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# Neoliberalism, internationalization, Japanese exclusionism: the integration experiences of international academics at Japanese universities

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## ABSTRACT

The study examines the role of neoliberalism, institutional internationalization, and Japanese exclusionism in shaping the academic environment of Japanese higher education institutions by exploring international academics' integration experiences at Japanese universities. Specifically international academics' perceptions of the academic environment, and their practical behaviors while integrating into Japanese universities were investigated via semi-structured interviews with 40 international faculty with various backgrounds. Employing Nvivo12, the interview data was managed based on a six-step thematic analysis procedure. Drawing on the integration experiences of international academics, the data analysis indicates that international academics perceived various subtle and overt constraints while integrating into Japanese universities, and they tend to seek private solutions to navigate their professional and social lives at Japanese universities. Moreover, although no differences in their practical behaviors were found, the study acknowledges the perceptual differences of the participants by suggesting that international academics, particularly those in the Humanities, those without previous experience in Japan, those who possess propaganda value due to their international appearance, and those who are not from countries that use Chinese characters, were more likely to perceive an integration deficit at Japanese universities. The research findings are indicative of the complex academic environment of Japanese HEIs caused by neoliberalism, institutional internationalization, and Japanese exclusionism, which is competitive, exclusionary, and pragmatic. Both theoretical and practical implications for policymakers, researchers, and university administrators are provided.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Neoliberalism; institutional internationalization; Japanese exclusionism; international academics; integration experiences; Japan

## Introduction

With the development of neoliberalism and globalization, new public management has become prominent in many higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide since the 1990s. One such context is Japan. Since the mid-1990s, the incorporation of national universities was discussed as it was supposed to promote the efficiency and quality of education, research, and management of HEIs. Its official implementation was launched in April 2004. The policies for the structural reform of Japan's HEIs, including the implementation of private management techniques and the third-

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party university evaluation based on competition principles (Tsuruta, 2003), were closely associated with the main ideas of neoliberalism. Meanwhile, with the advent of globalization, the institutional internationalization of HEIs has also been remarked as a significant concern of policymakers and university administrators in Japan. This focus is driven by the aspiration to enhance both the diversity and excellence of Japanese HEIs, leading to a significant increase in the number of international students and academics at Japanese universities (Huang, 2018; Huang & Chen, 2022). However, existing evidence has constantly described Japan as a negative case for immigrants, as many struggle with their integration into the country (Chen, 2022b). Previous studies have attributed this to Japanese exclusionism (Morita, 2015, 2018), emphasizing Japanese culture and values, and thus, the insistence on doing things the Japanese way.

Such a context, therefore, raises scholarly questions concerning how the rationales of exclusionism are intertwined with neoliberalism and institutional internationalization at Japanese HEIs, and how the entanglement of such forces influences the overall academic environment of Japanese HEIs. Despite integration being emphasized as a two-way adaptation between international academics and their hosts (Chen, 2022a), to gain a better understanding of the complex features of Japanese HEIs, this study primarily focuses on the experiences of international academics at Japanese universities, which best reflects the entanglement of such complex forces in Japan. On the one hand, in line with neoliberalism and the internationalization of higher education (HE), international academics have been seen as crucial agents for achieving world-class status and systemic reform, making them highly desirable to Japanese universities (Brotherhood et al., 2020); On the other hand, given the uniformity and conformity promoted by Japanese society, international academics are also expected to adhere to such societal norms (Sugimoto, 2020). Furthermore, due to their possession of various skills and knowledge, they are more susceptible to the effects of exclusionism (Geurts et al., 2021).

The study is devoted to exploring the integration experiences of international academics at Japanese universities. Semi-structured interviews with 40 international academics hired by Japanese universities were conducted to gather data. The study begins with a review of relevant literature, followed by an explanation of the methodology. The third part presents the main findings derived from the interview data. The fourth part offers a discussion and conclusions of the main findings, as well as the implications and limitations.

## Background literature

### *Japanese context*

Neoliberalism takes the world as a market and emphasizes privatization and marketization. The adoption of new public management largely reflects the manifestation of neoliberalism in HEIs (Leisyte & Kizniene, 2006), even though it has been deemed to be undesirable due to its potentially pernicious effect on academic freedom, casualization of academic labor, and focus on reputation and rankings (Thorsen & Lie, 2006). In Japan, it has been embedded in university reform practices since the mid-1990s (Hosoi et al., 2014). Congruent with the tenets of neoliberalism, the ideology of competition aiming to provide better products at lower cost was applied in any market, and higher education is no exception. The Incorporation of National Universities in 2004 marked the formal beginning of this process in Japan. Following the global trend toward neoliberalism, national universities have been provided with a more autonomous legal status, enabling them to independently decide detailed management mechanisms. Meanwhile, to better improve international competitiveness and increase the economic gains of national universities (Hatakenaka, 2004), the operational grant, which was the main revenue source for national universities from the Japanese government, was reduced by 1% every year (Oba, 2007). In this context, universities inescapably became an integral part of the international and national competition markets, thus, are keen to pursue university reputation and academic performance (Morrish, 2020). The individual

academics, therefore, have been reconfigured as ‘individual entrepreneurial actors’, who were allocated with increased competition, accountability, and performance goals (Davies & Bansel, 2007). This performance-based evaluation rather than demanding output makes it difficult for national universities to achieve the government’s expectations in the fiercely competitive academic market (Kim, 2021).

In addition, spurred by globalization, internationalization has also become an urgent issue in Japanese universities. Those internal and external changes have profoundly impacted Japan’s HE, serving as a strong incentive for international academics’ recruitment since they have been considered potential agents for university transformation (Altbach & Yudkevich, 2017). Thus, increasing political and institutional attention has been paid to international academics, such as the Top Global University Project in 2014. The target universities were required to hire more international academics to improve the diversity and global competitiveness of Japan.

Moreover, exclusionism is a term that has been widely used to an express exclusionary attitude or opinion aligned with the insistence on doing things the Japanese way (Morita, 2015), actively highlighting the distinctive differences in Japanese identity. Its manifestation in practice—*Nihonjinron* (theories of Japaneseness)—has become a mainstream ideology in Japanese society. Despite the ambiguity of the term *Nihonjinron*, three main concepts were generally adopted to capture its ideology: nationality, ethnicity, and culture (Sugimoto, 1999). Existing *Nihonjinron* literature has constantly assumed that *Nihonjin* (Japanese people) are those who have Japanese nationality and are ethnically Japanese. In addition, in *Nihonjinron* discourses, Japanese language is deemed to be an integral part of being *Nihonjin* and constructed as Japanese nationality and race (Liddicoat, 2007). This mentality, therefore, hinders the engagement and integration of non-Japanese people, even in the case of ethnically Japanese who were raised outside Japan. The insistence and admiration for Japanese uniqueness and distinctiveness are likely to lead to their distrust and suspicion of non-Japanese people (Vogt, 2017), resulting in inequality between Japanese and foreigners in Japan (Morita, 2017).

The rationales of neoliberalism and internationalization in Japan can be considered largely incompatible with the principles of exclusionism (Kawai, 2009). The discourse of Japanese exclusionism constructs the ideology of collectivism that develops a specific conceptualization of nationalist insistence on a Japanese identity, which is distinct and homogeneous. On the other hand, the beliefs of neoliberalism and internationalization stimulate the international mobility of culture and people to achieve interculturality and maximize benefits, decontextualizing relations with national and social borders. Therefore, how the national tendencies toward exclusionism are entangled with global neoliberalism and institutional internationalization, and to what extent such entanglement impacts the overall academic environment of Japan’s HEIs should be of concern.

### **The integration experiences of international academics**

Current literature on the integration experience of international academics is instructive in illuminating the trajectories of their settlement in host affiliations, including their work roles, challenges, and professional development. Despite the distinctive contribution of international academics to academic excellence, campus internationalization, and intercultural perspectives (Tebbett et al., 2021), their integration experience was captured as a bleak picture, which was hindered both professionally and socially. Existing evidence investigating international academics’ working experiences has constantly indicated that they were more commonly confined to disadvantaged employment, including low salaries, unstable work positions, and massive workloads. A further strand of previous studies is closely associated with the challenges of international academics imposed by cultural issues in their host affiliations since cultural disconnection may lead to misunderstanding and communication gaps (Wilkins & Neri, 2019). Likewise, as a reflection of culture, language plays a vital role in integration as the foreign accent of many international academics has been found to influence their interactions with local people (Hsieh, 2012). Those factors lead

to the perceptions among international academics that they are isolated, excluded, and experiencing 'otherness' (Wilkins & Neri, 2019).

Due to the fact that Western countries are depicted as academic centers and that they tend to have greater ease regarding immigration procedures, they have inevitably become attractive destinations for international academics' mobility (Altbach, 2007), leading to a great focus on international academics in Western countries and a lack of emphasis placed on international academics in non-Western destinations (Seggie & Çalıkoğlu, 2023). Despite limited literature, a similar challenging situation regarding their integration in work and social-cultural aspects was reported in those non-Western destinations (Seggie & Çalıkoğlu, 2023). Additionally, their integration in these countries was further depicted as closely related to the local milieus. For example, in the case of South Korea, international academics were expected to engage in teaching international students, international networking, and service activities (Shin & Gress, 2018), which was a gap in understanding between international academics and their affiliations (Gress & Shin, 2020). Likewise, with the increasing control by the central government, the universities in China are depicted as battlefields of ideology (Cai & Yan, 2019). In addition, the collectivistic nature caused by Confucian traditions in some East-Asian countries, such as China and Japan, is particularly difficult for foreigners to integrate into as there exists a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders (Froese, 2010). Moreover, the insistence on local language in university management, and hierarchical and bureaucratic organizational cultures in these countries have further stifled international academics' voices and integration (Gress & Shin, 2020; Huang et al., 2019).

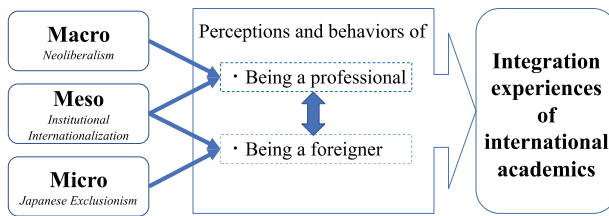
In Japan, previous studies concerning international academics' integration mainly focus on the challenges they encounter at their affiliations (Huang et al., 2019). For instance, they are expected to visualize the internationalization of Japanese universities, therefore, perceiving themselves as tokenized symbols of their affiliations (Brown, 2019; Chen, 2022a; Chen & Chen, 2023; Chen & Huang, 2022). Moreover, the perceived limited professional development and access to leadership positions were also highlighted (Brotherhood et al., 2020; Chen, 2022b; Huang, 2018). A recent study categorized those challenges into four main categories, namely work, social-cultural, interpersonal, and environmental dimensions (Chen, 2022b). Despite the palpable tensions in the integration of international academics and its increasing importance, except for Chen (2022a) examining international academics' attitudes toward integration, there is a dearth of research on the theme of international academics' practical behaviors combating their exclusion in their host affiliations.

In summary, among the few existing studies investigating international academics' integration in Japan, several issues remain. Firstly, the exploration of the intersection of neoliberalism and Japanese exclusionism in shaping international academics' experiences is lacking. Secondly, investigation into the reasons for the international academics' integration deficit in Japanese universities and its consequences is insufficient. Thirdly, the emphasis on practical strategies employed by international academics to overcome challenges and integrate into Japanese universities is inadequate. Finally, there remains a need for examination of the background of international academics on their integration experiences.

## Methodology

### *Conceptual framework*

The study examines the role of neoliberalism, institutional internationalization, and Japanese exclusionism in shaping the contextual academic environments of Japanese universities by exploring the integration experiences of international academics, specifically their perceptions of the academic environment, and their practical behaviors while integrating into Japanese universities. While neoliberalism operates at a macro level by shaping global economic and national political structures, internationalization operates at a meso level by influencing university policies and practices. In contrast, Japanese exclusionism particularly operates at a micro level of individual academic units by



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework of international academics' integration experiences at Japanese universities. Source: created by authors (2023).

affecting the interactions of individual international academics with their colleagues in a more direct and apparent way. The conceptual framework applied in the study is shown in Figure 1. A qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews was employed since it has been considered the best method when investigating complex and sensitive experiences (Ritchie et al., 2013). Three research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How do international academics perceive their integration at Japanese universities?
2. What strategies do international academics develop to navigate their professional and social lives at Japanese universities?
3. Do their integration experiences differ according to international academics' backgrounds?

### **Data collection and procedure**

Applying the concept from recent previous studies (Chen, 2022a, 2022b), international academics in the study were defined as full-time academics hired by Japanese universities who were not Japanese nationals and did not receive their primary or secondary education in Japan. The participants of the study were recruited by the following three methods: Firstly, inviting the respondents who agreed to be interviewed from Huang's (2018) national survey ( $n = 20$ ). Secondly, sending requests to the potential population in various Japanese universities ( $n = 15$ ). Thirdly, snowballing, requesting the participants to introduce eligible people ( $n = 5$ ). Institutional and individual attributes, such as nationality, gender, discipline, and locations of the universities were thoroughly considered before the interviews. The outline of the participants is shown in Table 1.

The main interview questions associated with the study were as follows: 'How is your integration at your affiliation?', and 'How do you integrate into your affiliation?'. To better understand their perceptions and experiences, relevant follow-up questions (e.g. why did you think/do in that way? What happened at that time/later?) were asked. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, only eight interviews were conducted face-to-face, while the rest were conducted through online platforms, such as Zoom, Skype, Wechat, and Google Meet, from July to November 2020. Depending on the participants, the interviews used English, Chinese, and Japanese as the main languages, and lasted between 40 min and 2 h. Except for two cases, the interviews were professionally recorded and transcribed for further analysis. To ensure the accuracy of the interview information, transcripts were reviewed and approved by some of the participants, including the two mentioned above which were not audio-recorded.

### **Data analysis**

This study employed Nvivo12 to manage the qualitative interview data based on a six-step thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which consists of (1) familiarization, (2) generating

**Table 1.** The outline of the participants.

No.	Area	Nationality	Discipline	Age	Position	Japanese experiences
A1	Chugoku/Shikoku	Iran	Engineering	30s	Associate Professor	Yes
A2	Chugoku/Shikoku	Bolivia	Economy	30s	Assistant Professor	No
A3	Chugoku/Shikoku	India	Physics	30s	Assistant Professor	Yes
A4	Chugoku/Shikoku	Vietnam	Engineering	30s	Assistant Professor	Yes
A5	Touhoku	Russia	Computer Science	30s	Associate Professor	No
A6	Chugoku/Shikoku	Korea	Education	30s	Assistant Professor	Yes
A7	Kyushu/Okinawa	Canada	Linguistics	60s	Associate Professor	No
A8	Kinki	China	Marketing	30s	Associate Professor	Yes
A9	Kyushu/Okinawa	UK	Education	50s	Associate Professor	No
A10	Chugoku/Shikoku	Iran	Environment	30s	Assistant Professor	Yes
A11	Kinki	China	Literature	30s	Lecturer	Yes
A12	Kantou	US	Literature	50s	Professor	Yes
A13	Kyushu/Okinawa	US	English	40s	Associate Professor	Yes
A14	Chugoku/Shikoku	UK	Linguistics	60s	Associate Professor	Yes
A15	Kantou	Australia	Political Science	40s	Professor	Yes
A16	Touhoku	UK	Education	50s	Associate Professor	Yes
A17	Kantou	Ireland	Computer Science	40s	Lecturer	Yes
A18	Kantou	German	History	50s	Professor	Yes
A19	Chugoku/Shikoku	Thailand	Agriculture	30s	Associate Professor	Yes
A20	Kinki	UK	Literature	50s	Professor	Yes
A21	Chubu	Ireland	Psychology	50s	Professor/Representative	Yes
A22	Kinki	US	English	40s	Associate Professor	Yes
A23	Kinki	New Zealand	Biogeography	60s	Professor	Yes
A24	Chubu	US	Linguistics	60s	Associate Professor	Yes
A25	Kyushu/Okinawa	US	Linguistics	50s	Lecturer	Yes
A26	Kantou	UK	Linguistics	50s	Professor	Yes
A27	Chugoku/Shikoku	US	Psychology	30s	Assistant Professor	Yes
A28	Chubu	China	Film Studies	40s	Associate Professor	Yes
A29	Hokkaido	China	Engineering	30s	Assistant Professor	Yes
A30	Chugoku/Shikoku	US	Linguistics	60s	Professor	Yes
A31	Hokkaido	German	Chemistry	50s	Professor/Dean	Yes
A32	Kantou	China	Anthropology	30s	Assistant Professor	Yes
A33	Hokkaido	UK	Education	50s	Associate Professor	Yes
A34	Hokkaido	Brazil	English	30s	Lecturer	Yes
A35	Kinki	Mexico	Chemistry	30s	Lecturer	Yes
A36	Hokkaido	Sri Lanka	Chemistry	40s	Associate Professor	Yes
A37	Kantou	UK + Poland	Economy	30s	Assistant Professor	No
A38	Kyushu/Okinawa	US	Music	50s	Lecturer	Yes
A39	Touhoku	Brazil	Engineering	40s	Associate Professor	Yes
A40	Chugoku/Shikoku	Korea	Engineering	40s	Associate Professor	Yes

Note: A means academic.

Japanese experiences refer to previous Japanese experiences of study or/and conducting research before they were hired at their current affiliations.

Source: Based on the first author's interviews in 2020.

codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing codes, and (5) defining themes, (6) producing a report. It was used as a guide to analyzing the interview data since it can effectively contribute to a summary of key features and the provision of a 'thick description' of the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes were extracted from the interview data based on previous studies and the structure of this study.

## Interview results

Drawing on the narratives of the participants in the study, this section presents the main findings concerning their perceptions and practical behaviors while integrating into Japan under the entangled forces from the three main levels. Despite some progress acknowledged by the participants, interview data reveals numerous challenges they have encountered in various aspects caused by the complex contextual academic environment in Japan, resulting in their perceptual inequality and disadvantages. The main themes were analyzed below through an inductive process.



## 1. Integration experiences in a neoliberal context

### Perceptions: stranded in a competitive academic environment

When asked about their integration at Japanese universities, the participants shared concrete examples to illustrate their perceptions. The first common theme stressed is in relation to the ambiguity in the realization of their professional ambitions and the loss of management of their professional ambition and the control of their affiliations over management rights, which is in alignment with neoliberal principles. For example, many participants highlighted their absence in the decision-making processes at their affiliations, and thus, the new decisions were generally conveyed to them as a 'fait accompli' without their engagement (Brown, 2019).

I was not given sufficient information to follow the procedure of the administration of our department. When I suggested, even in written form, it's usually ignored. (A18)

One of the big frustrations is often, I am excluded from decision-making regarding English education, so I might be in a meeting, and they asked me to leave. (A26)

In addition, many participants shared their concerns regarding their limited opportunities for upper-level positions at Japanese universities. It appears that this issue was particularly pertinent to those specializing in the Humanities. On the one hand, many participants in the Humanities were required to engage mainly in language-teaching activities with a heavy workload, irrespective of their specialties. However, performance-based evaluation systems embraced by Japan's HEIs lead to disadvantages of those international academics when it comes to promotions. Additionally, leadership positions at Japanese universities are often filled using a system of short-term rotations. However, compared with other open and competitive fields, such as the Natural Sciences (Yonezawa et al., 2014), often those positions in the Humanities were occupied by Japanese academics, and international academics were excluded. Consequently, the number of international academics occupying senior positions is much less than Japanese academics (Huang, 2018).

They rotate some positions, for example, the head of the department, and the leader of educational affairs. And these positions, usually foreign professors don't take ... they have always been Japanese ... usually the *Eigo-kyoushi* (English Teachers) have to teach many more classes ... this special contract that mostly foreigners get ... so without papers, they feel like an outsider. (A34)

In a related vein, given the acknowledged importance of grants in scientific performance and career advancement in the neoliberal academic context, many participants voiced their conjured concern that international academics seem less likely to receive grants compared with their Japanese colleagues. This constraint stems largely from the fact that both connections and proficiency in Japanese language contribute to the establishment of collaboration with Japanese industry. This is hard for international academics, especially those without previous experience in Japan, to acquire such connections.

There are lots of funding organizations in Japan, (but) many of them don't even accept English applications ... In Japan, if you want to get that data, you need to have really strong connections. It's not so easy for foreigners especially. (A1)

### Behaviors: overperforming to prove oneself and international academics in general

In order to prevent being belittled by their colleagues professionally, many participants tend to overperform at their affiliations, displaying as working diligently, to prove that they can be as capable as their Japanese colleagues, and thus obtain more professional opportunities.

I did my best, I performed my best there, especially regarding teaching and research to prove that I can do as good as them (Japanese academics) so that they will give me more opportunities. (A39)

In addition, being a foreigner in Japan, more than self-proving, some participants commented that they were the representatives of all foreigners. Thus, they were more stringent in their words and

behaviors to prove that they, foreigners, can perform as well as or even better than Japanese academics so that being a foreigner would not be a reason for their exclusion.

I personally have this sense that I will do it as well as Japanese ... because I'm a foreigner if I did something wrong or not enough, all the foreigners will be pointed out. (A11)

Because it all falls back or not onto me myself as a person, but also onto other foreigners. So, if I behave badly, people will think, ok, all foreigners behave badly. So, at some places, I need to be extra careful. (A31)

The narratives above explicitly reveal the palpable tension created by the principles of neoliberalism. Participants painted a picture of a competitive academic environment and a widespread lack of professional opportunities and commitment encountered by international academics. Despite the performance-based evaluation system, the data analysis surprisingly suggests a division of professional opportunities, including absence in decision-making, leadership positions, and grants allocation based on nationality. This is particularly challenging for those in the Humanities and those without previous experience in Japan. In this context, participants embraced an overperforming approach to secure career possibilities and prove that international academics deserve their positions based on their expertise.

## 2. Integration experiences in an internationalization era

### **Perceptions: disillusioned with internationalization**

Regarding internationalization, despite the rapid expansion of international academics and students attracted to Japanese universities, it seems that their presence was more likely to be deemed as the sole indicator or symbol for internationalization, which remains superficial. The fundamental reforms that were expected have not yet been catalyzed, and this seems to be particularly resisted by the top-ranking and senior Japanese professors, who are opposed to or skeptical of such reforms (Brotherhood et al., 2020).

I realized that H University wants to look like an international university, but they don't really want to change. They just want to look like they are changing ... They just want to show that they are international. (A2)

Internationalization here is a top-down process ... So hiring foreign teachers doesn't mean more perspectives, which only means they have some hard indicators to fulfill, so you may feel tricked of being hired. (A28)

In this traditional institutional context, international academics were often excluded and relegated to a 'second-order' status at Japanese universities. Their foreignness, especially those with foreign appearances, was mainly used to showcase the internationalization of Japanese universities to external audiences, echoing Brown (2019).

They have very fancy names in the titles, like super global. But actually, they're not international at all ... they're just interested in your face ... we're just informed about what is going to happen. (A39)

### **Behaviors: developing internal mission and engaging in Japanese universities**

Many participants developed an internal mission approach in response to such host environments, which is closely associated with their self-management (Lamont et al., 2016). Although some felt like tokenized symbols, they emphasized that their distinctive roles at Japanese universities were to create a diverse environment and promote the multicultural competency of students, in line with the goal of internationalization. Therefore, the heterogeneities of international academics should be preserved. These internal mission statements have been developed to maintain a sense of self-worth in response to external pressures.

If I changed to Japanese ... I don't think it makes much sense for them to hire me as a foreign teacher ... so whatever happened, I won't change. I think this is the best way to achieve my value. (A11)

As foreign researchers ... we have our own specific function ... So, it is ok to be different ... the students who interact with me will get some insights they could not get from a Japanese professor because I'm different. (A31)

In contrast, some participants replied with an emphatic affirmative of actively engaging in Japanese universities by describing their detailed plans or efforts to learn the Japanese language and culture, which is consistent with the ideas of internationalization.

I am trying to get better at my Japanese ... I have a plan for myself: 2 years to get N1 (highest level of Japanese-Language Proficiency Test). (A19)

So, I think living in an international era, we should have an international posture and desire to integrate into Japanese culture as much as we can ... having an international attitude and desire is really important ... otherwise, why are you here? (A25)

A comprehensive approach to internationalization, as noted by some participants, is closely linked to the integration of international perspectives. However, the tension created by the fact that leadership positions were typically filled by Japanese academics and that the rhetoric and reality of Japanese universities remain hierarchical exacerbates international academics' perception that they lack opportunities to contribute to university system reforms and management in general. This is particularly true for those with foreign appearances, who are often associated with the propaganda value of their institutions in terms of internationalization. As a result, the hierarchical and entrenched cultural practices in Japanese universities have led to many participants becoming disillusioned with the advancement of internationalization, and they have implemented various strategies to address these issues.

### 3. Integration experiences in an exclusionary milieu

#### **Perceptions: perceived insistence on Japanese distinctiveness**

The principle of Japanese exclusionism values the distinctiveness of Japanese culture and identity, which has resulted in homogeneity being a prominent feature of Japanese universities. Maintaining organizational identity and allegiance is highly valued (Horta et al., 2011), reflected in recruitment practices that prioritize in-house students and those with connections. As foreigners in Japan, international academics, especially those without prior experience in Japan, are more aware of this situation and their lack of Japanese connections, which further exacerbates their exclusion from the academic community.

In many cases, they make fake open calls ... they ask that person to apply. So, the person applies, like 40 or 50 other poor people also apply. They don't even look at their applications ... It's not fair that they do it, especially for foreigners. (A1)

In addition, many participants reported that despite being hired, they were unable to fully understand the existing organizational structures in the same way as their Japanese colleagues due to the so-called *we-ness* connections (Horta et al., 2011). As outsiders, they often found it challenging to develop collaborative relationships with their Japanese colleagues, as found by Richardson and Zikic (2007).

I expected to have more research collaboration with my colleagues, but I still do my research in collaborating with my previous networks ... I have already proposed to them two times, and I could see that they were not eager to have such collaborations with foreign faculty. (A10)

Moreover, due to the insistence on Japanese language, many international academics felt difficulty in engaging in their affiliations. This is especially true for those who were not from countries that use Chinese characters, such as American and British academics. They were more keenly aware of this issue, as the cultural similarity between their home countries and Japan is comparatively less, and they have rarely obtained their educational degrees in Japan (Huang, 2018). Thus, despite the adoption of bilingual policies in some universities, a significant tension caused by the Japanese language is alluded to constantly.

It's difficult for me to integrate because they operate in Japanese ... I'm not fluent in Japanese, it's difficult for me to see what is really going on. (A23)

What always surprises me is that these are meetings where we're talking about English teaching. But, the majority of the time that we spend in these meetings is all in Japanese ... that's something that I feel is a burden on me. (A24)

### **Behaviors: learning Japanese knowledge and seeking support from both work and social networks**

To combat the difficulties stemming from such an exclusionary context, some participants emphasized the importance of Japanese knowledge, because a better possession of such knowledge can increase the homogeneity with Japanese locals on the one hand, and on the other hand, in the process of cultural acquisition, it is possible to get to know more local people. Therefore, some participants were actively engaging with Japanese people and society to improve their integration.

I studied Japanese almost all of the time ... The second thing is participating in social activities ... We need to learn not only the language but also their ideas and culture. (A8)

Meanwhile, some participants highlighted the significance of support from both work and social networks. They found that practical advice and emotional support from their supervisors, colleagues, friends, and family members helped them deal with the practical constraints and mental stress associated with the exclusionary environment. This support empowered them with greater encouragement to face further integration challenges.

I have friends here and they are supporting me. (A3)

There is no such support in my department. So, to overcome these stressful things, I usually try to get help from my international friends, who can speak Japanese. (A11)

My wife is Japanese. So, usually, she helps me if I have a particular problem that I need to discuss with the office ... I just don't want to keep relying on them (university staff) too much. (A12)

Based on the data analysis, it appears that international academics in Japanese universities face significant challenges due to the principle of Japanese exclusionism, especially for those who don't have previous experiences in Japan and those who were not from countries that use Chinese characters. These challenges range from practical issues such as job hunting and daily life to broader issues such as organizational engagement and integration. Despite these challenges, participants in the study adopted two main approaches to manage their situation. The first approach was to actively learn Japanese knowledge, including language and culture to build relationships with Japanese people and seek out opportunities for collaboration and professional development. The second approach was to create support networks and seek out support from friends, family members, and other personal networks to help them navigate the challenges they faced. Overall, the data suggests that many international academics in Japanese universities were self-reliant, and adopt individualist strategies to manage their situation, seeking out solutions and assistance on their own rather than relying on official support systems.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Drawing on the integration experiences of the participants, data analysis indicates that international academics, especially those in the Humanities, those without previous experience in Japan, those who possess propaganda value due to their international appearance, and those who are not from countries that use Chinese characters, perceived various subtle and overt constraints while integrating into Japanese universities. They tend to seek private solutions to navigate their professional and social lives at Japanese universities. The research findings are indicative of the complex academic environment of Japanese HEIs, which is competitive, exclusionary, and pragmatic. The key findings that emerged from the study can be discussed as follows.

Firstly, regarding the perceptions of international academics, the study reveals that the principles of neoliberalism and Japanese exclusionism lead to a perceptual competitive and exclusionary academic environment for international academics. The implementation of neoliberal theory, such as the Incorporation of National Universities in 2004, has led to Japanese universities' increasing focus on efficiency. It is notable that this new regime has caused numerous challenges to academic equality and shared governance at Japan's HEIs (Hosoi et al., 2014). Many HEIs attempt to hire those who are not equally expertized, such as part-timers and adjunct teachers, with the aim of efficiency gains in the management process (Bousquet and Nelson, 2008), which is in tandem with what was identified in this study. Despite an increasing population of international academics, many of them were confined to restricted work roles and expectations, regardless of their specialties (Chen, 2022a), in particular language-related teaching. This explains why international academics in the Humanities were more likely to perceive an integration deficit at Japanese universities, reinforcing Chen's (2022b) findings. Despite a desire to develop their scholarly reputations, excessive teaching loads and performance-based assessments leave them juggling the minimum requirements for promotion. Thus, a new division of workload and power imbalances has been created. This finding is in contrast to Shore (2008), suggesting neoliberalism can break the traditional hierarchical system and create shortcuts to promotion based on performance.

In addition, given the acknowledgment that the predominant upper echelons of Japanese universities are primarily Japanese academics, the principles of Japanese exclusionism, serving as a boundary schism, make the professional promotion of international academics precarious. The principles of neoliberalism and Japanese exclusionism contribute in this way to inequality, peripheral roles, and a low proportion of international academics in senior positions at Japanese universities (Horta & Yonezawa, 2013; Huang, 2018), which excludes them from institutional management structures and makes their functions more limited. Thus, ultimately, their integration into Japanese universities has been discouraged. This finding has challenged Kunz's (2016) assumption, claiming that the integration of skilled immigrants in the neoliberal era is a smooth process without much influence from local contexts. Despite being highly skilled immigrants who are highly desired by Japanese HEIs, the empirical evidence offered by international academics in this study underscores the great influences of local customs and values embedded in their lives, implying the significance of institutional endeavors from host institutions.

Meanwhile, Japanese universities have attempted to maximize their status through the employment of international academics as they are thought to play significant roles in international networking, global collaboration, and internationalization (Horta & Yonezawa, 2013; Huang, 2018). The institutional practices, however, suggest that the recruitment of international academics through the strategies of promoting internationalization in a neoliberal-framed context can be largely depicted as a critical pursuit of predominant institutional benefits, such as higher international ranks, world-class status, and global competitiveness, echoing existing literature (Bamberger et al., 2019; Brotherhood et al., 2020). This is why many participants in the study emphasized the value of international appearances as a means of promoting the institutions they are associated with through propaganda. Additionally, instead of the transition from progressive values of multiculturalism and diversity, following the theory of 'without relations of differences, no representation could occur' (Hall, 1996), the increasing population of international academics hired in the pursuit of internationalization may strengthen Japanese universities' emphasis on organizational identities and frameworks, and construct international academics as 'others', which creates clear barriers for them as for minority outsiders. Thus, international academics from countries that use Chinese characters and have previous experience in Japan tend to integrate better into Japanese universities. This largely mirrors recent findings presented in Brotherhood et al. (2020) and Chen (2022b). The promotion of internationalization is, therefore, linked to practices of both neoliberalism and exclusionism in Japan. Such institutional practices contribute to international academics' sense of exclusion as discussed previously, which, in a vicious cycle, may result in internationalization without reformative progress. This is probably why, despite the rapid expansion in the number of international academics

in Japan, empirical evidence shows the absence of qualitative development in practice (Brotherhood et al., 2020).

Moreover, regarding their practical behaviors in integrating into Japanese universities, our analysis indicates that the critical framing of neoliberalism may conspire with Japanese exclusionism to encourage the individualistic solutions of international academics for navigating their professional and social lives. In other words, those who felt the inability to integrate into Japanese universities tend to employ individualistic strategies to overcome the constraints encountered. Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors probably can be applied in explaining their adoption of such integration strategies at Japanese universities. Intrinsically, embedded in the neoliberal theory, individual accountability has been highly emphasized in market models. What the neoliberal regime stresses is not 'social problems', but 'only individual challenges' (Saunders, 2010). Therefore, instead of seeking organizational assistance, international academics tend to take responsibility for their own issues through individualistic strategies. Extrinsically, the internal approaches adopted by international academics appear to reflect the effects of institutional climate on the quality of their integration experiences. The analysis suggests a lack of racial equality at Japanese universities, which may be considered largely caused by Japanese exclusionism. Sufficient support from host institutions is considered essential to the integration of international academics (Bamberger et al., 2019; Hsieh & Nguyen, 2020), however, the entrenched cultural and institutional practices at Japanese universities make institutional support less likely to occur (Brown, 2019). Consequently, the rationales of both neoliberalism and Japanese exclusionism have resulted in the employment of individualistic strategies by international academics.

Regarding the implications, theoretically, the empirical evidence in this study provides insights that can support future research on the challenges and contributions of international academics in non-English-speaking countries that share a similar academic context with Japan, e.g. China and South Korea, facing the impacts of neoliberalism, aiming for diversity and excellence in HE, and are influenced by local cultural milieus. The study may also contribute to other countries, shaped by complex interplays of global influences, national priorities, and contextual environments. Practically, recognizing the significance of integration as a two-way process, this study advocates for the creation of an inclusive academic environment in Japan, which should be characterized by a lack of interior frontiers, fostering a fairer approach to the internationalization process. In such a context, international academics should also actively engage as agents of transformation and serve as leaders in driving internationalization efforts within their respective Japanese HEIs.

The following two limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. Firstly, several abstract key terms were used, such as neoliberalism, exclusionism, and integration, which, despite thorough explanations provided, are likely to have been understood by the participants in different ways depending on their backgrounds. Secondly, as the research focus of this study is placed on international academics, the perspectives of Japanese academics have been omitted from the discussion. Further studies into the considerations of Japanese academics should be conducted.

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