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International academics' perceptions of short-term teaching in a Chinese university: motives, challenges and academic acculturation

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ABSTRACT

International mobility in academia contributes to knowledge exchange, career progression and internationalisation, but limited research has investigated short-term roles. This paper studies international academics who travelled to China to teach a four-week summer school programme. Participants ($n = 44$) were interviewed about motives for coming to China, challenges encountered and academic acculturation. Findings showed that motives, challenges and acculturation experiences were complex and diverse. While disciplinary outreach was a prominent driver, the programme itself had an important role. Most challenges for long-term international academics were not applicable to short-term international academics. Instead, short-term mobile academics' reported challenges tended to be programme or discipline-related, and perceptions of difficulty were shaped by individual factors such as frequency of academic mobility and personal world view. In addition, short-term international mobile academics did not report active engagement in a mutual academic acculturation process, although there was evidence of one-way acculturation directed from home (academic staff) to host (students) and reported changing views about the host culture. Findings enrich understanding and support policy for short-term international academic mobility.

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Introduction

The higher education sector has witnessed the growing scale, speed, and volume of migration flows of academics (known as mobility) (Bauder, Lujan, and Hannan 2018). However, few studies examine the experiences of internationally mobile academic staff (Jiang et al. 2010) – especially those in the Chinese context (J. Chen and Zhu 2022; Larbi and Ashraf 2019), where figures show that the number of foreign staff teaching in Chinese universities has almost doubled between 2007 and 2022 (MOE 2023). International academics report an elongated process of adjustment as they transition into the host institution, navigate new systems, and become integrated into the new country (Saltmarsh and Swirski 2010), yet the experiences of academics travelling abroad to work on a temporary basis has been largely neglected. According to Hoffman (2009), periods abroad lasting 1 year or less are considered short-term mobility, while periods lasting more than 1 year are considered long-term mobility. In this paper, we investigate the experiences of a group of international academics who joined a four-week summer school teaching programme in China. We explore their motives (i.e. the

drivers and reasons for the mobility), challenges, and academic acculturation process, and examine how these compare to existing literature on longer term mobility. Findings will enrich understanding of academics' international mobility and inform policy in institutions who host and support academics visiting for shorter periods.

International academic mobility

International mobility is an established feature of academia and is valued for talent development, knowledge exchange and academic progress (Bauder 2012; Teichler 2015). Academic mobility is generally conceived as geographic border-crossing, but there is a complex spectrum based on context and timescales (Bauder 2012; Hoffman 2009). Research on academic mobility has explored its geographic hierarchy (Bauder, Lujan, and Hannan 2018), the pull-push factors influencing movement (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002) and its links with internationalisation and globalisation (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009; T. Kim 2017). However, the social and cultural dimensions of academic mobility can be downplayed, and new insights can be gained by focusing on the academics themselves in relation to their immediate context and personal journeys.

Taking a socio-cultural approach, academic mobility can be understood as 'situated and multi-faceted' (Cantwell 2011, 429). Internationally mobile academics are 'self-driven sojourns' (Lee and Kuzhabekova 2018, 381) – undertaking different types of mobility, for different reasons, and with different experiences (Huisman 2022; Jöns 2007). Motives for international academic mobility can include career progression, family ties, unstable labour markets and pursuit of new experiences (Huisman 2022), but the drivers for short-term mobility may differ from those moving for longer periods. Staff seeking stable employment or to relocate for family may pursue long-term contracts, compared to those seeking new horizons to broaden experience and enhance their career. Similarly, the demographic profile of staff pursuing short-term mobility will likely vary based on career stage and personal circumstances (Bauder 2012).

Acculturation of international mobile academics

Acculturation is 'those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups' (Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits 1936, 149). Berry (1997) further distinguishes acculturation between a group-level phenomenon (changes to social structures, institutions and cultural practices) and an individual-level phenomenon (psychological and behavioural changes). A common challenge during acculturation is sojourners' potential changes in cultural identity, involving constant inquiries about sense of belonging to, being accepted by, (dis)identification with and/or negotiation with various groups (Y. W. Chen and Mendy 2021). Such challenges may bring both mental and psychological distress when encountering loss of social support, identity, social norms and culture. This 'acculturative stress' (Smart and Smart 1995, 390) is associated with individual personalities, cultural proficiency, group norms and cultural value conflicts at the micro level, and ideological conflicts at the macro level (Jin, Wei, Wang, et al. 2024).

Since internationally mobile academics are associated with academic settings that have their own features, 'academic acculturation' is used to describe 'the processes by which one becomes a part of a group (for example, institution, department, etc.) and integrates with its members, while possibly influencing the host group with one's own life experience and academic expertise' (Jiang et al. 2010, 156). Research examining sustained mobility experiences showed that academics working in a new cultural setting might have context-specific problems, including teaching and learning difficulties due to institutional cultural differences (Ghazarian and Youhne 2015), language barriers or challenges with educational qualifications (Pherali 2012). International academics need 'cross-cultural transition' to adapt to the host culture (McClure 2007, 217) and show 'willingness to adapt' before teaching abroad (Getty 2011, 352). Wang's (2022, 142) research on mobile foreign academics

through the lens of infrastructure in migration is helpful to understand how three layers of infrastructure operations, institutional (e.g. visa regimes and work contracts), physical and technological (e.g. transportation facilities, workspace and digital applications utilised by migrant individuals) and social (social networks of different kinds including friends and colleagues), can facilitate or hinder international academics' move into new cultural settings.

Literature presents inconsistent voices about the role of 'time abroad' in acculturation experiences. According to Lysgaard (1955), sojourners staying abroad for less than 6 months were better adapted than those between 6 and 18 months, which suggests a U-shaped cross-cultural adaptation curve. In Jin, Wei, Yin, et al. (2024) study, time abroad influenced participants' acculturation process differently, but Selmer and Luring (2009) did not find that duration abroad made a difference in academics' adjustment. For Berry (2005), acculturation is variable between people, with outcomes related to desired goals. He describes four acculturation strategies, based on differing attitudes, behaviours and preferences. 'Assimilation' is where individuals shed their heritage culture and become absorbed into the local culture, whereas 'separation' involves maintaining the heritage culture and avoiding interaction with the new culture. 'Integration' involves maintaining heritage culture whilst frequently interacting with other groups, and 'marginalisation' is where the heritage culture is not maintained nor does interaction with others occur. This implies that the extent of adaptation to the host culture is perhaps an individual choice rather than time duration alone.

Research on international mobile academics in Chinese context

International mobility trends in academia are geographically asymmetric. Typical aspirational movement is from developing to developed countries, with English-speaking countries (such as the U.S.A., Canada, Australia and the UK) and Western Europe topping the hierarchy (Bauder, Lujan, and Hannan 2018). Less common is academic mobility into the 'global scientific periphery' (p53), including countries such as India and China. Focusing attention on the motives and experiences of the so-called 'reverse flow' (Lee and Kuzhabekova 2018) faculty into periphery regions is important – particularly for countries wanting to attract international talent.

In China, maintaining a higher education sector that is globally competitive is a priority. The current foreign-Chinese faculty ratio in Chinese universities is about 0.9% (MOE 2023), far below the 2.5% and 5% indicators of internationalisation by world university ranking and QS World University Rankings (Shakirova and Smolnikova 2017). Having foreign teachers is a sign of being 'international' or 'global' (E. C. Kim 2015, 608) and helps promote students' understanding of multiculturalism alongside internationalising the curriculum (Chu 2013).

Despite the increasing number of academics taking offshore teaching positions, little is known about their lived experiences (T. Kim and Locke 2010), and few studies focus on the emerging community of international academics in China (J. Chen and Zhu 2022). Whilst international academics settling in China enjoy educational autonomy, research independence, and better life conditions, they might face challenges such as language barriers, administrative constraints, balancing family and career, heavy workload, and 'otherness' (Cai and Hall 2016; Larbi and Ashraf 2019, 156). Likewise, lack of institutional or social assistance to navigate the new environment, and ideas clashing with the organisational culture and processes of Chinese universities is difficult (J. Chen and Zhu 2022), alongside challenges with teaching Chinese students due to differing classroom behaviours (Getty 2011; Zhao and Liu 2016). The available research indicates that living in China, Chinese institutions and teaching Chinese students could all present cross-cultural challenges and feelings of isolation (J. Chen and Zhu 2022).

Despite recent literature reviewing international academics' motives and challenges in working in China (Xu et al. 2022), this has concentrated on long-term international academic mobility, meaning that the extent to which motives and perceived challenges are comparable to short-term mobile academics remains unanswered. 'International academics' in the present study refers to Non-Chinese nationality or ethnicity, and the research focus is international academic's mobility to China to teach

Table 1. Adapted categories of motives, challenges and academic acculturation of international mobile academics in China.

Categories			Description
Motives	Professional		Permanent or tenured academic positions Research opportunities Teaching opportunities
	Cultural		Cultural interest in China
	Personal & social		Marriage with a Chinese Friends/colleagues
Challenges	Institutional	Power relations	Institutional power dynamics with hierarchical approach to management
		Professional isolation	Lack of sense of belongs to a group, department, school or university; lack of institutional support for staff induction or professional development
		Research work	Ineligible for fund application
		Administrative	Tight deadlines, visa application; contract
		Teaching	Chinese students' lack of active class participation Lack of teaching support Conflicts between home university norms and Chinese university norms Teaching qualification
	Social	Interaction with others	Conflicts with group norms Lack of cultural proficiency Feelings of exclusion and otherness
	Individual	Acculturative stress	Loss of identity ethnic or gender discrimination Language barriers Housing, healthcare, children's schooling Personalities Cultural value conflicts; ideological conflicts

on a 4-week summer school programme (SSP) in a Chinese university. Whilst this exploratory study mainly adopts a data-driven analytical approach, it uses the literature to provide a framework integrating theoretical insights with interpretation guided by international academic studies (Xu et al. 2022), migration research (Wang 2022) and a cross-cultural adaptation model (Lysgaard 1955) to enhance understandings of short-term international academics' motives, challenges and academic acculturation process in China, and facilitate comparison between existing findings with international academics in China for longer periods (Table 1).

The summer school program (SSP)

The SSP has been running since 2009 by the university in the present study. As one of the leading institutions, the university attracts over 3,000 undergraduates and 3,000 postgraduates annually across China, plus some international students. Entry requirements are high and competitive.

The SSP is important for the institution's internationalisation agenda and is a vital platform to attract international academics. All undergraduates at the university need two credits (amounting to 34 teaching hours) from the SSP during their studies, and it is also open to postgraduate and international students. The SSP offers courses on four areas: China studies (economics, politics, law etc.), general courses (social sciences and humanities), Chinese culture (Chinese calligraphy, Chinese music etc.) and Chinese language. Courses are taught in English by both visiting academics and university faculty.

The university advertises teaching posts for the SSP annually online. International visiting academics who successfully apply will receive a teacher's manual including programme instructions, course descriptions, travel and living information; and 4 weeks' free on-campus accommodation, meals, a modest salary, and a return flight ticket. Unlike in term-time when offices are provided for visiting academics, the university does not provide a workplace for international academics on the SSP. However, each course taught by international academics is assigned a Chinese student volunteer to guide, assist the course teaching (for example, printing teaching materials) and solve issues. Additionally, the university organises optional weekend cultural tours for foreign teachers. The international academics' duties are teaching only, but it is common for them to participate in

conferences or give lectures within or outside the host university due to their personal links with China.

The SSP is distinctive in comparison to existing research on international mobility. First, the duration of the programme distinguishes it from short conferences which academics might attend in foreign countries. Four weeks involve more sustained 'cultural exposure' but are shorter than might be experienced through other roles such as visiting fellowships. Second, the teaching-focused nature of the SSP differs from some research on short-term international academic mobility examining professional networks and research collaborations (Haupt 2021; Pope et al. 2017). Also, the nature of teaching in China and potential differences previously reported by foreign staff (Getty 2011; Zhao and Liu 2016) might be especially pertinent to these visiting academics.

This study therefore aims to answer the following exploratory questions:

- (1) What are the motives for international academics to join a short-term teaching programme in China?
- (2) Do international academics encounter any problems when teaching in China? If yes, what are they?
- (3) To what extent has the experience of teaching in China facilitated or hindered the international academics' acculturation process in the host institution?

Method

The open-ended exploratory nature of the research questions warranted a qualitative approach (Braun and Clarke 2013), reflecting an existing trend in academic mobility research towards qualitative techniques to understand nuanced experiences (e.g. see Fahey and Kenway 2010; Han 2022; Wiggins et al. 2011). The present study used semi-structured interviews to retain a core focus whilst allowing space for participants to narrate their accounts (Braun and Clarke 2013).

In the year of this study, 108 academics joined the SSP. To avoid insiders' view, home and overseas Chinese academics ($n = 36$) were excluded. The remaining 72 international academics were contacted by email to invite them to participate via self-selection, from which 50 responded. Six participants had long-term mobility experiences so were excluded. In total, 44 participants were interviewed (35 males and 9 females). Participants' country of origin is illustrated in Figure 1.

Among them, 9 participants were teaching in China for the first time, 29 had been to China a few times previously, and six had been for consistent short visits. Their disciplinary areas are shown in Table 2.

Informed by the interview by Jiang et al. (2010), an interview guide (Appendix I) was developed through several rounds of revision and piloting. Topics followed the time line of international academics' participation in the SSP and included why they wanted to visit China; how they found it on arrival; areas of work; involvement in the university; interactions and community integration; and comparisons with their home country. Questions were predominantly open-ended to allow participants to narrate their own accounts. The researcher was careful not to interrupt the participants' flow and encouraged further elaboration of participants' experiences.

Interviews, lasting 30 to 45 minutes, were arranged via email and took place in the researcher's campus office, which is quiet and convenient for participants who all stayed in on-campus accommodation. As all participants taught in English on the SSP and were sufficiently proficient English language users, interviews were conducted in English by the first author, who was not personally involved in the SSP. Participants provided informed consent and had the option to withdraw at any time.¹

Interviews were transcribed and read several times to ensure data familiarity. Due to the exploratory nature of the research questions and limited prior work on short-term mobility in China, the researchers followed a data-driven inductive analytical approach rather than applying a theoretical framework (Xu et al. 2022, 422). After preliminary themes were generated, the researchers counted themes emerging

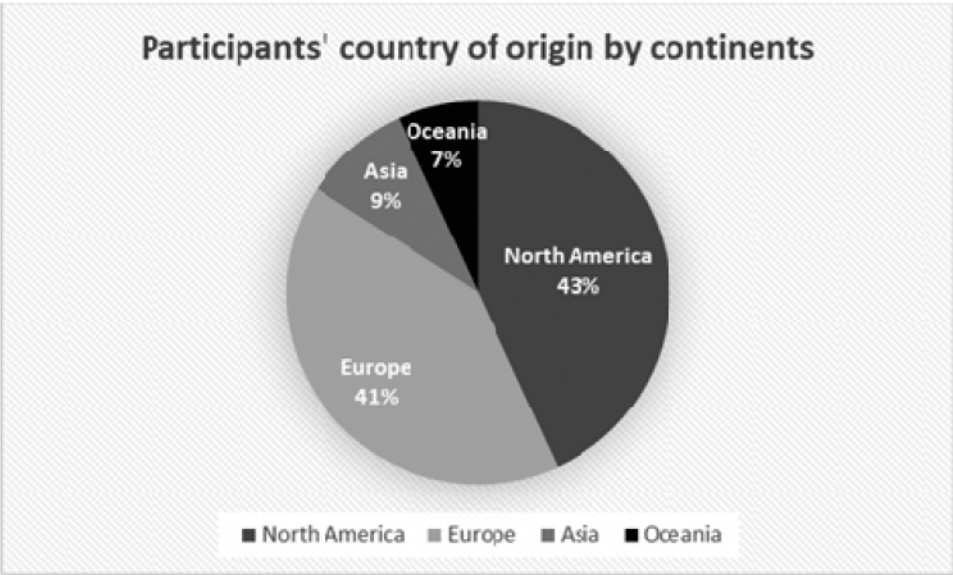


Figure 1. Participant’s country of origin by continents.

Table 2. Participants’ associated disciplines.

Discipline	Number of Participants
Politics	9
Economics	3
Psychology	3
Public administration	3
International studies	3
Religion	3
Philosophy	2
History	2
Education	2
Law	2
Human Resources	1
Computer Science	1
Rural development	1
Urban Planning	1
Chinese literature	1
Environmental Studies	1
Social Service	1
Agricultural Economics	1
Arts	1
English literature	1
Forestry	1
Chinese history	1

from at least three separate transcripts. Through constant comparison (Miles and Huberman 1994), themes were discussed, reviewed, and relabelled resulting in a final identification of the most salient themes.

Analysis

Analysis revealed rich information about international academics’ experiences, namely, diverse motives, various encountered problems, and interactions with the new culture and

Table 3. Structure of themes and sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-themes	Number of participants where theme identified
Motives for teaching in China	Disciplinary outreach	34
	Curiosity about China as a country	9
Challenges of teaching in a Chinese University	None reported	26
	Classroom teaching	13
	Administrative support	9
	On-campus accommodation	7
Interactions with the 'new' culture	Perceptions of student performance	39
	Perceptions of Chinese academic life	23
	Perceptions of China as a country	9

its impacts. Table 3 shows the three main themes and sub-themes identified. Findings are organised around these key themes. Quotations from participants have been anonymised and tidied for publication.

Motives for teaching in China

Participants' reasons for teaching in China varied but could be grouped into two main categories: disciplinary outreach and curiosity about China.

Disciplinary outreach

Many participants expressed that disciplinary outreach, be it self-initiated, invitation through personal contact, or arrangement by professional organisations, was their major motive to teach in China. Some academics were driven by their disciplinary concerns and the alignment between their expertise and the subjects taught at summer school. As one participant stated:

My background is studying Chinese politics. It is part of my professional life ... (Participant 34)

For others, there was a broader objective to building academic links with China that could be returned to their home institution.

I am going to take over as <identified job role> in my university and we are also trying to establish non-western international studies. I thought China would be really great place to start (Participant 13)

The institution of the SSP was appealing for several participants, in terms of reputation and professional links.

... I came here because I knew that this university is a renowned university ... (Participant 18)

Other academics were informed of the SSP through personal contacts, for example,

One of our (former) PhD students ... is now a professor in this university. She ... asked me if I would be interested in coming here via this program (Participant 16)

Receiving a direct invitation from established connections at the university was noted by other academics and was an important facilitator in deciding to travel to China. Such invitations could be associated with longer term roles, such as Participant 26 who was invited to take a permanent position at the university:

I was asked whether I could teach here permanently and one of the reasons I came here was to look at this campus...talk with the dean and the academic affairs people ...

For some, chances for teaching in China were given by professional organisations. For example,

the division of XXX that I belong to created a relationship with this university ... they asked for representative ... to come here, and I was selected (Participant 40)

As such, the motives for teaching on the SSP were often integrated with participants' broader academic roles, professional networks, and areas of expertise in their home countries.

Curiosity about China as a country

Another motive was a general curiosity about China, its history and changing outlook. Some were interested in ancient Chinese philosophy and cultural traditions. Others were curious about any culture that differed from their own. For example,

I enjoy travelling, seeing new cultures, and meeting new students. I love seeing how other countries do education and always want to visit China. (Participant 13)

Linked to this, some academics had worked with Chinese students in their home countries, which triggered their interest to know more about Chinese education.

On average Chinese students in my home university are much better than other foreign students ... I want to know more about the Chinese education system (Participant 24)

Visiting China was also a means to understand its structure, customs, practices, and increasing world impact. For Participant 17, gaining contemporary experience in China was presented as a professional necessity for them:

China is a unique country both because of its size and its environmental impact. As someone who works in the field of environmental policy internationally, it was unimaginable to me if I do not know the situation up to date.

Here the drivers were individually located, based on personal and professional interest and desire to improve knowledge and experience in China as a country.

Challenges of teaching in a Chinese university

Many of the academics did not report encountering problems teaching in Chinese higher education. For those who did, challenges were reported in three aspects: classroom teaching, administrative support, and on-campus accommodation.

Classroom teaching

Some academics discussed students' class participation and reported difficulties when trying to generate discussion.

The problem is to make them talk, a bit interactive. (Participant 12)

Several participants referred to cultural differences when explaining students' reluctance to actively participate in class. Participant 4 had prior experience of working in an Asian context and drew parallels between students they had taught previously.

It is invariable to keep quiet in the class. I am used to teaching in Singapore and Asia for many years ... there was no students asking questions.

Students' behaviour was attributed to established cultural practices. There were also concerns about language proficiency and the use of English on the SSP. For example, Participant 22 said:

Either they don't feel comfortable speaking English in public or they are just painfully shy. Some of them never said anything when I ask for volunteers.

Here, students' reluctance to talk in class was interpreted more as personal characteristics of the student. In contrast, Participant 41 referred to broader classroom norms and cultural practices that shaped behaviour.

I realise that in most cases their English is quite good. Maybe they are a little bit intimidated to use their English in a group, or it is a partly Chinese custom hindering students from participating actively in class.

Some participants reported adopting specific strategies to 'change' the classroom-learning culture with their SSP groups. Participant 12 said:

I realize I will force them to talk at one point, so I call their names. Gradually, they know each of them should speak in my class and classroom discussion become more dynamic.

Similarly, Participant 21 reported an effective way to break the classroom silence:

I asked them to search topics and prepare classroom presentations before the class ... this leads to more active classroom participation.

These examples showed how some academics were actively adopting strategies in the classroom to encourage student interaction.

Administrative support

Although academics appreciated the assistance assigned to them, some still found lack of administrative support made their teaching experience less smooth. The most frequently mentioned problem was not knowing about students' backgrounds beforehand. For example, Participant 20 mentioned that,

We did not know their qualification. We even did not know if they are from the major, you prepare material based on your expertise ... that is a bit a problem.

This showed that academics were keen to know about the student cohort they would be teaching, so they could pitch the material accordingly.

Another problem reported was the absence of technological support to assist classroom teaching. As articulated by Participant 8,

In my home university, every class has a website where you can upload materials for students but there is no online system here ... That is a challenge.

In addition, things like a 'common room' (Participant 27) or 'working office' (Participant 28) were unavailable for many international academics. The visiting academics compared provisions to their home institutions and used this as a framework to navigate their new environment.

On-campus accommodation

While free on-campus accommodation for the SSP provided 'considerable convenience' for international academics such as Participants 2, 5 and 8, a small group (e.g. Participants 32 and 24), mainly on their first visit to China, said that on-campus accommodation presented some problems. These challenges are related to language proficiency, practical daily living, and dietary preferences. For example, Participant 32 said:

Difficulty is the language. I don't speak sufficiently mandarin to communicate with Chinese, so I think that's a problem. (Participant 32)

Not being fluent with the host language made it difficult for them to interact with others, which was seen as a barrier. Participant 24 had specific comments about discomfort with Chinese food offered by the on-campus canteen:

Each day, we were provided with rice, from morning to dinner, I just can't tolerate that ... the canteen has no English names for dishes, and I have no ideas about them.

In addition, others commented on differences in the weather, and getting used to being 'crowded almost everywhere in China' (Participant 24).

Interactions with the 'new culture'

Participants' reported interactions with the 'new culture' included their observations of students' performance, Chinese academics' academic life, and China as a country, which brought associated impacts either on the host classroom or the academics themselves.

Perceptions of students' performance

When academics reflected on teaching in China, students were often described as more hardworking and disciplined than their foreign counterparts. For example, in Participant 15's words, not all students 'consider higher education is a privilege', yet Chinese students 'know how difficult to enter a university ... and value this opportunity by making more efforts'.

Second, Chinese students were seen to be more respectful for teachers. As expressed by Participant 15, 'some students ... thought they knew more than someone who has been practiced and teaching in this field for 15 years ... here students are very respectful'. Chinese students tended to 'believe teachers' more than home students.

Third, Chinese students were also seen to be concerned more about face, which meant they were 'reluctant to talk in public' (Participant 12), 'wouldn't volunteer' (Participant 17) and often 'talk to me after class' (Participant 13). On the contrary, their foreign counterparts were thought to be more forthright, for example, 'students are much more confident, aggressive' (Participant 17), or '(they) are much more intuitive in response and willing to discuss with teachers' (Participant 20).

Fourth, Chinese students were seen by some participants as less critical than other students. Participant 5 explained:

Students are much less able to have critical view, just not analytical view of problems ... is very dedicated to pleasing the teacher, doing what they have been taught to be right things.

This impression was shared by Participant 44 who observed 'Chinese students were not so critical in thinking ... tended to accept teachers as experts'.

Chinese students were also described as 'passive' in the classroom by some participants. This conclusion was based on academics' observation of them being 'unwilling to talk in class' (Participant 12), 'not used to having seminar format' (Participant 23), or 'shy in responding questions' (Participant 35).

However, not all academics thought Chinese students significantly differed from home students. One participant even strongly opposed the idea to stereotype Chinese students. He said:

Passive students are everywhere, not just Chinese students. You simply cannot generalize a group of students to the whole population. (Participant 38).

Perceptions of Chinese academic life

Since the SSP took place during the vacation, many host faculties were absent from campus, which hindered some international academics from interacting with local faculty. However, for academics who had longer contact with the university or worked in certain disciplines of the institution, this was not an issue. Chinese academia was compared with their home countries in several areas, including professional trajectory, research/teaching balance and supervision.

Participant 23 felt that the academic career trajectory in China was more challenging than their home country.

The professor at this university told me that newly joined academic staff only has 3 years ... if they cannot publish a certain number of articles with the desired quality, they are no longer considered by the university.

This and other examples were based on information they had received from Chinese academics. Some participants perceived a heavier research emphasis in China. For example, Participant 9 expressed:

I found my colleague in this university under great pressure in research publications ... domestic journals are limited and only ... indexed international journals are counted.

This suggested that the visiting academics were interacting with Chinese faculty during their visit and comparing their academic experiences.

Another difference found by some participants was the supervision system. For example,

Here (in China) only certain professors can be supervisors, to supervise doctoral students, junior lectures have no chance. But in my university, anyone is eligible. (Participant 29)

This was agreed by Participant 34 who indicated that 'students in China choose supervisors by title not by research', which in their view, constrained junior academic's career development.

Perceptions of China as a country

Teaching at a Chinese university offered academics first-hand information about China. For those who were visiting for the first time, China was very different from what they read through media at home. For example, Participant 15 expressed,

I don't think I knew how modern Beijing was before I came. It is very modern ... I didn't know there would be so many cars.

China's modernity also surprised Participant 25 who believed that people from his country should visit, not holding 'the old image of Chinese'. However, for those who had previously made regular short visits, their perception of China was more than a superficial outlook of country's image:

There was an image in the west, the strong image in the 1950s and the 1960s by a couple of books ... what strikes me is that people are much better-off, more confident in the sense they are having their own views in all kinds of things ... from a more collectivism culture to individualism (Participant 44)

Such comments were supported by Participant 34 who thought China is 'more diverse and individualistic'. For both Participant 44 and 34, their observations related to a deeper side of China such as Chinese people's mentality and characteristics.

Discussion

Compared with long-term mobile academics, the findings suggest that short-term international academics' reasons for international mobility, the challenges faced and academic acculturation process were multifaceted (see Table 4).

In comparison with categories of motives for international academics working in China for a long term (Xu et al. 2022), short-term international academics' motives mainly related to professional and cultural aspects. Although unlike long-term international mobile academics who desired better career opportunities (Froese 2012), or a break from their home university (Cai and Hall 2016), participants in this study reported that the drivers were also research concerns, career development or mixed with cultural excursion (Jöns 2007; Lee and Kuzhabekova 2018), which fell into the cultural type of motivation (Xu et al. 2022). Interestingly, except for those who came to China for the first time, some participants who expressed their motives by being curious about Chinese culture were from social sciences and humanities such as Public Administration (Participant 17), History (Participants 24 & 44) and English literature (Participant 35). It is thus difficult to judge whether their motives were purely cultural fascination or generated from research interests. Moreover, while personal and social types of motives for long-term international academics refer to marriage or stable personal relationships with a Chinese person (Xu et al. 2022), evidence from this study indicated that short-term international academics' personal and social motives could be individuals themselves, personal contacts, or professional organisations of which participants are members. Moreover, the reputation of the host university could also be a driver for them.

Table 4. A comparison between short-term and long-term international mobile academics on motives, challenges and academic acculturation.

	Long-term mobile academics	Short-term mobile academics
Motives	Permanent or tenured academic positions	NA
	Research opportunities	✓
	Teaching opportunities	✓
	Cultural interest in China	✓
	Marriage with a Chinese	NA
	Friends/colleagues	✓
Challenges		Reputation of the university
	Institutional power dynamics with hierarchical approach to management	NA
	Lack of sense of belongings to a group, department, school or university; lack of institutional support for staff induction or professional development	✓
	Ineligible for fund application	NA
	Tight deadlines, visa application; contract	NA
	Chinese students' lack of active class participation	✓
	Lack of teaching support	✓
	Conflicts between home university norms and Chinese university norms	NA
	Teaching qualification	NA
	Conflicts with group norms	NA
	Lack of cultural proficiency	✓
	Feelings of exclusion and otherness	NA
	Loss of identity	NA
	Ethnic or gender discrimination	NA
	Language barriers	✓
	Housing, healthcare, children's schooling	NA
	Cultural value conflicts; ideological conflicts	Discipline-related teaching
Academic acculturation	Becoming a part of a group (department, institution)	NA
	Influence the host group with experience and academic expertise	Influenced the host institution in teaching
	Willingness to adapt	NA
	Making necessary changes before entering a new cultural setting	NA
		Changing views of Chinese culture
		Understanding Chinese academics' professional development trajectories, university practices

(NA = Not applicable)

Findings showed that most challenges long-term international academics might encounter were not applicable among short-term international academics. For instance, possibly due to lack of deep involvement in the host institution in academic life, challenges of institutional power dynamics, research funding applications, and tight deadlines were not reported by short-term mobile academics. Moreover, as participants knew their role being teachers and had undertaken an application process, challenges such as 'loss of identity' and 'teaching qualification' were not found here. However, challenges linked with teaching were reported. Comments about Chinese students' classroom behaviours (Ghazarian and Youhne 2015), language barriers (Pherali 2012), and lack of administrative support (Larbi and Ashraf 2019) corresponded to the categories of 'teaching', 'research work' and 'professional isolation' as illustrated by Xu et al. (2022), 426. Nevertheless, some of these challenges were interpreted differently. For example, while the lack of administrative support refers to 'restrictions to institutional decision-making' (Larbi and Ashraf 2019, 155) by long-term international mobile academics, for short-term mobile academics, their requests for administrative support were more programme-related including knowing students' background, necessary technological support, and physical workspace. Participants who reported challenges in classroom teaching mainly came from disciplines such as Politics (Participant 4, 21, 41) and Philosophy (Participant 12), which suggested that certain disciplines might bring more challenges in classroom

teaching to international academics. Although most categories of 'non-professional type of challenges' as depicted by Xu et al. (2022), 427, were not applicable to participants in this study, voices of feeling China being crowded and dietary preferences indeed echoed the 'cultural integration' challenge.

Using Lysgaard's (1955) cross-cultural stage model, short-term international mobile academics are expected to remain at a high level of the cross-cultural adaptation curve, yet this was not supported here. Moreover, unlike most academic acculturation research that emphasises visiting academics' active adaptations to the host culture (McClure 2007), findings in this study suggested participants' academic acculturation were the other way round (from home to host) and demonstrated mainly in classroom teaching. Some participants tried to change the Chinese classroom learning culture with practices from their home universities and some observed positive outcomes upon completion of the teaching programme. However, participants' short experiences in a Chinese university did bring some changes at a conceptual level to them (from host to home). For instance, participants reported changing views on Chinese culture and learning more about Chinese academics' professional trajectories and university practices. Except for teaching, participants did not engage extensively in communications with disciplinary departments, which may explain why extensive 'two-way changes' (Jiang et al. 2010, 167) were not identified among the short-term mobile academics, although those that had visited China previously reported more interactions with faculty. Limited department/school involvement made challenges such as 'conflicts between home and host university norms' and 'conflicts with group norms' unseen by short-term mobile academics. Personal acculturative stress, feelings of exclusion (Jin, Wei, Wang, et al. 2024) and/or mental health were also not seen in the data.

To analyse how different layers of infrastructure operations might facilitate or hinder cross-cultural adaptation, the present study revealed that 'physical and technological ones' (workplace and digital facilities supporting online teaching materials) and 'social ones' (personal contact with host university) (Wang 2022, 142) stood as major factors influencing short-term international mobile academics' acculturation process. Social operations were sometimes hindered by language, which created a barrier for integration. Without the necessary infrastructural support, short-term international mobile academics tended to take 'separation' strategies instead of active 'integration' or 'assimilation' in their cross-cultural experiences (Berry, p705). However, as indicated by some participants, in-depth interactions with the host faculty and/or department could certainly facilitate such changes. Perhaps the necessary affordances of 'emotional capital' (Wang and Chen 2021, 3451) by the host university will facilitate international academics' acculturation process. Follow-up research tracking these academics longitudinally could enhance our knowledge in this regard.

Taking Berry's (2005) definition of acculturation as a 'dual process of cultural and psychological change' (p698), this study suggests that for short term mobile academics in China the contact between two cultures appears to have brought about some changes at the individual psychological level for the academics, in terms of their cultural attitudes and understandings towards China. The data did not show direct behavioural changes for the academics adapting to Chinese culture, or indicate group-level/institutional change, but did show evidence of shifts in students' learning behaviours due to the visiting academics bringing their familiar pedagogy to the Chinese classroom. This could be seen as early indications of a two-way change, the extent of which is impacted by the short duration of their visit. Acculturation is a process involving longer term adaptations through sustained contact between groups (Berry 2005), so it is indeed likely that international academics on short-term excursions will only experience early signs of acculturation. Some of the participants had prior knowledge of China, which likely influences the extent of acculturation experiences and may show a cumulative effect over time with repeat visits.

Taking the SSP as a research focus has enriched our understanding of international short-term academic mobility, yet this study has several limitations. First, although participants were selected under the same criterion, some participants had prior short-term mobility experiences, while others came for the first time. It is possible that comparison between previous frequent short-term mobile academics and first-time mobile academics may bring new insights. Second, the study was only

concerned with international academics' views; a more complete picture will be obtained if students, faculty and administrators' opinions were included. Third, gender influences were not investigated, and a study with a balanced gender profile might shed additional insights. Lastly, the location of interviews being in the researcher's campus office may have shaped responses due to power dynamics, so a neutral space is recommended for future research (Braun and Clarke 2013).

The study has several implications. For international academics who plan for short-term academic mobility, necessary preparations of knowledge in the host institution and embracing the new culture are important strategies for coping with potential challenges. For institutions engaging in the mission of internationalisation, it is advisable to carry out a short-term teaching programme that is economic yet can bring international perspectives to the classrooms and even pave the way for future joint research programmes. It is recommended that measures are taken to assist classroom teaching and enhance international academics' interactions with respective host faculty and/or departments to nurture academic cooperation. Future research can incorporate students and administrators in the host institution and further verify the findings reported here. Investigating different types of academic mobility and their impacts on academics' academic acculturation would also enrich our understanding. Additionally, this study aimed to gain an initial understanding of short-term mobile academics' motives, challenges and acculturation experiences in China given this has been a previously unexplored group. Further research examining the underlying mechanisms, cognitive processes and psychological pathways would build on these findings to gain deeper insight.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to explore a group of international academic staff's short-term teaching experiences in a Chinese university. By interviewing 44 international academics, the study found academics' motives, challenges, and academic acculturation process were complex and diverse, with features that differ from long-term mobile academics. Despite disciplinary outreach being a prominent driver for their travel to China, participants might hold multiple types of motives simultaneously, and the short-term programme had a role to play. Unlike long-term mobile academics who often had deeper involvement with the host institution and therefore experienced more challenges, short-term mobile academics' reported challenges remained smaller in scale and were more programme related. Moreover, short-term academics' interpretations of challenges were determined by individual factors such as the frequency of academic mobility and personal world view.

Different from Lysgaard's (1955) cross-cultural stage model, short-term international mobile academics did not report a dynamic cross-cultural adaptation process. Even though evidence of one-way change was reported, such changes exhibited two striking features: directing from home (academics) to host (students) and remaining at conceptual (from host to home) level. While both physical and technological, and social types of infrastructural operations influenced international mobile academics' cross-cultural adaptation process, again they were seen as programme and university related. For more frequent mobile academics, especially those who have stable contact with the host university, potential two-way changes were foreseeable, which could be investigated in further research.

Note

1. The university where the study was conducted did not have an institutional ethics committee in place at the time, but the researcher followed the guidance of Statement of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association to ensure participant consent, comfort and right to withdraw.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Ethics

Due to ethical/commercial issues, data underpinning this publication cannot be made openly available.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Interview guide

Part 1 Background information

- Have you taught at XX university or in another university in China before?
- What were the reasons that you were interested in coming here?
 - If first time, what were your expectations about the role/university/country before you came?
- What is your job in your home country? (general description about academic life, i.e. research, teaching load, publication pressure etc.)

Part 2 teaching and other academic experience

- How did you find it when you first arrived?
 - What was surprising to you? What was difficult?
 - What was different to your expectations?
- Can you tell me about the work that you've been doing since you came here?
- Can you tell me about the teaching that you've been engaged in? What kind of classes/students?
- How have you found the students' performance (in class/after class)? How does it compare to your experience of other universities/your home country?
- Have you been involved in other elements of academic work – research or service?
 - What has this involved?
 - Who have you worked with/for?
- Has this been valuable, i.e. what have you learnt/gained from this?
- How have you found the level of support during your stay? (institutional support, i.e. transport/accommodation, teaching assistance etc.)

Part 3 Any acculturation process?

- To what extent have you got involved in: University/department life?
- How have you done this? Who has helped you?
- How have you interacted with the research group/department/university/discipline? How has this experience influenced you? How have you influenced the group/department, etc.?
- How about the people you've interacted with here – the students/staff/research group/department/university/discipline? Have you had an influence on these people? Have they influenced you and your practice?
- How much do you feel a part of: the university/department/international community?
 - Do you think your experience is typical?
- Having had this experience of working in an academic environment: how do you think an academic job differs or is similar in China or in your home country?