

Swinging Pendulum: The Social Adaptation of Returnees from Universities

Yuejuan Dong^{1,a,*}

¹*Center of International Cooperation and Exchange, Hebei Normal University, Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province, 050024, China*

a. gjhzc@hebtu.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: College teachers now have more opportunities to engage in transnational education as people enter a new era of globalization and the shift toward a knowledge-based society. However, they also face various challenges in social adaptation. It has become a critical issue to enhance the sense of belonging and career resilience of the returnees from universities. By using a qualitative research method with the data from a respective provincial university in China, this study aims to explore the process and influencing factors of the social adaptation of returnees and finds that the social adaptation of returnees has gone through the process of longing, division, adjustment, and integration, which varies with individual and cultural differences. Social adaptation is similar to the swing and vibration of a clock. The working environment is the primary source of adverse cultural impact and one's social network support is negatively associated with social adaptation. Also, self-efficacy and informal social support networks play key roles in the adaptation process. To mitigate the re-entry shock, recommendations include optimizing work environments, providing emotional counseling, and enhancing organizational structures.

Keywords: Returnees from universities, social adaptation, social network, self-efficacy.

1. Introduction

Strengthening research in returnees from universities is significant to constructing double first-class Chinese universities and the internationalization of Chinese higher education. The flow of international talents has become an important factor in the transformation of the knowledge society, and the transformation of the third knowledge production mode requires more global and cross-cultural communication skills from talents [1]. Studies have shown that returnees play a positive role in promoting discipline construction, improving scientific research capacity [2], and promoting international education [3]. The importance of returnees has become more and more prominent in the academic field and policy formulation process.

Returnees face social adaptation problems after returning to universities in their motherland, including difficulties in scientific research, interpersonal relationships, low job satisfaction [4], and poor adapted cultural environment [5-7]. However, previous studies have paid some attention to academic adaptation, it is of great value to fully understand the process and influencing factors of the social adaptation for returnees using a dynamic perspective, which might give more

enlightenment on what types of social adaptation problems would returnees face with and which factors may help them to recover.

Based on the existing literature, this study poses the following two research questions.

- (1) What kind of social adaptation process have the university returnees gone through after returning to China?
- (2) What factors affect the social adaptation process of returnees?

2. Literature Review

To further clarify the research content, combined with the research subjects of this study, the two core concepts appearing in the study are explained as follows.

2.1. Returnees from Universities

In practice, returnees refer to citizens who have studied overseas for a certain period after obtaining academic qualifications or work [8]. As a sub-group of the overseas study returnees, scholars give returnees from universities different definitions. The differentiation mainly concentrates on two aspects. One is the length of overseas study time, the existing literature and definitions generally define it as more than one year or more than half a year [9]. The second difference lies in the identification of the study purpose, whether it includes work experience abroad. A representative example of Liu Rongjie believes that university returnees refer to non-foreign full-time teachers with overseas study or work experience who are currently engaged in teaching or scientific research in Chinese universities [10].

This study focuses on the social adaptation process of college returnees, and such problems also exist in the groups of visiting or exchange returnees. Therefore, the returnees defined in this study should be under the agreement that the length of time is more than half a year in practice and the study purpose includes academic study, post-career study, visiting study, etc. The returnees in this study are non-foreign full-time teachers with more than half a year or more of overseas study or work experience and are currently engaged in teaching, scientific research, or other jobs in universities.

2.2. Social Adaptation

The term "adaptation" has multiple connotations in biology, psychology, and sociology. Japanese psychologist Tokugawa believes that adaptation is a state, a result, and a process, a mechanism [11]. Extending to the field of pedagogy, social adaptation is mostly considered as a good interactive state between individuals or groups and the social environment, which is demonstrated by individuals or groups constantly adjusting their physical and mental states in the process of interaction with the social environment, to achieve harmony with the social environment [12].

Scholars have divided the dimensions of social adaptation. Li Lu divided return adaptation into three dimensions: work adaptation, interactive adaptation, and overall adaptation [13]. Xie Hongmei divided adaptation into two aspects: psychological adaptation and social and cultural adaptation. Psychological adaptation mainly refers to adaptation related to emotional and mental health, while social and cultural adaptation refers to the adaptation to social rules, behaviors, social customs, and other aspects [6]. Raquel Sanz Valle divided the return adaptation into two aspects: work adaptation and overall adaptation [14].

This study prefers to use a more synthetic and dynamic perspective to pay attention to the process and changes of social adaptation, combining the perspective of educational ecology and cross-cultural perspective, this study pays attention to returnees' interaction and social network with their families, schools, and society, thus to focus on the various stages of social adaptation and the key

influencing factors and focus on the interaction process of returnees with other participants and the environment.

3. Methodology

This study uses qualitative research to conduct multiple case studies on returnees from a provincial university in China. It selected Hebei Normal University (This paper call it H University afterward) as a research case. H school is a provincial university that is joined building by the Ministry of Education in China and Hebei Province. As one of the top universities in Hebei province, it ranked excellent for five consecutive years in the international provincial special evaluation, the situation of the returnees from H University is relatively representative. This study is based on the statistical data of the returned overseas from H University in 2022. The stock data can reflect the relevant situation in recent years, by using longitudinal data, the impact of events such as COVID could be minimized.

By purposive sampling, several teachers who have been studying abroad for more than half a year in the past five years are included to be interviewed and observed. As Table 1 shows, 9 returnees were interviewed, including 3 men, 6 women; 6 master's degree holders, and 3 PhD; 2 from the United States, 4 from Britain, 1 from Japan, 1 from Korea, and 1 from Spain.

Table 1: Data coding table

Code	Category	Gender	Country Visited
FT-S-F-01-20240102	study and visit	male	U.S.
FT-M-F-01-20240105	study and visit	female	Japan
FT-Z-X-01-20240106	study and visit	male	UK
FT-L-X-01-20240107	academic qualifications obtained	female	UK
FT-Z-F-01-20240106	academic qualifications obtained	female	Korea
FT-S-X-01-20240107	academic qualifications obtained	female	U.S.
FT-ZW-X-01-20240107	academic qualifications obtained	female	UK
FT-G-X-01-20240108	academic qualifications obtained	male	Spain
FT-SS-X-01-20240108	academic qualifications obtained	female	UK

3.1. The Swinging Pendulum: the Four Stages of the Social Adaptation

The results show that returnees feel the impact of exotic culture and have experienced a complex adaptation process, and their feelings include visions and expectations of home, cognitive confusion with different cultures and events, feelings of division with the institutional environment, and anxiety in balancing work modes and life rhythms. The contradictions mainly focus on the institutional environment and cultural perception, and there are individual differences in the process. The social adaptation of returnees from universities could be summed up into four stages:

- Vision: to start a new stage. At the initial stage of returning, the returnees have expectations for the new job or the new stage. Expectations are generally generated before returning, to some extent, longing and anxiety are the feedback and embodiment of their self-expectations.

"In the vision of the future career and life, there are also some people who have concerns and are uneasy. I am looking forward to and very uneasy to engage in the ideal career... think that being a teacher is a particularly sacred thing" (FT-S-X-01-20240107).

- Split: to feel uncomfortable and alienation. In the process of social adaptation, the returnees usually feel the discomfort and alienation brought by social distance, system differences, living habits, and concept cognition.

"Because in the UK, there was no one around me, all the work and daily life were one person, and the time arrangement was relatively independent. After home I get a huge workload, this feeling is like kind of how you are a beast in the jungle, suddenly become a fish in the pond, there are a lot of fish, the transformation from individual to the collective atmosphere, gave me such a pretty uncomfortable." (FT-Z-X-01-20240106)

"Almost for two years, I always feel alienated from the school that I do not belong to" (FT-L-X-01-20240107)

- Adjustment: to look for "comfort". After experiencing anxiety and discomfort, the returnees try to reduce their discomfort and find comfort through interaction with the environment and social networks. This adjustment not only includes the self-psychological expectation and action adjustment of returnees but also affects the behavior adjustments such as family members and friends through social networks.

"I feel the life is too regular and I am anxious and wanna make some change to feel comfortable..." (FT-ZW-X-01-20240107)

"This adjustment is not only for myself but also for my family. They are trying to spend more time with me to travel, watch movies..." (FT-Z-F-01-20240106)

- Compromise: to return to peace. After a period of social adaptation and adjustment, the returnees either return to their original pace of work or compromise with their new life, finally achieving a balance, much like a swinging clock returning to peace.

"Finally I feel that I may end such a short experience, and then get back into my normal work and life." (FT-M-F-1-20240105)

"I feel like no sense of belonging, but this is the career... can only adapt to the environment, now has no feeling..." (FT-G-X-01-20240108)

3.2. Precision Operation: Multiple Factors Affecting Social Adaptation

In addition to the research on the time course of social adaptation of the returnees, the main factors affecting the returnees are summarized from the perspective of social networks and educational ecological theory. The main conclusions are as follows:

- Expected deviation is the starting point of re-adaptation. Although the process of re-adaptation of returnees is a complex "black box", studies find that the earliest perceived adaptation process is the starting point of correcting the deviation of expectations, meaning that the inconsistency between reality and expectation is the starting point. Expected inconsistency is more common in the working environment but not as strong in the living environment. The expected deviation in the working environment is mainly manifested by the stronger non-institutional factors in Chinese culture and the higher time cost of maintaining interpersonal relationships.

"Teaching in college is not as relaxed as imagined, unlike being single and targeted in class, you have to deal with all kinds of trifles and interpersonal relationships every day" (FT-L-X-01-20240107)

- The work field is the main field of social adaptation. The concept of field was proposed by Bourdieu [15], who argued that fields are a network of objective relations existing between various positions. The study finds that the focus field in the social adaptation of returnees is the work field. On the one hand, this may be related to the social role of returnees. In the family field, the individual role is relatively simple, the interest directions are relatively consistent, and there is a large consultation space. On the other hand, the interactive subjects in the work field are more diverse, the construction of interpersonal relationships is more complex, and the degree of organizational coupling is higher, thus making the pressure and tension of cultural impact more prominent.
- Self-efficacy is the key to social adaptation. Self-efficacy, proposed by Bandura, refers to "the degree of confidence people have in whether they can use their skills to complete a certain task" [16]. Self-efficacy helps shorten the adjustment time, reduce the psychological gap, and adjust psychological expectations.
- Kinship offers support from informal social support networks. In the process of social adaptation, the informal social support network also plays a positive role, especially the influence of kinship on self-efficacy, which could help returnees get through the adaptation process. Informal social support networks mainly include interpersonal mutual assistance networks among relatives, friends, neighbors, and colleagues.

4. Conclusion

This study uses case and qualitative research method to study social adaptation and its influencing factors, which shows that personal expectations, environmental support, and personal self-efficacy are important factors affecting the social adaptation of returnees. The following suggestions are put forward to promote the social adaptation process of returnees from universities. The first is field support. To create and optimize the working environment. Studies have confirmed that the working environment is the main field for the returnees. Schools and communities should actively create and optimize the environment by organizing young teachers' training courses, establishing returnee exchange groups, and offering education guidance to study abroad returnees, to actively help returnees adapt to teaching and scientific research work as soon as possible. In addition, schools should establish a diversified system to support teachers' professional development and reduce the pressure of their assessments. Next is emotional brace. To adjust psychological expectations and build self-efficacy. Studies have confirmed that expectation deviation and self-efficacy are important factors affecting the social adaptation process. To further enhance social adaptation, returnees should constantly adjust their psychological expectations according to career development planning and environmental changes and pay attention to inner emotional needs and pressures. On the other hand, returnees should also focus on improving self-efficacy by establishing cultural confidence and strengthening positive psychological hints. Additionally, it is important that organizational build. To recognize the importance of informal structured networks. The importance of informal structural networks has been demonstrated. Universities should further strengthen organizational culture, guide overseas returnees through the adaptation period with the help of informal organizations, help them establish and develop good interpersonal networks, and improve teachers' psychological satisfaction. In addition, education authorities and social organizations should continue to strengthen various types of cooperation, creating platforms for the exchange and collaboration among returnees.

In general, this study provides an in-depth interpretation of the social adaptation of the returnees from a more dynamic and macro perspective, helping to decompose the process of their social adaptation and the key influencing factors. To further deepen this topic, more meaningful discoveries may be made by classifying and deeply tracking the different categories of problems presented in social adaptation.

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