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International academic or citizen scholar?: Singaporean returnees in the global city

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Yasmin Y Ortiga, Jue Wang, and Meng-Hsuan Chou

Abstract

Research on return migration has tended to focus their analyses on two imagined places: a host country where they used to live, and an origin country where they must reintegrate after a long period of being away. This paper reveals how spaces *within* the city can undermine the reintegration of former migrants seeking to reestablish themselves in their home countries. Based on in-depth interviews with 25 Singaporean academics, we discuss how the priorities of globally oriented universities can impact the reintegration of highly skilled returnees within their home city. Specifically, this paper reveals how returnees face the challenge of negotiating two conflicting demands upon their return home. As academics, they must adhere to the needs of their fast-changing universities, where the pressures of world rankings demand "global impact" through research and publications. Yet, as Singaporean citizens, they also face expectations to fulfill the responsibilities of being "home" in their city, juggling calls for national service and community outreach among local university faculty. We examine the conflict between these two demands as an understudied factor that shapes migration flows into Asia's global cities.

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The development of universities is often assumed to go hand in hand with the cities that surround them. Urban studies have documented how higher education institutions can channel economic resources to a city's growth, supporting local businesses and increasing demands for new amenities and residential spaces (Ruoppila and Zhao 2017; Sum 2018). More importantly, scholars argue that universities can draw human capital into cities, as people come to work or study within these institutions (Liu 2019; Revington 2021). The influx of highly skilled professionals, students, and entrepreneurs can bolster a city's global reputation, creating new jobs and opportunities for its residents (Ho 2014). However, universities' success in attracting such migrants also depends on whether they are located in desirable places to live (Deem, Mok, and Lucas 2008; Sidhu, Ho, and Yeoh 2020). As such, teaching and research within the university relies heavily on the safety and social life of its surrounding community.

Yet, the link between universities and their cities have been strained in recent years. On the one hand, universities have faced increasing pressures to compete in a global higher education landscape, where prestige is mainly determined by research publications and patents (Marginson 2004; Stack 2013). In a 2019 forum in this journal, KC Ho argued that such "competition for reputation" encourages universities to prioritize international standards of productivity, even if these do not necessarily align with national interests and concerns (Addie et al 2019: 255). On the other hand, local government bodies and community members have called for universities to play a bigger role in developing the cities they are in. Faculty and staff face increasing expectations to address persistent local problems such as public health disparities, environmental sustainability, and growing unemployment (Addie 2018; Liu 2019). This disjuncture is especially felt in the Asian region, where state agencies have poured massive resources into bolstering the status of public universities, while also grappling with problems brought about by rapid urbanization (Douglass, Ho, and Ling 2002).

As the city's immediate needs become detached from its universities' global priorities, how then do highly skilled migrants navigate these contradictory spaces? We address this question from the perspective of migrant academics who returned to their home city, after spending time overseas. Specifically, our findings are based on in-depth interviews with 25 Singaporean returnees who have taken on full-time employment in their country's research universities. While there is a growing literature on migrant academics moving towards destinations within Asia, much of these studies focus on foreign scholars (Kim 2016, Koh and Sin 2020, Authors 2019). We argue that in examining the experiences of *return migrants*, we see more clearly how the rapid globalization of universities within Asia's growing cities can lead to conflicting demands for migrants' knowledge and expertise.

We also emphasize how the Singapore case can inform the broader literature on how global cities grapple with questions of belonging among its residents. Singapore is unique in that it is a city-state. Yet, its desire to facilitate the return of overseas citizens echoes similar policies in other countries across the world. The Singapore case study provides an important example of how aspirations for global status can contradict expectations of local service, weakening the reintegration of return migrants.

The following sections outline the literature on the return migration, noting the field's overfocus on transnational ties and identities. We then discuss the case of Singapore as a global city and how changing definitions of citizenship shape expectations of returning academics. We argue that as scholars working in highly competitive universities, Singaporean returnees face pressures to produce research with "global impact" to reinforce their universities' status in world rankings. Yet, as Singaporean citizens, they grapple with the responsibilities of being at "home," juggling calls for national service and community outreach. We argue that current studies have overlooked the contradictory expectations that highly skilled returnees often need to navigate within their home cities. In the case of Singapore academics, the inability to balance

such conflicting demands pushes them to either remigrate to other countries or leave academia for alternative careers. In our conclusion, we discuss how both these outcomes undermine the benefits of their return home.

Making sense of return

Migration studies have largely defined reintegration as the process of re-establishing "economic and psychosocial ties" within a country of origin (IOM 2017). Much of this literature has sought to determine what factors shape this process, and how globalization and the ubiquity of cross-border ties affect returnees' sense of belonging. Specifically, scholars have investigated how return migrants remain connected to the places they leave behind even as they move across national borders (Ley and Kobayashi 2005; Upadhya 2013). Some believe that such migrants remain "dually embedded" in both their home and their former host societies, facilitating an exchange of ideas, investments, and resources for local development (Colic-Peisker and Deng: 238; De Silva 2018; Zhang 2019). Meanwhile, others argue that returnees are more likely to feel isolated within their countries of origin, as the long years spent away make it hard to adjust to the return home (Chavez 2016; Fitzgerald 2009). Cities and hometowns can go through massive change, not only in terms of physical infrastructure, but population diversity as well. As such, the idea of "home" can become "a contested site where host, returnee and immigrant communities jostle uneasily together" (Christou and King 2006: 825). Studies reveal how returnees tend to "mythologize" the image of their former home communities, thus increasing the likelihood of disappointment (Pido 2017; Ramji 2006). Those unable to reconcile this disparity between a "desired" and "lived" experience of return will also struggle to reestablish themselves at home (Ramji 2006).

These studies have raised important questions as to whether return migration truly leads to permanent settlement, even among well-resourced, highly skilled migrants. While highly

skilled migrants have the capacity to remain in their home countries after return, others believe that they are more likely to remigrate in the future, as international opportunities keep these professionals mobile and globally oriented (Colic-Peisker 2010; Ong 1999). In Zhang's (2019: 464) study on Chinese return migrants, state incentives and programs are unable to ensure long-term settlement. While his participants express a nostalgic sense of belonging towards China as a nation, they do not necessarily "develop a sense of place and belonging specific to a city and its development." Studies on academic returnees also cite other problems such as a lack of support or funding for research, professional envy among those who never left, and frustration with local bureaucracy (Author 2011; Teferra 2005). As such, migration scholars have come to see return as merely one phase of an ongoing migration journey rather than a move towards remaining in place (see Paul and Yeoh 2021).

While these studies provide important insight into the potential and problems of return, there is a tendency to describe migrants as people merely caught between two nations: a host country where they used to live, and a home country where they must re-establish themselves. Researchers have shown how migrants can end up either dually embedded within these two spaces or stuck with a feeling of "in-betweenness," where one is not fully integrated into either place. While important, struggles with return involve not only reconciling one's place between a home and host nation. As urban scholars have argued, people must also navigate different spaces *within* a city's boundaries, where they can feel either welcome or excluded depending on their identity and status (see Anjaria 2009; Teo 2015). In the following section, we discuss how Singapore's globally oriented universities complicate the reintegration of returning academics.

Belonging in the Global City

Scholars have questioned how notions of belonging and community go beyond national borders, as cities become increasingly diverse and interconnected within global markets and networks (Jonas and Wilson 2018; Purcell 2003; Sassen 2001). Much of this work investigates how the rise of global cities has worsened the exclusion of marginalized groups. Researchers have critiqued how low-wage migrants are often pushed out of public spaces and made invisible within the cities where they work (Iskander 2022; Ye 2016).

In the case of Singapore, the government's success in "going global" has long been regarded as the best means of ensuring the nation's survival (Velayutham 2007: 83). As a small country with limited natural resources, state leaders have sought to reinforce Singapore's role in global trade and commerce, building its status as a financial and knowledge hub. Such efforts have often left Singaporeans struggling to reconcile the conflicting demands of "globalization and nation-building" (Ho 2006). As Elaine Ho (2006: 397) argued, this tension has led to a "dual challenge to ensure that the citizens continue to feel at home in Singapore both affectively and materially."

In examining the question of citizenship within global cities, scholars have mostly compared the experiences of new migrants and the local citizens who receive them. Often lost are the perspectives of returning migrants who must also find a place for themselves within their fast-changing home city. Woods and Kong (2022) argue that local residents can experience varying degrees of belonging and discomfort as they move through different spaces within their own city – whether these be the workplace, the home, or places of worship. In a rare study on Singaporean returnees, Chan and Chan's (2021) interviewees reported feeling different levels of integration into their work environment, their children's schools, or even the space of local politics. However, the study did not explicitly examine how and why these spaces elicited such different experiences among returnees. There remains a significant gap in

scholars' understanding of how tensions between local belonging and global aspirations can play out in various places within the city.

In this paper, we focus on the space of the university as a workplace. Specifically, we discuss how the standards and priorities that drive these institutions impact the reintegration of highly skilled Singaporeans who return to their home city after time spent overseas. This paper argues that for Singaporean academics, coming back to their home city has also meant navigating multiple roles as returning citizens *and* faculty employed within the country's globally competitive universities. In the following sections, we emphasize how a growing disconnect between the city and the university undermines our interviewees' successful return home.

The case of Singapore's global universities

In the last two decades, Singapore universities have climbed world rankings at a rapid pace, surpassing more established institutions in the West (Sidhu, Ho, and Yeoh 2011). State agencies invested heavily in academic research, constantly looking "outwards" in benchmarking local institutions with prestigious international universities (Collins et al 2014: 662). A key part of this investment has been the aggressive recruitment of highly qualified faculty from top overseas institutions, offering generous compensation packages and research funding that rival those in Western countries (Paul and Long 2016).

However, studies on academic mobility to Singapore have been largely centered on the experiences of immigrant scholars (Authors 2020; Paul 2021). This is unsurprising, given that foreign-born faculty are estimated to comprise more than half of tenure-track and tenured professors within the country (Paul and Long 2016). In contrast, fewer studies have examined the return of Singaporean academics who either worked or studied in universities abroad. To date, there is no publicly accessible data on how many Singaporean returnees are employed in

local universities. Our own survey on academics working in Singapore universities showed that only 21% of respondents (149 out of 707) were local Singaporean citizens (Authors 2019). Still, it is important to note that among the Singaporean academics who responded to our survey, 84% (125 out of 149) were returnees from abroad. In other words, a significant proportion of Singaporean academics within Singapore are also returnees who obtained their doctorate degrees outside the country.

The high number of Singaporean academics with foreign degrees reflects the government's heavy investment in promoting overseas experience among academically inclined citizens and facilitating their return to the country after their studies. Since the 1960s, Singapore state agencies had sponsored the overseas education of selected scholars through programmes such as the President's Scholarship, the Armed Forces Overseas Scholarship and the Police Force Overseas Scholarship. These students attend highly selective institutions in the US and UK, in exchange for a bonded contract in public service (Ye 2021). State programmes have also sponsored Singaporeans interested in pursuing postdoctoral fellowships or those completing the last few years of their doctoral research. While many of these scholars returned to work in government ministries, specific programmes also channel local scholars to academic positions within the country's universities (Ye 2021). For example, in 2001, state officials set a target of supporting 1000 Singaporean PhDs in STEM majors (Lee 2014). For the next three years, the government funded the doctoral training of 276 Singaporean students specializing in biomedical fields (A STAR 2005).

Individual universities also offer their own state-funded scholarship programmes for promising Singaporean students planning to pursue PhD studies or postdoctoral training abroad. Upon completion of these programmes, awardees are appointed as tenure-track assistant professors. The policy is designed to encourage local students to pursue an academic career and enlarge the pool of local faculty.

Beyond government sponsorship, Singaporean undergraduates have been touted as highly competitive and academically driven, with many choosing to pursue further study outside the country (Paul 2021). As such, many Singaporeans have also invested in their own graduate study, obtaining scholarships from non-government sources.

In the last decade, the Singapore government has increasingly invested in encouraging established Singaporean scholars and researchers to return home from overseas (Toh 2014). However, Singaporean academics who choose to return must adjust two types of change. First, returnees face a constantly evolving global city, where residents grapple with the usual problems of precarious markets, immigration, and rising costs of living (Ho 2002). As highly educated citizens with overseas experience, Singaporean returnees are often regarded as local "experts" who must help address the challenges facing their small city-state. For government-sponsored scholars, such expectations are especially salient given that public funds had paid for their education (Ye 2021).

At the same time, Singaporean academics are returning to fast-changing universities. In the early 2000s, Singapore corporatized its two national universities, transforming them from statutory government boards to more autonomous institutions (Gopinathan and Lee 2011). This strategy is not unique to Singapore, with countries like China also decentralizing power over higher education to allow universities to "move quicker" in making changes that would benefit the institution (Sidhu, Ho, and Yeoh 2020). Underlying this strategy is the need for universities to achieve higher status in a knowledge-based economy and attract economic investments into the country (Liu 2019: 132). In the case of Singapore, the push for global status has led to massive shifts in university policy and structure. Singaporean returnees must then navigate such changes alongside their desire to settle and contribute to their home city.

Methods

This paper's findings draw from a larger study on the experiences of migrant academics in Singapore universities. We focus specifically on a sample of 25 Singaporean returnees who took on full-time faculty positions at three public institutions: the National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University, and Singapore Management University. We limited our study to these universities given that they were the three oldest and largest institutions in Singapore. Currently, there are six public institutions in the country. We acknowledge that our findings may not reflect the sentiments of academic returnees in these newer universities.

The research team recruited interviewees by sending invitation emails to faculty members from two major fields: Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM); and the Social and Behavioral Sciences. We then asked interviewees to connect us to other colleagues who might be interested in participating in the project ("snowball" sampling). To supplement this recruitment method, team members promoted the project at university workshops and events, distributing fliers with project details to interested faculty members. We conducted these interviews between 2015 and 2017.

The amount of time interviewees had spent overseas varied widely. Half of our interviewees (13 out of 25) had benefited from some government sponsorship, either for the entirety of their doctoral studies or for their postdoc years. For these academics, returning to Singapore was initially an obligation to fulfill. However, all our interviewees claimed that they would have returned to Singapore anyway, whether they had a government sponsorship or found other ways to fund their education. They saw return as a voluntary choice, differentiating their situation from others who may have felt "pushed out" of their host societies due to economic or political reasons.

Interviewees had returned to Singapore at different points of their universities' development. This variance turned out to be an important factor in shaping their experience of return. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the sample by discipline and the number of years interviewees had spent abroad.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Our interview questions centered on participants' decision to pursue graduate studies overseas, their experience returning to Singapore, and their work within the country's universities. However, this paper's findings focus mainly on the interviewees' experience of returning to Singapore. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software.

All members of our research team were foreign scholars, and we were mindful that interviewees may be uncomfortable sharing their views on immigration and the prevalence of foreign faculty in Singapore. Still, we found that interviewees were candid about their perspectives and took pains to explain how they felt about their experiences compared with their foreign colleagues. Overall, interviewees agreed that the internationalization of Singapore's higher education had fostered a vibrant academic community in the region. However, they also worried about the constant pursuit of global prestige and what this meant for local scholars within the country's public universities.

Like other qualitative studies on migrant experiences, this paper is limited in that our findings are based on a small number of Singaporean returnees, all of whom were still working as faculty at the time of our interview. We were unable to include Singaporean academics who obtained their degrees from local institutions and currently work within the country. As noted earlier, this is a much smaller group and most Singaporeans in tenure-track positions are also

educated overseas. Due to the small size of our study's sample, we were unable to make general arguments as to how other factors such as gender, marital status or family arrangements shape their experience of reintegration. However, we note in our findings how relationships had impacted our interviewees' decisions to return to Singapore. Interviewees themselves also pointed out that our study did not include other Singaporean returnees who eventually left the country or no longer work in academia. In many ways, this topic became an important point of reflection that reinforced our later arguments about the factors that shape their return home.

Returning "Home"

In deciding to pursue their studies overseas, Singaporean academics were much like other student migrants. They wanted opportunities to gain international exposure, learn from established scholars in foreign institutions, and pursue degrees that would open doors for future careers. However, their motivations for returning to Singapore were slightly different. Studies on migrant academics have largely framed the decision to return as a choice between pursuing career opportunities or being closer to family and community (Authors 2011; 2019). In contrast, the Singaporean returnees in our study argued that coming back to their home city fulfilled both professional and personal needs.

Singapore was already an attractive destination that provided career incentives for both local and foreign scholars (Authors 2020; Paul and Long 2016). For most of our interviewees, Singapore universities offered an active intellectual community, a good salary, and research funds comparable to the best universities in the world. Singaporean citizenship was also an advantage in obtaining an academic job within the country, given that university administrators actively recruited qualified Singaporeans with training from overseas institutions. For example, Charlotte, an assistant professor at a professional school, received an offer for her current job even before she obtained her PhD degree. "My university is always on the lookout for

Singaporeans abroad," she explained. "Coming back here was very easy. Even before I defended my dissertation, they gave me an office. They even gave me a salary."

In some ways, Singaporean returnees benefited from a system wherein the need for academic staff was greater than the supply of qualified local citizens (Rostan and Ceravolo 2015). Jiayun, an Assistant Professor in the sciences, emphasized that this gap was not due to "a lack of trying." While her research center wanted to recruit more Singaporean scientists, 90% of the center's 200 researchers are still foreigners. She believes this gap is the reason why it was relatively easy for her to secure a job there.

> It's not that we are trying to exclude locals and hire more foreigners. If you look at it, the pool of foreign researchers is much, much larger than the local pool…It really has to do with the supply issue, and that's why I say that it's an advantage for me. I stand out more.

Other interviewees echoed Jiayun's experience, arguing that finding academic positions was easier at "home" than it would have been elsewhere. However, they were careful to emphasize that success in the job market also depended on an applicant's field of study or institutional affiliation. Interviewees admitted that their universities placed a premium on hiring Singaporeans from high-ranked schools, particularly in the US. Jess, a social scientist who graduated from an Australian university, had to work as a postdoc for a few years before she was able to obtain a tenure-track position in Singapore. Still, interviewees' experiences reveal that being Singaporean was an advantage in pursuing an academic career within the country.

Aside from professional opportunities, our interviewees also expressed strong personal reasons for coming back to Singapore. Some wanted to spend more time with aging parents, while others wanted their children to grow up with extended family in a familiar environment.

We found that this was the case for both our male and female interviewees. Megan, an associate professor in the sciences, had competing offers from universities in the US after she obtained her doctorate degree. However, she realized that having her young daughters start school overseas would mean being away from Singapore for the rest of their childhood years. “It was like a lifetime decision,” she said. “If you are educated in the US, I don’t think you can come back to Singapore for your pre-university education. The system is different.” For Joel, an assistant professor from the applied sciences, the main issue was having aging parents to care for at home.

> Actually, my sister migrated to Canada and my brother to Hong Kong, but the rest of my family is here. My dad is here, my mom is deceased, but my wife’s folks are here. So you know, it’s a very different proposition for me to leave.

On the surface, our interviewees seemed well-positioned for a smooth reintegration process. Their experiences as overseas Singaporeans made them ideal candidates for local universities eager to attract faculty with international credentials. Their personal desire to be with family also elicited a strong sense of belonging that Singapore state officials sought to encourage among its citizens. Yet, even as returnees tried to balance their professional and personal lives, it became clear that fulfilling both their roles as international scholars and local citizens would not be as easy.

The expectations of citizenship

Migration scholars and policymakers have often portrayed return migrants as catalysts of positive change within their countries of origin (Colic-Peisker and Deng 2019; Xiang, Toyota

and Yeoh 2013). In the Singapore context, state agencies framed such expectations as contributing to Singapore society, despite the nation's global outlook and status (Ho 2006). As such, while academic returnees are recruited to their universities due to their international experience, they also face expectations to lend their expertise to local state initiatives and community programmes. Although foreign faculty in Singapore are also expected to perform some public service, local scholars were more likely to sit in government panels, chair scholarship committees, and provide expert advice for local policy.

On the one hand, returnees understood the value of this service. In choosing to return, Singapore academics were committed to the development of their home city. Esther, an assistant professor at a professional school, admitted that she never felt this sense of responsibility in her previous position as faculty in an Australian university. "In Australia, it was a job, it was something I needed to do well," she explained. "But here…you have that sense of citizenship, which goes beyond your professional commitment."

On the other hand, interviewees admitted that such expectations could be burdensome at times. Given the tight networks of academic and policy circles within the country, many returnees found it hard to say no to service obligations, even if these requests took away time that could have been spent on research and teaching. Joel, an assistant professor in the applied sciences, recalled spending an entire month helping the government manage a local health issue. While state agencies had also asked his foreign colleagues to lend their time to similar initiatives, he felt that it was not appropriate for him to decline these invitations as a Singaporean.

> I could have said no, but it would've pissed people off (laughs). To some extent, the same expectation doesn't apply to the foreigners. We face the same pressures in terms of getting tenure but at the same time, we have these difficulties.

Asyraf, an associate professor in the humanities, echoed this sentiment. He claimed that it would reflect poorly on a Singaporean academic if he or she refused to do service for the community.

> I mean, all academics must do some kind of public service, even if they are foreigners. But there are certain expectations of locals. You are expected more to serve the communities, and get involved. If you choose not to do so, then you are not a team player. You're not a good Singaporean.

Both these statements indicate that in the context of a "world-class" university, expectations for service seemed to be unevenly defined among both local and foreign scholars. For Singaporean returnees, "service" meant more than just mentoring students or handling administrative tasks within the university. They also took the work of fulfilling the university's role as a public institution that engages with its surrounding community. Our interviewees felt that such responsibilities were often relegated to them, mainly because of their citizenship.

The task of enacting local service was particularly heavy for Singaporean returnees with family or care work responsibilities at home. For example, Jessica, an assistant professor in the sciences, was often assigned to do "outreach" activities in the local junior colleges and secondary schools, given that she was also one of the few Singaporeans in her department. Jessica agreed to do this work because she enjoyed introducing younger Singaporeans to her field. However, she admitted that she would have been less eager to do so if she had children or elderly parents to care for at home. She explained,

> I think it's easier for me because I'm not married yet. But I understand for Singaporeans who already have a family and are already weighed down by the responsibilities, it's much more difficult to take up other responsibilities outside of your job, unless you're already retired and you have more time. For starting faculty, it's a lot more challenging.

Asyraf, who had to balance both childcare and his tenure-track career, agrees with this point. Although he was already tenured at the time of our interview, Asyraf recalled struggling to find time to do his research while raising his young family. His claim was that colleagues who were single or married without kids were often better off in navigating the expectations of the university.

> If you don't have a family, you don't have too many obligations over the weekends…As a Singaporean, you have all these other national service stuff to do and that I think adds on to the load. If you don't have family obligations, you can basically spend more time at work. I think it's the same everywhere, really.

Asyraf and Jessica also complained that many of the service expectations required of local citizens could not simply be reassigned to foreign colleagues. This was especially the case when it came to the distribution of courses and teaching load. Cheng Can, a tenured professor in the social sciences, shared that Singaporean faculty taught most of the university's required courses on Singapore society. While his own research was on China, Cheng Can taught a basic "Singapore Studies" module for many years, handling up to 400 students per semester. Like other interviewees, he saw the value in this type of work. Most of the graduates from his department obtain jobs in the public sector, working for government agencies or teaching in the public school system. Handling Singapore-focused classes was an important means of

training the country's future public servants. A large number of students also enrolled in these classes, allowing Cheng Can's department to make a case for more faculty hires. In this sense, he believed that teaching such classes benefited the entire department, while fulfilling the university's "public mission." However, he confessed that it was also exhausting to teach the same required module every semester.

The experiences of academics like Cheng Can reveal how Singaporean returnees faced pressures to serve their home city. As citizen scholars working in public universities, returnees were expected to enact different forms of public scholarship, in line with the needs of state agencies, public schools, and other Singaporean institutions. However, Singaporean returnees found that despite the value of this service, such work was not fully recognized when it came to the standards for promotion within their universities.

Pressures on "global" academics

Within Singapore's research universities, international publications were largely seen as the main measure of success. As these institutions became more prominent in university world rankings, faculty felt increasing pressure to produce work at par with these changes. Hui Ming, an associate professor in the sciences, returned to Singapore in the late 1990s, when local universities were mainly oriented towards teaching undergraduates. She described herself as a "witness to change" when the state corporatized the country's higher education system and transformed the two largest public universities into research institutions. "I needed to reinvent myself and build a good research programme fast enough to be able to ride the wave," she recalled. "Other people were not able to do that. They had to exit the system. Some might be still in the system, but they are very bitter."

Riding these "waves" of change meant keeping pace with global competition for academic prestige. Given that Singapore institutions rose through the rankings so quickly,

returnees on the tenure track felt like they were constantly chasing "moving the goalposts," as their institutions' standing shifted from year to year. For many, the only solution was to somehow outpace the university's development by producing more than what was currently expected. Asyraf shared,

> I have been around since 2004…It was not as competitive as it is now…So the younger ones, when they come back from finishing their PhD, they have to *run*. You can't say, "Oh I finished my PhD, I can relax a bit." No, no, the PhD was the easiest part. The hardest part is actually being an assistant prof. Before you get tenure, you got to run and run and run.

While the challenges that Asyraf described may exist in most research universities, the high aspirations of institutions in Singapore make this task even more challenging. Establishing a stable academic career only becomes progressively harder as tenure expectations rise alongside the country's status in global rankings. As Asyraf noted, younger scholars on the tenure track need to put in more effort than their predecessors in order to remain in their jobs.

As a result, developing a "global" outlook on one's career can be difficult to reconcile with the local sense of rootedness that Singaporean leaders expect among its citizens. While Singaporean returnees were at "home," their work continued to be evaluated based on standards set by traditional academic centers in the US and UK. For Asyraf, maintaining this standard meant having to compete at the same level as some of the most established universities in the world.

> You must understand universities in Singapore. They are ascending to that level – they want to be the top 10. It's like holding on to a plane that's taking off. As you are

> going up, somebody will fall off. Those who managed to hang on are the people who can send their works to prestigious journals or publish their books with American university presses. It's very tough.

Other scholars echoed Asyraf's critique, arguing that for their universities, publishing in a prestigious venue seemed more important than doing work that had local relevance. Researchers in STEM fields also raised concerns as to how international prestige did not necessarily translate to better research. In many fields, the difficulty of publishing in certain journals was mainly due to the increasing number of scientists conducting similar studies. As Hui Ming argued,

> In the last six, seven years, it has become very difficult to put your paper into a journal of a certain impact factor. So, like me, I was able to publish in [top journals] because at that time, it wasn't that difficult. But now, if I want to publish in those journals again, they require so much more data than they used to. It's because so many people are submitting papers!...I think that this made [tenure] so much harder now.

Given such competition, meeting the standards for tenure meant not only allocating more time to research, but also prioritizing topics that were enticing enough for a global academic audience. In this sense, research questions relevant to Singapore society were not always seen as ideal pursuits for junior academics. The push to pursue "big" questions implied that Singapore-focused studies did not contribute to general academic scholarship. Many of the returnees in our study were frustrated with this constraint, given that they wanted to study topics that were relevant to Singaporeans' everyday lives. This dilemma was particularly salient for scholars in the applied sciences. For Joel, one of the topics he felt most passionate

about was both too time-consuming and too "small" in scope to ensure enough publications for tenure. He explained,

> In the long run, what do I want in this society? I feel that there is a gap in primary care research here. Do I want to step in and do something about it? But for my tenure prospects, that might not be a great thing to do…You want to be in something that is not saturated, but at the same time, you don't want to be in something that is not mature. If you have to set up everything all over again, it'll take several years to see the results. Right? And the tenure clock is very short.

Joel's statement reveals how pressures to be globally competitive contradicted expectations that Singaporean returnees channel their knowledge and skills to local issues and problems. This contradiction reflects what Elaine Ho (2006: 389) had discussed as the "paradox" in how Singapore has defined citizenship. On the one hand, there was a pervasive aspiration to "go global" and promote a strong presence to other nations. On the other hand, there is a desire for Singaporeans to "stay local" and develop a sense of loyalty to the country. While Singaporean returnees felt implicit pressure to contribute to local affairs, they were also well aware that research productivity was the type of output recognized within their globally oriented universities. As such, interviewees were left to decide how much of their time could be spent fulfilling these contradictory demands.

Citizen scholar or global academic?

Contrary to most research on return migrants, the Singaporean academics in our study were not caught "in between" a former host country and their home nation. Among the 25 returnees we interviewed, only two regretted their decision to come back to Singapore. While most of our interviewees had enjoyed their time overseas, they had no desire to remigrate elsewhere. Neither were they the ideal transnational subjects, simultaneously integrated at home and in their former host countries. Rather, for many of the returnees we spoke to, the main source of anxiety was the prospect of being forced to leave Singapore. This paper reveals how spaces *within* the city can undermine the reintegration of former migrants seeking to reestablish themselves in their home countries.

In the case of Singaporean academics, tensions in their return were due to a growing detachment between the global aspirations of their university and the expectations of citizens in the surrounding city-state. While all Singapore-based faculty needed to produce enough publications for tenure, returnees had to balance these demands with expectations that they also contribute to Singapore society. Attending to one set of demands took away time to fulfill others, leaving returnees insecure about their future in the university. Some interviewees believed that the stress of balancing these competing demands was what discouraged other Singaporeans from coming home. As Taufiq, an assistant professor in the social sciences, explained, "I can understand why my friends are reluctant to come back. There's a lot of uncertainty in our universities…You need to play for global rankings. Young scholars like us, we have difficulties publishing you know."

Adding to returnees' sense of precarity was that Singapore's small higher education system made it unlikely that a faculty member denied tenure in one institution would be able to find another tenure track post in another local university. As such, failure to obtain tenure in Singapore meant that returnees would have to either leave the country or, if they chose to

remain in Singapore, they would be forced to take on non-research positions or find other jobs outside the university. One can argue that foreign faculty can face the same problems if unsuccessful in obtaining tenure. However, for the Singaporean returnees in our study, cutting ties to Singapore would not be as easy. Just as the family was a prominent reason for return, the question of how to care for elderly parents or move growing children compelled our interviewees to remain in Singapore. Chee Chuan, an assistant professor in the sciences, admitted that he considered leaving Singapore after serving his bond. He and his wife had no children and could technically move wherever they wished. Yet, they worried about leaving their elderly parents behind. At the time we spoke, Chee Chuan was the only one among his siblings who was living in Singapore, while his wife was an only child. Fortunately, Chee Chuan was granted tenure in his institution. He soberly noted that many others were not as lucky.

Other interviewees shared that their attachment to their home surpassed their desire to continue working as academics. Joel, an assistant professor in the applied sciences, explained that he felt more strongly about his place in Singapore than his status in his academic discipline. If he had to choose between the two, he would sacrifice the latter for the former.

> If I had to change [my research area], I would change it. Because the thing is, I am bound here…If they said, "Okay, what you are doing is no longer important here, we want you to focus on something totally different." I would try to do it. For me the loyalty is not to the science, it's to the country and to the family.

Joel's statement is not meant to imply that Singaporean academics are more dedicated to the country compared to their foreign counterparts. Rather, his dilemma pushes against the image of academics as hyper-mobile individuals, able to simply leave the country for other places in

need of their skills. For many like Joel, the decision to leave was not something they could readily make. Remaining in Singapore often felt more important than remaining in academia.

Still, our interviewees were quick to emphasize that in speaking to returnees who were still in Singapore, our team was missing the perspectives of many others who left or were forced to leave. The tenured faculty in our sample represented the Singaporean academics who had managed to "ride along" the waves of change and rising standards within the country's global universities. In contrast, the experiences of our untenured interviewees reveal how these waves of change have become increasingly unpredictable and more difficult to navigate. An interesting exception within our small sample was two professors who returned to Singapore as tenured faculty. Given that they were already granted tenure upon their return, these two professors felt less precarious in navigating the global demands of their universities and the expectations for local service. However, spending more time away from Singapore did not necessarily translate to an easier process of reintegration. Rather than time, it seemed that part of academics' successful return depended on their status within their universities. Our findings show how, for academic returnees, Singapore's global universities make the process of re-establishing both social and economic ties much trickier. In many ways, the decision to return home is only one step in a longer process of reintegration – one that involves not only reincorporating oneself in the home country, but also fulfilling contradictory roles for other institutions within their city.

Conclusion

In making sense of return migration, current studies have tended to focus their analyses on two imagined spaces: a host nation and a country of origin. This paper shifts our scholarly lens to the home city, where returnees negotiate the different roles they play within their communities, family homes, and places of work. We draw from the experiences of academic returnees in

Singapore to examine how the conflicting demands of being a citizen scholar shaped how they experienced their return home.

We highlight two important implications based on these findings. First, our paper argues for a study of return migration that goes beyond simply analyzing returnees' cross-border ties to their former host nations. Instead, we echo the need to examine how returnees reestablish themselves in their countries of origin, finding their place among the different institutions that make up their home cities. Studies on global cities like Singapore have emphasized how increasing diversity and interconnectedness have challenged traditional notions of citizenship, redefining our ideas of community beyond physical borders. Meanwhile, other studies have emphasized how age, marital status, and family arrangements can also impact people's experience of return and their propensity towards moving elsewhere (Fong 2012; Hagan and Wassink 2020). Our paper reveals how different spaces within the city demand different expectations of returning citizens. People's ability to fulfill these expectations impacts their sense of belonging within their home country. In the Singapore case, academic returnees may develop the social and emotional ties needed to reintegrate with their families and local communities. However, the need to produce "high impact" research in their universities makes them feel uncertain about maintaining a career at home. Investigating how returnees navigate different spaces within their home cities can lead to a more nuanced view of the process of return.

Second, the experiences of Singaporean returnees highlight how ideals of "good" citizenship become more complicated as "global" spaces within the city become increasingly isolated from the residents and locales that they are meant to serve (Addie et al 2019: 256). Studies on Singapore as a global city have provided thoughtful insights on how Singaporeans must negotiate an ideal of citizenship that requires both a global outlook and a strong sense of local commitment (Ho 2006; Velayutham 2007). This paper reveals how such expectations

define the everyday work of academic returnees, hoping to contribute to their local communities while still meeting their universities' global aspirations. Sadly, our findings show how the high standards of local universities can inadvertently push returning academics to re-migrate in the future. As many of our interviewees shared, those who are unable to obtain tenure within their universities would be forced to either leave Singapore or leave academia for alternative careers.

State policy may have generated some "success" in bringing back overseas scholars and facilitating their entry into local universities. However, resources channeled towards producing and attracting Singaporean academics abroad can be wasted when the fast-changing priorities of its public universities risk pushing these local scholars out of the country or out of academia. Both situations seem like lost opportunities to make the most of local scholars' knowledge and skills.

Scholars have also warned that despite such global aspirations, universities remain place-based institutions, bound to national politics and local responsibilities" (Addie 2018; Collins et al. 2014). Our paper illustrates how even international research universities must justify their contributions to society. Unfortunately, our findings also reveal how the labor of public service is mostly relegated to Singaporean scholars. As this disparity becomes harder to reconcile, tenure denials and burnout may lead to a loss of local academics whose skills could have benefited the nation.

It is important to note that despite their personal struggles, the Singaporean returnees in our study did not advocate for special treatment or "localizing" faculty within public universities. Instead, what they sought was more balance in how scholarly contributions were assessed and valued by their administrators. Such calls are not unique to Singapore, as academics across the world have questioned the overemphasis on rankings and other international standards of prestige (Lim 2021; Stack 2013). In many ways, this paper reinforces

a need for scholars to be more cognizant of how disparities between global aspirations and local concerns shape our expectations of highly skilled work. Investigating the implications of this disjuncture will become more important as more and more universities now compete at a global scale. Beyond Singapore, countries such as China and Malaysia have also seen similar issues in facilitating the successful return of highly educated citizens. China's Hundred/Thousand Talents Program and Yangzi River Scholars Program have failed to fully reintegrate Chinese academic returnees who struggle with the environment and academic culture within local universities (Yang 2016). Similarly, most Malaysian scientists and engineers who returned through their government's overseas programs (7th Malaysia Plan in 1996 and the Brain Gain Malaysia Program in 2006) have left the country once again (Lee 2014). While scholars of academic migration have largely pointed to the push and pull of a highly globalized academic landscape, we argue that issues of reintegration can very well exist within the cities that highly educated migrants return to. We use the Singapore case to call for a deeper investigation of the disjuncture and conflicting pressures that highly skilled returnees may face among different institutions within their home cities.

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Table 1

Descriptive data of interview participants

	Returnees (n = 25)
Gender	
Female	13
Male	12
Discipline	
STEM	10
Social Sciences	7
Professional	5
Humanities	3
Rank	
Non-tenured	11
Tenured	14
No. of years overseas	
< 5 years	10
5-10 years	10
> 10 years	5