

# Returnees, Diasporas and Failure: Can governments benefit from skilled outmigration?

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## Introduction

The conveners of this conference gave me three tasks: (1) determine what policies have proven to help encourage reverse flow of talented migrants;” (2) determine what policies successfully encourage overseas nationals who choose not to return home to contribute to national development in their home country; and (3) address problems and challenges in carrying out research on these two issues.

### 1. Policy Options: *What’s a government to do?*<sup>1</sup>

Countries seeking to attract returnees must have suffered a significant outflow of skilled talent; otherwise, there would not be a plethora of home country nationals living abroad. So if governments want to increase the reverse flow of skilled country nationals living abroad, they must first overcome the original problems and the “drivers” that led people to migrate in the first place. These often include improving aspects such as the education system, the research environment, salaries, freedom of expression, and/or quality of life and work. Since relative, not just absolute, salaries trigger migration, resolving income discrepancies between host and home countries should form a core of the effort to reverse the outflow.

Second, if countries confronting a significant outflow of talent are highly regulated economies, liberalizing the market and creating a climate of opportunity may be needed to attract overseas talent back home, as many migrants are by nature risk takers and often seek to engage in activities that will advance their own and their family’s income. Third, weak scientific infrastructure drives out talented students and scientists, so investment in research institutes is a *sine qua non* of reversing the outflow of talent.

Overall, government policies geared at attracting overseas nationals to return to their country of origin fall into three categories: financial incentives, non-financial incentives, and infrastructure development. The targets of those policies are academics, scientists, professionals and entrepreneurs, and different policies may be necessary to attract different

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<sup>1</sup> Governments that have been relatively successful in attracting overseas nationals to return include: Taiwan, South Korea, India, Israel, Hong Kong and the PRC.

types of people.

Since better relative salaries often trigger the initial skilled migration to better paying economies, salary enhancement may be key. It is worth recalling that population flows need not be solely from the developing to the developed world. A great deal of North-North population movement occurs, including migration from advanced regions such as Canada, Britain, or Israel to the U.S., which is largely driven by improved incomes. Governments may subsidize universities or research laboratories, allowing them to pay higher salaries to returnees, or give government fellowships directly to those who return. Thus, despite Canada's better quality of life, it loses many talented people to the U.S., where salaries are higher. So the Canadian federal government established the Canada Research Chair program, which combined salaries higher than those of most Canadian academics with generous research support, to attract talented Canadians living abroad to return. This policy is also targeted at talented academics who might be drawn away to the U.S. by higher salaries, thereby stemming the outflow.

Wealthy overseas co-ethnics, or wealthy nationals living at home, can provide fellowships to reward returnees financially, provide subsidies to their incomes, or engage them in research projects. Governments can encourage wealthy citizens living, at home or in host societies, or international donors to support such projects. Scientists may receive higher salaries and research grants, allowing them to set up laboratories, purchase equipment and hire research assistants. Housing allowances and pension schemes, which include a returnees' time spent in universities abroad, may comprise such packages. Because returnees worry about losing links with overseas developments, policies that enhance libraries, facilitate academic exchanges, or support travel abroad for reverse migrants is important.

China's "Hundred Talent's Program," controlled by the Chinese Academy of Sciences, requires applicants to show that they possess some new technology, for which they are rewarded with a 2 million RMB (US\$250,000) grant, of which 20% can be used for salary enhancement. The Changjiang Scholars program, funded by Hong Kong billionaire Li Kai-hsing, supports university academics of exceptional talent who want to return, even for one or two years. For example, in China, international aid agencies created special research institutes that paid higher salaries and functioned under international principles that differed from domestic institutions.

Governments can establish programs that bring home country nationals living abroad to visit the country and experience first hand changes that have taken place since they left. Lecture or study tours can establish links with local scholars out of which collaboration may emerge; and data suggest that

overseas nationals who establish ties back home are more likely eventually to move home. Thus in 1997, China set up the “Spring Light Program,” which has funded thousands of overseas mainland academics to visit China (Zweig, et al. 2008). The goal is in part to encourage them to return.

Business entrepreneurs have their own needs, such as tax or tariff relief or cheap loans, which help them start new enterprises. Governments must construct a conducive “soft” environment for businesses by liberalizing the foreign trade regime and the domestic market, constraining predatory government officials from confiscating or interfering with the private economy, creating a freer labour market, or privatizing state-owned businesses. Only open markets can provide opportunities for large numbers of people to return and start up private businesses. Highly regulated markets will only attract a small number of people with government ties who earn profits through arbitrage or “rent-seeking,” but will not promote the widespread development of a vibrant, globalized market economy.

A modern “hard” environment is equally important. Telecommunications, roads, harbors, electricity—infrastructure—promote market expansions, improve the quality of life, facilitate international contacts, and enhance business opportunities. Governments with limited resources may establish scientific, industrial, or export processing parks which provide companies with better facilities and preferential taxation treatment, compared to companies outside the parks. However, Saxenian argues that “policy makers in developing countries should devote their efforts to facilitating a bottom-up process of entrepreneurship”—that is, introduce policies that help returnees become entrepreneurs—rather than over-invest in infrastructure in an effort to create the next Silicon Valley (Saxenian, 2006: 8).

These policies do not differ greatly from policies that attract non-national foreign investors. Both overseas nationals and non-nationals are drawn by economic incentives. However, to attract overseas home country nationals, governments can employ non-economic factors, such as honorific positions, faster academic promotions, or other indicators of higher status, particularly because Chinese often say that one reason they do, or would, return is to enhance their social status (Zweig and Chen, 1995).

Unlike most foreign investors, returnees have important social and familial issues that need resolving, such as education of children who may have spent their formative years overseas and therefore face academic challenges in their parents’ home country. Other issues include freedom of movement in and out of their home country, and residency in their home country if they acquired citizenship in their host society.

Migrants may lack concrete information about conditions and job opportunities in their original home country. Thus Chinese consulates set up education or investment promotion agencies, and provide consultancy services for job searching, to spread career and investment information (Chen and Liu, 2003). Agencies can arrange or finance visits for people interested in returning to home countries, but visits are useful only if there is something to really show. Delegations from the home country can tour the developed world to recruit returnees, though many Chinese living abroad see these delegations as opportunities for tourism for the delegation members rather than as serious employment opportunities.

Residency issues need to be addressed. Returnees may not want to give up newly gained citizenship from their host country. They may have invested much time and money in getting foreign citizenship; and foreign citizenship may play an important calculation in their decision to go home, as it affords political and social security should problems emerge in the home country.<sup>2</sup> After all, political insecurity is a key factor driving the skilled overseas. Taking away that security may force them to reconsider the decision to return.

Similarly, governments must avoid punishing returnees for taking foreign citizenship and allow them to compete for grants and fellowships that are available to locals who have not gone abroad. Thus many countries offer dual citizenship schemes for returnees and their family members, while China recently offered permanent residence status to returnees with foreign passports.

Finally, developing states must consider whether some degree of political liberalization is a worthwhile price to pay for attracting returnees. While full-fledged democracy may not be necessary for returnees; political stability and a more open society, allowing free expression of views, may be necessary. This situation is particularly likely if politics drove people out in the first place and if they have grown accustomed to the freedoms in the West. Thus the flow of returnees to Taiwan, South Korea and the People's Republic of China have all preceded the blooming of full-scale democracy; yet in all three cases, some liberalization preceded a flow of reverse migrants. Open societies also foster freer flows of information, necessary for widespread business entrepreneurship, while "crony capitalism" benefits only those with government or military ties. Thus, one reason mainland Chinese living abroad do not establish companies in China is the perception that the

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<sup>2</sup> One returned scientist in China who took up Canadian citizenship resented that he was not allowed to renew his membership in the Chinese Communist Party. Interview by the author.

business playing field is “not level” (table 4).

## ***2. How Important are Government Policies?***

Governments play only a limited direct role in attracting returnees. Their role is indirect: emphasizing and improving the broad environment for science, technology and business development; deregulating markets which allow for greater entrepreneurship; insuring political stability, thereby mitigating fears that drive much of the outflow of talent. Thus, a report from UK stated that,

in the absence of improvements in the economic and political conditions in migrants’ home countries, any scheme to facilitate sustainable return is likely to fail”. If developing countries are to benefit from the sustainable return of their migrations, they need to pursue policies---better governance, less bureaucracy, and economic growth---which will make migrants want to return, and which will ensure that those migrants who have returned have a sense that they and their country are moving toward a brighter future (IDC, 2004).

In fact, incentives offered to people overseas to encourage them to return— increase the quality, but not the quantity of returnees. Thus, granting special privileges to those who return can create an outflow, not just an inflow, as people realize that the benefits of returning are available only to those who have gone abroad. But once they go overseas, the home country must introduce strategies to get them to return. What may emerge then is a vicious circle created in part by the special privileges granted to reverse migrants.

In 2002, a survey conducted by Zweig and Chen among returned academics, scientists and entrepreneurs allowed people to select only three reasons why they thought other people had returned.<sup>3</sup> The responses suggest that the government’s role is not so important (table 1).

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<sup>3</sup> They were asked this question, rather than one which asked their own views, because the authors believed that informants might admit the importance of “self-interest” over patriotism, if they felt that no one could accuse them personally of selfish motivations for returning.

**Table 1. Why People Return?**

<i>Reasons Others Returned</i>	<i>Shares of Respondents' Choices</i>
<u>“Changes in the domestic environment”</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 2<sup>nd</sup> choice of 22%</li></ul>
<u>“Freedom to come and go”:</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 1st choice of 3%</li><li>• 2nd choice of 10%</li><li>• 3rd choice of 10%</li></ul>
<u>Political stability:</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 2nd choice for 7%</li><li>• 3rd choice for 3.4%</li></ul>
<u>Changes in how the government utilizes returnees</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 3rd choice of 9%</li></ul>

*Source:* Zweig, 2006.

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Yet when the question is worded differently, government policies become the second most important explanation for the increase of returnees in China (table 2). Political stability is rated as important as well.  
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**Table 2. Why has the number of returnees increased?**

<i>Selected Reasons</i>	<i>Percentage**</i>
China’s rapid economic development	58%
Good government policy	47%
Good opportunity to develop new technology in China	42%
Hard to find good opportunities overseas	32%
Glass ceiling overseas for Chinese	31%
Political stability in China	19%

*\*\*Note:* people could choose more than one response.

*Source:* Zweig 2006.

Another survey carried out in China in 2000 indicates that government policies do attract reverse migrants, as nearly 30% of 278 respondents selected “favorable government policies” as their primary reason for returning (table 3).

**Table 3. Major Reasons for Returning**

<i>Reason</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Favorable government policies	82	29.5
Better job opportunities	57	20.5
To be close to family members	38	13.7
To be close to friends	33	11.9
Better business opportunities	33	11.9
Other reasons	35	12.5
Total	278	100

*Source:* Luo, Fei and Huang, 2003.

Failure abroad may spur some reverse migration, particularly in societies which do not recognize academic or professional credentials from developing country institutions. Thus Canada's migration program to encourage mainlanders who already have graduated from college and are working in China as professionals has met with great difficulties (Li, 2008). The failure rate (and therefore the rate of reverse migration) is reportedly quite high. Still, Chinese people who do not go abroad do find comfort in explaining the strong reverse migration wave on migrants' failure overseas, rather than increased opportunities at home. Nevertheless, failure is not an insignificant factor. Gow and Iredale (2003) found that people returned to Bangladesh, albeit reluctantly, because they had not accomplished what they had set out to achieve. Similarly, in table 2 above, "Hard to find good opportunities overseas," and the "glass ceiling overseas for Chinese," both of which reflect less than stellar performances overseas, were selected by 32% and 31% respectively as key reasons leading people to return.

Governments play a more important role in attracting academics and scientists, as compared to entrepreneurs, because the first two groups work in universities or laboratories, organizations that depend almost entirely on state funding. So, state policies that expand tertiary educational institutions or research funding directly influence the number of returnees to these organizations. Entrepreneurs, on the other hand, need to "negotiate the marketplace," so the broader environment affecting profit-making, such as deregulation, privatization, limited bureaucratic interference, less corruption, legal enforcement and good governance, are of greater importance to them.

Governments can help returned entrepreneurs who need funding or assistance to commercialize their technology, often by granting start-up loans. Ironically, one study comparing attitudes among 100 local and 100 returned entrepreneurs in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou towards local governments, found that while returned entrepreneurs relied on government

assistance more than local entrepreneurs, returnees were more likely to resent the government and see it as intrusive. These people had received very little funding from the government or local banks, relying primarily on funds they had saved while abroad and the support of relatives and friends. Hence, they resented having to turn to the government for assistance in navigating the domestic environment (Vanhonacker, et al, 2006).

We can also discern possible roles for the government by looking at why expatriate entrepreneurs would NOT set up a company or move back. Saxenian’s survey of Chinese entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley showed that government bureaucracy and regulations were the most important reasons why mainlanders living abroad would not start a business in China (table 4). This meshes with Vanhanocker, et. al., who found that among the 100 returned entrepreneurs, many resented government interference. Saxenian’s data also show that China’s inadequate legal system ranked second and political instability third.

**Table 4. Top 3 Reasons Why Not to Set up a Business in China**

<i>Reason</i>	<i>Perc ent</i>	<i>Reason</i>	<i>Perc ent</i>
Government bureaucracy/regulation	57.5	Lack of access to capital	18.4
Inadequate legal system	50.0	Poor business services	16.6
Political or economic uncertainty	38.3	Inferior quality of life	13.0
Unfair competition	37.0	Poor quality of labour	5.2
Immature market conditions	32.9	Rising cost of labour	1.8
Unreliable infrastructure	19.9		

*Source:* Zweig, 2006.  
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To summarize, while government policy can encourage returnees, a lack of business opportunities and the socio-political environment can dissuade migrants from returning. So, the government’s job in some measure is simply to get out of the way of the market. Saxenian (2006), noting that Silicon Valley has gone “global,” sees successful entrepreneurs there serving as matchmakers, linking their own companies in Silicon Valley with markets in their home country, creating new start-ups, financing investment, and transferring new

technology. To this extent, independent entrepreneurs encourage overseas students to return home by creating new start-ups. Nevertheless, as suggested by the UK's International Development Committee (IDC, 2004), governments can call on people overseas to return, but unless the situation within the country has changed, returnees will face the same issues of poor governance, bureaucracy and corruption which led to their initial departure. Under such conditions, they may choose not to return.

### **3. Diaspora Option**

It is approximately 10 years since the concept of the “diaspora option” focused on how developing countries could turn human capital, lost through migration, into a positive force for national development by encouraging overseas citizens or educated migrants to help their home country (Meyer et. al., 1997). The “diaspora option” re-conceptualizes the migration of educational, scientific or medical personnel, seeing it less as a permanent exodus or loss to the home country but more as “brain circulation,” where talent goes abroad but information circulates back to the individual's country of origin (Saxenian, 2003). Through scholarly, business, and educational exchanges, skilled migrants can stay in their host country yet still participate in the economic and scientific development of their home country.

In 2001, the Chinese government decided to mobilize overseas talent to help national development. Chinese citizens who remain overseas and their organizations were encouraged to engage in seven types of activities: (1) employ their professional advantages or the advantages of their professional bodies; (2) concurrently hold positions in China and overseas;<sup>4</sup> (3) accept commissions to engage in cooperative research in China and abroad; (4) return to China to teach and conduct academic and technical exchanges; (5) set up enterprises in China; (6) conduct inspections and consultations; and (7) engage in intermediary services, such as running conferences, importing technology or foreign funds, or helping Chinese firms find export markets.<sup>5</sup> China called on professional, academic and technical associations of overseas students to “give full play to their collective advantages in developing various activities in the service of China.”<sup>6</sup> This way, scientific collaboration ensues without people in the diaspora uprooting their lives and moving back home (Zweig et. al., 2008).

Associations of overseas entrepreneurs are critical if information, funds and

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<sup>4</sup> This is known as the “dumbbell” model because individuals have a foot in two worlds.

<sup>5</sup> Numerous ministries worked together to draft these guidelines. See “A Number of Opinions on Encouraging Overseas Students to Provide China with Many Different Forms of Service,” in *Chinese Education and Society*, vol. 36, no. 2 (March/April 2003): 6-11.

<sup>6</sup> “A Number of Opinions,” p. 9.

technology are to be transferred back to the home country. Approximately 100 academics in southern Ontario, outside Toronto, set up an organization that helps one city in Sichuan Province develop—some of those people return for six months each year. Similarly, a group of former students living in Osaka assisted three factories and established over 100 projects in a small city outside Shanghai. By Chinese calculations, these import substitution technologies saved China over 100 million RMB (US\$12 million) (Chen and Liu, 2003). Statistical analysis of Saxenian's data on mainland Chinese in Silicon Valley shows that an important predictor of whether a person there collaborated with a company in China—becoming a “server”—is whether they have a friend who has returned to the mainland (Zweig, et al, 2008). Similarly, Taiwanese in the U.S. formed strong associations among themselves and they have also been increasingly building professional and social networks that span national boundaries and facilitate flows of capital, skill and technology back to Taiwan.

The Chinese government encourages such projects by offering grants to local researchers who partner with an overseas mainlander. Such international scientific networks have grown rapidly, and the number of papers by co-ethnics, that is, Chinese in the U.S. and China, has increased enormously over the past 10 years (Jin, et. al., 2007). Chinese institutes are keen to establish these linkages, in part because universities compete for ranking based on publications in international journals and part-time overseas faculty increase those numbers.

Also, China's government encourages mainlanders overseas to establish businesses in China. No doubt, business activities are motivated by profit rather than the ideology of “serving the country.” But overseas mainlanders are much more likely than non-Chinese to transfer technology to China. Some mainlanders working overseas design new technology, but resent the fact that their host country employers maintain ownership over technology which they helped create. So, they bring the new technology to a partner in China to reap the benefits of their own creativity.

Corresponding with the diaspora option, a recent survey of 49 countries showed that for many of them, getting overseas students to physically return was not the priority, either because they preferred other types of programs that were targeted at “virtual returnees,” or because of the costs to them of such permanent return programs was simply too high. Local Chinese officials told a group of mainland researchers that smaller communities could not afford to support the work of overseas researchers, but could benefit greatly from the work that they did overseas (Chen and Liu, 2003: 173).

There are many reasons to believe that the “diaspora model” will succeed in China. Compared to African and Latin American countries, China's large

indigenous and relatively developed scientific community allows for very fruitful interactions for people abroad. Interviews cite the benefits of working with high quality scholars and excellent graduate students as major reasons for working with people on the mainland. Second, China's booming economy creates incentives for overseas mainlanders to transfer a new technology; it need not be world class, but if it is in short supply in China, it can be quite profitable in the short run. At the same time, it fills a gap in China's economy or scientific honeycomb. In fact, many Chinese who go abroad to study at a more advanced level search for such "shortage" technologies which they bring back to China, either by moving home or engaging in a project in the PRC (Zweig, et al, 2006). Third, the globalization of scientific techniques and the positioning of many Chinese in leading research centers in the West mean that they have much to share with China. Finally, China is no longer poor; it can pay salaries and research costs incurred by scientists or academics who return for short periods. Thus, although many of the mainland's top researchers and entrepreneurs currently living in the diaspora are not prepared to return, the diaspora option of building a transnational scientific community becomes one an important way Western technology can flow into China.

As for Colombia's diaspora, apart from physical organizations or associations based in different countries, overseas students and academics interact through the internet. Many joint projects were carried out between overseas and domestic researchers. The first, the "Bio-2000 Project," was launched in 1993 when European and North American-based Colombian researchers tried to launch an R&D project in biomedical applications of physics in Colombia (Meyer, et.al., 1997).

As for the impact of the diaspora option, Meyer et. al. (1997) argued that it contributed to scientific development in several ways. For example, policy design and implementation: Colombia's National System of Science and Technology called on specialists abroad to participate in their 11 disciplinary councils that designed policies in each of these 11 fields. The diaspora also provided experts for peer review to assess the quality of projects on behalf of the councils. Some research projects linked overseas academics with people in Colombia. These projects were often of one to several years in duration or established a permanent structure, such as an academic centre with a doctoral program in a provincial university.

Drawing on Colombia's experience, Meyer et. al. suggested that the "diaspora option" should be complementary to, rather than replace, the "return option." Successful reintegration of returnees is more likely if the expatriates had maintained and developed working relationships with their national professional community before they returned. Also, the diaspora option's

advantage resides in its flexible network; it does not require massive infrastructural investment beyond the reach of developing countries. But it does require a firm commitment with regard to implementing policies that result from strategic thinking. Lists must be built and regular communication with overseas academics must be maintained. Yet interviews in several Canadian cities show that even China has had only limited success in getting its educational and scientific consular officials to establish systematic lists.

### **Research Dilemmas: Finding Servers and Losers**

Surveys of returnees or people in the diaspora who work with their home country depend on the creation of lists from which researchers can draw randomly. Fortunately, one can pinpoint Chinese mainland academics at Western universities because of the “*pinyin*” or Romanization system they use for their names. Thus, in a 1993 survey of mainlanders in the U.S., Zweig and Chen went through department lists on various campuses, drawing a total population before choosing a sample. University web-sites offer similar opportunities, if one is patient enough to work through department lists on the web. Several such studies have been done relating to mainland scholars in the US, Canada and Hong Kong (Han, et. al., 2005). However, web-based surveys have low response rates, usually not much more than 15%, so after such lists are drawn up, it may be preferable to carry out a mailed survey, if not send out researchers for face to face interviews.

What percentage of overseas sojourners actually help their home country? We cannot answer that question, as the total population of people overseas who could help is not available. Saxenian built her data set from members within professional associations in Silicon Valley, but members of these groups are more likely than non-members to work with China. Therefore, we can only say things about the nature of the ‘servers,’ rather than compare them to the overall population of country nationals residing abroad.

Still, web based surveys of mainlanders in the U.S. and Hong Kong found significant differences in the share of respondents who were engaged in some way in academic exchanges with the mainland and found that the returnees in the two territories emphasized different reasons for engaging with the mainland. Thus, while the data may have limits, it does highlight important characteristics of the different diaspora populations.

Finding people who have returned to their home country should be much easier. Returnee associations abound, so even entrepreneurs can be found. Universities, too, have lists of faculty who returned from overseas, although, university offices may be unwilling to give out such lists. Still, department web sites are useful if they list where the faculty member got their Ph.D.,

though not all universities do this. High tech zones are home to many returnees, so working with directors of such zones may yield an acceptable population. Surprisingly, however, officials in Nanjing responsible for managing the returnees had no real idea of how many returnees were working in the city.

But the big problem is to find the “failures,” because only by comparing their experiences with the experiences of those who succeed can one really explain the forces that trigger success. But returned entrepreneurs whose businesses go under, migrants who give up and return home, or people who move onto a third country, are difficult to locate. One can ask people in the diaspora who have chosen not to return why they have taken that decision—much as we asked people who had not set up a firm in China—but these remain hypothetical situations.

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