

A stylized, light blue illustration of a plant with several large, pointed leaves and a cluster of small, round buds on a stem, positioned on the left side of the slide against a dark blue background.

Being and becoming academics: cases of overseas returnees' career pathways in China

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Overview

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Purpose

By taking two contrasting cases (one is a “Thousand Youth Talent Program” scholar in natural sciences, the other is an overseas returnee in social sciences), we aim to explore the different experiences, pathways and **early academic career** development of Chinese returnees with overseas doctoral degrees.

Our perspectives

1. Shifting from the political and economic perspectives, to the **academic and cultural** perspectives
2. Much research leans on macro-level of policy and trend, by using nation state as the analytic unit, we will focus on the **meso level** (of institution and disciplinary environment)and **micro level** (of individual scholar and scientist development)

Background: attracting the best and brightest

The global mobility of Chinese elite scientists in the globalized academic labor market and their professional development



Background: attracting the best and brightest

For decades, a large number of Chinese students and scholars have studied in the industrialized countries and stayed in the host countries upon graduation.

China has lost the best and brightest minds to the industrialized countries.

The 21st century has witnessed the shifting of brain drain into brain gain and brain circulation.

Chinese government has been strategically luring back overseas Chinese talent to strengthen science, technology and higher education.

One of the major initiatives is the **Thousand Youth Talents Program** (TYTP) launched in 2011.

Numbers of Thousand Youth Talent Program Scholar

<i>Round</i>	<i>Year/Month</i>	<i>Number of individuals</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
No.1	2011/1	143	4.0
No.2	2012/2	218	6.2
No.3	2012/7	177	5.0
No.4	2013	183	5.2
No.5	2014/1	396	11.2
No.6	2015/4	661	18.7
No.7	2016/3	558	15.8
No.8	2017/5	590	16.7
No.9	2018/2	609	17.2
Total		3,535	100.0

Data source: The author combined from the shortlists of the Thousand Youth Talent program awardees.

Thousand Youth Talent Program scholar Candidates qualifications

- ✓ Rising stars who are under the age of forty
- ✓ The best scientific elites
- ✓ Specializing in natural science or engineering technology
- ✓ Obtaining a doctoral degree
- ✓ Having no less than 3 years of overseas research experiences
- ✓ Holding a formal teaching or research title in foreign universities or other organizations
- ✓ Returning to China as a full-time staff

Preferential policy

Research grant: 1 to 3 million RMB over three years

Salary: About 400,000 RMB per year

Academic title: Appointed as full professor

Research lab building and research team forming

House bonus (Shanghai-ECNU): central government
0.5 Million+ local government 0.3 million + host
institution 0.6 million RMB

Family settlement: Children education, spouse job

Policies for academics in the disciplines of social science

1. Super post-doc researchers
2. The Postdoctoral International Exchange Program
3. Chang Jiang Scholars Program
4. Youth Scholar of Chang Jiang Scholars Program

In general, there are few policies, less financial support for overseas returnees in HSS.

Research questions

1. How do overseas returnees translate transnational capital and mobilize resources to construct their professional development space and navigate their career trajectory?
2. What are the patterns of their academic career development in China?
3. How do overseas returnees' academic pathways and experiences differ STEM disciplines to those of humanities and social sciences?
4. How do the academic career development of overseas returnees of “Thousand Youth Talent Program” distinct from that of less privileged overseas returnees?

Mixed methods

Quantitative methods



Qualitative methods

Study One:

C.V analysis: structural characteristics

Study two:

**Semi-structured interview
Case Study**

Our research project focused on Academic returnees at the Four “985” project universities at Shanghai and a First –class disciplinary university in Jiangsu Province

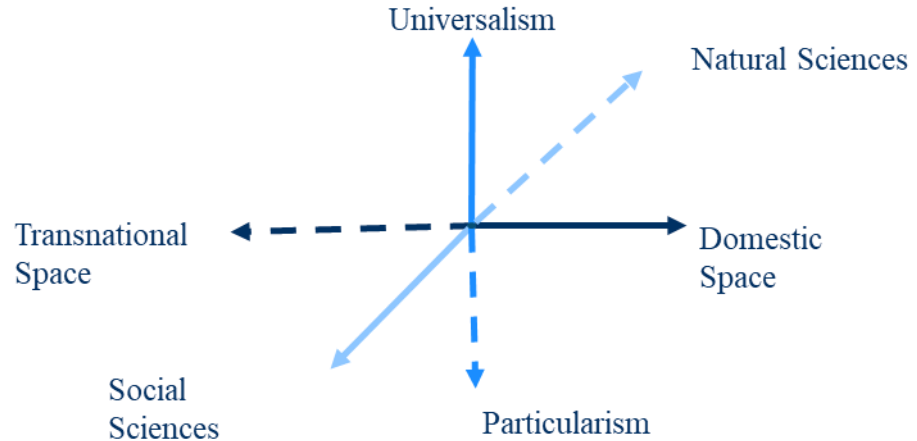
Brief Information of the two cases

- Dr Wang
- Male
- Age: 37
- Discipline: Natural Science
- Title: Research Prof.
- Institution: First-class discipline
- 7 years in two elite universities in UK, PhD+Post-doc
- Year returning: 2017
- Thousand Youth Talent Program Scholar in 2017

- Dr Xu
- Female
- Age: 34
- Discipline: Social Science
- Title: Post-doc
- Institution: Double-first class university
- 3 years in Australia
- Year returning: 2020

Perspectives for investigating the cases

1. Norms of academic circle
2. Disciplinary culture
3. Professional development space



Norms of universalism vs particularism

The norm of universalism refers to the idea that that scientists/scholars should be rewarded based on the merits of their contribution to the production of knowledge (Jiang et al. 2020) .

The norm of particularism refers to the idea that the allocation of rewards and resources considers scholars' characteristics independently from their scientific contributions (Jiang et al. 2020) .

How to deal with (take advantage of) norms of particularism and universalism in China

Particularism: The returnees feel difficult in deciding whether to be more involved in non-academic affairs since administrative positions bring significant personal benefits and career advantages in the Chinese academic system but also cost them much time and energy (Xu,2009).

Universalism: publication, publication and publication!

Publish in Chinese or English?

Natural sciences VS social sciences

Academic life in small worlds, different worlds

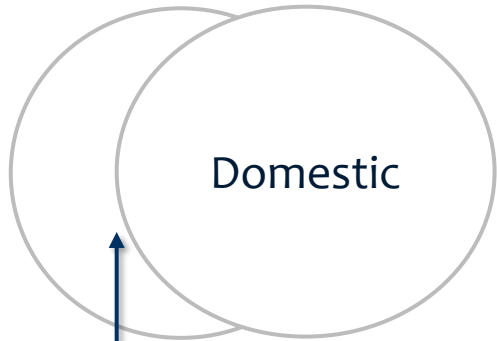
“The American system of higher education is highly diversified, steadily dividing along the two basic lines of discipline and type of institution.”

“Disciplines exhibit discernible differences in individual behavior and group action, notably between ‘Hard’ and ‘Soft’ subjects, and ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ fields.

Burton Clark

Knowledge production and reputation building in natural sciences and humanities & social sciences

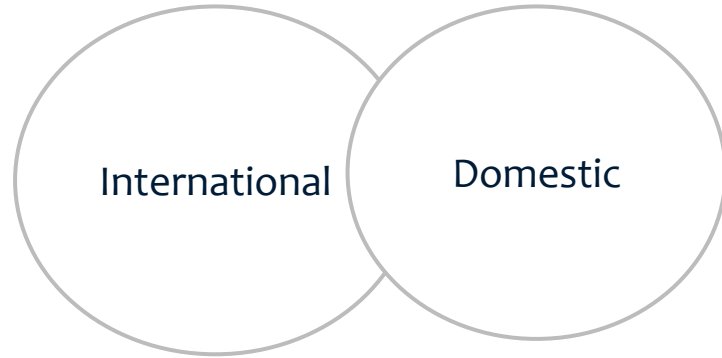
Natural Sciences



International



Humanities and Social
Sciences



**A Special Case:
A Thousand Youth Talent Program Scholar**

Dr Wang

age of 31 when returning to China from UK

1 Apprenticeship: Accumulating transnational capital and embedding in transnational academic community

The growth story of a young scientist

Family: He was born in an intellectual family, his father is a university professor

combination of Chinese and foreign elite higher education

Bachelor degree from a C9 University (4 years)

PhD from an elite university in UK(5 years)

The first post-doc in another top university in China (2 years)

The second post-doc in another elite university in UK (2 years)

9 years

Dr Wang's Career path Planning

1. How did he make decision upon PhD graduation in UK?

Contact with Prof H (*Yuanshi*, 院士) in a C9 university in China and become a post-doc.

The post-doc experience China is the turning point of his career.

2. Why did Wang conduct the second post-doc in UK?

The qualification for Thousand Youth Talent Program requires overseas working experience.

2 The Construction of Professional Development Space and conditions

2.1 Constructing infrastructural space of disciplinary platform and research lab

2.2 Building research team

2.3 Acquiring research grants

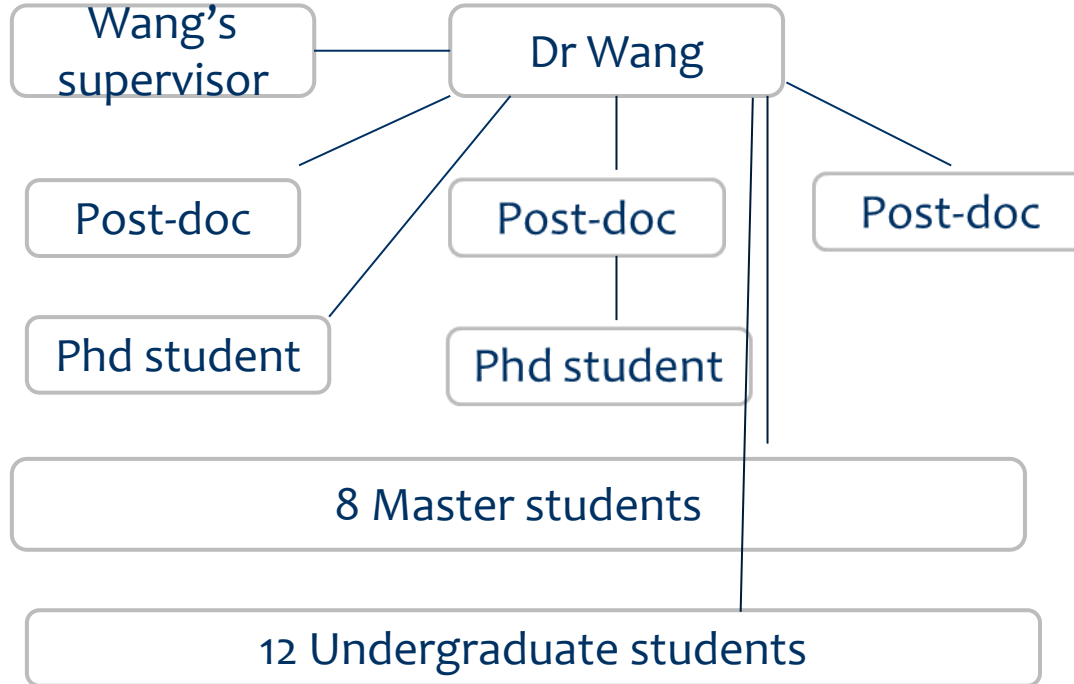
Dr Wang's lab

Two Rooms, 70 square meter, plus student offices
He is very satisfied with his lab and working conditions.
Some other TYTPSSs' lab is 30-40 square meter in China

Dr Wang's team (Middle size)

2
teachers

30 young
students



By contrast, for young returnees in social sciences, their teams are very small in size.

Dr Wang's research grants

He has successfully acquired research grants from a variety of sources such as the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC) , the Ministry of Science and Technology, and the provincial and city governments and university.

3. Dr Wang's Academic performance

New research direction and fields

- He is at cutting-edge level in their research fields as a result from their doctoral and postdoctoral experience in best research labs.
- His research focuses and interests are relatively new in China
- His research interests and fields are often inter/cross-disciplinary

Dr Wang's Productivity and Coauthor Publications

Excellent publications in terms of quantity and quality

Having better productivity after returning to China

More than 200 papers

Coauthor with team members, colleagues home and abroad, former supervisors

The impacts of norms of particularism on Dr Wang's career development

Significant others

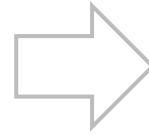
Bachelor, PhD and two post-doc supervisors are prestigious scientists

Institutional reputation

Elite universities in China and UK

Preferential Policy: TYTP

Identity: The Title of TYTP scholar



Job and position
Government and university support on research
Quick Academic Promotion
Rapid career development
Reputation

The role played by Dr Wang's supervisor

Wang's Chinese post-doc supervisor plays the most important role in his career development.

Career planning

Offering job opportunities

Empowerment of team and lab leadership

...

“H Academician is my enshi (significant other)” –Dr Jing

Master+Team Mode of disciplinary development in University B

“The Master (Academician) + Team Development Mode” initiated by University B in the 1990s has exerted notable influence upon the improvement of the overall discipline.

After returning to China in 2017, Dr Wang entered at University B, where he joined his post-doctoral supervisor’s team.

His former supervisor is an academician (yuanshi), who was also in charge of a laboratory there. As the academician supervisor cannot be in University B full time, Dr Wang helped his supervisor lead the scientific research team.

The influence of norms of universalism on Wang's career

Merits and Contributions

Productivity

Contributions to knowledge

Contributions to economical and social
development

Dr Wang's achievements in international and Chinese professional spaces

In China

Siqing(国家四青人才): national titles of outstanding youth scientist

Director of University Lab

Director of Provincial lab

.....

Transnational

Editorial board member: J. Energy Chem.

Citation >13000 , h index=65

Fellow of the Royal Chemical Society

outstanding performance in both transnational and domestic academic communities

Characteristics of Dr Wang's professional development

- ✓ Owing to his transnational capital (human/ social/ identity), he enjoys privilege and advantages in terms of professional promotion, research team, research funding, and lab space construction
- ✓ He transfers his transnational capital to upgrade career trajectory and make contribution to institutional and disciplinary development

Patterns of TYTPSs' academic career development

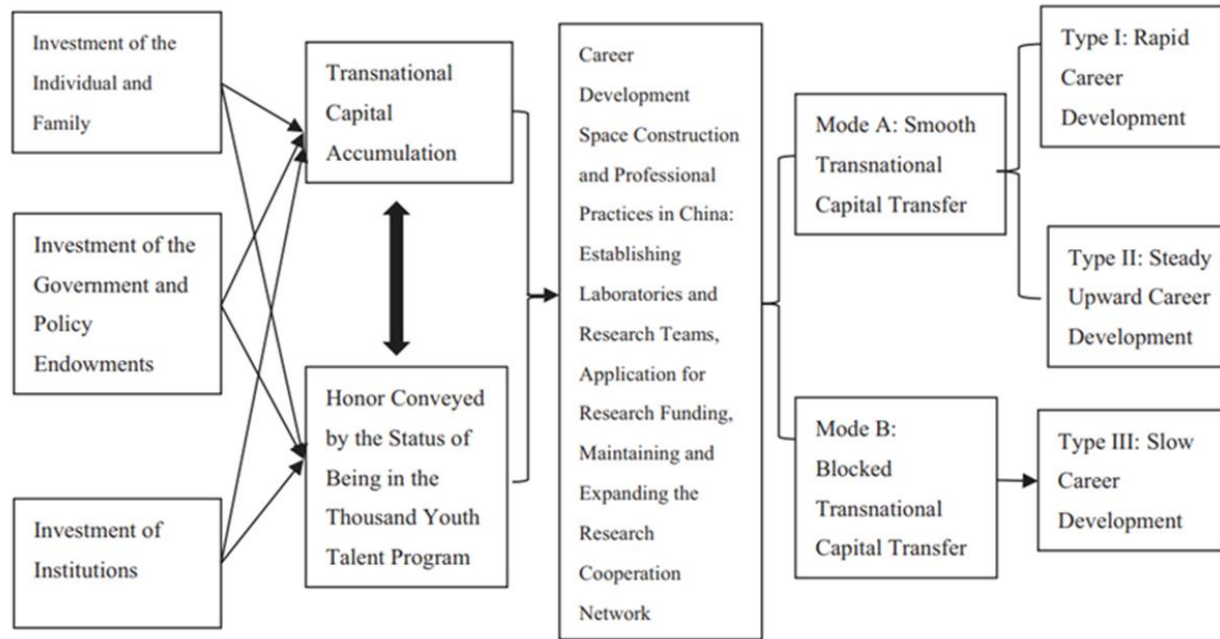


Figure 5.1 An analytical framework for the career development of the Thousand Youth Talent Program Scholars.

A contrasting case: an ECR in the discipline of social science

A brief note about me:

I am a post-doc research fellow at East China Normal University, China. I completed my doctoral studies in Australia and returned to China in 2020. Up to now, I have 19 sole-authored/co-authored (as first author) journal articles and a monograph published (from 2020 to now), and most of them have been published in prestigious journals.

Some Chinese concepts...

- *neijuan* (involution in English) – an anthropological term that literally translates to an inward curling

* ‘being locked in competition that one ultimately knows is meaningless’

- From the *tie fanwan* (iron rice bowl) to *feisheng jizou* (the ‘up-or-leave’) policy: the changing work culture in Chinese universities

Some essentials in the disciplines of social sciences

- grants (projects approved by **National Social Science Fund**, the Ministry of Education, etc.)
- publications (CSSCI/SSCI journals, monographs)
- networking

→ job-seeking, promotion

A contrasting case: an ECR in the discipline of social science

My identity:

vulnerable, precarious, outsider vs. **'grassroots'**

A grassroots identity empowers me to negotiate, challenge and resist the contemporary research order from below (see Appadurai, 2000).

My career pathway

- grants (projects approved by China Postdoctoral Science Foundation and the Ministry of Education)
- publications (highly valued international academic capital)
- collaboration networks (overseas → overseas+domestic)
 - * academic capital → social capital
- job-seeking (before post-doc vs. after post-doc; hard mode vs. easy mode)

Discussion

- Professional frustration associated with *neijuan* (involution in English): cruel optimism in Chinese academia
- Is borrowing an American model applicable to the Chinese context and will it ultimately lead to the flourishing of academics?

Conclusion

1. Heterogeneity across fields and scientists ;
2. Norms of universalism and particularism play a crucial role in overseas returnees' career development ;
3. Overseas returnees take advantage of /mobilize both international and domestic academic and social capital to build their professional development space

1) Li, Mei, Yang, Rui, Wu, Jun (2018) . Translating transnational capital into professional development: a study of China's Thousand Youth Talents Scheme scholars. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 19(2)pp 229-239.

2) Poole, A., & Xu, W. (2022). Pursuing and playing the academic game: A duoethnographic perspective on two early career academics' publishing experiences in China. *Compare: A journal of Comparative and International Education*. doi:10.1080/03057925.2022.2149242



Q & A