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Why English? Exploring Chinese early career returnee academics' motivations for writing and publishing in English

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To improve their research performance in international league tables, many universities in non-English language dominant settings recruit academic returnees in the hope that they will increase the quantity and quality of articles published in English-medium internationally indexed journals. This study explores Chinese early career returnee academics' motivations for writing and publishing in English. Utilising ecological systems theory, the findings show that the microsystem is reflected in the early career returnee academics' interaction with collaborators, while national policies constitute the exosystem. The academic culture has a noteworthy impact at the macrosystem level. This study contributes to the understanding of early career returnee academics' motivations to write and publish in English which will assist policymakers and university administrators to create a more beneficial environment to promote the accomplishments of academic returnees.

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Introduction

International academic publications and citations are important parameters for evaluating the internationalization level of higher education institutions (HEIs) and are one of the key criteria used in world-class university rankings (Hazelkorn, 2015). For universities, more high-quality international publications mean higher rankings in international league tables (Lillis and Curry, 2013). Thus, universities around the world encourage the practice of publishing in internationally indexed academic journals in their pursuit of a world-class reputation (Chou, 2014). In the Chinese context, early career returnee academics (ECRAs) are young scholars who obtained their doctoral degrees outside mainland China and then returned to universities in mainland China for academic work (Zhao and Liu, 2022a). These young scholars contribute to international publications and the internationalization of Chinese higher education (HE) (Li et al., 2018).

International academic experiences are beneficial for scholars' development in the mid-long term (Zhao and Liu, 2022b). Having experienced overseas study and accepted Western academic culture (Flowerdew and Li, 2009), younger generation academics appear to be passionate about writing in English and are likely to publish in internationally indexed journals (Ge, 2015; Jiang et al., 2015; Mu and Zhang, 2018). Nevertheless, it might be unreasonable to expect that young returnee academics would naturally write and publish in English rather than their mother tongue. The study thus sets out to explore the factors that motivate ECRAs to write and publish in English. It argues that ECRAs' decision to write and publish in English medium internationally indexed journals is not solely related to the researchers or to their environment, but also to person-environmental interactions. As Duszak and Lewkowicz (2008, p.108) point out, it is not simply a choice of language, but "a complex and multifaceted process of decision making". We found Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory to be a useful framework for examining both the immediate and wider environments in which ECRAs are embedded. The overarching question for this study is 'What are the factors that motivate ECRAs to write and publish in English?' The research focuses on humanities and social sciences (HSS) as, unlike natural sciences (NS), HSS writing and publishing in English is more closely tied to society, thinking patterns and culture, and "represents a more complex picture" (Li and Flowerdew, 2009, p.279) as an international academic language. The study first offers a literature review and theoretical framework before introducing the process of data collection and analysis; this is followed by the findings, before moving on to a discussion and the conclusion.

Literature review

Scholars' motivations to write and publish in English is a topic of significant interest to many researchers, and numerous factors that prompt non-native English-speaking researchers to choose to write and publish in English have been identified. The existing literature has demonstrated a variety of benefits of publishing in English, which are "often found to be closely intertwined with the motivations for publishing in English" (McDowell and Liardet, 2019, p.142). Writing in English and publishing in internationally indexed journals may reach a wider audience (Bocanegra-Valle, 2014; Ge, 2015; Jiang et al., 2015). Authors' research is more likely to be disseminated and new knowledge advanced because of increased and higher visibility, thus a considerable impact can be made (Bardi, 2015; Ge, 2015). Consequently, multilingual scholars are able to better participate and engage in discussions with a wider international research community (Bocanegra-Valle, 2014; Jiang et al., 2015).

National and institutional policies and regulations often prioritize international publications (Englander and Smith, 2013;

Muresan and Pérez-Llantada, 2014; Shchemeleva, 2021). At present, many evaluation agencies assess research performance based on articles published in internationally indexed journals where the majority of articles are in English (López-Navarro et al., 2015). Taking China as an example, Tian et al. (2016) contend that, in their efforts to improve HEIs' research performance and rankings in international league tables, universities pass on the stress of international publication to individual scholars via the formulation and implementation of various assessment methods and incentive policies. For the participants in Tian et al.'s study (2016), publishing in particular internationally indexed journals was of great importance for tenure and further promotion – in other words, surviving and thriving. Monetary incentive schemes are also used as tangible rewards that encourage international publications. For example, Qiu (2010) reported that universities gave scholars cash, housing benefits and other financial rewards for English language papers published in high-impact journals, and Shchemeleva (2021) found that the role of economic stimulus in rewarding English language publications seemed to be widespread in HE.

Several motivations and benefits have been found to be valuable for the authors. First, international peer-reviewed and indexed journals, particularly those listed in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) and Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI), represent high quality and rigorous standards. Aiming at such high academic standards helps to improve the quality of research, which is also beneficial for personal academic development (Bardi, 2015; Ge, 2015). Young academics can learn from dealing with multicultural and multilingual reviewers' and editors' feedback, perspectives and comments, enhancing their English language skills and academic thinking (Cheung, 2010; Ge, 2015; Sasaki, 2001). Second, successfully publishing in internationally renowned journals is convincing evidence of research ability, which could make scholars more competitive and confident academically (Jiang et al., 2015; Tian et al., 2016). Third, the benefits obtained from cross-cultural research encourage more international publications. Compared to publishing in the local language, international publishing may lead to academics having more opportunities to engage in joint research with international scholars. Such international collaboration is a major benefit of publishing in English and also an effective way to increase research outputs (McDowell and Liardét, 2019). In addition, cross-cultural scholarly collaboration has been proved to play a role in knowledge production, broadening horizons and enhancing academic English writing and publishing (Bardi, 2015; Li and Hu, 2018).

Many non-native English speaker early career returnee academics are more likely to share their research in English and prefer publishing in English medium to domestic local language medium journals (Lee and Lee, 2013; Li, 2014; Li and Hu, 2017; Mu and Zhang, 2018; Tietze, 2008). This could be due to their unique international training experience having a continuous and prolonged impact on their writing and publishing decisions upon their return to their home countries. More specifically, the returnees were found to spend a lot of time reading English materials and writing in English (Li and Hu, 2017), having grown accustomed to reading in English and become familiar with the particular jargon and concepts used in their specific field during their time abroad. In terms of language competence, overseas-trained scholars are often more familiar with the academic genres of English than with those of their native language (Bocanegra-Valle, 2014; Li, 2014). Moreover, they tend to feel more capable of and comfortable with writing and publishing in English than in their native language (Casanave, 1998; Li and Hu, 2017; Shi, 2003; Shin et al., 2014).

The existing research tends to suggest that choosing English as the language for writing and publishing can be attributed to multiple reasons. However, few studies have focused exclusively and intensively on young returnees' motivations for writing and publishing in English in the Chinese context, where over half a million academics return home each year (Ministry of Education, 2020a, 2020b), the majority of whom are young returnees. Furthermore, unlike most existing studies which draw on concepts and frameworks from linguistic or sociological theories (Zheng and Guo, 2019) or lack explicit theoretical support, this research uses the psychological framework of ecological systems theory. Thus, the study extends the literature on language choice for writing and publishing, and adds to the literature by providing an in-depth understanding of the interaction between external influences and individuals' motivations for and practice of writing and publishing in English.

Theoretical framework

Ecological systems theory is used in this study to understand the environmental and/or contextual factors influencing an academic's writing and publishing. This framework gives insights into the interactions between an individual and the environment. The theory claims that, throughout their lives, people encounter different environments that may influence their behavior to varying degrees and that individual development in particular is influenced by the ecological environment which is composed of a series of interrelated systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

The *microsystem* is a "pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.22). In the current research, the microsystem is characterized by the interaction between the ECRAs and their academic collaborators/research partners. For the ECRAs, these collaborators might involve academic partners working in the same or different universities or institutes, both Chinese and foreigners. Defined as the link and interplay between different microsystems, the *mesosystem* in this research refers to the interplay between different academic departments, research institutes, and universities. If these groups collaborate or compete, it may create an atmosphere that promotes or compels researchers to publish in English in order to improve exposure and worldwide recognition, or to compete for funding. Moreover, if Chinese universities collaborate with international institutions and academics, there may be a greater emphasis on publishing in English in order to promote communication and cooperation.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, p.25) defines the *exosystem* as "one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as a participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person". Thus, the exosystem has an indirect influence on processes in the setting that the microsystem inhabits or functions in, and so an individual may be indirectly influenced by external forces. The exosystem in the current research refers to national policies, which reflect government ideology and control. Faculty members are not involved in the making of these national level policies, and it is unlikely that they would be able to change the decision-making process, but these policies may affect their decision whether or not to write and publish in English. As they are disseminated through institutional and departmental schemes, regulations, and policies pertinent to international publications. Bronfenbrenner (1979, p.26) describes the *macrosystem* as consistencies "that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or

ideology underlying that system". In this study, the macrosystem refers to the academic/research culture underlying scholars' writing and publishing activities. Although the culture may be intangible and seem distant from the ECRAs, the impact it has could be unexpected and significant, especially for ECRAs who have cross-cultural experiences. Finally, the *chronosystem* takes into account change or consistency over time in both the individuals' characteristics and the environment in which they live. In this study, the globalization trend, rising dominance of English as the global lingua franca, and scholars' significant work and life transitions, such as change in employment, may inspire Chinese researchers to write in English.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected mainly through semi-structured interviews. Only participants who met specific criteria were selected: they should be working in HSS related disciplines, have gained their PhD degree from an overseas university (including Hong Kong Special Administrative Region), and returned to a mainland Chinese university to teach and research. Following Bazeley (2003, p.274), who defines an early career researcher as "one who is currently within their first five years of academic or other research-related employment allowing uninterrupted, stable research development following completion of their postgraduate research training", only participants who were also within the first five years of employment in mainland Chinese universities were included.

This research adopted the snowball sampling method whereby already enrolled research participants assist in finding new study volunteers. Snowball sampling is popular in research due to its networking nature and flexibility, especially in situations when it is difficult to approach/find participants (Liu, 2018) These potentially difficult-to-reach groups may be small in number, geographically dispersed, unrecorded or unnoticeable, feel stigmatized, be especially sensitive, or need to feel at least somewhat trusted in order to participate willingly (Parker et al., 2019). In this study, ECRAs in HSS are a relatively small group, often neglected or unheard and trust needed to built to facilitate participation. Having an interviewer who is an insider will facilitate the data collection in research (Liu and Burnett, 2022). Using our social networks, we initially interviewed acquaintances who met these criteria. Treating these initial contacts as the seeds, at the end of the interviews, we asked them to recommend other potential participants who also satisfied the criteria.

Since snowball sampling is based on referrals, it may lack representativeness, and hence generalizability to a larger community. However, the goal of qualitative research is to generate an in-depth and contextualized examination of a fundamental phenomenon rather than to generalize to a community (Creswell, 2005). Snowball sampling has also been criticized for sampling bias, since the initial participants generally recommend persons from their own social networks, thus limiting variety, and potentially resulting in overrepresentation of specific characteristics or attributes. In response to this, Morgan (2008) writes that it is important to ensure that the initial cohort of respondents is as diverse as possible. Therefore, in determining the initial interviewees as the seeds of further contacts, we diversified their gender, age, country/region of study, year of work, discipline and academic title. The sampling continued until the data was saturated (Naderifar et al., 2017).

In total, 20 ECRAs in HSS from eight different Chinese universities were approached and interviewed. All eight universities are committed and oriented to research and internationalization as a major strategy in their efforts to build world-class reputations. They are located in six provinces in Eastern, Western, and

Table 1 Demographic profile of interviewees.

Code	Gender	Age	Country/Region of Study	Employed Since	Academic Discipline	Academic Title
T1	Female	34	United States	2017	Education	Lecturer
T2	Male	35	Germany	2017	Education	Assoc Prof
T3	Female	36	United States	2018	Literature	Lecturer
T4	Female	31	United Kingdom	2016	Linguistics	Assoc Prof
T5	Female	37	United Kingdom	2018	Education	Assoc Prof
T6	Male	30	United Kingdom	2018	Political Science	Assoc Prof
T7	Male	35	Denmark	2014	Sociology	Lecturer
T8	Female	33	United Kingdom	2017	Linguistics	Lecturer
T9	Female	36	Netherlands	2015	Education	Assoc Prof
T10	Male	32	Hong Kong SAR	2016	Linguistics	Assoc Prof
T11	Male	33	Hong Kong SAR	2018	Education	Lecturer
T12	Female	33	Hong Kong SAR	2016	Psychology	Assoc Prof
T13	Male	34	United Kingdom	2015	Economics	Assoc Prof
T14	Female	30	United Kingdom	2018	Economics	Lecturer
T15	Female	38	Netherlands	2015	Political Science	Lecturer
T16	Female	36	Australia	2014	Communication Science	Assoc Prof
T17	Female	34	United Kingdom	2015	Education	Lecturer
T18	Male	38	United Kingdom	2017	Education	Lecturer
T19	Female	37	United States	2018	Law	Lecturer
T20	Male	35	United States	2018	History	Lecturer

Central China respectively. The participants' background information is detailed in Table 1.

Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' personal information. The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 to 60 min and they were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, since the participants felt more comfortable communicating in their mother tongue. Eight participants were interviewed face-to-face in their personal offices and twelve by phone. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. All the participants permitted the interview to be digitally recorded. The primary interview questions were: 'Please would you describe your English writing and publishing experience?', 'What makes you write and publish in English?', and 'How do these factors influence your decision to write and publish in English?' Additionally, we also collected various official policy documents pertinent to international publications which covered the schemes, regulations and policies at the national, institutional and department levels. These texts constituted the supplementary data and helped to triangulate the interview data.

In addition to the primary questions, we also asked the specific interview questions (see Table 2). These were designed to align with the key dimensions or sub-systems of ecological systems theory. By doing so, we believed that the connections between the interview content and each sub-system of the theory would be made explicit, thus helping to establish a stronger foundation for our conclusions and ensuring a more rigorous application of the theoretical framework to our analysis.

The recorded interviews were first transcribed verbatim and then returned to the participants for correction to ensure the accuracy of the data prior to the analysis. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis. We read and re-read all the transcripts thoroughly to familiarize ourselves with the qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We employed open coding to initially analyze the unprocessed interview data without preconceived categories or themes, allowing for the comprehensive capture of a wide range of responses and viewpoints without imposing predetermined structures. Through open coding, we identified unexpected themes that were not part of our initial theoretical framework but emerged organically from the data, enriching our analysis with diverse perspectives. We continuously compared the interview data with existing codes and themes to determine if they introduced novel perspectives or reinforced previously identified patterns, aiding in the identification of saturation. Coding was continued until thematic saturation was achieved, indicating that no new themes or patterns emerged from the data. This rigorous approach ensured that our analysis captured the full spectrum of perspectives expressed by the participants, leading to a robust and comprehensive interpretation of the data. We triangulated the data by employing multiple coders to independently analyze the data and compare results. We independently coded the transcripts and then compared the codes. When variances occurred, we traced the source and negotiated with each other to come to an agreement. This approach enhances the reliability and validity of the coding process by minimizing individual bias and increasing the trustworthiness of the findings.

Subsequently, this study sorted and collated all the pertinent data into themes. This was followed by a refinement step, in which we reviewed "the coded data extracts for each theme to consider whether they appear to form a coherent pattern" (Nowell et al. 2017, p.9). We then extracted the substance of the themes and ascertained the different facets captured by each theme so that readers could understand what the themes represented. The analysis was an iterative process that entailed regular reflection, refinement, and revision of the coding structure based on ongoing analysis and feedback. This ensures that the coding process remains dynamic and responsive to the evolving understanding of the data. In reference to ecological systems theory, the themes were further grouped to correspond to certain sub-systems. Finally, we discovered that the clustered themes resonated well with the micro-, exo- and macro-systems as shown in Table 3.

Research findings

According to the qualitative data, no findings fit well with either the mesosystem or the chronosystem. When explaining their motivations for writing and publishing in English, participants rarely attributed their decisions to these levels. This may be due to lack of reflection or self-awareness, the returnees not have thoroughly examined or critically analyzed the influences of the mesosystem and chronosystem on their motivations, but simply followed the established practices or norms without fully contemplating the underlying factors. Another reason might be the perceived relevance and familiarity. The participants might not have felt comfortable expressing these more general contextual

Table 2 Interview Questions.

Primary questions	1. Could you describe your English writing and publishing experience?
	2. What makes you write and publish in English?
	3. How do these factors influence your decision to write and publish in English?
Microsystem level	1. Do your colleagues/peers/supervisors influence your decision to write and publish in English?
	2. Can you describe any specific instances where their influence played a significant role in your motivation?
Mesosystem-level	1. How does the collaboration between your department and other departments or research groups within your institution affect your motivation to write and publish in English, if any?
	2. Can you describe any networks or communities of practice that exist within your institution focused on English writing and publishing, and how do these networks impact your motivation to write and publish in English?
Exosystem-level	1. Are there any policies or guidelines within your institution that affect your motivation to write and publish in English?
	2. Are there any national policies that affect your motivation to write and publish in English?
	3. How do these policies impact your choices and actions?
Macrosystem-level	1. How do you think about the similarities and differences of research culture between China and the West?
	2. How do you see the differences between writing in Chinese and English?
Chronosystem-level	1. Are there any specific historical events or milestones in your field that have shaped your motivation for English writing and publishing?
	2. Are there any significant life transitions that have impacted your motivation for English writing and publishing?

Table 3 Codes and themes.

Codes	Themes	Sub-system
Academic Communication; Collaborative Research; Ideas Coming Out; Exchange of Ideas; Difficult Collaborative Writing and Publishing Process; Complementary Relationship	ECRA-Chinese colleague interactions	ECRA-Collaborator at the Microsystem Level
Supervisor; Using the Prolonged Professional Relationship; Division of Labor in Writing; International Academia; Academic Feedback	ECRA-previous supervisor interactions	
Academic Partnerships with Foreign Friends; Writing Book Chapter; Feedback and Suggestions; Improving Academic English; Tracking International Academia	ECRA-foreign partners interactions	
Monetary Reward; Point-Based Workload System; Uneven Points; Institutional Assessment Schemes; Nationwide Policies; Countermeasures; Institution Beneficial Regulations	'Pull' factors	Regulations and Policies at the Exosystem Level
Tenure System; Emphasis on Internationally Indexed Journals; 'Publish or Perish' Culture; Returnee as Identity; Different Quantitative Requirements	'Push' factor	
Re-adaptation; Re-familiarizing and Re-learning; Chinese Academic Culture; Chinese Discourse System; Time Consuming	Re-Learning Chinese Academic Writing	Academic Culture and Norms at the Macrosystem Level
Research Paradigm Differences; Comparison; Research Perspective; Preferring the Western Style	Different Discourse Systems Between China and the West	

elements or might have thought that impacts from the meso-system or chronosystem were less pertinent to their own experiences. They could have thus tended to talk about things that were more noticeable and pressing in their academic and professional life. However, we found the findings corresponded well with the remaining three sub-systems of ecological systems theory.

ECRA-collaborator at the microsystem level. These interactions occurred through scholarly communication and writing and publishing articles. The ECRAs wrote and published with others quite often and had various co-authors including previous supervisors, foreign colleagues, and Chinese colleagues. Such relationships were viewed positively by ECRAs as significant facilitators in writing and publishing articles in English.

Many participants still maintained a scholarly relationship with their foreign supervisors, even after returning home for academic work, and took advantage of the prolonged professional relationship through academic discussion and joint publishing. T13 said:

> My PhD supervisor and I, we have common research interests. When we talk, either he or I would come up with an idea. He is a well-known scholar and considers the values of the proposed research and is responsible for

writing the introduction. I would do technical things like programming.

T7 reported that he still maintained academic partnerships with previous colleagues in Denmark. Rather than articles, T7 concentrated on writing book chapters. The most significant motivation for him is that this helps to keep his academic English at a high level, allowing him to also keep an eye on international academia and track the research in his area from a global perspective.

> During the process, we discussed the core themes and basic framework. They provide academic feedback and revision suggestions after I write the draft. It improves my academic English and enables me to understand international academic trends. (T7)

A majority of participants reported that they had built and maintained close communication with Chinese colleagues. Such academic collaborations facilitated new research projects as well as writing and publishing. Working in the discipline of education, T13 reported that, "Many ideas come up during face-to-face discussions in the daily contact with my colleagues, because they are close to me". Noticeably, T14 emphasized the importance of the complementary relationship in terms of personalities:

I invited a colleague to work together to explore an academic question. She is quite introverted but I'm extraverted; she is calm and rational, but I'm sentimental. The complementary relationship makes our collaboration interesting. … I often come up with fresh ideas and she seems to be cool and asks me quite a lot of questions before we actually conduct a research project because she wants to know more about the feasibility of the project.

Similar views were expressed by T16, who said that she had formed a complementary relationship with her co-author:

Our collaboration is complementary. I'm emotional, while she is rational. I'm passionate about what I research and full of inspiration, whereas she sees things in a rational way and has strong execution ability.

Another example comes from T4:

My partner is really good; she knows me well and she encourages me often and takes good care of my emotions. I'm emotionally fragile, especially when reading critical comments from reviewers about our work. But she is able to rationally analyze the feedback, figure out coping strategies and encourage me to work on it. One of our joint papers was rejected three times, and I was about to give up. But she said we should hold on and find other journals. Thanks to her determination, we finally succeeded.

T4 appreciated the critical role that their personalities' complementary relationship played when facing comments from the reviewers and rejections.

National Policies at the exosystem level. National policies, which represent the ideology and authority of the government, are referred to as the exosystem. These impact faculty members' choice of whether or not to write and publish in English even though they are not engaged in the formulation of these national level regulations and are unlikely to be able to influence the decision-making process. This is because their influence is disseminated through departmental and institutional plans and rules that apply to worldwide publications. Thus, national policies have an indirect impact on ECRAs' writing and publishing choices.

Policies issued by top educational authorities have an enormous impact on institutional regulations involving international publishing. A new set of policies regulating the management of international publications and the assessment of academics was recently enacted by the Ministry of Science and Technology (2020), and the Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Science and Technology (2020). For HSS, the Ministry of Education (2020a, 2020b) enacted *Opinions on Eliminating the Harmful Orientation of 'Paper Only' in the Research Assessment of HSS in Universities* (hereafter the 'Opinions'). This official policy document stipulated that universities in mainland China should NOT: (1) place too much emphasis on international journals; (2) only consider the number of SSCI papers when deciding on resource allocation, material reward, and salary; or, (3) view a predetermined number of SSCI papers as the precondition and basis for promotion. HEIs were also required to restrain the 'supremacy' of international journal articles and eliminate high-reward papers. Obviously, the Ministry was attempting to reverse the 'SSCI paper only' ethos or SSCI 'worship' by reducing the emphasis on prestigious international journals. The government expected the institutions to execute the policy quickly (within several months). However, it did not impose national platforms for coordination, influence, and collaboration on creating shared tools and information resources or for agreement on the definitions, criteria, and protocols needed for the procedures (Zhang and Sivertsen, 2020). In this sense, universities were allowed a certain discretion.

Even though their attitude towards English medium publications was negative, or discouraging to say the least, the newly released national policies continue to encourage and endorse the publication of high-quality papers in renowned international journals. Accordingly, many universities significantly increased the importance they attached to publishing in high-profile journals. T18 explained:

In the past few years, I have published several SSCI journal papers in succession, but they were all in [journals rated] Q3 or Q4. I have read the new policy, which actually encourages the publication of high-level scientific research results in high-level international journals, and my university also has similar regulations. We have a point-based workload system. If you publish in ordinary English journals, you may only get 40 points. But if you get your article published in top journals, you will be awarded 120 points. Now you see the huge gap. So, my next work is to continue to publish in English, and the most important thing is to work hard to publish in top journals.

This quote shows that the national policies act as a general guideline, setting the publishing tone. Following the central guideline, each university introduces and implements its own corresponding feasible measures, in this case, widening the point gap to stimulate more high-level research achievements.

Moreover, the new national policies also underline the 'representative achievements' (*Daibiaoxing Chengguo*), which refer to each scholar's perceived most important and valuable achievements in a certain field of work. At the institutional level, new evaluation schemes were introduced to highlight the key role that representative achievements play in assessment. T8 stated: "Our representative publications will be evaluated in terms of novelty, quality, academic influence, and practical contribution. I must compete with others along these key indicators". Noticeably, however, the policies do not restrict the achievements to Chinese or English in terms of language. One could feel confident in subjectively assessing one's English publication(s) as a representative achievement.

If you can write good English papers, those can be your own representative achievements. Neither the Ministry of Education nor our university says such achievements must be in Chinese, I think this makes sense. Why must I write Chinese papers? Besides, English writing and publishing are my true strengths. (T18)

Obviously, the inclusivity of publication language requirements was appreciated by ECRAs who were productive in English language publications, and this strengthened their determination to continue writing and publishing in English.

Certain participants provided insights regarding the self-contradictory underlying logic between the aim of building world-class universities and, at the same time, devaluing international publishing: "Our slogan is to build world-class universities in China, but without international publications, how can scholars around the world or global academia acknowledge you are world-class?" asked T19. As a countermeasure, some universities compiled their own journal lists, as T6 explained:

Now, we don't aim at SSCI: we have made a new journal list of our own. We also classify them [the journals] and encourage academics to publish in higher-level journals. But to comply with the new policies, we designed the

reward system and institutional incentive schemes with care.

Thus, following the new national policy of breaking the 'SSCI supremacy', Chinese universities have devised institution-based contextualized alternative assessment and reward systems. However, regardless of the specific adjustments universities make to comply with national requirements, international publications continue to be important in the assessment process.

Academic/research culture at the macrosystem level. That there is a difference between China and the West in terms of academic/research culture is obvious. According to the qualitative data, Chinese research culture can be summarized as having a preference for grand topics, relying on personal thinking and having a strong utilitarian tendency (practical use of knowledge): developing theories including data or evidence seems to be less important. Western research culture, however, is primarily evidence-based, focusing on understanding and knowledge contribution. It is because of this difference that Chinese scholars need to choose which one they want to follow.

T9 and T18 were keenly aware of the different research paradigms between China and the West. Chinese scholars prefer grand topics and rely on personal reflection: developing theories including data or evidence seems to be less important. In the West, evidence from first- or second-hand data is imperative and the argument has to be built on these data. When comparing the two, the interviewees were critical of the traditional Chinese, and in favour of the Western, style. Additionally, the perspectives adopted by Chinese and foreign researchers were different, as T16 observed:

Following a Western critical perspective, your paper may not be published in China because you can't only analyze and criticize but should be constructive as well, offering some policy suggestions. But I think the purpose of my research is about policies which shall be finished by policy research.

T7 further contended that the Chinese stress on usefulness distorted scholars' understanding of research:

In China, the substantial attribute of social science research implies practicability or usefulness. But in Denmark, maybe in Western academia, research targets new ways of understanding, and original in-depth analysis. We [Chinese] overstress practicability and finding a solution but ignore the value of deep analysis of the problem. How can you pose a solution without analyzing an issue?

It appeared that neither T7 nor T16 had (re)acclimatized themselves to the research perspective taken by domestic scholars in China. They were confused about and critical of the perspective and 'distorted' way of understanding scientific research. In general, the Chinese research perspective was not fully endorsed by ECRAs and the vast majority of them choose to follow the newly-gained style learned from the Western cultural backdrop, and to write and publish in English.

It should be noted that the study participants had all completed their master's degrees at Chinese universities over a period of three years, when they engaged in reading and writing in Chinese and adhered to the academic conventions prevalent in Chinese academia. Subsequently, they pursued doctoral studies abroad for a period of four to five years, when they engaged in reading and writing in English and adhered to the academic conventions prevalent in Western academia. Upon starting work in China, they actively participated in reading, writing, and publishing materials in both Chinese and English. This experience has equipped them with a comprehensive comprehension of the distinctions in writing and publishing academic papers in Chinese and English.

Discussion

There are several noteworthy differences between the present research and extant studies. The first is the cooperation between Chinese colleagues who want to write and publish in English. Although the findings verify two of Li's (2014) collaboration modes, namely self and overseas scholars, and self and domestic colleagues, the frequency of the latter differs. For the first mode, ECRAs often mention their doctoral supervisors or foreign colleagues as co-authors. Although the self-domestic colleagues mode was uncommon in Li's (2014) study, our research revealed that ECRAs were quite likely to collaborate with Chinese colleagues. This might imply that, even if aiming at international publications, ECRAs still prefer to collaborate with their Chinese partners. This might be due to cultural reasons, and/or the fact that working with domestic colleagues is more convenient than maintaining contact with foreign collaborators. However, due to the qualitative nature of this study, we cannot generalize this finding.

Complementary relationships have been proved to be pivotal throughout the collaboration process (Li, 2014). Ou et al. (2012, p.407) have proposed that an academic cooperation team is more likely to achieve success if the members "increase complementary resources and reduce transaction costs". The complementary resources referred to in Ou et al.'s (2012) research are knowledge and scholars, yet our findings demonstrate that complementary emotions and personalities are equally imperative. Academic writing and publishing "can be both an intellectual and emotional process" (Sullivan, 2012, p.134) and therefore requires both intellectual and affective capabilities. Writing alone may give rise to negative feelings such as feeling "isolated and disengaged" (Sullivan, 2012, p.136). Moreover, in response to reviewers' critical comments, even experienced researchers appreciate and may need support, as modifications "entail complex discursive, social and emotional work" (Kamler, 2010, p.81). Several examples in our findings show that the participants and their co-authors complemented each other, both emotionally and in terms of personality. While being excited when developing new and fresh ideas is a positive emotion (Sullivan, 2012), it is helpful to have a partner who can help to critically assess the feasibility of the research as T14's and T16's cases indicated. The complementary relationship of personality is also critical when dealing with feedback during the revision process and encountering rejection decisions, as described by T4.

The noticeable enactment and implementation of a set of national policies at the exosystem level reflects the government's determination to reverse the overdependence on SSCI and A&HCI journals. Overemphasis on international publications may run the risk of self-colonization (Dang, 2005), as HSS scholars tend to "accept Western concepts and theoretical frameworks without critical scrutiny and creative thinking" (Deng, 2010, p.182), or selectively focus on Chinese issues that are of concern to Western research communities (Zhu, 2009). Numerous policies have been issued in recent years that require HEIs and scholars to treat domestic and international publications equally and use citation indices such as SSCI and A&HCI more rationally (Xu et al., 2021) in order to reverse the widely accepted SSCI and A&HCI 'worship' (Xu et al., 2019). The enactment of the *Opinions* is a typical example, advocating against the prevailing practice of citation indices-based research assessment.

It is worth pointing out that academic merit is not weighed against the language of contribution but is celebrated for the

depth and breadth of understanding it brings to the shared human quest for knowledge. Scholars worldwide are making valuable contributions to the academic community, in which the promotion of inclusivity is key. In addition, impact, which is derived from analysis and new ways of understanding, is an important aspect of evaluating research and could be meaningful globally. Translating analysis into action or application is key, in that analysis alone, without subsequent action or real-world implementation, may be ineffective or unproductive. However, taking action without proper analysis can be equally futile. Analysis and practical application needs to be balanced for research to have meaningful and impactful outcomes.

Consistent with Foucault's (1991) analysis of the dynamic relationship between power and knowledge, the recent change in China's academic policy framework, particularly in the fields of HSS, represents a significant restructuring of academic power dynamics. Viewed through a Foucauldian perspective, this policy initiative marks a significant departure from the prevailing discourse that has historically favoured Western academic standards, as exemplified by indices such as the SSCI and A&HCI. By advocating for a more inclusive recognition of domestic scholarly works, the policy actively challenges the entrenched dominance of Western academic norms, thereby disrupting the traditional power-knowledge dynamic that has long shaped the field. This shift not only repositions domestic research within the global academic conversation but also prompts critical reflection among Chinese scholars. By promoting a more discerning engagement with Western theoretical frameworks, the policy reflects Foucault's (1972) concept of power operating through discursive practices, thereby fostering a scholarly environment where power is dispersed rather than concentrated. This dispersion of power results in a more equitable academic landscape, where the value of knowledge is determined not solely by its origin, but by its inherent scholarly merit. Consequently, this policy can be viewed as a deliberate effort to democratize the academic discourse, allowing for a diversity of voices and perspectives that challenge the singular nature of knowledge production and reshape the identity and practices of HSS scholars in China.

This research has some findings similar to those of existing studies. At the exosystem level, in the context of the new policies, Chinese universities are allowed to introduce and implement corresponding measures. This finding echoes Zhang and Sivertsen's (2020) observation that the government trusts universities to find their own ways of implementing the new policies within a short period of time, which is a positive indication of respect for autonomy. Gao and Guo (2023) argue that a major reason for emphasizing international publications is because this helps to improve Chinese universities' global rankings. More specifically, publications will be converted into numbers to fulfil external evaluation objectives such as rankings (Xu et al., 2021). Better rankings often represent higher global reputations and increased international recognition. Our study, however, reveals a subtle contradiction between the pursuit of building world-class universities and the devaluing of international publications. Caught between the two views, Chinese universities are still attempting to develop institution-based contextualized evaluation and incentive systems to ensure that: (1) they do not violate newly-released policies such as the Opinions; and, (2) academics are motivated to write and publish in English. Therefore, similar to Gao and Guo's (2023) recent research, we also find that importance is (still) attached to international publications.

At the macrosystem level, the participants were also found to industriously read English materials and write articles in English (Li and Hu, 2017). ECRAs are more familiar with academic English than academic Chinese (Bocanegra-Valle, 2014), and so find it easier to write in English (Casanave, 1998; Li and Hu, 2017; Shi, 2003;

Shin et al., 2014). Having been trained in academic English writing skills and engaged in publication practice, they gradually understood and endorsed the norms and importance underpinning the convention (Ge, 2015). Re-encountering Chinese research culture upon their return, the young scholars are sensitive to the divergence between China and the West, the "separate discourse communities" (Flowerdew and Li, 2009, p.9) and, given their overseas education and research training, the ECRAs prefer the Western style. Moreover, to publish in Chinese journals, the ECRAs have to re-familiarize themselves with and re-learn Chinese academic writing and norms – and this additional workload pushes them to concentrate on international publications (Li, 2014).

The macrosystem does not operate in isolation, but rather interacts with other systems within the framework of ecological systems theory. In this study, the impact of the academic/research culture divide between China and the West penetrates the policies and regulations at the exosystem level. The Opinions call for the establishment and improvement of academic norms and evaluation systems: universities should comprehensively optimize the academic ecology, constantly improve the quality of research, and accelerate the construction of philosophy and social sciences with Chinese characteristics. The Opinions further stipulate that in order to prevent the supremacy of international journal papers, Chinese scholars should not overly rely on international data and journals, nor should they deliberately belittle or vilify China, or undermine national sovereignty, security and development interests in pursuit of international publication.

It is clear that the official government document deliberately favours the Chinese academic/research culture. The macrosystem could also infiltrate the ECRA-collaborator relationship at the microsystem level. Spending time in a culturally different, Western, country, the ECRAs become familiar with and get accustomed to Western academic culture; and this comes at the expense of their familiarity with Chinese academic culture due to their detachment from the Chinese HE system. When it comes to academic writing and publishing, they choose English and aim at international publications. Although Chinese is still their mother tongue, they do not use it for academic purposes, nor do they read or write for Chinese academic journals. Moreover, a major reason for choosing their particular academic partners–previous foreign supervisors, foreign or Chinese colleagues – could be that the ECRAs believe that these scholars are also versed in Western scholarly research culture, which is helpful for English article writing and international publishing.

Ecological systems theory provides a robust and appropriate framework for analyzing ECRAs' motivations. It highlights the importance of considering individuals within the framework of multiple interconnected systems. ECRAs' decisions to write in English are likely influenced by factors at various levels, making this theory suitable for capturing the complexity of their experiences. The theory emphasizes the significance of environmental influences on individuals. Ecological systems theory allows for a detailed analysis and exploration of how contextual factors interact to shape their writing motivations. However, it is also important to recognize the limitations of applying ecological systems theory.

First, it places considerable emphasis on the impact of external environmental factors on individual development, potentially overlooking the agency and personal choices of ECRAs in shaping their motivations for writing in English. While contextual factors are important, individual aspirations, interests, and goals should also be given due consideration. This suggests that the theory may oversimplify the multifaceted nature of motivations. Second, the theory's focus on the influence of environmental systems may oversimplify the complexities involved in understanding motivations for writing and publishing in English, potentially portraying individuals as passive recipients of influences rather than active participants in constructing their own motivations and goals. Additionally, the theory may underemphasize ECRAs'

adaptive capacities and resilience in navigating these influences. Their ability to adapt to new academic environments, overcome linguistic barriers, and negotiate cultural differences can also shape their motivations for writing in English, and should be acknowledged. Third, the notion of 'nesting' in various systems has also been questioned. For instance, while ecological systems theory views activities as a subset of activity policy, a network approach sees them as distinct systems, influencing each other through social interactions among individuals in different settings (Ettekal and Mahoney, 2017). Therefore, the relationship between the internal systems should be further examined.

Conclusion
This study contributes to the knowledge base of facilitators promoting ECRAs' writing and publishing in English. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems framework, it identified external/environmental factors that facilitate ECRAs' writing and publishing in English. The microsystem is reflected in ECRA-collaborator interactions. The national policies regarding international publications constitute the exosystem. In the macrosystem, even though the seemingly more remote academic culture is invisible, the impact that it has on young scholars' choice of writing and publishing language is proved to be remarkable.

An appropriate external environment is indispensable for the promotion of returned young scholars' international academic accomplishments. Faculty members' experience in their early years may influence their careers as a whole (Boice, 1992); consequently, knowledge of how to create a beneficial environment to improve ECRAs' international research performance is valuable. Government officials and university administrators can utilize the findings of the research to better formulate and adjust pertinent policies and regulations. The research uses empirical data from the Chinese context, but the core issue is universal and drives HE systems across the world. Scholars in other countries, especially in developing countries, may take into account the applicability of the factors the present study reveals.

According to Salager-Meyer (2008), researchers who received training abroad demonstrated a greater ease and efficiency in writing English research articles compared to their counterparts trained in their home countries. Likewise, the studies conducted by Casanave (1998) and Shin et al. (2014) revealed that individuals with overseas training exhibited heightened confidence and comfort in publishing their work in English. These findings imply that the experience of studying abroad contributes to improved proficiency and fluency in composing and disseminating research articles in English among non-native English speakers. Nonetheless, upon return to their home countries, the returnee researchers may find themselves isolated and confronted with a range of obstacles when attempting to continue their English language publications. They may need to balance various research customs, traditions, and methods, as well as handle the conflicting and occasionally contradictory requirements of writing in two different languages (Shin et al., 2014). It is important to note that, despite the difficulties (Shi, 2002; Tardy, 2004), returnee researchers often maintain a strong desire to write and publish in English. They recognize the value and global reach of publishing in English and are motivated to overcome the hurdles they encounter. Their determination reflects a deep understanding of the benefits of English language publication for knowledge dissemination and collaboration on an international scale.

Scholars' motivation to publish in English has been researched in diverse countries, such as Iran (Rezaei and Seyri, 2019), Spain (López-Navarro et al., 2015) and Romania (Muresan and Pérez-Llantada, 2014). These studies discovered that, despite the challenges that academics encounter, there is a growing inclination among individuals who are not native English speakers to publish

their research in English because English language journals attract more readers and have greater impact factors compared to local journals. Moreover, publication in international mainstream journals is important for the research assessment and productivity evaluation carried out by evaluation agencies in both English-speaking and non-English-speaking nations (López-Navarro et al., 2015). The dominance of English in the global academic community has been further ensured by policies and regulations in various nations. For example, since the 1990s, South Korean universities have been actively working to internationalize their institutions by recruiting faculty who are proficient in English. To secure tenure, faculty members are expected to publish their work in international indexed journals, which effectively establishes a policy of publishing in English. In the past few years, there has been growing demand for researchers and academics in Egypt to publish their work in international journals rather than local ones. This shift is seen to enhance the ranking of Egyptian universities (Abd-Elaziz, 2015) and changes are being made to the promotion system to encourage academics from various fields to transition into the international arena (Shehata and Eldakar, 2018).

While ECRAs play a significant role in international projects, it is noted that cross-cultural research collaboration may lead to quality achievements that can help to enrich the body of knowledge across various fields, understand common phenomena (e.g., global issues) from diverse perspectives, promote greater cultural sensitivity and ethical conduct, avoid ethnocentrism, address complex challenges, inform policy decisions, etc. Moreover, cross-cultural research usually requires essential resources such as funds, time, and skill in negotiating multiple cultural situations. It would be interesting and feasible to examine, for the same population, whether there will be a continued attachment to the "western academic 'dialect/idiom'", or if there will be a slow re-integration and accommodation to government statements after 5–10 years. Further studies are needed to explore the factors that impact the writing and publishing experience of senior academics who have returned to the field. Additionally, longitudinal research is necessary to ascertain how publishing experiences affect the career development of early career researchers. We also suggest that future studies increase the sample size to provide insights into the issues this study has uncovered. For example, whether men work more independently and need less emotional support than women. A larger sample (perhaps a questionnaire survey) could help to verify whether there are certain gender differences.

Future research could also explore the implications of linguistic diversity on identity and conflicting loyalties more comprehensively. It could adopt a philosophical reflective style, drawing from traditional Chinese philosophical thought to examine how individuals and communities navigate their sense of self and allegiance in the face of language diversity and global influences. By taking this approach, we would hope to gain a deeper understanding of these complex issues and their impact on people's lives.

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Author contributions

We declare that each of us made a significant contribution to conducting this work. XL collected, analyzed and interpreted the data and XZh drafted the paper. Each contributed an equal amount of work. SY participated in the data collection and joined writing in the revision stage. All three authors approved the final version.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the corresponding author's affiliated institution. It was confirmed that the research complied with ethical standards and was performed in accordance with relevant guidelines/regulations.

Informed consent

Informed consent was gained from all participants. The participants were all adults, and their participation was entirely voluntary. The personal data from all participants has been anonymised.

Additional information

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