

The Influence of Overseas Study Experience on Teachers' Beliefs in Chinese Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

This study uses a thematic analysis method to examine the influence of overseas study experience on the beliefs of college teachers. The following four themes were extracted from the analysis: Overseas study can positively influence individual views of teaching and learning, overseas study can promote the sustainable development of individual scientific research, overseas study has little effect on the interpersonal distance between teachers and students, and overseas study enables individuals to more comprehensively and objectively recognize similarities and differences in the study characteristics of Chinese and foreign college students. The impact of overseas study experience on individual views of teaching practices and scientific research involves a wider range of subfields. The results show that the experience of overseas study will have a certain short-term adverse impact on the scientific research of returning teachers. This finding was either not covered or ignored by previous related studies and deserves further research attention.

Keywords

Overseas Study Experience, Teachers' Beliefs, Teaching Concept, Scientific Research Development, Thematic Analysis

1. Introduction

With the in-depth study of educational issues, teaching research has gradually shifted its focus from explicit teacher behavior to implicit teacher cognition. As a vital dimension of teacher cognition, teacher beliefs have become an important theme in teacher education and development research (Xiong, 2019). With the continuous advancement of basic education curriculum reform, teachers' educa-

tional beliefs have gradually become an emerging field in teacher research (Xu, 2020). The literature provides various definitions of teachers' beliefs. For example, Borg (2003) posited that teachers' beliefs are teachers' thoughts and knowledge on, and understanding of, teaching, students, learning, the role of teachers themselves and scientific research concepts. Some scholars believe that teachers' beliefs are a complex system with openness. Teachers summarize their own teaching experience, guide educational practice, influence teaching reform, and reflect teachers' beliefs through teacher behavior (Fullan, 2016). In the present study, teachers' beliefs include knowledge view, learning view, teaching view, teacher-student view, and research view. Teachers' beliefs provide strong support for teaching behavior and an important guarantee for teaching effectiveness and have a central role in promoting educational reform and teachers' professional development (Ham & Dekkers, 2019; Kramer & Engeström, 2019). Most scholars argue that teachers' beliefs are important and share a complex relationship with individual practices and experiences (Borg, 2017).

Teachers' beliefs are part of teachers' cognition, and the construction and remodeling of teachers' beliefs are inseparable from teachers' psychological and cognitive activities. Therefore, teachers' beliefs are bound to be affected by individual factors related to teachers themselves (Gao & Li, 2018). However, teachers' cognitive activities are inseparable from their teaching environment. Teachers' beliefs are formed and developed through the constant interaction between teachers' cognition and the teaching environment; therefore, teachers' beliefs are also affected by external environmental factors (Gao & Li, 2018). Existing studies have found that individual factors affecting teachers' beliefs mainly include gender, age, professional title, personality characteristics, experiences as learners, subject structure and background, training experience, and teaching experience. External environmental factors mainly include campus culture, educational policies, school resources, teaching objectives and objects, student needs, teacher job satisfaction, colleague relationships, and teacher evaluation systems (Borg, 2006; Richard, 1998). Many scholars believe that the formation of teachers' beliefs is influenced by social customs, life experiences, and previous educational experiences (Borg, 2004; Pajares, 1992).

Previous research has mainly focused on the impact of individual experiences on teachers' beliefs, role beliefs, and professional development and professionalism. For example, an interview-based qualitative study by Chen and Wu (2016) found that the construction of teachers' beliefs through individual experiences is the core element that affects the beliefs of teachers at teaching universities, and individual learning experiences have a directional effect on teachers' beliefs. In their research, teachers' individual learning experience referred to teachers' educational experiences at the primary, secondary, and university levels before entering the profession. Further, findings from a qualitative study suggested that teachers' individual cultural backgrounds, personal experiences, and contextual factors drive changes in their beliefs about their role, including how they understand their role as facilitators, their teaching knowledge, and the way they build

relationships with students (Wang & Du, 2016). Two other interview studies found that the experience of overseas study can have a positive impact on college teachers' professional development, including their teaching attitude, teaching content, teaching method, academic style, scientific research attitude, and academic achievement (Wang, 2014). Specifically, the motivation of visiting students, choice of visiting schools and tutors, and different experiences with foreign classroom teaching and academic environments have a positive impact on the personal, teaching, and academic development of teachers after returning to China (Gong & Xu, 2018). In sum, previous research (not in regard to overseas study experience) suggests that individual learning experiences are an essential factor affecting college teachers' beliefs and behaviors. Previous studies also suggest that having overseas study experience positively impacts one's career and professional development.

However, individual learning experiences vary, and overseas study is one of the specific learning experiences which has yet to be focused on by previous research relating it to teachers' beliefs. According to the ecological systems theory model (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), individuals' (in this case teachers') beliefs are influenced by micro-, meso-, macro-, and appearance-systems. The overseas study experience considered in this study is related to individual background factors at the microsystem level. Thus, one can reasonably infer that the experience of overseas study affects individual teachers' beliefs. However, a crucial question that remains unknown is how the experience of overseas study affects individual teachers' beliefs. Thus, the present study aims to explore this question. Compared with the content, the formation and transformation process of teachers' beliefs is a more urgent and meaningful topic to examine, as several studies have obtained fruitful results on the former, while research on the latter is scarce. Only by dynamically exploring the factors influencing teachers' beliefs (including overseas study experience) from the "process" perspective can the essence of "teachers' beliefs" be fundamentally grasped. Further, a qualitative thematic analysis method would be quite suitable for this type of exploratory research.

The reasons for adopting qualitative over quantitative research include the exploratory nature of qualitative methods. Most research on the influencing factors of teachers' beliefs has been quantitative, with little qualitative research conducted (Chen & Wu, 2016; Wang & Du, 2016). Further, qualitative research is suitable for exploring relatively unknown topics (Wang & Huang, 2021), and little psychological research has been conducted on this topic; thus, it is a suitable method for this study. Another reason is the flexibility of qualitative methods. Through in-depth interviews, researchers can directly interact with research participants and explore their thoughts and feelings in depth by asking and following up on questions. Thematic analysis is a flexible and open approach to qualitative data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013) in which researchers are neither restricted to a rigid theory-based model nor confined by the mechanical coding of content analysis, and can decide the path of analysis

according to the data's characteristics, making it a suitable method for exploratory psychological studies.

In summary, little is currently known regarding the influence of overseas study experience on teachers' beliefs, which lacks a corresponding research basis. However, qualitative methods, especially thematic analysis methods, can expand and deeply explore this research theme. The data collected in this study are also suitable for thematic analysis.

Goal of the study

The goal was to explore, interpret, and describe the role overseas study experience play in the university teachers' beliefs. The following research questions guided this study:

- What are the contents of university teachers' beliefs in China?
- What overseas study experience play a role in the teachers' beliefs of university teachers in a Chinese context?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

After respondents were selected using purposive sampling, they were asked to participate in one-on-one, semi-structured, in-depth interviews. A purposive sample is the one whose characteristics are defined for a purpose that is relevant to the study (Andrade, 2021). The lead author contacts the participants individually. The inclusion criteria for the respondents were no previous participation in similar or identical research, willingness to participate in this study, and signed written informed consent. When selecting interviewees, the author attempted to balance factors such as participant gender, age, subject background, professional title, and experience. A total of 15 teachers participated in this study, and their basic information is shown in **Table 1**.

2.2. Procedure

The corresponding author of this article interviewed respondents using a self-developed interview outline. The interviews were conducted in Chinese language through internet and audio recorded. Data collection was stopped after reaching theoretical saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Based on our definition of "teacher beliefs" and relevant literature, the following 5 interview questions are proposed: 1) "how has the experience of overseas study affected your view of knowledge," 2) "how has your overseas study experience influenced your outlook on learning," 3) "how has your overseas study experience influenced your teaching outlook," 4) "how has the experience of overseas study affected your views on teachers and students," and 5) "how has your overseas study experience influence your research outlook." The duration of the interviews ranged between 55 - 150 minutes, with an average of 118 minutes. The audio records were transcribe in Chinese by software first, and then checked by the corresponding author. The transcript amounts to 260,000 words in total.

Table 1. Basic information of respondents.

Serial number	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Highest degree	Highest degree specialized	Countries (regions) where you overseas study
1	CJJ	Female	31 - 40	PhD	Chemical	United States
2	CZY	Male	31 - 40	Master's	MBA; Economics	England/United States
3	MJQ	Female	31 - 40	PhD	Pedagogy	Australia
4	SHY	Female	41 - 50	PhD	Metallic Material	Japan
5	ZY	Female	31 - 40	PhD	Japanese Language and Literature	Japan
6	BZK	Male	41 - 50	PhD	Materials Science Engineering	U.S.
7	CJ	Female	41 - 50	PhD	Pedagogy	Finland
8	CY	Female	41 - 50	PhD	Agronomy	Canada, United States
9	LH	Male	31 - 40	PhD	Psychology	United States
10	LHF	Female	51 - 60	PhD	Pedagogy	Japan
11	LJX	Male	51 - 60	PhD	Biology	Australia
12	MJP	Female	31 - 40	PhD	Management	New Zealand
13	MY	Female	41 - 50	PhD	Pedagogy	Australia
14	WF	Female	51 - 60	PhD	Pedagogy	Finland
15	ZBJ	Male	41 - 50	PhD	Agronomy	Hong Kong

2.3. Data Analysis

To extract themes, the responses were subjected to a thematic analysis involving six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017): familiarization with the material, generating initial codes, finding common themes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and producing reports. In thematic analysis, researchers actively search for significant or interesting meanings and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, in this study, the authors adopted a three-tiered approach to enhance the analysis process (Fossey et al., 2002). First, the first and second authors shared coding sessions to revise the initial codes, generate themes, and resolve disagreements through consensus. Then, the first author shared the initial findings with the participants to verify the plausibility of the interpretations of their narratives. Second, the first and second authors worked together to create the complete codes (Table 2) and themes. Third, all authors systematically identified and validated the final main themes and subthemes. To make certain that we presented the most plausible understanding of the participants' teachers' beliefs, we also asked their opinions regarding the generated themes and integrated their feedback when refining and finalizing this manuscript. Once the themes were generated, the interview text was read again to consolidate the results and identify exceptions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first and second authors had some prior experience in thematic analysis.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

The Research and Ethics Committee of Lingnan Normal University approved

Table 2. The coding tree.

Theme	Subtopic	Codes and Examples
Overseas study experience will positively affect individual teaching views.	<p>The experience of overseas study will positively affect individual beliefs in education and teaching.</p> <p>The experience of overseas study makes teachers tend to adopt more scientific and efficient teaching methods.</p> <p>The experience of overseas study helps teachers to expand the content of classroom teaching.</p> <p>The experience of overseas study makes teaching styles teachers more suitable to students' needs.</p>	<p>Education and teaching beliefs: some [foreign] concepts that can really be integrated into our current teaching, such as the concept of cultivating people and the development space of students (15, ZBJ); after the exchange, [I think that] teaching methods and interactive methods must be localized (11, LJX).</p> <p>Teaching method: [I use] online and offline teaching, that is, teaching combined with the model platform. It must be that the course of ××× during the visiting period opened a window for me (7, CJ); I will have some open discussions, and think, because more teachers abroad also want students to say instead of them [teachers] (13, MY).</p> <p>Teaching content: From the teaching content, the most obvious thing is that when I talked about a certain chapter before, I didn't dare to expand too much, because it was difficult to control. After studying in Hong Kong, I have become very proficient in this content, and I will talk about this place in more depth (15, ZBJ).</p> <p>Teaching style: I was very strict with students before going abroad. After returning, it mainly depends on the students' [willingness]; if they want to learn more, I will talk to them more (14, WF).</p>
	<p>The experience of overseas study makes individuals hold a more rigorous, serious, and scientific research attitude.</p> <p>The research motivation and research methods of domestic and foreign university teachers are obviously different.</p> <p>The experience of overseas study enables individuals to have a relatively solid foundation for preliminary research, which effectively promotes the sustainable development of their scientific research.</p> <p>The experience of overseas study has a certain adverse impact on the scientific research of returning teachers in the short term.</p>	<p>Research attitude: There is one thing when I come back from Japan. I think it is necessary to be very rigorous in doing things, because the Japanese style is rigorous (4, SHY); some people will do anything to achieve a certain goal at a certain stage, whether in China or in other countries, [which is] not allowed; this is a question of integrity. As for the basic issue of integrity, [foreign countries] are indeed better than ours in China; we must learn and achieve a high degree of integrity (12, MJP).</p> <p>Research motivation: I especially respected people like our supervisor in Japan at the time. He was already very old, but he continued to teach students and conduct research. He had no plans. Like our research, which is more utilitarian, it is for the purpose of publishing papers and evaluating professional titles to engage in scientific research (5, ZY).</p> <p>Research method: Cooperation among multiple centers in China is rare, but very common abroad (9, LH).</p> <p>Scientific research accumulation: I have won five National Natural Science Foundation of China grants, three of which are for my later work on fern research, and two of which were made by the laboratory I visited for the first time (8, CY); foreign teachers are really lifelong researchers. I just said Gilbert Strang (the father of MIT linear algebra), who can do decades of research on linear algebra. Linear algebra is such a boring thing. After studying this for a lifetime, he has achieved the top of the industry (2, CZY).</p> <p>Short-term adverse effects: I am not very good at writing Chinese [declaration forms], and I am not familiar with domestic customs and rules. Before, when I was a postdoctoral researcher in the United States, I also wrote a lot of declaration forms in English. They just said something and wrote whatever they wanted, but the Chinese [declaration form] I wrote, experts said that I couldn't write it like this, and the format of the writing did not conform to Chinese at all (1, CJJ).</p>

Continued

<p>Overseas study experience has little effect on individual teacher-student views.</p>	<p>Compared with foreign countries, the roles of teachers and students in China are more complex and diverse. The experience of overseas study has little effect on the interpersonal distance between teachers and students. The experience of overseas study has a certain influence on the content and method of communication between teachers and students.</p>	<p>Roles of teachers and students: I think [foreign countries] have one point that Chinese education can learned: that is, no matter how poor the students' ability is, whether they have a foundation or not, the teachers really help them step-by-step in the process of building their knowledge (13, MY). In the relationship between teachers and students in China, teachers are sometimes like a nanny, sometimes like a consultant, and sometimes like a strict teacher (2, CZY). Interpersonal distance: I think [the teacher-student relationship should] be relaxed. [After going abroad], I don't think the teacher-student relationship has changed much, because I have always adhered to this principle. Some things that I don't agree with abroad, I am not influenced by (13, MY); I have a relatively equal relationship with my students, and there is not much distance. The relationship between me and the students itself is more similar to that of foreign countries, so nothing has changed for me (12, MJP). Communication content: I communicate with students more about life ideals. I will tell students a lot, such as some of my overseas study experiences, or students tell me what they think (2, CZY). Communication method: I prefer face-to-face communication because face-to-face communication is more approachable. My overseas study experience [provides me with] a deep understanding of this (2, CZY).</p>
<p>The experience of overseas study enables individuals to more comprehensively and objectively recognize the similarities and differences in the study characteristics of Chinese and foreign college students.</p>	<p>In comparison, foreign college students have a clearer learning purpose and stronger learning motivation. Foreign college students are particularly fond of exploring, but domestic college students are accustomed to obtaining knowledge directly. The learning abilities of Chinese and foreign college students have their own areas of advantage.</p>	<p>Learning purpose: [Foreign college students] choose their university majors based on their own interests, but many of the domestic students' parents want them to major in [a] major (1, CJJ). Learning motivation: Foreign college students are very motivated to learn, while domestic college students are not active enough to study (13, MY). Learning method: Exploration is definitely one of the biggest gaps between domestic and foreign students. Foreign students are particularly fond of exploring and researching since childhood, but domestic students are accustomed to obtaining knowledge directly (2, CZY). Learning ability: Our [Chinese] students are not as good as foreign college students in their comprehensive application ability, ability to apply knowledge in various disciplines, and problem-solving ability. [However,] our students may be stronger in exam ability and solving some static problems (14, WF).</p>

the study. Participants provided written consent to take part in the study, and subsequent publication of anonymous responses and identifiable information. Additionally, we assured the participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without giving any reason. We explained the study's purpose and procedures to the participants and informed them that the data would be kept anonymous and confidential.

3. Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis yielded four key themes as well as potential subthemes that helped identify the influence of experience overseas study on teachers' be-

liefs. These themes are discussed below.

3.1. Overseas Study Can Positively Influence Individual Views of Teaching and Learning

Overseas study can positively influence individual beliefs on education and teaching

The experience of overseas study can greatly influence individual beliefs regarding education and teaching. Of the 15 respondents, 12 mentioned that their experience overseas study influenced their beliefs about education and teaching. For example, one teacher stated:

Some foreign concepts can really be integrated into our current teaching, such as the concept of cultivating people and the space for student development, after returning to China. (ZB)

Qualitative studies on Chinese undergraduate students in Hong Kong and English teachers at Japanese universities have found that the experience of overseas study can indeed reshape individuals' educational and teaching beliefs (Mayumi & Hüttner, 2020; Tam, 2016). Some respondents indicated that their teaching beliefs had changed substantially. One teacher stated:

After the exchange, [I stated to think that] teaching methods and interaction methods must be localized. (LJX)

LJX reported using the success of the Chinese revolution as an example to explain how to better absorb and utilize some advanced concepts from abroad.

Why did the Chinese revolution succeed? The countryside encircled the cities and found a unique path. This is suitable for China's national conditions. Don't put yourself in a high position. What I have learned is not a copy of Western things. That's how I understand it. Localization is internationalization, and things like the vetiver we studied are not found in all parts of the world. (LJX)

Another teacher described the biggest change they experienced abroad as an increased willingness "to spend time and energy [exploring] how to stimulate students' initiative in learning." This teacher explained the reasons for this change as follows:

Teachers hope that students do not waste time. Since they are here to study, they must talk about efficiency and use their time to improve their learning efficiency. Four years cannot be wasted like this. Seeing that foreign students have such high learning initiative, and our students' overall learning initiative is not as strong as theirs, I think from the teacher's point of view, what we can do, this is the teacher's inevitable sense of professional ethics. As a teacher, it is my responsibility and obligation to help students improve their learning initiative. (MJP)

Teachers' beliefs are part of their cognition, and the construction and reconstruction of those beliefs are inseparable from their psychological and cognitive activities (Borg, 2006; Richard, 1998). The cognitive development theory proposed by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget describes the main theoretical basis for teachers' belief generation (Gao & Li, 2018; Piaget, 1977). This theory posits that

individual cognitive development results from interactions between internal and external factors, or between a subject and an object. Teachers' beliefs must be developed and perfected through two mechanisms: assimilation and adaptation. Through assimilation, teachers filter, integrate, and transform elements and information in the experience of overseas study, and ultimately absorb them into their original system of teachers' beliefs. When the schema of this system cannot meet the requirements of a new overseas study environment, teachers will adapt to the new environment by developing, improving, and changing the original system or creating a new one. With continuous changes in the overseas study environment, teachers will continue to revise, expand, and improve their teaching belief system through assimilation and adaptation, ultimately forming and developing a new system.

3.2. Overseas Study Makes Teachers Adopt More Scientific and Efficient Teaching Methods

Overseas study experience plays an important role in promoting the transformation of teaching methods. Among the 15 respondents, 10 mentioned that overseas study prompted them to adopt more scientific and efficient teaching methods. For example, one stated with great certainty:

[I use] online and offline teaching, which is teaching combined with the model platform. It must be the course of××× during the visiting period that opened a window for me. (CJ)

Further, another respondent stated:

I will conduct some open discussions and thinking, because more teachers abroad also want students to speak instead of them. (MY)

Overseas study can promote the transformation of teaching methods for several reasons. First, important others, such as the leading role of doctoral supervisors, can be influential. One respondent described this influence in more detail:

When I was in class in Japan, how the teacher taught me to search for materials and guided me to do research, and when I returned to instruct students for their graduation thesis, I may have been influenced by my supervisor. (ZY)

Another respondent provided a similar statement:

In foreign countries, what the teacher taught me is how to come and how to use it [knowledge], how to iteratively update and how to use it in the future. I also teach students this way. (CZY)

In the teacher growth process, important others (interactive and iconic) and key events (explicit and recessive) are critical factors that affect their teacher-student role beliefs, and this influence is subtle (Yi, 2021). The second influence comes from teachers' own experiences overseas study. Many researchers believe that the change in teachers' beliefs and their educational and teaching practices are mutually influenced, and a cyclic relationship exists between changes in beliefs and in practices (Chen & Wu, 2016; Lerman, 2002). To illu-

strate this, one respondent stated:

In foreign countries, no matter how good a professor is, there may be some people who oppose him. Therefore, when I am in class, I encourage students to have this kind of dialectical thinking and dare to challenge authority. Now (after returning to China), I will add more questions and discussions to my class and encourage students to have dialectical thinking and dare to challenge authority. (LH)

3.3. Overseas Study Helps Teachers Enrich the Content of Classroom Teaching

The teaching task was realized through the organization and design of teaching content. After returning to their homeland, some teachers will consciously or unconsciously integrate foreign teaching content into their domestic curriculum and teaching process (Wang, 2014). For example, teachers often deepen teaching content based on the experience of overseas study, and use that experience as teaching material, which greatly enriches the content of classroom teaching. After returning to China, teachers have some considerations when using their overseas study experience as teaching material. The first is the ability to expand their teaching content, which is addressed in the first quote below. Second, as addressed in the second quote, it can make the classroom come alive. Respondents stated:

From the teaching content, the most obvious thing is that when I talked about a certain chapter before, I didn't dare to expand too much, because it was difficult to control. After studying in Hong Kong, I have become very proficient in this content, and I will talk about this place in more depth. (ZB)

Taking Japanese classes after returning to China, such as talking about some of the current living conditions in Japan, is really something that I have personally experienced, and it is very real. (ZY)

3.4. Overseas Study Makes Teaching Styles More Suitable for Students' Needs

Overseas study enables teachers to consider students' development needs more in terms of teaching style. For example, one respondent described having a very different teaching style after going abroad:

I was very strict with students before going abroad. After returning, it mainly depends on the students' [willingness]. If they want to learn more, I will talk to them more. (WF)

The experience of overseas study can broaden teachers' horizons, which contributes to changes in teaching style. One respondent explained such a change as follows:

The year I went abroad, I mostly thought about life, and seeing the diversity in the world, I became more tolerant and diverse. (WF)

Regarding how overseas study can affect teaching style, another respondent

described a representative experience for overseas study:

I listen to two academic reports every week, and the atmosphere of foreign academic reports is very relaxed. Those teachers, big professors, including the director of the laboratory, would go a little later. Some of them would stand in the corner, leaning against the wall, listening while eating pizza. Maybe because of these influences, the atmosphere will be more relaxed when I return to my home country for class. (LH)

3.5. Overseas Study Promotes the Sustainable Development of Individual Scientific Research

Overseas study leads to a more rigorous, serious, and scientific research attitude

Overseas study experience can greatly influence individual attitudes toward scientific research, which 11 of the 15 respondents reported as their own experience. For example, one participant stated with deep feeling:

After coming back from Japan, I feel that we should be very strict in doing things, because the Japanese style is strict. (SHY)

Further, regarding the issue of scientific research integrity, one respondent stated with sadness:

To achieve a certain goal, unscrupulous means are not allowed, whether in China or in other countries. This is a question of integrity. Like the basic issue of integrity, [foreign countries] are indeed better than ours in China. We must learn and achieve a high degree of integrity. (MJP)

The experience of overseas study shapes the teachers' rigorous, serious, and scientific attitudes toward research from several aspects. First, there is the power of good role models. Several respondents mentioned this many times over the course of the interviews, such as "in foreign countries, my teachers write papers, but never...casually (CZY)," and "my biggest gain from overseas study is the rigor of scientific research (ZBJ)." Other respondents provided more specific examples as follows:

I [analyzed] the experimental results at that time, and I thought the results were good, but the teacher did not allow me to post or write articles. He said that other methods must be tried, and the results must be very stable. In the end, my verified results were relatively stable. He felt that it was not enough. He had to use other data to verify it, and he had to use data from other laboratories to verify it. At that time, I felt, how could this be, there is already a result basically on the line. However, the teacher said no, he felt that he had to be very convinced, and he had to convince himself first that the results were very good, very stable, and very reliable. (LH)

I was doing scientific research, and I felt pretty good when I saw the results of an experiment. But after I went to Hong Kong to study, they said that this is not good, and I have to continue to do it. You must get a very specific result, [before] they will agree. (ZBJ)

The second experience is the warning provided by negative events. Compared with other teachers, those who overseas study can better perceive that foreign countries have zero tolerance for academic fraud and anomie, which can strengthen the belief that overseas teachers conduct scientific research in good faith. Overseas teachers' general attitudes toward negative events such as academic fraud and academic anomie are reflected in the following statements from respondents:

One day, my foreign colleague suddenly saw a message on Twitter, which seemed to be academic fraud at the dean level. There was a foreign female reporter who was staring at the professor's article, saying that the pictures he made were fake. He asked me if this is from your country, and I was a little embarrassed at the time. (CJJ)

I felt very angry when I saw these reports [of academic fraud and anomie], and severe punishment should be given to such people. (SHY)

3.6. Overseas Study Shows the Differences in Research Motivation and Methods between Domestic and Foreign University Teachers

The research motivation of foreign university teachers is relatively simple; however, that of domestic university teachers is more utilitarian. Some previous studies have also confirmed the universality and value of scientific research cooperation abroad (He et al., 2017). One respondent stated:

I especially respected people like our mentor in Japan at the time. He was already very old, but he continued to teach students and conduct research. He was not utilitarian in teaching and researching. Like our research, it is more utilitarian, and it is only for the purpose of publishing papers and evaluating professional titles that we do scientific research. (ZY)

Another respondent provided a good explanation of the differences in research motivation between college students at home and abroad as follows:

I was a little idealistic before, and I just wanted to do research. But you have to face reality, face assessments and professional titles, and still come up with this kind of short-term thing. However, when I was abroad, I found that they were very slow in doing scientific research, and the whole project was progressing very slowly. He has been working on a research question all the time. At that time, our experimental projects were all five-year periods, and after investing five years of funding, we could do it slowly in five years. If there are some good discoveries after finishing, continue to invest money and continue to do this research. They are not in a hurry to publish articles and produce results, because when they say the conclusion, it is not necessary to see how many articles you have published, but to see how far you have advanced on this research issue. Even if you don't have an article, write a good report, they think this content is worth digging further, and they will continue to give you money. It seems that we can't do this in our country. The National Natural Science Foundation of China has only a three-year research period, and there must be an article at the

end of the three-year project. There is a cycle for publishing papers, so basically there is only one year to do research. After one year, the results will be produced immediately. I haven't really thought about why my research results are like this. (LH)

In terms of scientific research methods, domestic scientific research is dominated by solo work, while foreign scientific research is dominated by teamwork: cooperation between multiple [research] centers in China is relatively rare, but it is very common in foreign countries. (LH)

The above differences in scientific research methods exist for two main reasons. The first is the assessment system, which two respondents addressed as follows:

I think one of the main reasons is institutional. The assessment system in China depends on the results and must be assessed every year. Each research group, each center or each department, has an annual assessment task. (LH)

In the evaluation indicators, published papers must be the first author and the first affiliated unit. If several centers cooperate and the publication is successful, who should the first unit be linked to? Because the final result only recognizes the first unit, this creates a conflict of distribution of interests, which hinders cooperation. (LH)

However, foreign assessments rarely clearly stipulate that only the first unit and the first author are considered. Their assessment also does not stipulate how many articles must be published each year, so it is easy for them to cooperate. (CZY)

The second is the reward system, which respondents addressed as follows:

Domestic publications are rewarded, which is also a very important conflict of interest. (LH)

The standard of reward is that only the first unit will be rewarded. Foreign scientific research investment mainly considers workload input and is not reflected in income. (C)

In the process of [domestic] cooperation, my workload can only be reflected if I get the first unit. But there is only one first unit, for whom? So forget it, don't cooperate. (LH)

3.7. Overseas Study Effectively Promotes the Sustainable Development of Individual Scientific Research

Relying on a good scientific research platform abroad, coupled with their own efforts, overseas study experience enables individuals to have a relatively solid foundation for early research. Thus, they will have sufficient development potential in scientific research after returning to China. One respondent illustrated this as follows:

I have won five National Natural Science Foundation of China, three of which are for my later work on fern research, and two are materials given to me by the laboratory I visited for the first time. (CY)

Redoubled effort to conduct scientific research is a true portrayal of the situa-

tion of many college teachers overseas study (CY, CZY, CJ, ZY). One respondent, whose experience was a microcosm of this situation, recalled with deep emotion:

I go back every day after eleven o'clock in the evening. I can only go to lunch after listening to the report at two o'clock in the afternoon, and I only eat dinner at around eight o'clock in the evening. I cook six days a week on Sunday, from Monday to Saturday, and I eat it all by the end. I'm going to have a bad stomach at the end of the meal, but I don't have time to cook. But I just didn't post an article. I was very stressed, so I worked day and night. But it is such an effort, let yourself lay a better foundation. (CY)

Favorable conditions in foreign countries facilitate the scientific research of overseas teachers. Referring to this aspect, one respondent provided the following example:

When I went abroad for the first time, I didn't even know how to do it. I didn't post the article, but through my hard work, I got the teacher's praise, and when I came back to write the project, the teacher helped me change it, so I got the project. The second time I went abroad, I had materials. I got the project in 2008, and in 2009, I applied to go to the same laboratory, and then I took the materials and came back to continue this work. (CY)

Liu et al. (2021) found that institutional reputation and the academic status of overseas study are important factors necessary for visiting scholars to generate high research performance. They also posited that overseas study is an important way for university teachers to grow their academic relationship network and other types of social and cultural capital. Academic talent with international perspectives can relocate their overseas capital across borders, which can maintain cross-border cooperation, continue scientific research output, and speed up the development of scientific research (Liu et al., 2021). Hu et al. (2020) showed that university teachers with experience overseas study can make full use of their international experience, update their knowledge, improve their research abilities and problem-solving skills, enrich cross-cultural cooperation, increase joint research programs, and become co-published.

3.8. Overseas Study Has a Certain Short-Term Adverse Impact on Returning Teachers' Scientific Research

In general, the experience of overseas study has a strong role in promoting individual scientific research; however, it can also quickly become a hindrance to some aspects. One respondent expressed a deep understanding of this as follows:

I am not very good at writing Chinese [declaration forms], and I am unfamiliar with domestic customs and rules. Before I was a postdoctoral researcher in the United States, I also wrote a lot of declaration forms in English. They just said something and wrote whatever they wanted, but the Chinese [declaration form] I wrote, experts said that I couldn't write it like this, and the style of the writing did not conform to Chinese at all. (CJJ)

They also further described their discomfort after returning to China as fol-

lows:

Before the review, our school sent our book to some more senior experts in other schools, and asked them to read it first. My writing is really not good enough. After I modified it, another problem occurred, which is more verbose. (CJ)

Another respondent expressed a similar issue, in that they were “a PhD student abroad” and “not very good at writing Chinese papers.” They also mentioned the problems caused by resource shortages:

[For papers to be successfully published], there must be resources to operate in it. As a person returning from abroad, I have no such resources. (MJQ)

The adverse effects of overseas study experience on individuals mainly manifest in two ways. First, adverse effects can be caused by inconsistencies in the scientific research norms at home and abroad. This can be explained by the transfer theory of learning. Cognitive structure transfer theory posits that three main factors affect the learning and retention of new knowledge: the availability of original knowledge, consolidation of original knowledge, and distinguishability of old and new knowledge (Ausubel, 1968). Inconsistent scientific research norms between home and abroad make old and new knowledge lack the necessary similarity and distinguishability, resulting in existing learning experiences interfering with new learning, which is reflected as a type of negative transfer. Second, study resource shortages can have adverse effects on individuals. The resources the respondents mentioned mainly included those such as academic resources, network resources, and scientific research platforms (MJQ). From the capital theory perspective (Diao, 2022), resource shortages will have a certain negative impact on the progress and effectiveness of individual scientific research.

However, in general, these two adverse effects were short-lived and limited in magnitude. Therefore, the positive impact of overseas study experience on individual research is far greater than the negative.

3.9. Influence of Overseas Study on Teachers’ and Students’ Views Shows Complexity

Overseas study has little effect on the interpersonal distance between teachers and students

Experience Overseas study has little effect on teachers’ interpersonal distance before and after going overseas. One respondent described this as follows:

I personally have a relatively equal relationship with students, and there is not much distance. Before and after going abroad, the teacher-student relationship has not changed much. (MJP)

The experience of overseas study has little effect on the interpersonal distance between teachers and students mainly because of the following reasons. First, individuals resist change in their original beliefs. As one respondent described:

Some things in foreign countries that I don’t agree with, such as the relation-

ship between teachers and students, I have not been affected by [them]...I think I am quite friendly in the classroom, a teacher who is very approachable and easy to be accepted by the students. But at the same time, I am very serious. There are rules in my class, and students must follow these rules. After I came back from abroad, I still insisted on this teacher-student relationship. (MY)

The second reason is that old and new beliefs are more consistent. Two respondents described this as follows:

My relationship with students [interpersonal distance] itself is more similar to that of foreign countries, so nothing has changed for me (MJP).

Before and after going abroad, I don't think the relationship between teachers and students has changed much, because I have always adhered to this principle, including that sometimes students do not hand in their homework, and after bargaining, I will give students a deadline. I will be as strict as a foreigner, and there will be no special cases. (MY)

3.10. Teachers' and Students Roles in China Are More Complex and Diverse than in Foreign Countries

The roles of teachers and students in China are more complex and diverse than their foreign counterparts. This difference is evident in the following statements from a respondent:

I think [foreign countries] have one point that Chinese education can be learned: that is, no matter how poor the student's ability is, whether they have a foundation or not, teachers are really in the process of building their knowledge by helping them step by step. (MY)

There are several factors that affect the differences between the roles of teachers and students at home and abroad. The first factor is cultural differences. Cultural background plays a crucial role in the development of teachers' beliefs (Andrews, 2007; He et al., 2017). China is a typical collectivist culture, while many countries where university teachers overseas study are individualistic cultures, such as the United States (Zheng et al., 2018). Collectivist cultures make individuals exhibit multiple roles and multiple role behavior patterns simultaneously. For example, one respondent stated:

[Chinese] Teachers sometimes look like nannies, sometimes like consultants, sometimes like strict educators. (CZY)

The second factor is the realistic appeal. For example, a respondent stated:

After the end of secondary education, students are crammed and test-oriented. Once they reach the university, whether it is an application-oriented university or a research-oriented university, the students' learning ability, their ability to think, suddenly has very flexible requirements. Many students cannot think flexibly and with agility, and lack communication. They have become accustomed to doing questions and exams, and cannot adapt to the way of life such as in university and society. Therefore, when our students are just beginning their studies at a university, teachers sometimes act like nannies, for example with

homework, they [teachers] have to add a lot of annotations for them [students] for fear that they will not understand. (CZY)

3.11. Overseas Study Influences the Content and Methods of Teacher-Student Communication

The experience of overseas study also changes the content and method of communication between teachers and students, to varying degrees. From a communication content perspective, respondents indicated that they talk more about life ideals and personal development, as illustrated by the following:

I communicate more with students about life ideals, and I will tell students a lot, such as some of my overseas study experiences, or students tell me how they are... A classmate who was going to Russia before, I asked him if he started to read foreign textbooks. He said no, and I would talk to him about what preparations should be done before overseas study and my personal experience. I talk to my students more about topics that are more academic and less about entertainment. (CZY)

Another respondent expressed that the content of their communication with students mainly focuses on learning as follows:

I now mainly ask students about their learning, and generally do not ask students other questions...because abroad, my supervisors and I also have a relatively simple teacher-student relationship. They only pay attention to the progress of my scientific research and generally seldom intervene in my other aspects. Therefore, after I return to China this time, I will not care about the life of ordinary students or other personal problems unless the students come to me to talk to or ask me. I think this will be better because students may also feel less pressure. (LH)

Regarding communication methods, face-to-face communication is dominant. One respondent stated:

I prefer face-to-face communication because [it] is more approachable. The study experience abroad gave me a deep understanding of this... [For example,] generally we go to teachers with questions. I remember my teacher always telling us, "Every time you come to me, you must have a question, not an ambiguous idea." My teacher always told us this, so our communication was very efficient. [We could] finish talking about something. (CZY)

The respondent further explained his preference for face-to-face communication as follows:

Online communication, if it is a video conversation, may be better, if you type or send a voice, it lacks a little human touch, just like talking to a machine box, not like communicating with a person. Especially in today's fast-paced society, young people are very lonely, and they sometimes need a kind of care. I always feel that face-to-face communication is very important. (CZY)

Another respondent explained the importance of face-to-face communication as follows:

Face-to-face [communication] is more important, because it has more affinity, and then you have very good support and encouragement for students. Students can get affirmation from you, and then he has the confidence to do it. (CY)

3.12. Overseas Study Enables Individuals to More Comprehensively and Objectively Recognize Similarities and Differences in the Study Characteristics of Chinese and Foreign College Students

Foreign college students have a comparatively clearer learning purpose and stronger learning motivation

In choosing universities and majors, foreign students start from their own interests, while domestic students mainly start from their parents' expectations. One respondent described this phenomenon as follows:

[Foreign college students] choose their majors in university based on their own interests, but many domestic students are asked by their parents to major in [a] major... [This is because] when [foreign college students] were very young, their parents cultivated their independent concept. [Children] often go to various summer camps and have to be outside in the summer. If they are not with their parents, they have to spend the night outside at the summer camp. They have strong self-care ability and independence ability, and they also know what they want to do in the future. Some [domestic] students may not know what they want to do in the future. Their parents told them to be a teacher in the future, so they studied this major, and their purpose may not be particularly strong. I feel that some students may really just come here to get a diploma. (CJ)

Another respondent also stated:

In China, after graduating from university, students do not know what they want to do, what they can do, or what they should do. (WF)

Domestic and foreign college students show obvious differences in learning motivation. Several respondents noted that foreign college students are very active in learning, while domestic college students are not active enough in learning (MJP, MY, CJJ, CJ, CZY, MJQ). One respondent provided a representative explanation for this as follows:

Domestic students, who have never worked in society, do not have such a strong thirst for knowledge, nor do they think such knowledge is important, but their parents paid tuition for them to go to university. It's not the same abroad. Some undergraduates I know went to work directly after graduating from high school, instead of going to university, but found that they needed to be improved in their work, and the breadth and depth of their knowledge structure were both problematic. So, when they go to university, they have a strong thirst for knowledge and a strong goal. (MJP)

Another important reason for these differences is that foreign college students often pay their own tuition fees. Financial pressures force them to spend their money on ideas. Liu (2016) found that it is common for college students to earn

their own money for school, and spending their own money to study makes American college students generally more academically motivated. In addition, Ma (2021) stated that the vast majority of American college students are very self-disciplined, have strong independent learning abilities, and will not “mess around” or “waste” their hard-earned money. In fact, learning motivation is a very complex topic, influenced by many factors, including personal, social, teaching, family, and cultural factors (Schunk, 1991, 2004). It is important to note that the above point of view concerning differences in learning motivation between Chinese and foreign college students was from a Chinese perspective.

Foreign college students are good at inquiry-based learning; domestic college students are more accustomed to acquiring knowledge directly

Domestic and foreign college students show differences in their learning styles. For example, foreign college students are accustomed to active-inquiry learning, while domestic college students are accustomed to passive-acceptance learning. One respondent offered an example as follows:

Exploration is definitely the biggest gap between domestic and foreign students: foreign students are particularly fond of exploring and researching since childhood, but domestic students are accustomed to direct access... The apple hit Newton's head, and he wondered why the apple fell? It might be a stupid question in the eyes of others, but he's just fumbling for these things. For our students to learn to explore, they need to do research in this area. (CZY)

Three main reasons can account for the above differences in the learning styles of college students at home and abroad. The first is the serious consequences of traditional exam-oriented education. China's primary and secondary education has long been dominated by exam-oriented education, in which students are only taught what is tested. In recent years, China has vigorously promoted and implemented quality education and achieved great results. However, the negative impact of exam-oriented education widely persists for various reasons. As a result, students are still accustomed to using the passive acquisition learning method from primary and secondary school even after entering university (Lin, 2019). Moreover, university curricula and teaching formats often strengthen the passive learning methods that students already practice.

The second reason is the impact of university curricula. In Chinese universities, the proportion of domestic general courses is generally between 25% - 30%, the proportion of professional courses is generally over 50%, and the proportion of practical courses is generally approximately 20% (Wang & Sun, 2020). Regarding the curriculum settings in foreign universities, the proportion of total graduation credits for professional courses is basically the same as that for general courses. The lower proportion of general courses and higher proportion of professional courses lead to Chinese college students developing a vision fixed prematurely, while they continue to learn how they did in secondary school and maintain their psychological dependence on independent study (Wang & Sun, 2020).

The third reason is the influence of university teaching form. In recent years,

although new forms of MOOCs, micro-courses, flipped classrooms, and online courses have emerged in China's university education, traditional classroom lectures and even textbooks are still common. This easily leads to Chinese college students becoming accustomed to passive knowledge acquisition. Seminars are an educational format that exists widely abroad, and because this format provides students with opportunities to showcase their work, it can mobilize their enthusiasm and promote active exploration (Wang & Sun, 2020).

Chinese and foreign college students have their own advantages in learning ability

Domestic and foreign college students have their own areas of advantage in their learning abilities. Some respondents expressed their opinions as follows:

Our students' comprehensive application ability, ability to use knowledge of various subjects, and ability to solve problems are not as good as those of foreign college students. [However,] our students may be stronger in exam ability and solving some static problems. (WF)

Japanese students have strong comprehensive ability, communication ability, and organizational ability, and all aspects are relatively strong. (ZY)

Further, in explaining why learning ability differs between domestic and foreign college students, one respondent explained:

The learning ability of students is closely related to our education and social system. Foreign college students have been doing their own affairs since childhood. Parents also know that children are independent individuals and do not care about them. Therefore, foreign students are relatively independent. From high school, teachers and parents monitor [Chinese students] 24 hours a day, and when they get to college, they are completely confused. Therefore, I think the active learning and self-regulation abilities of domestic college students are very poor. (WF)

Another respondent provided a similar explanation:

[Foreign college students] have a very strong sense of cooperation, which may be related to culture and the environment. They are very social-oriented. In the big environment, their system is very flexible. For example, there is a lot of cooperation between laboratories, bosses, and students. At that time, my research group cooperated with three research centers on research projects. (LH)

Using a discussion of the topic of "social stratification" as an example, one respondent noted the possible impact of educational methods on students' learning ability. She stated:

Finnish society is not very stratified, but teachers still allow university students to discuss the topic. Finnish university students have had extensive and lively discussions on the possible effects of social stratification from all sides. In contrast, Chinese college students may have never considered the impact of "social stratification." Because what they learn is more of what the teacher has set for them, and they are used to thinking at this pace. (C)

The four themes were extracted from the analysis: Overseas study can positively influence individual views of teaching and learning, can promote the sus-

tainable development of individual scientific research, has little effect on the interpersonal distance between teachers and students, and enables individuals to more comprehensively and objectively recognize similarities and differences in the study characteristics of Chinese and foreign college students.

4. Study Strengths and Limitations and Future Directions

Strengths of this study are the large number of college teachers whose opinions we accessed, and the good degree of information from them. Participants were detailed in their responses and shared a lot of information, possibly related to the relative anonymity of the online methodology which seemed to enhance freedom of expression. In this study data saturation was reached and all possible themes identified and explored.

However, there are some limitations in this study.

First, this study preliminarily explored the influence of overseas study experience on teachers' beliefs in the Chinese cultural context, and obtained new findings compared to the results of existing studies (Gong & Xu, 2018; Ma & Wen, 2016; Wang, 2014), namely, that the experience of overseas study will have a certain negative impact on individuals shortly after they return home. However, this requires testing in further research.

Second, according to Pope et al. (2007), the flexibility of thematic analysis can hinder transparency because it can be difficult for readers to determine how and at what stage themes are identified. In addition, data in qualitative research is usually generated through language. However, individuals may not always fully understand or be able to comprehensively articulate their experiences through language (Polkinghorne, 2005). This may have been the case with the participants in this study when they were asked to describe their current or recent experiences, which they themselves may not have had the time to digest and process fully before sharing them with the first author.

Third, a purposive sample of respondents was made. College teachers were invited to participate in this study if they met the inclusion criteria and were stable enough to participate in the interviews. However, these teachers represented a minority group and did not reflect the target population of this study. In addition, the sample was fairly homogeneous in terms of gender. The themes identified were more likely to reflect the influence of experiences overseas study on the teachers' beliefs of female rather than male teachers. Therefore, it would also be beneficial to include more male respondents in future studies to reveal any potential gender differences.

Fourth, no control group was used for comparison and the exploration of participants' internal and subjective experiences was insufficient. In the future, differences should be compared in the influence of study experience on teachers' beliefs between college teachers with and without overseas study experience, to more deeply explore their internal and subjective experiences in a narrative manner.

5. Conclusion

Four themes emerged in this study: the experience of overseas study positively affects individual teaching views, can promote the sustainable development of individual scientific research, has little effect on the individual views of teachers and students, and makes the individual more fully and objectively recognize the similarities and differences in the study characteristics of Chinese and foreign college students. The experience of overseas study has a comparatively greater impact on individual teaching and scientific research, which is manifested in a wider subfield. Notably, the experience of overseas study will have a certain adverse impact on the scientific research of returning teachers in the short term. This adverse effect is mainly reflected in the productivity of researchers in terms of their scientific research achievements. This finding was either not covered or ignored by previous related studies and deserves further research attention.

In previous studies, most scholars have focused on the impact of overseas study experiences on teachers' professional development or a particular aspect of professional development (Gong, 2018; Martin & Nakayama 2010; Ramburuth & Welch, 2005; Wang, 2014; Yan, 2022; Zhong, 2007). Richard (1998) argues that it is not only in teachers' professional development that teachers master some teaching skills, but also the enhancement of teachers' beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, and Xu (2020) thinks that teachers' beliefs play a key role in the process of teachers' professional development. This study shifts the impact of overseas study experiences on university teachers' professional development from external influences to teachers' beliefs to explore the intrinsic motivations that promote teachers' professional development, deepening the research on the impact of overseas study experiences on university teachers.

Our study found that the overseas study experience has a negative impact on university teachers in the initial period of their return to China. After living abroad for a period of time, when they return to China they find it difficult to adapt to the domestic academic environment, such as academic system and academic evaluation methods in the short term, and find it difficult to achieve results in the publication, research projects and research grants, which to some extent confirms the reverse culture shock research which they found when the sojourner return to their home countries they may show a discomfort with the home culture in the early stages of their return (Gaw, 2000; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Martin, 1984; Sussman, 2000; Uehara, 1986).

Our study also found that these teachers who have studied abroad are not familiar with academic norms and academic networks, which leads to a gap between their expectations and reality after returning to China, it is very difficult for them to adapt to their culture of home country, which is consistent with previous research (Martin, 1984). In addition, this study found that some interviewees did not change their previous teacher-student relationship in China, because he didn't agree with foreign teacher-student relationship, it shows that the change of teachers' beliefs is not entirely influenced by the change of cultural

context.

Based on the results of this study, we think that the government and university should make targeted policies for university teachers returning from overseas. For the government, apart from formulating policies which will provide them material conditions, it should also pay attention to the academic development of these teachers and give them more spiritual care, provide them academic support, for example providing good academic environment for their research. For universities, when evaluating these teachers who have returned from abroad, they should be given a certain period of buffer and adaptation, and pay attention to the quality of their academic achievements rather than just the quantity, so as to promote the long-term development of these teachers.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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