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\* 'Asia Pacific region' as used here includes East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Oceania, and the Russian Far East.

## Dashing Out and Rushing Back: The Role of Chinese Students Overseas in Fostering Social Change in China

by Dannie LI Yanhua

### ABSTRACT

As a leading source country of overseas students worldwide, China has seen two rapid increases among students flowing out of the country and returnees from abroad. The rises can be easily seen as consequences of China's opening policy in 1978 and the booming economy that China is now experiencing. Yet, behind the seemingly straightforward emphasis on education and careers, there are significant changes in Chinese society driving the trends. These changes, such as shifts in political policies, altered economic and social environments, increasing nationalism, and rational westernization among Chinese nationals, contribute to the current human talent flows between China and abroad. The changes also indicate a tendency of transnationalism, a global trend emerging in Chinese society. This discussion explores China's actual and imagined community of students studying abroad by looking at its demographics, the motivation of going abroad, majors of study, roles in Chinese society, and prospects upon return in the past quarter century.

### Dashing Out—Studying Abroad

Studying in a foreign country was still a dream to most Chinese before 1978, especially after China discontinued most of its international education exchanges during the Cultural Revolution from the mid 1960s till 1976. Overseas study became an opportunity for some Chinese from 1978 to the early 1980s, when Deng Xiao Ping, in June 1978, declared his support for increasing the number of Chinese students going abroad for further study. Since the late 1980s, studying abroad has been both an opportunity as well as a risky investment for many Chinese. It became a reality because of the loosened policy for self-funded overseas study and the economic takeoff in China. Yet, it remains a risky investment since an overseas education no longer guarantees a high financial return and strong competitiveness as it used to, before Chinese became more rational about the benefits of overseas study. This transformation of perception can be seen by demographic changes in student population studying abroad as well as the motivation for this study. Meanwhile, other factors such as diversifying destinations and majors of studies will also be discussed.

### Population

According to the official statistics from the Chinese Ministry of Education, from 1978 to 2004, the total population of students and scholars studying abroad amounted to 815,000, with a figure of 114,700 in 2004 alone. Though the number shows upward growth since 1978, the rise was not necessarily even over the past twenty-seven years, quantita-

tively and qualitatively speaking. For example, compared with the 114,700 students going abroad in 2004, the number in 1978 was only 860, though it has already quadrupled the number of 220 in 1977 (See Chart 1). While the population of students sponsored by the state or by their associated organizations remains at a steady slow growth, the number of self-funded students has risen dramatically in recent years. Only one fifth of the total overseas students were self-funded between 1978-1987, but they have constituted more than 90% of the total in recent years (Yao, 2004: 10).

**Chart 1: Number of Students and Returnees from 1978-2004**

	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986
Students	860	1,777	2,124	2,922	2,326	2,633	3,073	4,888	4,676
Returnees	248	231	162	1,143	2,116	2,303	2,920	1,424	1,388

  

	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Students	4,703	3,786	3,329	2,950	2,900	6,540	10,742	19,071	20,381
Returnees	1,605	3,000	1,753	1,593	2,069	3,611	5,128	4,230	5,750

  

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Students	20,905	22,410	17,622	23,749	38,989	83,973	125,179	117,300	114,700
Returnees	6,570	7,130	7,379	7,748	9,121	12,243	17,945	20,100	25,100

Source: Chinese Educational Yearbook: 1978-2004

The aforesaid changes over the past twenty-five years are attributed to three major policy changes in 1978, in 1984, and in 1993, respectively. Deng Xiao Ping made a speech in 1978 to encourage studying overseas that was the key policy shift for the trend. According to Zweig and Chen, this is a "strategic decision" the Chinese government made to compensate for its loss over the Cultural Revolution and to enhance its national capacity for science and technology (Zweig & Chen, 1995: 7). If Deng's remark in 1978 was a breakthrough for educational exchange in modern China, a more liberal policy adopted in December 1984, allowing people to "study overseas at their own expenses" (*zi fei liu xue*), sparked the "fever to study abroad." This policy resulted in a 50% increase in overseas student populations in 1985 over 1984. Having said that, the real momentum driving the current surge is the policy introduced in 1992, which officially granted students the freedom to leave and return to the country (Zweig & Chen, 1995: 23). From then on, studying abroad and returning has become merely a matter of choice for Chinese, not a political statement. The three major policies over three different decades have shown that a globalizing China is on the move towards its integration with the world educational exchange.

Economic and social environments are two key factors contributing to the student outflow. At the start of implementing the opening reform policy, China faced a series of consequences from the Cultural Revolution, such as stagnation in science and technology, an economic downturn, and rigid social norms. China was then impoverished and backward. The annual average income per capita for an urban resident in 1978 was about \$43 US Dollars (See Chart 2).

**Chart 2: Annual Average Income Per Capita in China: 1978-2004**

Year	Urban per capita income	Rural Per Capita Income
1978	343.4	133.6
1979	405	160.2
1980	477.6	191.3
1981	500.4	223.4
1982	535.3	270.1
1983	564.6	309.8
1984	652.1	355.3
1985	739.1	397.6
1986	900.9	423.8
1987	1002.1	462.6
1988	1180.2	544.9
1989	1373.9	601.5
1990	1510.2	686.3
1991	1700.6	708.6
1992	2026.6	784
1993	2577.4	921.6
1994	3496.2	1221
1995	4283	1577.7
1996	4838.9	1926.1
1997	5160.3	2090.1
1998	5425.1	2162
1999	5854	2210.3
2000	6280	2253.4
2001	6859.6	2366.4
2002	7702.8	2475.6
2003	8472.2	2622.2
2004	9421.6	2936.4

Source: Chinese Educational Yearbook: 1978-2004

Economic hardship, adding to policy constraints, made it impossible for people to study abroad without sponsorship from the government or its associated organizations. In the mid 1980s, China started its economic takeoff, which sped up in the early 1990s when Deng Xiao Ping made his famous “trip to the South” in 1992. The market economy facilitated enormous wealth for some people who jumped into this “sea of trade.” By 2004, urban residents were earning an average of about \$1166 US Dollars (see Chart 2), which still seems insufficient for funding overseas education. However, this average is misleading because there was great disparity in household income based on geographic location and employment. Many middle-class families, particularly urban families in major cities, could afford for their children to study abroad with relative ease.

Meanwhile, the only-child generation since the late 1970s is another significant social factor for the surge. Given the primary importance of education in Chinese culture, it is not surprising that parents, even at the cost of taking out loans, give their maximum support and resources to provide their children the best education, which, to many, is an overseas education. Furthermore, many international education institutions have realized that China is a big piece of cheese yet to be integrated into the global education market. Numerous education institutions have come to China to recruit Chinese students, especially in the last six years. Promotional seminars and education exhibitions have flooded the market. All these market promotions, together with people’s zest for foreign experiences, make the idea of “receiving overseas education” a chic and modern trend.

## Motivation

Apart from the external factors, what is the internal motivation for the decision of a typical Chinese to study abroad? According to Huang, many people, particularly the first generation of students sponsored by the state or by their associated organizations since 1978, aim for advanced knowledge that is relevant both to China’s and to their own development. Other motivations include financial benefits, experience in the US, and an intention of getting “gold-coated”—a pun for social honor, respect, better job opportunity, compared to those locally educated (Huang, 1997: 3). Yao gave a more up-to-date analysis of a person’s possible motivations for study abroad: avoiding domestic competition from both the education system and employment, disappointment at the domestic universities versus high expectation of the foreign schools, and transferring illegal money by corrupt government officials (Yao, 2004: 11).

These motivations are especially suited to the situation in the 1980s and early 1990s. However, starting from around 2000, one will find that some earlier analyses are no longer entirely convincing. The gap between China and the developed countries keeps narrowing, and it is particularly so in China’s major cities where most overseas Chinese students come from. Gaining financial benefit from overseas seems a comparatively naïve idea now, when many countries experience economic slumps and high unemployment rates while China grows fast. In terms of foreign experiences and studies, these can also be easily achieved without overseas education. The further loosening of control on overseas travel by the Chinese government has enabled people to travel abroad without getting approval from the local public security bureau (Liu, 2005: 297). International education programs, including those collaborations between prestigious western and domestic universities, mushroomed in China to offer local students education based on a western curriculum without having to leave the country. In addition, the expansion of university recruitment in the late 1990s has greatly relaxed the stress and competition of obtaining higher education. Finally, the competition for employment, though remaining severe, does not grant a preference to overseas graduates, due to an overwhelming abundance of human resources in the work force, which will be discussed later.

What else should one consider in understanding the motivations among the flock going overseas in recent years? People’s growing awareness of transnationalism, their intention to escape the ideological void since the 1990s, and the zest for independence and freedom among the only-child population are worth pondering. First, the idea of transnationalism within Chinese society is nurtured by China’s increasing integration to the processes of globalization. Economical and efficient means of transportation and communication have made international travel convenient yet cheap. The relaxation of government policy has decreased the distance and space between China and other countries. Having access to these conveniences has inspired Chinese to be involved in the global community and to cross national boundaries. Transnationalism also lures people, especially

the young population, with the enormous opportunities brought by its “transnational capital”— defined as “value added to an individual’s capacities that result from overseas links, foreign education or training, or transnational networks” (Zweig, Vanhonacker, Fung & Rosen, 2005: 5). For young Chinese, overseas education grants them membership in the transnational community, thus it is a stepping-stone for activities that more easily and frequently link China to the rest of the world.

Second, some people seek faith and a belief system abroad, which they do not find in Chinese society. The political turmoil that occurred in the 1980s made many Chinese doubtful and cynical towards the government and their belief system. The ideological basis of society was questioned, ridiculed and abandoned. Communism failed a lot of people. The zeal for democracy was driven underground. Religion is either under the leadership of the CCP, or it is characterized as backward or even as an antirevolutionary cult. People have shifted their passion into creating economic miracles not for China but for themselves. Money has become the last belief, with the common expression “I only believe in money” heard from many Chinese.

For aspiring and thoughtful young people, this ideological void represents social repression and emptiness. According to an interview done on Dec 2nd, 2005 with a female in her twenties who came to the US in 2001, the money-driven and repressive social atmosphere pushed her out to seek her faith and new truths. She described that she feels no stress to pursue her Christian belief and non-profit career in the US, where she enjoys more freedom and privacy. The desire for independence and freedom among the only-child generation also contributes to the flow. Showered with over-attention and protection, many people in this population yearn for independence. This desire also coincides with parents’ wishes for their children to be self-reliant. The benefit of developing independence and logical thinking through experience of living abroad, promoted by overseas institutions, appeals to both parents and young people, and results in a remarkable recruitment among this population.

### Destinations and Academic Majors

Now that there is a huge number of people leaving for overseas education, where do they go and what do they study? With the prime importance given to the economy, people seem to give preference to capitalistic countries. The popular majors are also skewed to practical subjects, especially to those seeming to have the most demand in the job market.

Socialistic countries, once popular in Mao’s era, now rarely attract people’s interest, except for a very small percentage of people sponsored by the state or state organizations (Yao, 2004: 12). Capitalist countries, such as the US, Japan, and the UK became the most desired destinations since 1978. Even so, more and more educational institutions from various countries have come to share this big education pie. With more countries to choose from, overseas Chinese students have spread to over 108 countries. Yet over 90% of

the students are concentrated in the developed capitalist countries such as the US, Canada, Japan, Australia and those in Europe (Liu, 2005: 294; Yao, 2004:12).

Fields of study, an indicator of social change, also shifted significantly over the past quarter century. Traditional subjects such as mathematics, physics, and philosophy are less preferred by the current students, due to their academic rather than profit-oriented nature. The craze for computer science, electric engineering and MBAs in the past decades produced an overwhelming number of graduates that flooded the job market. Though these majors are still popular due to their practicality, students are now more rational in selecting their fields of studies, with a combination of personal interests and market demand. The range of majors is wide and diversified, including some that rarely attracted any interest in the past. For example, social sciences, such as psychology or nutrition science, have gained more interest from Chinese students because of the increasing social needs and scarcity of professionals in recent years. Nevertheless, practical and profitable subjects, such as business, economics, medicine, law and hi-tech majors, are still desired by the majority of the overseas Chinese students.

### Rushing Back—Returnees from Overseas

While the wave of Chinese studying overseas continues to grow, academic research has been done on the prospects of the returnees to China since 1980s. Among the total of 814,900 students studying abroad since 1978, there are 427,000 people who are in progress, another 197,900 have returned to China, therefore 190,000 people have remained overseas upon finishing their education. The low percentage of returnees in the mid-1980s till the mid-1990s has attracted scholars’ attention. The “brain drain” to developed countries was once seen as a sign that the “third world is at the periphery of the world’s educational and intellectual systems, while industrialized nations constitute the center” (Zweig & Chen, 1995:11). However, with the thriving domestic economic and social environment, China’s “brain drain” has largely converted into its “brain gain” or “reverse brain drain,” as thousands of overseas students have returned to China since the late 1990s. This transformation also greatly affects returnees’ roles in the society and their prospect upon return. Similar to the surge going abroad, the reverse human capital flow is seen as a sign of growing significance of globalization for China and the world at large.

### Population

Before the mid-eighties, most of the overseas students and scholars returned to China after they finished their education. This group consisted of a good majority of state-sponsored or organization-sponsored scholars, who would be guaranteed advancement in their profession and career upon their return. According to Zweig and Rosen, the problem of the brain drain began in the mid-eighties and continued into the mid-nineties. Many of the self-funded students remained overseas, and the number of returnees dropped

significantly between 1985-1987 (see chart 1). The crackdown after the 1989 Tian'anmen Square Incident further aggravated the problem, with a mass exodus of Chinese students and scholars remaining overseas after their education (Zweig & Rosen, 2003). In a survey done with 276 Chinese students and scholars in the US in 1993, Zweig and Chen found that only one third of the interviewees expressed a desire to return (Zweig & Chen, 1995: 28-33). This survey revealed that China ran the risk of losing substantial brainpower to the developed countries.

Due to a shortage of intellectuals caused by the brain drain of the early 1990s, the Chinese government launched campaigns to attract overseas talent to return. Policy wise, the government promised better benefits for returnees and assured there would be no political consequences for those who participated in the democracy movement (Sun, 1992: A12). A liberal policy of allowing people to "come and go freely" adopted in 1992 became an incentive for those who hesitated to return due to the restraints of mobility from the government. Besides, tax reduction and favorable supporting policies, which assisted returnees in establishing their own businesses, enhanced the prospect of entrepreneurship among returnees. This greatly helped to pick up the number of the returnees and signified a turning pointing in the transformation of the brain drain into the brain gain in mid-1990s.

Meanwhile, according to Zweig et al., "reverse migration might be the result of individual responses to changing economic and political policies in China, the U.S, and the region." The authors also state that "tectonic shifts and the locus of global-economic power have pulled people back to Asia since the early 1990s" (Zweig et al, 2005: 3). Since the nineties, many developed countries have encountered various economic downturns, such as the continuous recession in Japan and the collapse of the Dotcom boom in the US. China, on the other hand, benefiting from the opening policy, has been on the rise with its economic modernization and integration with the world market.

A more enlightened social atmosphere has also encouraged the overseas Chinese to return. Government initiatives, together with the positive economic and social factors, have facilitated a rise of returnees since 1992. Statistics showed that there was about a 50% annual increase of returnees in the years of 1992 and 1993, after which the number started to level off with a steady increase each year. Reviving of Chinese nationalism abroad, with Chinese government's encouragement and with overseas Chinese's involvement, also served as a "pull" factor for human capital inflow into China (Liu, 2005:301-303). Starting from 2001, when China entered the WTO and won the sponsorship of Beijing Olympic 2008, the returnees flocked back with an annual increase of 25% to 30%, with a rocketing figure of 25,100 in 2004. Returnees were not only seen to possess knowledge and technology from abroad. Many also brought in financial capital, advanced business concepts, and transnational networking. Thus the brain drain has largely converted into a brain gain.

## Sea Turtle and Seaweed

Upon their return, returnees found different experiences in readapting to local culture. Nevertheless, their overseas education and adventures distinguish them from the locally trained people. "Sea turtle," a pun for returnees with overseas education and skills, has been commonly used to describe returnees in the 1990s. The sea turtle has the ability to survive in the water or on the ground, hence it adapts to different environments. Similarly, the returnees, with "portable skills," are able to manage in dual social and work systems. "Sea turtles" were especially welcomed by domestic employers and academia during the eighties and nineties, because of China's scarcity of foreign-trained talent yet its rising demand for human capital with international education and skills.

At that time, returnees occupied key positions in academia, domestic as well as multinational enterprises, and professional positions; also, many became entrepreneurs. On the other hand, they contributed to society in many ways. First, they brought back advanced science, technology, and business concepts. For example, many returnees from the Silicon Valley brought back leading technologies and business practices, which helped them to establish the Chinese Silicon Valley in the Beijing Zhongguan Cun Hi-Tech Park. They were seen to have brought China into an "Internet Age." Secondly, many brought in venture capital from abroad with their projects. Thirdly, they helped to established international exchanges with their overseas ties. Returnees were then much respected and honored in society because of their contribution and their worldwide perspective in their professions, compared to their locally trained counterparts. Last but not least, they were generously paid and were promised a bright future with the high demand from the job market. Thus the title—"sea turtle"—signified an aura of honor and admiration pervading the returnees in the Chinese society.

However, this aura has been diminishing, since "sea turtle" was replaced by "seaweed" in recent years. "Seaweed" have become popular since 2001, when new returnees found their overseas studies losing credit in the employment competition in China. "Seaweed" is a pun for returnees awaiting jobs. Enthusiasm for seemingly immense opportunities in China dropped among fresh returnees as their frustration from job hunting and employment soars. What made this radical change in a period of merely several years?

Glionna and his description of the dilemma that returnees are facing provide insightful perspectives on this change (Glionna, 2004). With their precursor's achievement and significant social status, returnees in recent years were shocked to find that their foreign studies no longer granted them the opportunities they had expected. Many people were attracted to return for the same reasons—China's rising economy, improving living environment, and its more liberal social atmosphere. China's involvement in the international community is also seen to offer enormous opportunities for returnees from overseas. However, it was these same reasons that brought over 85,000 returnees back from 2000 to 2004 (see chart 1). On the other hand, China's expansion in university

recruitment since the late 1990s has boosted the number of domestic college graduates. With an increase of both domestically trained and foreign trained human capital, the job market is now over supplied, especially in the field of business management, computer sciences, and finance—coinciding with overseas students' most popular fields of studies. In addition, employers have become more rational towards people with foreign degrees and education, as China and its people are more exposed to the rest of the world. Overseas education no longer promises to be superior to domestic studies, as news reports have revealed that some foreign educational institutions are poor in quality and some people go abroad merely for the purpose of getting "gold-coated" without achieving real academic success. In contrast, domestic graduates outdo the returnees with their improving foreign language abilities and similar educational background, and more modest expectations from their employers. Furthermore, many returnees are fresh graduates, who lack the actual work experiences most employers seek. Taking these factors into consideration, returnees, losing preference by the employers, became "seaweed." Glionna describes Chinese employers' views on returnees as unrealistic in their expectations. The returnees are seen as lacking sufficient insight into the ever-changing Chinese marketplace, having unwelcome outspokenness, and acting overly individualistic in a collectively-oriented work environment (Glionna, 2004: A3).

The strong contrast seen regarding returnees in the past two decades again demonstrates changes in Chinese society. Changes are both realistic and rational behind the seemingly radical fluctuations. Having said that, the returnees' prospect in China remains promising, if they have obtained solid academic preparation abroad, hold a realistic view of their expectations, and are willing to re-acculturate in domestic society. After some down-to-earth work experiences in China, they are still among the most competitive human talent, unique due to their international ties that China needs for its globalization.

## Conclusion

In a mere twenty-seven years, the Chinese people have experienced a huge shift in their perceptions of overseas education—from a far-fetched dream, to a possible opportunity, and then to the current affordable reality. On the other hand, the respected status of returnees has also been adjusted realistically with people's rational views on the continuing reverse talent inflow. These phenomena not only reveal the changing society in China, but they also indicate that the transnational human exchange in China is no longer rare or a one-way outflow—it has become a popular practice coinciding with global trends. Similarly in many countries and areas

in the region, such as Korea, Japan and Hong Kong, the exchange of transnational human capital is one of the many processes of participating within a global community. This human capital flow will continue to increase as long as China maintains its political, economic, and social development. At the same time, it will serve an active role, boosting China's progress by empowering its workforce.

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