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Returnee Entrepreneurs: A Systematic Literature Review, Thematic Analysis, and Research Agenda

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Returnee Entrepreneurs: A Systematic Literature Review, Thematic Analysis, and Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT

Returnee entrepreneurs are individuals who return to their home country to start a new venture after studying or working abroad. Such individuals are argued to be key agents of growth and innovation in emerging economies. Hence, they have attracted interest from policy-makers and scholars. Our work systematically reviews and thematically analyzes the growing but still fragmented research stream on returnee entrepreneurs. Our work identifies, examines and synthesizes this theoretically, methodologically and thematically diverse research stream by inductively categorizing it into themes and thematic areas. Based on the findings, we provide a conceptual mapping of the phenomenon and discuss promising research opportunities that address a range of

key questions pertaining to returnee entrepreneurs and their importance in emerging economies. We provide a comprehensive inventory, organization and evaluation of the research stream offering guidance for the design and positioning of future scholarly enquiry in this field. Our detailed discussion of theoretical lenses and research designs also extends to potential contributions to adjacent fields and underlying theories, that is, well beyond the specific domain of returnee entrepreneurship.

Keywords: returnee entrepreneurs; systematic literature review; international human mobility; emerging economies.

1

Introduction

Returnee entrepreneurs are skilled individuals who return to their home countries to start up a new business after having gathered business experience and/or education in another, predominantly developed, country (cf. Drori *et al.*, 2009). They are assumed to be of particular value for emerging economies, many of which have allegedly faced a ‘brain drain’ and only recently been able to capitalize on a ‘brain circulation’ due to talents returning home (Lin *et al.*, 2016). By contributing to the development of industries (Kenney *et al.*, 2013), transferring knowledge and innovation to local firms (Filatotchev *et al.*, 2011) and fostering internationalization (Prashantham and Dhanaraj, 2010), they are argued to play an important role in the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Ahlstrom and Ding, 2014) and to be drivers of growth in emerging economies (Kenney *et al.*, 2013; Liu *et al.*, 2010b). Apart from their role in the development of emerging economies (Kenney *et al.*, 2013), returnee entrepreneurs are an excellent context to study problems relevant to the broader fields of entrepreneurship, international business and management research, including but not limited to international knowledge transfer, the mobility of human and social capital, and brokerage activities between different institutional environments (cf. Drori *et al.*, 2009).

From humble beginnings the returnee entrepreneurship literature has started to take off, evidenced by a recent increase of publications in high quality journal outlets (e.g. Han *et al.*, 2019; Liu *et al.*, 2019; Qin *et al.*, 2017). However, despite these examples the research stream remains highly fragmented and under-theorized. This is likely due to the fact that research has progressed rather independently in multiple disciplines such as migration studies, economics, international business, and entrepreneurship. It may also reflect the phenomenon-focused approach that is common in emerging research streams (Keupp and Gassmann, 2009). Fragmentation can hamper a unified understanding of the phenomenon as well as the identification of future avenues for research (Shepherd *et al.*, 2015). This calls for an inventory of the current state of scholarly inquiry into this field in order to synthesize current research, identify knowledge gaps, and trigger new research approaches (Jones *et al.*, 2011; LePine and Wilcox-King, 2010).

The fragmentation starts with a lack of a unified understanding of the phenomenon. The definition that returnee entrepreneurs are ‘scientists and engineers returning to their home countries to start up a new venture after several years of business experience and/or education in another (developed) country’ (Drori *et al.*, 2009, p. 1006) is often adopted with minimal adjustments (e.g. Bai *et al.*, 2016; Liu and Almor, 2016). However, many authors do not provide a clear definition at all, and there is no agreement as to whether returnee entrepreneurs need to be ‘scientists and engineers’ or for how long they need to have stayed abroad. Further confusion may arise from real or assumed overlaps with related phenomena such as ethnic, diaspora, migrant, international or transnational entrepreneurs.

Our work attempts to contribute to an advancement of the research stream by providing a systematic and thematic review of research on returnee entrepreneurs. Our primary aims are as follows: Firstly, because of the fragmentation and cross-disciplinary examination of the phenomenon we aim to compile a repository of research on the phenomenon and trace its emergence and development. We are confident that this endeavor aids in providing a comprehensive overview of existing research and a basis for synthesis and unified understanding of the phenomenon (cf. Shepherd *et al.*, 2015). Secondly, we aim to identify

main themes to provide a conceptual mapping of the research stream. Doing so allows derivation of a structure based on fundamental concepts reflecting the topic (cf. Jones *et al.*, 2011). This assists with our third aim, which is to identify avenues for future research and new research approaches (cf. LePine and Wilcox-King, 2010).

Our review presents insights into an important research stream across diverse literatures facilitating the identification of future research opportunities that are of relevance to the broader interest of entrepreneurship, international business, and management research. Our main contributions thus are: (a) to take stock of the insights gained so far about the phenomenon of returnee entrepreneurship; (b) to discuss theoretical implications of our conceptual mapping; and (c) to provide guidance for the design and positioning of future contributions to this research stream.

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