

Back to china: the reverse brain drain in china

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Every autumn, American students are busy applying for undergraduate or graduate schools, so there is an increasing number of Chinese students.

Chinese get to realize the significance of being transnational. “

Transnational” means involving in many countries. Now, human capital, especially those who have international experience, is significant to the development of a country in the internationalized world. However, plenty of overseas students from developing countries tend to stay abroad for a better future, which is a great loss of developing countries.

But, recently, more and more Chinese students go back to China after they complete their studies, which is good news to China. Looking through this new trend, there are three main factors that may drive overseas scholars to come back to China: the growth of the economy in China, the support from the government to overseas scholars, and the bond between overseas scholars and homeland. Reverse brain drain is a term of migration. The definition of this term is the phenomenon that talented people who once studied or worked in developed countries go to a less developed country which is developing in a high pace.

Recently, this has been common in developing countries, such as India, Brazil, and China (Llana, Ford, Marquand, Pflanz, & Ibukun, 2012). Conversely, in the past, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was not as open as it is now. PRC even ceased the communication in education with other countries once because of the Chinese Culture Revolution which lasted from 1966 to 1976 (Liu, & Li, 2010). Not until 1978 when China renewed the policy of international academic communication did China send students to go abroad (Yao, 2004).

As China's policy became looser, "outgoing tide" and "incoming tide" appeared (Zhang, 1997). "Outgoing tide" is a description of the phenomenon that plenty of students go abroad and the "incoming tide" means those students go back. Since 1978, according to China statistical yearbook 2011, more than 632,000 Chinese, or 33 percent of those who studied abroad, have returned home and both the rate of increase of overseas Chinese students and the rate of increase of returning Chinese scholars have grown sharply in recent years. For instance, in 1989, 3,329 went abroad to study.

In 1990, the number of students who went abroad even decreased to 2,950, only 1,593 scholars went back to China. In contrast, the total of students who studied abroad in 2010 increased to 284,700. In the same year, 134,800 students return after their study in a foreign country, up 24.7 percent from 2009 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011, 20-10). Statistics show that the reverse brain drain to China has already begun. In the past, the reason why the majority of overseas scholars chose staying abroad instead of returning was that they found there were obstacles blocking their way back to China.

Those scholars were concerned about the factors linked with money, especially the living condition and careers. Compared with working in China, it would be easier for scholars to have convenient places to live and earn relatively high salaries when working abroad (Li, 1998). As for career, in China, when some young scholars applied for research funds, they were not able to get funded, which means they could only be assisted by institutions

and companies abroad or study further overseas. Ruizhang Guan is one of the scholars who went abroad because of a lack of funds.

He did not have a Ph. D. at that time. He said, “ It was difficult to get any funds without a Ph. D., and without funding it was very hard to produce any results” (Yan, 1998, p. 59). Furthermore, Zweig, the chair professor of Social Science of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology who is known for his research on Chinese politics and political economy, pointed out in his paper “ Competing for talent” (2006) that the economy of China was in poor condition, most of the institutes and research centers did not have enough money to update the facilities.

Then scholars believed that they could not develop further in their fields with the deficient equipment in Chinese institutes. To have a promising future, these scholars were willing to develop their careers in developed countries. It is undoubtedly true that there were many factors motivating the migration of scholars in that period. However, two decades have passed, and the living and working environment in China has changed dramatically, owing to the development in the economy. The growing economy has given China opportunities to improve Chinese people’s living conditions.

And now when scholars consider the question of whether to stay abroad or to go back to the homeland, better living conditions there can make life abroad less attractive. To illustrate the changes in living conditions, Engel's coefficient is one of the index numbers. Engel's coefficient means the proportion of spending on food in total spending. A decreasing Engel's coefficient shows the average income has increased and life is getting better for a population. According to China statistical yearbook 2011 (National <https://assignbuster.com/back-to-china-the-reverse-brain-drain-in-china/>

Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011), Engel's coefficient there dropped from 54. in urban areas and 58. 8 in rural areas to 35. 7 and 41. 1 relatively (10-1). Also, the housing condition has been improved, for the rates of the population with access to tap water and gas have increased to nearly 100% respectively and the per capita living space has been enlarged (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011, 10-1). Although the living condition in China is still not comparable to that in developed countries, it is much better than what it was 20 years ago, and this is acceptable to returnees.

When compared with the rapid growth of China's economy, the financial crisis in other parts of the world has disappointed overseas students recently, in terms of employment and advancement opportunities. In developed countries, scholars' work and life seemed the same as before, and hardly can the pattern of life and work be changed. Whereas, China usually presented a better appearance to overseas scholars every time they came back to China (Liu & Li, 2010). Usually, opportunities appear in changes. Therefore, scholars believe there are better and more opportunities in their career in China.

For example, in the report on October 21st, 2012, Sophie Tao, an ex-fund manager in New York who went back to China to promote her career further, states, " China is one of the few bright spots in the world economy" (Ford, 2012). In China, many academic fields have not been explored enough yet, and some are even virgin lands. For this reason, those returnees, equipped with the experience and knowledge gained from abroad, can lay foundations in their own field in China. The possibility of success attracts the scholar to do research in China (Engardio, & Engardio, 2009).

In fact, the 2008-2009 financial crisis tested economic stability worldwide and the harm caused by the global economic crisis still affects the economics of the rich nations (Llana et al. , 2012). Moreover, it increased the unemployment rate of immigrants in developed countries and it became difficult for overseas students to find a job there. According to Stephen Castle, a Research Chair at the Department of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Sydney, the unemployment rate for immigrants increased by 3.4% in the European Union in 2008. And that rate in the USA has increased by 4. % (2012, p1847). Chinese students found out that it was difficult for them to find a suitable job overseas. Then, they started to think about whether the developed countries were their only choice of destination, or whether their homeland would be a feasible choice. And China did not disappoint them. China entered the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. And in 2002-2009 international companies have invested 683.5 billion in China (Wang, 2012). The main method of their investment is to start its branch offices in China. Furthermore, China had to compete with other countries in the world.

As a consequence, the “golden time” for overseas students to go back to China began (Ye, 2000, p. 20). Returnees believe that they can have their own contribution to the development of China. Ma Jianghe, who gained his doctorate of Law in the United States, chose to develop his career in China after the agreement on China’s accession to WTO was signed. He believed: “After China joins the WTO, I will have a big advantage in China’s law service market. My good understanding of Chinese and American laws will convince businessmen from both countries to trust me.” (Ye, 2000, p. 1) As Ma said,

the abilities that returnees possess are what a country or a company needs to succeed in international competition. Their multi-cultural background, their communication skills and their ability of adapt in their own field make them outstanding among employees. Besides the economic factors, in the past, another reason that would stop overseas scholars from returning was the strict control of scholars made by the government. Because of the control, the most violent issue happened on 4 June 1989. Students died, for their political status went against the government.

Scholars were afraid of being deprived of freedom, both physically and politically (Zweig, 2006). They thought once they went back to China, they could never go abroad again and hardly could they communicate with international scholars. Considering of the life in future, many scholars refused to return home. Indeed, policies at that time were not open enough. Chinese government noticed that China was confronted with a serious problem that plenty of overseas talents chose to stay abroad. Only 20% of Chinese overseas scholars thought they might go back home according to Zweig's survey which was done in 1993 (Zweig, 2006).

Facing this obstacle, the authorities decided to support overseas scholars to come back to home and began to create a friendly environment to welcome scholars. To encourage returning, the government has provided financial support to scholars through plenty of programs in recent 20 years. To illustrate how those programs work, the " thousand talents program" that was launched in 2008 is an appropriate example. The aim of this plan is to lure overseas scholars to go back to China and help their homeland to " raise its global competitiveness" and become " an innovative society" (Ford, 2012,

para. 0). The Chinese government launched it to bring top scientists and high-tech entrepreneurs back home in the next five to 10 years. In this plan, the government is going to grant 1 million Yuan (about \$146, 000) per person as salary and research fund. Then the government offers them insurance, housing and pensions, too. Thanks to this plan, over 2000 experts in the varied fields have gone back to China to start a new career during the last three years(Zhang, 2012, para. 1).

The financial supports make the returnees' road back to China easier. Not only the central government but also the local government attempts to attract overseas scholars. "Enterprise incubators" have been set up to offer the opportunity to returnees to start their own business since 1994 (Zweig, 2006, & Liu, & Li, 2010). An "Enterprise incubator" is a special zone that provides preferential policies and services for overseas entrepreneurs, which makes it an appropriate zone for overseas scholars to begin from.

According to the statistics cited in "Zhongguo Liu Xue tong shi" (The history of a Chinese student studying abroad, Liu, & Li, 2010), in 2003, there were over 110 such zones in China, more than 6000 companies were founded in those zones, and over 15, 000 overseas entrepreneurs were attracted to those zones. The annual output value of 2003 was 32. 7 billion Yuan (about \$5. 24 billion). The success in these enterprise incubators may lure more overseas scholars to go home. Cultural binding with homeland also lures overseas scholars to go back to China.

In a foreign country, it is probable for someone to suffer from nostalgia, discrimination, and other problems. And they would miss home and return to their familiar culture to avoid those problems. Family is an essential part of

one's cultural background. As a consequence, it acts as a firm bond between overseas scholars and their homeland. First, Kellogg, a researcher working on international migration at UCLA, did a survey on the future plans of Chinese students in America in 2012. According to the survey, the top one reason why they want to return home is family (Kellogg, 2012).

It is suffering to stay far away from relatives and friends for a long period of time. Furthermore, because of the one-child policy, the only child is what parents can rely on except for welfare and pension when parents get old. In Chinese traditional convention, children should take care of the elder family members (Smith, 1973). So parents and children would like to live together, at least live nearby each other (Settles, Sheng, Zang, & Zhao, 2008). This will lead to an increasing number of overseas students to come back to China.

Moreover, China, a familiar environment, may comfort these scholars and give them confidence in their career, which is an attraction to scholars who stays abroad. Integration into the local society is a troublesome problem to Chinese students. In a survey done by a website named deyi which is a popular website among Chinese students in Germany (2007) about the students' situation in the local society, only seven percent of students assert that they have no problem joining the mainstream. Others encountered problems more or less (as cited in Liu & Li, 2010, p. 88-491) To evade this, some of them tend to limit their social contact to a small group of Chinese people and confine their career to the lab when they graduate, which lead to the result that they have less communication with the mainstream and it becomes more troublesome for them to integrate into the society (Miller,

1992 & Liu & Li, 2010). On the other hand, their situation in China is different from that abroad. An overseas scholar has both a native knowledge of his or her homeland and the ability to use Chinese fluently.

That is the basis of overseas scholars' confidence. When they strike root in their homeland, they gain confidence. Chaoyang Zhang, the CEO of sohu (Sohu is one of the most successful Internet companies in China.)and a returnee, shares his experience: " When I was an official at MIT, I met Zhangliang Chen (He is a famous expert of tropical botany in China and he studied in Washington University in St. Louis.) once. From his expression and the look in his eyes, I could see the authority and firmness that he gained during the years when he was in China.

His confidence and pride are what overseas students and successful overseas scholars do not have. That is a result of the striking roots in the homeland. The difference is so enormous to make me shocked, which strengthens my determination to go back to China. " (Liu & Li, 2010, p. 587)

The confidence based on living in a homeland cannot usually be gained elsewhere. On the other hand, the cultural binding with homeland may be a disadvantage of Chinese scholars when they live abroad. Chinese scholars and those who have already immigrated to a foreign country may experience discrimination from others. The glass ceiling exists, which according to Joseph Tsien, an American neuroscientist from China, is " an unspoken truth" (Mervis, 2005, p. 607). A glass ceiling means that a certain barrier blocks the advancement to a relatively high position faced by a minority in a society. Because of the culture gap and language barrier, most of the scholars from

China find they can not totally understand the foreign culture (Liu, & Li, 2010).

As a result, many of them can have fame and achievement in their own field as scientists but only a few of them can get a job of senior management in their field (Mervis, 2005). Alice Huang, a successful virologist who came from mainland China to America when she was 10 years old, encountered the barrier in her application to a high- level job in New York University in 1991. During her interview, she found out that what the committee was searching for is a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) candidate and the committee set barriers to make Huang give up that position. In the end, she lost that position (Miller, 1992).

Since evaluation, which may be subjective, is a key step in process of promotion, one, not belonging to the mainstream, maybe afraid of the unequal judgment done by the evaluating committee which consists of the majority. Scholars want to prove their value and be accepted by society. But the existed barriers prevent scholars from getting higher positions and realize their plans. Under this condition, scholars would believe that they will be a minority and nearly impossible to be integrated to the mainstream, which may hurt scholars and drive them to go home (Liu, & Li, 2010).

However, racial discrimination to those overseas scholars will be eliminated in their homeland. They will be honored in China. Experiences of studying and working abroad are called “ paint a little gold” (du jin) in Chinese (Zweig, Chen, & Rosen, 2004, p. 736), which means returnees are regarded precious in China. To conclude, the three keys to the Chinese reverse brain drain are dramatic growth in the economics, proper policies that encourage overseas

scholars to return and a cultural environment that can give returnees a sense of belonging.

Through the success of China's alluring scholars back, power plays a significant role. To encourage more overseas scholars to go back, the authorities should concentrate on developing the economy to gain more hard power. Moreover, an open political environment is necessary, for overseas scholars who have experienced freedom in political status. Furthermore, for moving the trend of returning further, the government should not only concentrate on the quantity of the returnees but also the quality of the returnees.

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