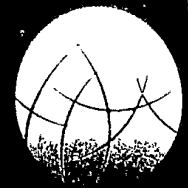


NEWSLETTER

# NAFSA: ASSOCIATION OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATORS



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## A case study in "delayed return"

### **SOME CHINESE STUDENTS HEAD HOME**

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BY KYNA RUBIN

Although only one-quarter of the roughly 120,000 PRC Chinese students and scholars who have studied on American campuses since 1978 have returned home, there are signs that the trend may be reversing. Job opportunities in the United States, the Chinese Student Protection Act, a high standard of living, and uncertainty about China's political and economic future continue to act as magnets for the 90,000 Chinese who have not returned and for their spouses and children—many of

whom are U.S.-born. Given the clear temptations to settle down in the United States after graduation, why are some Chinese choosing to head home? What awaits them there?

Contrary to popular perception, most returnees are going back to China not because of failure to adapt to American life or to compete for good jobs in the United States. Rather, it is their success in these regards that allows them to take the risks

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inherent in returning home. Many returned Chinese students are profoundly ambitious, entrepreneurial individuals who are not satisfied with the anonymity of American life and what they perceive as a "glass ceiling" for minorities in the U.S. workplace. PRC graduates of American M.B.A., law, and applied science and engineering programs say they can find decent jobs in the United States and have adapted well to the foreign environment. But many feel a lack of personal satisfaction working outside of China. Unlike the majority of fellow PRC Chinese in the United States who share these feelings, the relative handful who make the difficult decision to return to the motherland are willing to make great sacrifices to make a go of it on home turf.

The sacrifices can be significant. On the professional side, Chinese who go home may give up tenure-track university positions or lucrative jobs in mainstream U.S. companies—and with them, the hard-earned rewards of middle-class life. On the

personal side, they may risk family disintegration. Quite often wives and U.S.-born children do not share the desire to move home. Separation and divorce over the issue of returning to China are not uncommon.

What awaits these self-described "pioneers" depends on their field of expertise. China's fast-track economic development holds tremendous opportunities for Chinese with advanced Western degrees in business, economics, and law. However, in a nation that now values the bottom line above all else, funding and regard for the humanities, basic sciences, and theoretical social sciences have dwindled. Crafting a successful career in these fields is relatively difficult. It is not surprising, therefore, that the majority of Chinese returnees are in fields of applied technology and social sciences.

Regardless of the extent to which their expertise is welcomed back home, students returning to the PRC after three to eight years abroad face a high adaptation curve. Today's China is not the same place they left behind. A feverish money-making cli-

mate now permeates every segment of society, corruption is a common element of daily life, and urban citizens no longer enjoy freedom from crime. Official government policy offers special perks to returned Ph.D.s from abroad, but the ability of local employers and the willingness of bureaucratic entities to deliver on these promises are limited.

### BIG FISH IN A SMALL SEA

In the 1980s, PRC students commonly cited patriotism as an important factor drawing them back home after graduation from U.S. universities. Though cultural affinity for the homeland and a desire to see it strengthened still apply, today's returnees are more willing to admit that professional fulfillment is the primary catalyst motivating their moves home. Ironically, the same prospects for career opportunity that drove Chinese students to leave China in the first place are now attracting some of them back. In a country only beginning to develop a private industry of law firms, investment houses, and high-

tech consulting services, opportunities for highly adventurous, Western-trained professionals are enormous.

"In China, I can be at the top," explains Alex Cai, a Berkeley-trained lawyer who returned to Shanghai in the fall of 1994 to open his own private law firm. "Chinese who stay in the States don't have as high a sense of self-worth as those who return. Many Chinese students working for U.S. companies have gone as far up as they're going to go. They envy people who have returned because in China, there's no limit to what we can do, to the challenges before us. China has only 50,000 lawyers out of a population of 1.2 billion, and only 2,000 of them speak a foreign language. I have as a client one of America's premier investment houses. If I were working for a big U.S. law firm I wouldn't have this sort of opportunity until I made partner."

Zhai Zhihai, who has a 1987 M.A. in international public policy from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and is now running his own consulting firm with a

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U.S. partner, agrees. "I have friends who have been away from China for such a long time that they've lost their connections and a golden opportunity to come back. They're bored in the States. I didn't want to just buy a house and a car and go back and forth between home and office everyday. In China life may be harder and the emotional and material strains greater, but

three years ago. Here I get to work on interesting projects and big deals worth hundreds of millions of dollars; at this point in my career I wouldn't have that opportunity had I remained in the States." Liu, who received his J.D. from Hamline University, St. Paul, in 1986, estimates he's worked on about 100 joint ventures since his return to China in 1992, gaining satisfaction from reading in the newspapers about the high-profile deals he's managed.

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*China's returnees from the United States bring significant benefits to American academia and business because of their increasingly prominent positions within Chinese universities, government institutions, and nascent private industries.*

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there are more challenges for me here."

Adds U.S.-trained attorney Liu Fengming, in the Beijing office of law firm Graham & James, "Now that China's hot, it's natural for people to come back, and there's less of a professional risk returning now than say,

Returnees in business and law are much freer from political and economic constraints than are academics who return to China, but a handful of prominent scholars are also attracted back. "For social scientists, the home country is the best place to build up

your career," says Ma Rong, a Peking University demographer. "I could find an acceptable job in the States if I wanted to, but because of the Cultural Revolution I lost a lot of time and didn't get my Ph.D. at Brown until I was 37 years old. To start teaching at an American university, work for several years to get tenure, and only then have the free time needed to do research in China—which is what I really wanted to be doing all along—was not the best route for someone my age [44]. I can teach and publish abroad but can't be an outstanding scholar there because I can't possibly compete with Americans in studying American sociology or demography. Chinese society is undergoing fundamental changes. There is so much to study" and so few scholars to do it. Ma conducts research on ethnic integration in Inner Mongolia, where he spent nine years as a herdsman and worker during the Cultural Revolution. Ma proudly explains that graduate students vie to study under his tutelage.

Chinese social scientists are also drawn back because living abroad handicaps understanding of China as

an object of study. "My working environment and salary would be better in the United States, but only by living in China can I get a feel for the Chinese economy," asserts Yu Mingde, a recent Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.

Yu's colleague, Justin Lin, director of the China Center for Economic Research at Peking University, cites loftier reasons for his own return. "I have a vision that the next century will be the century of Chinese economists, because Eastern nations will become the largest economic region in the world, and China will be the largest economy in Asia. The center of economic research will then shift to East Asia and China, just as it shifted from England to the United States after World War I—when the U.S. displaced Great Britain as the world's largest economy." Lin and his Center colleagues are members of a tiny vanguard. "There are about 500 PRC Chinese with Ph.D.s in economics outside of China today," says Lin, "some 300 of whom are in the States. But less than 10 have returned to China." Lin received his doctorate in 1986 from the University of Chicago.

## KEYS TO SUCCESS

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The American-trained mainland Chinese students who have returned home over the last few years and seem on their way to reaching the heights of professional achievement share some unique characteristics. They are ambitious, committed, entrepreneurial (a necessity even for academics), unflaggingly optimistic, and thick-skinned. It is not merely coincidence that the

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same resolve that saw many of these individuals through grueling stints in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution of the 1970s and the rigors and challenges of studying in a strange land in the 1980s is now helping them adjust back to the stress of life in China a decade later. Most of the achievers have published books by U.S. mainstream academic presses while abroad and maintain part-time jobs in America or have overseas work offers but choose to remain in China most of the year. One telling indication of their success, many of them argue, is that they have not incurred the wrath of potentially jealous colleagues who have not gone abroad. This is because instead of competing for limited resources from the home unit, they rely on self-support, seeking funds from abroad or elsewhere in the PRC. In today's China, successful returnees create unique niches for themselves, either within already existing institutions, or by opening their own businesses.

Returned biotechnologist Chen Zhangliang is a stellar example. The 32-year-old dean of Peking University's College of Life Sciences has formed several companies, part of whose profits are channeled to the college and to staff for generous bonuses. Says one thankful biology professor, "His money-generating activities have permitted professors

like me to drop our moonlighting jobs and concentrate on research." Another example is Wang Qiwen, who has a 1990 Ph.D. in management science from the University of Maryland and is now associate dean of the new, highly visible Guanghua School of Management. The school is jointly administered by Peking University and the private Taiwan foundation for which the school is named. In early 1995, Wang traveled to the United States with a design team to get ideas for the school's new complex of buildings to be constructed on the Peking University campus.

## WHAT THE PIONEERS FIND

Chinese regulations stipulate that returnees are welcome home regardless of past "political attitudes," and that even those who participated in anti-government activities while overseas are free to return—no questions asked—as long as they cease such engagement. Indeed, a mini returnee "industry" is in place to illustrate the seriousness of official efforts to lure back foreign-trained talent. Government directives specify special treatment for returnees with advanced degrees from abroad, and a national-level magazine is devoted to glorifying their accomplishments. In 1990 the State Education Commission began a research fund exclusively devoted to issuing start-up grants to returned Ph.D.s. (The fund is small but growing; grants average \$4,800 to

\$6,000.) "Returned student centers" in large cities help returnees find jobs for themselves and their spouses, and secure transfers of resident permits (*hukou*) from one district to another—an enormously bureaucratic procedure that, if not carried out successfully, can prevent returnees from living and working in new areas after their return home.

Returnees are free to find their own jobs and may enjoy above-average (by Chinese standards) housing offered by employers aiming to entice overseas talent. Promotions for returned academics are generally swift, with thirty-something Ph.D.s elevated to full professorships within a few years after return—bucking the Chinese tradition to award age before merit. Returned scientists may run their own labs and hire their own staff. Western-educated Ph.D.s can return to one of several hundred "post-doctoral stations" housed in universities around the country, where for two years they receive special perks including *hukou* transfers, research grants, higher salaries, and decent housing. In theory, returnees can buy imported cars tax-free within a year of their return and are at liberty to travel abroad as they wish.

It sounds great, but reality can be otherwise. "Development in China, even development within one city, is very uneven," laments one Beijing government official who deals with returnees. "Not all employers can give returnees the conditions they want. Some are just better off than others." With less and less authority being exercised at the center in China, the local situation is the one that counts for returnees, and local agencies' attitudes toward special treatment for returnees vary enormously. "For instance," complains one

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Shanghai official, "the policy states that returnees can buy imported goods without paying [the high] tariffs [imposed on other Chinese]. But the customs people say no way and make them pay. We can't control what the customs does—they have their own regulations."

China's returnees face significant material and emotional challenges. Quality of life is constrained because salaries are meager, particularly for academics. Quips one Peking University economist, "a half year of my Chinese salary equals one day's salary I could make in the U.S." Returned scholars sometimes teach overseas one semester a year to supplement their paltry incomes—a practice encouraged by the Chinese government as a practical step to retaining even a part-time presence for returnees in China. While job mobility is officially encouraged, another

professor who changed universities once he returned to China discovered that the key to a smooth transition from one employer to another is cordial relations between the two and willingness on the part of the first employer to let the employee go. Because this scholar's original university was averse to transferring his file and *hukou* to his new workplace, he was initially unable to collect a salary from his current university or to obtain gas and heat hook up for his apartment. The latter problem was only reversed after intervention by his (new) university president. This same scholar received another unpleasant surprise upon return, when his original university demanded that he pay back not only the plane fare it had provided for him to go to the United States, but also salary for the three years during which he was still on staff while abroad. "In the United States, I didn't have all the information I needed to make the decision about returning. The Chinese Con-



sulate there had said I wouldn't have to return any money because I was doing service for the country by returning and that would be enough."

Housing is scarce, cramped, and often rundown by U.S. standards. Returned scholars or professionals may live in their offices during their first year back because of the acute housing shortage in China's large cities, where returnees wish to live. The housing dilemma has forced attorney Alex Cai to split up his family of four in Shanghai: one child lives with him and his wife in her parents' home; their second child lives across town with his parents. These living arrangements are especially trying for a family accustomed to life together in the home they still own in Seattle, which, ironically, remains empty.

### ATMOSPHERIC CHALLENGES

For returnees whose single-minded focus on work may distract them from material discomforts, China still pre-

sents acute psychological difficulties. "My biggest challenge is trying to focus on my research while ignoring others' demands to make money," asserts sociologist Ma Rong. Chinese universities are under tremendous pressure to be as self-sufficient as possible, resulting in the creation of for-profit entities on campuses that tend to distract scholars from teaching and research. For Zhao Xinsheng, a physical chemist with a 1988 Ph.D. from Berkeley, the greatest challenge is "to produce first-rank work in an environment that is not first rank." Although Zhao secured government start-up funds to set up his own lab, "laser equipment has a lifespan of about 10 years, but my equipment [bought within the last three years] is already somewhat out of date."

For returned lawyers, representing foreign clients in China can be frustrating because of that country's different approach to law. Complains one lawyer, "I can't just call up people in government agencies and get a clear answer about the meaning of a particular regulation. There are still so many things you just can't know here. You have to be patient, but that's difficult because foreign clients want to know why I can't get clear answers for them."

Most returnees are concentrating on developing their own careers, building up their universities or businesses, and making enough money to support themselves. Politics is not high on their minds, but even so, China continues to monitor the activities of some returnees and inevitably plays a part in the lives of those who have returned to university campuses. Explains one professor, "Generally you can predict what's not politically correct but sometimes you can't. You don't know until people criticize you after the fact. Some Chinese leaders, both at the national and at the university level, are more open-minded than others." Returned scientists at Peking University must still attend political meetings once every two to three weeks. Returnees running their own businesses assume that their phone calls are monitored by the government.

## GREEN CARDS FOR BETTER AND FOR WORSE

The possession of green cards gives returnees and their families an escape valve in case things do not work out in China, but the effort of maintaining joint country status can be stressful, time-consuming, and expensive. Green card holders must periodically return to the United States to prove their intent of retaining U.S. residence. Explains one private Chinese lawyer, "Keeping the green card but going back and forth to China is a problem. My ideal is to stay in China part-time, but to make the business work you have to put full-time effort into it."

The status of returnees' children is another distraction. "We call ourselves 'one family, two systems,'" jokes Alex Cai. "Our second child has a U.S. passport, and this is a problem" because children with foreign passports must continuously renew their Chinese visas, under some circumstances having to leave China to do so.

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### REMEMBERING THE HAND THAT FED THEM

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Chinese students who have returned to work in China with green cards in hand clearly maintain ties to the United States, to which they may someday permanently return to live. Regardless of their resident status, China's returnees from the United States bring significant benefits to American academia and business because of their increasingly prominent positions within Chinese universities, government institutions, and nascent private industries.

PRC returnees often maintain professional links to their American employers and universities. Alex Cai, for instance, says he still assists his former Seattle law firm from time to time. "Chinese students remember the hand that fed them," says a member of Shanghai's Overseas Scholars' Association, half of whose 3,000 members have returned to Shanghai from the United States, beginning in the 1940s. "Members feel great loyalty toward their foreign institutions and are very grateful for the education they received abroad. Some of our members donate \$50 or \$100 to their American alma maters, but in the future they will give more." Returnees use their U.S. alumni groups to network in China, just as they relied on Chinese university alumni groups to

network in the United States. The University of California at Berkeley, for example, has 63 alumni in Shanghai who participate in an annual meeting for all of Berkeley's Pacific Rim alumni groups. According to Shanghai's Overseas Scholars' Association, these groups serve as business networks both for returned Chinese and for those who are now U.S. citizens and wish to invest in China.

China's history of economic and political instability makes it difficult to predict whether the current trickle of American-trained Chinese scholars and professionals going home portends a larger surge to come. It is safe to say, however, that a large percentage of China's educated elite now making their homes in the United States would like to have the opportunity to "make it" professionally back home. They will only quit their American jobs to do so if and when they see hard proof that China can offer them the political freedoms and material comforts they desire—a scenario unlikely to occur in the near future. This said, it is still probable that the numbers of returnees will grow. Why? Because the longer PRC Chinese live and work in America, the more homesick they grow, and the more they realize that the chances of reaching their professional potential in a foreign land pale in comparison to the opportunities and contributions they can make back home.

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