

# A Comparative Study of Why Chinese Graduates From Japanese or Australian Universities Return to China and How They Contribute

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**This article was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, including ChatGPT or other support technologies**

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## Abstract

*This study compared the career choices, contributions, and challenges of Chinese graduates of Japanese and Australian universities who returned to China, and it explored the factors that influenced them based on the life planning model. The mixed-method approach was adopted by combining the results of 208 questionnaire responses and 13 semi-structured interviews of the returnees working for a company in China. As a new finding, study country-specific factors, such as economic relation between the study country and home country and institutional factors related to the human resource management style of the study country, were identified to have influenced the returnees' career choices, satisfaction, and contributions. This study also highlighted the importance of career development and utilization of specialty/expertise in graduates' decision-making and the issue of overtime work, which was raised as a common challenge by the two groups.*

Keywords: Australia, career development, Chinese international students, Japan, life planning model, returnees

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## Introduction

Chinese students studying overseas have dramatically increased in the last two decades, standing at 39,000 in 2000 to reach 703,500 in 2019 (Ministry of Education of China, 2020). China's rapid economic development, spurred by its participation in WTO and funding from the IMF, was a driving force for this expansion. It has also drawn these students back to their home country: the number of returnees from overseas study increased from 130,000 in 2000 to 4.2 million in 2019 (Ministry of Education of China, 2020). Wang et al. (2021) state that these returnees have contributed to the localization of multi-national enterprises and the internationalization of traditional industries in China.

In international higher education, studying overseas has been seen as a pathway to better career outcomes (Waibel et al., 2017), including for Chinese students (Tsang, 2013). Pan (2011) pointed out that Chinese students who returned to China after studying overseas have contributed to the development of their home country by utilizing their enhanced human capital. Traditionally, the most popular study destinations for Chinese students have been the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, and Japan (Gong & Huybers, 2015). However, few studies have compared the career choices and contributions of Chinese students who returned from these destinations.

According to the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), the number of Chinese international students enrolled in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Japan was 95,003, accounting for 43.4% of the total international students in Japan's HEIs in 2020 (JASSO, 2021). In 2017, among 79,502 Chinese students in Japan's HEIs, 32.6% were enrolled in graduate schools while 46.2% were in undergraduate programs; 58.4% majored in humanities and social sciences (H & S) while 17.7% majored in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) (JASSO, 2018).

In Australia, the number of Chinese international students enrolled in HEIs was 129,464 as of May 2020, accounting for 35.7% of the total international students in HEIs. In December 2020, 40% of Chinese students were enrolled in undergraduate programs while 45% were in Master's programs; 44.3% majored in management and commerce, followed by 11.1% majoring in information technology (Department of Education, Skills, and Employment, 2021).

There are some similarities between Chinese international students in Japan and Australia. First, Japan and Australia are located in the Asia-Pacific region, with less geographical distance and time zone difference from China, compared to other major study destinations in North America and Europe. They are the groups who did not choose to study in the most popular destinations, the US and the UK, due to their concern about expensive tuition fees and/or insufficient academic ability to obtain a scholarship in these countries.

Considering these similarities, this study compares the career choices and contributions of Chinese graduates of Japanese and Australian universities who returned to China. A comparative approach reveals the similarities and differences among the target groups (Kosmützky, 2016). This approach proves particularly valuable in the field of higher education, where studying international trends and reform requires an examination of diverse contexts and practices (Teichler, 1996). However, there is a lack of cross-country studies on student trajectories through higher education (Haas & Hadjar, 2020). Considering this situation, this study aims to compare the career choices, contributions, and challenges of Chinese returnees who graduated from Japanese universities (hereafter referred to as "Japan returnees") and those who graduated from Australian universities (hereafter referred to as "Australia returnees") and explore the factors (contexts) that influenced them.

The following research questions were posed to compare the results between the two groups:

- (1) What factors have motivated them to return to China?
- (2) What factors did they consider in choosing a workplace in China?
- (3) What are their major contributions and challenges in their workplace?

### **Literature Review**

Pioneering work on international students who returned to their home countries was carried out by Saxenian (2005). She described the contribution of Chinese and Indian engineers who received degrees in the US and started information technology (IT) businesses in their home countries by utilizing their skills and networks obtained overseas. The phenomenon was named "brain circulation," and numerous studies have been conducted since then. Here, we mainly focus on the studies of Chinese graduates who returned from overseas study and extract the major findings related to our research questions: reasons for their return and choice of a workplace, their contributions and challenges, and the characteristics of returnees from Japan or Australia.

#### **Reasons for Return and Choice of Workplace**

Dustmann and Weiss (2007) found that the main reasons for international students in the UK to return to their home country were lower living costs and higher return on their educational investment than the host country. Kenney et al. (2013) pointed out that political support and encouragement attracted scholars back to their home countries.

Hao et al. (2017) reviewed 143 empirical studies on Chinese returnees published between 2005 and 2015 and concluded that family ties, career opportunities, and economic growth had motivated them to return to China. Tharenou and Seet (2014) found that Chinese returnees were pushed away from their study countries by social and psychological concerns, such as dissatisfaction with career and economic opportunities and lack of cultural assimilation. Xiong and Mok (2020)

added the growing wave of nationalism and protectionism as a push factor from some host countries. Jiang (2016) asserted that the policies and projects to offer preferential treatment had attracted overseas Chinese students and scholars back to China.

Regarding the choice of workplace, the Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange (CSCSE) survey of 1,625 returned graduates of overseas HEIs revealed that 56% hoped to work in first-tier cities, and 35% listed career development, 27% listed salary and social welfare, and 26.7% listed workplace location as an essential factor in choosing their workplace (CSCSE, 2019).

### **Returnees' Contribution and Challenges**

Wahba (2014) explored the returnees' contribution to the economic development of their home country by bringing back both financial and human capital through savings, skills, and knowledge. Wang (2015) surveyed 4,183 former J1 visa holders in the US who returned to their countries and found that returnees' knowledge transfer success depended on their embeddedness in their home and host country workplaces.

Dai and Liu (2009) found that the high-tech companies created by Chinese returnees showed better performance than those owned by local entrepreneurs due to their technological and commercial knowledge as well as their international orientation. Ma and Pan (2015) indicated that homecoming Chinese talent has contributed to China's scientific research, technological economy, and academic leadership through quantitative and qualitative brain gain.

Despite these expectations and preferential treatment provided to them, the returned graduates have faced challenges in their home country. Increasing numbers of Chinese returnees from overseas study have faced growing competition in the home labor market (ICEF Monitor, 2018). Tran and Bui (2019) asserted that losing home connections and networks due to their overseas stay could result in lower social capital when returnees compete with the local graduates in their home labor market. Xiong and Mok (2020) concluded that the return on educational investment of UK-educated Chinese returnees had declined because of the increased difficulty in finding jobs and dwindling career prospects. Chen (2023), based on a large-scale quantitative survey, disclosed that US-educated applicants had fewer callbacks from companies in China than applicants educated in China, especially from Chinese-owned firms that had concerns about retaining the former.

Bai et al. (2016) pointed out that some returnees faced challenges in knowledge transfer due to the different characteristics of domestic and foreign markets. Gill (2010) analyzed that the unfamiliarity with the communication skills used in the workplace bothered the Chinese returnees. Cheung and Xu (2014) indicated that Chinese society's complicated social resources and networks (*guanxi* in Mandarin) had puzzled the returnees from Western countries.

Hao and Welch (2012) pointed out the gap between the recognition of returnees' self-ability and their evaluation in China's labor market. Dal Maso (2020) listed the mismatch between returnees' expertise acquired in the study country and the demand from China's labor market.

### **Studies on Returnees From Japan or Australia**

The studies on Chinese returnees from Japan or Australia are much fewer than those on Chinese returnees from the US or the UK. Here we list several studies on returnees from Japan or Australia.

Okunishi and Tanaka (2020), based on the interview with five Chinese returnees from Japan, indicated that they maintained some aspects of Japanese culture, such as emphasis on the observation of public rules, respecting other people's intentions in communication, and orientation toward co-existence with others, which have indirectly impacted their life and work. Sato (2019) compared the questionnaire responses of Asian graduates of Japanese universities working for Japanese companies in Japan and those working for Japan-affiliated companies in their home countries (including 43 Chinese returnees) and pointed out that although the graduates working for Japan-affiliated companies in their home countries showed higher satisfaction than those working for Japanese companies in Japan, it is necessary to reform the Japanese traditional human resource (HR) management such as seniority system to prevent their job-hopping to other multi-national companies and local companies.

Hao et al. (2016), based on the online questionnaire and interviews of Chinese master's degree holders of top Australian universities, pointed out that holding an overseas qualification no longer guaranteed success in China's labor market because of the intensified competition with other overseas returnees and graduates of Chinese elite universities. Singh (2020) conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with Chinese returnees who graduated from Australian universities and depicted the significant barriers to finding employment in China, including limited prior work experience, a difference between graduation time and employment period in China, and a lack of *guanxi*. Tran et al. (2021), based on interviews with Chinese returnees who majored in accounting in Australia, their (potential) employers, and other stakeholders in China,

pointed out that their overseas accountancy credentials were assumed to represent a form of cultural capital that could be converted to permanent residency capital in Chinese global cities (through the provision of household registration) and that some employers raised concerns about returnees' lack of localized knowledge and long-term commitment to local small or medium-sized companies which had been treated as stepping stones in their career development. Pham and Saito (2020) categorized Vietnamese returnees from Australia into three types according to their strategies in the home country's labor market: navigators (who utilize soft skills to navigate barriers), rebels (who change jobs or start a business), and retreatants (who compromise with the rules in the home country's labor market).

### **Research Gap**

Although extensive research has been conducted to analyze the Chinese students' decision to return and their experiences in China, few studies have compared the returnees from different countries and elucidated the study country-specific factors that influence their decisions, contributions, and challenges, especially those on returnees from Japan or Australia based on quantitative survey data. While there exist common factors that influence returnees' decisions and experiences, some aspects of their choices, contributions, and challenges should be understood in the light of study country-specific factors, such as the advantage of their studies and the relation between their study country and China, which would be clarified by adopting a comparative approach.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To fill the research gap stated in the previous section, we adopted the life planning model of Sato (2016, 2021) in our research design to explore the factors that influenced the returnees' decisions and their contributions and challenges in their workplaces in China. The life planning model offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing the factors that influence international students' decision-makings in choosing a study destination, workplace, and place of settlement, both in their home country and the study country. It assumes that international students make rational decisions by considering restricting factors (such as cost, language, the intention of family, and visa) and their benefits (such as capacity development/utilization, better employment, and social environment). It also assumes that their decisions are influenced by policies and institutional, economic, and cultural factors of their study country and home country (and the relations between them) (Sato, 2021).

Since we aimed to explore the study country-specific factors that influenced the returnees' career choices and their consequences (contributions and challenges in their workplace), the life planning model that considers the policies and institutional, economic, and cultural factors of their study country and its relation to the home country was regarded to be a good fit for this analysis.

### **Methodology**

We adopted a mixed-method approach by combining questionnaires and interviews. Explanatory sequential design was employed considering its advantage in using the quantitative data to provide a general understanding of the research topic, and the qualitative data to explore participants' opinions in more depth (Ivankova et al., 2006). In this study, we used the questionnaire data to see the tendency of returnees from Japan or Australia in choosing their workplaces, and how they perceive their contributions and challenges in their workplaces. Then, we interviewed the returnees to understand the factors that have affected their decisions and perceptions.

The questionnaires were designed based on the life planning model by asking about their decisions, satisfaction, contribution, and challenges in chronological order. The 5-point Likert scale was used in the questions related to the reasons for return, choice of workplace, and satisfaction with the working environment to examine the statistical differences between the responses of Japan returnees and Australia returnees. We also asked open-ended questions to investigate the background of their choices and the details of their contributions and challenges in the workplace.

The pilot survey of Chinese graduates of Japanese universities was conducted in 2015. After confirming its result, the questionnaire was distributed to Japanese university graduates via the Chinese students' alumni associations of several Japanese universities, the International Foreign Student Association (IFSA) mailing list, and the authors' social networks. The questionnaire of Chinese graduates of Australian universities was conducted from October 2019 to December 2020 to compare the results with those of Japanese university graduates. It was distributed via the Chinese students' alumni associations of several Australian universities, the Network for Research into Chinese Education Mobilities (NRCCEM), and the authors' social networks. In 2021, an additional questionnaire of Japanese university graduates was conducted via the

authors' social networks to increase the comparability of the respondents between Japan and Australia. We collected 471 valid responses from Japanese university graduates and 190 valid responses from Australian university graduates.

Since we focus on the Chinese graduates who returned to China, we screened the respondents by setting the following criteria: those who (a) completed a degree course in the host country's university, and (b) worked for a company in China. As a result, 129 Japan returnees and 79 Australia returnees were selected as the target of this study. Those working for a company were selected to decrease the professional difference between the two groups. They constituted the largest group of both Japan returnees and Australia returnees.

**Table 1**  
*Major Demographic Characteristics of Survey Participants*

| Variable                                  |                              | Japan returnees<br>N=129 |                         | Australia returnees<br>N=79 |       |
|---|------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-------|
| Gender                                    | Male                         | 69                       | 53.5%                   | 44                          | 55.7% |
|   | Female                       | 59                       | 45.7%                   | 35                          | 44.3% |
|   | Prefer not to answer         | 1                        | 0.8%                    | 0                           | 0.0%  |
| Age                                       | 20-29                        | 46                       | 35.7%                   | 56                          | 70.9% |
|   | 30-39                        | 73                       | 56.6%                   | 18                          | 22.8% |
|   | 40-49                        | 9                        | 7.0%                    | 3                           | 3.8%  |
|   | ≥50                          | 1                        | 0.8%                    | 1                           | 1.3%  |
|   | Prefer not to answer         | 0                        | 0.0%                    | 1                           | 1.3%  |
| Study period in the host country ( years) |                              | 4.2                      |                         | 3.7                         |       |
| Highest degree obtained in host country   | Bachelor                     | 52                       | 40.3%                   | 34                          | 43.0% |
|   | Master                       | 68                       | 52.7%                   | 41                          | 51.9% |
|   | Doctor/Ph.D                  | 9                        | 7.0%                    | 4                           | 5.1%  |
| Major                                     | STEM                         | 86                       | 66.7%                   | 19                          | 24.1% |
|   | H & S                        | 32                       | 24.8%                   | 15                          | 19.0% |
|   | Business                     | 6                        | 4.7%                    | 36                          | 45.6% |
|   | Others                       | 5                        | 3.9%                    | 9                           | 11.4% |
| Company type                              | Host country's company       | 59                       | 45.7%                   | 8                           | 10.1% |
|   | Chinese company              | 62                       | 48.1%                   | 61                          | 77.2% |
|   | Third country's company      | 8                        | 6.2%                    | 10                          | 12.7% |
| Industry                                  | Manufacturing                | 35                       |                         | 13                          |       |
|   |                              | Machinery (20)           | 27.1%                   | Electric appliance (7)      | 16.5% |
|   |                              | Electric appliance (10)  |                         | Food (4)                    |       |
|   | Services (non-manufacturing) | 50                       |                         | 45                          |       |
|   |                              | IT (17)                  | 38.8%                   | Education (14)              | 57.0% |
|   | Finance & insurance (11)     |                          | Finance & insurance (8) |                             |       |
|   | No response                  | 44                       | 34.1%                   | 21                          | 26.6% |

We conducted semi-structured interviews (around 60 minutes for each participant) with seven Japan returnees and six Australia returnees from November 2021 to March 2022. They were selected from the questionnaire respondents by purposive sampling, considering the demographic characteristics of each group and the comparability of the two groups. The interviewees were asked about the background of their decision-makings and their actual contributions and challenges in their workplaces.

The t-test compared means of the two groups' responses concerning the reasons for returning to China, choosing a workplace, and their satisfaction with the working environment. A content analysis of the open-ended answers about their contributions and challenges in their workplaces classified the responses into categories identified through the analysis, and the frequencies were calculated. The study employed a thematic analysis approach to analyze the interview data. By integrating both qualitative and quantitative data, this study aimed to enhance the validity and depth of the analysis and to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

**Table 2**  
*Major Demographic Characteristics of Interview Participants*

|                        | Identifi-<br>-cation | Gender | Age   | Degree    | Major    | Industry                | Company               | Position             | Location |
|------------------------|----------------------|--------|-------|-----------|----------|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|----------|
| Japan<br>returnees     | JR1                  | Female | 31-35 | Master    | H & S    | Machinery               | Chinese<br>company    | Assistant<br>manager | Beijing  |
|                        | JR2                  | Female | 26-30 | Master    | Business | Finance                 | Japanese<br>company   | No title             | Beijing  |
|                        | JR3                  | Male   | 31-35 | Doctorate | STEM     | Chemistry               | Chinese<br>company    | No title             | Shenzhen |
|                        | JR4                  | Male   | 46-50 | Bachelor  | STEM     | Electrical<br>machinery | Japanese<br>company   | Director             | Suzhou   |
|                        | JR5                  | Female | 26-30 | Master    | H & S    | Internet                | Chinese<br>company    | No title             | Beijing  |
|                        | JR6                  | Female | 26-30 | Master    | H & S    | Consulting              | American<br>company   | No title             | Dalian   |
|                        | JR7                  | Male   | 26-30 | Master    | H & S    | Data<br>development     | American<br>company   | Team leader          | Shanghai |
| Australia<br>returnees | AR1                  | Male   | 20-25 | Bachelor  | H & S    | Education               | Australian<br>company | No title             | Shanghai |
|                        | AR2                  | Female | 26-30 | Master    | STEM     | Data<br>development     | Chinese<br>company    | Team leader          | Shenzhen |
|                        | AR3                  | Female | 26-30 | Bachelor  | Business | Aviation<br>service     | Chinese<br>company    | No title             | Shanghai |
|                        | AR4                  | Male   | 36-40 | Master    | Business | Consulting              | Chinese<br>company    | Director             | Shanghai |
|                        | AR5                  | Female | 26-30 | Master    | Business | Education               | Chinese<br>company    | Team leader          | Hangzhou |
|                        | AR6                  | Male   | 31-35 | Master    | STEM     | Data<br>development     | Chinese<br>company    | No title             | Tianjin  |

## Participants

Table 1 shows the major demographic characteristics of questionnaire participants. Among 129 Japan returnees, 40.3% got a bachelor's degree, 52.7% obtained a master's degree, and 7% obtained a doctoral degree in Japan; 66.7% majored in STEM, 24.8% in H & S, and 4.7% in business. 45.7% worked for a Japanese company, 48.1% for a Chinese company, and 6.2% for a third-country company in China. Among valid responses, 41.2% worked in the manufacturing industry and 58.8% in the service industry. Among 35 participants in the manufacturing industry, 20 worked for machinery companies and 10 for electric appliance companies; among 50 participants in the service industry, 17 were in IT, and 11 were in finance and insurance. The percentage of those majoring in STEM is higher among the survey participants than the Chinese international students average in Japan, which seems to be caused by sampling bias in the survey.

Among 79 Australia returnees, 43% got a bachelor's degree, 51.9% obtained a master's degree, and 5.1% obtained a doctoral degree in Australia; 24.1% majored in STEM, 19% in H & S, and 45.6% in business. 10.1% worked for an Australian company, 77.2% for a Chinese company, and 12.7% for a third-country company in China. Among valid responses, 22.4% worked in manufacturing and 77.6% in the service industry: among 45 in the service industry, 14 were in educational services, and 8 were in finance and insurance.

Although the two groups show similar ratios in gender and master's degree holders, there are differences in age, major, type of company, and industry. These differences will be considered in the analysis of the survey results. Table 2 presents the major demographic characteristics of seven Japan returnees and six Australia returnees who participated in the interview.

## Results

This section presents the questionnaires and interview results of Japan returnees and Australia returnees who worked for a company in China.

### Reasons to Return to China

Table 3 shows the answers to the question, "To what extent do the following statements apply as the reasons why you returned to China?"

Japan returnees' top reason for returning to China is "better career prospect in China," followed by "promotion is limited in host country," and "my specialty is in higher demand in China." The top reason for Australia returnees to return to China is "better career prospect in China," followed by "my specialty is in higher demand in China," and "because promotion was limited in the host country." These results show that both Japan and Australia returnees chose to return to China expecting better careers, promotion, and utilization of their specialty obtained overseas.

**Table 3:**

### *Reasons to Return to China*

| No. Reasons  | Japan returnees<br>N=77 |      | Australia returnees<br>N=48 |      | p |
|--|-------------------------|------|-----------------------------|------|---|
|  | Mean                    | S.D. | Mean                        | S.D. |   |
| 1 I need to take care of my parents                    | 3.23                    | 0.94 | 3.57                        | 1.16 |   |
| 2 My spouse and/or children live in China              | 2.64                    | 1.30 | 2.94                        | 1.51 |   |
| 3 I would like to educate my children in China         | 2.54                    | 1.38 | 2.90                        | 1.46 |   |
| 4 Because of better career prospect in China           | 3.78                    | 0.97 | 3.91                        | 1.10 |   |
| 5 Because my specialty is in higher demand in China    | 3.35                    | 1.04 | 3.75                        | 0.93 | * |
| 6 Because I don't like the foreign working environment | 3.07                    | 1.14 | 3.29                        | 1.24 |   |
| 7 Because I had stress in host country's society       | 2.77                    | 1.15 | 3.33                        | 1.36 | * |
| 8 Because promotion was limited in host country        | 3.72                    | 1.05 | 3.73                        | 0.92 |   |

*Note.* S.D. = Standard Deviation, \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; Likert scale (1=does not apply at all, 2=does not apply so much, 3=neither way, 4=applies to some extent, 5=applies very much) was used in the answer option

As the result of t-tests comparing the means of the responses of the two groups, significant differences at the 5% level were found in "my specialty is in higher demand China" and "I had stress in host country's society." This indicates that Australia returnees had higher stress in Australian society and higher expectations for utilizing their specialty in China.

In our interview asking about the reason for returning to China, an Australia returnee (AR6) elaborated on the stress in Australia as follows:

the most important reason [why I felt stressed] is the impossibility of getting the immigration opportunity as before because there were too many applications [for the limited quotas] in the general skilled migration program. I had to live with anxiety every day because I can't get the PR (permanent residency).

A Japan returnee (JR4) who had worked for a Japanese electrical appliance company testified about the limited promotion opportunity in Japan as follows: "I was well aware that if I were working in Japan, I couldn't have a higher position [than a

**Table 4**

*Reasons for Choice of Workplace and Satisfaction with Working Environment*

*(a) reasons for the choice of workplace (a company in China)*

| No | Reasons                                   | Japan returnees<br>N=129 |      | Australia returnees<br>N=79 |      | p  |
|----|---|--------------------------|------|-----------------------------|------|----|
|    |   | Mean                     | S.D. | Mean                        | S.D. |    |
| 1  | Good salary                               | 3.43                     | 1.11 | 3.34                        | 1.13 |    |
| 2  | Good living environment                   | 3.53                     | 1.16 | 3.89                        | 1.01 | *  |
| 3  | Prospect of career/capacity building      | 4.19                     | 0.94 | 3.92                        | 1.05 |    |
| 4  | Prospect of promotion                     | 3.08                     | 1.07 | 3.78                        | 1.16 | ** |
| 5  | Utilization of capacity/specialty at work | 3.73                     | 1.11 | 4.00                        | 1.04 |    |
| 6  | Convenience of spouse                     | 2.25                     | 1.30 | 3.27                        | 1.39 | ** |
| 7  | Convenience of parents                    | 2.30                     | 1.36 | 3.42                        | 1.37 | ** |
| 8  | Convenience of children                   | 1.82                     | 1.04 | 2.87                        | 1.51 | ** |

*(b) satisfaction with the working environment (a company in China)*

|                      |   |      |      |      |      |    |
|----------------------|---|------|------|------|------|----|
| 1                    | Match between expectation and reality of work | 3.69 | 0.87 | 3.85 | 1.08 |    |
| 2                    | Utilization of my expertise/specialty         | 3.52 | 1.02 | 3.91 | 1.03 | ** |
| 3                    | Salary  | 3.23 | 0.85 | 3.75 | 1.03 | ** |
| 4                    | Relationship with colleagues                  | 3.80 | 0.74 | 4.09 | 0.95 | *  |
| 5                    | Guidance of superiors                         | 3.70 | 0.88 | 3.90 | 0.97 |    |
| 6                    | Promotion or prospect of promotion            | 3.18 | 0.97 | 3.73 | 1.07 | ** |
| 7                    | Working hours                                 | 3.24 | 1.10 | 3.61 | 1.18 | *  |
| 8                    | How to proceed work/efficiency                | 3.35 | 0.97 | 3.96 | 0.97 | ** |
| 9                    | Clarity of duty sharing                       | 3.43 | 0.98 | 3.87 | 1.07 | ** |
| 10                   | Personnel evaluation system                   | 3.35 | 0.93 | 3.94 | 1.02 | ** |
| 11                   | Realization of own ideas in the workplace     | 3.29 | 0.89 | 3.89 | 1.04 | ** |
| 12                   | Social insurance and other fringe benefits    | 3.85 | 0.82 | 3.91 | 1.00 |    |
| Overall satisfaction |   | 3.69 | 0.87 | 3.96 | 0.90 | *  |

Note. S.D. = Standard Deviation, \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; Likert scale from 1=does not apply at all to 5=applies very much was used for Table 3 (a), and Likert scale from 1=very dissatisfied to 5=very satisfied was used for Table 3 (b)



manager], because they [company leaders] always gave the opportunity to Japanese staff." An Australia returnee (AR1) working for an educational agency for study in Australia commented on his competence in China's labor market:

after studying in Australia, I became familiar with the procedures to apply for Australian universities, so I can use my specialty [overseas studying experience] in China [by helping others contact and apply for Australian universities]."

Finally, a Japan returnee (JR2) working for a Japanese finance company in China stated her advantages as follows:

one is my familiarity with Japanese culture, language, and etiquette because I studied in Japan; another advantage is one of my lab mates is working for this company, and it was his social network [that recommended me to this company].

### **Reason for Choice of Workplace and Satisfaction with Working Environment**

Table 4 shows the questionnaire participants' answers to the question "To what extent do the following statements apply as the reason you chose the current company/organization in China?" and "How do you describe the level of your satisfaction with the following elements of your working environment?"

As shown in Table 4(a), the top reason for Japan returnees to choose a company in China is "prospect of career/capacity building," followed by "utilization of capacity/specialty" and "good living environment." The top reason for Australia returnees to choose a company in China is "utilization of capacity/specialty," followed by "prospect of career/capacity building," and "good living environment." These results show that both Japan and Australia returnees chose a workplace considering their career/capacity building, utilization of capacity/specialty obtained overseas, and living environment. As the result of t-tests comparing the means of the two groups, significant differences at the 1% level were found regarding "prospect of promotion" and "convenience of spouse/parents/children," and a significant difference at the 5% level was detected in "good living environment" between the two groups.

In our interview asking the reason for the lower prospect of promotion among Japan returnees compared to Australian returnees, a Japan returnee (JR5) working for a Chinese internet company explained as follows:

Although I could utilize my Japanese language ability in my workplace, promotion opportunity was limited because I am responsible only for the Japanese market and could not do any other job [like other overseas marketing] in my department.

Another female Japan returnee (JR1) working for a Chinese machinery company also stated her concern: "... considering my age [31–35 years old] and plan of pregnancy, I don't think there will be many promotion opportunities for me." All the interviewed Australia returnees mentioned that they chose the current job because of the workplace location, namely, the first-tier city or special municipality directly under the central Government of China. This preference may be related to the convenience of their spouses/parents/children, as seen in the testimony of an Australia returnee (AR2): "I came to work here because my fiancé is a Shenzhen city resident, and this city can provide a good education for our children." A Japan returnee (JR1) also chose the workplace to get a household registration (*hukou*) in the capital city:

even though the salary [of this company] was not that much, I'm happy because I could have a Beijing *hukou*. My children and my future social welfare will be benefited from it."

On the other hand, a Japan returnee (JR6) working for a consulting firm in Dalian expressed a different perspective about location: "I am happy because my living cost is much lower here. I can make some savings."

Regarding the satisfaction with the working environment shown in Table 3(b), the item with the highest satisfaction for Japan returnees is "social insurance and other fringe benefits," followed by "relationship with colleagues" and "guidance of superiors." The item with the highest satisfaction for Australia returnees is "relationship with colleagues," followed by "how to proceed work (efficiency)," and "personnel evaluation system." As the result of t-tests comparing the means of the two groups, there are significant differences at the 1% level in "utilization of my expertise/specialty," "salary," "promotion or prospect of promotion," "how to proceed work," "clarity of duty sharing," "personnel evaluation system," and "realization of own ideas in the workplace," and significant differences at the 5% level in "relationship with colleagues" and "working hours" between the two groups. The overall satisfaction with the working environment is also higher among Australia returnees than Japan returnees with a significant difference at the 5% level.

In our interview exploring the reason for satisfaction/dissatisfaction, JR3, who took a doctorate degree in engineering in Japan and worked for a Chinese chemistry company, confessed as follows:

although I can conduct my research [in this company], many people are bossing me around. I had to listen to them because this company is very hierarchical. My salary is not proportional to what I spent for study abroad for many years.

AR4, an Australia returnee working for a Chinese consulting firm, illustrated the reason for his satisfaction as follows: with many small and medium-sized startups, this industry [consulting] has huge potential in China. My overseas working experience can be an advantage here. I am also satisfied with the salary level, though it is much lower than what I received in Australia. Since Shanghai is my hometown, I can save on my housing expenses.

JR5, a Japan returnee working for a Chinese internet company whose business mainly targets the Japanese market, shared her positive feelings about her relationship with her colleagues and superiors: "... most of us [in my department] have similar experience [study in Japan], so it is easy to communicate and work with them."

Some Australia returnees expressed their intention to improve their working environment, as seen in the talk of AR5 who worked for a Chinese agency for study abroad as a team leader:

I care more about the working style in the company, such as productivity and whether the organizational arrangement is reasonable. I don't want to spend too much time at work because I need my own life after work. My colleagues who studied in Western countries have a similar view to me.

### Returnees' Contributions and Challenges in the Workplace

Table 5 shows the answers to the open-ended question in the questionnaire: "Please state your major contribution(s) and challenge(s) in the workplace."

Among 76 responses from Japan returnees related to their major contribution, 63.2% listed "bridging China's market with Japan's market," which included "expanded business for a Japanese company in China," "promoted cooperation with a Japanese company," and "introduced some products to the Japanese company." 11.8% raised "improvement of product competitiveness," such as "optimized the product" and "improved the product's quality." 10.5% wrote that they contributed by transferring technology/management systems from Japan to China, such as "using what I had learned in Japan in this company." 9.2% replied that they started or carried out a project related to Japan, and 5.3% said that they helped with language and cultural problems in the company.

Among 53 responses from Australia returnees regarding their major contribution, 58.5% listed "helping with language and cultural problems at the workplace," such as translation and communication with foreign customers. 22.7% raised utilization of their experience/specialty acquired in Australia; 9.4% reported transferring Australia's management

**Table 5**

#### *Major Contributions and Challenges in the Workplace*

*(a) Major contribution*

| Japan returnees<br>N=76                                       |       | Australia returnees<br>N=53                                       |       |
|---|-------|---|-------|
|   | %     |   | %     |
| Bridging China's market with Japan's market                   | 63.2% | Helping with language and cultural issues                         | 58.5% |
| Improvement of product competitiveness                        | 11.8% | Utilizing experience/specialty acquired from Australia            | 22.7% |
| Transferring technology/management system from Japan to China | 10.5% | Transferring technology/management system from Australia to China | 9.4%  |
| Started or carried out a project                              | 9.2%  | Started or carried out a project                                  | 5.7%  |
| Helping with language and cultural issues                     | 5.3%  | Bridging China's market with Australia's market                   | 3.8%  |

*(b) Major challenge*

| Japan returnees<br>N=42                             |       | Australia returnees<br>N=34                     |       |
|---|-------|---|-------|
|   | %     |   | %     |
| Working overtime                                    | 54.8% | Working overtime                                | 55.9% |
| Dissatisfied with salary level                      | 16.7% | Dissatisfied with salary level                  | 23.5% |
| Competition in the company                          | 9.5%  | Limited promotion opportunity                   | 14.7% |
| Limited promotion opportunity                       | 7.1%  | A mismatch between work and what you hope to do | 5.9%  |
| Personnel evaluation system                         | 7.1%  |   |       |
| Cannot utilize the Japanese language in the company | 4.8%  |   |       |

systems to China. 5.7% replied that they started or carried out a project related to Australia, and 3.8% listed "bridging China's market with Australia's market."

Regarding challenges, among 42 responses from Japan returnees, 54.8% reported "working overtime," such as working during the weekends and getting off work late. 16.7% were dissatisfied with their salary. 9.5% faced too much competition in the company. 7.1% had challenges in the limited promotion opportunity. 7.1% held a negative opinion about the personnel evaluation system, such as "wasting young employees' ability," and 4.8% felt frustration for not being able to utilize the Japanese language ability in the workplace.

Among 34 responses from Australia returnees about challenges, 55.9% listed working overtime, 23.5% were dissatisfied with their salary, 14.7% worried about their promotion for their limited social connection or working performance, and 5.9% were bothered by the mismatch between work and what they hope to do.

In our interview asking about their contributions and challenges in their workplaces, we found similar testimonies. Six interviewees from Japan (JR1, JR2, JR3, JR4, JR5, and JR7) and four interviewees from Australia (AR2, AR3, AR4, and AR6) complained about working overtime. AR2, a team leader in a Chinese data development company, reported her situation as follows: "If I'm lucky, I can get off work before 10 p.m., and I only have one day off a week."

An Australia returnee (AR3) working for a Chinese aviation company briefed her major contribution and challenge as follows:

when someone encounters language [English] difficulties, they always call me for help. However, I am worried about my career development. I only obtained a bachelor's degree, and it's not enough to achieve a higher position. And I've found that leaders always favor people who are close to them or give them gifts. I've never done this before.

A Japan returnee (JR7) stated his hope to contribute to his workplace by utilizing his advantage (Japanese language): "I do jobs related to programming now. I hope to move to a position to utilize my advantage [Japanese language ability] because I feel my language ability is not as good as before."

## Discussion

The above results revealed the commonalities and differences between Japan returnees and Australia returnees in their decisions, satisfaction, contributions, and challenges. In this section, we discuss the influencing factors behind them based on the life planning model and compare our findings with those of the previous studies.

Firstly, regarding their decision to return to China, better career prospects, higher demand for their specialty in China, and limited promotion in their study countries were listed as common reasons for return by the two groups. China's economic development is regarded to be the leading cause of such views. According to the World Bank (2022), China's gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate was 6.7% in 2018, much higher than that of Japan and Australia. Returnees must have seen it as a signal of opportunities for better careers, promotion, and utilization of their expertise. The results confirm the assumption of the life planning model that capacity development and better employment will impact international students' decision-making.

Previous literature on returned graduates listed family ties, career opportunities, higher return on educational investment, favorable political support, economic growth in the home country, and social and psychological concerns/stress in the study country as key drivers for their return (Dustmann & Weiss, 2007; Tharenou & Seet, 2014; Jiang, 2016; Hao et al., 2017). Our study shows that prospects for career development, utilization of specialty, and limited promotion in the study country were more important reasons for their return than consideration for their families for both Japan and Australia returnees.

Australia returnees listed "stress in the host society" more often than Japan returnees as a reason for returning to China. This finding might be partly explained by the study of Blackmore et al. (2015) on Chinese accounting graduates who faced difficulties in finding employment in Australia because of the oversupply of graduates, tightening immigration policy, and lack of English proficiency and social resources compared to local students in Australia. It also might be explained by the wider cultural distance between China and Australia than between China and Japan based on the life planning model.

Secondly, in choosing a workplace in China, both groups listed "prospect of career/capacity building," "utilization of capacity/specialty," and "good living environment" rather than the salary level. This result mostly coincides with the result of the CSCSE survey. It is noteworthy that career development and utilization of specialty were again identified as the top reasons for their choice of a workplace by both Japan and Australia returnees.

Our interview results indicate that "good living environment" includes household registration (*hukou*) in big cities. As the Chinese household registration impacted China's labor mobility (Colas & Ge, 2019), providing *hukou* to returnees from overseas study seems to have played a significant role in attracting them to big cities. This analysis endorsed the assertion of Tran et al. (2021). However, this phenomenon could lead to a brain drain from other cities within China.

Australia returnees tended to consider "convenience of spouse/parents/children" more than Japan returnees in choosing a workplace. All the interviewees from Australia chose the current workplace because of the location (the first-tier city or special municipality), implying that many of them were from such cities/municipalities or had a stronger desire to let their families live in such places.

Thirdly, concerning satisfaction with the working environment, Australia returnees reported higher satisfaction than Japan returnees in expertise utilization, salary, promotion, work efficiency, clarity of duty sharing, personnel evaluation, realization of their ideas, relationship with colleagues, and working hours. These disparities in satisfaction levels can potentially be attributed to differences in the types of companies and industries that they work for. A larger proportion of Japan returnees were employed by the host country's companies in the manufacturing industry while over three-quarters of Australian returnees were employed in the service industry, particularly in the educational sector.

Traditional Japanese companies' HR management is based on seniority system and lifelong employment, which are reported to be less attractive to international employees (Huang et al., 2020). Conrad and Meyer-Ohle (2017) contended that Japanese companies expected international employees to comply with conventional HR management rather than reformed it. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) pointed out that Japanese manufacturing companies adopted more tacit knowledge and middle-up-down management (characterized by hierarchy and task force) than Western companies, which may be perceived to be less transparent and efficient by the local staff, including Japan returnees. This analysis aligns with the finding of Sato (2019) that illustrated the unpopularity of traditional Japanese HR management among the returned graduates working for Japan-affiliated companies. Based on the life planning model, the results show that institutional factor has affected the satisfaction of returnees.

According to the Ministry of Commerce of China (2021), Japan's investment in China was US\$ 33.7 billion in 2020, while that of Australia was US\$ 3.4 billion, about one-tenth of Japan; the major field for Japan's investment was manufacturing, while Australia mainly invested in services and information technology. According to the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2016), China is Australia's largest market for education-related travel services. These economic relations appear to have influenced the career choices of the returnees.

As shown in the aforementioned analysis, returnees had a strong orientation for career development and utilization of specialty, which must have led them to choose an industry where the economic activities between their study country and China would be most active: the manufacturing industry for Japan returnees and the educational service industry for Australia returnees. In such industries, they expect to utilize their specialty/expertise (such as knowledge of their study country's language and business manner) most effectively and develop their career further. This is the most notable finding of this study related to the study country-specific factor that has influenced the graduates' career choices. This verifies the assumption of the life planning model that international graduates' choices would be affected by the relationship between the home country and the study country.

Fourthly, regarding contribution in their workplaces, more than 60% of Japan returnees reported that they have contributed by bridging the home and study countries' markets. This will be related to Japan's closer economic relationship with China than Australia. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 2021, China's merchandise export to Japan amounted to US\$ 166 billion, while that to Australia was US\$ 66 billion. Facilitating business connections between China and Japan is assumed to have given them opportunities to utilize their expertise acquired in Japan and develop their career.

Australia returnees listed their major contributions in helping language and cultural issues, followed by utilization of their experience/specialty acquired in Australia, such as English proficiency and familiarity with Western business culture. This is in line with the analysis of Pham and Saito (2020) that some returnees from Australia utilized their soft skills (working style, professionalism, and communication ability) to navigate their home country's labor market.

Lastly, as challenges, the prevalence of overtime work was listed as a common issue by both Japan returnees and Australia returnees. Wang (2020) described how certain Chinese employers adhered to the 996 regime, which requires employees to work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week, to maximize profit. Our survey illustrates that it has posed significant challenges to the well-being and work-life balance of returnees as well. This is a new finding that was not listed in the previous studies that mainly discussed the challenges, such as the mismatch between returnees' expertise and the demand of the local labor market.

## Conclusion, Implications, and Limitations

Through conducting a focused comparison between Chinese returnees from Japan and Australia, this empirical study has provided new insights into the factors that influenced the returnees' career choices and trajectories. By employing the life planning model, study country-specific factors (such as economic relation between the study country and home country and an institutional factor related to HR management style) were identified to have influenced the returnees' decision-makings, satisfaction, and contributions. This study also highlighted the importance of career development and utilization of specialty/expertise in their decision-makings and the issue of overtime work commonly listed by the returnees from the two countries.

This study presents precious implications for policymakers and educational institutions of study countries, especially Japan and Australia, regarding the career development of their graduates in their home countries. Since international students tend to find employment in the sector where the transactions between their study county and home country are most active, HEIs need to design their education and offer career advice to enhance students' employability considering the needs in these sectors.

Our study also provides valuable implications to employers to utilize and retain the returned overseas graduates. It is essential to place them in a position where they can utilize their specialty/expertise obtained overseas and control their working hours to create a healthy working environment.

This study has a few limitations. Questionnaire participants may not represent the population (Japan returnees and Australia returnees) properly because of the insufficient number of responses and sampling bias. The percentage of survey participants (Japan returnees) majoring in STEM was higher than the Chinese international students average in Japan. Thus, the results have reflected a stronger tendency of Japan returnees in the STEM field.

Another limitation is insufficient comparability between Japan returnees and Australia returnees who participated in the questionnaire. The differences in age, major, and type of company may have affected the survey results. To overcome this limitation, we hope to conduct a broader survey of Chinese returnees from Japan and Australia by improving the sampling method. Also, we would like to compare the working situation of returnees by industry and company type to see the influence of institutional factors on their satisfaction, contributions, and challenges. By doing so, we seek a deeper insight into the career development of Chinese returnees who studied in these countries.

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