

## **From “Sea Turtle” to “Seaweed”: Changing Images of Returned Overseas Students and Skilled Migrants to China**

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Fei Guo  
Department of Business, EFS  
Macquarie University  
Australia  
Tel: 61-2-98508445  
Fax: 61-2-98506065  
Email: [fguo@efs.mq.edu.au](mailto:fguo@efs.mq.edu.au)

### ***Abstract***

Since the late 1970s a large number of people have migrated from China to other countries, mainly as students, scholars and other professionals. The United States, Europe and Australia are the major places of destination. Majority of Chinese students and scholars who studied at overseas institutions opted to settle down at their places of destination and only a small proportion had returned. In the mid- to late 1990s when China’s economy started to take off and international companies started to move to China, most of those who returned were treated as a special class of privileged and were often regarded as “sea turtles” (*hai gui*, or coming from overseas), which was distinguishingly different from “land tortoise” referring to those locally educated professionals. Many returnees landed high profile and high income jobs and became key players in their professions. However, in recent years, an increasing number of students, scholars and professionals have returned to China to take advantage of rapid economic growth and potential job opportunities associated with the growth. At the same time, the image of return skilled migrants to China has changed remarkably, due to a number of factors, including changing demographics of out-migrants from China, changing labour market structure as a result of further economic reforms and marketisation, and changing public and societal perceptions of overseas returnees. It has been observed that the unemployment problem among overseas returnees in recent years has been concerning. The term “seaweeds” (*hai dai*, or waiting for jobs) was often used to refer to those returnees who were unable to find jobs upon their return. This paper reviews the recent patterns of returned students and skilled migrants from overseas to China, changing government policies and public perceptions toward returnees, and labour market participation and adjustment of returnees upon their return.

## Introduction

After many decades of isolation from the rest of world, China started opening up its doors in the late 1970s. While the initial efforts were devoted to attracting foreign investment to the country, the governments at various levels also realised that the country urgently needed to have adequate number of professionals, especially those in scientific research areas, who could communicate with outside world and were equipped with advanced skills and knowledge. It was for this purpose that Chinese government since late 1970s started to select and send students and young scholars to study or work in overseas universities or research institutes. Most of those students and young scholars were selected from top universities and research institutes and were sponsored by government scholarship schemes or international organisation scholarships, such as Rockefeller Foundation, Ford Foundation, and the United National Population Fund. It was hoped that after completing their study programs overseas those students and scholars would return to China and contribute to the development of the country with their learned expertises. Between the late 1970s to the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, about 320,000 students and scholars had gone to overseas to study, nearly half to the North America. Additionally, close to another 100,000 people left the country under various other statuses (as spouses, visitors, and short-term working visa, *etc.*) and then changed to studying overseas. Among those 320,000 students study abroad, 50,000 were publicly sponsored by the state, 94,000 were publicly sponsored by various work units<sup>1</sup>, and the rest paid their own way. In the same period, only 110,000 have returned, of which majority were publicly sponsored either by the state or various work units<sup>2</sup> (Ministry of Education, 2003; Luo, Guo and Huang, 2003). China's out-migrants since the late 1970s to other countries have been mainly skilled migrants who have joined an increasing number of highly mobile and highly skilled people that have already been observed in other parts of Asia Pacific region (see Iredale, 2000).

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<sup>1</sup> Work units mainly refer to the organisations, institutes, businesses or enterprises that are in state own public sector or collective sector.

<sup>2</sup> It was estimated that more than 40,000 were publicly sponsored by the state and more than 50,000 were sponsored by work units (MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, 2003)

Before the mid-1990s, although the number of returnees was relatively small compared with the number of going abroad, those who did return were treated as a class of privileged. Many of them played important roles in their work units as leading researchers, professors, or institutional administrators. Many set up enterprises in various newly established “Science and Technology Parks” and became successful business people. Many returnees received preferential treatments by their employers or the state. High salaries, start-up research grant, subsidised housing and children’s education, and even the costs of relocation of spouses were the common items of benefit awarded to returnees (Ministry of Education, 2003; Luo, Guo and Huang, 2003; Li and Kang, 2003; Wang and Zhou, 2003; Liu, 2003). The term “sea turtle”<sup>3</sup> was often used to refer to those who returned from overseas.

In recent years, with more drastic economic reforms and more rapid economic growth, an increasing number of Chinese people had opportunities to move to overseas, and at the same time, an increasing number of people have returned to China. Unlike the previous cohorts of students and scholars who were sponsored by various public schemes, more recent migrants, of which majority were young students, were mainly self-funded and could enjoy more freedom when they decided to settle down at their host countries. However, the status and the images of overseas returnees to China in recent years have changed considerably. Upon their return, many returnees found that it was difficult to land a desirable job and the knowledge they have learned overseas were either unpractical or irrelevant to the job markets in China. Some of them simply were not competent or flexible enough to compete with locally trained graduates who normally have more realistic salary expectation. The term “seaweed”<sup>4</sup> then was invented to refer to those returnees from overseas who are unable to land a job upon their return. The dramatic shift in the public perceptions towards returnees is a sign of change in a number of areas that this paper attempts to address.

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<sup>3</sup> “Sea Turtles” phonetically sounds like *hai gui* or “coming back from overseas” in Chinese. *Turtle* sounds exactly as *gui* in Chinese meaning “coming back”. *Turtle* in Chinese culture could also indicate something positive – longevity, calmness, and stability.

<sup>4</sup> Seaweed phonetically sounds like *hai dai* meaning “coming back from overseas waiting for jobs”. The term *seaweed* is used primarily for its similar pronunciation with *hai dai*, but may also arguably indicate something negative associated with seaweed the plant – large amount but worthless.

This paper reviews the changing patterns return migration to China, especially return of those skilled migrants who previously left China to pursue academic credentials as students or as skilled professional or business migrants to other countries. It examines the changing government policies of out-migration in general, and the policies of students and scholars studying abroad in particular, which reflect the changing social and economic conditions in China in recent years. It will also focus on shifting demographics of out-migrants in recent years in comparison with earlier periods. It attempts to identify the key issues and problems in Chinese labour market that returnees have encountered upon their returns. In addition, the changing public perceptions toward returnees will be discussed. It is argued that the patterns of return of skilled migrants to China have not only been closely related to the government policies and social and economic conditions in China, they have also been related to the migration policies, educational policies and labour market of the host countries, especially those major migrant-receiving countries, United States, Canada, EU countries, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand.

### **Patterns of Migration and Return Migration to China**

Although China was one of major source countries of international migration in the history, regular international migration virtually stopped between 1949 when the People's Republic was founded and the late 1970s, except for a small number of students going to the then Soviet Union and other socialist countries, and a sizeable number of people moving to Hong Kong (Skeldon, 2004). With limited contacts with the West, China became internationally isolated. Very few Chinese people had any knowledge about the West, let alone having opportunities to go to the West. The Cultural Revolutions that lasted more than ten years from the mid-1960s and to the mid-1970s took China's science and technology a huge step backward (Beijing University School of Education, 2005). When the Cultural Revolution was concluded and the economic reforms and "opening up" policies started to be implemented in the late 1970s, China urgently needed to have a large number of educated young researchers and scientists to shoulder the responsibility of modernising the country and catching up with the rest of world, especially the United

States and West European countries, who were the dominant players in the world economy and international affair. However, the higher education system in China was totally destroyed during the period of the Cultural Revolution. While limited number of universities started to recruit students, the quality of university curriculum and the number of students were far from adequate to meet the need of modernising the country's economy and advancing the science and technology. It was under this background that the Chinese government started to establish a number of sponsorship schemes that systematically recruited the best and brightest students and researchers from China's top universities and research institutes and sent them to study in the top universities in the North American, Japan and Europe. At the same time, a number of international organisations also started to provide various scholarships. Majority of the students sent to overseas were to study at postgraduate level for Master or PhD degree in science and engineering disciplines and some in social science areas, including a noticeable number of demography students studying in the top universities in the West sponsored by the schemes of the UNFPA. A new wave of international migration was revitalized.

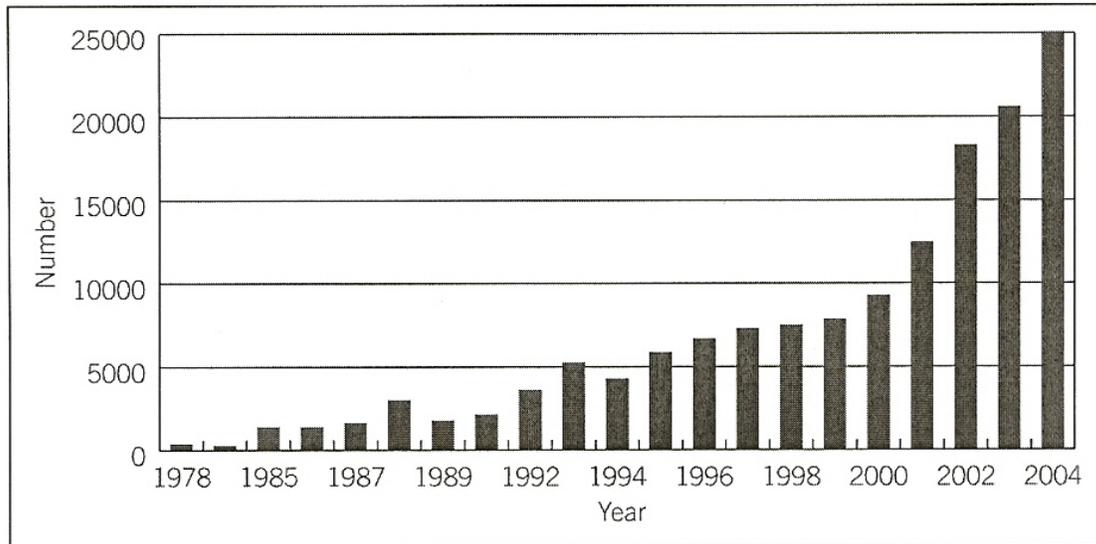
At the early stage of the economic reforms, roughly from 1979 to mid-1980s, the majority of international migrants were students and scholars sponsored by scholarship schemes from the state or their employers as visiting scholars or as post-graduate students. The major destinations are the North America, major European countries, and Japan. In the second half of the 1980s, the numbers of publicly sponsored and self-funded students and scholars were approximately the same as a result of the changes in government regulations that allowed "self-funded" students or scholars to go to abroad. Australia and New Zealand and more European countries started to recruit self-funded Chinese students and scholars (Ministry of Education, 2003; Beijing University School of Education, 2005; Luo, Guo and Huang, 2003; Gong and Wang, 1998). Those who were "self-funded" students or scholars (except for language students) often were the recipients of research assistantships or teaching assistantships from the universities overseas, most of them had impressive academic records or/and working experiences.

Before the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, most of those publicly sponsored students and scholars had to return to China after they had completed their studies overseas, because they were obliged to return under the agreements that they had signed with the state or their employers. The relevant official document indicates that “sending students abroad by the state represents the state’s investment in higher education. Because the great majority of personnel sent abroad go to study or conduct research in institutions of higher education, one may regard these students as an extension of higher education in China” (Ministry of Education, 2003). Although the 1989 Tiananmen Incidence slowed down the flow of returnees, some of these earlier cohorts of students and scholars did managed to return in the following years when China’s economy started to take off. Many returnees played very important roles in China’s top universities or research institutes. A survey published in 1999 indicated that of 629 academic researchers in the Chinese Academy of Sciences, 507 were educated overseas and have returned. Of 423 academic researchers of the Chinese Academy of Engineering, 227 have returned after completing study overseas. In addition, more than two-thirds of the candidates chosen for the Ministry of Education’s Excellent Tran-Century Talent Program (*kua shi ji ren cai*) were those who have returned after studying abroad. People who have returned from overseas comprise more than half the people in such projects and programs as the “Chinese Young Scientist’s Award” and the “State Science Foundation for Outstanding Young People” of the State Natural Sciences Foundation Commission (Lingdao Juece Xinxi, 1999).

Numerous reports and studies have suggested that many earlier returnees had found career success and business opportunities in China. They filled the vacuum of many areas in Chinese technological and scientific research, as well as the areas in social sciences which were totally destroyed during the Cultural Revolution period. Many of them obtained postgraduate credentials with Masters or Doctoral degrees overseas and upon their return were given important positions as leading researchers, professors, or administrators, and were treated as a special class of privileged. Major preferential treatments included higher salaries, research grants, and housing allowance. Research also show that returnees with overseas qualifications were normally able to perform better compared with their local counterparts (Zweig, Chen and Rosen, 2004’ Wang and

Zhou, 2003; Li Hujun, 2004; Huang Jianbin, 2004; Cao and Suttmeier, 2001). “Sea turtle” or *hai gui*, was used to refer to this special group of people (*Economist*, 2003; Kan, 2004).

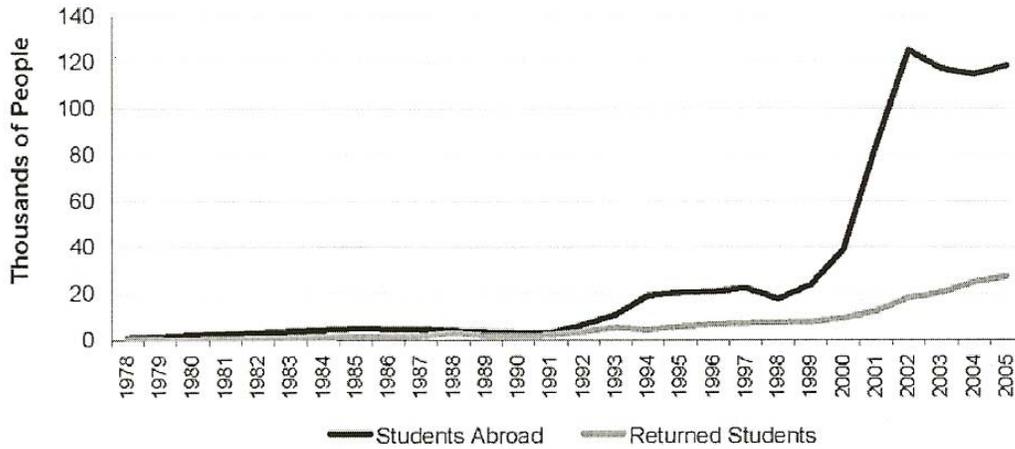
**Figure 1** Number of returned students, 1978-2004



Source: Zweig, D. (2006) Learning to compete: China’s efforts to encourage a “reverse brain drain”, *International Labour Review*, vol. 145, no. 1.

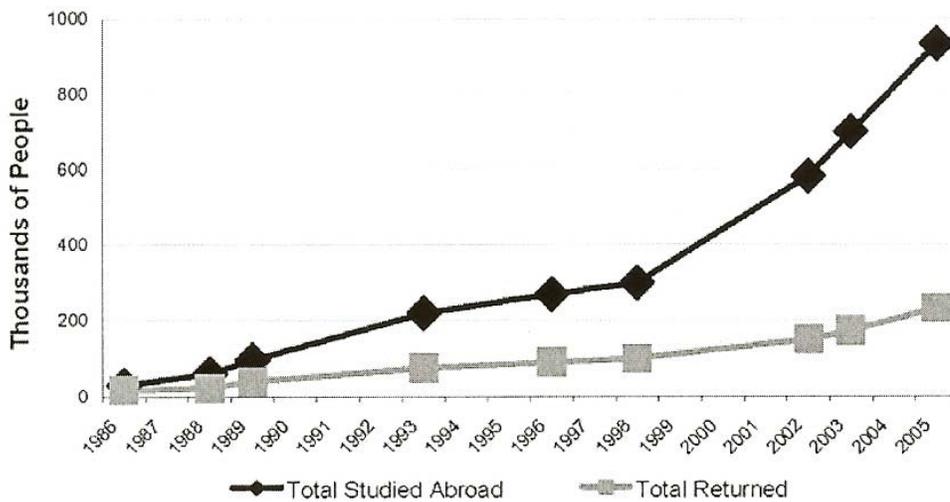
As indicated in Figures 1 that the number of returnees to China since the late 1970s has significantly increased, while the rates of return have not necessarily increased at the same pace, as liberalization of the policy on going overseas as self-funded students or visitors has generated a significant increase in the number of people going abroad (Zweig, 2006). Before the mid-1990s, the number of returnees and the rate of return were generally low. One study suggests that between 1978 and 1995 a total 130,000 Chinese students studied in the United States and among them some 20,000 (15.4%) returned. In the same period of time, of about 20,000 Chinese students in Canada, some 4,000 (20%) returned. The return rate of Chinese students studied in Australia was even lower, only 2,500 (6.3%) out of 40,000 returned. In this period of time, those self-funded students were much less likely to return than those who were sponsored by the state or their employers (Li, 2005).

**Figure 2. Number of Chinese students studying abroad and returning to China, by year**



Source: China Statistical Yearbook (2006), cited in Levine (2006).

**Figure 3. Cumulative number of Chinese students and scholars study abroad and returning by year**



Source: Levine (2006)

The return of large number of Chinese students from overseas has happened in the recent years, especially after the turn of 21<sup>st</sup> century. As indicated in Figures 1, 2, and 3, the annual number of returned students from overseas reached to 25,000 in 2004, which was a remarkable increase from less than 5000 returned students just 10 years ago. The large

number of students, scholars or other young professionals returned to China at the time when China joined WTO and further economic reforms were implemented. The labour market competition became much tougher than before. Unlike the previous “sea turtles” who were normally treated with preferential policies and job promises, increasing number of returnees in recent years were unable to land jobs that they expected. A China Youth Daily report suggested that as high as 35% of the returnees from overseas had difficulty in finding employment in recent years. In 2003, 7,000 returnees in Shanghai alone were unable to find work (Sun, Gui and Chen, 2005). The popular reference “seaweeds” to those overseas returnees who were unable to find employment was started in recent years (Tian, 2005). The status of overseas returnees has changed significantly from the privileged “sea turtles” who were a class of elite to the not-so-valuable, sometimes dispensable, “seaweeds” who were not able to compete with others in the increasingly competitive job market in China. Among a number of factors that have contributed to the changing status and public images of overseas returnees, the government policies, labour market conditions, and changes in demographics of out-migrants have been especially important.

### **Changes in Government Policies**

Since the late 1980s, an increasing number of students and scholars, especially those who were sponsored by the state and employers, have chosen to settle down permanently in their host countries after completing their study. There have been heated debates in Chinese policy circle, research community, and media on whether allowing a large number of China’s best and brightest students and scholars to go to overseas was strategically unwise and was a “brain drain” of country’s human capital. Government policies in the early years were to strictly control the flow of students and scholars to overseas. As discussed in the previous section, Chinese government from late 1970s to mid-1980s established a number of scholarship schemes, with help from various international organisations, to select the best university graduates and young researchers from top universities and research institutes. Vigorous examinations were administered in selecting the best qualified candidates. Majority of those who went to abroad were

sponsored by the state or work units, either as visiting scholars or post-graduate students enrolled in the top universities. Starting mid-1980s, the government started to allow more students and scholars to go to overseas without the sponsorship from the state or their employers. Many of these self-funded students and scholars obtained teaching assistantship or research assistantship from overseas universities to pursue advanced academic degrees in sciences, engineering, and social sciences. Similar to those who were selected by the state or the units, those who were able to obtain overseas scholarships were also among the best and brightest of university graduates. Government policies on self-funded students going overseas were still quite strict (MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, 2003; Beijing University School of Education, 2003). According to the government policies in some cities, after graduating from a university, one normally needed to work in China for at least six years (two years according to MINISTRY OF EDUCATION's official policy) before she/he was allowed to apply to go to overseas even she/he did not need financial sponsorship from the state or work units<sup>5</sup>.

The relaxation of government policies on students and scholars going abroad started to take place in late 1980s. The number of self-funded students and scholars out-numbered those publicly sponsored. Ministry of Education's (Ministry of Education, 2003) estimate suggested that between 1989 and 2000, among 43,000 people who went to abroad, 38,000 were self-funded. Since mid-1980s, a number of countries, including UK, France, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, started to attract Chinese students to study in a range of educational institutions, including established universities, vocational training institutions, high schools and even language schools. Overseas Chinese migrants became more diversified.

After the 1989 Tiananmen Incidence, a number of countries granted overseas Chinese studies permanent resident status. The number of students and scholars going abroad and returnees in the years immediately after 1989 reduced considerably. The government policies after 1989 were adjusted – the number of publicly sponsored students and

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<sup>5</sup> Author's own experience in Beijing.

scholars was reduced and the number of postgraduates studying academic degrees was also reduced.

The Chinese government policies towards returned students and scholars have been complicated and have changed from time to time (Zweig, 2003, Luo, Guo and Hung, 2003). In the early years after the implementation of economic reform policies, the policy concerns were primarily focused on how to ensure a large proportion of students and scholars studying abroad to come back after the completion of their pre-designed programs. Controlling out-flow of people and encouraging their return by offering preferential treatments were the main themes of the policies before the mid-1990s. Gradually, the government recognised that those who didn't return to China could also contribute to the country's economic development. The policies were then shifted to encouraging overseas Chinese to make contribution in different ways, including providing business or professional networks for Chinese counterparts, establishing commerce linkages to China, or by visiting research institutes at temporary basis, etc. Permanent return was no longer considered as the only way of contributing to China's rapid economic development (Ministry of Education, 2005).

The policy orientation in recent years has shifted considerably. Many Chinese cities have implemented various schemes to attract "international talents" and their advanced knowledge and technologies. Many schemes aimed to attract returnees, but many others are more flexible and are also available to those who are still overseas but are willing to establish a business or commercial ventures in collaboration with local Chinese counterparts. Shenzhen was at the forefront of initiating such schemes as "Overseas Scholars Incubator Park" that aimed specifically at attracting overseas Chinese students and scholars to set up industrial, manufacturing or commercial ventures. The first incubator park was established in 2001 sponsored by the municipal government and local government and in collaboration with a number of overseas Chinese associations. The sponsorship normally included seed funding, infrastructure support and tax exemption for certain period of time (Liu, 2003). This model soon was adopted in other cities. Beijing's Zhongguancun was another successful example in attracting overseas Chinese

students and scholars to set up business ventures in its science and technology incubator parks (Li and Kang, 2004). Other provinces such as Zhejiang province has also set up similar scheme trying to attract more overseas trained personnel to their province (Zhu, 2003).

More recently, with China's accession to WTO and globalisation of economy, the Chinese governments at various levels started to realised that China is a part of globalised labour market. The competition for talents – regardless educated overseas or locally, has become tougher than ever before. Enhancing the capacity of competition in a globalised market should be the only way to reverse the “brain drain” that China experienced in the past decades (Zweig, 2006).

### **Changing Demographics of Out-migrants**

Out-migrants from China since the late 1970s have mainly been students and visiting scholars who later on have settled in the host countries permanently or at a long-term basis. Although in recent years a small number of business or skilled migrants moved directly to countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand without studying in overseas educational institutions, their numbers have been small in comparison with the large number of students. For this reason, the discussion on the changing demographics of out-migrants from China will mainly focus on the changing demographics of Chinese students going abroad in the past decades.

As shown in the publication of the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2003), before the early 1990s, majority of students and scholars going abroad were either sponsored by the state or the work units. Those who were selected normally have to go through a strict selection process through examinations. They were the best and brightest in their field of study or their work units. Even those who were able to obtained scholarships, teaching or research assistantships from overseas universities were among the best and brightest. Having already had a undergraduate degree in China, many pursued advanced degrees in the North America, Europe, Japan and Australasia. They

were considered an extension of post-graduate training programs in China (Ministry of Education, 2003). An estimate by Zweig, Chen and Rosen (2004) indicates that before 1990, the returned post-graduate students from overseas as share of total post-graduate students graduating in China ranged 4% to 8% each year, but the percentages increased considerably since the 1990s, ranging between 12% and 18%. Before the mid-1990s, going abroad to study was a special privilege held by a minority of elite in universities and research institutes. Many stayed overseas. Those who returned were normally able to assimilate well into the system, many could perform much better than their locally trained counterparts (Sun, Gui and Cheng, 2003).

Although age distribution of students/scholars sent overseas was not available, the distribution by various degree categories of students/scholars sent abroad between 1978 and 1986 are presented in Table 1. It is clear that between the late 1970s and mid-1980s, majority of students and scholars sent abroad were to pursue postgraduate degrees or as visiting scholars (or advanced-studies personnel presented in Table 1). Only a small proportion went to overseas to study for undergraduate degrees. During this period of time, China's own postgraduate educational system was being gradually restored. In 1986, there were 41,310 postgraduate students were enrolled and 16,950 have graduated. In the following year, PhD programs were also established in a number of universities. Sending students and scholars abroad was part of strategy of revitalising China's educational system at postgraduate level and catching up with the rest of world (Beijing University School of Education, 2005). Because of their special status, upon their return, the returnees in this period of time normally either went back to their original positions or were assigned to the positions with responsibilities and preferential treatments. Unemployment problem was rarely an issue for these returnees.

Table 1: Various Categories of Students/Scholars Sent Abroad Sponsored by the State,  
1979-1986

Year	Total number of people sent abroad	Postgraduates	Advanced-studies personnel	Undergraduates
1978	314	5	229	80
1979	1,277	113	987	177
1980	1,862	202	1,503	157
1981	2,925	252	2,459	214
1982	2,801	924	1,665	212
1983	2,821	1,291	1,444	86
1984	2,913	1,224	1,598	91
1985	3,246	1,184	1,989	73
1986	3,234	1,013	2,073	148

Source: Beijing University School of Education, 2005.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Basic Characteristics of Returnees  
in Three Top Universities/Research Institute, 2001

Category	Academy of Sciences	Qinghua University	Beijing University
Gender			
Male	84.8	84.2	74.3
Female	15.2	15.8	25.7
Academic qualification			
Junior college & below	-	0.5	2.3
Undergraduate degree	18.2	32.5	36.6
Masters	15.6	19.6	20.6
Doctorate	66.2	47.4	41.6
Age			
30 years and younger	0.7	-	0.8
31-40	66.3	27.6	30.7
41-50	22.5	19.0	28.7
51-60	8.3	28.6	22.2
61 and above	2.2	24.8	16.9

Source: Li, Xiaoxuan (2004) "A study by the Chinese Academy of Sciences on the Benefits of Study Abroad", Chinese Education and Society, vol. 37, no. 2, March/April, pp61-87.

Table 2 presents basic characteristics of returnees in two major universities and one research institute in China, which are from a 2003 survey (Li X., 2004). It is clear that majority of returnees were male, with PhD degree, aged 30 years old and above, and in

sciences and engineering disciplines. Li's study also suggests that majority of the returnees presented returned to these three institutes in the 1990s as result of vigorous campaign of attracting overseas educated academics. It is noted that these three institutes are among the best research institutes in China, which may have benefited considerably from the state-sponsored overseas study programs.

A study of 450 middle school students and 200 college students and their parents in Shenzhen, one of special economic zones in Guangdong province, suggests that although more than 40% of students and their parents wish their children to go to abroad after graduating from college, considerable proportion of students (Years 7 to 9) and their parents wished to go to overseas after graduating middle school (25% for students and 16% for parents). These students would go to overseas to study college degree. When asked about their intention of return to China, more than 60% of students and 41% of parents wish the students could return. Considerable proportion will make decision later on and only very small proportion of students and their parents have already determined that the students would not like to return to China (Yi, 2001).

Table 3. Intended Time of Going Abroad (%)

Timing	Students	Parents
After graduating from junior middle school	4.5	3.8
After graduating from senior middle school	20.1	13.2
After graduating from college	43.3	46.5
When the opportunity available	32.1	36.5

Source: Yi Songguo (2001).

Table 4. Intention to Return to China (%)

	Hoping to return	Remain abroad	See how things turn out
Students	60.8	4.2	35.0
Parents	41.8	4.7	53.5

Source: Yi Songguo, 2001.

Since the mid-1990s, the composition of people going abroad gradually became more diverse. Demographics of out-migrants have changed considerably. Students are still the major source of out-migrants from China in recent years while a small, but increasing, number of out-migrants are in the category of independent or skilled migrants. Nationwide statistics on recent out-migrants are not readily available. Some fragmented evidence suggested that since late 1990s, especially in recent years, an increasing number of self-funded high school students went to abroad to study in high school, and similarly, an increasing number of Chinese high school graduates went to overseas to study undergraduate degree (Du, Guanghui, 2001; Hai Ming, 2001; Sun, Gui, and Chen, 2005). The very fact that Australia universities have received a large number of Chinese students reflects such trend. Upon the completion of their study, a considerable proportion of them opted to settle at the host countries at a long-term basis, and other do return to China. Even many of those who have obtained long-term resident status in the North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand have also returned. Since the mid-1990s, China's economy became more commercialised and privatised, and the state has been playing less important role in labour market. Hiring and firing employees became the responsibility of work units and private employers. The more diversified demographic patterns of out-migrants from China as well as returnees to China have determined that their labour market adjustment abilities would also be diversified. Some could be assimilated easily into the labour market while other would feel difficult in landing a desirable job. As mentioned in the previous section, 35% of the returnees from overseas had difficulty in finding employment in recent years. In 2003, 7,000 returnees in Shanghai alone were unable to find work (Sun, Gui and Chen, 2005). When a large number of returnees are unable to find jobs in the labour market, the image of and public perception toward the returnees as a group has been changed. "Seaweed" was invented to refer to this group of returnees who are unable to land a job upon their return. It is also argued that the overall social and economic conditions since the mid-1990s have been equally important in re-portraying the image of returnees.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

As discussed in the previous section, government policies and changing demographics of out-migrants and returnees have been important in affecting the employment outcomes of returnees. Another important factor in determining the employment status of all labour force participants, including those returned from overseas, is the changing social and economic conditions, especially China's accession to WTO in 2001 and further globalisation and privatisation of Chinese economy. In recent years, government restrictions over the movements of people to and from overseas have been relaxed. Government policy orientation has shifted from attracting returnees themselves to attracting the capital, knowledge and networks that are associated with returnees or those who stayed overseas. Chinese government at various levels have to learn how to compete in a globalised market in terms of investments, human capital, trading, and all other aspects of the economy. Regions and cities in China have to learn how to compete with each other. Competing for "talents", as it was phrased by Chinese policy makers, has become even more important (Zweig, 2006). Returnees in the early years of economic reforms normally would be taken care of upon their return by the state or their employers, as they were a small group of selected elite. Since China's market became increasingly globalised, major world economic events have had impacts on China's economic performance. The burst of dot-com bubbles in late 1990s and the tendency toward the integration of Chinese and foreign technological development have dimmed the hope of some returnees. Employing a large number of returnees has no longer been considered as a factor for improving the enterprise's value or image. "Ability" rather than "background" has become more important in the mind of employers (Sun, Gui and Chen, 2005). In a highly competitive job market, some returnees' qualification overseas may not be useful in Chinese market, and therefore could not be converted to "Chinese opportunities". The changing image of returned skilled migrants to China, from privileged "seas turtle" to sometime "seaweed", is a reflection of changing government policies, changing demographics of out-migrants, but more importantly, changing labour market conditions that are associated with globalisation and marketisation.

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