

The Best are yet to come: State programs, institutional culture and reverse migration of high-level talent to China

by

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To stem the brain drain and promote the reverse migration of high quality talent, the Chinese government has instituted almost a dozen programs targeting the top Mainland-born Chinese academics who have earned foreign degrees. But many believe that the very best and brightest are remaining abroad and not returning home.

We have collected the CVs of 1400 participants in three major programs, the Changjiang Scholars Program (under the Ministry of Education), the Hundreds Talents Plan (under the Chinese Academy of Sciences), and the Thousand Talents Plan (under the Organization Department of the CCP) and, using the impact factor of the journals in which they have published, we gave them all an annual average impact factor (AAIF) score.

We then compare the participants in three programs and find, first, that participants in the Hundred Talents Plan, under the Chinese Academy of Sciences, have the weakest publication record. In the paper, we suggest several reasons for this outcome. Second, we compare full-time and part-time participants in these programs, showing that part-time returnees in the Thousand Talents Plan, who are still fully employed overseas, are the best researchers as measured by the impact factor of their publications.

We also collected the CVs of approximately 120 former Mainland Chinese, who now hold positions in the very best universities in the U.S., Britain, Canada and Australia and find that people who remain abroad, but do not join any national programs, are slightly better than even the part-time participants in these programs in the fields of Science and Life Sciences, and much better than the part-timers in Engineering.

So, the best are indeed not returning full-time, and those who are returning to universities are better than those returning to the Chinese Academy of Sciences. But since the part-time participants are almost as good as the best Chinese researchers who have chosen to remain abroad, we can argue that, from the perspective of the "Diaspora Model," China is relatively successful in getting the best overseas Mainland-born academics to participate in China's scientific development.