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Revival of "internationalization" in mainland Chinese universities with Christian roots? Historical and empirical inquiries in overseas experienced talent recruitment

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Abstract
Given that the recruitment of overseas returnees has become a strategic approach to facilitate the internationalization of higher education (HE) in mainland China, this paper adopts historical and empirical approaches to explore this phenomenon. By examining two Chinese universities with pre-1949 Christian roots, it intends to identify successful historical experiences with recruiting talent and current challenges and problems with this strategy concerning HE internationalization. Data were collected through historical files, policy documents, interviews, and observations. The research found that the role of the current wave of talented overseas returnees has not been fully operative in HE development for institutional and macrolevel reasons, such as utilitarianism and an unhealthy academic culture, which dominate academic communities at the local level and beyond.

Keywords Higher education · Internationalization · Chinese universities · Christian roots · Overseas returnees · Talent recruitment

Introduction

Higher education (HE) internationalization, especially for recruiting scholars with foreign academic credentials, appears to be a new HE practice and a recent research topic in mainland China in the twenty-first century. The recruitment of "elite" international faculty is even seen as a pragmatic approach, contributing to the improvement of international competitiveness and global ranking of elite Chinese universities (Wu & Huang, 2018). However, this practice has deep historical roots predating 1949, particularly in the case of Christian universities established by foreign missionaries. Their internationalization and indigenization practices at that time may have influenced the development and internationalization of Chinese universities with Christian traditions today. In our multiple-year fieldwork, we critically examined the issues and tensions accompanying HE internationalization in mainland China. Meanwhile, we never stop seeking better HE internationalization practices. In this investigation, we conducted a case study of two universities with Christian traditions and a pre-1949 history of internationalization—East China Normal University and Soochow University—to gain new insights into the practices and tensions associated with HE internationalization in mainland China, especially in the area of recruiting overseas returnees with foreign academic credentials, typically a Ph.D.

Internationalization has been prioritized in HE development in mainland China, particularly over the past two decades. Powerful macrolevel policy rhetoric and various international activities have made HE internationalization appear to be a new approach to HE development. However, HE internationalization in mainland China that existed in the pre-1949 period has long been neglected in China's domestic narrative for ideological reasons. We believe this topic should not be overlooked. Foreign education models, including the Japanese, Continental European, and American models, were borrowed to establish China's HE system before the communist revolution (Wu & Zha, 2018a). International features of HE can be observed in public national universities such as the National Southwestern Associated

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University [*Xi'nan Lianda*] from the Republican period, but especially in pre-1949 Christian universities, such as St. John's University in Shanghai and Soochow University in Jiangsu Province, which were considered by scholars such as Perry and Tu (2020) as "world-class universities with Chinese characteristics" (p. 35).

Given that recruiting scholars with foreign credentials has become a crucial strategy for improving HE development and internationalization in China, we conducted case studies at our target institutions to examine their respective histories and realities related to this matter. Our investigation aims to answer the following questions:

(1) How are the institutional policies and strategies being utilized for HE internationalization, especially in recruiting scholars with foreign academic credentials, and how have our participants experienced HE internationalization at the meso/institutional level?
(2) How does the historical internationalization of the predecessors of our target institutions, especially in talent recruitment, compare to present practices?
(3) How do the historical roots of our target institutions potentially influence their present internationalization practices, and what is the effect and why?

Our case study of East China Normal University and Soochow University sheds light on these questions and offers predictions of what HE internationalization might look like in the future, given the current institutional and national initiatives to attract returnees. Before presenting and discussing our findings, we briefly review the history of HE internationalization in China since the late Qing dynasty. We then present a theoretical framework that encompasses innovation diffusion, indigenization, and Holmes' taxonomy of educational settings, followed by our research methods. Finally, we argue that the two case universities in China have a comparative advantage in overseas experienced talent recruitment, but constraints such as academic culture and utilitarianism limit the contributions of returnees, despite the positive experiences of their predecessors a century ago.

Evolution of HE "internationalization" since the late Qing dynasty

The term "education internationalization" [*jiaoyu guojihua*] was first used in Chinese by the magazine *Qingnian Jinbu* [Youth Progress] published by the Chinese YMCA in 1925 and by the newspaper *Shun Pao* [Shanghai News] in the same year (Tian & Wang, 2015). However, the internationalization of HE in the modern sense dates back much earlier. In fact, the Qing government's Chinese Educational Mission project from 1872 to 1875, led by Yung Wing, Yale's first Chinese graduate, marked the earliest official initiative of sending Chinese students to study abroad (Xu & Mao, 2005). Despite political and cultural challenges, many of these students became leaders in various fields during China's modernization process (Xu & Mao, 2005). Furthermore, the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship, initiated by the U.S. government in 1908 and later by the British government in 1922, became China's most important HE exchange and internationalization program before 1949 (Tu, 2005). Many elite Chinese students studied in the U.S. and UK through this scholarship program. In addition to the inward-oriented "relocation diffusion" of foreign innovations (Wu & Zha, 2018b) through sending students abroad, Christian universities established by foreign churches and missionary groups, such as Yenching University, Cheeloo University, University of Nanking, St. John's University, and Soochow University, played a significant role in introducing foreign knowledge and educational philosophies to China.

After the 1949 communist revolution, China's domestic political environment was transformed, affecting its knowledge exchange with the outside world. Christian universities were cut off from foreign missionaries, and foreign faculty and staff members were asked to leave the country. Overseas returnees at universities, especially in the humanities and social sciences, were no longer fully trusted because of Sino–Western relations. By the end of 1951, all private universities and institutions supported by overseas missionary organizations had been converted into public entities, and the Chinese government had assumed full authority over the country's HEIs. Without considering the pre-1949 experience with HE internationalization, the first significant mention of attracting and retaining international talent in national policy can be traced back to the early 1980s. Both foreign talents and overseas experts of Chinese origin were targeted by the Chinese government to bring advanced science, technology, and management experience to state construction. To attract and retain well-known foreign experts, the Chinese government adopted an open attitude and allowed foreign experts to receive honorary academic titles and serve as committee members of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (State Council, 1983). After moving into the 1990s and 2000s, with an increasing number of Chinese studying abroad, attracting more high-end overseas returnees received more attention from the government (e.g., the "Thousand Talents Program," and the "National Science Fund for Distinguished Young Scholars"). During the most recent decade, the Chinese government has implemented flexible and supportive policies to attract and retain talented individuals to further enhance China's international competitiveness. According to Zwetsloot (2020), "China has formulated a multi-pronged strategy for growing its science and technology talent pool: improving domestic education; attracting overseas Chinese talent, and attracting foreign talent" (p.

1). However, some scholars have observed that Chinese academics who have returned to China after studying overseas are not being utilized to their full potential by local institutions due to "utilitarian practices of macrolevel policies at the institutional level" (Zheng &Wu, 2022, p. 614). In the same vein, "in many cases, plans that look impressive on paper have yielded mixed results in practice […while] attracting high-quality talent from abroad has proved challenging" (Zwetsloot, 2020, p. 1).

Theoretical framework: innovation diffusion, indigenization, and Holmes' taxonomy of educational settings

The concept of internationalization in HE has been a subject of scholarly debate, with Knight (1997) and Lingard and Rizvi (1998) contending that HE internationalization is closely linked to a country's history, culture, resources, and priorities. Yang (2000) concurs with this view, highlighting the importance of this relationship. Wu and Zha (2018b) provide further insights into the historical and contemporary dynamics of HE internationalization, arguing that innovations, including knowledge, culture, HE models, and norms, have been imported or exported through HE internationalization. They note that recent decades have seen new dynamics emerging from countries in the developing world (Wu & Zha, 2018b). To account for these new dynamics, they proposed a typology that categorizes the interactions between HE systems in different states as inward- and outward-oriented, primarily based on the direction of the spread or diffusion of innovations (Wu & Zha, 2018b). Wu and Zha (2018a) define inward-oriented HE internationalization as "the process and activities of learning from foreign knowledge, culture, HE models, and norms through internationalization" (p. 260). On the other hand, outward-orientation internationalization refers to the process of exporting domestic innovations to the world (Wu & Zha, 2018b).

Wu and Zha's (2018b) typology has further categorized innovation diffusion through internationalization into "expansion diffusion" and "relocation diffusion," based on whether the occurrence of innovation diffusion relies on the mobility of people/materials (Wu & Zha, 2018b). For "expansion diffusion," HE systems "may spontaneously learn from foreign knowledge and cultures due to their attractiveness, or follow foreign HE models and norms for capacity building" (Wu & Zha, 2018b, pp. 264–265). Conversely, for "relocation diffusion," "a source HE system may promote and export its HE programs and providers, implement HE-related cultural diplomacy programs overseas, and recruit international students to enhance its […] international status" (Wu & Zha, 2018b, pp. 264–265). In the Chinese context, examples of "expansion diffusion" of foreign innovations through inward-oriented HE internationalization/Westernization/colonization prior to 1949 included the spontaneous learning and use of foreign languages and HE philosophies in domestic institutions. "Relocation diffusion" of foreign innovations occurred mainly through the mobility of people, including young returnees who were once supported by government scholarships (e.g., the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship) and foreign faculty members primarily sent abroad by missionary agencies. This typology provides a valuable framework for analyzing how innovation diffusion occurs during HE internationalization and highlights the importance of historical roots in shaping this process.

Inward-oriented diffusion of innovations through HE internationalization in China can be traced back to its pre-1949 history. Elements such as English language instruction, foreign faculty, and outbound student mobility, were features of Chinese HE over a century ago in the context of colonialization. Colonialism is the subjugation of one people by another (Kohn & Reddy, 2017) and involves inferiority in legal, administrative, social, and cultural terms (Steinmetz, 2014). Nowell et al. (2022) argue that China was partitioned by colonial powers at the turn of the nineteenth century while remaining nominally independent. However, "preliminary attempts to Westernize Chinese society from within did not deter further foreign penetration, nor did the subsequent revolution (1911) succeed in freeing China from Western domination" ("The Open Door Policy," para. 1). Against this backdrop, several modern universities were established by foreign missionaries with the explicit objective of converting Chinese to Christianity. Given this historical context, "colonized internationalization" describes these educational and social phenomena in early Christian universities in China. This terminology underscores the role of colonialism in shaping the inward-oriented diffusion of innovations through HE internationalization and provides a critical lens through which to view this phenomenon.

Indigenization occurs naturally "when foreign and local cultures come into contact with one another […whether] within Western contexts, between Western and non-Western contexts, or within non-Western contexts" (Gray & Coates, 2010, p. 2). Although indigenization is a concern in various contexts, it is particularly relevant in developing countries such as China, with the potential to deepen sensitivity to the richness of local customs and behaviors driven by indigenous traditions (Adair, 1999). However, as Gray and Coates (2010) pointed out, it also runs the risk of being ethnocentric (Gray & Coates, 2010). Our historical exploration and empirical research provide different insights into this theme. China's long history and culture made foreign missionaries realize that they could not conquer the Chinese through the English language and religion alone, leading them to explore indigenization as an alternative approach. Their success was due to their integration of Christian and

Chinese characteristics, "integrating elements of traditional Chinese folk religion […to make] Christian beliefs more acceptable" (Bays, 1996; cited in Ng, 2014, p. 38). However, our empirical studies of the present situation mainly reveal a tendency toward self-colonization, where foreign HE models are superficially interpreted and followed. HE internationalization at the national, sectoral, and institutional levels is often conceptualized as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education" (Knight, 2004, p. 2). However, as some scholars argue, internationalization itself is also problematic, with the risk of leading to universalization and adaptation (e.g., Gray, 2005). Such aftermaths have been observed during our empirical fieldwork.

Above all, considerations of historical, cultural, and religious roots are essential when analyzing empirical data collected from Chinese institutions. This study employed Holmes' (1981) four-pattern framework to analyze contextual features of educational issues. This framework draws on Karl Popper's critical dualism, which differentiates "between the man-enforced normative laws" that can be made, changed, and estimated by man, and the "natural regularities" or "sociological laws" that "are connected with the functioning of social institutions" and "play a role in our social life similar to natural law in engineering" (Holmes, 1981, p. 77). This inspired Holmes (1981) "to draw a distinction between a social world of convention and a social world of institutions" (pp. 76–77). His taxonomy for understanding the setting of target educational issues contains four patterns: normative, institutional, environmental, and mental states or people's "lower valuations" which "motivate their behavior" (Holmes, 1981, p. 83). Normative patterns involve statements about norms and normative laws, (Holmes, 1981), while patterns of mental states refer to people's persistent beliefs related to cultural and historical traditions. Holmes believes that "human behavior does not always follow the expressed beliefs […] but often reflects what people truly believe deep in their hearts" (Wu, 2021, p. 126). Inspired by Holmes' framework, this study analyzes the overall conditions of regional and institutional research contexts, normative institutional and academic cultures, institutional patterns of talent recruiting policies and strategies, and participants' real thoughts about professional development and social contribution. The aim is to gain fresh insights into HE internationalization practices in mainland China.

Research methods

We regard case study as a methodology and strategy for inquiry in which "the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information" (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). Among the three types of case study identified by Stake (2005), the intrinsic case study is conducted mainly due to the research interest in the case itself. For this investigation as a qualitative intrinsic case study (Stake, 2005), two cases were selected: East China Normal University (ECNU) and Soochow University. Both universities have a Christian heritage and predecessors with experience in HE internationalization. St. John's University, one of ECNU's predecessors, was the first HE institution (HEI) in China to adopt English as the language of instruction and a leading center for English medium HE (Gu & Zhang, 2007), while the Christian Soochow [*Dongwu*] was the first university to adopt Western-style education in modern China (Wang & Zhu, 2009). More importantly, the two predecessors have successful experience in recruiting faculty members. At present, both universities are actively involved in internationalization. We further narrow down our focus to the School of Tulip (RS1) at ECNU and the School of Lily (RS2) at Soochow University. RS1 plays the most active role in internationalization within the university, promoting academic mobility and recruiting foreign faculty. RS2 takes a more flexible approach, recruiting scholars with different backgrounds and helping returnees and foreigners adapt to the local academic environment. We decided to focus on RS1 and RS2 due to their academic heritage, institutional experience, and accessibility, which will facilitate our research and contribute to providing insightful findings.

Our theoretical framework guided our data collection, taking into account the macrolevel policy contexts of each case during different eras (pre-1949 and the reform period). We collected data from policy documents, observation, semistructured interviews, and key informant interviews. In particular, we gathered data from historical files and government policy documents to explore the historical contexts of the two universities. For RS1, we recruited 16 participants (P*) through acquaintances and snowball sampling and used observations and individual interviews for data collection. For RS2, we made several field visits and used key informant interviewing, onsite observations, and online observations for data collection with seven research participants involved (see Table 1). We focused on participants' reflections on the research context, institutional/academic culture, talent recruitment policies/strategies, and professional development. Each interview lasted 1–1.5 h. As this is an intrinsic case study, we do not aim for a holistic description or comparison but rather an in-depth understanding of specific aspects of the case, i.e., historical analysis of the faculty recruitment of the two cases as well as field investigations on the matter at RS1 and RS2. Data analysis is a process of "systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials" which

Table 1 Target institutions and participants

Target institutions and cases	Participants	Identities
RS1, East China Normal University ($N=16$)	P1	Lecturer/research fellow
	P2	Lecturer/research fellow
	P3	Lecturer/research fellow
	P4	Associate Professor
	P5	Lecturer/research fellow
	P6	Associate Professor
	P7	Lecturer
	P8	Lecturer/research fellow
	P9	Lecturer/research fellow
	P10	Lecturer/research fellow
	P11	Lecturer/research fellow
	P12	Associate Professor & Vice Chair
	P13	Associate Professor
	P14	Professor & Chair
	P15	Associate Professor
	P16	Associate Professor
RS2, Soochow University ($N=7$)	P17	Senior Administrator
	P18	Associate Professor
	P19	Professor
	P20	Associate Professor
	P21	Professor
	P22	Administrator
	P23	Professor & Vice Dean

are accumulated for producing findings, while data interpretation is "developing ideas about [findings] and relating them to the literature and to broader concerns and concepts" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 159) in this research. We analyzed the data during and after data collection to create a meaningful dialogue between our theoretical lens and the data. Data analysis went through initial coding, category development, and thematic analysis. The main themes that emerged were regional and institutional research environments, institutional and academic cultures, talent recruitment policies and strategies, and the expectations of Chinese scholars returning from overseas academic programs regarding professional development and making social contributions. Confidentiality and trustworthiness, as well as ethics are fully guaranteed in this research.

Findings and discussion

Our historical analysis and field investigation show similarities and differences of the two case universities historically and presently. In general, HE in mainland China has predominantly undergone an inward-oriented diffusion of innovations. This process involves acquiring foreign knowledge and learning about other cultures, HE models, and norms through internationalization, which has occurred during the Republican era and after the Reform and Opening Up. The two case universities, along with their predecessors, well represent internationalization and indigenization of HE in China, particularly during the pre-1949 period. Presently, utilitarianism and unhealthy academic culture have harmed Chinese HEIs by limiting the role and dwarfing the image of overseas returnees, challenging the quality of HE development in mainland China. In other words, the internationalization of HE that took place before 1949 was substantial and took indigenization into account. This is in stark contrast to the superficial approach to internationalization that characterizes Chinese HE today. As discussed by Zheng and Wu (2022) in their examination of the internationalization of the humanities and social sciences in Chinese universities.

Historical analysis

As mentioned, both expansion and relocation diffusion of innovations through HE internationalization are not brand new for mainland China since its "reform and opening up," although the inward-oriented process in China's pre-1949 period might be better described as Westernization or colonization from certain perspectives. In terms of our two cases, both of their predecessor institutions embraced open, modern, inclusive, and realistic cultures, within which faculty hiring was a priority. University administrators actively

recruited appropriate candidates, and recommendations were a common approach to faculty recruitment. In general, internationalization and indigenization characterized their early history, which provides us with a unique perspective for analyzing the present.

St. John's University as a predecessor of ECNU and its faculty team

The present ECNU was founded in 1951 by the regional government based on two private universities in Shanghai, the Great China University and Kwang Hua University (Yuan & Wang, 2001). Guanghua University, one of its predecessor institutions, was established in 1925 when scholars and students left St. John's University due to its refusal to support student protests against imperialist interests (Hayhoe et al., 2011, p. 3). In 1952, most of the departments of St. John's University were merged into ECNU as part of a nationwide restructuring of universities and colleges (Yuan & Wang, 2001). ECNU currently manages St. John's archives and includes its global alumni group as part of its alumni association. As one of China's oldest and most prestigious Christian universities, St. John's University's location in Shanghai was no accident. After the First Opium War, Shanghai's geographical location made it China's most important port for international trade and a missionary center for foreign churches. In 1865 and 1866, the American Episcopal Church established the two educational predecessors of St. John's University, Baird Hall and Duane Hall (Xu, 2008). Through the efforts of three prominent pastors, Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky, Yen Yun-Ching, and Francis Lister Hawks Pott, these Christian primary schools, designed for missionary purposes, gradually developed into a modern university (Xu, 2008). Since its inception as an HEI in 1879, St. John's University has employed both Chinese and foreign faculty members, such as its early members William Jones Boone Jr., professor of English literature and ethics, Yen Yun-Ching, professor of mathematics and natural philosophy, Daniel M. Bates, professor of history and religious studies, and Chinese faculty members who taught Chinese (Xu, 2008). From 1888 to 1925, the university grew rapidly under the leadership of its president, Francis Lister Hawks Pott, who succeeded in creating an American-style campus culture at St. John's by promoting English-medium education (Xu, 2008). By its 40th anniversary in 1919, the university had a wide range of disciplines including the humanities, natural sciences, theology, medicine, and Chinese literature and philosophy. Other disciplines, including economics, journalism, and civil engineering, were established later (Xu, 2008). Despite the exodus of faculty and students in 1925 and the devastating effects of the Sino–Japanese War, St. John's University remained one of China's most prestigious universities until 1952.

Throughout its pre-1949 history, both domestic and foreign faculty members with diverse backgrounds provided Chinese students high-quality academic training. For instance, Professor Wen Youzhang [James G. Endicott], a Canadian born in China's Sichuan Province, taught in the Department of Education at St. John's University. His concept of "direct-education" differed greatly from Dewey's educational philosophy, which was predominant in St. John's Department of Education, but was well accepted by Chinese students at the time (Yu & Wang, 2009). His courses combined educational theories and social realities and attracted students not only from the education department but also from the departments of political science and economics to attend (Yu & Wang, 2009). According to the recollections of his students at St. John's University, Wen Youzhang often invited students to his home after class to share views on political and social issues (Yu & Wang, 2009). This stimulated students' enthusiasm for learning and broadened their horizons. Meng Xiancheng might be one of the most representative Chinese faculty members. As the first president of ECNU, Meng "was a noted educational theorist [at St. John's University before 1925], who had studied in the United States and England in the early part of the century and translated a number of John Dewey's works into Chinese" (Hayhoe et al., 2011, p. 4). Overall, foreign professors (e.g., James G. Endicott and W. H. Taylor) and Chinese scholars who had overseas experience (e.g., Meng Xiancheng and Ni Baochun) together contributed to the diverse academic culture at St. John's University before 1949.

Christian Soochow [*Dongwu*] University and its faculty team

The pre-1949 history of the second case study is similar. Soochow [*Suzhou*] University can be traced to over one hundred years ago when the first Western-style Soochow [*Dongwu*] University (1900–1952) was established in China and registered in the State of Tennessee by the American Methodist Episcopal Church. Compared with St. John's, it particularity lies in the fact that such a university did not materialize in the coastal metropolises imbued with Western influences, such as Shanghai, but in Suzhou, where the profound cultural and educational traditions spanning over several millennia have contributed to the city's acceptance/tolerance of a church university (Wang & Zhu, 2009). At the very beginning, Bishop Alpheus Wilson, one of the board members of the newly established university, elaborated in one U.S. fundraising speech that the Chinese people traditionally prioritized education, and if they turned premodern Chinese education into Christian education, then all Chinese people from the emperor to the lowliest citizen would be transformed (Wang, 2009, p. 34). Indeed, the emergence of the Christian Soochow [*Dongwu*] University played a

pioneering role in the development of modern HE in China. The university's first three American presidents successively made tremendous efforts to develop a modern HEI in China. For instance, the first president, Dr. Anderson, insisted that education should take precedence over religious proselytizing in a church university, and he related the cultivation of students to the development of the state and society. The university's motto at the time, "Unto A Full Grown Man," reveals this orientation. Unlike some other Western missionaries, he realized the importance of indigenization and argued that Chinese people should play a leading role in developing their own HE and church affairs (Ji, 1913). Dr. Anderson recounted that the newly adopted Western education system in China must be transformed through indigenization, but not maintain its exoticism (as cited in Wang et al., 2010). Given the nationalist and anti-imperialist wave in China of the 1920s, the third president, Dr. Nance, recommended his student Yang Yongqing, who had graduated from Soochow University and continued his studies in the U.S., for the presidency. In 1927, Yang became the university's first Chinese president and served his alma mater until 1952, when the nationwide reorganization of HE occurred.

Faculty member recruitment also underwent a transition from colonized internationalization to indigenization before 1949. Dr. Anderson spotlighted the importance of high-quality faculty members. He thought that real talents were more valuable than hardware (as cited in Wang et al., 2010). However, at the very beginning, the university lacked faculty members, and all courses were taught by a handful of American missionaries. But as 1903 approached, there were a total of 14 faculty members, including seven Americans and seven Chinese. Conscious of traditional Chinese culture and believing that English would ultimately become the second language of the Chinese people, President Anderson suggested that students learn their native language and play a role in advancing global development and culture. China's own history and civilization had never been neglected at this Christian university (Nance, 1956). Anderson's governance contributed to the university's transition from colonization-internationalization to indigenization. Between 1927 and 1929, in the light of China's domestic social movement, the university board decided to re-elect members and appoint a Chinese as the president, and the university was transformed from an American Christian university to a private university. Many outstanding graduates of Soochow [*Dongwu*] came back after further studies in Western countries to serve their alma mater as faculty members (Wang, 2009). For instance, Dr. Nathaniel Gist, a professor of biology at Soochow, played a key role in the disciplinary construction of sciences and graduate education. His first master's student, Shi Jiyan, was also the first person to obtain a master's degree in biology in China and gained academic attention for his publication on rice in an American journal. One of Gist's master's students, Hu Jingfu, later returned to China after completing his PhD in biology with Professor James G. Needham at Cornell University, serving as Chair of the Department of Biology at Soochow University between 1920 and 1926 (Wang, 2009).

Analyzing present practices via multiple approaches

As previously mentioned, translating policy rhetoric into practice is a complex process. We conducted our research at two universities with historical roots in "internationalization," looking for better practices. However, the present never replicates history or linearly continues historical roots. The interview data further explain the complex reality.

Regional and institutional research context

Many of our participants mentioned that the regional and institutional research environment was their main concern regarding the job search after returning to mainland China. For instance, participant P1 told us that she has a strong sense of affection for the city of Shanghai. When looking for an academic position, she cares much about the research environment and field. She conveyed,

> I have a lot of friends here and I spent almost one year in Shanghai collecting data […] for my doctoral thesis. When I was looking for an [academic] position, […] I would like to join in a place where I might have the best chance of finding people who are like-minded with me, [and therefore] we can have philosophical discussions. (P1)

Similarly, in addition to personal expectations of a better living environment, participant P2 stated that she wanted to join ECNU because it was one of the best universities in her research field. "For continuing my research, I am sure that the platform is very important" (P2). She highlighted the influence that a stable research community and calm atmosphere have on knowledge production: "I do think that a university should at least make its faculty members feel that they are stable there, [in order to make] them really want to do something that they are really interested in" (P2).

In contrast to idealized expectations, participant P4 thought that, although Shanghai was Westernized, its academic environment was not satisfying. According to her observation, there lacks rigorous research teams and long-run research agendas in her field. She also thought that "the current environment and policy context do not allow people to have long-term plans, and cooperation is difficult because people are all eager to fulfill certain quantified tasks" (P4). Participants P7 and P10 both considered other cities in mainland China. Participant P7 failed to obtain an offer from another university, while P10 felt that Beijing was even

harsher to young scholars than Shanghai. Participant P16 pointed out that the cosmopolitan image of Shanghai and its HEIs might impress people. However, she found that neither policies nor services in Shanghai were considerate or ready to support universities and young scholars. She said,

> Although internationalization is highly evaluated here, there are many problems at both municipal and institutional levels. For instance, university administrators are not ready to deal with internationalization issues. When international students, foreign faculty members, and Chinese scholars with overseas academic credentials come, they could not appropriately accommodate their engagement into the academic community. I think many of us had a hard time during our first years working here. (P16)

Participant P17, an administrator and a faculty member, added that recruiting and retaining foreign scholars is challenging since many things are unknown to them. Foreign scholars and returnees need to learn how to tackle the related issues and adapt to cultural differences.

In contrast with our findings from RS1, both policies and services related to internationalization seem to be comparatively better at RS2. As one of our key informants P17 shared with us,

> Our university used to have an important program called the Overseas Training Program for Young Outstanding Administrators, which was implemented for two sessions and was entirely initiated by our university. Both the former and current [university] presidents have a broad horizon. The former president […] thought that the internationalization of administrative staff was also a crucial aspect to the development of our university, so both staff members of our laboratory and university administrators arranged to make short-term visits to foreign institutions. Our middle-level administrators used to take a year off to visit a foreign university. We not only visited its administrative units, but also went to the classroom to observe teaching and learning. We had substantially exchanged ideas with their deans, administrators, and faculty members regarding administration on international issues. (P17)

Hence, it seems that many university administrators at RS2 have a deeper understanding of internationalization. She went on to tell us that,

> In order to attract and retain talents, we have offered facilities and kindness. For instance, we established a service center for foreign staff and students on campus. We also hold orientation salons for foreign staff members to get to know the university and local people. We hope to create such an atmosphere, which is friendlier and more supportive, and not to make foreigners feel that they are isolated or they do not belong here. (P17)

Our interview with participant P18 shows that she has benefited from such services and university support with her visa and social benefits. This may be partly due to the international nature of the city where the university is located. The China–Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park, established in 1994, and Sino–foreign joint HEIs, such as Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University that was established in the last decade, both reveal the city's international character, according to P18. Based on a deeper knowledge of internationalization, administrators may not focus only on the number of recruited returnees without providing sufficient support, as many Chinese universities have done.

Institutional and academic culture

In addition to sharing their thoughts on the regional and research context, participants expressed their confusion and the contradictions between their previous (overseas) and current institutions. Since they all obtained doctoral degrees abroad, there are tensions between the foreign academic culture they experienced and the domestic academic disciplinary culture of mainland China at their present site. Participant P1 shared,

> The department where I studied in is very traditional. At that time, there were some unwritten rules told by my supervisor, which indicated that they would not encourage you to publish during your degree studies. Because they thought that we were still in the process of exploration and there is no need to rush to publish those immature ideas. (P1)

Compared with her overseas experience, she further mentioned that,

> Some people [at my current institution] are not serious about authorship and academic contributions. It looks like they are "trading," offering authorship to others too easily, regardless of whether they have contributed or not. I personally feel greatly challenged by such violations of academic ethics and integrity. (P1)

Participant P4, who obtained her PhD in the U.S., also commented on ethics and authorships. She told us that, unlike many Chinese students who prefer to study with "big names" in the field and publish papers with their supervisors in so-called top journals, her doctoral supervisor played an active role in training her to become an independent scholar.

> My supervisor […] felt that he was just leading me in, then what I should become and whether I should go beyond that depend on my own ability. In terms of collaboration, my supervisor told me that except for

> my doctoral dissertation, there was no need to publish with his name. He believed that I could do it independently. I am influenced by his educational philosophy because he leads you but he leaves enough room for you to become independent. I think that I will benefit from such a training model throughout my lifetime, rather than just obtaining something from him right away. (P4)

In terms of those overseas returnees who worked within the domestic academic community for a relatively longer time, after serving the university for almost 20 years, participant P12 told us that it was very difficult to become accustomed to the domestic academic environment, especially during the first 3 years. Both her commitment to academic integrity and quality have been greatly challenged by the micro academic culture at her institution. She said,

> Up until today, I can say that I have not been assimilated into that awkward and pompous academic culture. Even some young scholars know how to play tricks and power. They don't delve into research and teaching but would like to take shortcuts. They are aggressive but do not respect intellectual property. They lack a sense of responsibility, let alone offer high-quality supervision to students. All these contradict what my supervisor taught me over twenty years ago. (P12)

Participant P13 is an established scholar in her field and graduated from a prestigious foreign university. She also shared her story about struggling to publish articles in Chinese to meet promotion criteria for her permanent position and felt it was difficult to join the domestic research community. She told us that,

> I was in deep desperation as I submitted many papers in Chinese to domestic journals every year. However, none of them were accepted in the first few years. Those journals never provided any feedback to me. Finally, a well-known professor helped me out and my paper has started to be accepted by those journals. Then I survived with publications. (P13)

Talent recruitment policies and strategies

In response to our research question about national/regional/institutional talent recruiting policies and strategies, many participants expressed their views on the matter. Participant P16 thought that many national, regional, and institutional projects have been implemented, attracting talented Chinese studying overseas to return and contribute to China's state construction. However, at the institutional level, faculty recruiting policies and strategies that emphasize university rankings and publications were reflected upon by all participants. Obviously, "rankings as social constructions" which "tend to reproduce previous formal and informal hierarchies" (Rostan & Vaira, 2011, p. ix) have been ignored by institutional policymakers and administrators.

P1 said, "I think such requirements are fair enough, however, I personally think not all Cambridge graduates are excellent" (P1). P2 thought that using the university ranking as a means to filter potential faculty members was too absolute and narrow-minded. She doubted the reliability and validity of university rankings and argued that the quality of universities should not be judged by all kinds of rankings. She also insisted that the strategy would eventually be abandoned as it is unscientific to judge a scholar, especially an emerging one, by SSCI publications only.

> There are also academic journals around the world that have been published for years but are not included in the SSCI. Articles published in SSCI journals do not mean they are all good and vice versa. I think the purpose of our research is to solve practical problems. Scientific research is different from business. We do it out of social concerns, but not for profit. The nature of the occupation as a faculty member encompasses a devoted spirit. Therefore, faculty members should not be evaluated by such pragmatic policies and strategies. (P2)

Participant P3 talked about the differences in faculty recruitment between the UK and China. She pointed out that universities in the UK highly value peer review results, whereas in mainland China, a person's previously earned positions, titles, and academic degrees from prestigious foreign universities are prioritized. Furthermore, participant P5 pointed out recruiting talent should consider other criteria. She narrated,

> In fact, I myself can say that I am a beneficiary of such policies and strategies, but I actually think that we must look at whom this person […] really is. Yet, in such a fast-paced environment, it is impossible to make other people know you well. But I would like people to get to know me not because of my publications, but because I am an honest person, a hard-working person, a reliable person, etc. Also, I do think human beings are complex, but teamwork spirit and academic integrity are both necessary. I have also found most of those who graduated from the world's top universities either have a solid educational foundation or work very hard. So there is certainly a reasonable part of such policies and strategies. (P5)

Participant P6 thought that domestic academic institutions could not truly engage in dialogue with the West without recruiting faculty members with overseas experience. She added that "simply having an overseas academic degree just meets the bottom line. The university and the faculty

recruitment committee should figure out if a candidate has really undergone foreign academic training and cross-cultural training and has learned something from it" (P6). Participant P10 shared the following about the aftermath of using university rankings and publication record to recruit faculty:

> Actually, we have already lost some talented people. One of my colleagues, an authenticated researcher in critical thinking, left us for Cambridge. He enjoyed living in China but could not agree with such pragmatic policies toward "publish or perish." He thought that such pragmatic orientation contradicts his academic belief. His stay should have helped us make big progress in critical thinking, but he left and now none of us are really engaged in this research area. I personally sort of understand that the world university ranking mostly depends on the number of SSCI publications. That is why the university is in urgent demand of a group of faculty members with overseas academic experience to contribute to publications. In a case where all candidates graduated from world-class overseas universities, publication becomes a hard indicator and a door knocker for them to obtain a faculty position in mainland Chinese research universities. (P10)

In contrast with RS1, RS2 appears more amenable to talent recruitment. Our interview with participants P19 and P20 revealed that administrators and faculty members at RS2 have a deeper understanding of talent recruitment and knowledge production. They disagree with the pragmatic measures and instead have adopted a more humanistic perspective on the academic evaluation of faculty members. As P18 told us,

> A few candidates with a bunch of publications came here for a job interview but finally failed, since we do not judge a person merely based on the quantity of publications, instead, we also care about their personalities and other contributions. (P18)

However, as the university has started to join the ranking pool, administrators at RS2 also highlight the quantified knowledge production.

Real thoughts on professional development and social contributions

In answering our question, "what is your expectation for your professional development," almost all participants described their future plans and expressed their deep aspiration to contribute to society. Participant P1 expressed a passion for oral history with a specific focus. She said,

> I hope I am able to, for example, write an oral history textbook, and build a school museum. Since I myself have learned so much and gained a better understanding toward life from oral history, I wish I can preserve more stories and memories of […my target group] and make more of them benefit from those stories and memories. I also want to meet more scholars who can challenge me more intellectually and engage in more academic dialogue. I wish to make the history of […my target group] known to the world and showcase what we can do for the world. (P1)

Participant P2 explicitly expressed that she would like to make good use of the platform provided by the university and contribute to the larger academic community, given that she has benefited significantly from it. She said, "I feel I need to devote myself to society, for instance, to serve domestic practices, facilitate reform, do empirical research, help school teachers, and publish research findings" (P2). She also hoped that the university could offer some support and certain academic freedom but not intervention:

> I did not complete my degree studies at this university. Therefore, I am not familiar with everything here. People are nice, but I just feel it's hard to melt into the new academic environment. Sometimes I just feel I come from another system and am like a stranger. I need to take social networking seriously into account. (P2)

Unlike P2, participant P3 told us that she completed both her undergraduate and master's studies in mainland China, and therefore was familiar with the domestic academic situation. However, she felt a bit disappointed:

> So many years have passed, but the situation has not changed a lot. To meet evaluation criterion should not be our task. Our job has an explorable process. We are knowledge producers but not knowledge workers. Academic publication is just a superficial phenomenon. The research process should be more valued instead as we are always in the process of exploration. At the early stage of an academic career, we need to accumulate more academic experiences and polish our ideas and thoughts. We need such a process. I previously did research for fun, but now I come to realize we should take more social responsibilities. This relates to my intellectual values. (P2)

Participant P4 had a relatively relaxed attitude about academic performance. She thought that "as a scholar, our academic achievement will always be there no matter if it is good or bad. I personally care more about my life and wellbeing" (P4). Participant P5 thought the role of faculty members should never be restricted to publishing. She highlighted teaching and articulated that faculty members should

spend more time and energy thinking about motivating and inspiring students. She described her ideal academic life. "I would like to work with students. My expected academic life is that I have my own teaching. I also spend some time on research. If time allows, I would also like to collaborate with other colleagues" (P5). Of all the research participants, only participant P6 agreed with the institutional audit culture around professional development.

> I am fine with the rule of "publish or perish." I think the university should eliminate those incompetent faculty members. It is quite reasonable. I did not have teaching experience during my previous studies. I don't want to put much of my energy into teaching in the future, either. (P6)

Participant P7, who joined another institute at ECNU, expressed feeling more freedom in mainland China than in the United States, as he has found it easier to start his academic career and to identify opportunities, such as offering English courses, given his previous academic studies in the United States. Participant P10 thought she needed some institutional support because her focus during her studies in Hong Kong differed from her current work. She hoped to receive assistance in relocating to a new environment. She thought attending international conferences would be a good way to seek out potential international collaborations. She indicated a passion for teaching and hopes to devote herself to designing and teaching courses in the future. According to their expectations for future professional development, we found that for most of the participants, there is a motivation to promote inward diffusion of innovations to make contributions to either the academic community or society in a broader sense, such as introducing innovative methodological approaches (at least for the domestic academic community) while conducting research in local scenarios. However, their initial optimistic expectations face multiple challenges worth discussing further.

Discussion: a historical–present comparison

It is apparent that the primary objective of comparing the similarities and differences between the two periods is to elucidate why and how these dramatic changes occurred, the resultant effects, and the lessons that can be drawn from history to address the current challenges faced by Chinese HE. As mentioned, although the current situation is never a linear continuation of history, pre-1949 traditions, such as Christian universities supported by foreign churches, have influenced the current internationalization practices of both institutions. Our observation and research visits enabled us to witness the historical buildings and other material legacies, such as statues of the first foreign and domestic presidents of the Christian Soochow University and relevant scripts. However, we have found that significant influences on the present reality from rich historical roots with internationalization have hardly been connected, especially at the institutional and administrative levels. Historical legacies, such as the university governance model, could not be inherited mainly due to political/ideological reasons. As Hayhoe (1996) pointed out, reforms such as "the reordering of colleges and departments" in the 1950s under Soviet guidance left no chance for private and missionary colleges to survive. "Universities that had grown up over decades [during China's Republican period] with fairly comprehensive programs, including humanities, basic sciences, engineering, education, agriculture, and medicine were now dismembered, with their various departments required to amalgamate into an entirely new constellation of institutions" (Hayhoe, 1996, p. 75). The knowledge map and the mission of HE have been totally altered in line with the state construction of a communist China (Hayhoe, 1996). Hence, the present internationalization practices are neither replications nor a rejuvenation of those from the early twentieth century.

Due to policy and ideological constraints, although both institutions are in good standing with their peer institutions in China in terms of HE internationalization, neither university is as strong as it previously was as a Christian university in China, which emphasized both foreign/Western knowledge acquisition and indigenization. RS2 has made more positive attempts at internationalization within the existing policy context, including efforts to create a more inclusive atmosphere for both overseas returnees and foreign scholars. It is noteworthy that this is interestingly linked to the fact that Soochow has more symbolic objects related to its Christian predecessor institution in both its historic and new campuses, such as a replica of the old university gate with a motto from the biblical book of the Ephesians. Within a centralized system, some scholars have already shown the tensions between macro policy rhetoric and institutional practices (Zheng & Wu, 2022). One typical problem is how to retain and make good use of talented overseas returnees. In contrast to the policies of the predecessor institutions of the two universities in recruiting and retaining talented people and the indigenization of talent, today, the universities exhibit less openness and reflection on the matter, mainly due to ideological constraints, the policy context, and academic culture, rather than institutional agency. Moreover, it seems obvious that the internationalization of faculty can have a significant impact on other dimensions, such as research collaboration and knowledge exchange, internationalization of curriculum and teaching, and diversity and inclusiveness of institutional culture and value (Yuan, 2011; see also Guo et al., 2022). More specifically, the loss or marginalization of overseas returnees can hinder both substantive international research collaborations and the

development of students' intercultural communication and critical thinking skills.

Conclusion

According to the empirical data, along with China's rapid economic growth and opening-up policy in the past decades, the two case universities have been enjoying the comparative advantage in human resources, as many faculty members with overseas credentials have returned to join them. However, compared with a century ago, talented overseas returnees have not received enough attention and have not been able to significantly contribute to HE development due to several constraints, such as institutional and academic culture and utilitarianism. According to the historical analysis and history–present comparison, considering the encounter with internationalization a century ago, some positive experiences are worth further reflection. First, there was an emphasis on talent recruitment. To ensure HE operations, the two universities had been striving for talented faculty members and made good use of human resources. Second, indigenization was given much attention when developing Western HE at the two universities. Both Christian universities in the Republican period included Chinese language and culture in their curriculum and hired Chinese faculty members. Third, the goal of HE was quality education in nature. In particular, the motto of Christian Soochow University illustrates the aim of cultivating a well-rounded person. This is quite different from the current HE practices dominated by utilitarianism and an unhealthy academic culture, which have limited the role and dwarfed the image of faculty members with overseas academic experiences, who should play a key role in pure knowledge production, international communication for achieving bilateral diffusion of innovations, as well as social contribution to HE and development, rather than becoming "paper machines" and "indices of HE internationalization." In line with the view that "the seed of locally innovative pathways to internationalization has already been planted on the campuses of Chinese universities" (Zha et al., 2019, p. 684), it still seems appropriate to be relatively optimistic about the future development of internationalization of the two universities, given their historical roots and the lower valuation and expectations of individuals.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors disclosed no relevant relationships.

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