

## RETURNED STUDENTS AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN CHINA

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*This article provides an overview of China's returned students and their impact on political change in China. The article analyzes how the returned students promote political reform and what changes they have brought to the political climate. The argument here is that quite a number of persons who have returned from studies abroad are in important positions and many of them serve as carriers of Western values. A large number of Chinese returnees endorse incremental political liberalization rather than radical democratic transformation. If China's political and economic conditions continue to improve, more students will return home. In the long run, they will play a more significant role in transforming China.*

**Key words:** China, returned students, economic reform, political reform

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## Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the cold war, and the opening of China have created an unprecedented surge of global migration. According to Douglas Massey, these events have forced the traditional immigrant-receiving democracies in the West to impose barriers to counter the pro-emigration policies of countries such as China.<sup>1</sup> Each year, approximately 15 percent of graduates from the top Chinese universities pursue further education in overseas universities, mainly in the United States and Europe.<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon of hundreds of thousands of well-educated Chinese living abroad permanently had sparked concerns that the economically backward country would never recover. But the “brain drain” has begun to reverse. Improving political, social, and economic conditions in mainland China have encouraged Chinese students to return home—some permanently, others as reverse “sojourners”—maintaining homes in both the United States and China. These “reverse migratory” movements affect a transformation of the cultural and intellectual forces of the home country, a phenomenon of particular significance in the twenty-first century.

According to official statistics, from 1978 to 2003, a total of 700,200 Chinese students and scholars have studied in 108 countries and regions all over the world.<sup>3</sup> The number of students from China in America is frequently larger than the number of students from any other foreign country. In 2003, the total number of PRC students and scholars studying abroad was 117,300, among whom 3,002 people were state-funded, 5,144 employer-funded, and 109,200 self-funded. In the same year, a total of 20,100 students and scholars returned from overseas studies, among whom 2,638 were state-funded, 4,292 employer-funded, and 13,200 self-funded.<sup>4</sup>

1. Douglas Massey, “International Migration at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century: The Role of the State,” *Population and Development Review*, vol. 25, No. 2 (June, 1999), pp. 311-12.
2. Piset Wattanavitukul, “Hai Gui: The Sea Turtles Come Marching Home,” online at [www.apmforum.com/columns/china19.htm](http://www.apmforum.com/columns/china19.htm).
3. See the website of the Ministry of Education at [www.moe.edu/english/international\\_2.htm](http://www.moe.edu/english/international_2.htm).
4. See the website of the Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange of

The Chinese students have returned to their homeland in growing numbers since the late 1990s. An official with the Ministry of Personnel predicted that the number of returned students will grow by 13 percent in the years ahead.<sup>5</sup> A new Chinese term, *haigui*, was recently coined to describe this rapidly growing group.<sup>6</sup> *Haigui* are one of the most tangible and intriguing aspects of the changes underway in China.

There is a growing scholarly interest in the returned students (*liuxuesheng*). Hayhoe analyzes the roles of China’s returned scholars in the late 1980s.<sup>7</sup> The book by Zhidong Hao offers an excellent discussion of political attitudes of the Chinese intellectuals in post-Mao China.<sup>8</sup> Several studies explore the educational exchanges between the United States and China.<sup>9</sup> The Chinese news media has devoted a lot of space to reporting on the professional achievements and business successes of those Chinese students and scholars who have returned to China. Yet most of the available literature is historically oriented, and many studies emphasize government policy on study abroad and the employment patterns of returnees. With few exceptions, little attention is being directed to the political impact of the current generation of returnees. Despite the significance of the subject, presently there

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the Ministry of Education.

5. “Plan to Reverse Brain Drain,” *China Daily*, December 23, 2003, online at [www2.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-12/23/content\\_292555.htm](http://www2.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-12/23/content_292555.htm).
6. “*Haigui*” means the returning “sea turtles”—an abbreviation that sums up returnees from overseas. The pronunciation also suggests the Chinese phrase for sea turtles that were born on the shore, grew up at sea, but eventually returned to the shore again.
7. Ruth Hayhoe, “China’s Returned Scholars and the Democracy Movement,” *China Quarterly*, No. 122 (June, 1990), pp. 293-302.
8. Zhidong Hao, *Intellectuals at a Crossroads: The Changing Politics of China’s Knowledge Workers* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2003).
9. Cheng Li, *Bridging Minds Across the Pacific: The U.S.-China Educational Exchanges 1978-2003* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2005); David Zweig, “To Return or Not to Return? Politics vs. Economics in China’s Brain Drain,” *Studies in Comparative International Development*, vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring, 1997), pp. 92-125; David Zweig, Chen Changgui, and Stanley Rosen, “Globalization and Transnational Human Capital: Overseas and Returned Scholars to China,” *China Quarterly*, No. 179 (September, 2004), pp. 735-58.

is no in-depth study on how much the returnees have influenced political reform and what changes they have brought to the political climate. This article seeks to fill this gap in the literature of Chinese politics.

The article addresses the following questions: To what extent will the returned students become the carriers of Western ideas and American values, thus expanding the democratic potential to the rest of society? Why is the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) trying to coopt the returned students? Are the returned students willing partners with the state, promoting regime goals of economic growth and political stability, or are they an autonomous force in opposition to the state? In what way have they served as agents of democratization in China? Can their experience in the West help them govern China in a more democratic way? The article, which is principally based on extensive interviews in China over the past few years, is organized as follows. The first section documents the three generations of students who have studied abroad and returned to China.<sup>10</sup> The second analyzes the impact of the returnees. The third explores how Beijing deals with returned students and assesses to what extent the returnees serve as agents of political reform.

### Brief Overview of Returned Students

There are three generations of returned students in modern Chinese history.<sup>11</sup> The Chinese study-abroad movement was born in 1872 when the Qing government decided to send students to the United States. Between 1846 and 1949 about 150,000

10. In-person interview with scholars, journalists, businessmen, government officials educated and trained overseas in Beijing in summers of 2003 and 2004; and in Shenzhen in December 2004.

11. For detailed discussion on the topic, see Stacey Bieler, *"Patriots" or "Traitors"?: A History of American-Educated Chinese* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2004); Jianyi Huang, *Chinese Students and Scholars in American Higher Education* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997); Tao Li, ed. *Zhonghua liuxue jiaoyu shilu* (A History of Chinese Study Abroad) (Beijing: Zhongguo jiaoyuguoji jiaoliu xiehui, 2003); and Ting Ni, *The Cultural Experiences of Chinese Students Who Studied in the United States During the 1930s-1940s* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002).

Chinese students studied abroad.<sup>12</sup> In the 1880s, the returned students from the United States and Europe became the main managerial forces in the new enterprises of the Self-Strengthening Movement (1862-1894). Many returned students advocated social and political theories ranging from complete Westernization of China to socialism. Sun Yat-sen, for example, known as the "father of the Republic," spent many years abroad. Returned students from Japan were the main organizers and leaders of the 1911 Revolution. Many of the early revolutionary leaders of China were returned students. Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai were among the best known Chinese studying in Paris in the 1920s.<sup>13</sup>

The second wave started in the early 1950s soon after the People's Republic was established. In 1949, the Chinese Communists defeated the Chinese Nationalists and established a new regime. Education, in spite of its place as a longstanding tradition, was put in a less important position. After 1949 the mainland Chinese government no longer allowed intellectuals to go to the West to study. The connection to the Western schools was cut due to the regime's anti-Western cultural movement and its pro-Soviet policies. Among the 11,000 Chinese who studied abroad between 1949 and early 1960, an overwhelming majority went to the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> Large-scale educational exchanges between China and the Soviet Union ended in the early 1960s due to political and ideological disputes between the two countries. Several returned students later became top party and state leaders. Jiang Zemin, (former president) and Li Peng (former premier) were prominent figures among this generation of the returnees. In the CCP Politburo that served from 1997 to 2002, seven (29 percent) studied in the Soviet Union or other East European countries. Other members of that third generation of leaders also had Soviet study experience.

12. Zhang Yufa, "Returned Chinese Students from America and the Chinese Leadership 1846-1949," *Chinese Studies in History*, vol. 35, No. 3 (Spring, 2002), p. 52.

13. For detailed analysis of this generation of the returnees, see Marilyn A. Levine, *The Found Generation: Chinese Communists in Europe During the Twenties* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1993).

14. For more discussion, see Cheng Li, *China's Leaders: The New Generation* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), pp. 17-18.

The third wave of study abroad began with the market-oriented reforms in the late 1970s. Since then sending students and scholars abroad to earn degrees and conduct research has been an integral part of China's policy of upgrading its educational systems and obtaining the professional manpower necessary to meet the goals of modernization. More than ever before, large numbers of students and scholars have been sent to Western Europe, Japan, and the United States for advanced studies and training. In the early years, candidates tended to be middle-aged or older, and were drawn mainly from national-echelon higher education institutions, the best-quality institutions in China. Later, more and younger graduates, as well as undergraduate students, were sent.<sup>15</sup>

The post-Mao Chinese leadership believes that overseas studies is the quickest way to learn the West's secrets of wealth and power. Previously, few of the students returned to China because of poor conditions there. That has changed since the late 1990s. Students have been returning to China in increasing numbers because of stiff job competition in the United States, racial prejudice, language difficulties, and patriotism.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, rapid economic growth has created more opportunities in China. The reflux has accelerated, especially since 1998, when as many as 7,379 persons returned to China, almost five times the number in 1990.<sup>17</sup>

In the last few years, attracted by China's awesome economic growth and a hope of greater freedom, significant numbers of Chinese-born professionals and even artists are moving back. Many work in the private sector but some are taking government jobs. In addition, there has been an increasing demand for administrators in government agencies—people who are more competent, who can help promote economic development (a top priority for the government), and who can better respond to the needs of an increasingly complex and globally oriented econo-

15. Bangchen Pang and Nicholas Appleton, "Higher Education as an Immigration Path for Chinese Students and Scholars," *The Qualitative Report*, vol. 9, No. 3 (September, 2004), pp. 500-501.

16. Bieler, "Patriots" or "Traitors"? p. 358.

17. Silin Duan, "The Studied-in-America Faction and the Qinghua Faction in China's Political Arena," *Chinese Education & Society*, vol. 36, No. 4 (July-August, 2003), p. 93.

my. Among China's 5.41 million active public servants, 52 percent have a junior college education, 10 percent have a university education, and only 1 percent has a postgraduate education. Very few have majored in administrative affairs.<sup>18</sup> Most of the students sent by China studied science and engineering, while only 18 percent studied humanities and social sciences.<sup>19</sup> For self-funded students, the percentage of humanities majors is even lower.

It has become apparent that there is a great potential for development in China and the returnees can play a strategic role in that growth. As a result, foreign education (mainly Western education) gradually replaced traditional Chinese education as the dominant cultural capital and the most important means of social mobility in modern China.<sup>20</sup> Under such a circumstance, more intelligent young people will seek advanced training abroad and then return upon their graduation.

It is well known that "Eastern ethics, Western science" was a popular slogan for modernization during Japan's Meiji period. Similarly, China has aggressively pursued "socialism with Chinese characteristics." One important strategy, analogous to that pursued by Japan after the Meiji Restoration, has been to send students abroad for their education in the expectation that upon their return they would bring with them the skills and technology essential for China to "catch up" with the West. And as in Japan, the Chinese leadership hopes to vet the influx of ideas and knowledge in such a way as to exclude democratic notions incompatible

18. Caroline Haiyan Tong and Hongying Wang, "Sino-American Educational Exchanges and Public Administrative Reforms in China: A Study of Norm Diffusion," in Cheng Li, *Bridging Minds*, p. 167.

19. From 1979-1984, J-1 students studying agriculture, computer science, engineering, health science, life science, math, and physical science totaled 78 percent whereas those studying business management, education, TESOL, humanities, law, and social sciences totaled 18 percent. "Other" equaled 3 percent. David Lampton, with Joyce A. Madancy and Kristen M. Williams, *A Relationship Restored: Trends in U.S. China Educational Exchange, 1978-1984* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1986), p. 187.

20. Hui Huang, "Overseas Studies and the Rise of Foreign Cultural Capital in Modern China," *International Sociology*, vol. 17, No. 1 (March, 2002), p. 35.

with the CCP's monopoly of political power—to create a China that is “Western in form, Chinese in content.” In other words, the study abroad program since 1978 was designed as part of general efforts for catching up and as a means of economic modernization, not for political reforms.<sup>21</sup>

### The Political Impact of Returned Students

Many of the third generation returnees not only became high achievers in science, technology, and academic circles but also excelled in other sectors such as finance, economy, business, law, and journalism.<sup>22</sup> Unlike the returnees in other societies who have the choice of engaging in politics and forming their own political organizations and associations, the returnees under the communist regime have little choice but to devote themselves to their scholarly work or commercial activities. In spite of this, many returnees are gaining high positions in the ministerial and provincial governments. This pattern repeats itself in different institutions such as banks, regulatory bodies, and think tanks.<sup>23</sup> One recent study found that the returnees already dominate leadership positions in China's higher education, and the diffusion of liberal ideas and Western values in Chinese society has become apparent.<sup>24</sup> This section will assess the roles of the returnees in the political changes in China.

First, a growing number of returnees are holding influential positions in central and provincial government. They have played an important role in the “political transformation” of

21. For detailed discussion on the topic, see Beijing University School of Education and Zhongshan University Institute of Higher Education, “Retrospect and Analysis of China's Policies with Regard to Students Sent by the State to Other Countries Since 1978,” *Chinese Education & Society*, vol. 38, No. 3 (May-June, 2005), pp. 7-62.

22. Some studies refer the current generation of the returnees the Tenth Generation of Returnees, others call it the Fifth Generation of Returnees.

23. Enze Cai, “Perspective of Overseas Scholars' Difficulties in Returning to China,” *Chinese Education & Society*, vol. 36, No. 4 (July-August, 2003), pp. 7-12.

24. For details, see Tong and Wang, “Sino-American Educational Exchanges,” pp. 155-76.

China. Among the 356 full and alternate members of the latest CCP Central Committee (CCPCC), thirty-two had study or work experiences abroad lasting a year or more.<sup>25</sup>

In Shanghai, 80 percent of the presidents of the city's thirty-nine universities have studied abroad.<sup>26</sup> In recent years, think tanks have come to play an important part in the formation, development, and propagation of new, reformist economic and foreign policies. Many returnees are working in think tanks. For instance, there are several prominent *haigui* at the China Center for Economic Research at Beijing University who have played a significant role in socioeconomic debates in China.<sup>27</sup> Most of the Chinese “America Watchers” have been students or visiting scholars at American universities.

As of today, a large number of returned students are holding important positions, such as Zhou Xiaochuan, governor of the People's Bank of China, and Zhou Li, Minister of Education. The *haigui* represent some of China's brightest minds. Fifty-four percent of the members of the Chinese Academy of Engineering and an astonishing 81 percent of the members of the Chinese Academy of Sciences are people who have returned from studies abroad.<sup>28</sup>

Chinese students faced many financial, emotional, social, and academic difficulties and hardships when they studied abroad, yet a large number of them excelled in the West with little money and language preparation. They succeeded largely on merit and effort rather than because of family ties or political connections. This elite group is becoming more powerful since the country entered the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. As Duan notes, “along with the deepening of reform and opening up and the accelerated reflux of overseas scholars from

25. Cheng Li and Lynn White, “The Sixteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party: Emerging Patterns of Power Sharing,” in Lowell Dittmer and Guoli Liu, eds., *China's Deep Reform: Domestic Politics in Transition* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), p. 102.

26. *People's Daily* (Beijing), July 6, 2001.

27. For details of the China Center for Economic Research, see the website at <http://ccer.pku.edu.cn>.

28. Michael D. Lemonick, “Are We Losing the New Technology Race?” *Time*, February 13, 2006, p. 33.

the United States, it can be foreseen that these studied-in-America scholars will, in future, gradually take over in the political, economic, and academic fields to become the pillars and main force in China's society."<sup>29</sup> In short, the returnees have filled key positions in the government, universities, and think tanks, and their help will be vital to whoever controls Zhongnanhai.

Second, the returnees brought not only knowledge and technology but also new ideas and ways of doing things. The returnees are among the strongest supporters of Beijing's policy of "reform and openness," and serve as a bridge between China and the West in its efforts to modernize. They have played a key role in bringing socioeconomic awakening. According to one study, nine of the ten most influential economists in China in 2006 received their education in the West.<sup>30</sup> When the students were in the United States, many stayed attuned to the Chinese intellectuals' critiques of China's past mistakes and present ills.<sup>31</sup> They became convinced that traditional Chinese cultural isolation would never lead to progress. Instead, "stones" of knowledge from Western "hills" must be utilized to build up their Chinese mountain. For instance, Wang Xiaobo was a novelist known for his penetrating and somewhat satirical views of society, which were attributed to his years of study abroad. Another often cited example is Chen Danqing, who went to the United States in 1982. He was one of the first Chinese artists to make a living abroad. After living in New York for eighteen years, he returned to China in 2000 to teach art at Qinghua University. Since his return, Chen has been outspoken about the shortcomings of art education in China.

The returning students advocate a variety of economic and political theories and ideas ranging from complete Westernization of China to new authoritarianism. In the field of international relations (IR), after twenty-five years of mind bridging, Chinese IR scholars have mainly adopted Western (mainly American) concepts and vocabularies.<sup>32</sup>

29. Duan, "The Studied-in-America Faction," p. 93.

30. "Ten Most Influential Economists in China," *Huaxi dushi bao* [Huaxi Metropolitan News], February 23, 2006.

31. Bieler, "Patriots" or "Traitors"? p. 351.

32. Shiping Zheng, "Sino-American Educational Exchanges and International

Xia Shuzhang, a leading scholar in Chinese public administration known as "the father of China's MPA," received his degree from Harvard in the 1940s. He was among the first to propose the adoption of an MPA program in China. Several associate deans at leading MPA programs (e.g., Qinghua University and Beijing University) received their doctorates from the United States. Their educational backgrounds and professional networks abroad have had an impact on the design and development of the programs under their leadership.<sup>33</sup> Most of China's leaders of environmental nongovernmental organizations have also spent significant time abroad, particularly in the United States, either at universities or in training with various U.S.-based environmental NGOs. Several, including Liang Congjie, Liao Xiaoyi, and Wang Yongchen, have won major international environmental awards for their work.<sup>34</sup>

Third, the returnees constitute a new engine for political and economic reform. During their stay abroad, students learned to govern China in a democratic way. Free elections for the Chinese students and scholars' organizations are held in almost all campuses outside China. After studying and working overseas, they are more open to Western ideas and less bound by communist ideology than those who have no experience in overseas study. Western political, social, and educational ideas have had a considerable influence on many returnees who, without evident self-consciousness, have adopted elements of the Western ideas and ways of doing things. For instance, the Western college model, the diversity of course offerings, the pragmatism in the sense of social usefulness, and the spirit of academic freedom in seeking truth have all had their impact on the Chinese students. They normally want government to tolerate criticism, boost the private sector, and encourage the rule of law. Some of them strongly feel that a democratic China is absolutely necessary for its modernization. Together with the newly enhanced middle class, some of

Relational Studies in China," in Chen Li, *Bridging Minds*, p. 148.

33. Tong and Wang, "Sino-American Educational Exchanges," p. 169.

34. See the statement of Elizabeth Economy, "China's Environmental Movement," Testimony before the Congressional Executive Commission on China Roundtable on Environmental NGOs in China, February 7, 2005, online at [www.cfr.org/publication.html?id=7770](http://www.cfr.org/publication.html?id=7770).

them have begun to assert an important influence in the political system.<sup>35</sup>

Rather than trying to enter politics, either by working within the government or by becoming its opponents, some of the returnees have invested their role as “experts” and critics with public and political importance. For instance, Li Fan serves as director of the World and China Institute (WCI), a nongovernmental institute in Beijing that studies electoral reform. He is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science at Ohio State University, where he also received his M.A. in 1986. Li Fan and others have been calling for moving direct elections from village to township level. Li designed and assisted the first direct election in township government in the town of Buyun, Sichuan province, in 1999. This has produced positive impact on the political reform in China. He has helped bring about several such experiments in recent years.<sup>36</sup>

Returnees have assumed leadership positions in many top universities in China, and some have built their faculties out of returned students. Many liberal-minded returnees realize the necessities of radical reform in the current university faculty promotion system. Scholars returned from abroad are considered movers and shakers in personnel reform at Beijing University (also known as Beida). This reform has changed the way China’s most prestigious university recruits and retains faculty. Previously, Beida and other Chinese colleges and universities recruited faculty from the graduates of the school. In 2004, for the first time, Beida openly recruited outside professors in large numbers. Since the reform, a professorial position at Beida is not necessarily an “iron rice bowl.” According to the Beida plan, once an associate professor is promoted to full professor, he or she receives a long-term teaching position. How long the “long term” is depends on whether the engaged person is able to observe Beida’s “rules of the game,” for example, whether he or she can meet the university authorities’ requirements at the outset of the contracted term of engagement. If they meet the conditions, they can work until

35. For detailed study on the subject, see He Li, “Middle Class: Friends or Foes to Beijing’s New Leadership?” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, vol. 8, Nos. 1-2 (Fall, 2003), pp. 87-100.

36. Interview with Li Fan at the World and China Institute in Beijing, 2002.

retirement.<sup>37</sup> Zhou Qiren, a professor at Beijing University with a Ph.D. in economics from UCLA, quoted Hayek’s words: “The reform or reconstruction of a competitive rule-of-law society is an intellectual adventure.” He considers Beida’s reform to be just this sort of intellectual adventure.<sup>38</sup>

One recent study found that as the number of returnees has increased and as many of them have become leaders in diverse fields such as education, law, media, business, and non-governmental organizations, the inevitable diffusion of liberal ideas and values in Chinese society has become visible.<sup>39</sup> Some of the returnees are largely responsible for educational reform in China. There has been a growing consensus in China that as more *haigui* return home, they will play a prominent role in the transformation of China.

### Partners or Foes of the Party-State?

In the past few years, thousands of students have returned to China. The returnees have played increasingly visible roles in all walks of life. It would seem that *haigui* are poised to use their influence to play an important role in China’s political life since their experience in the West makes them natural leaders of the democratic movement. If every returned student made known his/her convictions about liberal democracy, the cumulative effect could be significant. However, the effect of the increasing number of returnees in China’s social and political fabric is a subject of debate. Some argue that the time for a student-led revolution is over and that China’s future depends on the outcome of struggles among various social forces within China today.<sup>40</sup>

37. Chunlin Yuan, “Beida Personnel Reform Plan Offers Ninety-Five Posts for Recruitment at Home and Abroad,” *Chinese Education & Society*, vol. 38, No. 1 (January-February, 2005), p. 90.

38. Chunlin Yuan, “Scholars Returned from Abroad Root for Beida’s Reform,” *Chinese Education & Society*, vol. 38, No. 1 (January-February, 2005), p. 92.

39. Cheng Li, *Bridging Minds*, p. 3.

40. Hao, *Intellectuals at a Crossroads*, p. 189. In the 1911 Republican Revolution led by Sun Yat-sen, the returned students were among the most active forces opposing the imperial system. In October 1911, the victory of Sun’s United League was the death knell of the moribund Qing dynasty.

Others believe that the returnees have become a political force whose attitude and opinions have strongly influenced the reform process. These Western-trained students will gradually take over in the political, economic, and academic fields to become a significant force in Chinese society.<sup>41</sup> Some have criticized the returned students. In the words of Yang, "Lured by the promise of power, the returned students have abandoned their professional and academic specialties and have become parasites of the Chinese communist regime."<sup>42</sup> This state of affairs points to the need for more rigorous and systematic efforts to assess the roles played by the returned students. This section will explore why the returnees are more likely to become the agents for incremental political liberalization rather than the leaders or supporters of radical democratic reform.

#### *Political Persuasions of the Returnees*

First, while no consensus has emerged about the future of the returnees, it is clear that many of them loathe political dogma and extremism from both sides of the spectrum. Some believe scholars should remain aloof from politics and concentrate on their scholarly work. Others feel that reforming China's political system is a delicate process that would take two or three generations. They prefer to make change from within the existing political system (*tizhinei*) rather than from outside the system (*tizhiwai*). The returnees I interviewed generally wish for a strong state that would bring vigorous economic reform and incremental political reform. They support a government run by pragmatic technocrats, much like South Korea under the last dictator, Park Chung Hee, and Singapore under strongman Lee Kuan Yew.<sup>43</sup>

A large number of the returnees feel that a democratic China is absolutely necessary for its modernization; many also feel that neither current Chinese nor foreign forms of government can

41. Duan, "The Studied-in-America Faction," pp. 91-98.

42. Lili Yang, "Does a Western Education Produce More Enlightened Chinese Officials, Or Merely Better Equip a New Generation of Tyrants?" online at <http://cicus.org/news/newsdetail.php?id=5391>.

43. Interview with returnees in Beijing in the summer of 2004.

work in China. Many of them believe Western democracy is good, but not appropriate for China today. While some returnees talk about political reform, they are not proposing to democratize the polity but to make the single party rule of the Chinese Communist Party more efficient or to provide it with a more solid legal base. Some question whether democracy alone would be enough to save China. Pan Wei, a political science professor at Beijing University with a Ph.D. in political science from the University of California at Berkeley, argues that in order to lay the groundwork for the country's sustainable development, a rule of law must be established. According to Pan, the rule of law without democracy is the most likely path to political reform in the short run.<sup>44</sup> Many returnees have looked upon political liberalization without democratization as an alternative solution to many of China's problems related to the extant authoritarian system. Pan Wei's proposal for building a rule-of-law regime is representative of the work of this group of Chinese intellectuals.<sup>45</sup>

In the context of market reform and growing inequalities, a group known as China's "New Left" has emerged in China. This loose coalition comprises leading academics, many of whom have studied in the West and are disenchanted by it. They are challenging China's unique system of state-controlled capitalism with a simple message: That what they call China's failed 20th-century experiment with communism cannot be undone in the 21st century by embracing a 19th-century style *laissez-faire* capitalism.<sup>46</sup> The New Leftists mostly attack neoliberal economic policy. One of them is Cui Zhiyuan, professor at Qinghua University's School of Public Policy and Management in Beijing. Cui was a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He

44. Pan Wei, "Toward a Consultative Rule of Law Regime in China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 12, No. 34 (February, 2003), pp. 3-44.

45. Interview with scholars at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Renmin University in July 2004. For a critique of Pan Wei's proposal, see Suisheng Zhao, "Political Liberalization without Democratization: Pan Wei's Proposal for Political Reform," *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 12, No. 35 (May, 2003), pp. 333-56.

46. Jehangir Pocha, "China's New Left," *New Perspectives Quarterly*, vol. 22, No. 2 (Spring, 2005); and Jehangir S. Pocha, "In China, Disillusionment Spurs Challenge—Market Change Policies Create a Backlash," *Boston Globe*, March 24, 2006, p. 12.

has been described as a “new leftist” in part because he has tried to find positive aspects of Mao’s Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Similarly, Wang Shaoguang, a Yale-educated political scientist now at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, argues that China’s leaders have allowed the central government to atrophy by placing blind faith in the market to provide public goods.<sup>47</sup>

Stepping on Western soil did not automatically transform Chinese students into leaders for democratic reform. Having spent many years abroad, some of them lack the skills needed to run a bureaucratic machine and formulate policy. In fact, by going overseas, many *haigui* weakened their connections (*guanxi*) with those who could help them move up when they returned. In China, individuals are still usually promoted due to *guanxi* rather than their qualifications. As a result, only a small number of the returnees are interested in politics. Those holding key positions in the ministerial and provincial governments are more likely to be state- or institution-sponsored students. While it is true that returnees have given us penetrating analyses such as Wang Xiaobo and Chen Danqing’s critique of the Chinese educational and political systems, that level of achievement is insignificant in comparison with results from the vast majority of the returned students.<sup>48</sup>

Secondly, Beijing has kept a close eye on the emerging civil society and *haigui*. The term “liberalism” is given a negative connotation because it is often translated into Chinese as “freedomism” (*ziyou zhuyi*), which brings to mind a range of images such as political freedom, individualism, and a threatening, unrestrained license for behaviors that could lead to national chaos. The Chinese leaders use the idea of *luan* or chaos as a bogeyman to argue against any change that might threaten their power.

Throughout the reform era, the Party created a wide array of economic and social organizations in order to provide channels for interest articulation, facilitate the exchange of information between the state and key groups in society, replace the state’s direct and total control over the economy and society with at least partial social regulation, and screen out unwanted

47. Joseph Kahn, “Some Chinese See the Future, and It’s Capitalist,” *New York Times*, May 4, 2002.

48. Yang, “Does a Western Education?”

groups.<sup>49</sup> The returnees have managed to get together and develop some sense of attachment. For example, the Western Returned Students Association (WRSA) is an organization that allows those returned students to cultivate a sense of unity and a patriotic spirit. A certain amount of affection is embedded in this “we” feeling because of their common history, common experiences, common acquaintances, a common sense of pride, and common likes and dislikes. But most of these associations, including the WRSA and the NGOs, are monitored and sponsored by the party-state. If an organization wishes to be registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, approval must be obtained by a sponsoring institution. This means the sponsoring institution has to be responsible for the organization’s action. As it is so difficult to register as a social organization, many NGOs register as an enterprise or a subsidiary of a facade institution; or they avoid registration altogether by establishing as an informal “club” or “salon.”

Similarly, the Internet is regulated and censored by the government. Beijing has been largely successful in keeping websites advocating democracy and other topics considered taboo by the communist party off the personal computers of PRC Internet surfers. Under such circumstances, one of the very popular *haigui* forums ([haiguinet.com](http://haiguinet.com)) has a published policy that “discussion of any sensitive political issue is not allowed.”<sup>50</sup> Ironically, some *haigui* design and implement the Chinese “Golden Shield” project, using technologies they learned in the West to install censorship firewalls that block access to banned web pages and track sensitive words and expressions.<sup>51</sup> Religious affiliations also emerged through church services or bible studies as the Chinese students were assimilated into the Western communities. Nevertheless, in their beloved motherland, religious freedom has a different interpretation.

There has been little effort to bring back the talents who might push for political reform at home. It is well known that the

49. Bruce Dickson, “Economics as the Central Task: Do Entrepreneurs Matter?” in David Michael Finkelstein and Maryanne Kivlehan, eds., *China’s Leadership in the 21st Century: The Rise of the Fourth Generation* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), p. 189.

50. For details, see Rule #8 of Haiguinet (online at [www.haiguinet.com](http://www.haiguinet.com)).

51. Yang, “Does a Western Education?”

time for deep political reform hasn't come yet. As the leaders jostle for power in the post-Deng era, political reform is still suspended. Though a number of professors in other fields left their tenured positions in the United States and returned to China, few of those in the field of political science attempted to do so.<sup>52</sup> Some foreign-educated social scientists were ignored or regarded with suspicion by the government. They are treated with suspicion by party leaders mainly because they have received a Western education, and because as a group they have a history of being too outspoken. In China, open opposition to the communist party leadership is still not tolerated. This means that nearly all political dissidents remain abroad as exiles. Beijing maintains a list of dissidents to prevent these potential troublemakers from coming back. It is for this and other similar reasons that a large number of returnees choose to stay out of politics.

#### *Coopting the Best and the Brightest*

Third, in the post-Mao period, the switch from class struggle to economic modernization as the key task of the Party has made the Party dependent on the technocrats and entrepreneurs who play an important role in economic growth. The Party's cooptation strategy is a partial substitute for its traditional party-building practices: It is now targeting elites instead of the traditional focus on workers and peasants.<sup>53</sup> The Party has coopted elites by offering party membership to competent persons from all walks of life, including the returnees. They were incorporated into the system where they could be carefully controlled by the communist party. A number of the returnees are highly honored by the government. Research shows that the social, economic, and occupational mobility of those trained abroad was more rapid than for those who had never studied abroad.<sup>54</sup> Using a mixture of cooptation and control, Beijing has brought a large number of the

52. For details, see Zheng, "Sino-American Educational Exchanges," pp. 133-54.

53. For detailed discussion, see Bruce Dickson, "Cooptation and Corporatism in China: The Logic of Party Adaptation," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 115, No. 4 (Winter, 2001), pp. 517-41.

54. Ting Ni, *The Cultural Experiences of Chinese Students*.

returnees into the existing party-state system.

Scholars from the social sciences and humanities also have access to advancement opportunities. Some returnees were recruited by the Party. In some cases, overseas study or advanced "training" for promising technocrats has been used as a "perk" by the CCP to reward its loyal party members. It has been noted that a disproportionately large number of the people who were given permission to study abroad were the sons and daughters of high-ranking officials. Examples are Deng Zhifang, Deng Xiaoping's second son; Jiang Jinheng, Jiang Zemin's son; and Qian Ning, Qian Qishen's son. It should be noted that in the Taiwanese case, too, many ranking cadres of the Kuomintang (KMT) were "princeling" returnees, such as Lien Chan, James Soong, and Ma Ying-jeou. Yet, in mainland China, princeling returnees usually do not join officialdom, as they prefer not to work in the personnel and propaganda systems of the communist party.<sup>55</sup>

Because the talents of the Western-trained scientists and engineers have been crucial to the modernization of China, the government works hard to recruit brainpower from overseas. The Ministry of Education has provided several incentive programs to recruit senior researchers and prominent professionals in the high-tech, finance, law, trade, management, education, and high-level personnel sectors. These programs include the Chunhui Program (literally, Spring Bud), the Changjiang Scholar Incentive Program, and the Program of Academic Short-return for Scholars and Research Overseas.<sup>56</sup> The Chinese leadership recently adopted a "strategy of strengthening China through human capital" with the goal of enhancing the country's international competitiveness in higher education. Recruiting foreign-educated Chinese nationals has now become the top priority in that strategy. China offers its students abroad incentives to return once they graduate, including generous research grants and the opportunity to run their own research and development projects. Although China does not allow dual citizenship, in order to attract more returning talent Beijing is examining India's experience which offers dual citizenship to Indians from a selec-

55. Princeling refers to the privileged offspring of China's ruling elite.

56. See the website of the Ministry of Education at [www.moe.edu/english/international\\_2.htm](http://www.moe.edu/english/international_2.htm).

tive group of countries. It is said that Beijing might offer similar policies to *haigui* so that they can return to China more easily.

The returnees have been treated more favorably than other intellectuals. Numerous *haigui* are working in joint ventures that offer much better compensation than Chinese firms. China is still in the process of modernizing itself and is trying to model itself after foreign nations. Since the returned students are often thought to be persons of talent, they are afforded better opportunities than those who have never studied abroad. As of 2003, the Chinese government has established more than seventy industrial parks for returned students to start businesses. In these parks, the returnees can easily get loans to start a business, and their relatives can also easily obtain permanent residency.<sup>57</sup>

Students who return with doctoral degrees can begin their careers with a high title in a given institution with assurance of a substantial income. As a *New York Times* article points out, "China's model to build world-class universities is simple: recruit top foreign-trained Chinese and Chinese-American specialists, set them up in well-equipped labs, surround them with the brightest students and give them tremendous leeway. In a minority of cases, they receive American-level pay; in others, they are lured by the low cost of living, generous housing perquisites and the laboratories."<sup>58</sup> Their privileged status has caused a backlash of suspicion and jealousy in China's closed and hierarchical society. Meanwhile, Beijing does appreciate and seek overseas-educated scholars' comments on some of their policy issues. For instance, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conferences (CPPCCs) regularly solicit information from Western-trained scholars on a variety of issues.

At present, the CCP is ruling mainly by the power of cooptation, not by the dictatorship of the proletariat. The power of cooptation is stronger than the dictatorship of the proletariat, secured by purchasing the allegiance of the entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and *haigui*. Having been beneficiaries of the CCP's *gaige yu kaifang* (reform and opening to the outside world) policies, the returnees are reluctant to give up what they have obtained.

57. "Plan to Reverse Brain Drain," *China Daily* (Beijing), December 23, 2003.

58. Howard W. French, "China Luring Foreign Scholars to Make Its Universities Great," *New York Times*, October 28, 2005.

Their fate remains closely linked to the performance of the existing regime. Many returnees prefer the environment of growth with stability to the possibility of "democratic chaos," which is their interpretation of what happened in many former Soviet bloc countries.

### *An Uncertain Future*

Fourth, initially, returnees' foreign degrees automatically guaranteed them good jobs, prestige, and upward mobility. That has been changing lately. With the increasing number of returned students, the issue of employment has become increasingly salient. A good many returnees have not been able to find suitable work quickly and have become "unemployed from abroad" (waiting to find jobs). A recent investigation by the World HR Laboratory indicates that in China more than 35 percent of the returnees from abroad have difficulty in finding employment, and 40 percent of them feel that there have been mistakes in their job orientation. In 2004, 7,000 returnees in Shanghai alone were unable to find work.<sup>59</sup>

At present, the future of some returnees is still tentative. Some family members in China encourage their children to stay in the West because it offers an escape route for the family if China's political system collapses.<sup>60</sup> Those who have gained permanent residency in the United States, for example, are clinging to their green cards, even as they test the waters at home. A few are taking positions in government agencies, but continue to leave their spouses and children in the West. If these returnees stay to become part of the Chinese establishment, this may indicate that the rule of law is catching on and that the Party is losing its grip.<sup>61</sup>

In order to have any recognized role in government, job seekers, including returned students, need to take and pass the civil service examinations. The test is very competitive. In 2005,

59. Sun Hua, Gui Jie, and Chen Gang, "Can Foreign Diplomas Be Exchanged for 'Chinese Opportunities'?" *Chinese Education & Society*, vol. 38, No. 3 (May-June, 2005), p. 81.

60. Bieler, "Patriots" or "Traitors"? p. 358.

61. Erik Eckholm, "How's China Doing? Yardsticks You Never Thought Of," *New York Times*, April 11, 2004.

more than 400,000 people took the civil service examinations to compete for 8,600 positions.<sup>62</sup> At present, 1 million or roughly one third of all college graduates have trouble finding jobs after their graduation. Those who had no previous working experience abroad need to spend a longer time to land a decent job. As a result, many sea turtles have become seaweed.<sup>63</sup> The harsh economic reality is forcing them to devote more time and effort to their work instead of promoting the values they professed when they were abroad.

Finally, a fair estimate of the number of the returned students currently in China would be about 200,000. These returnees obviously make up a tiny percentage of China's total population of 1.3 billion. Of these, only a small percentage of them hold advanced degrees. Some of them were government-funded students who only studied abroad for three to six months. Comparatively, Taiwan, with about 2 percent of the Chinese population, has sent far more students abroad since the 1950s than has mainland China.

In the "tiger" economies of East Asia, the majority of political and business leaders have been educated overseas, and the rapid democratization of Korean and Taiwanese polities and the increasing return of the students have been interrelated in a self-sustaining manner. The large number of returnees and the increasingly important role they play in China parallel that which occurred in South Korea and Taiwan; but whether the results will lead similarly toward democratic pluralism in China is not yet knowable.<sup>64</sup> I share the view of Li and White that it remains to be seen whether the number of returnees will significantly increase in future Chinese leaderships; whether China-educated elites and foreign-trained elites will cooperate well; and whether the differences in their career paths will affect the norms of future Chinese successions.<sup>65</sup>

62. *Dongfang zaobao* (Oriental Morning News), October 31, 2005.

63. "Seaweed" is the nickname for sea turtles who are unable to find jobs.

64. Eckholm, "How's China Doing?" p. 6.

65. Li and White, "The Sixteenth Central Committee," p. 105.

## Conclusions

The events of 1989 showed that if democracy is to take root, it must have the support of key elites who are committed to a democratic transition. So far, China lacks a critical mass of that kind of elite. Most returnees pursued their studies abroad in the fields of natural science and economics. The returnees have become a pool of technocrats. However, as Xiaowei Zang argues, Chinese elite politics is a political technocracy.<sup>66</sup> Returnees are less likely to occupy key positions in the personnel and propaganda systems. Their chance to dominate the Party's politburo is slim. To some extent, their political roles are limited to policy consultation and administrative positions in education, science, technology, foreign trade, and banking; only in a more indirect and gradual way do they serve as carriers of Western political values.

Up to now, the party-state has rarely promoted self-funded returnees with Ph.D. degrees to positions as ranking officials. Public-funded returnees with advanced degrees and returnees for training or visiting study are the Party's people, and are therefore more likely to become high-ranking officials. Most of the self-funded returnees lack close connections with the Party and are therefore less likely to obtain quick promotion.

As discussed earlier, the impact of the returned students on political and economic changes is visible and long-lasting. Although China's returnees may be potential agents for democracy, at present they seem more interested in good governance than in democracy per se. In other words, they are unlikely to be strong advocates of radical democratic transformation. To date most Chinese returnees endorse incremental political liberalization rather than radical democratic reform. However, if China's political and economic conditions continue to improve, more *haigui* will return home. In the long run, they will play a more important role to transform China.

66. For analysis of political technology, see Xiaowei Zang, "The Fourteenth Central Committee of the CCP: Technocracy or Political Technocracy?" *Asian Survey*, vol. 33, No. 8 (August, 1993), pp. 787-803.

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