwards is often problematic and may result in stressful and ineffective attempts. Hence, having a secretary who understands both the Chinese and Western languages but above all cultures is very beneficial to international academics. This is important for everyday academic work, but especially during the phase of negotiating the recruitment package.

The negative side

Many of the negative aspects deal with the cultural domain. The cultural problems faced by international academics in fully fledged Mainland Chinese universities appear, *prima facie*, analogous to those working at the international branch campus in China (Cai and Hall 2015). However, the situation is more complicated for international academics working at Chinese universities.

The main and most frequently raised challenge is the impossibility to “penetrate” the Chinese academic sphere, especially the administrative and bureaucratic one. As discussed earlier, international academics feel they cannot fully contribute to and/or benefit from the same collegial participation. Language is one of the barriers, but for the few who do not have the language problem, it remains hard to fully participate. International academics are limited in their bubble of foreignness, feeling difficult to navigate the outer academic zones (i.e., departmental committees, informal institutional and national networks, etc.).

In terms of research, one widely discussed problem is accessing the grants system outside calls specific to foreigners. While some institutions offer special grants for international academics, not all are grant-holders of the schemes that really count in China. The national and provincial grants are difficult for international academics even to apply to, partly because the application procedures are entirely in Chinese, partly because some grants are not open to internationals. The latter case often concerns social sciences disciplines. Usually, some allowances are nevertheless secured, as stated earlier. However, international academics would like to compete under equal conditions for prestigious and munificent Chinese grants, which is often not possible. It is unclear to what extent it is a matter of being foreigners per se. One participant who is highly proficient in the Chinese language, maintained that even if an international got hypothetically the Party membership, provided this is possible, they might still be excluded on an ethnic basis.

For teaching, a major challenge concerns different pedagogical ontologies. Although international academics report generally positive teaching experiences, some challenges exist. There are two main sets of

concerns. First, interviewees detect a heterogeneous quality of Chinese students and international students in China. Second, when they teach, internationals are concerned about the traditional lack of active participation and engagement in classes, detected typically via a sporadic practice to raise challenging questions to teachers freely. This latter point is particularly lamented whenever international academics try to challenge the “established truth”. As a result, some international academics, especially those whose dedication to teaching is genuine and a priority, feel uncomfortable about this unfulfilled pedagogical experience. Nevertheless, this relationship is not so frustrating as what Walker (2015) founds about international academics teaching in the UK. In many cases, to challenge students or encourage students to challenge them becomes a challenge itself, an intellectual meta-goal some interviewees dedicated much time and effort. But they are aware that the cultural dimension is a delicate connection they do not have to strain too much. This challenge is a result of the fundamental differences between Sinic and Western approaches to thinking, learning and teaching. Escaping any facile and superficial opinion about which side is “right” or “wrong”, multiple interviewees pose the possibility to envision a more balanced teaching mode, which coalesces Western “critical thinking” assumption with the “Confucian” way of learning and teaching.

Another non-academic challenge is about the education of one’s offspring. The Chinese schooling is considered by some as problematic against Western standards: too stressful (no time to relax or just play freely since early in life); too much rooted in the Confucian idea of repeating rather than critical thinking; patriotic education in public schools. While some universities have public schools affiliated with the university and are free for faculty’s children to attend, many of these schools only offer Chinese-language education. Consequently, many of the participants send their children to the closest international schools, which offer a more internationalised educational environment, with English or bilingual (English and Chinese) education. International schools are much more expensive, compared to both local schools and schooling in their home countries. These schools are also not necessarily close to one’s campus, making everyday life more complicated.

Further negative points about living in Mainland China are often, but not always, remarks about: air pollution; limitations in accessing web resources, albeit usually bypassed via “grey” VPN connections; some standards slightly still below Western ones in terms of dwellings, although the conditions are improving in recent years; specific food supply. All these latter material conditions appear to be marginal and not major hindrances to an overall good package of living in China.

The prospect for the future

International faculty expressed a generally positive attitude about staying in China, at least insofar and in the near future. In our survey with 124 respondents, an average of 3.72 (out of 5) was reported about their likelihood to continue working in China in the next 5 years. The quantitative finding echoes qualitative findings. Interview participants largely shared this perception, and perceived China as mostly a good place to work and live for the time being. The working conditions, career opportunities, and generous allowances are all considered favourably when interviewees talk about staying in China longer.

Many envisage coming back to their home country in a generic “one day”. The “one day” is left open, should disruptive events, better opportunities, retirement, education for children or other family plans occur one day. This is related to the perception of being a “guest”, but perhaps a “guest” on longer terms. Things develop, plans can also change. An academic, for instance, said they did not think they would have stayed long when they first moved to China. But they ended up in China for around 10 years now.

It is remarkable that usually interviewees do not discuss any form of acculturation process when talking about the future, keeping the integration issues mostly at the negative side of the story, rather than one that they seek to change. This, at least in part, might be explained by a utilitarian approach to one's stay in China. This is more likely to be found in academics without a (Chinese) family member, among the younger people, and those from disciplines outside the humanities. Such a perception echoes the positionality of some international academics as "outsiders", and the challenges they recognised to fully understand and engage with the Chinese culture.

Academic freedom

Although not overtly asked, often interviews touched upon the topic of academic freedom in China. For most participants, this does not appear to be a relevant problem – they can do their research and teaching without detachable concerns identifiable as academic freedom. For others, more likely in social sciences and humanities, there are some self-censorship exercises to avoid certain "sensitive topics" – being this per se a sign that some limitations do exist. Typically, this problem assumes the form of realising that certain topics or certain implications of research about a topic ought not to be disclosed. As part of the *integration* process, some interviewees told that they understood whom to talk freely and whom not to. This is a good example of how there are not only grey topics, but also grey academic contexts: sometimes it is possible to have a "Western" standard, sometimes it is not possible. Also in applied sciences, international industrial collaborations may raise the issue of nested geopolitical controversies hampering synergies that instead might bring to greater outcomes. This latter problem is understood as a source of instability, rather than impossibility as such. In this realm, more than others, it is visible that international academics navigate the prospect of *marginalisation* by means of trying to understand beforehand what they can really do without creating problems for anyone, themselves included. As one participant commented, one should try to be a "good guest", especially when treated as a special guest. This latter aspect intersects laboratories linked to campuses, or guested within campuses, and funded with generous arrangements and strong prospects for both research and business. It is possible that adversarial international relations may hamper in the future those collaborations. In this sense, academic freedom is not necessarily something that is poor in China, it could be also a result of international isolation Chinese universities might have no direct responsibilities upon.

IV Discussion, conclusion, and policy recommendations

This section reflects and discusses major findings of the project, including China in global academic mobility, international faculty as “golden guests” in China, and the future of international academic mobility to China. The final sub-section also proposes policy recommendations about universities’ recruitment of, and engagement with, international faculty.

International academic mobility: beyond the push-and-pull framework

When discussing the reasons for international academic mobility, a widely-used framework is the push-and-pull framework (e.g. Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Yudkevich, Altbach & Rumbley, 2016; Lee & Kuzhabekova, 2018). Under this framework, international students or international academics are considered as being pushed away and/or pulled in by their home country and destination country. In addition to the push factors from sending countries, and pull factors from the receiving country, there could also be “reverse push-pull factors” that describe push factors from the receiving country and the pull factors from sending countries (Li & Bray, 2007). This latter is certainly an enriching perspective. However, the push-and-pull framing has several limitations.

Firstly, the “push-and-pull” model overlooks individuals’ agency. It overlooks the agency of the faculty or students, who are the subjects likely deciding if and where mobility happens. Contextual conditions are important references when making such decisions. Some literature also pointed out that personal characteristics are important in interacting with the external push and pull factors (e.g., Li & Bray, 2007). But overall, agents are considered as negative recipients of the decision posed by “pushing-out” or “pulling-in” factors. The decisions are contextualised, but not constrained by the external contexts.

A second limitation of the “push-and-pull” framework, is the binary construction or understandings of the context. All influential factors are divided into two categories: pushing-out or pulling-in. In addition, when examining transnational mobility, all factors are limited to be within two national borders: the home/sending country and the destination/receiving country. Factors within the sending or receiving countries are often generalised and simplified, which diminish the variations within each country. However, as this study illustrates, not all factors fit in the binary division of pushing-out or pulling-in categories. The same factor may work as a pushing-out factor for some, but a pulling-in factor for others. There are factors beyond the national containers that are influential. Last, there are many-layered factors within each country’s category.

Building on the findings of this study, we can identify various factors that are important in faculty’s mobility decisions. Each individual’s decision involves a “package of factors”, as our empirical evidence suggests and as it is reasonable to expect. These factors can be organised into different layers: global, regional, national, local, institutional, and personal (including the microsocial aspect such as family links). These scales are not hierarchical and can overlap with each other. Table 6 displays the factors.

In this framework, factors are not limited to national ones or constructed as binary sets of notions. The national and local context can apply to both the sending country and receiving country. Factors outside the national levels are included too. One important thing to note is that each country is not an entity without internal variations. There are in fact too many variations and stratifications within the Chinese academic

system. Sometimes these differences appear more influential than the national context. These factors are reflected in local and institutional contexts.

Not all factors are equally important to each individual's decision making. While some factors are perceived as prevalently favourable conditions for mobility, such as the job offer per se, not all factors are equally enabling for all in their mobility decisions. Each factor can function in various ways for different individuals. Some factors provide conditions for mobility for some people, but act as hindrances to others. For instance, whether Chinese culture becomes a positively influential factor or not, is dependent on how a given individual perceives and engages with it. The framework in Table 6 tentatively explains decisions both to move to one place, as well as the decision to leave one place. To the best of our knowledge, this is a novel way to address the topic in this field.

Table 6 Influential factors for international academic mobility: factors and empirical findings

Scales	Factors	Empirical examples from the study
Global	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development of global academic mobility and immigration; - Development of global connectivity (via the Internet and transportation); - Development of international collaboration and cooperation; - Landscape of global research; - Landscape of economic development; - Deteriorated academic job markets in some systems and the development in other systems; - Geopolitics; - World cultures, religions and beliefs; - English as a global language 	<p>Increased global connection via the Internet provides conditions for international faculty to learn about China and job opportunities before coming to China, but some information about China can also be a misrepresentation that feeds in international academics' presumption about China, thus influencing their mobility decisions.</p>
Regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regional mobility and cooperation framework; - Geographical proximity within the region; - Cultural commonalities within the region 	<p>Academics from the neighbouring South Korea and Japan selected China due to the geographical and cultural proximity.</p>
National	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internationalisation practices; - Economic development; Science and R&D investment; - Research strategies and structure; - Cultural traditions and languages; - Legal structure for immigration; - Talent programmes 	<p>China's opening up internationalisation approaches, rise in science and technology, R&D investment, and generous talent programmes, all provide favourable conditions for international academics. On the other hand, legal regulations for immigration and cultural traditions can be factors complicating to commit oneself to moving to China.</p>
Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Funding, resources, and infrastructures; - Administrative support or bureaucracy; - Talent programmes; - Cultural traditions 	<p>Provincial or city-level talent programmes provide additional opportunities for international academics to have a better job package in China; this includes mixed labs (industry-university campuses).</p>
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Job offer; - Funding, resources, and infrastructures; - Administrative support or bureaucracy; - Research performance; - Talent programmes; - Teaching loads; - Research culture; - Climate of the (micro)environment 	<p>Job package offered by the university or the department/school is important to international academics' decision to move to China and their experiences in China. Not necessarily universities are effectively able to "sell" the recruitment package properly. Academics likely to underestimate the actual value of the package as-a-whole.</p>
Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disciplinary/personal ties, collaborations, and development; - Cultural identity and proximity; - Family considerations; - Language issues; - Career aspiration and plan; - Life aspiration and plan 	<p>Established research and personal links are influential to some international academics' decision to move to China; but international academics can face cultural glass ceiling.</p>

International faculty as “golden guests” in China

With its fast-developing science and higher education, China is becoming a rising magnet for international faculty. As this research shows, the flow of international academics to China started to accelerate since the beginning of the 2010s, surging to a global leader after around 2015. While international academics still constitute a very small proportion of academic faculty in China, their total number is growing. The outlook for the near future is certainly to continue to grow, at least in the elite group of research-intensive universities in mainland China. The international academics working for long significant stints of purely academic careers in China are mostly male from STEM areas, originally from and/or educated in OECD countries. The prestige of their awarding PhD institutions is often, but not always, from the list of the first 100 universities according to the most popular rankings (e.g., ARWU). International postdoctoral researchers in China are, in comparison, predominately educated in China, India, Egypt and some Western countries like the UK, France and Germany.

For this first generation of international academics, the attractiveness of China appears mainly career-related. International academics find China a good workplace, with the global rise of Chinese science and the fast development of Chinese higher education. This rising system draws in some academics with a future-oriented mindset, and optimistic prospects. In addition, international academics in China enjoy generous job packages that often come with special privileges, together with a research-oriented workload. This comes as a contrast to the lack of opportunities to obtain tenure or tenure-track positions, or equivalently satisfactory, offers in some other systems. Typically, their choice is driven by the realisation that either they would work on precarious tracks (“eternal post-docs”), or with exhausting teaching-loads, especially if they wish to continue to work in world leading Western universities. China has the, sometimes unexpected, a combination of fair developmental career prospects along with the same world top prestige. It happens just not to be “Western”, at least geographically speaking.

All cases universities in our project are high-profile research-intensive universities in China. They share similarities with research-intensive universities where most international academics came from, such as the (increasingly) wide use of the English language in teaching and research, and emphasis on institutional management and performativity. International academics are thus familiar with some of the challenges prevailing across research-intensive universities, with the notable difference that in China such practices are still of recent introduction. Nonetheless, international academics also perceive the culture and the climate in Chinese universities as mostly tranquil and favourable, at least for their internal own “golden bubbles”. Nevertheless, we need to acknowledge that the definition of foreigners and academic used in this study inevitably brings to a specific target, failing to include any foreigners working (or studying if we include doctoral students) in Mainland universities. Not all foreigners working in academia (e.g., language experts, post-docs, less secure contracts, etc.) are likely to have the same working conditions. This is likely to mirror *a priori* expectations in relation to ethnicity, place of education and employment, country of birth as well. We leave this latter specificity for future studies.

Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) is a valuable comparison here. It has been a key magnet for international academics in the Greater China area for a much longer time. Hong Kong SAR has been influenced by the Western neoliberal pressure, contrived collegiality, and individualisation (Macfarlane 2016). In contrast, the Mainland Chinese system is processing the global pressures into a Chinese way (Cai & Yan 2020). Previous research suggested that internationalisation is accepted and incentivised by the Chinese academic system (Liu & Metcalfe 2016), but without colonising the system in any acritical way (Rhoads & Hu 2012). In other terms, internationalisation and excellence are happening in a Chinese way, rather than adopting purely isomorphism recipes. This is evident in interviews with international faculty. The academic culture in Mainland China, at least from the perspective of some participants, is, and is

deemed to remain, “Chinese” in its core: a strong emphasis on personal links, patronage, some sensitive topics that ought to be avoided, good manners and respectfulness.

International academics in China are generally perceived as useful and valuable, people who need to be treated accordingly. From the Chinese side, this happens to assure a fair initial starting package, ensuring a definite channel to access resources for individual development, and being treated with respect. Foreigners are also granted patience and understandings, such as regarding their lack of understandings Chinese language or more broadly the Chinese culture. Compared to the previous generation of international academics in China, who floated in and drifted away easily, the current first generation of international faculty demonstrates more possibilities to take some roots in the Chinese society and higher education. The extent to which roots will deepen is uncertain and up to the test of time.

One thing to note is the communication between international academics and Chinese universities. Although international academics generally understand the “overarching offer”, not all Chinese academic staff in charge of appointing or developing international academics have a perfect understanding of how to communicate these offers to those who might have been acculturated (via PhD and further steps) in Anglo-Saxon countries. From Westerners’ eyes, the Global West is particularly different from the apparently extemporaneous and politically driven Chinese academic system. This echoes previous research on international faculty in Shanghai, who experienced false anticipation about their career prospects (Chen & Zhu, 2020).

Following Peterson & Spencer (1990) seminal work about the difference between culture and climate in universities, a fair summary of our data is that international academics benefit from a benign climate, but this nice climate is *given* to guests, who will encounter cultural barriers if they try to transform themselves from guests into “peer householders”. This is reported in one way or another by many interviewees. They often find themselves in a space of special resources and opportunities, which constitutes a “golden circle” or “golden bubble” surrounded by a reinforcing halo of respect. This general feeling echoes that one recently found about international students in Mainland China (Dervin et al. 2020).

The “golden bubble” both enriches and constrains international faculty in China. It creates a dilemma. On one side, the “golden” aspect confers international academics with “supra-citizen preferential treatment” (*chao guo min dai yu*, 超国民待遇) that are not enjoyed by their Chinese peer colleagues. Examples include generous work and life packages under “talent programmes” for foreigners, the general status of being valued, respected and protected. In comparison, their Chinese colleagues may also enjoy the benefits of “talent programmes” but are working in a more complicated and “political” academic culture (Yang 2015).

On the flip side of the coin, the bubble stops international faculty from being treated as equal. “(Academic) circles” (*quan zi*, 圈子) are unneglectable parts of Chinese academic culture, which are associated with protectionism within certain circles and exclusivism for those outside them (Xu, Oancea & Rose, 2021). Some continental European systems are not totally different from this pattern (Clark 1977), especially when recruitment and promotions are at stake. International academics in China also found themselves in circles of foreignness that are surrounded by transparent but tangible boundaries. To try to trespass the boundary is not per se dangerous, but it looks to bring nowhere. International academics find it impossible to transform themselves into “Chinese” from a cultural point of view. This is even more remarkable if one notes that foreigners perceive and report this even in the eventuality of being proficient in Mandarin and/or whether married to a Chinese spouse. Despite the willingness of some participants to engage more with Chinese higher education and even take roots in China, they encounter restrictions. Such restrictions are

experienced by non-Chinese citizens, showcased as cultural barriers within the Chinese higher education (such as access to research funding, the “glass ceiling” in leadership roles, difficulties in penetrating the Chinese cultural sphere), and society (such as interactions with locals, issues with visa and residence permit, education of one’s children, pension).

This kind of interaction appears to be the *type h* mode of cultural acculturation as developed by Rudmin (2003): a sincere feeling of respecting a different country, coupled with the condition that they can carry on what they are in China for. It is a combination of assimilation of the dominant culture (the Chinese one) and integration (Chinese academia welcoming the foreigners). From the point of view of our interviewees, the foreigners, what they are in China for is usually to carry on without much stress one’s most preferred part of the academic profession which is most of the cases research (for few people, teaching or entrepreneurship is one’s vocation). In research, both the Chinese and “Western” cultures are familiar with same definitions of priorities (e.g., publishing in top journals) and both cultures recognise the value of publishing. Some benign tokenism does not hamper in accomplishing this function. Nevertheless, in teaching and daily life, the cultural difference emerges as more challenging. The critical thinking and reflection represent, for example, interesting attempts enacted by international academics to influence Chinese culture.

International academics thus become the “golden guests” in general, some enjoying more privileges than others. The status of “guest” creates both comfort zones and glass ceilings. The “golden” here refers to the status of being happy, prosperous and favourable. However, not all foreign faculty in China enjoy the same level of privileges. Early-career international academics, for instance, do not always report enjoying the similarly generous treatment as their established senior foreign colleagues. We also note the coincidental connotation of “golden” with being predominantly White and Western profile. In Chinese, a common stereotypical way to describe White people is that they have “golden/blonde hair and blue eyes” (*jin fa bi yan*, 金发碧眼). While we cannot identify and report the racial characteristics of all international academics in our sample with 100 per cent accuracy, there has been a large proportion of White international academics found across the 15 case universities. As also commented by a participant, international academics with colour are very rare in China. It can be deduced from our study that the coincidence between ethnicity, geographical origin, and place where PhD (and research) has been pursued tend to coalesce into a clear profile. From our own definition of “foreigners in academia” we are likely to have excluded several biographical profiles. These might be: non-White minorities within “Global West” countries, persons originally from non-Global West countries, individuals whose education was not obtained in research-intensive institutions. We need to acknowledge that more research is needed to pair extant literature about immigrants working in Mainland China that highlight criticalities around the broad concept of “race” (Bailey et al. 2016; Lan 2019; Lan 2016).

The future of international academic mobility to China

The main feature of the experience of international academics in Chinese Mainland universities is that the context they are involved in is under constant change. The rise of China as a science and technology superpower brings together some cohort effect in the Chinese staff composition, with recurrent turbulent reforms adapting the whole system to new and progressively more ambitious goals (Horta & Shen, 2019). In this overall context, the expansion of international academics is one foreseeable aspect of the further internationalisation of Chinese higher education.

There are several possible scenarios for the future development of international faculty in Mainland China, each associating with possible advantages and pitfalls. The main scenario would be continuing growth in

numbers, as has happened in the past few years. This scenario would let international academics continue to arrive in Chinese universities under the same or similar conditions. Within this scenario, it is likely that non-Chinese academics will gradually understand better what a career in China might look like, considering this geographical destination more often as a credible option, and ending up applying to specific top-tier universities in China. This projection could be natural and simple, bringing reciprocal benefits to both the Chinese system and the foreign academics opting for this increasingly less uncommon venue.

Nonetheless, the main problem would be the feasibility to provide an increasing number of international academics with equally generous packages as of today. To continue to treat them as welcomed, highly recognised and respected is possible only to some extent. Culturally, the increased number of international faculty may coalesce into a larger reservoir, albeit a golden or at least a good one. Under these circumstances, international academics may represent by time a culturally detached part, rather than an integrated part, of the hosting institution and of the Chinese system as a whole. In the cultural worst scenario, international academics could become a metaphorical outbuilding of the university. This possibility is potentially disruptive and, although on a very minor scale and in very sporadic episodes, we have already envisaged this possibility. Similar cases in and outside China have already been reported, about international academics facing difficulties to merge into the local culture, being hired as “symbolic gestures” of internationalisation (Brotherhood, Hammond, & Kim, 2019, p. 506), and being disempowered in the local contexts (Han, 2021; Kim, 2016).

Other scenarios, likely to be non-exclusive with a smooth increment of the number of international academics as defined in this study, may include: the increasing attraction for post-docs from top global universities, that might happen if contracts are, for instance, longer than they are in respective Western universities; the continuing increase of institutional partnership with top universities to facilitate more frequent exchanges and collaborations, also sharing funding schemes; the continuing growth of home-educated international academics, who receive doctoral education in China and stay upon graduation. Thus, it may be of interest to future research to investigate the international postdoctoral researchers in Chinese universities, and the rise of home-educated international academics in China. Chinese universities may also rely progressively more often on the prestige they are gaining at the world level to bargain conditions, although geopolitical adversities might also prevent in the future specific domains of development and collaboration.

This study proposes several recommendations for institutions, in their recruitment and engagement with international faculty:

- It would be highly valuable for the recruiters not to rely primarily, if not solely, on personal contacts, but to develop instead professional recruiting strategies. The latter approach is already in place in some of these universities.
- Institutions need to consider altogether issues of integration/assimilation when recruiting international faculty. The positionalities of international faculty as “guests” and/or “golden guests” and the impacts of such positioning also need critical reflection. Some academic recruiters have taken into consideration the integration issues. Nevertheless, even more attention could be paid in the future, as the category of “international talents” may expand. This component of talents acquisition would maximise the reciprocal benefits and would avoid unconstructive misunderstanding and unmet expectations from both sides.
- Upon recruitment, institutions could try to provide a wider picture to international faculty about the conditions they will face. This may go beyond the materialist side and be explicit enough, so that

people not familiar with the Chinese context will have a better understanding of their actual careers and life pathways in their new place. This possibility is not rendered any easier by the fact that the Chinese system is rapidly changing. Yet, the fact that there is an increasing number of Chinese returnees working in China might be helpful. Returnees may make the transition of foreigners into the Chinese academic culture easier, and they could communicate the Chinese academic culture in a way which is easier to be understood by foreigners.

- Institutions could take more into account the communication for personal development of international faculty (e.g., preparation for cases of promotion; research enhancement such as grant opportunities). This would facilitate the realisation and achievement of a win-win relationship for both individuals and institutions.
- Institutions could recognise and provide further assistance with specific challenges for foreigners living in China, such as visa issues or educational costs for one's children.

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Dissemination Plans

Completed presentations

- *An investigation on international faculty's engagement with Mainland Chinese higher education.* Presentation at the “China and Higher Education Conference” at the University of Manchester. December 2019.
- *The mobility of international faculty to China: Motivations, challenges, and future patterns.* Presentation at the “China and Higher Education Conference” at the University of Manchester (online). December 2020.
- *International academics in Chinese higher education: The journey to the “Global East”.* Panel presentation at the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER) Annual Conference (online). September 2021.
- *Mobility of international faculty to Chinese universities: Motivations and challenges.* Individual paper presentation. Presentation at the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Annual Conference (online). September 2021.

Forthcoming presentations (proposals accepted by October 2021)

- *Positionality of International Faculty in Chinese Higher Education: The Distinguished Guests? Though “just Guests”?* Presentation at the “China and Higher Education Conference” at the University of Manchester (online). December 2021.
- *International Faculty in Chinese Higher Education: Characteristics and Positionality.* Presentation at the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) Annual Conference (online). December 2021.

Outputs in preparation

- Journal articles drawing on the key findings of the project, to be submitted within six months of submission of the report;
- Proposals submitted or to be submitted to forthcoming conferences and webinars in 2021 and 2022;
- Blog posts and contributions to the media platforms drawing on the research findings.

Appendix

This appendix reports some descriptive statistics from the sample as described in the methodology section.

Table A1. Nationality of international academics (N=108)

Nationality	Number of respondents
United States	20
Germany	12
Italy	9
Canada	6
United Kingdom of GB and N.I.	6
India	5
Pakistan	5
Netherlands	4
Australia	3
France	3
Spain	3
Switzerland	3
Japan	2
Korea South	2
Poland	2
Sri Lanka	2
Albania	1
Algeria	1
Andorra	1
Bangladesh	1
Belarus	1
Belgium	1
Bulgaria	1
Dominica	1
Estonia	1
Indonesia	1
Iran	1
Ireland {Republic of}	1
Nepal	1
New Zealand	1
Nigeria	1
Philippines	1
Romania	1
Russian Federation	1
Sweden	1
Turkey	1
Ukraine	1

Table A2. Gender of respondents (N=94)

Gender	Number of respondents
Male	80
Female	13
Other	1

Table A3. Country/Region of PhD Attainment (N=108)

Country/Region	Number of Respondents
United States	25
United Kingdom of GB and N.I.	16
Germany	12
China	7
Canada	6
Italy	6
Netherlands	6
Switzerland	6
India	5
France	4
Australia	3
Japan	2
Belarus	1
Dominica	1
Korea South	1
Singapore	1
Spain	1
Sweden	1
Taiwan	1
Ukraine	1

Table A4. Relationship status (N=95)

Relationship status	Number of respondents
Married to other national	41
Married to a Chinese national	20
Single	17
In a relationship with a Chinese national	7
Prefer not to say	6
In a relationship with another national	4

Table A5. Disciplinary field (N=109)

Disciplinary fields	Number of Respondents
STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math)	44
Social Sciences	34
Humanities	18
Life, Medical and Health Sciences	13

Table A6. Number of years respondents have lived in Mainland China (N=111)

Year	Number of respondents	Cumulative percentage
1 or less	19	17%
2 years	19	34%
3 years	19	51%
4 years	8	59%
5 years	14	71%
6 years	6	77%
7 years	6	82%
8 years	6	87%
9 years	5	92%
More than 10 years	9	100%
Total	111	

Table A7. Respondents have child(ren) (N=95)

Have child(ren)	Number of respondents
Yes	50
No	43
Prefer not to say	2

Table A8. Averages of factors influencing mobility (range: 1-5; 5 most relevant; 1 least relevant)

Factors influencing mobility decisions	Average
Career opportunities at the current institution	4.08
Career opportunities in China	4.06
Funding support	3.67
Salary	3.48
Poor opportunities in home country	3.40
Study or work experiences in China	3.18
Interests in Chinese related issues (i.e. language etc.)	3.08
Scientific excellence in one's field in China	3.01
Family / personal relationship	2.68
Likelihood to continue to work in mainland China in the next 5 years?	3.72