

# International Academics in Mainland China:

## What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know?

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A blurred map of East and South Asia, showing countries like Mongolia, China, India, and Bangladesh. The map is overlaid with a semi-transparent teal color. A white vertical line is on the left side of the text. The text is in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

**International academics in  
mainland China:  
What do we know?**

# Background

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- The cross-border mobility of academics is a significant yet under-researched global phenomenon (Rumbley and De Wit 2017). Asia, or the broadly conceptualised ‘Global East’, has developed several attractive destinations.
- **China has become a magnet for some international academics**
  - China’s rise as a global science power, generous recruitment offers
  - Local academic culture and lifestyle has become more Westernised than it used to be
  - (before the pandemic) political, institutional and grassroots-level initiatives facilitated mobility
- **Growing research interest on international academics working in (mainland) China**
  - From the ‘**first cohort**’: university (language) teachers, short-term/part-time post holders, honorary affiliates, trailing spouses or ethnic returnees to the ‘**new cohort**’: non-Chinese nationality, non-Chinese ethnicity, full-time, long-term academic positions (Marini and Xu 2021; Huang 2022).
- **However, many research gaps remain due to a lack of unified definitions, reliable sources, etc.**
- **Our research question:** What are the major themes in the existing research on international academics in China? What can we learn from the extant research?

## Previous research

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- Xu, X., Braun Střelcová, A., Marini, G., Huang, F. & Cai, Y. (2022). International Academics in Mainland China: What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know? *European Journal of Higher Education*, 12(1): 416-433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2022.2074865>
- Cai, Y., Braun Střelcová, A., Marini, G., Huang, F., & Xu, X. (2022). Foreign Academics in China. *International Higher Education*, 111, 29-30. <https://doi.org/10.36197/IHE.2022.111.14>

**Project 1:** Huang, F. 2022. “International Faculty in China: Their Motivations and Work Roles”. In Simon Marginson and Xin Xu (eds, 2022). *Changing Higher Education in East Asia*. Bloomsbury Academic.

**Project 2:** Braun Střelcová, A., Cai, Y and Shen, W. 2022. The experience of European researchers in China: A comparative capital advantage perspective. *Journal of the Knowledge Economy*.

**Project 3:** Marini, G. and Xu, X. 2021. “The Golden Guests”? *International Faculty in Mainland Chinese Universities*. SRHE Research Report.

# Relevant projects

Projects	Case institutions	Participants (international academics)	Datasets	Period	Publications
<b>Project 1</b>	26 universities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Foreign nationality or citizenship</li> <li>Full-time employment for &gt; 1 year</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; 800 demographic profiles</li> <li>38 survey responses</li> <li>Interviews: 23 academics +14 administrators</li> </ul>	2016–20	Huang 2022; Huang and Kim 2022.
<b>Project 2</b>	16 universities + 4 research institutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Europeans by citizenship &amp; ethnicity</li> <li>Full-time in Chinese academia</li> <li>Doctoral researchers included</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interviews with 28 academics</li> <li>Interviews with 19 experts</li> </ul>	2017–18	Braun Střelcová, Cai and Shen, 2022.
<b>Project 3</b>	15 universities in 12 cities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Non-Chinese ethnicity &amp; nationality (excl. returnees)</li> <li>Full-time, long-term employment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>323 academics and 43 postdocs' dem. profiles</li> <li>124 questionnaires</li> <li>31 interviews with academics</li> <li>University policy documents</li> </ul>	2019–21	Marini and Xu 2021.

# Who are international academics in China? Definitions.

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- The term ‘**international academics**’ has been used interchangeably with alternative terms such as ‘academic migrants’, ‘expatriate academic staff’) (Luczaj and Holy-Luczaj, 2022)
- In the Chinese context, the terminological ambiguities are associated with **legal, social, political, historical and cultural** factors
  - ‘Soviet experts’ (苏联专家, *sulian zhuanjia*)
  - ‘foreign cultural and educational experts’ (外国文教专家, *waiguo wenjiao zhuanjia*)
  - ‘foreign-nationality teachers’ (外籍教师, *waiji jiaoshi*)
  - ‘foreign talents’ (外籍人才, *waiji rencai*)
- Previous research defined ‘**internationals**’ in China by
  - The place of birth (Postiglione and Xie 2017), nationality (Chen and Zhu 2020b), ethnicity (Project 2 and Project 3)
- Previous research defined ‘**academics**’ (‘researchers’, ‘scholars’, ‘faculty’, ‘talents’, ‘academic staff’):
  - **Doctoral and postdoctoral** researchers (Larbi and Ashraf 2020; Project 2)
  - Full-time **and visiting** academics (Chen and Zhu’s (2018, 2020a, 2020b)
  - **Full-time academics** with both research, teaching and administrative roles (Han 2021; Projects 1 and 3)

# Who are international academics in China? Definitions

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

# How are international academics in China researched? Disciplines

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- **Interdisciplinary research** - often a mixture of **higher education and international migration literature** – clustered around (Braun Střelcová, Cai and Shen, 2022):
  - **Higher education research**, internationalisation and mobility (e.g. Wang & Chen 2020)
  - **Migration research**, China's 'talent attraction' and migration policy (e.g. Zweig et al. 2020)
  - **Management studies**, expatriation of global academic talents (e.g. Froese 2012)
  - **China studies**, on the experiences of foreign social scientists carrying out research with/in China (e.g. Klotzbücher 2014)
  - **Non-scholarly reports**, in both news media and other publications (e.g. Science, Nature)
- **Diverse theoretical frameworks** such as capital, push-pull model, social ties, no theories, etc.
- **Methodologies** have employed mostly qualitative approaches; with an increased use of mixed methods



# Who are international academics in China? Demographics

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- Research is hampered by a lack of accurate, up-to-date statistics
- In 2019, over 18,000 foreign staff worked at Chinese universities (Cai et al. 2022)
- Up from 9,433 in 2007 (Liu et al. 2019 in Chen, 2020)
- Around 1000 are from Europe (Project 2)
- **Not a homogenous group!**
- Most foreign academics in China are **male** (77% in Project 3) with **degrees from OECD countries**
- **STEM fields and life sciences** (58%), social sciences (30%), arts and humanities (12%) (Project 3)
- Social, arts and humanities scholars tend to arrive to China at an **earlier career stage**
- Natural scientists are **more senior**, professors or associate professors (Project 2, 3)
- Concentration **on the coast** (reflects the local higher ed. disparities) (Project 1, 2, 3)
- Emerging group are **China-educated** foreign academics

# Who are international academics in China? Demographics

Study	Kim (2015)	Wu and Huang (2018)	Project 1 (Huang 2022)	Project 3 (Marini & Xu 2021)
Sample	41 international 'college-level instructors' (non-Chinese, foreign)	236 full-time international faculty (foreign nationality)	855 full-time international faculty (foreign nationality)	323 full-time international faculty (foreign nationality and ethnicity)
Type	Type II	Type III	Type III	Type I
Case institutions	Universities and colleges	Four leading universities	12 universities, diverse profile	15 research-intensive universities
Location	Beijing	Shanghai	Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou etc.	12 cities across China
Gender/Sex	Men (27) Women (14)	Male almost 7 times than female academics	Male (82%), female (18%)	Male (77%), Female (16%) Rest N/A
Academic rank	/	Professors (63.3%) Lecturers (15.7%) Associate Prof- (14.4%) Others (6.6%)	Professors (35.3%) Assistant Prof. (17.4%) Associate Prof. (16.0%) Lecturers (11.1%)	Professors (36%) Associated Professors (31%) Assistant Professors (26%)
Nationality/Citizenship/Home country	41% from the USA, 34% from Western Europe; other countries	USA (41.9%), HK/MC/TW (15.8%), Canada, Germany, Japan, UK	USA (83), Canada (17), HK (16), TW (14), the UK, Japan, Germany	N/A

# What are their motivations to work in China?

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- **Professional opportunity** is the primary motivation (Chen & Zhu 2020; Projects 1, 2, 3)
  - Career development, research opportunities
  - China as experiencing unprecedented growth in the academic labour market
  - More secure work opportunities than the precarious job markets in the US or Europe
- **Cultural connection** is entangled with the professional aspects:
  - Moving to China could mean new cultural adventure, or conducting research in a culturally interesting country (Cai & Hall 2016; Wu & Huang 2018)
  - Important as data for social scientists and humanities scholars (Xu et al. 2022)
- **Personal links**: Many academics moved to China for family reasons or thanks to existing social networks (e.g., a spouse, a colleague or a former supervisor) (Project 1, 2, 3)
  - Project 3: 28% of survey respondents had a Chinese spouse

# What are their challenges?

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- **Professional challenges**

- Power relations (ambivalent, revered yet mistrusted, Project 1,2,3; Li & Xue 2021)
- Professional isolation (outsider, 'glass ceiling', 'golden guest', Project 3)
- Research funding (e.g. funding nationality requirement, Project 3)
- Research freedom (political ideology and shrinking academic freedom, Project 2)
- Administrative work (language barriers, bureaucracy overload, Project 1,2,3)
- Teaching (talented students but not active class participation, Project 3)

- **Non-professional challenges**

- Cultural integration ('golden bubble'; Project 3)
- Legal procedures (lengthy regular visa and work permit renewals; Project 2)
- Living conditions (high costs of living, children's education, air pollution, internet censorship; Project 2)

# What are their expected roles?

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- In Project 1, international academics reported that they were expected to
  - Enhance the international reputation of their current universities (3.81 out of 5)
  - Yield high research productivity (3.62)
  - Be active in carrying out other international activities (3.24)
  - Bridge their current universities and universities of their home countries (2.65)
  - Organise faculty development activities (2.76), recruiting more international students (2.65)
- In Project 2 and in Project 3, academics also see themselves as **bridge builders who create links between their Chinese institutions and their global academic networks**.
- Their expected roles mirrored the **neoliberal globalisation of higher education** in China and the world, which highlighted research productivity and international benchmarking.
- This could lead to **tokenism in recruiting internationals** – echoing findings from Japan and South Korea (Brotherhood, Hammond, and Kim 2020; Kim 2016).

# Are they satisfied, and will they stay?

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- They are generally **satisfied** with the working conditions (mainly in **STEM**, Project 3)
- Fast-paced environment, funding, job security, lighter teaching and admin (Project 3)
- But dissatisfaction often **grows with time** (Project 2); **early-career researchers and social scientists** feel the most dissatisfied

## Will they stay?

- **More research is needed, preliminary evidence shows that:**
- Foreign population **has decreased** in China's major cities (China's census, 2011 and 2021)
  - From 208,602 to 163,954 in Shanghai; from 107,445 to 62,812 in Beijing
- Covid-19 and travel restrictions have caused a **further outflow** of people
  - 'Expat exodus' (e.g, Gibbs 2021)
  - Population of European academics has **shrunk** by a third (EURAXESS China, 2021)

A blurred map of East and South Asia, showing countries like Mongolia, China, India, and Bangladesh. The map is overlaid with a semi-transparent teal color. A white vertical line is on the left side of the text. The text is in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

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# What do we need to know?

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- What about those from **outside the 'Global West'**, such as the Belt and Road countries?
- What about those who **have left** China? Why did they leave? We know more about international academics' entry than about their exit (Huang and Welch 2021)
- What about their **engagement with knowledge circulation and epistemic justice** (Morley et al. 2018; Shen, Xu, and Wang 2021)?
- How do they experience the **changing landscape of international academic mobility**?
  - Due to travel and visa restrictions under the **pandemic**
  - Due to the rise of **(neo-)nationalism, geopolitical tensions** between China and the Global West, Russia-Ukraine war, and **politicisation/securitisation of research**.
- What are the **long-term effects** of the pandemic and geopolitics on the population of international academics in mainland China?



# Thank you!

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## Funding acknowledgements

Research projects leading to this presentation were respectively funded by:

- The **Japan Society for the Promotion of Science** (for the project 'An International and Comparative Study in Roles and Contributions of International Faculty and Researchers', 2019–2023, project code 19H01640)
- **Agence Nationale de la Recherche** (ANR) (project 'Immigrant China: Immigration & Transformation of the Chinese Society' 2016-2019, ANR-14-ORAR-0004)
- **Society for Research into Higher Education** (SRHE)

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