The Integration Experiences of International Academics at Japanese Universities

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Abstract

This study is devoted to exploring international academics' integration experiences at Japanese universities via semi-structured interviews with 40 international faculty with various backgrounds. The analysis indicates that the complex academic environment at Japanese universities has caused the integration of many international academics to be fraught with numerous constraints, and they tend to seek individualistic solutions to navigate their professional and social lives. The study extends the scope of previous studies by analyzing the potential factors affecting their integration and indicates that more efforts should be paid to the root causes of these issues to create an accommodating and inclusive academic environment.

Introduction

Spurred by the advancement of neoliberalism and internationalization of higher education, the international mobility of highly skilled academics has become an integral feature of an ongoing process. Attracting global talents has become an important component of building human capital, and the recruitment of international academics has been viewed as one of the effective ways of promoting the international competitiveness and rank of higher education institutions (HEIs) (Cantwell 2011). It is thought that international academics bring benefits to universities, tangibly and intangibly, contributing to knowledge production, global collaborative productivity, and internationalization (Hazelkorn 2007; Kim, Wolf-Wendel, and Twombly 2011; Altbach and Yudkevich 2017). Global competition for international academics has intensified all over the world, especially in some non-English speaking countries. Japan is no exception. Since the early 1980s, the Japanese government has made great strides in attracting international academics, contributing to the rapid expansion in their numbers from 1.17% in 1983 to 4.71% in 2019 (MEXT 2020).

Despite the quantitative increase, it appears that the integration of international academics at Japanese universities is fraught with numerous challenges, leading to their perceptions of being 'tokenized symbols' of internationalization (Brotherhood, Hammond, and Kim 2020). Existing evidence has attributed the dissatisfaction of highly skilled immigrants in Japan to Japanese exclusionism (Morita 2015; 2017; 2018). Thus, one explanation of international academics' tokenization can be considered as Japanese exclusionism since they may be more prone to this exclusionism effect, particularly because of their possession of various intelligences and skills (Batalova and Lowell 2007). Despite the possibility of being excluded, in conjunction with neoliberalism and the internationalization of higher education, international academics have been touted as necessary agents for world-class status and systemic reform, being highly desired by Japanese universities (Brotherhood, Hammond, and Kim 2020). Moreover, HEIs are traditionally managed by the norms and practices associated with academic freedom and shared governance, which is significantly different from industrial settings (Gerber 2014;

Gheorghiu and Stephens 2016). Such a phenomenon, therefore, raises scholarly questions concerning how the rationales of exclusionism are intertwined with neoliberalism and internationalization at Japanese universities, and to what extent Japanese exclusionism affects the integration of international faculty directly and indirectly. A research focus therefore needs to be placed on the integration experiences of international academics at Japanese universities, especially from their own perspectives since their perceptions are the best reflections of this complex entanglement. However, previous studies on international academics at Japanese universities have been limited to investigating their general outlook, motivations, and their perceptions of Japanese universities (e.g. Huang 2018a; 2018b; Huang and Chen 2021). The study addresses this gap by exploring the integration experiences of international academics at Japanese universities. Semi-structured interviews with 40 international academics hired by Japanese universities were undertaken.

The study first reviews background literature, followed by an explanation of the methodology. The third part presents the main findings drawn from the interview data. The fourth part is concerned with the discussion of these main findings. Finally, the study offers conclusions, implications, and limitations.

Background literature

Japanese context
Exclusionism is a term that has been widely used to encapsulate sentiments of exclusive nationalism. It has been characterized theoretically as an attitude, or practice in which an individual or entity negatively evaluates or prevents an object from having various opportunities and rights based on attributes such as ethnicity, or religion (Tarumoto 2018). In addition, practically in Japan, it has been defined as an 'exclusionary attitude or opinion aligned with the insistence of doing things the Japanese way (Morita 2015), actively highlighting the distinctive differences of Japanese identity. Its manifestation in practice – *Nihonjinron* – has become a mainstream ideology in Japanese society due to the vigorous promotion of the Japanese governments (Morita 2017). This should be of concern as it is likely to impact negatively on foreigners in Japan.

Neoliberalism, based on economic principles, takes the world as a market and emphasizes privatization and marketization. The adoption of new public management largely reflects the manifestation of neoliberalism in HEIs (Leisytë and Kizniene 2006). Despite the numerous criticisms of the application of neoliberalism to HEIs (e.g. Miller 2013), it has been embedded in the university reform practices in Japan since the mid-1990s (Hosoi, Ishii, and Mitsumoto 2014). The Incorporation of National Universities in 2004 marked the formal beginning of this process. Following the global trend toward neoliberalism, the national universities have been provided with a more autonomous legal status, enabling them to independently decide detailed management mechanisms. However, the numerous tensions caused by the annual 1% reduction in operational grants and the fierce market competition make it difficult for national universities to achieve the government's expectations. In addition, spurred by globalization, internationalization has become an urgent issue in Japan. Those internal and external changes have profoundly impacted Japan's higher education, serving as a strong incentive for international academics' recruitment since they have been considered potential agents for university transformation (Altbach and Yudkevich 2017). Thus, increasing political and institutional attention has been paid to international academics. Various strategies have been conducted by the Japanese government, such as the 'Top Global University Project' in 2014 and the 'Global 30' program in 2009. The target universities were required to hire more international academics to improve the diversity and global competitiveness of Japan (MEXT 2014).

The rationales of neoliberalism and internationalization in Japan can be considered largely incompatible with the principles of exclusionism. The discourse of Japanese exclusionism constructs a collectivism ideology that develops a specific conceptualization of nationalist insistence on a Japanese identity which is distinct and homogeneous. On the other hand, the beliefs of neoliberalism and internationalization stimulate the international mobility of culture and people to achieve interculturality and maximize benefits, decontextualizing relations with national and social borders. However, how the national tendencies towards exclusionism entangled with these global forces, and to what extent such

exclusionism impacts Japan's HEIs and integration of international academics remains unclear.

Integration of international academics

Despite their significance, it appears that generally the integration experiences of international academics are fraught with numerous challenges. Among these, issues related to work and social-cultural aspects are the most researched themes, which significantly affect both their work performance and satisfaction (Wilkins and Neri 2019). Regarding the work aspects, despite their conceived higher productivity than their native colleagues, it appears that international academics are more commonly confined to disadvantaged working conditions and limited professional development (Corley and Sabharwal 2007; Selmer and Lauring 2011; Van Der Wende 2015; Siekkinen et al. 2017), which is detrimental to their satisfaction, organizational commitment, and integration. Likewise, Liang, Li, and Beckett (2006) argue that the barriers to career advancement for international academics are often associated with various types of discrimination stemming from race. In addition, departmental professional relationships with native colleagues and students, have also been acknowledged as pronounced factors (Collins 2008; Wilkins and Neri 2019; Wilson 2001).

With respect to social-cultural aspects, previous studies have constantly indicated the constraints imposed by cultural differences, influencing international academics' integration both professionally and socially (Jonasson et al. 2017). For instance, many international academics considered their American colleagues and students to be associated with 'rudeness, and cultural unawareness' (Gahungu 2011). Some reported that they are deprived of many opportunities for social interaction and activities due to their national backgrounds (Skachkova 2007; Lin, Pearce, and Wang 2009). Additionally, local language proficiency is also an often cited theme, and considered a critical skill that enables communication and development of academic identity (Marvasti 2005; Pudelko and Tenzer 2019), contributing significantly to interactions and acceptance in host countries (Yudkevich, Altbach, and Rumbley 2016). For instance, the 'heavy, thick' foreign accent of international academics often leads to a communication gap with their students (Gahungu 2011;

Villarreal 2013). Consequently, a perennial cultural disconnection may result in their perceived distance from local society, their inability to establish relationships, and their difficulty in developing professionally, hindering the formation of cultural and professional identities.

In non-English-speaking countries, it appears that international academics' journey of integration is more elusive. Beyond challenges similar to English-speaking countries mentioned previously, their integration is associated closely with local characteristics. In general, host institutions' expectations and leadership in English-speaking countries are shown in the formal written forms, whereas in non-English-speaking countries, they often come from unspoken pretexts (Hall 1981). For example, Shin (2012) indicates that informal occasions are the settings where formal consensus are achieved in the case of Korean universities. In addition, the tensions caused by local language problems were palpable in both work and social aspects (Huang, Daizen, and Kim 2019; Altbach and Yudkevich 2017; Gress and Shin 2020). Moreover, in some East-Asian countries with Confucian traditions, such as China and Japan, the collectivistic nature of the culture is particularly difficult for foreigners to integrate into (Froese 2010). Despite the negative influence on minority international academics' integration created by the local exclusive practices, attempts at reforms within entrenched cultural norms are generally ineffective (Kezar and Eckel 2002). Hierarchical and bureaucratic organizational cultures have stifled the voices of international academics and fundamental reforms in higher education settings, which has exacerbated their distrust of their affiliations (Shin 2015; Siekkinen et al. 2017), as reinforced by the studies investigating China (Cai and Hall 2016), and Korea (Gress and Shin 2020).

Despite its increasing importance, there is a dearth of research on the theme of international academics' integration at Japanese HEIs specifically. Previous studies remain mainly engaged with their general outlook, motivations, and views towards Japanese universities (e.g. Huang 2018a; 2018b; Huang and Chen 2021), which can be attributed to the fact that only in recent years has the significant contribution of international academics in Japan been more recognized (Huang, Daizen, and Kim 2019). In the limited existing literature in this area, the challenges faced by

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international academics at Japanese universities, such as their distinctive working roles and limited opportunities for professional, have been investigated. For instance, many international academics reported that they are confined to working roles that Japanese academics do not wish to do or have difficulty undertaking (Tsuneyoshi 2005; Huang 2018a; Nishikawa 2021), such as externally visualizing the internationalization of Japanese universities (Brown 2019; Chen 2022). In addition, the perception of less access to professional development than their Japanese colleagues has also been noted (e.g. Huang 2018b). Moreover, many international academics perceived themselves as 'tokenized symbols' of internationalization (Brotherhood, Hammond, and Kim 2020). The tensions caused by a lack of Japanese language proficiency have also been considered as a notable issue (Huang, Daizen, and Kim 2019). A recent study has further explored their perceptions and attitudes towards their integration at Japanese universities (Chen 2022).

To sum up, compared with studies conducted in English-speaking countries, scholarly interest focusing on the integration of international academics at Japanese universities remains limited. Few studies have associated international academics' integration with the contextual climates of their affiliations. In addition, despite investigation of the challenges of integration from various perspectives, such as education, sociology, and management, limited evidence has covered about the mechanisms for these challenges, especially from the exclusionary perspective, which has been considered as the root cause of foreigners' dissatisfaction in Japan, being widely discussed in migration studies (Morita 2015). Thus, there is a need to explore how and to what extent exclusionism has impacted Japan's HEIs in such a complex context. In the face of such criticism, it seems that current literature tends to focus more on what the host should/can do to improve the hosting environment. However, it is also imperative to explore how international academics navigate their professional and social lives at Japanese universities under such circumstances, which helps to better reflect their institutional dynamics.

Methodology

Conceptual framework

Building on previous studies, this study explores the integration experiences of international academics at Japanese universities. A qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews was employed since it has been considered the best method when investigating complex and sensitive experiences (Ritchie et al. 2013). The conceptual framework exploring integration experiences is shown in Figure 1. The two main research questions which guide this study are as follows:

1. How do international academics perceive their integration at Japanese universities?
2. What strategies do international academics develop to navigate their professional and social lives at Japanese universities?
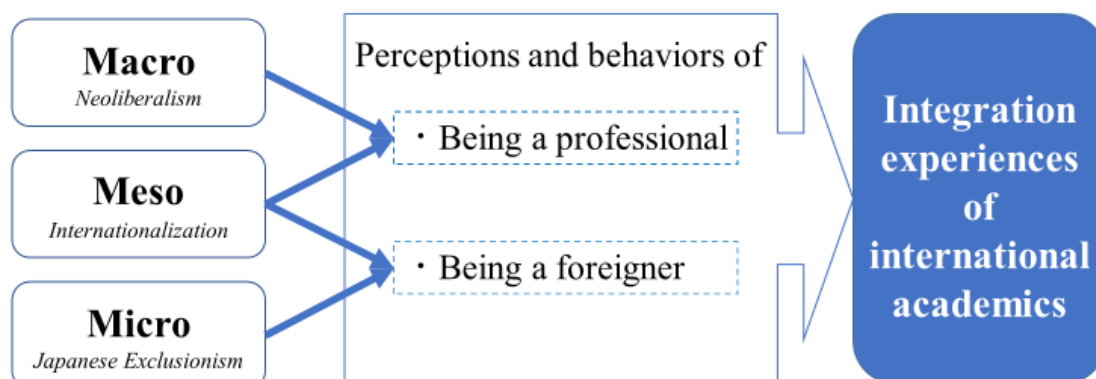
Figure 1. Conceptual framework of international academics' integration experiences at Japanese universities. Source: Chen and Huang (2022).

Data collection and procedures

The population of this study compromises full-time faculty hired by Japanese universities who have neither a Japanese passport nor a primary or secondary education in Japan. They were recruited by the following three methods: Firstly, inviting the respondents who agreed to be interviewed from Huang's (2018) national survey (*N*=20). Secondly, sending requests to the potential population in various Japan's universities (*N*=15). Thirdly, snowballing, requesting the participants to introduce eligible people (*N*=5). Institutional and individual attributes, such as

nationality, gender, discipline, and locations of the universities were thoroughly considered before the interviews. The outline of the participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The outline of the participants

NO.	Affiliation	Nationality	Position	Educational degree obtained in Japan	Discipline
F1	National	Iran	A. Prof.	Yes	Engineering
F2	National	Bolivia	Ass. Prof.	No	Economy
F3	National	India	Ass. Prof.	No	Physics
F4	National	Vietnam	Ass. Prof.	Yes	Engineering
F5	Local	Russia	A. Prof.	No	Computer science
F6	National	Korea	Ass. Prof.	Yes	Education
F7	National	Canada	A. Prof.	No	Linguistics
F8	Private	China	A. Prof.	Yes	Marketing
F9	Private	UK	A. Prof.	No	Education
F10	National	Iran	Ass. Prof.	No	Environment
F11	Private	China	Lecture	Yes	Literature
F12	Private	US	Prof.	No	Literature
F13	Local	US	A. Prof.	No	English
F14	National	UK	A. Prof.	No	Linguistics
F15	Private	Australia	Prof.	No	Political Science
F16	Local	UK	A. Prof.	No	Education
F17	Private	Ireland	Lecture	No	Computer science
F18	Private	German	Prof.	No	History
F19	National	Thailand	A. Prof.	Yes	Agriculture
F20	Private	UK	Prof.	No	Literature
F21	National	Ireland	Prof./Rep.	No	Psychology
F22	Private	US	A. Prof.	No	English
F23	National	New zealand	Prof.	No	Biogeography
F24	Local	US	A. Prof.	No	Linguistics
F25	Private	US	Lecture	No	Linguistics
F26	Private	UK	Prof.	No	Linguistics
F27	National	US	Ass. Prof.	Yes	Psychology
F28	National	China	A. Prof.	No	Film Studies
F29	National	China	Ass. Prof.	Yes	Engineering
F30	Local	US	Prof.	No	Linguistics
F31	Local	German	Prof./Dean	No	Chemistry
F32	National	China	Ass. Prof.	Yes	Anthropology
F33	Private	UK	A. Prof.	No	Education
F34	Private	Brazile	Lecture	No	English
F35	National	Mexico	Lecture	Yes	Chemistry
F36	National	Srilanka	A. Prof.	Yes	Chemistry
F37	National	UK+Poland	Ass. Prof.	No	Economy
F38	Private	US	Lecture	No	Music
F39	National	Brazile	A. Prof.	Yes	Engineering
F40	National	Korea	A. Prof.	Yes	Engineering

Source: Based on Chen's interviews in 2020

The main interview questions associated with the study were as follows: 'How is your integration at your affiliation?', and 'How do you integrate into your affiliation?'. To better understand perceptions and experiences in Japan, relevant follow-up questions were asked. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, only eight interviews were conducted face-to-face, while the rest were conducted through online platforms, such as Zoom, Skype, Wechat, and Google Meet, from July to November 2020. Depending on the participants, the interviews used English, Chinese, and Japanese as the main languages, and lasted between 40 minutes and 2 hours. Except for two cases, the interviews were professionally recorded and transcribed for further analysis. To ensure the accuracy of the interview information, transcripts were reviewed and approved by some of the participants, including the two mentioned above which were not audio-recorded.

Data analysis

This study employed Nvivo12 to manage the qualitative interview data based on a six-step thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which consists of (1) familiarization, (2) generating codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing codes, and (5) defining themes, (6) producing a report. It was used as a guide to analyze the interview data since it can effectively contribute to a summary of key features and the provision of a 'thick description' of the dataset (Braun and Clarke 2006). These themes were extracted from the interview data based on previous studies and the structure of this study.

Interview results

Drawing on their narratives, this section presents the findings structured in alignment with the research questions. Despite some progress acknowledged by the participants, interview data revealed numerous challenges they have encountered at Japanese universities, contributing to their perceptual disillusionment with internationalization. In addition, it seemed that the participants tended to embrace individualist strategies to navigate their professional and social lives at Japanese universities. The main themes were analyzed subsequently through an inductive process.

Stranded in a complex academic environment
When asked about their integration at Japanese universities, the participants shared concrete examples to illustrate their perceptions. It seems that many participates were critical about the overall academic environment of Japanese universities due to their perceived exclusion in various aspects.

1. Perceived difficulties stemming from exclusionary social context

Since homogeneity has been remarked upon as one of the critical features of Japanese universities, the maintenance of organizational 'identity and allegiance' is considered especially important (Horta, Sato, and Yonezawa 2011), which has been reflected in recruitment practices favoring the recruitment of those who have connections, such as their in-house students, something which has been always a feature of Japanese universities. Therefore, some participants tend to be more knowledgeable than others about this situation, especially those who don't have previous experiences in Japan, leading to their lack of Japanese connections.

> Something that also bothers me…In many cases, they make the fake open call…they ask that person to apply. So, the person applies, like 40 or 50 other poor people also apply. They don't even look at their applications...It's not fair that they do it, especially for foreigners. (F1)

Due to the so-called we-ness connections, despite being hired, many participants reported an inability to equally understand the existing organizational structures like their native Japanese colleagues (Horta, Sato, and Yonezawa 2011). Their status of being an 'outsider' makes it unlikely that a cooperative relationship with their Japanese colleagues will develop, as found by Richardson and Zikic (2007).

> I expected to have more research collaboration with my colleagues at H University, but I still do my research in collaborating with my previous networks...I have already proposed them two times, and I could see that they were not eager to have such collaborations with foreign faculty. (F10)

I was trying to collaborate with professors in my department for 5 years, and they always postpone: okay, let's do it maybe next month, next year...they just make excuses, and then never happened. (F39)

In addition, due to an insistence on Japanese language skills, many international academics felt difficulty in engaging in their affiliations. This is especially true for those who were not from countries which use Chinese characters, such as the American/British faculty. They were more keenly aware of this issue, as the cultural similarity between their home countries and Japan is comparatively less, and they have rarely obtained their educational degrees in Japan (Huang 2018a). Thus, despite the adoption of bilingual policies in some universities, a significant tension caused by Japanese language is alluded to constantly.

It's difficult for me to integrate with, because they operate in Japanese...all the meetings, are managed in Japanese. And the project leaders are operating and thinking in Japanese...I'm not fluent in Japanese, it's difficult for me to see what is really going on. (F23)

What always surprises me is that these are meetings where we're talking about English teaching. But, the majority of the time that we spend in these meetings are all in Japanese, is like, why? So, that's something that I feel is a burden on me. (F24)

One of the participants, who was from Germany, summed up his sentiment towards this issue clearly by characterizing Japanese universities as 'they':

They want to have that symbolic capital of foreigner…they hired me and just throw me into this situation, and now let's see how you can deal with it. I don't think that's pretty fair…I would say they could do a lot more. (F18)

In a related vein, many participants voiced their concerns that international academics are less likely to receive grants compared with their Japanese colleagues. This constraint stems largely from the fact that both connections and

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proficiency of Japanese language contribute to the establishment of collaboration with Japanese industry. This is hard for international academics to acquire, especially for those without previous experience in Japan, as such experience helps to build connections. Given the acknowledged value of grants in scientific performance and career advancement in the neoliberal academic context (Bloch, Graversen, and Pedersen 2014), the tension caused by the grants system should be of concern, as argued below:

> There are lots of funding organizations in Japan, many of them don't even accept English applications…you will miss a lot of them…And in Japan, if you want to get that data, you need to have really strong connections. It's not so easy for foreigners especially. (F1）

> I have no idea about those companies at all. It might because of the limited information we get…people that we talked to is limited. So, that information is also a limit…Most Japanese foundations like to get the Japanese application, not English, even your research topic is quite good... the chance that you can get *Kakenhi* (Grants) if you write in English is lower than you write in Japanese. (F19)

2. Constraints caused by competitive professional opportunities

Regarding the academic environment at Japanese universities, many participants felt absent in decision-making processes at their affiliations, which is indicative of the exclusionary and closed Japanese HE system. New decisions were generally conveyed to them as a 'fait accompli' without their engagement (Brown 2019).

> One of the big frustrations is often, I am excluded from decision-making regarding English education, so I might be in a meeting, and they're going to discuss the program, and they asked me to leave. (F26)

I was not given sufficient information to follow the procedure of the administration of our department. When I suggested, even in written form, it's usually ignored. (F18)

Moreover, given the acknowledged impact of professional promotion on satisfaction and retention (O'Meara, Lounder, and Campbell 2014), many participants in this study voiced the same concern by pointing out their limited opportunities for upper-level positions at Japanese universities. It appears that this issue was particularly pertinent to those specializing in the Humanities. On the one hand, many participants in the Humanities were required to engage mainly in language-teaching activities with a heavy workload, irrespective of their specialties. However, performance-based evaluation systems embraced by Japan's HEIs lead to disadvantages of those international academics when it comes to professional promotions. Leadership positions at Japanese universities are often filled using a system of short-term rotations. However, compared with other open and competitive fields, such as the Natural Sciences (Yonezawa, Ishida, and Horta 2014), often those positions in the Humanities were occupied by Japanese academics and international academics were excluded. Consequently, the number of international academics occupying senior positions is much less than Japanese academics (Huang 2018a).

Most of the time that they were asking me to teach classes about English, like technical presentation, technical writing, academic writing and everything English-related…I'm not an English Teacher, my major is science engineering. But they are asking me to do something else that I wasn't trained to do. (F39)

They rotate some positions, for example, the head of the department, the leader of the educational affairs. And these positions, usually foreign professors don't take…they have always been Japanese…usually the Eigokyoushi (English Teachers) have to teach many more classes…this special contract that mostly foreigners get…so they feel…without papers, like an outsider. (F34)

3. Disillusionment with the internationalization

In a related vein, some participants further stated that hierarchal and entrenched cultural practices at Japanese universities make reforms unlikely to happen (Kezar and Eckel 2002; Brown 2019). Despite the rapid expansion of international academics, they were confined to a 'second-order' status at Japanese universities since it seems that their foreignness has been capitalized mostly to externally visualize the internationalization of Japanese universities (Brotherhood, Hammond, and Kim 2020). Many participants claimed that internationalization at Japanese universities remains superficial, and fundamental reforms were not yet catalyzed as expected.

> I realized that H university wants to look like an international university while they don't really want to change. They just want to look like they are changing…So they just want to hire foreigners, and then that's it. They just want to show that they are international. (F2)

> Interestingly, you can find that the nationalities of the teachers are written on the pamphlets. So, Japan thinks that's called internationalization…I remember once the Ministry of Education came over to check how international of K University. They asked me to deal with it…the first time I felt that I'm actually a symbol of internationalization. (F32)

> They have very fancy names in the titles, like super global. But actually, they're not international at all…they're just interested in your face…the international staff cannot participate…only Japanese can participate and make decisions for very important meetings…we're just informed about what is going to happen. (F39)

> So, the internationalization here is a top-down process, which means they may tell you that they will conduct something. But they don't need you to say yes or no, because they already decided everything, and just inform you about it…So hiring foreign teachers doesn't mean more perspectives, which only means they have some hard indicators to fulfill, so you may feel tricked of being hired. (F28)

In summary, the analysis showed that systematic and institutional practices in the exclusionary and competitive academic environment at Japanese universities have resulted in many participants' perceptions of being a token at Japanese universities, both socially and professionally, especially those in the Humanities, those who were not from countries which use Chinese characters and those without previous experience in Japan. It appears that they have become discouraged and demotivated from pursuing career development and organizational commitment. As internationalization is intimately entwined with the integration of international perspectives, many participants were critical about the advancement of internationalization at Japanese universities, complaining of their lack of opportunities to contribute to reforms of the university system and management in general.

Strategies for integration

Given such integration challenges, both Problem-focused and Emotion-focused strategies, namely engaging in Japan, overperforming, creating supporting networks, and developing personal missions, have been employed by international academics to manage their internal and external demands within institutions.

1. Engaging in Japan

Firstly, those who lack local knowledge may feel less possibility of integration, leading to their perceptions of being a token, which reduces their interest in integration in a vicious cycle (Sam and Berry 2010). Thus, many participants described their detailed plans or efforts to learn Japanese language and culture, which may raise their integration possibilities. Interaction with Japanese people is seen as one of the efficient ways to not only develop a better understanding of Japanese knowledge, including Japanese language, culture, and mentality, but also develop social networks in Japan.

> I feel I need to be independent myself…So, I am trying to get better with my Japanese. Actually, I have a plan for myself: 2 years to get N1 (highest level of Japanese-Language Proficiency Test). (F19)

I studied Japanese almost all of my time, except for sleeping. I did not make friends with anyone from any country other than Japan…The second thing is participating in social activities. I am very active to follow painting exhibitions or other events and communicate with people…We need to learn not only the language but also their ideas and culture. (F8)

2. Overperforming

Experiences of exclusion have resulted in their perception of being belittled by their Japanese colleagues. Thus, in response to the negative effects of being tokenized, evidence emerged of a desire to be overperforming, displaying as working diligently, creating a self-representation in an attempt to prove that they can be as capable as their Japanese colleagues.

I did my best, I performed my best there especially regarding teaching and research to prove that I can do as good as them. (F39)

I talk about my research a lot at work. So, everybody knows what I research about. And I do that because I want them to know that I am working...I feel like they think I'm having fun. (F13)

In addition, in terms of being a foreigner in Japan, more than self-representation, some participants commented that they felt they were representatives of all foreigners. Thus, they were more stringent in their words and behaviors to prove that they, as foreigners, can perform as well as or even better than Japanese academics, so that being a foreigner is not a reason for their exclusion.

I personally have this sense that I will do it as well as Japanese...because I'm a foreigner if I did something wrong or not enough, all the foreigners will be pointed out…maybe there is such a worry, so I always try not to let that kind of problems occur. I am more demanding of myself. (F11)

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Because it all falls back or not onto me myself as a person, but also onto other foreigners. So, if I behave badly, people will think, ok, all foreigners behave badly. So, at some places, I need to be extra careful. (F31)

3. Creating supporting networks

Some participants highlighted the significance of support from both work and social networks, such as their supervisors, colleagues, friends, and family members. They described how the practical suggestions and emotional support from their private networks helped them not only to deal with practical constraints but also to relieve mental stress, which empowered them with greater encouragement to meet further integration challenges at their affiliations.

I have friends here and they are supporting me. I think if you have some problem, it's much better to discuss it with someone so that you will feel released and relaxed. (F3)

There is no such support in my department. So, to overcome these stressful things, I usually try to get help from my international friends, who can speak Japanese. (F11)

My wife is Japanese. So, usually, she helps me if I have a particular problem that I need to discuss with the office…I just don't want to like kept rely on them (university networks) too much. I'd rather reliant on my wife. (F12)

My Japanese is so bad, they need to work with me in English. But they normally willing to do that. So, I think that's generally very good. They are the people I'm really close to at work and also, I go drinking and socializing with. (F15)

4. Developing a personal mission

In responding to host environments, many participants had also developed an internal mission approach to deal with their tokenization, which is associated closely with their self-management (Lamont, Welburn, and Fleming 2016). Despite perceptions of being a token, some participants emphasized that in conjunction

with internationalization, one of their distinctive roles at Japanese universities is to create a diversified environment and promote the multicultural competency of the students. Therefore, the so-called heterogeneities of international academics should be maintained. Their internal mission statements have been developed to preserve a sense of self-worth in response to the external pressure.

> In Japan, I am a Chinese teacher…if I changed to Japanese, there is not much difference between me and Japanese. I don't think it makes much sense for them to hire me as a foreign teacher…so whatever happened, I won't change. I think this is the best way to achieve my value. (F11)

> As a foreign researcher in Japan…we have our own specific function…So, it is ok to be different…the students who interact with me will get some interactions they could not get from a Japanese professor because I'm different. (F31)

The data analysis revealed that a variety of mechanisms were adopted by the participants to better encounter the challenges at Japanese universities. It appears that many participants were self-reliant in overcoming their obstacles, since they tended to seek solutions and assistance by themselves or from their personal networks rather than from a wider community, such as their affiliations. This underscores the importance of organizational support for both professional development and general well-being at Japanese universities.

Discussion

Based on the findings revealed above, three points need to be discussed. Firstly, the implementation of neoliberal theory, such as the Incorporation of National Universities in 2004, has led to Japanese universities' increasing focus on efficiency. It is notable that this new regime has caused numerous challenges to academic equality and shared governance at Japan's HEIs. As suggested by Bousquet and Nelson (2008), many HEIs attempt to hire those who are not equally empowered, such as part-time and adjunct teachers, with the aim of efficiency gains in the management process. A

similar situation has been identified in this study. Despite an increasing population of international academics, many of them were confined to distinct and restricted working roles and expectations, regardless of their specialties (Nishikawa 2021; Chen 2022), in particular language-related teaching. Despite a desire to develop their scholarly reputations, excessive teaching loads and performance-based assessment leave them juggling the minimum requirements for promotion. Thus, a new division of workload and power imbalances has been created. In addition, given the acknowledgment that the predominant upper echelons of Japanese universities are primarily Japanese academics, the principles of Japanese exclusionism, serving as a boundary schism, make the professional promotion of international academics precarious. The principles of neoliberalism and Japanese exclusionism contribute in this way to inequality, peripheral roles, and a low proportion of foreign-born academics in senior positions at Japanese universities (Horta and Yonezawa 2013; Huang 2018a), which excludes them from institutional management structures and makes their functions more limited. Thus, ultimately, their integration into Japanese universities has been discouraged.

Nevertheless, Japanese universities have attempted to maximize their status through employment of international academics. They are thought to play significant roles in international networking, global collaboration, and internationalization (Horta and Yonezawa 2013; Huang 2018a). Therefore, the recruitment of international academics through the strategies of promoting internationalization in a neoliberal-framed context can be largely depicted as a critical pursuit of predominant institutional benefits (Bamberger, Morris, and Yemini 2019), such as higher international ranks, world-class status, and global competitiveness.

Moreover, as 'without relations of differences, no representation could occur' (Hall 1996), the increasing population of international academics hired in the pursuit of internationalization may strengthen Japanese universities' emphasis on organizational identities and frameworks, and construct international academics as 'others', which creates clear barriers for them as for minority outsiders. The promotion of internationalization is, therefore, linked to practices of both neoliberalism and exclusionism in Japan. Such institutional practices contribute to

international academics' sense of exclusion as discussed previously, which, in a vicious cycle, may result in the advancement of internationalization without reformative progress. This is probably why, despite the rapid expansion in the numbers of international academics in Japan, qualitative analysis has shown the absence of any equal development in practice (Ota 2018; Brotherhood, Hammond, and Kim 2020).

Thirdly, our analysis shows that those who felt an inability to integrate into Japanese universities tend to employ individualistic strategies to overcome the constraints encountered. Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors probably can be applied in explaining their adoption of such integration strategies at Japanese universities. Intrinsically, embedded in the neoliberal theory, individual accountability has been highly emphasized in market models. What the neoliberal regime stresses is not 'social problems', but 'only individual challenges' (Saunders 2010). Therefore, instead of seeking organizational assistance, international academics tend to take responsibility for their own issues through individualistic strategies. Extrinsically, the internal approaches adopted by international academics appear to reflect the effects of institutional climate on the quality of their integration experiences. The analysis suggests a lack of racial equality at Japanese universities, which may be considered largely caused by Japanese exclusionism. Sufficient support from host institutions is considered essential to the integration of international academics (Bamberger, Morris, and Yemini 2019; Hsieh and Nguyen 2020), however, the entrenched cultural and institutional practices at Japanese universities make institutional support less likely to occur (Brown 2019). Consequently, the rationales of both neoliberalism and Japanese exclusionism have resulted in the employment of individualistic strategies by international academics.

Conclusions

Drawing on the integration experiences of international academics at Japanese universities, data analysis indicates that many international academics undergo challenging integration experiences at Japanese universities, and they tend to seek private solutions to navigate their professional and social lives at Japanese universities. Three key findings have emerged from this study.

Firstly, the study reveals that international academics encountered various subtle and overt constraints from the exclusionary and competitive academic environment while integrating into Japanese universities. This finding has challenged Kunz (2016)'s assumption claiming that the integration of skilled immigrants in the neoliberal era is a smooth process without much influence from local contexts. Despite being highly skilled immigrants who are highly desired by Japanese HEIs, the empirical evidence offered by international academics in this study underscores the great influences of local customs and values embedded in immigrants' lives.

In addition, despite similar challenges cited previously (e.g. Huang, Daizen, and Kim 2019; Brotherhood, Hammond, and Kim 2020), vacant further evidence has revealed factors of influence and forming mechanisms. The study extends the scope of previous studies by analyzing the potential factors causing these difficulties. On the one hand, the analysis underscores the significant influences of international academics' origins, academic rank, and previous experience in Japan. On the other hand, based on the rationales of Japanese exclusionism widely applied in migration studies, in contrast to Shore (2008), who suggests neoliberalism can break the traditional hierarchical system and create shortcuts to promotion based on performance, our findings reveal that the complex entanglement of Japanese exclusionism and neoliberalism embodied in Japanese HEIs may be detrimental to the promotion of international academics, hindering their integration at Japanese universities.

Secondly, the analysis demonstrates a disillusionment on the part of international academics with internationalization at Japanese universities, which is consistent with

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existing evidence (e.g. Ota 2018; Brotherhood, Hammond, and Kim 2020). Moreover, the study addressed the reasons for this phenomenon by suggesting that infused with the rationales of neoliberalism and exclusionism, internationalization at Japanese universities may transition from progressive values of multiculturalism and diversity to being seen solely in instrumental terms as a beneficial investment. Thus, despite the perceived value of internationalization, the study suggests that an uncritical pursuit of internationalization may be problematic, and that it should be promoted based on a more nuanced and contextualized framework.

Thirdly, despite the criticism of being tokens, little is known about what strategies international academics embrace to overcome such difficulties and challenges. Our study fills this gap by suggesting that international academics have adopted both Problem-focused and Emotion-focused strategies, namely engaging in Japan, overperforming, creating support networks, and developing personal missions to navigate their social and professional lives within the complex academic environment at Japanese universities. The analysis of their diverse means of overcoming these constraints shows that the critical framing of neoliberalism may conspire with Japanese exclusionism to encourage the individualistic solutions of international academics for navigating their professional and social lives. This study, enriching existing evidence suggesting the significance of institutional support (e.g. Gress and Shin 2020), indicates that more efforts should be paid to the root causes of these problems so that an accommodating and inclusive academic environment can be created.

Regarding the implications, theoretically, the empirical evidence presented in this study offer insights that may contribute to further relevant research into the challenges and contributions of international academics in other non-English-speaking countries, such as China and South Korea, which possess a similar academic context to Japan. Practically, it is hoped that the study's findings will contribute to reforms and more tailored measures in the process of internationalization at Japanese universities. Interventions to promote fairness and transparency in the system of research grants, recruitment, and promotion, are essential to create a legitimate, impartial, and attractive academic environment.

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In addition, given the significant importance and the limited evidence concerning the problems we raise, further studies investigating more nuanced details are greatly needed. The study also underscores the need for more effective official efforts to address these issues in the academic environment at Japanese universities, so that international academics can be treated as equals and well mentored, which would be advantageous to their integration and the improvement of comprehensive internationalization within Japan. Recommendations at a national level for fostering open-mindedness and diversity in university education should therefore be made and acted upon.

The following two limitations of this study need to be acknowledged and noted. Firstly, we have used several abstract key terms, such as neoliberalism, exclusionism, and integration, which, despite thorough explanations provided before the interviews, are likely to have been understood by the participants in different ways depending on their individual backgrounds. In addition, as this study investigated the integration experiences primarily from the perspective of international academics, the perspectives of Japanese academics have been omitted from the discussion. Further studies into the considerations of Japanese academics should be conducted.

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