Mismatched expectations of internationalisation: Lived experiences of Chinese returnee academics in an international joint university

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Abstract
This study examines the lived experiences of Chinese academic returnee staff working in a joint venture university in China. Through in-depth interviews with 11 Chinese returnees, we explore their expectations and experiences working in an internationalised university environment following an international degree overseas. Using Bourdieu’s concepts of field and habitus as an analytic lens, the findings identify the ways that returnees imagine or expect internationalised habitus and field in the unique design of joint venture universities. Yet, through participant reflection on policies towards 100% English Medium Instruction (EMI) and internationalised curricula, we identified experienced tensions between the institution’s aim to internationalise the campus and its perceived effectiveness in implementation. Many returnees spoke of Sino-foreign institutions as a substitute for the field of Western academia, and reported challenges with implementing EMI policies that caused them to rely more on their Chinese than their international experiences which ran counter to their expectations. This analysis adds nuances to the inter-relationship between field and habitus by analysing the reasons for mismatched expectations and the way individuals engage with their own habitus in response. This article concludes by outlining implications for transnational higher education in China and other host countries.

Keywords
Chinese higher education, internationalisation, international joint university, returnee staff, transnational higher education

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Introduction

Internationalisation in higher education (HE) refers to “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2004, p. 2). It is a purposefully fuzzy definition that includes mobility of students and staff, curriculum internationalisation, knowledge transfer, transnational cooperation, and more (Kehm & Teichler, 2007). Internationalisation is one of the core features of transnational knowledge exchange since 21st Century, and is “a leading variable, encouraging and facilitating globalisation” (Mitchell & Nielsen, 2012, p. 4).

China has made multiple efforts to accelerate the internationalisation of HE. One approach has been to encourage transnational higher education (TNHE), which is defined as the phenomenon where “learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based” (Council of Europe, 2007). This trend arose when China responded to economic globalisation post-1978, shifting from a planned economy towards a socialist-oriented market, which significantly impacted the HE sector (Iftekhar & Kayombo, 2015). Chinese HE has since become less centralised, reflected in increasing institutional autonomy (Qian & Verhoeven, 2004), while becoming more profit-driven (Liu, 2021) and less politicised, referring to the transfer from ideological education to accumulation of “personal positional goods acquisition” (Yu, 2021, p. 225). Alongside this, the tendency to view domestic education in China as a shortage and international education as surplus (Liu et al., 2013) motivated the development of greater China-foreign educational cooperation, introduced in national policy texts as “Chinese-foreign cooperation in running schools” (MoE, 2019). TNHE takes various forms involving mobility between educational programmes and providers, international branch campuses, joint ventures (JV), and distance education (Knight, 2015).

The development of TNHE intersects with introduction of English-medium instruction (EMI) in Chinese HE (e.g., McKinley et al., 2021). With students and staff becoming increasingly mobile, English has become a lingua franca which is assumed to facilitate intercultural communication (e.g., House, 2003). This connects with experiences in other non-English-speaking countries, where curriculum internationalisation is often linked to changing the language of instruction to English, as this is seen to enable access to a wider range of curriculum materials and global labour markets (Duong & Chua, 2016). Therefore, EMI in many ways has been constructed as a symbol of internationalisation (e.g., Galloway et al., 2020). In China, EMI has not only been incorporated into national strategies to facilitate educational exchanges with other countries, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (Yuan & Li, 2021), but also to enhance global competitiveness by counting the percentage of the EMI courses provided by Chinese universities as one of the ranking criteria by the Ministry of Education (Hu & Lei, 2014).

With the increasing growth of TNHE institutions in China over last decade, their specific internationalised strategies, such as EMI, remain largely unexplored. To fill this gap, we investigate whether Chinese returnee staff were drawn to TNHE because of its internationalised environment symbolised by EMI, and whether their expectations matched their actual experiences. We analyse how issues like EMI implementation symbolise and problematise internationalisation within a single campus; and use a Bourdieusian lens, especially, the concepts of habitus and field to unpack institutional internationalisation in a JV in relation to individual experiences.
Internationalisation: Through the Lens of Returnee Staff

Internationalisation, from a staff perspective, is often explored through the concepts of academic mobility (e.g., Morley et al., 2019) or cross-cultural experiences (e.g., Bailey et al., 2021) of overseas staff. In the context of internationalisation in Chinese HE, previous research has highlighted challenges experienced by overseas (i.e., non-Chinese) staff, including their self-reflected unpreparedness or difficulties resulting from the mismatch between their expectations and lived experiences (Chen & Zhu, 2020). Others have highlighted staff feeling that their diversity and contributions are undervalued (Bailey et al., 2021). Perceptions of ‘foreignness’ may also lead to feelings of being isolated, rejected and marginalised due to issues such as linguistic challenges (Morley et al., 2019). In terms of TNHE setting, such as branch campuses, although they tend to have a more internationalised environment, international and expatriate staff confront no less challenges. These challenges include lack of autonomy in decision-making (Pyvis, 2011), insufficient induction (Cai & Hall, 2016), and, for expatriate staff, difficulties relating to different student profiles between home and branch campus (Wilkins & Neri, 2019).

There are also challenges encountered by staff who work in another type of TNHE, JV, defined as “independent, internationally co-founded or co-developed institutions licensed by the host country but developed through international collaboration” (Knight, 2015, p. 112). As described by Dobos (2011, p. 19), staff may find themselves “serving two masters”, where they must adjust their internationally-acquired teaching methods and language in accordance with the host institution. Shams and Huisman (2012) also raise the issue that some branch campuses established in non-Western countries with a Western provider have been accused of being culturally imperialist, and local staff might be negatively affected by such views and feel undervalued. Shams and Huisman (2012) have considered this from a managerial perspective, arguing this impact may in turn lead to decline of local staff’s teaching quality and institutional efficiency. The managerial focus echoes Chen and Zhu (2020)’s argument that studies surrounding academic staff of branch campuses centre on their role as teachers, aiming to improve teaching quality, students’ satisfaction, and thus brand image, rather than exploring staff’s lived experience, without which could be ineffective in improving the former.

However, there is limited literature exploring the lived experiences, specifically, of returnee staff in TNHE, indicating a gap waiting to be addressed as returnees are more inclined to work in an internationalised workplace. For instance, Mok et al. (2020)’s research indicate that most Chinese returnees are likely to make workplace decisions based on their competitive advantage in having international experiences; Hao et al. (2016) argue that returnees may find challenges at work readapting to China’s specific type of interpersonal relations, cultures, and workplace dynamics, which obstruct them from working in a typical Chinese-style environment. Therefore, an “atypical” workplace in China that emphasises international experiences, such as TNHE institutions, is likely to attract returnees.

While there is a relatively large amount of literature concerning staff in international HE, few help us understand the lived experiences of Chinese returnee academic staff in TNHE. Returnees, who return their home country after being educated or worked in the West, confronting less intuitive issues as those faced by international staff, which are largely shaped by mobility and cross-cultural transition, a well-documented and conceptualised phenomenon. Also, while returnees have been mobile in the past, they now reside in the country of their nationality, so mobility and cross-cultural adaptation is not the dominant force shaping their experience. However, they are not fully “domestic”, as their previous international experience effectively differentiates them from their mobile peers. Returnee staff, as staff who are in this liminal space of being both “home” (in terms of their culture and nationality) and “international” (in terms of their prior experiences abroad), potentially embody dilemmas, challenges, and tensions in the way
TNHE institutions operate. Therefore, we believe that examining returnee staff’s experience could add valuable insight to current literature on HE internationalisation. In next section, we will provide a description and justification of the reason why this research is situated in a specific TNHE institution.

**Context: Internationalisation in Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University**

In this study, we choose JV as the specific TNHE type to research. Miller-Idriss and Hanauer (2011) categorise two different underlying values under which TNHE operates, namely cultural diffusion, which aims to standardise education regardless of context, and cultural borrowing, which emphasises localised needs. JV is categorised as the latter, as their curriculum and governance structures must bridge two countries, including their political, regulatory, and cultural contexts (Feng, 2013). Therefore, JV occupy spaces of both possibility and tension for globalised knowledge exchange, perhaps more so than other forms of TNHE.

Among contemporary JV in Chinese HE, Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) is considered to be a pioneer and “one of its kind”. Both founders (Xi’an Jiaotong University, China; University of Liverpool, UK) are prestigious global universities and are perceived to be academically equal, resulting in a shared and localised model of governance and curriculum design (Feng, 2013). The institution is in stark contrast with other kinds of transnational campuses, such as the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC), whose Chinese founder (Wanli Education Group) is only in charge of administrative responsibilities, while its UK counterpart has full control of curriculum (Yu, 2021). As a result, on the standardisation/localisation spectrum, UNNC leans toward the former, attempting to build a replicated UK university in China, whereas XJTLU the latter, representing a type of institution that absorbs international educational resources and indigenises them into a local environment.

According to its official website, the university is built upon the idea of equality between China and the UK, an integration of “cultural and educational essence of the west and the east” (XJTLU, 2021b). XJTLU’s vision statement is:

“To become a research-led international university in China and a Chinese university cognised internationally for its unique features in learning and teaching, research, social service, and education management.” (XJTLU, 2020)

Aspiring to be an international university in China, XJTLU lays a strong emphasis on increasing internationalisation level. Indeed, “internationalisation” is one of the core supporting themes of its leadership agenda, which mostly relates to making progress in attracting international students and staff. Other international emphases include: a) EMI: “100% taught in English”; b) study abroad: “over 85% of graduates planned to continue their studies in world-renowned universities”; and c) provision of internationalised curriculum and student-centred pedagogy, which is framed against the exam-oriented educational tradition in China.

Equality is emphasised less in XJTLU’s staff recruitment strategies. As an independent university, XJTLU is able to carry out staff recruitment activity as an effort of an independent institution rather than branch campus (MoE, 2019). The decision of recruiting staff, therefore, mostly reflects the way XJTLU positions itself and implements its vision in practice. XJTLU’s highlight on its “international” and “unique” characteristics is reflected by the fact that its academic staff profile entailing a high degree of national diversity, with a strong preference for staff who have been professionally trained in the West. XJTLU’s staff page demonstrates that only one of the schools employs academics who have received all their professional training in China (XJTLU, 2020), implicitly prioritising returnees over exclusively domestically-trained academics.
When XJTLU highlights the fact that most staff hold a foreign nationality and strategically emphasises its diverse academic staff profile as one of its “selling points” (XJTLU, 2021b), it implies that foreign and returnee staff are in some sense important to achieving its mission.

This research sought to understand how Chinese returnee academic staff negotiate their roles to embody internationalisation in JV institutions such as XJTLU. This was accomplished through the following research questions:

RQ1: How does internationalisation influence Chinese returnee academic staff’s decision to work in a JV institution?

RQ2: How do Chinese returnee staff’s lived experiences of internationalisation in a JV institution (mis-)match with their initial expectations?

To answer these questions, Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field are utilised. In next section, an explanation will be provided regarding why Bourdieu’s conceptual tool is insightful in understanding the complexity and dynamics associated with staff’s experiences within the field of internationalised HE.

Conceptual Framework: When Imagined and Actual Fields Diverge

This study refers largely to Bourdieu’s concepts of “habitus” and “field”, which are key conceptualisations for analysing individuals’ internalisation of social regularities, i.e., “how social structure and individual agency can be reconciled” (Maton, 2014, p. 49). According to Bourdieu (1977, p. 214), habitus represents “a way of being, a habitual state...a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination”. Habitus is shaped by one’s past and present and shapes one’s present and future practises (Bourdieu, 1992). Field is “a structured social space, a field of forces (which) contains people who dominate, and people are dominated...a space in which various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 41). Therefore, concepts of field and habitus can be applied to the study of international HE spaces, and to mobile staff, as they help to explain how different spaces are structured and how individuals acquire sets of dispositions to occupy those spaces.

A Bourdieusian perspective is insightful for explaining why people with certain habitus are more prone to consider entering a particular field as a ‘natural’ step (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 127) highlight this taken-for-grantedness and smoothness when entering a familiar field:

[W]hen habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a fish in water: it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted.

This study is situated in the global field of HE, where knowledge produced in a Western way is attached with more valuable symbolic capital compared to knowledge produced in a non-Western way. Symbolic capital, according to Bourdieu (1986, p. 244), “is recognized as legitimate competence, as authority exerting an effect of (mis)recognition”. Globalisation of HE affects the role of symbolic capital in various ways in non-Western countries, such as “linguistic skew”, where graduates of EMI courses are disproportionately prioritised in job markets (Choi, 2010, p. 237). This indicates that English has greater symbolic capital than other global languages.

Symbolic violence happens when Western hegemony “succeeds in imposing meanings and in imposing it as legitimate in disguising the relations of power” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p. 18), and is therefore exercised against non-Western people through epistemic exclusion and
marginalisation from powerful positions. Further, non-Western people may internalise the superiority and hegemonic position of Western knowledge, considering it as “natural”, perpetuating this through applying deficit discourses to those who fail to internalise Western knowledge or practices (e.g., Yu, 2021). Since most academic staff in XJTLU have been educated in Western countries, they can be said to have been immersed in the field of Western HE, where this symbolic violence is endemic, and to have developed their habitus accordingly. Bourdieu specifically categorised all pedagogy as symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979), regardless of its progressive intent, and thus academic staff’s pedagogic practices, knowledge, and dispositions (habitus) are shaped by and reproduce symbolic violence. They are structured by the global knowledge system that privileges Western forms of knowledge and approaches to learning that are situated as ‘Western’.

When an individual does not possess “feel for the game” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 66), i.e., their habitus is not aligned with the field, there is likely to be dissonance. There is various literature on explaining habitus-field mismatch and the resulting disjuncture when a habitus enters an unfamiliar field (e.g., Chen & Zhu, 2020; Dai et al., 2020). This is likely to lead to what Bourdieu called “false anticipation”, which occurs when “the sense of a probable future is belied and, when dispositions ill-adjusted to the objective chances” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 62). Chen and Zhu (2020) employs “false anticipation” to describe when academic staff’s previous, often vague, ideas were unable to adequately prepare them for the new workplace (field)’s future prospects.

However, even returnees whose habitus seems to be a perfect fit for the anticipated workplace due to their perceived compatibility with its policy and requirement, are unlikely to enter the field without struggle. This is because instead of merely implementing policy, staff may interpret in response to the - sometimes unexpected - situation (Braun et al., 2010) according to their habitus. In a Bourdieusian perspective, field contains “the broadest possible range of factors that shape behaviour” (Swartz, 1997, p. 121). In this study, policy and requirements are at the core of this range which attracts academic staff to work in TNHE; and actual practices could be understood as extension, the “discretionary spaces” (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 126) that are not clearly mentioned in texts but play an essential role in the life of a university. Dai et al., (2020) argue that when changes in the field happen, habitus tends to change accordingly, in an incremental instead of radical way. Therefore, building on Chen and Zhu (2020)’s interpretation of false anticipation and Dai et al. (2020)’s incrementally adaptive habitus, this article aims to provide insights on circumstances when imagined and actual fields diverge, as in the case of Chinese academic staff return from education or work overseas to take up their first post in a JV in China.

Methodology

To investigate Chinese returnee academic staff’s lived experiences, we adopt a qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews. Because “internationalisation” could be subject to different interpretations between actors (Mok, 2007), qualitative methodology is preferred as it provides thick descriptions which are necessary to explore different meanings, and it is compatible with an interpretivist paradigm we adopted to understand the constructed meaning of internationalisation.

In this study, we chose XJTLU as the specific research location. The university is identified purposefully due to its idiographic form of Sino-foreign institution in China, within which the analysis of its unique construction of internationalisation would be meaningful. We also ensured that we only used publicly available material from XJTLU. The first step was to collect academic staff information from XJTLU’s official website by examining the “academic staff” page under each department’s website. Keeping in mind that habitus-forming is a process of internalising what individuals experience in the field, which can become gradually unconscious for individuals,
we have purposefully excluded staff who have worked at XJTLU for over 5 years. This identified 200 Chinese academic staff within our selection criteria. Because this study is not discipline-specific, all eligible staff were invited to participate in an interview by email, from which 11 accepted the invitation.

The dataset contains 11 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Chinese academic staff in XJTLU. The participants are of different ages, genders, disciplines, educational backgrounds, and at different academic career stages. Ethical permission was gained from the authors’ university research ethics committee; 10 interviewees agreed to be audio-recorded, 1 did not, so the primary researcher made interview notes; and interviewees were provided with consent forms and information sheets to ensure their consent upon participation. Participants’ confidentiality was protected by using a pseudonym (Table 1); identifiable places or affiliations were anonymised to preserve confidentiality; participants’ disciplines were collapsed to broad ‘academic areas’. Participants were free to choose between Chinese and English as interview language, which led to ten Chinese interviews and one English. Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom, recorded, and automatically transcribed with manually grammatical edits.

The interview questions were developed from a Bourdieuian perspective. Questions about prior experiences and career expectations are based on the fact that all participants have been educated or working in Western countries, it is hypothesised that there are similarities in their habitus that have led to an imagined field in which they would be a good fit. According to Bourdieu (1977), every field has its underlying principle which generates practices that produce implicit “rules for the game”. Therefore, individuals with a habitus that is homologous to the field will naturally be attracted to this field, enabling them to “choose the fate that is also statistically the most likely for them” (Maton, 2014, p. 57). By asking about actual experiences and if they still consider themselves as a fit, it tries to unpack the discrepancy between imagined and actual field, and the strategies they have employed to respond to these differences.

The primary researcher conducted data analysis, with support and clarifications from research team. We conducted inductive thematic analysis to analyse data as this particular approach is inherently descriptive and analytical which requires researchers to immerse in the data, with theoretical assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019) - in this case, guided by Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus, symbolic violence, and false anticipation. We conducted data analysis by NVivo, to categorise, merge and visualise data that has been identified in transcribing process. Specifically, we generated three rounds of inductive, line-by-line coding of the data in Chinese. Selected extracts were discussed with research team in translation. These several hundred initial codes were then categorised into broad themes, developed with research team.

| Participant | Pseudonym | Academic Area | Study-abroad Destination |
|-------------|-----------|---------------|--------------------------|
| 1           | Sun       | Science       | Europe                   |
| 2           | Long      | Humanities    | North America            |
| 3           | Zheng     | Business      | Europe                   |
| 4           | Shao      | Business      | Europe                   |
| 5           | Gao       | Science       | Europe                   |
| 6           | Jia       | Business      | North America            |
| 7           | Song      | Business      | North America            |
| 8           | Tan       | Humanities    | Europe                   |
| 9           | Li        | Science       | Europe                   |
| 10          | Yi        | Science       | North America            |
| 11          | Chang     | Humanities    | North America            |
Findings

We developed four key themes from the participants’ accounts of their experiences, namely, working in the West as a first choice; Working at XJTLU - An internationalised field in China; Experiencing false anticipation under an “internationalised” approach; Enacting and constructing “internationalisation” through mismatched expectations. All returnee academics situated working in the West as a first choice, and XJTLU as the next best option. At the time of exploring XJTLU as a potential workplace, they took at face-value website and policy claims about internationalisation, EMI, and pedagogy. Their lived experiences highlighted discrepancies that we characterise as ‘false anticipation’, and we define their coping strategies as ‘repertoire approach’.

Working in the West as a First Choice

After completing their doctoral studies, the majority of participants unequivocally stated that they would prefer to work internationally rather than in China, owing to two perceived factors: attractiveness of Western academia and unsatisfactory conditions in China. The former refers to the characteristics of working abroad that most participants find appealing and rewarding based on their international experiences, for example, being professionally supported by supervisors and their department:

“Everyone did their part to support me” (Tan).

Jia highlighted feeling that his experiences abroad provided a more inclusive environment than in China:

People with different political stances can co-exist very well in where I studied.

Other participants reflected feeling that academic cultures in the West were less hierarchical, based on their observations between PhD researchers and their supervisors. For example, Sun reflected on this when she was in Europe, which she compared with supervisory relationships in Chinese universities:

My supervisors [in Europe] made no attempt to keep me under control. I can go around and ask everyone; all I have to do is to send them an email and I’ll get excellent feedback. However, I was surprised to learn later that some Chinese supervisors try to restrict their students, saying things like ‘you’re my students, you’re crossing the line if you ask someone else’.

These perceptions led to the impression of the Chinese ‘field’ as more hierarchical and controlled, in contrast to the ‘Western’ field as more open and inclusive. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), fields operate in a semi-autonomous way in their own distinct logic, thus naturalising and justifying practises, and therefore, producing symbolic violence under different logic. This is confirmed by above quotes that, participants have established habitus of being more at ease in the field of Western HE, when they have already internalised its logic and developed a feel for the game, based on previous experiences.

There are multiple reasons participants considered themselves to not “fit in” with Chinese academia, mainly due to their perceived detachment from the Chinese context and the loss of opportunities to refresh their local knowledge due to their physical absence (Hao & Welch, 2012). One of the most important deterrents for participants was the heavy reliance on guanxi - interpersonal relationships and social networks that serve as valuable resources for job markets.
After spending more than 5 years in North America, Song found the most obstructive aspect to securing a domestic job was the lack of guanxi. He observed that:

_Because my PhD degree was not acquired in China, networking was a challenge for me. Despite the fact that my PhD supervisor is Chinese, she has no domestic contacts, thus I am not familiar with Chinese job market. So, initially, I had no intention of returning to China to work._

However, working in the West was also a challenge, and several participants noted the competitiveness of securing an overseas academic position:

_It was incredibly tough for the job because there were so many applications, and a recent graduate like me was unlikely to be offered. After being turned down for a few (overseas) jobs, I decided to look for domestic positions._ (Tan)

His response was typical of participants’ descriptions of working in China as a compromise (echoed also by Sun, Long, Gao and Song). While competitiveness serves as a powerful push, there are also two non-negligible attractions of working in China. The first is family obligations, which often link to the urgency of finding a job:

_I needed to find a job as soon as possible to support my family. So, I decided that if I couldn’t secure a job in North America, I would return to China._ (Long)

The second is employment opportunities offered by Chinese universities. When combined with anxiety associated with difficulty of finding a job abroad, several participants adopted a “why not?” attitude and accepted offers from Chinese universities. For example, Gao comments on his first job in China:

_I had a chance to go back to a Chinese university where I graduated...Since I hadn’t got an offer in Europe, I thought, ‘Yes, why not?’_

Other participants adopted a similar attitude when they were offered positions in XJTLU. Therefore, although the habitus created through Western education “naturally” leads to the field of overseas academia, it is also conditioned by “the range of options available at that moment” (Maton, 2014, p. 51).

**Working at XJTLU-An Internationalised Field in China**

Within this compromise, participants reflected on XJTLU as a “next best choice”, constructing it as a field that is both akin to Western universities while being drastically different from domestic institutions, due to the high proportion of international staff, heavy reliance on EMI and an internationalised curriculum setting. Many participants developed their understanding of the institutional field through reviewing university’s website. For example:

_After browsing its website, I found XJTLU is a successful joint university which has great potential. The fact that most students studying abroad afterwards, and there are a large number of foreign and returnee faculty, may indicate that it is different from most traditional Chinese universities._ (Long)

_I had a look at the curriculum design and the departmental atmosphere, I thought it is an internationalised setting._ (Zheng)
However, it is risky to rely on website to forecast experiences, because university websites are primarily used to communicate with their target audience (Bae et al., 2021), instead of potential employees. Similarly, several participants were initially attracted to “100% EMI” teaching policy outlined on the university website. This was often related to their comfort in teaching in English rather than Chinese, linked to their established habitus through prior studying-abroad experiences:

*I feel more comfortable explaining terminologies in English as I never taught in Chinese.* (Zheng)

As returnees, they believed they possessed competitive advantages:

*We do not need to go through a language ability test...our English is not questioned because we are returnees.* (Jia)

They are also willing to maintain English proficiency:

*Teaching in English is important to maintain our English ability now that we don’t have the immersive English-language environment.* (Song)

And Tan was drawn to XJTLU’s overall reliance of English during the application process:

*I didn’t bother to translate my CV into Chinese, so I only applied to Chinese universities that accept English-language applications.*

At this stage, participants believed their proficiency in English was a fit and asset for XJTLU. Nonetheless, participants who did not previously study in English-speaking destinations or who spent a short period in English-speaking countries as visiting scholar, indicated language-related concerns:

*I was worried if I’m capable to teach in English.* (Shao)

*I was afraid I’m going to be awkward socialising with foreign colleagues.* (Yi)

The part of their habitus developed from Western countries is perceived as their competitive advantage, helping them secure a job in an international JV and thrive in the environment without challenges. The expectation that is solely based on university texts and perceived competitive advantage is likely to be problematic - a “false anticipation”, although their false anticipation might be inevitable when these texts are the only thing they can build their expectations on.

**Experiencing False Anticipation Under An “Internationalised” Approach**

“False anticipation” has been felt by participants according to their responses in terms of, for example, the unexpectedly heavy teaching responsibility (Sun), limited national funding (Jia), and the difficulty of adapting to a UK evaluation system (Tan). The most obvious one is EMI implementation, as the heavy reliance on English was for many a key reason to apply for a job there, as it corresponded to their habitus, and symbolic capital, acquired abroad. There is only one participant, Gao, is particularly concerned as a teacher about EMI implementation:

*My concern is that it would be stressful for students if they aren’t used to learning in English.*
Gao’s concern about students’ language ability was confirmed by participants’ disjunctions when implementing EMI. Six participants shared their observations on how they and their students struggled to adjust to a 100% EMI environment. Sun has been asked by her Chinese students to use Chinese in tutorials; Yi expressed concern on the effectiveness of EMI when his students gradually lost interest in the class due to language barrier; Shao worried about building rapport with students due to his limited ability to use humour in English. Also, although XJTLU claims to be attentive of students’ language limitations by offering English for Academic Purposes (EAP) which aims for “raise English language proficiency…and prepare students for academic study in their future degree programmes” (XJTLU, 2021a), Tan argued that, based on comments from students, EAP does not appear to be effective in facilitating a smooth transition.

Establishing an English-language reading list is also key to the enactment of EMI, according to XJTLU public-facing documents. In this regard, Long, as a humanities teacher, highlighted discipline-specific concerns about students’ scope being narrowed and missing out rich perspectives on contemporary issues in Chinese publications:

It can be difficult to find appropriate English publications on China’s most cutting-edge concerns...there are Chinese publications on these topics, but they must be excluded...I can look for English press releases, but I’m concerned that they’re not written academically.

Similarly, the student-centred teaching approach, which is strongly encouraged by XJTLU, is another “internationalised” feature that participants find particularly difficult for students to adapt to. According to XJTLU’s executive president, a student-centred approach, as opposed to “passive learning”, has been built as XJTLU’s core educational philosophy (XJTLU, 2014). Teachers are encouraged to embody it in their teaching practices, however, Yi spotted a mismatch between student-centred setting and Chinese students’ experiences:

Our director has requested that we employ the flipped-classroom method, but I don’t believe it’s appropriate for Chinese students. First, their language abilities prevent them from taking the lead; second, flipped-classroom necessitates too much commitment from students, who already spend a lot of time studying class material; third, most Chinese students are not accustomed to dominating a class, forcing them to do so will only end in awkward silence.

The discrepancy between students’ ability and the archetype like “100% EMI” and “flipped-classroom” is repeatedly noticed across interviews, contrasting participants’ initial focus on their ability and experiences as competitive advantage during job-application stage, inspiring them to devise new combination of elements from their habitus repertoire to support students.

Enacting and Constructing “Internationalisation” Through Mismatched Expectations

The challenging experiences provided a crucial opportunity for some participants to (re-)consider what “internationalisation” implies. Most participants sensed a conflict between fulfilling XJTLU’s internationalisation demand and conducting their professional practice in a way they believed most efficiently supported students. They admitted their limitations in EMI and demonstrated empathy towards students who had linguistic difficulties, and like one participant in a study by Jiang et al. (2019, p. 112), they also feel that “teaching key conceptual knowledge in Chinese is safer and time-saving”.

It has evoked important reflection for participants: where internationalisation is intended to be inclusive and horizon-broadening in principle, it becomes exclusionary and narrows students’
scope in practice. Yi expresses concern on the over-reliance of English would lead to the perception of XJTLU as a steppingstone, undermining value of internationalisation of Chinese HE as a substitute to Western HE:

*It is dangerous if students and their parents perceive XJTLU as a place that prepares students to study abroad; this is not the type of internationalisation we want. That, I believe, is a challenge for any institution that is highly internationalised.*

The challenges encountered by participants were mainly related to a mismatch between Chinese students’ experience and ability, and university requirements. To respond, participants described similar strategies of responding to challenges of EMI in a Chinese context to those identified by Jiang et al. (2019): code-switching, which occurs when speakers purposefully switch between two languages; and input-enhancement, when speakers rephrase or repeat in English. Four participants (Long, Gao, Song, Tan) prioritise input-enhancement as they believe it is beneficial to students’ English skills while adhering to “100% EMI” policy; 6 participants (Sun, Long, Zheng, Jia, Yi, Chang) used code-switching by inserting corresponding Chinese text in parenthesis, though most of them stressed that it should only be used as a last resort. Eight participants (Sun, Zheng, Gao, Jia, Song, Li, Yi, Chang) said they would not insist on using English in an unrecorded session with only Chinese students so that they are still operating within the norm of practice. Furthermore, Li remarked that when Chinese is included, there is a sense of risk-management; for example, he uses Chinese when he needs to guarantee that students understand safety precautions prior to a field trip. However, whether XJTLU provides clear induction on the extent to which Chinese can be utilised remains ambiguous:

*Our department director often warns us not to use Chinese in any situation, but I don’t believe we will be punished if we do, at least not in my experience. (Sun)*

Sun’s belief can be interpreted as evidence of that part of her habitus formed in XJTLU is the acquisition of unwritten rules of the game, an example of ‘discretionary space’ available to participants.

In terms of pedagogy, participants sought to simulate a student-centred approach while accommodating students’ experiences of uniquely teacher-led didactic settings. For example, Yi introduced a “question-led” strategy, which entails providing students clear questions to discuss and ensuring that the class adhered to the intended learning outcomes in terms of content. However, pedagogy was not a frequent topic of discussion during interviews, suggesting most participants experienced less dissonance in this domain than in that of EMI.

Generally, participants were comfortable dealing with unexpected experiences, e.g., within an English-only requirement. They appear to know when and to what extent they can use Chinese, almost instinctively as it is shaped by their habitus. This is mostly due to their familiarity with the situations of Chinese students, since they also had experiences of being educated in China:

*I’ve been educated in China for more than 10 years; I know what challenges they’re going through.* (Sun)

Such familiarity with different contexts and values contributes to their advantage as returnees, and it also appears to shape their understanding of internationalisation, for example, when being asked if they consider their teaching practices as internationalised, a common theme identified is “internationalisation as a repertoire of values”:
I will use either a Chinese or a Western approach, depending on which one helps students comprehend the content better. (Jia)

My teaching style is a mix between a Chinese and a British approach. I believe that high-school Chinese style would help students in their foundation phase... However, for higher levels, I will use the British approach, because asking year-four students to conduct in-class practice makes little sense. (Gao)

Participants see their habitus as a repertoire that contains elements/strategies developed from different fields, where they could develop appropriate strategy to respond to different situations. Yet, they must continuously remind themselves that these strategies are conditioned by university regulations.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

In this study, we investigated the reasons and incentives for returnees to work in a JV institution and discovered that internationalisation, symbolised by EMI, plays a key role (RQ1), and some of their lived experiences conflict with their expectations, especially in terms of EMI and student-centred pedagogy implementation (RQ2). Most participants first considered working in the West as a natural step (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979), and when they returned to China for practical reasons, XJTLU was constructed as the “least-worst” option as an internationalised institution was thought to suit returnees’ habitus, wherein they were supposed to be like “fish in water” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). Participants’ lived experiences sometimes contradicted their expectations, especially when it came to EMI practises, the reasons are twofold: 1) their expectations were based on website contents which intend to attract target audiences (Bae et al., 2021) instead of potential employees; 2) their expectations were based on core - policy and requirements, without taking the extension - “discretionary spaces” (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 126) into their decision-making process. Their “false anticipation” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 62) inspired them to consider what “internationalisation” means to them and XJTLU, and they negotiated these issues through a “habitus as repertoire” approach. In this way, this article proposes additional insights for applying Bourdieusian perspective in TNHE context, explains possible reason for false anticipation, and through analysing participants’ lived experiences, the core and the extension factors have been distinguished.

The interview results confirm Mok et al. (2020)’s finding that returnees are more likely to take advantage of their international experiences by working in an internationalised workplace. We took a step further to problematise their understanding of internationalisation symbolised by EMI, and analyse the actual consequences of “false anticipation”. Similar to Wilkins and Neri (2019)’s finding that expatriate scholars wrongly assume students at branch campus have similar educational experiences as students at home campus, therefore fail to replicate a home campus classroom, we also found that overlooking students’ potential experiences in returnees’ job-application stage could result in unexpected situations. However, our participants did not attempt to replicate what they did in Western countries, as Chinese returnees, they employed with a repertoire approach to figure out what are the best way for their students, for example, by engaging with code-switching and input-enhancement (Jiang et al., 2019).

Through analysing returnee staff’s lived experiences with internationalisation (RQ2), our findings also add nuance to the understanding of habitus by outlining possibilities where individuals form a “habitus as repertoire” which contains elements in their existing habitus. Participants were often comfortable dealing with unexpected situations because they learned to reconcile different elements in their habitats. Therefore, while “false anticipation” might explain
initial dissonance, it is only subtly sensed by participants and does not pose a high level of 
nuisance. False anticipation, which manifests itself in dissonance and disjunction between field 
and habitus (Chen & Zhu, 2020), may prompt individuals to modify their habitus incrementally 
and reflectively (Dai et al., 2020). However, instead of modifying their habitus, our participants 
tackled the immediate challenge by engaging with one element over another in their habitus 
repertoire - a shift in focus from utilising the part of their habitus created in Western academia to 
the part formed in China. They must, for example, place a higher value on their experiences in 
China in response to 100% EMI policy and student-centred requirement than they expected.

Returnees found themselves in a dilemma because XJTLU did not provide clear instructions 
about how to balance the need to internationalise the campus with improving the quality of 
teaching. Despite participants appearing to know how to react in unexpected situations, their 
options were often limited, and even supported students at the risk of violating university 
regulations. For example, while translanguaging strategies they have used are capable of solving immediate problems, they are not actually encouraged by XJTLU as a legitimate part of campus 
environment. This confirms Wang and Curdt-Christiansen (2019)’s finding that stakeholders of 
EMI tend to view it as proof of teachers’ and students’ English deficiency, rather than a natural 
bilingual outcome when non-native English speakers are involved. Also, as Long’s case illustrated, when “purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal 
and informal curriculum for all students, within domestic learning environments” (Beelen & 
Jones, 2015, p. 8), is essential to internationalise HE, XJTLU is implementing a questionable 
sense of curriculum internationalisation by limiting the language option to English only, which in 
turn, potentially risks overlooking the perspective from Chinese-writing authors. In this vein, we 
argue that discouraging the use of Chinese internalises Western academia’s symbolic violence and contributes to the marginalisation of Chinese-speaking students and faculty, and the valorisation of Western knowledge essentially obstructs XJTLU to operate in an epistemologically equal way.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that XJTLU, and perhaps other JV should avoid inter-
nationalising for its own sake and becoming an English-only and student-centred archetype that 
only exists in texts, resulting in the increase of staffs’ workload, and their pressure on getting 
cought. Further research areas indicated could include challenges when implementing inter-
nationalised strategy in various types of TNHE, and experiences of students attending such 
institutions, to provide a complete picture of different actors’ interaction with TNHE institutions in 
an internationalised context.

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Note

1. “Schools” refer to higher education institutions in this policy context.
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