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**Moving to Campus: Examining Motivations and Outcomes for Chinese Journalists**  
**Transitioning to Higher Education**

### **Abstract**

Journalism as a profession is facing growing challenges, which has led many journalists to explore alternative careers. One such trajectory, transitioning from news industry to higher education, remains relatively underexplored. This study employed semi-structured interviews with 15 Chinese journalists to investigate this career shift. Our interviews reveal three patterns of transition: (a) a full shift to higher education, (b) dual engagement in both domains, and (c) assuming senior academic positions through interchangeable professional titles across the two domains. Additionally, this study applied push-pull model to identify factors driving journalists to leave news industry, including transformations in the broader media environment, institutional constraints, and personal value vacuum. In contrast, the motivations for entering higher education often stem from the desire to systematize knowledge and uphold journalistic ideals, making this transition not simply a career change but an extension of core journalistic values. Moreover, this study enriched the push-pull model by incorporating the adaptation challenges encountered during the transition, particularly concerning professional identity and practices. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of occupational mobility among Chinese journalists, highlighting the complex dynamics between professional shifts and identity renegotiations.

*Keywords:* career change, Chinese journalists, higher education, academia, role conflict, push-pull model

## **Moving to Campus: Examining Motivations and Outcomes for Chinese Journalists**

### **Transitioning to Higher Education**

Journalism, as a profession, is grappling with numerous crises, including the dwindling advertising revenues, the rise of digital technology, and the decline in news credibility due to widespread mis(dis)information (Author YYYY; Waisbord, 2018). These challenges have prompted or compelled a growing number of journalists to seek alternative careers, such as positions in public relations (PR), advertising, or higher education. Although some studies have explored journalists' career shifts (e.g., O'Donnel et al., 2016; Viererbl & Koch, 2021), the transition from news industry to academia — including pursuing a doctoral degree or being employed in higher education — remains underexplored. Journalists who remake their careers in higher education, often termed “pracademics,” will enrich the academic landscape by blending practical experience with theoretical developments in journalism (Posner, 2009). This study focuses on the career shift from news industry to higher education in China, aiming to outline the paths they take, and to explore motivations driving journalists to pursue this career shift through push-pull model.

Meanwhile, notable differences in norms and practices exist between news industry and higher education. Journalists are ideally viewed as objective and neutral, tasked with reporting social realities in a timely and impartial manner. In academia, while part of journalism education also addresses news practical skills, its academic aspect focuses more on theoretical development, methodological rigor, and critical analysis. Unlike news reporting, academic work is less accessible to the public and is evaluated through peer-review process (Remler et al., 2014). Consequently, the transition from news industry to higher education may present substantial adaptation challenges (Usher, 2010; Viererbl & Koch, 2021). This study aims to investigate the conflicts and tensions that arise during such transition.

To address research questions, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with former Chinese journalists who have transitioned from news industry to higher education, and journalists who simultaneously maintain positions within the news industry while assuming roles in higher education since the year of 2010. This article begins with a discussion around the career shifts among Chinese journalists due to the transformation of media landscape. A push-pull model was then introduced, followed by an analysis of the adaptation challenges surrounding professional identity and practice that journalists may encounter.

### **Career Shifts among Chinese Journalists**

Amid the growing crises in the news industry (Waisbord, 2018), the employment landscape for journalists has become increasingly precarious, marked by widespread redundancy, low wages, and a growing trend toward the casualization of journalistic labour (Matthews & Onyemaobi, 2020). This escalating professional instability is contributing to a notable outflow of journalists (O'Donnel et al., 2016; Viererbl & Koch, 2021). In China, a marked wave of journalists' resignations has been observed since the early 2010s (Cao, 2019). Since 2011, newspaper revenues in China have sharply declined, with many media organization reporting annual losses exceeding 30%, and in 2015, a 53.2% drop was observed nationwide (GAPP, 2016). Concurrently, the year of 2012 marked the beginning of a substantial exodus of investigative journalists, with resignation rate peaking in 2015. For instance, between 2012 and 2014, *the Nanfang Media Group* — a leading media conglomerate in China's southern provinces — experienced a 20% annual increase in resignation rate. Additionally, a 2014 survey conducted among journalists from 70 media organizations in Beijing revealed that 64.2% were considering departure from the news industry (Author YYYY).

Upon leaving the news industry, journalists would pursue various career trajectories, with roles in higher education — encompassing both teaching and research roles — standing

out as a notable possibility. In the field of higher education studies, such transition by former or current practitioners into academia are termed as “pracademics.” (Dickinson et al., 2022, p.290). Pracademics bring multiple benefits to higher education. Operationally, they are uniquely positioned to support students in becoming “knowledge-able, not just knowledgeable,” (p.29) by leveraging their real-world experiences to enrich students’ understanding of abstract concept (Wilson, 2015). Strategically, their industry backgrounds enable them to build and foster industry-academia collaborations (Posner, 2009).

The phenomenon of pracademics has deep historical roots in journalism education. In the U.S., this trend can be traced back to the 1880s (Harcup, 2011), when journalism education began to take shape in universities through scattered courses (Nerone, 2013). By the 1920s, the American Association of Teachers of Journalism (now known as AEJMC) was already debating whether journalism education should be led by journalists or academic scholars (Singer, 2008). In the U.K., since the mid-1990s, a growing number of journalists have pursued formal degrees in journalism, with much of their education provided by former journalists who transitioned to academia (Greenberg, 2007). Similarly, in 1980s China, there were few scholars specializing in journalism, which necessitated the involvement of practicing journalists to bridge the gap between practice and academia (Cao, 2022). For instance, as one of the pioneering institutions in China’s journalism education, the School of Journalism at *Lanzhou University* recruited its first cohort of lecturers directly from local media organizations (Feng, 2023). Despite the historical background, the career transition to academia driven by the increasing uncertainty in the news industry over recent decade remains underexplored. Therefore, we propose the research question (RQ):

**RQ1:** What are the patterns of careers transitions from the news industry to higher education institutions by Chinese journalists since the 2010s?

### **Motivations for Career Transitions: Push-Pull Model**

The rising resignation rates among journalists have spurred studies to explore such transition. For instance, Usher (2010) analyzed “goodbye” letters, emails, and blog posts by U.S. journalists to reveal their motivations for exiting the field. These reasons include financial instability of news industry, the erosion of their influence, and the impact of technological advancements on news production. Similarly, Meyers and Davidson (2014) explored the occupational histories of 33 Israeli journalists, identifying three primary factors for their departure: (a) professional fatigue, (b) lacking monetary compensation, and (c) the overall decline in the quality of Israeli journalism. While these studies provide insights into the factor driving journalists away from news industry, they do not consider the appeal and dynamics of alternative career paths.

The push-pull model, originally developed in migration studies, provides a comprehensive perspective for understanding employment transitions. It views migration — or in this context, career transitions — as the result of an interplay between push factors (i.e., stressors that drive individuals away from their current positions, such as job dissatisfaction, organizational instability) and pull factors (i.e., attractive aspects of alternative careers, such as enhanced compensation, professional growth, and job security) (Change et al., 2014). For a career transition to occur, individuals have to navigate and reconcile the tensions among push and pull factors, carefully weighing the trade-offs involved in moving from one role to another. Viererbl and Koch (2021) applied this model to investigate the career shifts of German journalists from news industry to public relations. Their analysis revealed that unfavourable working conditions and heightened job insecurity in journalism (i.e., push factors) stood in contrast to the benefits of PR, such as greater stability and financial compensation (i.e., pull factors).

News industry in China has seen a notable exodus of journalists. Concurrently, China’s higher education has undergone substantial reforms, transitioning from a Soviet-style,

tenure-based system to a market-driven, contract-based model since the 1990s. By the 2010s, the *Double First-Class initiative* accelerated China's pursuit of global academic prominence, boosting research output and international collaboration (Chen, 2003). Amid these transformations, Chinese scholars are facing increasing job insecurity, greater mobility, and heightened research expectations, with salaries increasingly tied to performance rather than fixed rates (Wang et al., 2014). Despite these challenges, academic roles maintain significant prestige, rooted in China's cultural reverence for education, and offer greater flexibility compared to the rigid demands of news industry, rendering higher education an appealing option for transitioning journalists.

Applying the push-pull model to the context of Chinese journalists' transition to higher education, this study poses:

**RQ2:** What are the push and pull factors that motivate Chinese journalists to transition from the news industry to roles within higher education institutions?

### **Adaptation Challenges and Conflicts: Professional Identity and Practice**

Transitioning from the unstable environment of the news industry to higher education is far from a seamless process, as academia itself is also undergoing significant transformations, such as precarious employment contracts, and the intensifying pressures on publication and funding application (Eccles, 2023). Consequently, entering higher education can be particularly daunting for those who have already navigated instability in journalism. Existing research highlighted challenges faced by pracademics. Institutionally, pracademics often report feeling unsupported within academia, experiencing isolation and perceiving themselves as undervalued by scholarly peers (Eccles, 2023). They also frequently face a scarcity of time for research due to disproportionately heavy teaching responsibilities (Harcup, 2011). On the personal level, many find it challenging to adapt to the demands of



higher education, grappling with feelings of underpreparedness and diminished self-confidence (Eccles, 2023).

A central challenge for transitioning into higher education from other domains is surrounding professional identity. Professional identity refers to an individual's self-concept derived from their alignment with the values, beliefs, and norms of professional communities. It commonly stems from two sources — the institutions to which they belong, and their personal agency (Trede et al., 2012). The former reflects one's social "face" — how individuals believe they are perceived by others — while the latter pertains to internal self-conceptions. Although distinct concepts, *identities* derived from social institutions contribute to the formation of the *self*, which described by Oyserman (2012, p.70) as a "stable anchor." Within news industry, journalists' professional identities are often grounded in shared ideals and ideologies, such as autonomy and objectivity (Deuze, 2005), which will shape their self-perception. Consequently, even journalists have left the newsroom and need to redefine their professional careers, they often continue to adhere to these enduring values (Sherwood & O'Donnell, 2018). Nel (2010) interviewed 144 laid-off U.K. journalists and found that the majority remained "deeply committed to their profession," (p. 21) with professional identity serving as a source of pride, passion, and satisfaction. Another study of laid-off Australian journalists indicated ambivalence around professional identity, with around one-quarter of respondents reporting negative feeling related to career fragmentation, loss of status, and the challenges of forging new identities (O'Donnell et al., 2016).

Additionally, former journalists transitioning to higher education may also have to adjust their professional practices. While both journalism and academia share common ground in their emphasis on writing and communication skills, critical thinking, and investigative abilities, notable disparities arise, such as methodological rigor and transparency, evaluation standards, ethical considerations, and overarching cultural norms (Eccles, 2023;

Remler et al., 2014). Duffy (2015, p.10) noted that, “For journalists to give up their craft and pursue academic journals single-mindedly would be to abandon what made them valuable in the first place.” Similarly, Remler et al (2014, p.461) underscored key distinctions between two domains: Journalism often leans toward “oversimplification” to enhance accessibility; whereas academic discourse inclines toward “obscurantism,” prioritizing complexity and precision. These differences necessitate a significant recalibration of skills and approaches for journalists entering academia. In sum, transitioning from news industry to higher education potentially gives rise to a series of conflicts and tensions. Therefore, we propose:

**RQ3:** What adaptation challenges do Chinese journalists face regarding professional practice and identity when transitioning to higher education institutions?

### **Method**

To address RQs, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with China’s former journalists who have transitioned from news industry to higher education, and journalists who maintained positions in the news industry, meanwhile taking on roles within higher education since the year 2010. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Research Committee of the Authors’ University Panel on Research Ethics (Approval ID: XXX). These interviews were carried out both in person and online between January and March 2024, and supplementary interviews were conducted in October 2024 and February 2025. The academic roles in this study were defined as either full-time or part-time engagements in higher education positions, such as lecturers and researchers, or involvement in academic studies, such as pursuing a doctoral degree. Notably, the pursuit of a doctoral degree is considered an academia position, as this period in China is counted as years of working experience.

We began our recruitment through the authors’ professional networks, providing a foundation for assembling our participant list. Following the initial recruitment, we employed a snowball sampling approach, inviting initial participants to recommend additional

participants within their networks who could offer insights. Each recommendation was carefully reviewed to maintain relevance to the research and ensure a breadth of perspectives. To confirm that participants possessed substantial experience across both domains, we established eligibility criteria requiring a minimum of two years of professional experience in the news industry, alongside either current employment or active pursuit of a doctoral degree in university. In total, 16 participants were recruited, and 15 interviews were conducted with six female and nine male journalists. One participant was excluded because the participant was still in the process of applying for a doctoral student position and had not yet secured a confirmed role (see Table 1 for participants' information).

To seek a diverse range of experiences and perceptions, we included participants from news organizations at state, provincial, and municipal levels. Seven of the participants are senior journalists, five are mid-level journalists, and three are junior journalists. The sample represented a diverse range of media types, including newspapers, magazines, television stations, news agencies, and internet media, mainly situated in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. Participants' tenure in the news industry ranged from two to forty years. Regarding the roles in higher education, six are doctoral candidates, five are assistant professor or lecturers, three are associate professors, and one serve as the dean of a journalism school. Five have experience working simultaneously in both the news industry and academia, with three of them currently are pursuing a doctoral degree while remaining active in journalism. All other participants, however, opted to transition directly into full-time academic roles. Additionally, except interviewee R13, all other participants have obtained or are pursuing a doctoral degree. Most universities were in major Chinese cities, such as Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Xi'an, Wuhan, and Ji'nan, with two others based in the Netherlands and the U.K.

The interviews, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes (with a mean duration of 54 minutes), were conducted by three authors, and were audio-recorded and transcribed afterwards. Interview questions were formulated drawing on relevant literature (e.g., Eccles, 2023; Viererbl & Koch, 2021) and through collaborative discussions among the authors. The interviews followed a structured yet adaptable format, divided into three sections. The first section gathered basic demographic and professional information, including participants' age, residential location, years of experience, and working responsibilities across positions. The second section focused on the push factors that drive participants leave or consider leaving news industry, and the pull factors that attract participants to higher education. Example questions include "What challenges or limitations did you face in the news industry that influenced your decision to leave?" and "What aspects of higher education attracted you as a career alternative?" The third section examined adaptation challenges that participants encounter. Example questions include "What were your initial perceptions of working in higher education before entering the field?" and "Does your current experience in higher education align with your expectations? if not, what factors account for any disparities?" The interviewers adhered to a predetermined set of questions, yet they retained the flexibility to modify the sequence of questions to align with the progression of the conversation. Additionally, interviewers were able to probe more deeply into topics as they deemed relevant, ensuring a comprehensive and tailored engagement with each participant. Each interviewee's name was anonymized and replaced with "R" followed by a numerical identifier, such as R1.

## **Findings**

### **Patterns of Career Transitions from News Industry to Higher Education**

RQ1 examines the transition patterns from news industry to higher education. Interviews revealed three distinct paths. The first involves a complete exit from the news industry to

pursue a doctoral degree or secure a full-time academic position. This route is typically adopted by professionals who had considered academia even before entering journalism and are committed to a long-term academic career (R9, R11, R12, R14, R15). As one interviewee articulated: “I decided to pursue a doctoral degree not because the news industry was declining or anything of that sort; as of 2016, it was still relatively flourishing. I was optimistic about an academic career, and eager to combine both academic inquiry with journalism practice.” (R12). Despite this, some journalists left the news industry entirely due to practical constraints, such as difficulty in securing supervisors for part-time study, the intense demands of dissertation work, or restrictions imposed by media organizations. For instance, one noted that “I initially planned part-time doctoral studies, but the dissertation’s demands made balancing work and study unfeasible, forcing me to leave news industry.” (R3) This transition often involves notable sacrifices, especially for those balancing family financial obligations and caregiving responsibilities with academic pursuits (R9, R14).

The second path entails pursuing a doctoral degree or working as a part-time lecturer, while remaining employed in news industry. This is common among senior media professionals, particularly from state-level media, who maintain ties to both sectors. For them, working in higher education may serve as a career backup (R1, R4, R8, R10). Administrators or scholars in universities, in turn, may prioritize these journalists’ professional networks and industry resources over their research or teaching capabilities during recruitment. Although this approach allows journalists to leverage existing resources, it can also lead to challenges to academic integration. A one senior journalist noted: “My doctoral journey was far from positive. I often felt reduced to a tool serving my supervisor’s objectives. Their primary interest in me stemmed from my connections with my current news affiliation, which was the main reason for my admission. [...] I assisted him in establishing connections with corporations and creating opportunities for him to be interviewed.” (R10). Additionally,

finding a supervisor for part-time doctoral studies was often challenging. In some cases, they were compelled to pursue their degrees in universities located far from their residential and working places (R4, R8, R10). One interviewee mentioned: “I had to fly to the university weekly while balancing my job and family responsibilities,” (R10)

The third path involves former journalists transitioning into senior roles in higher education such as professors or deans of journalism school, driven by two key factors. First, there exists a reciprocal recognition of professional titles between news industry and academia in China. For instance, the status of a senior journalist is often considered equivalent to that of a professor, allowing them to bypass conventional hurdles typically associated with academic career advancement (R10). However, Journalists with less experience, or those from lower-tier or market-oriented media outlets, often lack awareness of these titles and their potential benefits (R1). Second, this transition is bolstered by China’s *Ministry-University Joint Construction (Bu Xiao Gong Jian)* policy, a strategic initiative that fosters governments-university collaboration to strengthen governmental regulations on academic programs (R13). Under this framework, some senior journalists or propaganda managers have been appointed as deans of journalism schools in China since the year 2013 (Repnikova, 2017<sup>1</sup>).

## **Push and Pull factors for Career Transitions from News Industry to Higher Education**

### ***Push Factors***

Regarding RQ2, interviews revealed multiple push factors at macro-, meso- and micro-levels (see Figure 1). At the macro level, interviewees frequently cited the transformation of China’s media landscape over the past decade as a critical impetus for seeking alternative careers (R3, R10). One interviewee highlighted that: “China’s media landscape has undergone gradual yet profound changes since 2012, and public intellectuals are faced with mounting constraints in recent years. I must be increasingly cautious in my online expressions and media reports.”

(R3). The shifting context is further complicated by the rapid expansion of digital media. For instance, self-media platforms — typically run by individual or small groups without relying on traditional media organizations (Li et al., 2022) — have marginalized legacy media, undermining journalists' career stability (R5, R12). One interviewee noted: "Self-media is evolving rapidly. Though they lack official press credentials and face restrictions on news reporting, they frequently engage in activities traditionally tied to professional journalism and often surpass our work in reach and impact." (R5)

These macro pressures are mirrored at the meso-level within media institutions, where increased competitions among peers and shifting role expectations further exacerbate the challenges faced by journalists. One interviewee highlighted the institutional pressures, stating: "The intensified competition within media organizations has not only heightened job insecurity but also fostered a discouraging atmosphere that curtails the potential for producing high-quality news [...]. Nowadays, a journalist's success is often evaluated by their ability to attain a director position rather than by the quality of their reporting." (R10). Institutional pressures are also evident in media organizations' growing shift toward profit-oriented objectives, which increasingly compromise journalistic independence and professionalism. An interviewee observed: "Since 2014, journalists' earnings have been declining, and financial considerations are shaping news production more than ever. The entire structure of the news agency has shifted; there is no longer a dedicated news division, and each department is now organized around advertising plan. [...] I was even tasked of transforming investigative reports into movie scripts to generate profits." (R4)

The combined pressures stemming from both the broader media environment and institutional challenges often engender a "value vacuum" for journalists at the micro or individual level, where they perceive a lack of meaningful opportunities, recognition, and career advancement in the media industry (R2, R8, R10, R14, R15). An interviewee

articulated this sentiment, “I gradually sensed a value vacuum, where the role seemed to serve only entrenched power structures. Even though you can meet many people with insights, these perspectives often proved superficial. Connections remain fragile, and the individual influence of journalists is restricted.” (R8) Additionally, the often-mundane nature of everyday news reporting, combined with the “youth rice” phenomenon of Chinese journalism — where news profession is seen as best suited for the young (Zhou, 2011) — leaves many journalists facing a lack of fulfilment and persistent career stagnation. One interviewee reflected: “Because your colleagues are all young. I feel I have nothing in common with them; this makes me feel embarrassed.” (R14)

### ***Pull Factors***

In exploring factors that draw journalists toward careers in higher education, interviewees revealed several key pull factors. Foremost among these is the opportunity for intellectual exploration and in-depth knowledge acquisition. Unlike the fast-paced demands of news reporting, academia provides a structured environment conducive to in-depth engagement with specialized subjects (R3, R8). One interviewee noted the value of this shift, stating: “Social interactions in news industry consume a significant amount of my time, yet pursuing a doctoral degree compels me to focus on reading and intellectual development.” (R1). Several interviewees emphasized prestige and long-term fulfillment associated with academia (R7, R15). One participant articulated: “Serving as a university teacher offers a lasting sense of achievement. The longer one remains in academia, the greater the capacity to generate high-quality academic output. Moreover, unlike many professions, the role of a professor does not come with a mandatory retirement age; one can continue conducting research even after retiring from formal duties, making the post-retirement phase both productive and meaningful.” (R7)



Another crucial pull factor is the opportunity to pursue journalistic ideals through endeavours in teaching and research (R2, R5). For journalists driven by a commitment to social change and foster critical thinking, higher education provides a viable path to realize aspirations that may be constrained by the media industry. Interviewees described pursuing these ideals by either cultivating news values in students through pedagogical efforts (R2, R4), or conducting relevant research (R5). One interviewee expressed this sentiment, stating: “I maintain a deep respect for journalism as a profession. Although practical participation is no longer feasible, engaging with it from a theoretical or academic perspective enables me to deepen my understanding and contribute meaningfully to ongoing discussion.” (R5)

Additionally, several interviewees emphasized that higher education offers substantial freedom and flexibility for developing personal branding and pursuing entrepreneurial endeavours. Unlike in media organizations, where team efforts often overshadow individual contributions, working in universities allows scholars to cultivate their own intellectual identity and establish themselves as thought leaders (R2, R3). One interviewee articulated the appeal of this aspect, stating: “My primary goal for transitioning to academia is to create my own intellectual property (IP) and branding based on my own capabilities. Meanwhile, I recognize the importance of embedding myself within the broader established social system. University offers flexibility and freedom to balance between a stabilized social identity and certain self-option actions such as being an online public intellectual.” (R3). Additionally, academia’s flexibility is also noted by some interviewees to initiate their secondary job, such as establishing a company while also taking up a position within the system. One interviewee, currently pursuing a doctoral degree while maintaining a position in a state media stated: “Nowadays, universities allow and encourage faculty to establish their own companies, which aligns with my interests. In fact, if I were to transition to an academic career fully, my

goal would not be to publish papers. Rather, I would aim to develop my own side business to earn money.” (R11)

### **Adaptation Challenges surrounding Professional Identity and Practice in Career Transitions**

Beyond the factors motivating journalists to pursue academia, we enriched the push-pull model (see Figure 1 for push-pull-adaptation model) by exploring the challenges and conflicts of adaptation that Chinese journalists encounter during the transition (RQ3).

#### ***Conflicts in Professional Identity***

Interviews revealed that journalists embarking on this transition after an established journalism career often encounter a steep learning curve, marked by a need to recalibrate their professional identity — from a public figure to a student or novice lecturer — and to deal with the challenges of establishing credibility and authority within the academic environment. One interviewee noted, “Although I have extensive experience in news practice, I still have to climb the academic ladder, which often leaves me feeling that the respect I have earned is not adequately recognized.” (R2). Similarly, a former journalist reflected on the internal dissonance during doctoral studies, “Following resignation, interactions with former colleagues or friends often elicit a sense of discomfort. This transition demands considerable internal adjustment; failure to manage it may give rise to feelings of inadequacy or intense inner turmoil.” (R9).

Tensions surrounding professional identity are further highlighted by former journalists’ reactions to China’s journalism pedagogy. While news practice in China has increasingly been instrumentalized as the political authorities’ “ears, eyes, throats, and tongue,” journalists have traditionally anchored their professional identity in core values akin to those of their Western counterparts, such as objectivity and autonomy (Denzu, 2005). Yet, our interviews revealed that contemporary journalism education in China increasingly

prioritizes *news governance* over practical training, leaving many former journalists feeling alienated from their professional values. One interviewee voiced this concern, noting that “news governance is becoming the dominant logic in journalism education, leading to a perception that training in journalism practice is both trivial and meaningless.” (R3)

Expanding on this, the interviewee explained that “the essence of news governance lies in the principle of ‘Party control over the media’ (*dangguan meiti*), which predominantly imposes restrictive mandates rather than encouraging journalistic inquiry. This framework establishes a rigid structure that asserts political authority over media operations. Consequently, students may become hesitant to explore journalistic practices freely, gradually internalizing the boundaries of permissible reporting, and over time unconsciously assuming the mindset of media regulators rather than independent journalists.” (R3) Moreover, students’ enthusiasm for journalism practice has waned, and classroom discussions about social events have become increasingly challenging, as relevant topics may be perceived as sensitive and controversial. This education paradigm contrasts sharply with the value of journalistic independence and professionalism that former journalists typically uphold. One interviewee elucidated this tension: “As a news commentator, I have long grown accustomed to ‘dancing with shackles on,’ so navigating constraints was not particularly challenging in the past. What worries me now, however, is not knowing where the boundaries lie anymore.” (R3)

### ***Conflicts in Professional Practice***

The transition from the fast-paced, practice-oriented environment of journalism to the theoretically rigorous and methodologically demanding field of academia presents notable professional practice conflicts for former journalists. The first challenge lies in the adaptation to academic discourses and theoretical development. While a few interviewees noted that their journalistic experience helped them in academic writing and theoretical construction (R14), the majority reported struggling with this transition (R2, R8, R10, R14, R15), with

some spending longer to complete their doctoral degree or meet graduation requirements compared to peers with purely academic backgrounds. One interviewee shared: “When I started my doctoral studies, my supervisor kept rejecting my proposed topics, saying they were too similar to news reports. Coming from the industry, it’s really hard to shake off that mindset.” (R15). Another interviewee emphasized the gap between academic and journalistic practice, stating: “I spent a lot of time reading papers, only to realize that they are made to appear sophisticated, yet often lag the current realities of the news industry. My colleagues in universities seem to operate within their own discursive system and show little interest in what journalists are doing. I am relieved that I did not fully leave the news industry, and I have no intention of working in universities once securing doctoral degree.” (R8)

Another primary challenge lies in the workload distribution, as these former journalists — positioned at the intersection of newsroom and classroom — often assume heavier teaching responsibilities, particularly related to journalism practice, compared to their colleagues. This increased teaching responsibility reduces the time and resources available for research, which is essential for academic advancement within higher education. An interviewee highlighted such challenge, stating that: “I have devoted substantial time and energy to teaching, often being assigned numerous practices courses, such as news writing. Consequently, I have less time for research, and this, for me, is quite unfair.” (R2)

Conflicts in professional practice also arise from the differing evaluation systems of the two domains. In academia, the focus on publishing in prestigious journals and securing research fundings poses significant challenges for former journalists. One interviewee highlighted this struggle: “The rules within academia differ greatly from those in the industry. Many former journalists often struggle to publish in quality peer-reviewed journals, and their English skills is not that good either. So where then do their strengths lie? News writing doesn’t align well with academic discourse. In other words, their most valuable skills are

largely disregarded.” (R3). Additionally, interviewees pointed out that the evaluation system within higher education often devalues their previous achievements. As one interviewee noted, despite having published multiple articles around news practices, these were not recognized as academic works, forcing them to produce new work to meet standards (R3). “Although I am popular among students due to my practical experience, such popularity is undervalued, and course evaluations by students matter far less than academic outputs in university.” (R4)

### **Discussion**

This study explores the rarely studied career transition from news industry to higher education in China’s context. Figure 1 presents the push and pull factors that emerged in this study, alongside the adaptation challenges related to professional identity and practice encountered during this transition. Theoretical implications of this study are discussed below.

First, three types of transition patterns were identified, including (a) complete transition to higher education, (b) dual engagement in both domains, and (c) assuming senior positions within higher education through interchangeable professional titles. Our interviews suggest that the adoption of transition pattern is often contingent upon the resources available to journalists, and their commitment to an academic career. For instance, we discovered that the second and third patterns are more prevalent among journalists from state-owned media, or those holding senior positions, who can leverage institutional resources to forge connections with academic works. In contrast, less experienced journalists or those working in market-oriented media outlets are often unaware of professional titles and the advantages they may confer, limiting their transition options. Intriguingly, some journalists from state media or senior positions also opted for a complete exit from the news industry. Interviews indicated that such decisions often stem from their steadfast commitment to academia as a lifelong career, often rooted in aspirations even before their journalism careers.

A crucial factor enabling the third transition pattern lies in China's policy of promoting journalism education reform through governmental initiatives. Over the past decade, the policy strategy has fostered tight collaborations between schools of journalism and propaganda departments or state news outlets. Correspondingly, former propaganda officials or senior state media journalists are increasingly appointed as deans or key administrators in top journalism programs. While not directly involved in prescribing teaching agenda, these senior managers wield influence over curricula and funding decisions (Repnikova, 2017). Unlike the other two patterns, which are more related to personal decisions, this path is primarily shaped by governmental structural adjustments aimed at reinforcing the Party's ideological priorities in education. Given this growing trend, future research should explore this transition in greater depth to elucidate the evolving influence of political authorities on journalism education and practice.

Second, this study applied the push-pull framework to career shifts by Chinese journalism. As shown in Figure 1, this study identified factors at three levels — macro media environment, media institutional, and personal motivations — that push journalists toward academia. These factors include increasingly stringent media regulations and rapid technological transformations in the media landscape, the prioritization of economic profit over journalistic professionalism within media organizations, and a perceived “value vacuum” among journalists that undermines their professional satisfaction. These findings align with previous studies in other contexts (Eccles, 2023; Vierebl & Koch, 2019). For instance, Vierebl and Koch (2019) discovered that German journalists transition to PR due to both extrinsic pressures, such as demanding working hours and negative impacts on personal life, and intrinsic factors, notably a perceived lack of opportunities for personal growth. This alignment indicates that the factors driving journalists to leave the news industry transcend specific political and media environment, highlighting a broader crisis in journalism industry.

Furthermore, journalists are drawn to roles in higher education on one hand by a desire to engage with knowledge in a more systematic and scholarly manner. This motivation stems from the inherent parallels between journalism practice and academic endeavors, as both fields are committed to exploring emerging social phenomena and serving the public interest. Additionally, some journalists also seek to realize news ideals through teaching and academia, reflecting their enduring commitment for journalistic values. These motivations differentiate the shift from news industry to higher education from moves to PR or business corporations (O'Donnell et al., 2016; Vierebl & Koch, 2019), where economic considerations typically predominate — a factor rarely mentioned among our interviewees. These findings suggest that the transition from news industry to higher education represents more than a career shift; it embodies a continuation and expansion of journalists' dedication to public service and societal engagement. This perspective aligns with the notion that journalism practice and academia maintain a symbiotic relationship, mutually informing and enriching one another (Wunderlich et al., 2024).

Third, this study enriched the push-pull model by examining the adaptation challenges that journalists encounter when transitioning to higher education. The identity conflicts often stem from the ideological disparities between journalism as a profession and as an academic discipline. Core news values, such as neutral, objectivity, and serving the public benefits, underpin journalists' professional identities and remain deeply embedded in their self-conception even after they leave the industry (Deuze, 2005). Our interviews reveal that these enduring values often clash with norms and frameworks in academia and education, creating tension for transitioning journalists. This divergence partly mirrors the evolving trajectory of Chinese journalism education. While the Soviet-style Party ideology has long been central to China's journalism education, a more professionalized approach, inspired by the U.S. model emerged in the 2000s. This shift has aligned China's journalism education more closely with

Western values and practices (Repnikova, 2017). Concurrently, the rise of market-oriented media in China further reinforced professional journalism values in education (Author YYYY). In recent years, however, China's journalism education has shifted toward promoting "socialist journalism with Chinese characteristics," placing greater emphasis on state-aligned narratives and ideological commitments (Le, 2021). As media governance becomes increasingly dominant in journalism pedagogy, journalists trained in Western-oriented values thus struggle to adapt to the evolving ideological landscape. Our findings indicate that these identity conflicts are stronger among journalists from market-driven media organizations than state-affiliated outlets.

Lastly, conflicts between the two domains extend to professional practices, highlighting a longstanding debate over the goals and structure of journalism education. Journalists practice prioritizes craft-based skills such as news writing and interviewing, valuing practical proficiency and on-the-ground experience. In contrast, academic institutions primarily assess success through scholarly publications and funding acquisition, aligning with broader academic norms but diverging from the skills-centered priorities of the journalism industry (Reese, 1999; Wunderlich et al., 2024). Our interviews echoed this debate, with former journalists expressing frustration that their professional experience and ideas were often undervalued in academia. Many were frequently assigned additional journalism practice courses in higher education, which required substantial effort but held little weight in academic evaluation. In some cases, their practical background was even seen as a disadvantage, as their age exceeded the eligibility criteria for funding application.

### **Limitations and Next Steps**

Limitations of this study should be noted. The findings are based on a small, non-random sample of participants, which does not represent all journalists undergoing similar transitions. This limits the ability to generalize the results to the broader population of journalists or to



other cultural contexts. Additionally, self-selection bias may be present, as participants with particularly positive or negative experiences may have been more motivated to participate, potentially skewing the findings. Furthermore, participants might tailor responses to seem socially acceptable or desirable, especially on sensitive topics like career dissatisfaction or professional conflicts; this can lead to underreporting of negative experiences or overemphasis on positive aspects.

Future studies can employ a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative survey using anonymous, standardized questionnaires. Researchers can also expand the study to different cultural and geographic contexts with a comparative insight. Additionally, future studies could examine organizational-level factors by investigating the perspectives of academia institutions and media organizations regarding these transitions, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the structural and institutional dynamics involved in journalists' transition to academia.

### **Conclusion**

This study sheds light on the underexplored career transition of Chinese journalists from the news industry to higher education. Three distinct transitions patterns were identified. By extending the push-and-pull model through the integration of adaptation factors related to professional identity and practice challenges, this research provides a nuanced framework for understanding these career shifts. The framework's explanatory potential could be further tested in other contexts where journalists undergo similar transitions. Like their global counterparts, Chinese journalists choose or compelled to leave the news industry due to a combination of social and personal factors. Yet, the distinct features of China's journalism education and academic landscape introduce specific challenges and tensions in their adaptation process.

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**Table 1.** *Demographic and Professional Information of Interview Participants*

ID	Gender	Age range	Years in media	Media level	Roles in media	Years in academia	University location	Roles in academia
1	M	40 – 45	2005 – present	Metropolitan media	Senior journalist	2021 – present	Mainland China	Doctoral candidate
2	M	40 – 45	2004 – 2010	Business magazine	Mid-level journalist	2011 – present	Mainland China	Associate Professor
3	M	35 – 40	2006 – 2016	Metropolitan media	Mid-level journalist	2010 – present	Mainland China	Assistant Profession
4	M	45 – 50	1995 – 2014	Metropolitan media	Senior journalist	2010 – present	Mainland China	Associate Professor
5	F	25 – 30	2019 – 2022	Provincial media	Mid-level journalist	2022 – present	The Netherlands	Doctoral candidate
6	F	25 – 30	2019 – 2022	Metropolitan media	Junior journalist	2022 – present	The U.K.	Doctoral candidate
7	F	25 – 30	2015 – 2017	Business magazine	Junior journalist	2022 – present	Mainland China	Doctoral candidate
8	F	35 – 40	2014 – present	State media	Mid-level journalist	2020 – present	Mainland China	Doctoral candidate
9	M	35 – 40	2012 – 2015	State media	Mid-level journalist	2016 – present	Mainland China	Lecturer
10	M	35 – 40	2013 – present	State media	Senior journalist	2019 – present	Mainland China	Doctoral candidate
11	M	35 – 40	2014 – 2016	State media	Junior journalist	2016 – present	Mainland China	Lecturer
12	F	40 – 45	2006 – 2016	State media	Senior journalist	2016 – present	Mainland China	Lecturer
13	M	60 – 65	1983 – 2016	State media	Senior journalist	2019 – present	Mainland China	Dean of school
14	F	40 – 45	2009 – 2015	Metropolitan media	Senior journalist	2015 – present	Hong Kong	Assistant professor
15	M	45 – 50	2004 – 2010	Provincial media	Senior journalist	2010 – present	Mainland China	Associate Professor

*Note.* Some journalists may work in different media types throughout their careers. To protect participants' privacy and limit the disclosure of personal details, we categorized them based on the media type where they predominantly spent their professional time. We also displayed age range, rather than specific ages, to avoid information disclosures.

**Figure 1.** *Push-Pull-Adaptation Model: Journalists Navigating Career Transition to Higher Education*

