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Value Alignment and Professional Socialization of Young Returnee Faculty in Higher Education: A Case Study of Jiangsu University

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of higher education internationalization, young returnee faculty have emerged as a core intellectual force in universities. Strengthening institutional talent governance and providing constructive value guidance for returnee scholars are of vital practical significance for fulfilling the fundamental mission of higher education and cultivating socially responsible professionals. Taking Jiangsu University as an empirical case study, this paper investigates the demographic and behavioral characteristics of young returnee faculty through questionnaires and in-depth interviews, analyzes the current status and bottlenecks of their institutional value guidance, and proposes optimized strategies for promoting their professional integration, civic awareness, and long-term development in the new era.

Keywords: Higher Education; Young Returnee Faculty; Institutional Value Alignment; Professional Socialization; Civic Engagement

1. Introduction

National strategic frameworks for higher education explicitly emphasize that education, science, technology, and talent serve as the foundational and strategic pillars for comprehensive modernization. In recent national talent development conferences, high-level directives have reiterated that talent governance must maintain a coherent direction, continually enhance engagement with intellectuals, encourage scholars to harbor a strong sense of social and civic responsibility, and motivate them to proactively assume societal missions. Coordinated institutional leadership serves as the fundamental guarantee for effective talent development.

In recent years, academic research on overseas returnees has expanded significantly. Scholars have defined returnee faculty in universities as high-level personnel who hold Chinese citizenship, studied abroad through government-sponsored or self-funded programs, obtained doctoral degrees overseas, and currently hold academic or senior professional technical positions in domestic institutions [1]. In this study, "young returnee faculty" specifically refers to overseas returnee scholars aged 40 and below. According to the latest Blue Book on Chinese Students Studying Abroad and Blue Book on Employment of Returnees released by the Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange, the total volume of overseas students continues to grow, demonstrating trends toward diversified study destinations and normalized return rates. An increasing proportion of overseas scholars express a strong preference for domestic employment. Driven by competitive national, provincial, and ministerial talent attraction initiatives, outstanding young returnee scholars have become an essential pillar of higher education faculties.

As a key provincial comprehensive university, Jiangsu University has aggressively implemented a "Talent-Driven University" strategy in recent years, leading to an increasing proportion of young returnees. The university currently employs 2,734 full-time faculty members, among whom 1,274 (46.6%) have overseas study or work

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experience of six months or longer. How to effectively guide the value orientation and civic integration of this demographic has become a critical agenda for institutional development and faculty capacity building.

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach incorporating literature review, in-depth interviews, and questionnaire surveys. A survey was conducted among 30 young returnee faculty members at Jiangsu University (age ≤ 40 , overseas study duration ≥ 1 year). In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 faculty members representing diverse academic disciplines and international backgrounds. By analyzing the empirical case of Jiangsu University in relation to the group characteristics of returnees, this study extracts replicable and scalable pathways for value guidance, aiming to enhance faculty members' professional ethics, reinforce organizational cohesion, and provide robust talent security for high-quality higher education development.

2. Ideological, Cultural, and Behavioral Characteristics of Young Returnee Faculty

2.1. Civic & Institutional Cognition: Prominent Global Vision with Gaps in Domestic Institutional Context

Significant divergences exist between domestic and Western political systems, historical traditions, developmental paths, ethics, and cultural philosophies [2]. Prolonged overseas study and work enable returnees to integrate deeply into multicultural environments and global academic networks; however, some encounter institutional friction upon their initial return. The survey indicates that 20% of the returnees went abroad at a relatively young age and exhibit limited understanding of the historical, theoretical, and practical logic of the domestic socioeconomic system. Consequently, they display an incomplete grasp of collective social development goals and the core educational mission of nurturing talent for societal progress.

2.2. Value Orientation: Predominantly Academic-Centric, Requiring Activation of Broader Social Responsibility

Interviews revealed that nearly half of the respondents experienced transitional difficulties within the domestic academic ecosystem. Approximately 60% of returnee faculty perceived the institutional promotion and evaluation metrics as excessively rigid and overly quantitative. Current assessment frameworks heavily favor high-impact international journal publications, foreign patents, and national-level competitive research grants, while under-recognizing local societal contributions and industrial applications. This imbalance directly reinforces an "academic-centric" orientation in their career pursuits.

Regarding social commitment, returnee faculty generally demonstrate "high latent intent but weak practical translation." Up to 80% of respondents stated that their decision to return was inherently rooted in a desire to contribute to societal advancement, viewing civic responsibility as an underlying career driver. In actual practice, however, 50% concentrated primarily on familiar academic niches that yield international publications quickly, rarely proactively aligning their agendas with urgent strategic needs, industrial bottlenecks, or practical public-welfare technological challenges.

2.3. Cultural Identity: Evident Cross-Cultural Competence Amid Challenges in Local Institutional Integration

Young returnee faculty demonstrate distinguished capabilities in cross-cultural settings. Over 90% of respondents not only exhibit high proficiency in international academic communication and scholarly writing, but also accurately master international research norms and cross-cultural communication techniques, effectively mitigating collaboration barriers arising from cultural friction. Furthermore, the majority display strong inclusivity toward cultural diversity, serving effectively as liaisons in international collaborative teams.

Nonetheless, clear deficits persist regarding their integration into the local cultural and institutional landscape. For instance, their comprehension of traditional and modern

historical culture often remains superficial, derived predominantly from archival literature rather than experiential practice. They exhibit limited immersion in the domestic institutional culture of holistic student development (Li De Shu Ren). Furthermore, many express discomfort with informal relational networks (guanxi) and multifaceted considerations in resource allocation within the domestic academic environment, generating a "transitional alienation" in organizational belonging that hampers deep integration.

2.4. Participation Patterns: Strong Focus on Individual Rights Versus Low Collective and Institutional Engagement

Interviews indicate that, influenced by overseas environments prioritizing individual rights, returnee faculty demonstrate acute concern regarding personal career prospects and core workplace entitlements. Concretely, they emphasize fairness in promotional pathways, transparency and rationality in research resource allocation, and practical welfare provisions such as childcare and medical coverage. Moreover, they strongly favor institutionalized and standardized channels for grievance redress, exhibiting pronounced rule-consciousness and rational rights-protection awareness.

Conversely, in terms of broader collective governance and civic activities, returnee faculty exhibit low proactive engagement. They often display indifference toward departmental governance and long-term disciplinary planning, perceiving these as external to their personal roles. Participation in institutional workshops, national condition study seminars, and policy briefing sessions tends to be passive. Constrained by demanding research workloads, they rarely actively track national macro-policy directives or socio-economic developments.

3. Analysis of Current Institutional Value Guidance: The Case of Jiangsu University

Jiangsu University has incorporated returnee faculty guidance into its overarching institutional governance, establishing a structured coordination system. The university clarified a three-tier operational mechanism: the Faculty Affairs Division oversees institutional coordination, the Human Resources Department manages onboarding, and secondary academic colleges implement routine mentoring, forming a full-lifecycle chain spanning "onboarding orientation, routine engagement, and career advancement support." Nevertheless, given returnees' diverse international backgrounds, disciplinary distinctions, and developmental needs, four prominent bottlenecks persist:

3.1. Insufficient Precision Failing to Address Differentiated Individual Demands

Institutional guidance content largely centers on macro-level policy dissemination (e.g., general higher education mandates and institutional ideological standards), lacking tailored frameworks differentiated by academic discipline or foreign study experience. Consequently, it struggles to resolve personalized professional dilemmas. Moreover, the administration overlooks cognitive divergences between short-term visiting scholars and long-term expatriates, as well as scholars returning from Western versus non-Western countries, causing certain guidance programs to disconnect from practical reality.

Simultaneously, the delivery mechanism remains dominated by traditional "top-down, unidirectional transmission," relying heavily on administrative assemblies, document dissemination, and didactic lectures. This creates weak interactivity and low engagement, failing to stimulate critical self-reflection among returnees. In practice, the university rarely organizes comparative seminars on international and domestic academic governance or tailored Q&A sessions. Similarly, practical field visits to historical sites and local industrial enterprises often remain superficial "check-in" tours without deep conceptual immersion.

3.2. Evaluative Bias Limiting the Mobilization of Deep Social Commitment

Since 2017, Jiangsu University has exercised independent authority over faculty professional title evaluation. Over the past decade, the university has continuously advanced evaluation reforms toward multidimensional talent assessment. However,

specialized assessment rubrics and dedicated promotional channels remain lacking for scholars engaged in strategic technology translation, defense-related research, and localized industrial engineering. A structural inertia favoring "international publication metrics over domestic practical contributions" persists in grant allocations and institutional honors. Under this framework, returnees naturally prioritize short-cycle, easily publishable international topics to secure career survival, suppressing their drive toward substantive societal contributions [3].

Although the university has actively promoted industry-university collaboration-facilitating two multi-million-yuan commercialization projects during the 14th Five-Year Plan-organized matchmaking and enterprise visits remain largely episodic and lack closed-loop operational support. Consequently, young returnees struggle to access accurate demand-side intelligence regarding regional industrial upgrades. Despite holding latent civic aspirations, they face structural deadlocks due to the absence of institutional landing points.

3.3. Waning Long-Term Guidance Failing to Sustain Mid-Career Growth

Institutional guidance resources are heavily skewed toward the first-year adaptation phase. The university holds centralized annual orientation programs where senior institutional leadership delivers systematic modules on higher education ethics, university history, and institutional missions. However, systematic guidance mechanisms are notably absent for mid-career faculty (years 3–5). Without continuous guidance, these scholars often experience value ambiguity under intense academic evaluation pressure, resulting in a tendency to focus strictly on quantitative research output while detaching from institutional and societal concerns.

Furthermore, supportive interventions from faculty unions, academic colleges, and organizational units remain confined to logistical and daily living assistance, lacking regularized dialogues at the conceptual and professional value level. Peer-mentoring programs between senior faculty and returnees primarily emphasize research grant applications rather than professional ethos or societal orientation. Although an annual faculty sentiment survey is conducted via secondary colleges, its low frequency and generalized formatting prevent it from surfacing latent cognitive or integration challenges among returnees.

3.4. Underutilization of Cross-Cultural Advantages as Bridges

Young returnee faculty at Jiangsu University are concentrated in competitive disciplines such as Agricultural Engineering and Mechanical Engineering, possessing superior cross-cultural communication capacity and international academic networks. However, the university's talent management reflects an imbalance: "prioritizing local adaptation while neglecting outward communication." Consequently, their potential as cross-cultural bridges remains under-leveraged.

While many returnees actively participate in international academic conferences, their engagements remain narrowly centered on personal research dissemination rather than connecting institutional disciplinary capabilities with international collaborative platforms. Furthermore, the university has yet to establish structured incentive mechanisms encouraging scholars to present Chinese educational and scientific practices abroad. International cooperation initiatives are primarily monopolized by administrative bureaus or senior professors; academic contributions detailing Chinese developmental realities in international journals or global forums are excluded from promotion and award criteria. This discourages returnees from cultivating organizational identity through international academic ambassadorship.

4. Optimized Pathways for Enhancing Value Alignment of Young Returnee Faculty

Higher education leadership and organizational bodies must heighten their proactive responsibility and responsiveness regarding the professional socialization and value guidance of returnee scholars [4]. Strategic implementation pathways should focus on the following dimensions:

4.1. Constructing a Tiered and Categorized System to Enhance Guidance Precision

Differentiating by Discipline: Returnee faculty should be categorized into Humanities/Social Sciences and STEM fields. For scholars in humanities, law, and management, whose research intersects with cultural communication, institutional governance, and global affairs, guidance should cultivate their capacity to articulate local institutional innovations using internationally accessible academic discourse. For scholars in agricultural engineering, machinery, and materials science, where research directly impacts strategic engineering and industrial upgrades, guidance should explicitly reinforce application-driven orientations and contributions to the real economy.

Differentiating by Overseas Duration: Short-term visiting scholars often hold fragmented impressions of overseas academic culture and are vulnerable to cognitive bias; guidance for this group should emphasize rapid contextual calibration and domestic institutional alignment. Long-term expatriate scholars possess entrenched cross-cultural habits; guidance should center on deepening institutional belonging and translating their global networks into collaborative advantages.

Differentiating by Host Region: Scholars returning from Europe and North America are accustomed to mature Western academic governance; guidance should facilitate comparative institutional analysis to foster objective recognition of the domestic higher education path. Scholars returning from non-Western regions often hold valuable experience in regional multilateral collaboration; guidance should prioritize mobilizing their expertise to support cross-border regional development initiatives (such as the Belt and Road Initiative).

4.2. Restructuring Evaluation Frameworks Toward Social and Applied Contributions

To activate returnees' intrinsic commitment to societal advancement, universities must first foster a healthy, transparent academic environment. Institutions should establish democratic, merit-based, diverse, and autonomous campus academic cultures, utilizing institutional rules to safeguard professional ethics and resolutely insulating academic appraisals from undue administrative or external interference [3].

Given the distinct backgrounds of returnees, homogenized evaluation standards fail to capture their true contributions. Assessment rubrics must integrate social contribution metrics, providing alternative promotional pathways for faculty engaged in technology transfer, key industrial engineering, or strategic practical projects. Tying social and industrial impact directly to professional title progression will fundamentally incentivize faculty to align their research agendas with public needs.

To translate returnees' goodwill into tangible output, institutions must build robust, closed-loop technology commercialization platforms. On one hand, universities should systematically aggregate industrial and municipal technology demands and match them accurately with faculty specializations via institutionalized matchmaking forums. On the other hand, seed funding should be allocated to support returnees participating in cross-disciplinary projects addressing societal bottlenecks and regional developmental priorities.

4.3. Establishing a Full-Lifecycle Developmental Support System

Returnee faculty exhibit evolving needs across different career stages. Institutions must allocate resources dynamically across the Adaptation Phase (Year 1), Growth Phase (Years 3–5), and Maturity Phase (Years 5+):

Adaptation Phase: Focus on institutional integration and baseline professional ethos. Add modules on "Disciplinary Trajectories and Societal Needs" to campus orientation, utilizing on-site immersions in national key laboratories to help scholars connect disciplinary value with broader industrial contexts. Adopt comparative international frameworks in policy briefings to prevent misunderstandings. Implement a dual-mentorship system-pairing each returnee with one administrative mentor and one senior academic peer-to host regular informal seminars, facilitating rapid integration into the campus ecosystem.

Growth Phase: Focus on continuous intellectual development and resolving career ambiguities. Establish advanced faculty development workshops featuring interactive roundtable discussions where returnees can openly discuss balancing international publication requirements with domestic applied research, or integrating professional ethics into curricula, supported by academic advisors.

Maturity Phase: Highlight role modeling and peer leadership. Publicize the achievements of mature returnees who have made exceptional public and academic contributions via institutional media channels. Concurrently, assign mature returnees as mentors for incoming cohorts, thereby reinforcing their own institutional belonging and leadership responsibilities through mentorship.

4.4. Establishing a Bidirectional Empowerment Framework to Leverage Cross-Cultural Bridging Roles

Compared to domestic-trained peers, highly educated returnee faculty possess superior international networks, innovative horizons, advanced cutting-edge expertise, and global peer relationships, enabling them to accelerate higher education internationalization [5]. Universities should systematically design application pathways that integrate returnees' cross-cultural advantages into teaching, collaboration, and research workflows:

Academic Roles: Empower returnees with decisive executive roles in international cooperative education programs, and guide them in embedding global ethics and local contextual realities into bilingual curricula.

Platform Construction: Provide Concrete Institutional Platforms for Constructive International Academic Engagement.

1. Organize international lecture delegations composed of returnees to visit partner universities and overseas academic associations;
2. Launch an international "Returnee Perspectives" column on the university's multilingual portal, inviting scholars to publish commentary and share research insights through their unique vantage points;
3. Nominate returnees to serve in municipal cross-border economic dialogues, helping local enterprises expand globally while articulating modern developmental models;
4. Actively nominate and support returnee scholars to assume governance roles, directorships, and editorial board positions within international academic organizations, thereby expanding their academic agency and enriching equitable international knowledge exchange.

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