Return migration and transnationalism: evidence from highly-skilled migration

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Abstract

Through a study of employees from what have recently been referred to as BRIC countries at a public US university, this paper explores the emergence of a new transnationalism among highly-skilled migrants as a supplement to notions of return migration. While our interviewees with migrants from Brazil, Russia, India, and China reported varying degrees to which they have considered returning to their home countries or participating in onward migration to other nations, they all engage in complex transnational practices on the professional and personal levels that they prefer to long-time return. Our findings suggest that the wide array of transnational activities by the highly-skilled remains to be studied as an important complement to the focus on return migration.

Keywords: highly-skilled migration, BRIC migration, United States, return migration, transnationalism
International migration research increasingly focuses on return migration as a component and stage of the migration cycle (Ley and Kobayashi 2005). The increasing number of migrants or their descendants who are returning or consider returning to their places or countries of origin from historical immigrant nations, such as the United States, have been approached by other scholars from a variety of perspectives. Earlier work also tends to focus on the return of the original migrants to the villages and towns from where they had come rather than take into account the possibility that they would move to other regions of the same nation or perhaps neighboring countries or to countries with similar colonial histories, languages, or national identities. Return migration research has traditionally emphasized either a return to places considered “ancestral”/ providing ethnic roots or relating to ethnic belonging (King and Christou 2011; Tsuda ed. 2009) or, alternatively, focused on returning to retire (Takaki 1998). While those who return have thus historically had divergent reasons, return migration is becoming even more diversified and complex as the global distribution of economic and political power is changing. A recent study, for instance, notes the differential return patterns among US Chinese and Mexican migrants as more educated Chinese tend to return, whereas those who are educated among Mexican immigrants tend to stay in the United States (Aguilar Esteva, 2013). Similarly, recent movement of highly-skilled migrants exhibit differential patterns in a context changing global patterns of economy power (Li and Lo 2012), as the booming economy and cultural familiarities in migrant home countries or other countries become increasingly attractive for these migrants.

This paper contributes to this scholarship on return migration and its relationship to shifts in global power by presenting results from our research on highly-skilled academics in the United States who migrated from the emerging economies of the so-called BRIC countries—
Brazil, Russia, India, and China, their transitional connections and return intension. Since the early 1990s, significant changes occurred in both migrant sending and receiving countries that influence the movement of highly-skilled migrants from BRIC nations to the United States and their potential return: the economic crisis, hyperinflation, and political instability in Brazil, and the dissolution of the former USSR accompanied by unprecedented and rapid change from socialist property regimes to a market economy that led to high unemployment and mass impoverishment, were major factors for emigration from these two countries (Cohen and Haberfeld 2007; Fishlow 2011). At the same time, the breakup of the former USSR caused the exodus of large numbers of highly-trained scientists and scholars, whom were recruited by some European and American countries (various interviews). On the other hand, both India and China started key economic reform initiatives: India abandoned its largely socialist economic policies in favor of free-market reforms in 1991 (Chacko 2007). Deng Xiaoping restated Chinese economic reform policies in 1992 aimed at revitalizing the economic stalemate as a result of the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. Chinese universities also started to significantly increase their annual admissions in 1993 (Li and Yu 2012). Such policies have since spurred rapid economic growth and the emergence of a large middle class in both countries. Many of those newly-rich or middle class people joined emigration outflows in ways that parallel the emigration by unskilled labor to traditional immigrant-receiving countries from nations transformed by either investment or military involvement as theorized by Saskia Sassen (1990).

While skilled professional migration from the BRIC countries to the United States has dramatically increased since the 1990s, recent economic developments in these countries also have the potential to induce return migration by luring back expatriates and their children. Since the BRIC acronym was coined in 2001 to describe nations considered to be at a similar stage of
newly advanced economic development, it has symbolized their rising economic power in the world. During the BRICS (BRIC and South Africa) fifth annual summit in March 2013, the five countries decided to form a new development bank to balance the IMF and World Bank (Polgreen 2013). Their rise as geo-economic-political powerhouses in the context of the global economic crisis has already changed the contours of international migration, which is shaped not only by the admission and integration policies of the receiving countries but also by developments in sending nations. Both Brazil and China are seen as “emerging destination[s] for economic migration” including returnees from other countries (Lulko 2011; Marcus 2011; Skeldon 2011). India and China constitute the largest sources for highly-skilled international migrants as well as the dominant global suppliers of services and manufactured goods.

As we focus on an understudied portion of the highly-skilled migrant population, namely those working in the public sector of academia, having come to acquire a degree or seeking academic employment, our work participates in the emergent body of scholarship on contemporary highly-skilled migration and its linkages to theories of immigrant transnationality and return migration (). Our work also contributes to ongoing discussions of the social and political contexts in the immigrant receiving and home countries as major factors that influence return migration decision and behavior, and also considerations of academic career timelines. We aim to contribute to new perspectives that examine understudied linkages between transnationalism and return migration, especially the roles of transnational connections and activities in return migration decision-making. We begin with a review of the relevant literature on transnationalism and return migration, especially as it relates to BRIC migration. We then introduce our research questions and methods, and discuss our findings before offering some concluding remarks.
Conceptual Framework: Transnationalism and Return Migration

Various approaches have developed to explain return migration and the characteristics of the returnees in recent decades (Potter, Conway and Phillips eds. 2005). The neoclassical economic approach views return migration as failed migration; in this view migrants fail to benefit from the wage differentials between the receiving country and their country of origin (Todaro 1969). Borjas (1989, cited in Borjas and Bratsberg 1996) finds foreign-born scientists and engineers who left the US are likely the least successful ones. In contrast, the new economics considers return migration as successful because during migrants’ stay in the receiving countries they manage to accumulate sufficient wealth to be able to return (Stark 1991, 1996; Taylor 1996). The structural approach, on the other hand, emphasizes how the social and economic context shapes the returnees’ decision making process (Gmelch 1980). Cassarino (2004) emphasizes interactions between structural conditions and migrants’ preparedness for return migration that highlight their accumulation of sufficient funds, their ability to mobilize what they gained in the receiving country, and their success in maximizing their networks in the origin country. In his study of Italian migrants, Cerase (1967) argues that highly-skilled return migration can be considered a “return of innovation” because migrants gained advanced knowledge and skills from their stays in the receiving countries and can then utilize these skills in their countries of origin. More importantly, King and Christou (2011, 452) stress that “what is important, … is the emic of perspective of migrants themselves,” which makes the analysis of migrants’ own perspectives front and center in return migration research.

The concept of transnationalism began to be used by geographers and other scholars interested in migration in the late 1980s. Differently from return migration where migrants
permanently settle in their countries of origin, the transnational approach highlights that migrants stay in either their countries of origin or their adopted nations but still maintain “regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders” (Portes 1999, 219).” Transmigrants are immigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state” (Glick Schiller et al. 1999, 73). Unlike prior approaches to return migration which see migrant return as the end of migration, transnationalism considers return migration as a necessary component of the migration cycle (Vertovec 1999, 2009). Moreover, the notion of return migration assumes that migrants eventually exert membership in only one country, while transnational theories highlight immigrants’ belonging and inclusion in multiple societies (Al-Ali and Koser eds. 2002). Most importantly, transnationalism fundamentally contradicts the binary model that underlines return migration theories, which pit receiving countries against origin countries. In contrast, transnational approaches demonstrate that migrants can be socially and economically tied to multiple countries via common ethnic origin, sense of belonging, or other types of intra group affinity (Levitt 2001).

Despite important differences among theories of return migration and transnationalism, there are also intersections among the two. Theories of return migration and transnationalism similarly assert that the goal of migration is to enhance migrants’ economic wellbeing and their social status, and return migration is an outcome of migrants and their families’ strategic decision, but also bound by societal conditions (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc 1995; Smith 2006). Secondly, connections between return migration and transnationalism are evident in transnational migrants’ lives. Return migration usually involves some level of transnational connections (Guamizoa 1997; Ho 2011; Tsuda 2003), and transnationalism can sometimes also
be achieved when migrants choose to re-migrate after they return home or to move among different countries during various life stages (Ley and Kobayashi 2005). Furthermore, return migration can be manifested in transnational activities, and “should be viewed as part of a broader pattern of transnational connection: those who have come to the United States with the notion of going back truly have their feet in two societies” (Foner 1997, 66; Glick Schiller 1999).

Studies of return migration and transnationalism among BRIC migrants in the United States emerged in the late 1980s, and it included work on both skilled and unskilled migrants from these countries. Work on return migration to these countries commonly discusses the factors for return (Wadhwa et al. 2009, 2011), the political and social context of return in each country (Zweig et al. 2008), and the regions where returnees tend to go in each country (Golgher 2008). Brazilian migrants showed a strong tendency to return home (Braga Martes 2008; Franzoni, Scellato, and Stephan, 2012; Siguiera 2006, 2008). Called “fazer à América,” a common Brazilian migration experience is described as staying in the United States for “two to five years as undocumented immigrants, saving money, and sending it back to Brazil to buy a car and house and start a business upon returning” (Joseph 2009, 5), even though most Brazilian immigrants have higher educational levels than Brazilians in general. Andrews (1992) addresses how Brazilians’ racial experiences in the receiving countries affect their return migration decisions.

diasporic communities to their notion of “homeland,” focusing primarily on Russian migrants within various USSR successor nations (Heleniak 2004).

In contrast, the large volume of highly-skilled Indian migrants since 1970s is discussed in terms of India’s “brain drain” (Dutt 1989; Ejnavarzala 1986; Morning 2001). While the number of Indian return migrants has grown in recent years, it still remains at a low level compared to the number of emigrants (Kabra 2005; Nasscom-McKinsey Report, 2005). The liberalization of India’s economy since 1991 and the offering of Non-Resident Indians status have assisted the emergence of immigrant transnationalism in the form of Indian transnational entrepreneurs who invest capital or open businesses in India (Chacko 2007; Lessinger 1992), and transnational networks for skilled workers (Vertovec 2002), such as professional diasporic organizations (Meyer and Brown 1999).

Significant contemporary Chinese return migration to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) emerged only after the 1980s (Wang 2009). The relevant literature mainly focuses on the factors and structural contexts of their return (Lu, Zong, and Shissel 2009; Wadhwa et al. 2009; Zweig 1997; Zweig et al. 2008). As the various levels of Chinese government have implemented multiple policies that provide incentives to attract highly-skilled returnees in the past two decades, more studies conducted in China began to examine return migration and the impact of governmental policies on this movement (Ran 2006; Wang 2009; Xia 2006). However, few studies on the transnational nature of Chinese migration exist, perhaps in part because China does not recognize dual citizenship. Moreover, a focus on immigration, emigration, and return migration are still the prevalent paradigm in Chinese migration research. Some US-based work examines transnational entrepreneurship between China and US gateway cities (Li 1998; Ong and Nonini 1997) or focuses on the notion of “brain circulation” (Cao 1996).
Since existing theories of return migration and transnationalism have emphasized different facets of international migratory movements when analyzing highly-skilled migration, especially contemporary BRIC highly-skilled migration, these theories are inadequate. A paucity of work examines the relationship between transnationalism and return migration, especially the roles of transnational connections and activities in return migration decision-making in addition to other factors that stimulate the migration decision of highly-skilled academicians. The main theories are based on the assumption that the economy and society in the immigrants’ home countries remain constant and less developed than those in the receiving countries. However, as the case of the BRIC countries demonstrates, migrants’ origin countries can develop rapidly in a short period of time, which will influence transmigrants’ decision to stay, return, or move to another country. Moreover, the existing literature focuses on labor migrants who mainly seek jobs and higher income in receiving countries in the private industry. Many highly-skilled BRIC migrants, however, came to the United States as international students for the purpose of education or to advance academic careers; the factors that affect their migration may differ from those theorized in existing scholarship on migrants who work in the private sector. Furthermore, even though comparative work on migration from various countries has increased recently, studies of BRIC migration and its effect on existing theories of immigration have remained understudied, especially in a comparative framework (for rare exceptions, see Kumar and Alexander 2010; Kumar and Kumar, 2012).

To address the gaps in the academic literature identified above, our paper addresses the following research questions:

1. How do the transnational connections that skilled BRIC migrants engage inform their awareness of the changing situations of their home and adopted countries?
2. How do the transnational activities by highly-skilled academics contribute to their
decision-making to return to their home country, stay in the United States, or to move to
another country?

3. How may respondents conceptualize the notion of return more broadly than has been
theorized so far?

**Background and Research Methods: Highly Skilled BRIC Migration**

The major western immigrant receiving countries have implemented recruitment policies
favoring highly-skilled and/or investor migrants in recent decades. Australia, Canada, New
Zealand, and the UK changed their immigration admission policies to serve this purpose in the
1980s (Li ed. 2006). The United States followed suit with the 1990 Immigration Act, which
tripled employment-based permanent resident visas and created H1-B temporary working visas
to accommodate the needs of a knowledge-based economy. Subsequent legislations repeatedly
increased H1-B visa quotas until after 9/11, although higher education institutions and NGOs
have always enjoyed exemption status from quota restrictions. In 2005 Congress added another
20,000 annual quota for international students who received a U.S. master or higher degree.
Increasing highly-skilled and/or investor migration (job creation and/or entrepreneur innovation)
is one of the cornerstones in current immigration debates that have received bipartisan support.
There is even concern that “America’s position as the global magnet for the world’s most
talented and hardest-working is in jeopardy” because of the “artificially low limits on the number
of visas and serious bureaucratic obstacles prevent employers from hiring the people they need –
and drive entrepreneurs to other countries, who are quick to welcome them” (The Partnership for
A New American Economy and The Partnership for New York City 2012). The European Union
implemented their Blue Card program, which is somewhat similar to the H1-B visa program.
Table 1 showcases the BRIC migration to the United States. BRIC migrants are overall well-educated as 68% Indian, 46% Russian, and 40% Chinese migrants have at least a bachelor degree, versus the US national average at 25%. Chinese and Indians are among the longest established Asian migrant groups, and consistently rank among the top five US migrant groups (Li and Skop 2010). Their numbers have grown since the 1990s, which contributes to the new trend that Asian migrants have surpassed Latino/a migrants since 2009 (Pew Research Center, 2012). They have the largest numbers and higher proportions of skilled migrants (both permanent residents and temporary workers), and India in particular tops both employment-based and H1-B visa holders (Figure 1). While Indian and Chinese migrants count for 4.4% and 3.8% respectively in total migrant population, their shares of skilled migrants nationwide are as high as 12% and 6% respectively (Table 1). They also exhibit a higher desire for return migration than European skilled migrants (Wadhwa et al. 2007 and 2009b). Brazil and Russia, on the other hand, have sent lower numbers of migrants. Moreover, even though the recent global economic crisis has impacted the BRIC economies, they have been less severely affected and are seen as engines for global economic growth, especially compared to the United States and other Western countries which have suffered a slow economic recovery, financial uncertainty, and a dire job situation. Such shifting global realities that affect both sending and receiving countries have yielded significant changes in the landscapes of highly-skilled international migration (Li and Lo 2012). Therefore, it is timely and important to study these groups in relationship to one another in order to gauge the impact of their respective home country on their return migration decision-making.
This study focused on the experiences and decision-making of highly-skilled migrants from BRIC countries who are employees of a large public higher education institution in the state of Arizona. We interviewed 33 BRIC-born academics between October 2011 and March 2012. We selected only those who had obtained at least one academic degree in their respective home country. Their legal status varied from U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, to H1-B visa holders, and a majority of them are US Ph.D. degree holders. Given the numerical discrepancies between Brazilians/Russians and Indians/Chinese, we attempted to interview all Brazilian and Russian faculty members, but segmented Indian and Chinese interviewees by gender, specialty, and academic rank (as shown in table 2) in order to roughly match their composition in the university at large and somewhat representative of Indian- or Chinese-born faculty. Interviews were primarily conducted in person and were supplemented by phone interview when interviewees chose to do so. Each interview lasted between 35 and 120 minutes, and were audio-taped unless declined by interviewees. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese (in the case of Chinese interviewees) or English (for all other interviewees), and interview tapes were transcribed (and translated when necessary). Relevant interview questions addressed the home country awareness of our participants, their assessment of home country and the United States, their transnational connections and activities, and their future career plans, as well as their knowledge of home country recruitment and US retention policies and practices. We summarized and organized answers into the themes that are presented and analyzed in the following section.

Table 2 about here

Transnational Connection and Migration by BRIC Academics
In considering how transnational activities may influence decision-making about return, we need to consider that academics are subject to a different set of labor market conditions than those in other economic sectors. Because they are subjected to a labor market with a long apprenticeship in the tenure-track system, academics consider their careers in more expansive terms, and they often retain and increase their labor value through mobility more than those working in private industry (Bauder 2012). An online survey of Chinese-born academics in Australian universities found that their immigration had less to do with ‘push’ factors in China, but more with options for enhanced career advancement or with reason related to lifestyle and family. Only 57% of the respondents indicated that they planned to stay in Australia permanently whereas almost 85% preferred the possibility of maintaining their transnational ties, such as a joint-position between Australia and China (Hugo 2005).

Similarly, transnational connections by BRIC academics are influenced by a variety of factors that include family and career enhancement but also changing conditions in their origin and receiving countries. Drastic improvements in modern communication and transportation technologies in the past two decades have enabled migrants’ frequent contacts with people in and visits to their home countries. This change coincides with increasing transnational flows of highly-skilled migrants and the global race for them as desirable immigrants. Our interviews demonstrate that the transnational activities by highly skilled BRIC migrants not only help to keep them informed of the changing conditions in their respective home countries, but also factor into their consideration of whether to return to their homeland, stay in the United States, or move on to another country. This awareness further prompts their behavior and their attempts to maintain connections to the research communities in their home countries.

*Transnational connections and awareness of home country situation*
Transnational connections – Communication patterns between migrants and their families in their home countries have changed and intensified with the explosion and cheaper availability of modern communication and transportation technology development. These new patterns in “migrant transnationalism” (Vertovec 2009, 14) inform migrants’ awareness and understanding of their home country situation. Our interviewees reflected upon the fact that earlier generations of international students and migrants felt completely isolated in the United States. Some eventually returned to their home country along with their US-born children. Those of our respondents who had arrived during the 1980s recounted the small numbers of international students from their respective countries on the university campuses where they studied, especially those specializing in the humanities or social sciences. Back then, migrants could only call home occasionally and visit parents and other family members every few years because of the high cost and, often, the lack of communication facilities such as home telephones in their home country (C11f, I4m, I5f, I49m). The knowledge these migrants possessed of their home countries came primarily from limited contact and US media outlets.

Current highly-skilled international migrants (recent arrivals or long-term migrants), however, are maximizing modern communication and transportation technologies and benefit from the decreasing prices and wider availability. They keep close contact and ties with their families and friends, and with developments in their countries of origin. Skype is probably the single most important tool the tech world offers to today’s migrants. Its free availability and video function made it our interviewees’ preferred mode of communication. The longest time span for our interviewees to call home is once a week while most make daily calls, all overwhelmingly using skype. This also shows that their families in home countries now have internet or telephone access.
On average, our interviewees visit their home country every year or every other year, although some visit more frequently (such as 3-5 times per year), even though all the BRIC countries are at a far distance from the United States. These trips include those who have scholarly projects in their home countries or need to take care of special family needs. Such personal contacts and visits serve not only to maintain family ties or even as repetitive forms of visiting that become “a pre-return strategy” (Conway et al 2009), but they also help to filter information about changes in the home countries through the perspective of their loved ones. Some of our interviewees clearly stated this as one of the main topics in their daily or weekly conversation with their parents.

Transnational awareness is also achieved by directly obtaining information via home country news outlets using one’s native language, such as listening to (online) radio, reading online newspapers or news websites, and/or watching satellite TV. The frequency varies from daily to rarely, but a majority of our participants obtain information this way; for some this is their daily morning ritual. Some longtime US residents do not directly access sources in their home country regularly but obtain information about their homeland primarily via Western media outlets like BBC, then consult sources from their homeland for more detailed information and different perspectives. Such frequent contacts and varied sources make our interviewees keenly aware of their home country conditions (various interviews).

**Awareness and assessment of home country and US** – As a result of such intensive transnational contacts and connections, our interviewees keep up with recent economic, social, and cultural developments in their home countries. All are aware of and pleased with the rapid economic growth in their respective homelands. They generally feel confident about their countries’ future, but are concerned about growing corruption. Importantly, their concern with
corruption in their various homelands becomes one of the key factors in keeping them from considering ‘permanent’ return. This similarity across members from very different nations warrants further study of the relationship between democracy and academic migration. It appears that especially highly-skilled academics want to live and work in a just society, in addition to seeking out financial rewards.

However, each group also has different perspectives. Russians are concerned that the economic growth in their country is almost entirely built upon natural resource extractions and has entailed drastic increases in the cost of living. Brazilians shared somewhat similar concerns. Indians and Chinese are excited about their home countries’ economic prospects, but worried about environmental degradation and socioeconomic polarization, and also about changing cultural values as a result of Westernized modernization processes (I1m, I2m, and I5f). As their countries transitioned into market economies out of the two largest former socialist nations, Russians and Chinese are also concerned about the persisting lack of freedom and political transparency and the negative impact on further development in their respective homelands. Such concerns are more prominent among humanity scholars and social scientists.

Our interviewees from all four groups believe that, in comparison to their countries of origin, the US academy still holds a decisive advantage when it comes to academic freedom, an open and merit-based research environment, and the ability to draw the academic best and brightest from the world. Such assessment is consistent across gender, specialty, and academic rank (various interviews) and with existing research (Franzoni, Scellato, and Stephan, 2012). However, the Chinese participants and others familiar with the Chinese academy also deem that recent enormous Chinese investment in research is likely to give China an edge in catching up with the United States faster than the other three countries. This fact contrasts predications made
by a leading scholar just 18 years ago that China and India “will remain peripheral in the world scientific system for a long time to come” (Altbach 1995, x). In the meantime, though, the Chinese interviewees worry about potential negative consequences from the escalation of geopolitical, ideological, and political differences, strategic conflicts of national interests, and trade wars between the United States and China. They hope such issues and conflicts can be resolved in a peaceful manner so they can focus on research and teaching (c37m; c49m).

**Transnational activities and return/onward migration**

Our research also examines the impacts of transnational connections and activities in migration decision-making; and once a decision is made do transnational activity patterns alter. This subsection addresses these questions.

**Migration decision and comparison: still a “X+1” symptom?**

What we always used to think, we will work for “x” years and in “x+1” we will come back. ... ultimately ending up in a situation where people never came back. This was for people who migrated in the 1960’s, 70’s, and 80’s. What I found different among my classmates who came here in the 90’s when the economic opportunity became much better, a lot of them actually decided to go back, which was something that was not heard of in the earlier groups. I hear more and more stories of my classmates deciding to go back (I36m).

This statement reflects that changing conditions in migrants’ homelands constitute a primary factor of consideration for return. In addition, these considerations are also shaped by current transnational activities that include home country recruitment efforts. Some sending countries increasingly attempt to achieve their developmental goals by proactively reaching out to their “knowledge diasporas” (Welch and Zhen 2008) through various institutionalized incentives. Just as Western receiving countries attract and retain highly-skilled migrants, one key goal of the sending countries is to recruit their emigrants or other international migrants to work and live in their country. While different sectors in all four sending countries have some programs to
encourage their highly-skilled emigrants to return, China leads the way with the most comprehensive programs and policies. For instance, three years in a row, top Chinese universities and research institutions sent a joint delegation coordinated by a Chinese government agency to recruit not only US American students to study in China, but also Chinese (American) professionals to return for jobs in their respective units. Various Chinese governmental agencies, educational and research institutions, and industrial sectors have also implemented incentive programs to recruit top achievers and entrepreneurs (Li and Yu 2012; Simon and Cao 2009). These policies appear to be somewhat effective because, on average, more Chinese faculty expressed their serious intentions to return to China at some point as compared to employees from the other three groups.

But academics from the other three countries also weighed seriously the pros and cons of possible return. For instance, a Brazilian interviewee stated “I started looking at Brazilian academia a couple years ago. And I was thinking seriously about it” (B2f); and an Indian participant told us that “there are more research labs in India. So I might stay in the US for several years (around 5 years) to get higher up in career ladder to a senior level and then go back to India” (I17m). While most Indians think academics are still better off staying in the United States, for those who want to work in private industries India now offers better opportunities. Our interviewees were not aware of any specific Indian government-initiated incentives for potential returnees, such as India’s participation in the United Nation Development Programme’s “Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals” since 1990 nor the proposed university for PIOs (Persons of Indian Origin)/NRIs in India (Khadria 2012). Most Russian interviewees rejected the possibility of returning to Russia for its failure to improve societal conditions. In
general, the potential for return migration was more widespread among migrant faculty from China and India than Russia and Brazil.

What career stage is the best time for returning also weighs heavily in their decision-making. Those interviewees who expressed an interest or desire to return declared that they did not want to go back as junior faculty but to establish their careers in the United States before returning in order to obtain the leverage of equal footing. For instance, one interviewee stated that “once you become a full professor then opportunities open up in India. Indian academic institutions tend to create special programs to attract established people” (I2m).

In terms of potential onward migration (the possibility of moving to a third country), interviewees’ opinions vary. With the exception of one, all of our Russian interviewees had worked and lived in another country (mostly in Europe) before moving the United States. Experiences in various European countries, especially hostility toward Russians and a closed academic culture, made almost none of them consider moving to a European country as they deemed the United States a more open society that holds less animosity toward Russians. Not surprisingly, quite a number of Indians indicated that they would consider migrating to Hong Kong or Singapore. These two places share similar colonial histories and the English language with India, and are physically and psychologically located closer to their homeland. Moreover, the large numbers of Indians in multiracial state of Singapore provides an additional draw. China is also mentioned by a number of Indians and Russians, given its rapid economic growth and increasing investment in research. Among the Chinese, other Chinese-speaking areas (Hong Kong and Taiwan) often topped the list. A number of interviewees from different groups also considered Asia in general as a migration destination, given that Asia is believed to become “the center of gravity of the planet” in the 21st century among interviewees (I34m). Some favor other
Pacific Rim immigrant countries such as Australia and Canada, especially because of the latter’s multicultural policy and the perception that it is characterized by a more welcoming attitude toward immigrants. However, none of our interviewees have undertaken any serious efforts to pursue employment opportunities in these countries.

Transnationalism and Brain Circulation

One of the key differences in recent decades is that transnational behaviors have become a way of life, which is particularly evident among academics (students and faculty alike). Previously, immigration occurred largely in the form of a one-way brain drain from developing to developed countries. But booming BRIC economies make it affordable for students from these countries to study abroad and earn a degree, while they also lure students and other migrants to return to their countries of origin. This reality creates a brain circulation pattern that accompanies transnational migration. As one Brazilian interviewee stated, “people are not just returning people are more mobile. There’s a lot more talk about getting a higher education elsewhere, but with the intention of returning” (B2f; emphasis added). A Russian interviewee said “We did not come with plans of immigrating to the US. We move, it’s normal for us” (R4f).

There are clear signs of change among different migrant cohorts. One Indian interviewee said, “When I graduated, going to the US was considered a very big success. Now people don’t think too much about it because the opportunities in India are so great that it’s fallen off the map” (I36m); and another declared “I’m a global soul, I can readily go to different centers, and still get my work done as long as what I’m doing here exist; and I don’t think it existed for people who came in 1980s, and they came to US and US was it” (I1m). These comments show that the United States starts to lose its edge as the most attractive immigration destination for highly-skilled migrants. One Brazilian interviewee mentioned
two cases actually of colleagues that had job offers in the US and decided no, they do not. Because it seems that once you accept that first assistant job offer, like you are making a compromise that, that’s it you are staying in the US. So even before making that commitment, no, I’m going back to Brazil even without a job. Eventually I find something over there. (B3f)

But despite these changes, most of these academics pursue transnational academic activities rather than consider permanent return or onward migration. These activities include teaching summer school, collaborating with colleagues on projects, holding labs in their home countries, and jointly training graduate students. Respondents see these activities as a key way to maintaining connections with their roots and their families, and to also keeping the door open for the possibility of return should an opportunity arise: “I have a lot, of course, research contacts because I still do research Brazilian [topics] mostly. So through research I was able to reconnect to my roots” (B2f). Many think it is the best to have a foothold in both the United States and their homeland. They would declare “I like the situation I have, having one foot here and one foot there. I think this is ideal” (B7m); “most of them still try to keep this as a part-time job and not completely disconnect with what they have in Europe or in US” (R6m); “we are thinking we will go there and teach part time during the summer or something so we have some sort of connection” (I36m); and “for now, I care more about collaborative research and jointly training graduate students. … We want to still have our base here” (C10m). Our interviewees consider such brain circulation a healthy and positive trend, as one stated it is actually healthy to have a lot of people to go back as well, because that built BRICs, so lots of those US-educated PhDs who are now teaching in India, they are going to send their students back to the US, right? They are going to collaborate with their US professors who taught them or their peers become faculty in the US, right, to me this is all of win-win. (I34m)

In general, the transnational connections our interviewees maintain, through private and public channels, make these highly-skilled academics keenly aware of the pros and cons of
returning to their respective homelands or staying in the United States; their transnational activities, either prior to or since moving to the United States have further convinced them of the career route they have chosen and the future prospects they are exploring. For them, although opportunities are more ample (especially when compared to lower skilled migrants), windows to act are often short, and they want to be sure they are ready when an opportunity arises. If they do not turn out to ever return or move on to another country, they want to keep connecting to and collaborate with academics in their homeland to maximize their opportunities.

**Conclusion**

Our findings provide insights into the importance of return migration in BRIC countries in the early 21st century. Discussions with participants in this increasingly large global migration circuit reveal that as transnational connections increase, BRIC migrants’ become more aware of the changes and linkages connecting their home country with the United States, and that these perceptions factor into their considerations for possible return migration. However, despite changes in the economic situations in their homelands making the option of returning home more attractive, at this time, the academics in our study tend to prefer engaging in transnational activities rather than return permanently to their home countries. Their transnational activities confirm their convictions. These findings are in tune with the work of King and Christou (2011, 458) who stated that “whilst repetitive return visits are useful for ‘keeping in touch’, the link to return migration was often tenuous”. Thus, it is not only important to study return migration, but also the wide array of transnational activities by the highly-skilled that influence their decision making about return and that take the form of “brain circulation” (Cao, 1996).

These transnational activities do not just function to prepare migrants for their return, but also to keep connections with their families and their roots while staying in touch with the
professional developments in their home countries. In addition, it appears that migrants are likely to consider migrating onward to another country if the perfect opportunity arises. This last fact merits further study because it questions the assumption that highly-skilled migrants prefer returning to their ancestral or ethnic “roots”, which has been central to the study of return migration. Our findings suggest that migrant transnational activities are both ‘‘linear’’–based on affective ties to others in their place of origin; [and] ‘resource-dependent’ – opportunities and constraints surrounding labour market position and accumulation of necessary economic and other resources” (Vertovec 2009, 18). Our work problematizes the nature and location of return’ as our respondents thought about return migration in more flexible ways that moved beyond returning to the original places of emigration to, also include nations with similar histories, geographies, or languages. In fact, some interviewees imagined not only moving to other nations than their original homes but also stretched the notion of ‘return’ to also include new forms of transnationalism that would not have been possible until recently. Their responses reveal that we need a more complex understanding of transnationalism in relationship to global migration.

Our research also reveals major factors that appear to influence migrant faculty’s decision-making about return and the extent of their engagement in transnational activities. We found that differences in the development of each country influenced migrants’ decision-making about return, in particular the existence of programs geared at attracting highly-skilled migrants and the success of individual countries in transforming not just their economies but also their societies into more democratic places, and their investment in and improvement of research environments. In this regard, China leads the pack with systematic recruiting policies and efforts which is somewhat effective, as compared to the other three countries. Moreover, the linkage
between economic development and the emergence of democratic societies that our highly-skilled migrant interviewees noted as an important factor for consideration merits further study and may be a factor that the BRIC may need to consider in potential attempts to lure members of their “knowledge diaspora” back home.

We argue that theories of return migration and transnationalism need to be more closely interlinked because our participants not only thought about the two activities as closely related, but at this point in time preferred new professional and personal forms of transnationalism over long-term ‘permanent’ return, while considering the options of onward migration. Such findings lays the ground work for advancing highly-skilled migration research on the increasing pattern of brain circulation beyond the framework of emigration, immigration, and return migration.

Notes:

1. http://www2.lse.ac.uk/economicHistory/Research/CCPN/ICRB/BRIC_project/BRIC_Project.aspx

2. China reportedly surpassed Japan and became the world second largest funder for R&D investment in 2011; and may even surpass the US as of 2023 if current trends stay the same (http://business-news.thestreet.com/mercury-news/story/china-strives-create-its-own-silicon-valley/1)


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