

Navigating the Global–Local Nexus: Professional Identity and Organizational Socialization of Overseas-Returned PhDs in Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges

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Abstract: China's higher vocational education sector has undergone rapid internationalization over the past four decades, progressively recruiting overseas-returned PhD graduates to strengthen faculty quality and institutional competitiveness. However, the professional integration of these returnee academics into vocational colleges—institutions that historically prioritize applied skill training over research production—remains a significantly under-researched phenomenon. This study investigates how overseas-returned PhDs construct, negotiate, and reconstruct their professional identities within Chinese higher vocational colleges (HVCs), and examines the organizational socialization mechanisms that facilitate or hinder this process. Drawing upon Social Identity Theory, Organizational Socialization Theory, and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, this article proposes an integrative conceptual framework—the Global–Local Identity Negotiation Model—that captures the multi-layered tensions returnee scholars navigate between their internationally acquired academic dispositions and the locally embedded expectations of vocational education institutions. By synthesizing existing empirical findings on returnee academics in broader Chinese higher education contexts and contextualizing them within the specific institutional ecology of HVCs, this study identifies three identity trajectories—adaptive assimilation, strategic hybridization, and marginal alienation—and analyzes how institutional structures, collegial interactions, and individual agency shape divergent professional outcomes. The article concludes with theoretically grounded and practically actionable recommendations for designing culturally responsive organizational socialization programs that facilitate

productive identity integration, thereby advancing both scholarly understanding of academic mobility in vocational education contexts and institutional policy for talent management in an era of intensified global competition for academic labor.

Keywords: Professional Identity; Organizational Socialization; Overseas-Returnee PhDs; Higher Vocational Colleges; Academic Mobility; China

1. Introduction

The globalization of higher education has fundamentally reshaped academic labor markets, institutional strategies, and individual career trajectories across national boundaries. One of the most consequential manifestations of this transformation is the unprecedented scale of academic mobility, wherein scholars traverse different national higher education systems for doctoral training, postdoctoral research, and career development [1,2]. China represents a particularly significant case in this global phenomenon. Of the 7.43 million Chinese students who completed their studies abroad between 1978 and 2024, 6.44 million have returned, with over 87 percent of these returnees having come back after 2012 alongside the rapid expansion of China's economy and technology sectors [3]. In 2025 alone, China recorded approximately 535,600 returnees from overseas study, according to the Ministry of Education [3]. This massive reverse migration has profoundly altered the composition of China's academic workforce, with overseas-returned PhDs now constituting a substantial proportion of faculty members across the country's higher education institutions.

Within this broader landscape, Chinese higher vocational colleges present a distinctive and theoretically generative institutional context that has received disproportionately limited scholarly

attention. These institutions, which enrolled over 17 million students as of 2022, form a critical component of China's higher education architecture, specifically tasked with cultivating application-oriented technical talent to support the country's industrial upgrading and economic transformation [4]. The internationalization of China's higher vocational education sector commenced in the early 1980s, initially focusing on "bringing in" advanced vocational education models and curriculum systems from developed countries, and subsequently evolving through strategic phases of cross-border cooperation and overseas institutional establishment [5,6]. The Guidelines on Building a Strong Educational Country (2024–2035) has further proposed that the internationalization of higher vocational education should elevate China's vocational education onto the global stage by enhancing its international standards, improving mechanisms for international cooperation, and participating in global education governance [5]. Central to this internationalization agenda has been the deliberate recruitment of overseas-returned PhDs—scholars who bring with them transferable experiences, knowledge, and skills acquired in foreign academic environments, yet who also face significant challenges with academic reintegration upon returning to work in Chinese institutions [7].

The professional integration of returnee PhDs into higher vocational colleges raises a series of theoretically and practically significant questions. How do scholars trained in research-intensive international universities construct professional identities within institutions primarily oriented toward teaching and applied skill development? What organizational socialization mechanisms support or impede their transition into the distinctive academic culture of vocational education? How do these academics negotiate the tension between their internationally acquired academic dispositions—their methodological training, publication expectations, and epistemological orientations—and the locally embedded imperatives of vocational education delivery? These questions acquire particular urgency given the intensifying competition among vocational colleges to recruit overseas-trained talent as a strategy for institutional prestige enhancement and quality improvement, coupled with growing concerns about faculty retention and job satisfaction within this sector [8].

Despite the considerable policy and institutional significance of these questions, existing scholarship remains fragmented across several largely disconnected research domains. Studies of returnee academics in China have predominantly focused on research-intensive universities [9-11], leaving the vocational college context substantially unexamined. Research on professional identity formation in higher education has concentrated overwhelmingly on teachers and students in university settings [12,13], with limited attention to the particular identity dynamics of academics in vocationally oriented institutions. Organizational socialization scholarship has developed robust theoretical frameworks for understanding newcomer integration [14,15], yet has seldom been applied to the specific case of internationally mobile academics entering vocational education contexts. The intersection of these research streams—academic mobility, professional identity, organizational socialization, and vocational education—constitutes a significant gap in the international literature.

This article addresses this gap by proposing a theoretically integrated and empirically grounded analytical framework for understanding the professional identity formation and organizational socialization of overseas-returned PhDs in Chinese higher vocational colleges. Rather than presenting original empirical data, the study adopts a conceptual and synthetic approach, drawing upon established theoretical resources from social psychology, organizational studies, and the sociology of education to construct a transferable model for examining returnee academic integration. The article advances three principal contributions. First, it synthesizes disparate research traditions to develop the Global–Local Identity Negotiation Model, which captures the multi-layered tensions characterizing returnee academics' professional identity construction in vocational education settings. Second, it identifies and elaborates three identity trajectories—adaptive assimilation, strategic hybridization, and marginal alienation—that capture the range of professional outcomes experienced by returnee scholars. Third, it derives theoretically grounded recommendations for institutional policy and practice that can inform the design of culturally responsive organizational socialization programs

in vocational colleges.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 establishes the theoretical foundations underpinning the analysis, drawing upon Social Identity Theory, Organizational Socialization Theory, and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Section 3 provides an analysis of the professional identity challenges facing overseas-returned PhDs in Chinese higher vocational colleges. Section 4 examines the role of organizational socialization mechanisms in shaping returnee integration experiences. Section 5 presents the Global–Local Identity Negotiation Model and articulates its constitutive components. Section 6 discusses the policy and practical implications of the analysis, while Section 7 concludes with reflections on limitations and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Social Identity Theory and Professional Identity Formation

Social Identity Theory (SIT), as originally formulated by Henri Tajfel and subsequently elaborated by John Turner [16,17], provides a foundational framework for understanding how individuals derive their self-concept from membership in social groups. Tajfel defined social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" [16]. The theory posits that individuals are motivated to achieve and maintain positive social identities, engaging in processes of social categorization, social comparison, and psychological distinctiveness to sustain favorable self-evaluations relative to relevant out-groups [18].

Within the context of academic professions, professional identity can be understood as a domain-specific instantiation of social identity—the understanding that individuals develop of themselves as members of a particular professional community, encompassing their beliefs, values, motives, and experiences related to their professional roles [19,20]. Professional identity formation is neither a static achievement nor a linear progression; rather, it is an ongoing, dynamic process of construction, negotiation, and reconstruction that unfolds across the career

lifespan and is profoundly shaped by the organizational, institutional, and sociocultural contexts within which professionals operate [12,13]. Recent research has highlighted how identity-based incompatibilities among academic job roles can significantly affect wellbeing and turnover intentions [21], underscoring the psychological stakes of successful professional identity integration.

The application of Social Identity Theory to returnee academics highlights several distinctive features of their professional identity construction. Overseas-returned PhDs occupy an interstitial social position: they have been socialized into the norms, values, and practices of international academic communities during their doctoral training abroad, yet they must establish professional legitimacy within domestic institutional environments that may operate according to different logics and reward structures [10]. This dual socialization creates potential for identity conflict, as returnees navigate between the professional identities they developed in foreign academic contexts and the identities demanded or expected by their home institutions. Yu and Yu [9], in their mixed-methods investigation of returnee teachers' professional identity in Chinese universities, found that returnees' dual domestic and overseas study experiences engendered particularities in professional identity formation, with influencing factors spanning individual background characteristics, organizational environment conditions, and sociocultural adaptation processes.

2.2 Organizational Socialization Theory

Organizational Socialization Theory (OST) provides a complementary analytical lens for understanding how newcomers acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors necessary to function effectively as organizational members. Van Maanen and Schein [14] proposed a foundational taxonomy of socialization tactics organized along a bipolar continuum, distinguishing between institutionalized socialization—characterized by collective, formal, sequential, fixed, serial, and investiture processes—and individualized socialization—characterized by individual, informal, random, variable, disjunctive, and divestiture processes. Subsequent research has consistently demonstrated that institutionalized socialization tactics are associated with more

positive newcomer outcomes, including lower role ambiguity, reduced turnover intentions, and higher job satisfaction [22,23].

The temporal dynamics of organizational socialization have been articulated through stage models that delineate the phases through which newcomers progress. Feldman [24] proposed a three-stage model encompassing anticipatory socialization (occurring prior to organizational entry), encounter (the initial period following entry during which newcomers confront organizational reality), and change and acquisition (during which newcomers master role requirements and adjust to organizational norms). A recent comprehensive meta-analytic review of the organizational socialization literature has extended these earlier models by incorporating resource-based perspectives and identifying the critical role of proactive personality and newcomer proactive behaviors in adjustment, while also highlighting the importance of social acceptance and perceived fit for newcomer success [15]. Tackett [25], in a study of new faculty integration at an American community college, applied the organizational socialization framework to investigate the integration experiences of faculty members, finding that structured feedback, mentorship, and orientation programs within the OST framework significantly shaped newcomer adjustment and long-term professional outcomes. The community college context examined by Tackett bears notable structural similarities to Chinese higher vocational colleges, as both institutional types prioritize teaching and applied learning over research production and face distinctive challenges in faculty recruitment and retention.

Of particular relevance to the case of overseas-returned PhDs is the concept of "organizational fit"—the congruence between individual values, abilities, and needs and organizational supplies, demands, and cultures [26]. Returnee academics entering vocational colleges may experience significant person–organization misfit if the research-oriented values and practices acquired during international doctoral training conflict with the teaching-intensive, application-focused expectations of their new institutional environments. This misfit, if unaddressed through appropriate socialization mechanisms, can precipitate identity fragmentation, professional dissatisfaction, and ultimately organizational withdrawal.

2.3 Cultural Capital and the Valorization of International Credentials

Bourdieu's [27] theory of cultural capital offers a critical sociological lens for examining the differential valuation of overseas-acquired academic credentials and competencies within domestic institutional fields. Bourdieu distinguished between three fundamental forms of capital—economic, cultural, and social—that can be converted into one another according to prevailing exchange rates within particular social fields. Cultural capital, which encompasses educational qualifications, intellectual dispositions, linguistic competencies, and embodied cultural knowledge, functions as a mechanism of social reproduction and distinction-making within academic fields [28].

The application of Bourdieusian theory to returnee scholars reveals the contested nature of transnational cultural capital. Overseas-returned academics possess forms of cultural capital—methodological expertise, international publication experience, foreign language proficiency, and cosmopolitan sensibilities—acquired through doctoral training in foreign higher education systems. However, the value of this capital is not fixed or guaranteed; rather, it is subject to processes of (de) valorization within the specific institutional fields to which returnees return. As Li, Xing, and Zuo [7] demonstrated in their study of returnee scholars at Chinese regional universities, returnees encountered challenges, including insufficient research resources and inadequate academic infrastructure, yet their transnational capital could simultaneously serve as a valuable asset for academic reintegration when appropriately leveraged and institutionally supported.

Significantly, the valorization of overseas cultural capital is not merely a function of objective institutional resources but also involves symbolic struggles over academic legitimacy. Research by Wang [29] has shown how Western-educated returnee scholars in China may encounter anti-Western distinction-making strategies deployed by locally trained academics seeking to monopolize privileged positions within domestic academic hierarchies. Cultural capital obtained by returnees may be "devalued by nationalist rhetoric, posing obstacles to its convertibility to other forms of capital," with some returnees

strategically concealing their acquired cultural capital "to demonstrate ease with Chinese culture," while others emphasize "their cosmopolitan cultural capital as sources of distinction"—a strategy that risks exclusion from core academic networks and consequent career disadvantage [29]. Peng [30] further demonstrated how Chinese student returnees confront a diminishing "halo" of overseas credentials in the changing field of the domestic labor market, with employability becoming increasingly time-, place-, and institution-specific. These dynamics are likely to be particularly acute in higher vocational colleges, where the practical, applied orientation of institutional missions may create a sharper disjuncture with the research-intensive socialization of internationally trained PhDs than that experienced in university settings.

2.4 Toward an Integrative Framework

Each of these theoretical traditions illuminates a distinct dimension of the returnee academic experience; yet none is individually sufficient to capture the full complexity of professional identity formation and organizational socialization in vocational education contexts. Social Identity Theory foregrounds the psychological processes through which individuals construct and maintain valued professional selves, but it pays insufficient attention to the institutional structures that constrain and enable identity work. Organizational Socialization Theory emphasizes the formal and informal mechanisms through which newcomers are integrated into organizational cultures; however, it has been developed primarily within corporate and conventional university contexts and requires adaptation to the distinctive features of vocational education institutions. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital reveals the contested politics of credential valuation and distinction-making, but its macro-sociological orientation may obscure the micro-level processes of identity negotiation experienced by individual returnees.

An integrative framework is therefore required—one that acknowledges the multi-layered nature of returnee professional identity as simultaneously psychological, organizational, and sociopolitical, and that situates identity formation processes within the specific institutional ecology of Chinese higher

vocational colleges. The Global–Local Identity Negotiation Model presented in Section 5 of this article represents an attempt to construct such an integrative framework, drawing upon the complementary insights of all three theoretical traditions while adapting them to the particular circumstances of returnee academics in vocational education settings.

3. The Professional Identity Challenges Facing Overseas-Returned PhDs in Higher Vocational Colleges

3.1 The Institutional Ecology of Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges

To understand the professional identity challenges confronting overseas-returned PhDs, it is necessary to situate their experiences within the specific institutional ecology of Chinese higher vocational colleges. These institutions occupy a distinctive position within China's stratified higher education system, differing from research universities in their educational missions, faculty expectations, resource environments, and prestige hierarchies. The internationalization of China's higher vocational education has undergone a strategic transformation from "bringing in" to "going global," gradually shifting from reliance on external technology input to autonomous output based on domestic industrial advantages, thereby contributing Chinese wisdom and solutions to global vocational education development [5]. By 2024, over 200 vocational institutions across 27 provinces had established more than 400 collaborative programs and institutional entities across over 70 countries and regions, with these numbers growing to over 300 institutions operating in more than 80 countries by 2025 [5]. However, despite this trajectory of internationalization, the core institutional identity of higher vocational colleges remains fundamentally oriented toward applied talent cultivation rather than knowledge production. Faculty members in these institutions are expected to prioritize teaching excellence, practical skill development, and industry engagement over research output and academic publication [31]. This institutional logic may stand in significant tension with the professional identities that overseas-returned PhDs have developed during their doctoral training in research-intensive international universities, where research productivity, theoretical

sophistication, and scholarly publication constitute the primary markers of professional achievement and status [32].

3.2 The Global–Local Identity Tension

The professional identity challenges experienced by overseas-returned PhDs in higher vocational colleges can be conceptualized along a global–local axis that captures the tension between internationally acquired academic dispositions and locally embedded institutional expectations. On the one hand, returnees bring with them forms of academic habitus shaped by their socialization into international doctoral programs—methodological preferences for quantitative rigor or qualitative depth, epistemological orientations toward theory-building and abstraction, publication aspirations oriented toward international journals, and professional network ties spanning national boundaries. On the other hand, their employing vocational colleges demand forms of professional practice—curriculum development for applied programs, industry partnership cultivation, competency-based assessment design, and student mentorship focused on employability—that may align imperfectly with, or even directly contradict, their internationally acquired academic dispositions.

Sun and Wu [11], in their temporal-agential study of early career STEM returnees, found that structures internal to the university can profoundly shape the way returnees leverage their cosmopolitan assets and the direction they take in envisioning their transnationally viable career paths. Their research underscores that national/local and institutional-level factors significantly mediate how returnees negotiate their professional roles and identities. Within vocational colleges, where the misalignment between internationally acquired research dispositions and locally expected teaching and applied practices may be more pronounced than in universities, these identity tensions are likely to be intensified.

3.3 Devalorization of Transnational Cultural Capital

As Bourdieusian analyses of returnee scholars suggest, the cultural capital acquired by overseas-educated academics may undergo processes of devalorization within domestic institutional fields. The specific nature of this devalorization in vocational college contexts

merits careful consideration. Unlike research universities, where international publication records and methodological sophistication may retain significant symbolic value even if their practical convertibility is contested, vocational colleges may accord relatively low institutional priority to precisely those forms of cultural capital that returnees are most equipped to deploy.

The devalorization process operates through both formal and informal mechanisms. Formally, performance evaluation systems in vocational colleges typically weight teaching quality, student outcomes, and industry engagement more heavily than research output, thereby reducing the institutional currency of the publication-oriented competencies that returnees acquired during their doctoral training. Informally, locally trained colleagues may engage in distinction-making practices that construct overseas credentials as "impractical" or "disconnected from Chinese realities," thereby undermining the symbolic value of returnees' transnational cultural capital [29]. The "halo" of overseas credentials may thus diminish in domestic institutional contexts, as Peng [30] documented among Chinese student returnees navigating the domestic labor market—a phenomenon likely to be amplified in vocational education settings where the perceived utility of research-oriented doctoral training is already tenuous. Wang [29] has captured this phenomenon vividly, noting that everyday interactions in academic settings—such as the routine acknowledgement of Chinese-language journal publications while English-language international publications go unrecognized—reflect broader nationalist discourses that have become increasingly visible in Chinese academic settings, signaling boundaries around trust, loyalty, and belonging.

3.4 Identity Trajectories: Assimilation, Hybridization, and Alienation

Drawing upon the empirical findings of existing studies on returnee academics and the theoretical resources outlined above, three broad identity trajectories can be identified that characterize the professional outcomes experienced by overseas-returned PhDs in higher vocational colleges.

Adaptive assimilation describes the trajectory of returnees who successfully internalize the norms, values, and practices of their vocational college

environments, progressively relinquishing or modifying the research-oriented professional identities developed during their overseas doctoral training. These individuals come to identify primarily as vocational educators, deriving professional satisfaction from teaching excellence, student mentorship, and industry engagement, and regarding their international research training as a supplementary rather than central component of their professional identity. While adaptive assimilation enables organizational fit and institutional acceptance, it may entail costs in terms of professional self-alienation if returnees experience the abandonment of their research identities as a form of loss or diminishment.

Strategic hybridization represents the trajectory of returnees who successfully integrate elements of their internationally acquired research identities with the locally demanded identities of vocational educators, constructing a hybrid professional identity that draws upon both cultural repertoires. Dai and Hardy [10], in their narrative study of international returnees and locally trained scholars in Chinese higher education, found that academics' identity development entailed "a process of struggle and confusion during earlier stages through to the construction of a more hybrid academic identity," suggesting that hybridization constitutes an achievable developmental endpoint rather than an inherently unstable condition. Strategically, hybrid returnees may, for example, develop research programs focused on vocational education pedagogy that leverage their methodological training while addressing institutionally valued questions, or they may cultivate international industry partnerships that bridge their cosmopolitan networks with their colleges' applied missions.

Marginal alienation characterizes the trajectory of returnees who find themselves unable either to assimilate into their vocational college environments or to construct viable hybrid identities, instead experiencing persistent professional identity fragmentation, role ambiguity, and organizational disengagement. These individuals may perceive their overseas training as fundamentally incompatible with their institutional contexts, yet lack the individual or organizational resources to negotiate productive identity integration. Marginal alienation is associated with heightened turnover intentions, reduced job

satisfaction, and diminished professional well-being, representing both an individual-level developmental failure and an institutional-level waste of human capital.

These trajectories are not fixed categories but rather ideal-typical patterns; individual returnees may move between trajectories over the course of their careers as their professional identities evolve in response to changing institutional conditions and personal circumstances. The factors influencing which trajectory a given returnee is likely to follow include both individual-level variables—such as adaptability, motivation for returning, and prior professional experience—and institutional-level variables—such as the quality of organizational socialization, the availability of mentorship, and the flexibility of performance evaluation systems.

4. Organizational Socialization Mechanisms in Vocational College Contexts

4.1 The Importance of Structured Integration Programs

Organizational socialization research has consistently demonstrated that structured, institutionalized socialization tactics produce more favorable newcomer outcomes than individualized, laissez-faire approaches [22,23]. For overseas-returned PhDs entering Chinese higher vocational colleges, the need for structured integration is particularly acute given the potential for significant person–organization misfit and the complexity of the identity negotiations in which they must engage. A recent comprehensive meta-analysis of the organizational socialization literature underscores that proactive newcomer behaviors—including information seeking, relationship building, and positive framing—are critically important for newcomer adjustment, while also highlighting the significance of social acceptance and perceived fit [15].

Tackett [25] found that the effectiveness of faculty integration at a community college was significantly enhanced when structured feedback, mentorship, and orientation programs were embedded within an organizational socialization framework spanning anticipatory, encounter, and transformational phases. These findings are directly transferable to the Chinese vocational college context, where the absence of systematic onboarding programs may exacerbate the

disorientation and identity fragmentation experienced by returning academics. Without structured support for understanding institutional expectations, navigating collegial relationships, and developing contextually appropriate professional practices, returnees are left to navigate the complexities of professional identity reconstruction through trial and error—a process that is inefficient at best and professionally damaging at worst.

4.2 The Role of Mentorship and Peer Support

Mentorship constitutes one of the most consequential organizational socialization mechanisms for newcomer academics. Kram's [33] foundational work distinguished between career functions of mentoring—including sponsorship, exposure, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments—and psychosocial functions—including role modeling, acceptance, counseling, and friendship. For overseas-returned PhDs in vocational colleges, both sets of mentoring functions are critical. Career mentoring can help returnees navigate the unfamiliar terrain of vocational education institutions, develop contextually valued competencies, and establish professional legitimacy within their new environments. Psychosocial mentoring can provide the emotional support and identity validation necessary to sustain returnees through the inevitably challenging process of professional identity reconstruction.

The specific form that effective mentorship takes in vocational college contexts may differ from that in university settings. Given that senior faculty in vocational colleges may themselves lack international academic experience, the career mentoring they can provide may be limited to institutional navigation rather than international research development. Complementary mentoring arrangements—for example, pairing returnees with both a local mentor who can guide institutional integration and an external mentor who can support continued research engagement—may therefore be particularly valuable in vocational education contexts.

Peer support networks among returnees themselves represent another significant socialization resource. Li, Xing, and Zuo [7] highlighted the importance of returnee scholars' capacity to leverage transnational capital through their networks and collaborations, noting that

transnational capital can serve as a valuable asset for academic reintegration. In vocational colleges, where returnees may constitute a relatively small minority of faculty, creating formal or informal communities of practice among internationally educated staff can provide spaces for identity validation, knowledge exchange, and collective problem-solving. These peer networks can serve as "identity workspaces" [34] wherein returnees can explore, experiment with, and consolidate hybrid professional identities that integrate international and local elements.

4.3 Institutional Structures: Evaluation, Incentives, and Career Pathways

The formal institutional structures governing faculty work—performance evaluation systems, promotion criteria, incentive schemes, and career pathways—exert powerful influences on professional identity formation by signaling which activities, competencies, and achievements are valued and rewarded within the organization [35]. For overseas-returned PhDs in vocational colleges, these structures may communicate messages that either validate or invalidate their internationally acquired professional identities. Liu et al. [36] have demonstrated through a meta-analytic review of field experiments that socialization programs can significantly improve newcomer retention, with participants showing 1.46 times higher odds of retention compared to control groups—findings directly applicable to educational institutional contexts.

When performance evaluation systems in vocational colleges exclusively or predominantly weight teaching and applied service activities while according minimal recognition to research output, returnees receive an institutional signal that their research identities are of limited organizational value. This signal may be internalized, contributing to adaptive assimilation, or, if resisted, to marginal alienation. Conversely, evaluation systems that recognize and reward a broader range of professional contributions—including applied research, pedagogical innovation, industry collaboration, and international engagement—create institutional conditions more conducive to strategic hybridization, as they provide legitimate space for returnees to maintain and develop their research-oriented identities alongside their vocational education

roles.

Promotion criteria represent a particularly consequential institutional structure. If advancement in vocational college hierarchies depends on criteria—such as teaching awards, curriculum development achievements, or industry partnership successes—that are relatively disconnected from research productivity, returnees face strong institutional incentives to redirect their professional energies away from research and toward teaching and applied work. This structural pressure may accelerate adaptive assimilation trajectories, for better or worse. Alternatively, the creation of differentiated career tracks—for instance, teaching-focused, research-focused, and industry-engagement-focused pathways—could enable returnees to pursue career advancement in directions aligned with their professional identities while still contributing to institutional missions.

5. The Global–Local Identity Negotiation Model

5.1 Model Architecture and Core Components

Drawing upon the theoretical foundations and empirical analyses presented in preceding sections, this section articulates the Global–Local Identity Negotiation Model as an integrative framework for understanding the professional identity formation and organizational socialization of overseas-returned PhDs in higher vocational colleges. The model comprises four interconnected components: identity antecedents, negotiation processes, contextual mediators, and identity outcomes. Identity antecedents refer to the individual-level characteristics and experiences that shape returnees' professional identities prior to and upon organizational entry. These include: the nature and prestige of the overseas doctoral program (research intensity, disciplinary culture, pedagogical approach); the returnee's motivation for pursuing doctoral study abroad and for subsequently returning to China (career aspirations, family considerations, patriotic sentiment); the professional experiences accumulated prior to doctoral study, if any (industry experience, teaching experience, research experience); and the returnee's pre-existing conceptions of vocational education as a professional field (status perceptions, career

expectations, identity prototypes). These antecedents condition the initial professional identity that returnees bring into their vocational college environments and influence their subsequent identity negotiation trajectories.

Negotiation processes capture the dynamic, agentic activities through which returnees construct, maintain, and reconstruct their professional identities in interaction with their organizational environments. Drawing upon the identity work literature [37,38], several distinct negotiation processes can be identified. Identity bridging involves returnees' efforts to establish connections between their internationally acquired competencies and locally valued activities, such as applying international research methods to vocational education problems or leveraging foreign language skills for international partnership development. Identity compartmentalization involves maintaining separate professional identity domains—researcher and vocational educator—that are activated in different contexts without attempts at integration. Identity revision involves the substantive modification of professional self-conceptions, whether through relinquishing previously valued identity elements or incorporating newly valued ones. The specific negotiation processes employed by individual returnees shape the identity trajectories they follow and the professional outcomes they experience.

Contextual mediators are the organizational and institutional factors that facilitate or constrain identity negotiation processes. These include: the quality and availability of organizational socialization mechanisms (orientation programs, mentorship arrangements, peer support networks); the content and flexibility of institutional evaluation and reward structures (promotion criteria, performance metrics, incentive systems); the cultural norms and collegial dynamics of the specific department or college unit (inclusivity, supportiveness, attitudes toward returnees); and the broader institutional commitment to internationalization (resource allocation, strategic priority, leadership vision). Contextual mediators do not determine identity outcomes in any mechanical sense, but they create conditions that render certain negotiation processes more or less feasible and certain identity trajectories more or less likely. Identity outcomes refer to the relatively stabilized professional identities that emerge

from the negotiation process, corresponding to the three trajectories—adaptive assimilation, strategic hybridization, and marginal alienation—discussed in Section 3.4. These outcomes are characterized by: the degree of coherence versus fragmentation in the professional self-concept; the degree of alignment versus conflict between personal

professional values and institutional expectations; the level of professional satisfaction and well-being; and the strength of organizational commitment and intention to remain.

5.2 Visual Representation

Figure 1 provides a schematic representation of the Global–Local Identity Negotiation Model.

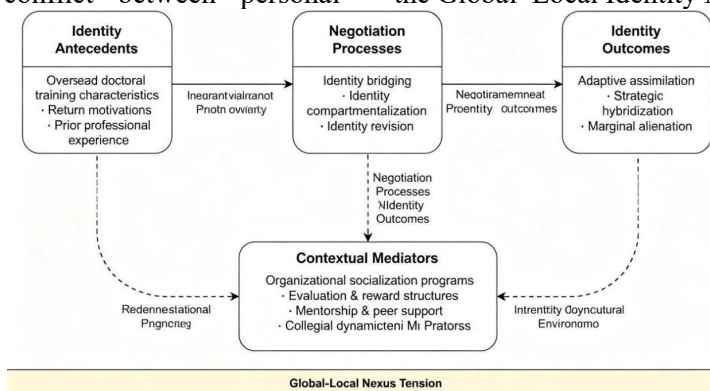


Figure 1. Global–Local Identity Negotiation Model: Relationships among Identity Antecedents, Negotiation Processes, Contextual Mediators, and Outcomes

Note: Solid arrows represent primary directional influence; dashed arrows represent feedback loops and reciprocal causality. Contextual mediators moderate the relationship between negotiation processes and identity outcomes.

Table 1. Summary of Key Characteristics Associated with Adaptive Assimilation, Strategic Hybridization, and Marginal Alienation Identity Trajectories among Overseas-Returned PhDs in Higher Vocational Colleges

Dimension	Adaptive Assimilation	Strategic Hybridization	Marginal Alienation
Professional Identity Configuration	Predominantly vocational educator identity; research self is suppressed or abandoned.	Integrated hybrid identity that synergizes researcher and vocational educator roles.	Fragmented, conflicting identities; inability to reconcile global academic and local applied selves.
Alignment with Institutional Mission	High alignment with teaching and applied focus; conforms to existing norms.	Creative alignment; stretches institutional boundaries while contributing to core applied missions.	Low alignment; perceived value mismatch between personal research ethos and institutional demands.
Transnational Cultural Capital Deployment	Capital is underutilized or devalued; research skills are gradually relinquished.	Capital is strategically leveraged for applied research, pedagogical innovation, and international partnerships.	Capital is unrecognized or actively devalued, leading to frustration and disengagement.
Dominant Identity Work Strategy	Identity revision (relinquishing previous self); may involve initial compartmentalization.	Identity bridging and creative integration of multiple repertoires.	Ineffective compartmentalization; persistent identity struggle without resolution.
Organizational Socialization Experience	Successful socialization into local norms; benefits from conventional teaching mentorship.	Requires, and often proactively seeks, tailored support for dual roles; benefits from hybrid mentoring.	Socialization failure; experiences isolation, lack of structured support, or conflicting institutional signals.
Professional Well-being & Satisfaction	Moderate surface satisfaction; potential latent dissatisfaction or sense of loss regarding abandoned research identity.	High satisfaction and a strong sense of professional growth and self-efficacy.	Low satisfaction; high risk of burnout, emotional exhaustion, and professional anomie.
Organizational Commitment & Retention	High normative and continuance commitment; stable retention but may lack innovative drive.	Strong affective commitment and proactive extra-role contributions; high likelihood of long-term retention.	Low commitment; markedly high turnover intention and actual attrition risk.
Institutional Contribution Pattern	Reliable, high-quality teaching and service; limited research output or international engagement.	Innovative pedagogy, applied research output, international linkage-building; acts as a boundary-spanner.	Minimal or disengaged contribution; underperformance relative to qualification level.

Note. The three trajectories represent ideal-typical patterns. Individual returnees may exhibit characteristics of multiple trajectories or transition between them over time.

Figure 1 shows that Schematic representation of the Global–Local Identity Negotiation Model, depicting the relationships among identity antecedents (overseas doctoral training characteristics, return motivations, pre-existing professional experiences), negotiation processes (identity bridging, compartmentalization,

revision), contextual mediators (organizational socialization, evaluation structures, collegial dynamics), and identity outcomes (adaptive assimilation, strategic hybridization, marginal alienation). Bidirectional arrows indicate reciprocal influence among model components. Table 1 provides a summary of the key

characteristics distinguishing the three identity trajectories.

5.3 Model Dynamics and Reciprocal Causality

The Global–Local Identity Negotiation Model is not a linear input–process–output model but rather depicts a system characterized by reciprocal causality and feedback loops. Identity outcomes are not merely the endpoints of antecedent-driven processes; they also feed back to influence subsequent negotiation processes and contextual conditions. For example, returnees who achieve strategic hybridization may, through their professional practice, contribute to reshaping departmental cultural norms in ways that render the institutional environment more hospitable to future returnee cohorts. Conversely, returnees experiencing marginal alienation may withdraw from collegial engagement, thereby reducing the peer support available to other returnees and reinforcing the conditions that produce alienation. The model thus captures the developmental and systemic nature of professional identity formation in organizational contexts.

6. Implications for Policy and Practice

6.1 Designing Culturally Responsive Organizational Socialization Programs

The analysis presented in this article carries several implications for the design of organizational socialization programs in higher vocational colleges that recruit overseas-returned PhDs. First, such programs should be structurally robust, encompassing systematic orientation, ongoing mentorship, and periodic developmental review, rather than relying on ad hoc or laissez-faire approaches to newcomer integration. Drawing upon the phased socialization models articulated by Feldman [24] and empirically validated in community college contexts by Tackett [25], vocational colleges should develop onboarding programs that address the distinctive needs of internationally educated faculty at each stage of their integration—anticipatory (pre-arrival communication, realistic job previews), encounter (intensive orientation, mentor assignment, initial teaching support), and transformation (continuing professional development, career planning, community building). Liu et al. [36] have shown that such

structured socialization programs significantly improve newcomer retention, with their meta-analysis demonstrating that newcomers participating in socialization programs had 1.46 times higher odds of retention.

Second, socialization programs should be culturally responsive, acknowledging and addressing the specific challenges faced by returnees who must navigate between internationally acquired academic dispositions and locally embedded institutional expectations. This responsiveness should include both practical support—such as assistance with understanding institutional norms, navigating bureaucratic procedures, and developing contextually appropriate pedagogical practices—and psychosocial support—such as identity validation, community building among internationally educated staff, and recognition of the emotional labor involved in professional identity reconstruction.

Third, socialization programs should be identity-sensitive, recognizing that returnees' professional identity formation is a central developmental task of the integration period, and that institutions have both the capacity and the responsibility to support productive identity negotiation. This implies that programs should not simply aim at assimilating returnees into existing institutional cultures—a goal that may produce maladaptive outcomes if it requires the wholesale abandonment of valued professional identities—but rather should create conditions conducive to identity hybridization, in which returnees can integrate elements of their internationally acquired professional selves with the locally demanded identities of vocational educators.

6.2 Reforming Institutional Evaluation and Reward Structures

The formal structures governing faculty evaluation, promotion, and reward exert powerful influences on professional identity formation. Vocational colleges seeking to support the productive integration of overseas-returned PhDs should consider reforms to these structures that recognize and reward the distinctive contributions that internationally educated faculty can make. Such reforms might include: expanding the range of activities valued in performance evaluation to include applied research, international publications, pedagogical innovation, and global partnership development

alongside teaching and service; creating differentiated career tracks that enable faculty to pursue advancement through multiple pathways aligned with different professional identity configurations; and establishing institutional mechanisms—such as research centers, international offices, or innovation labs—that provide organizational homes for the research-oriented and internationally oriented dimensions of returnees' professional identities. These structural reforms should be designed with attention to the potential for unintended consequences. For example, introducing research expectations without providing corresponding resources—funding, time release, equipment, research assistance—may produce frustration rather than support. Similarly, differentiated career tracks, while theoretically attractive, require careful implementation to avoid creating status hierarchies that devalue teaching-focused pathways relative to research-focused ones.

6.3 Cultivating Mentorship and Community

The significance of mentorship and peer communities for returnee academic integration suggests that vocational colleges should invest deliberately in cultivating these relational resources. Formal mentorship programs that pair internationally educated newcomers with experienced faculty members—whether returnees themselves or locally trained colleagues with relevant experience—can provide the career and psychosocial support necessary for productive identity negotiation. Such programs should be adequately resourced, with mentor training, protected time for mentoring activities, and recognition of mentoring contributions in performance evaluation.

Peer communities can be cultivated through the establishment of formal or informal networks, forums, or communities of practice among internationally educated faculty. These communities can serve multiple functions: providing spaces for identity validation and mutual support, facilitating knowledge exchange about navigating institutional environments, enabling collaborative research and professional development, and creating collective visibility for internationally educated faculty within their institutions. Given the minority status that returnees may occupy within vocational colleges, institutional support for such

communities—including resource allocation, leadership endorsement, and symbolic recognition—may be necessary to overcome the obstacles to their spontaneous emergence.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Contributions

This article has proposed an integrative conceptual framework—the Global-Local Identity Negotiation Model—for understanding the professional identity formation and organizational socialization of overseas-returned PhDs in Chinese higher vocational colleges. By synthesizing Social Identity Theory, Organizational Socialization Theory, and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, the framework captures the multi-layered tensions that returnee academics navigate between internationally acquired academic dispositions and locally embedded institutional expectations. Three identity trajectories—adaptive assimilation, strategic hybridization, and marginal alienation—have been identified as ideal-typical patterns characterizing the range of professional outcomes experienced by returnees, and the organizational and institutional factors that shape which trajectory individual academics are likely to follow have been analyzed.

The study contributes to several bodies of international literature. To the literature on academic mobility and returnee scholars, it extends analysis beyond the research university contexts that have dominated existing scholarship to the distinctive institutional ecology of vocational colleges. To the literature on professional identity in higher education, it foregrounds the identity dynamics of a particular category of academics—internationally mobile PhDs in vocationally oriented institutions—whose experiences have received limited prior attention. To the literature on organizational socialization, it applies established theoretical frameworks to a novel empirical context and identifies contextual adaptations required for their effective deployment in vocational education settings.

7.2 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As a conceptual and synthetic article, this study is subject to several limitations that point toward directions for future empirical research. First, the analysis draws upon secondary sources and

existing empirical findings rather than original primary data collection. The identity trajectories and mechanisms described in the model require empirical validation through systematic qualitative and quantitative research conducted specifically within higher vocational college contexts. Future studies employing in-depth interviews, longitudinal case studies, or survey methods—particularly those that capture the experiences of returnees across different stages of their career development—would significantly advance understanding of returnee professional identity formation in these settings. Second, the analysis has treated Chinese higher vocational colleges as a relatively homogeneous institutional category, whereas in practice, these institutions vary considerably in their prestige levels, resource endowments, geographic locations, disciplinary profiles, and institutional cultures. Future research should examine how returnees' experiences differ across these dimensions of institutional variation, potentially revealing patterns that are obscured by the generalized analysis presented here.

Third, the analysis has focused on the experiences of returnees themselves, paying relatively limited attention to the perspectives of other organizational stakeholders—locally trained colleagues, institutional leaders, and students—whose attitudes and behaviors significantly shape the identity negotiation environment. Multi-perspectival research designs that incorporate the voices of these stakeholders would enrich understanding of the relational dynamics of returnee integration.

Fourth, the predominantly Chinese focus of the analysis, while justified by the significance of the Chinese case for understanding academic mobility and vocational education development, raises questions about the transferability of the proposed model to other national and institutional contexts. Comparative research examining returnee academics in vocational education settings across different countries would contribute to assessing the model's generalizability and identifying context-specific versus universal features of returnee professional identity formation.

7.3 Concluding Reflections

The recruitment of overseas-returned PhDs into Chinese higher vocational colleges represents a significant and growing phenomenon at the intersection of academic mobility, professional

identity, and vocational education development. For individual returnees, successful identity negotiation—whether through adaptive assimilation or strategic hybridization—holds the key to professional satisfaction, career sustainability, and meaningful contribution to their institutions. For vocational colleges, the effective integration of internationally educated faculty carries implications for institutional quality, international competitiveness, and the capacity to fulfill educational missions in an increasingly globalized environment. For the broader field of higher education studies, the experiences of these academics illuminate fundamental questions about how professional identities are formed, maintained, and transformed in contexts of institutional and cultural transition. It is hoped that the framework presented in this article will stimulate further scholarly engagement with these questions and inform institutional efforts to support the professional flourishing of internationally mobile academics in vocational education settings worldwide.

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