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Antal, Ariane Berthoin; Wang, Jing

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## Organizational learning in China: the role of returners

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**Organizational Learning in China:  
The Role of Returners**

Ariane Berthoin Antal & Jing Wang

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### **Organizational Learning in China: The Role of Returners**

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**Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung gGmbH (WZB)**

Reichpietschufer 50, D-10785 Berlin

Telefon: +49 30 25491-0, Fax: +49 30 25491-209

[www.wz-berlin.de/ow/inno](http://www.wz-berlin.de/ow/inno)

## **Abstract**

The Chinese authorities have launched a range of policies and incentives at the national and regional level to attract citizens who have studied and worked abroad to return in order to contribute to upgrading the competitiveness of the Chinese economy, particularly in light of China's entrance to the World Trade Organization. In other words, the returners are expected to stimulate organizational learning in existing organizations and in new companies. This article provides an overview over what has been done to date and points out that simply increasing the number of returners is not enough to achieve organizational learning. Drawing on research findings about the dynamics of organizational learning from returned expatriate managers in international companies, the article develops recommendations for government policies, corporate strategies and Chinese returners.

## **Zusammenfassung**

In den letzten Jahren hat die chinesische Regierung vielfältige Maßnahmen eingeleitet, um chinesische Bürger, die im Ausland studiert und gearbeitet haben, zur Rückkehr zu bewegen, um mit deren Wissen die Konkurrenzfähigkeit der Wirtschaft des Landes zu stärken. Diese Transformationsaufgabe, die durch den WTO Beitritt Chinas als dringend angesehen wird, erfordert umfangreiche Organisationslernprozesse. Der vorliegende Beitrag bietet einen Überblick über die Palette der bisherigen Maßnahmen und weist darauf hin, dass eine rein quantitativ ausgerichtete Politik kein Garant für den nötigen Grad an Organisationslernen ist. Aufbauend auf Forschungsergebnissen über Organisationslernen durch Expatriates in multinationalen Unternehmen, werden Empfehlungen für die staatliche Politik, für Unternehmen und für die Rückkehrer ausgearbeitet.

## Valuable Knowledge Acquired Abroad<sup>1</sup>

On January 4, 1847, the Chinese imperial government of the Qing Dynasty sent a student to the United States for the first time in the country's history in order to gain and bring back fresh knowledge ("Yeguang xinwen," 2002). Over subsequent years, a hundred and thirty thousand more Chinese students studied abroad (Wei, 2002), until Mao Tse Tung's policy of Self-Reliance closed the door to the West for 30 years. Then, in 1978 Deng Xiaoping introduced significant reforms, and on December 26 of that year, the Communist government sent the first fifty students to study abroad and acquire new knowledge and skills that would benefit their home country and speed up its economic development ("Yeguang xinwen," 2002). Since the door was re-opened in 1978, three hundred and eighty thousand<sup>2</sup> Chinese have taken advantage of government sponsorship<sup>3</sup> to study in other countries, especially in the United States, England, Australia, Canada, Germany, France and Japan ("Yeguang xinwen," 2002). The surge in willingness to gain knowledge and experience overseas continues unabated. Over the next four years, the number of Chinese who will leave to study abroad is expected to double from 30,000-50,000 a year to 50,000-100,000 a year (Cheng, 2001).

The investment of public funds in sending students to learn in other countries only pays off if the students return and put their knowledge to use in organizations in their home country, either directly after completing their studies or after a period of work experience abroad. The exact number of returners to China is difficult to calculate, especially those who went on their own expense rather than through government sponsorship, but it is estimated that approximately a third of those sent to learn abroad have brought their improved skills back to China (Liang, 2002; "Returned," 2001; Cheng, 2001; "Zhongguo 25wan," 2001). In other words, although the percentage of returners is increasing annually by about thirteen per cent (Liang, 2002; Zhang, 2001), growing "from a trickle to a stream" (Wilhelm &

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<sup>1</sup> The authors gratefully acknowledge the helpful comments provided on earlier versions of this article by Christoph Dörrenbächer, Christiane Kerlen, Camilla Krebsbach-Gnath, Peter Volz, and Ying Zhu.

<sup>2</sup> A note of caution: the figures cited in this article are based on official statistics, and experts have often found such government statistics in China to be somewhat unreliable.

<sup>3</sup> It is estimated that an even higher number of Chinese left to study abroad without government sponsorship, but no records are available to document this outflow.

Biers, 2000), the Ministry of Personnel in China estimates that about two thirds of the students are staying abroad.

That large group represents a significant pool of untapped potential for the Chinese economy (“250,000,” 2001) at a time when China is seeking to modernize its economy very rapidly to meet the challenge of global competition associated with its entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO). The central and local government authorities have recognized that while it is very important to attract capital into the country, that alone is not sufficient to achieve the necessary level of modernization in its economy. Foreign direct investment by multinational companies and by overseas Chinese has generated capital and stimulated trade, but it has not embedded enough know-how into local Chinese organizations to upgrade them to compete on open international markets. The authorities decided to address this issue urgently under the heading “struggle for talented people” (Chen, 2000).

If China wants to stimulate learning from citizens who have studied and worked abroad, it is not enough only to answer the question “what can the government do to increase the number of returners?” The fact that Chinese return with valuable know-how is not in itself a guarantee that their knowledge and skills will benefit the local economy. One problem is that not all returners actually stay. In fact, it is estimated that of the 90,000 citizens who had returned by March 2001, about half had left again (Cheng, 2001). The second, far more important and difficult problem is that individual learning does not automatically translate into organizational learning, so the return of citizens with different knowledge bases and skill sets does not guarantee that Chinese organizations will become more knowledgeable or skilled. The Chinese government must look beyond the question of how to increase the number of skilled people returning to China and explore the more complex question of how to provide the conditions to maximize the organizational learning from the individual learning that its citizens have engaged in abroad.

This article first reviews the approaches taken by the Chinese authorities in recent years to attract citizens who have studied and worked abroad to bring their know-how back to China and contribute to rapidly modernizing the local economy. It then explores the literature on organizational learning to identify factors that would facilitate or impede the ability of the returners to put their knowledge and experience to use in China. Drawing on the insights from research in this field,

including studies on a particular type of returner, namely expatriate managers in multinational companies, recommendations are made for supplementing or improving government policies in the interests of promoting organizational learning. The article also offers suggestions for organizational strategies and for individual returners.

## **Current Policies to Attract Returners Back to China**

The Chinese leadership recognizes that the country needs more people with technology and business-related skills, particularly in light of China's entry into the World Trade Organization ("China Allotted," 2002). The Chinese government is becoming worried about the return rate: "If two-thirds of the country's best and brightest stay away, how will the Chinese economy achieve the required competitive edge?" (Cheng, 2001). In October 2001, Premier Zhu Rongji noted that, compared with other developed countries, China is lagging behind especially in terms of professionals in new, high technology areas and having advanced modern management skills, and he called on Chinese overseas to make their expertise available to China ("Chinese Premier," 2001; "Premier Calls," 2001). On January 18, 2002 the vice premier, Li Lanqing, reiterated the problem and emphasized that greater efforts must be made to attract highly qualified citizens back to China ("China Allotted," 2002).

In order to attract Chinese citizens to return with the knowledge, skills and experience they have gained while studying and working abroad, the government has been introducing a range of preferential policies and incentives, particularly noticeably since 1994. The government has recognized that it must address personal and family issues as much as business issues if it wants to draw citizens back to the country, because they have become accustomed to a certain life style and career orientation abroad. In order to facilitate their return and offer desirable career perspectives, the government has taken a multipronged approach: It has relaxed restrictions affecting individuals and new business ventures, created business parks, offered tax incentives and subsidies for business as well as individuals, and actively reached out to potential returners with information and advisory services:

- **Relaxing regulations:** The government has tried to make the return more attractive by loosening certain restrictions, such as allowing citizens with particularly desirable skill sets and knowledge bases who return to keep

the residence rights they may have obtained abroad (“More Talents Return” 2000).<sup>4</sup> The government now also recognizes that some Chinese who have been based abroad can contribute their expertise without actually moving back to China full-time. In June 2000 the State Council adjusted regulations for them as well, ensuring they get preferential treatment for setting up high-tech enterprises or investing in the rejuvenation of traditional industries under more flexible conditions than in the past (“Overseas Talent Urged,” 2000; “Greater Cooperation,” 2001). This was followed in May 2001, in preparation for China’s entry into the World Trade Organization, by a set of policies entitled “Decision on Encouraging Students Overseas to Serve the Motherland in Various Forms” (“China Encourages,” 2001). These policies include the protection of intellectual property rights, and special permits for entering and leaving the country so that they can continue to work abroad while also working in China. They have also granted returners the permission to remit their earnings (after tax) out of the country, a right otherwise reserved for foreigners working in China ( Yu, 2000). The new policies are seen as a breakthrough: until then, only those citizens who returned to China and turned their backs to their life abroad were considered “truly patriotic” (“China Encourages,” 2001; “Zhongguo 25wan,” 2001). Recent shifts in policies signal a willingness to accept and value different forms of return “to serve the Motherland” (“Haiguichao nengfou”, 2002), and a recognition that Chinese returners who maintain active links to their organizations and companies abroad represent useful bridges between China and other countries (Liang, 2002).

- Business development parks and incubators: The first science park in China was opened in 1994 in Nanjing, and since then some sixty business development parks have been created with an eye to drawing returners interested in setting up their own businesses (“Zhongguo yi,” 2002). About 10,000 returners are currently estimated to have entered such parks and incubators, creating nearly four thousand companies and generating returns of 10 billion Yuan (1.2 billion US dollars) (“More Returned,” 2001). The start-ups are multiplying rapidly. For example, the Zhangjiang Park in Shanghai was home to 40 companies established by returners in 2000, jumping to 170 companies by November 2001 (Cheng, 2001). During the

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<sup>4</sup> However, only if returners are willing to give up these foreign residence permits may they become executives in large state-owned enterprises, directors of government agencies, or senior managers in institutes of higher learning (“More Talents Return,” 2000).



nine-month period from January to September 2001, returners created 283 enterprises in Beijing's Zhongguancun Science Park ("Haiguichao nengfou," 2002).

- Tax incentives and project funding: Some provincial governments have promised temporary tax reductions or tax exemptions, and favorable import regulations for the companies created by returners, and have provided special funds for start-up projects ("China Allotted," 2002; "Overseas Talent Urged," 2000; Beech, 2000). Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, in particular, have been competing for returners, offering them attractive salaries in existing organizations in the private or public sector and good conditions for setting up their own businesses ("More Talents Return," 2000). For example, Shenzhen has been providing 4 million US dollars yearly to fund start-up companies and projects by returners, while Guangzhou positions itself with attractive preferential tax policies, and Beijing subsidizes new ventures by offering 60 square meters of rent-free office space rent in the business park. ("More Talents Return," 2000; "China Allotted," 2002). The provinces also compete to be attractive by offering special conditions at a personal and family level, such as help in covering tuition fees for returners' children, help in finding work for spouses, or advantages in obtaining housing ("Haigui chao," 2002; Liang, 2002; "Beijing Encourages," 2000).
- Information and advisory services: The Chinese government has been making efforts to improve its services for students returning from overseas in order to help them develop careers in China ("China Allotted," 2002). It has organized fairs, like the "Science and Technology Exchange Fair for Chinese Overseas Students" ("More Returned," 2001) and the president of the Ministry of Personnel sent out recruitment delegations to inform overseas students of opportunities in China (Zhang, 2001). The government launched a website ([www.chinatalents.gov.cn](http://www.chinatalents.gov.cn)) to provide information on matters interesting returners ("China Allotted," 2002). The Ministry of Personnel has created more than twenty offices in different local governments to provide advice for returners (Zhang, 2001). The Beijing municipal government has established an information platform called the "Chinese overseas talents network" ("Beijing shi rencai," 2002; Zhang, 2001). The delegations from high tech business parks travel abroad and hold seminars to woo entrepreneurs and skilled workers back to the motherland, apparently meeting with great interest because many delegations have been greeted by overflowing crowds (Kirby, 2002).

What are the results of the policies to date? The percentage of returners is growing by about thirteen per cent per year, so the situation is improving, but too slowly to meet the current and projected needs for skills and knowledge (Liang 2002). The impact of the government incentive programs on the decisions by overseas Chinese to return appears to be indirect rather than direct: “they have provided a positive signal that the social and economic policies in China are improving” (Iredale & Guo, 2001:14). Although there is a lot of talk of coming back (43 percent of the Chinese working in Silicon Valley say they would consider returning to China), “too few are actually doing it” (Clendenin, 2002:2). The talent gap identified by the government remains enormous: For example, it is estimated that Shanghai alone will need to attract at least 100,000 highly skilled people by 2010 in order to achieve its development goals (Liang, 2002). The best students and professionals are still not coming back (“Liujiachui,” 2001).

The high rate of enterprise creation by returners in the science parks and incubators is impressive. Nevertheless, it is disturbing to note that the success rate of these new enterprises is no better than that of other companies in the private sector in China (Zhang, 2002). The higher level of skills and experience the returners bring and the preferential policies afforded them by the national government and the provincial authorities should lead to better results than those achieved by managers who do not have these advantages. It appears that the knowledge and skills of the returners are not yet being put to their most effective use. Research on organizational learning processes, and especially on the factors enabling or hindering organizational learning from expatriate managers, provides some insights into the dynamics that may be responsible for these somewhat disappointing results. It also lays the groundwork for developing recommendations about how to improve the situation.

## **The Dynamics of Organizational Learning from Returners**

The Chinese government has high hopes for the contributions the returners should make to increasing the competitiveness of the economy. They are expected to bring back the knowledge they have gained in universities and companies abroad to improve the performance of existing organizations and to create new companies in China, and thereby trigger improvements in processes and enormous leaps in productivity and innovation. In other words, the returners are to serve as agents of organizational learning (Friedman, 2001).

A glance at the literature on organizational learning, however, shows that the transition from individual learning to organizational learning is far from seamless (Dierkes, Berthoin Antal, Child, and Nonaka, 2001). The importation of knowledgeable individuals does not automatically lead to “more knowledgeable” organizations. Organizations often know less than the sum of the knowledge of their members because organizational learning is not simply a matter of transferring knowledge from one head to another. Furthermore, knowledge is generated contextually, so ideas that work well in one setting cannot be transplanted directly to another one. Rather, organizational learning is an interactive process that is more creative than technocratic (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Nonaka, Toyama & Byosière, 2001), and it involves multiple factors, including culture, emotions and power (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2001; LaPalombara, 2001; Scherer & Tran, 2001).

A specific subset of the organizational learning literature promises to be particularly relevant for understanding how to maximize the contributions to organizational learning through returners in China is the research about a different type of returner, namely expatriate managers after an assignment abroad. Managers who work in a different culture for several years gain knowledge and experience about a wide range of issues related to conducting business effectively and innovatively, knowledge that represents a rich resource for organizational learning in the companies to which they return. (Adler, 2001). Contrary to expectations, however, research in multinational companies based in the United States (Gregersen & Black, 1999) and Germany (Berthoin Antal, 2000, 2001) reveals that very little use is made by companies of the knowledge acquired by their employees abroad. There is often relatively high pressure on the expatriates to reassimilate themselves into their local culture after their return (Adler, 2001), because their “difference” is treated, and often experienced by the individuals, as an impediment rather than as a resource. Although the companies invested significantly into the expatriation, they do not actively tap the returned expatriates’ ideas and skills to improve the way things are done or to do new things in the operations of the country to which they return.

There are many ways in which organizations can tap into the knowledge of returned expatriates in order to stimulate organizational learning. For example, senior managers in the German companies that participated in the empirical study conducted at the Social Science Research Center Berlin (Berthoin Antal, 2000,

2001) could have talked with the returned expatriates to try to discover possibilities for improving ways of doing things in the organization, or single loop learning, as it is called in the literature (Argyris & Schön, 1978). They could have taken advantage of the different perspectives gained by the expatriates abroad to question the existing policies and strategies of the organization (double loop learning, Argyris & Schön, 1978). They might even have engaged in discussions with the returned expatriates to find ways of improving the learning processes of the organization (deutero learning, Argyris & Schön, 1978). Senior managers could have profited from the perspectives and experiences of the returned expatriates to identify ideas and practices that their organizations needed to unlearn in order to develop new approaches (Hedberg, 1981). Recognizing that practices that have been developed successfully in one context cannot simply be transferred to a new location, the managers could have engaged with the returned expatriates in exploring how to imitate creatively the ways of organizing work that had proven effective abroad (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996). But the research revealed none of these organizational learning approaches (Berthoin Antal, 2001). Top managers in the sample companies did not seek out the expatriates to learn from them in focused debriefings; they did not include them in policy or strategy review groups; nor did they organize events at which other employees could tap into the experiences of the returned expatriates.

The lack of learning-oriented role modeling by senior managers had an impact on how others in the organization perceived the returned expatriates and their knowledge. Because the senior managers did not set an example and treat the returned expatriates as resources for learning, other employees did not tend to see the expatriates as resources for learning in the organization either. There were, of course, some colleagues who wanted tips on how to deal with the foreign employees, customers, or suppliers in the country where the expatriate had been located. Such knowledge sharing, however, was individual and externally focused. It was not oriented to embedding knowledge gained abroad into the home organization to improve processes and performance. In the absence of interest and active strategies by senior management in the organization to work with the returned expatriates to convert their knowledge into a resource for the organization, the pressure on the returned expatriates simply to re-adapt to existing norms and procedures is high (see also Adler, 2002).

To the extent that the returned expatriates in the study succeeded in introducing changes to the way things were done in their organization after their return, it was

on their own initiative and limited to their specific sphere of influence (e.g., department, or branch of a bank). The returned expatriates whose jobs entailed no international responsibilities or those whose sphere of influence was particularly narrow experienced intense frustration (see also Gregersen & Black, 1999). They were not in a position to use or share what they had learned abroad after their return.

The concepts and theories of organizational learning are relatively new to China (Dierkes, Berthoin Antal, Child, Nonaka & Zhang, 2001; Wang & Berthoin Antal, 2002), so the technical terms are not yet frequently used. What China is looking for in its returners are contributions to the multiple types of learning processes that returned expatriates, too, have the potential to offer: single-loop, double-loop, and deuterio-learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978), as well as knowledge creation (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), unlearning (Hedberg, 1981), and creative imitation learning (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996).

There are some differences, of course, between the situation of Chinese returners and returning expatriate managers, but also important similarities from which lessons can be drawn. Chinese returners are not in quite the same position as expatriate managers, who are sent abroad by an employer and who are reintegrated into the domestic operations of the same organization. Instead, Chinese returners are recruited into companies whose structures and processes they must first discover and then influence, or they create new companies, where they must deal with people who have been socialized in the local business culture. What Chinese returners and returned expatriate managers have in common is the challenge of sharing the knowledge they have gained abroad with others at home in such a way as to influence organizational mental maps, behaviors, processes, structures, and organizational cultures. Therefore, many of the factors limiting the impact of returned expatriate managers may also affect the Chinese returners' ability to stimulate organizational learning. This review provides a basis for generating practical strategies for each kind of actor involved: policy makers in government, employers, and individuals.

## **Factors impeding organizational learning**

The literature indicates that there is a wide range of possible barriers to organizational learning (for a thorough overview see Berthoin Antal, Lenhardt, Rosenbrock, 2001). Among the most important potential barriers are

organizational structure, culture, and leadership. In addition, there are barriers that relate specifically to returners.

### **General barriers to organizational learning**

*Organizational structure:* Some writers have suggested that centralized structures block learning because “a centralized, mechanistic structure tends to reinforce past behaviors, whereas an organic, more decentralized structure tends to allow shifts of beliefs and actions (Fiol & Lyles, 1985:805). This thesis sounds plausible, but empirical research does not consistently support it. In fact, the study of organizational learning conducted in Chinese, German and Israeli companies found evidence of effective and long-term learning in centralized and hierarchical structures as well as in decentralized structures (Berthoin Antal, Dierkes, Marz, 1999). This research showed that structure alone is neither the problem nor the solution. Organizational culture and leadership, and the fit between these three elements, are more important. Therefore, attempts to change the structure without adjusting the culture and the leadership style, will either lead to no improvement in organizational learning, or will actually impede processes of organizational learning.

*Organizational culture:* Research shows that there are numerous ways in which the culture of an organization can impede learning. Assumptions underpinning an organization’s culture act as a filter for perceiving and making sense of the information in and around an organization (Berthoin Antal, Dierkes & Hähner, 1998). The mental models embedded in an organizational culture influence the way members of the organization perceive changes in the social, political and technological environment that might require the organization to learn. The mental model in the organizational culture also defines what constitutes relevant and valuable vs. irrelevant or unreliable knowledge and it establishes which the individuals or groups are deemed to be important bearers of knowledge and legitimate agents of organizational learning. An organization’s culture can limit organizational learning because “mental models not only help us make sense of the world we see, they can also restrict our understanding to that which makes sense within the mental model” (Kim, 1993:39; see also Sull, 1999:45). Organizations often encompass several subcultures (e.g., between departments or professions) each of which generate their own sense for what is considered valuable information and who is considered worthy of receiving it, so the learning that may be achieved in one part of the organization does not automatically get

shared with other parts of the organization. Depending on how knowledge is associated with power in an organizational culture or subculture, individuals may be reluctant or even hostile to sharing their knowledge with others (Husted & Michailova, 2002). Furthermore, the norms in a culture for dealing with errors or failures influence the organizational orientation to learning. In companies characterized for a long time by restrictive, controlling management styles and systems that have traditionally dealt punitively with employees who deviated from the organizational norm or overstepped the boundaries of their jobs, it will be difficult to persuade employees that learning is safe (Schein, 1993).

*Leadership:* There is general agreement in the literature, that lack of good leadership is an impediment to organizational learning (Schein, 1985:317). However, the concept of “good leadership” is fuzzy and too normative to be useful, particularly in different national contexts. Recent research has brought to light that the connection between leadership and organizational learning has “a quantitative as well as a qualitative dimension . . . learning is impeded when there are not enough leaders and when the behavior of available leaders is not conducive to learning.” (Berthoin Antal, Lenhardt, Rosenbrock, 2001:869) Leaders can block organizational learning when they behave as though knowing were a greater virtue than learning, and when they relegate people to followership. By limiting the ability of others to participate in leadership, leaders curtail opportunities for learning, whereas by distributing leadership, they multiply opportunities for organizational learning.

A particularly important aspect of leadership for organizational learning that emerges from the recent literature is the visible role modeling by leaders of learning behavior, including, for example, dealing actively and constructively with the mistakes they and others make (Sadler, 2001). Leaders thereby reduce the entrenchment of “defensive routines” (Argyris, 1990, 1991, 1993)—behaviors that people develop to protect themselves from threatening situations, such as making mistakes and admitting their own contribution to the problems of the organization. The effect of these defensive routines is that they impede people’s ability to discover “how the very way they go about defining and solving problems can be a source of problems in its own right” (Argyris, 1991:100). Such defensive routines maintain themselves in organizational cultures that externalize blame and generate a sense of hopelessness and cynicism (Argyris, 1990: 45). Leaders who have the courage and the humility to take responsibility for errors and problems, rather than blaming other people or other external factors, create a culture that

supports learning and lay the groundwork for sustainable organizational success (Collins, 2001).

### **Barriers specifically relating to returned expatriates**

In contrast to the long list of potential barriers discussed in the literature about organizational learning, it is striking that only a few factors emerge in empirical research about the experiences of expatriate managers after their return. But these factors are so powerful that despite the wealth of the expatriates' knowledge revealed in the research, extremely little was turned into organizational knowledge in the companies under study (Berthoin Antal 2000 and 2001). Another striking finding is that the barriers the returned expatriates encounter to converting their individual knowledge into organizational learning are best characterized by the absence of certain factors rather than by the active presence of the potential barriers found in the theoretical literature. The most significant factors impeding the ability of expatriates to embed the learning they gained abroad<sup>5</sup> into their companies on their return are:

- Lack of interest, inability, or unwillingness of people in the organization to see the relevance of knowledge generated in a different context.
- Lack of processes in the organization for actively drawing out the learning from the returned expatriates and converting it into relevant and useful knowledge for the new context.
- Lack of appropriate job for the returned expatriate to apply foreign knowledge.

It is worth noting that there is one kind of barrier that has been discussed in the recent organizational learning literature that returned expatriates appear to be immune to, at least temporarily, namely knowledge-sharing hostility (Husted & Michailova, 2002), and the related fear of exploitation that restricts knowledge sharing between members of different organizational subcultures (Empson, 2001). A characteristic typifying the overwhelming majority of returned expatriates is the intense desire to share their experiences and bring the knowledge acquired

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<sup>5</sup> The barriers encountered by expatriate managers after their return are often also experienced by managers who return from executive development programs in business schools, and, to some extent the phenomenon is experienced by new entrants into organizations, as highlighted by March (1991) in his article on value of "slow learners". Research would be needed comparing the experiences made by the three types of groups to establish whether there are significant differences between the dynamics of the barriers affecting their efficacy as agents of organizational learning, or whether the organization's receptiveness to the ideas and knowledge from one of the groups is symptomatic of the culture's response to learning from all three types of actors.



abroad into their local environment (Osland, 1995). This strong urge to communicate “foreign” knowledge may, however, generate its own barrier in the form of resentment or a kind of “fear of contamination” (Empson, 2001), if the local employees feel subjected to (implicit) criticisms or missionary-like zeal to instigate changes in local ways of doing things.

### **Implications for Chinese returners of general and specific barriers to organizational learning**

Some, but not all, of the general barriers to organizational learning are relevant for Chinese returners. For example, the finding that structures per se are not necessarily a barrier suggests that Chinese returners can focus their attention on other items rather than in designing ideal organizational structures. This is not to say that structures are irrelevant, but rather that other factors are more important, particularly culture and leadership. The multifaceted impact of organizational culture on the ability of the organization to learn indicates that Chinese returners must invest in understanding the norms and past experiences remembered in the culture of an organization if they intend to stimulate learning in that culture. The conclusions about the role of leadership for organizational learning suggest that Chinese returners, who frequently have high leadership responsibilities either in a new venture or in an existing organization, should generate more leaders around them, rather than fall into the trap of being heroes seeking to lead in “splendid isolation.” and emphasize leading over knowing.

At first glance, the three factors distilled from the research on returned expatriates in German multinationals may not appear relevant for Chinese returners. For example, surely the government policies specifically seeking out Chinese returners guarantees that their knowledge will be welcome at and treated as relevant by people at work? Therefore, theoretically, the first type of barrier to organizational learning from returned expatriates should not be a problem for Chinese returners. The parallel to the policy statements of the multinational companies does not bode well, however. Most, if not all, multinational companies also have positive policies. They stress the importance of international assignments in career development, and many explicitly state that they want to use international experience for organizational learning. However, in practice, neither top management nor most colleagues show much interest in finding out what the expatriates had learned abroad that could be relevant and useful at home. If there is such a large gap between official intentions, on the one hand,

and organizational practices and individual activities and interests, on the other, within companies that invest significant sums in expatriating and repatriating individual managers, is it not even more likely that there will be a similarly wide gap between political intentions and practical behavior in organizations in the Chinese context?

Furthermore, the emergence in China of the pejorative labels of returners as “turtles from the sea” and “turtles from the puddle” to denote the local Chinese suggests that there is already a problematic tension between the two groups (Wang, 2002; Wei 2002). Government policies that have given so much preferential treatment to returners, and probably the arrogance of some returners vis à vis their local colleagues, have generated a certain amount of bad blood between them, reducing their willingness and interest in sharing knowledge. Employees are not likely to believe that “turtles from the sea” have relevant knowledge for their organization, nor are returners likely to expect to discover valuable ideas from “turtles from the puddle.”

The second barrier identified in the research on returned expatriates, the lack of active processes for drawing out the learning, is related to the first barrier. If there is no real interest in discovering what can be done differently, no processes will be put in place to learn from the returners. There is a risk that returners whose “foreign” knowledge is not valued will experience pressure to re-assimilate into the local culture. In existing and in new Chinese organizations, just as in the multinational companies in Germany, the pressures of daily work will dominate. The habits and routines that are known, even if they do not work especially well, will be maintained, because the time and effort needed to organize the sharing of ideas, the experimentation with new approaches, and the development of different skills will not be found.

The third barrier relates to the job and the scope it offers for applying the learning generated in a foreign context. The Chinese returners may face this problem but in a very different form than the returned expatriates. The latter are often limited either by a job that entails too little international scope to apply their international knowledge, or by too little authority to introduce changes. By contrast, many Chinese returners have jobs that are too big for their skills and experiences. The Chinese authorities have tried to attract returners back to the motherland by offering them high level positions in existing organizations and opportunities to start their own companies (“More Talents Return,” 2000; “High-Level,” 2001).

Recruitment campaigns have focused especially on returners with technical expertise, often quite young people who have not yet had the general management experience that is required to create sustainable companies or to change established organizations ("High-Level," 2001).

This mismatch between the scope of the job assigned to experts recruited from abroad and their management skills is a relatively common problem in economies where governments and companies seek to close a skills gap rapidly by importing people trained in western industrialized countries. Research in Poland and Latvia, for example, shows that both "hard" and "soft" skills are important for managers in transformation economies, but all too often, recruitment focuses primarily on technical skills (Rudolph & Hillmann, 1998a, 1998b). Creating or changing processes and structures in a company, shaping an organizational culture, motivating people to try new ideas and take risks, all of these management responsibilities require "soft" skills and management experience in different functions that young technical experts rarely have had a chance to develop abroad. Chinese returners may be ineffective in stimulating organizational learning for the opposite reason than returned expatriates in western multinational companies. They are in jobs where too much is expected from them, whereas returning expatriates in western multinational companies are limited by jobs where too little organizational learning is expected from them.

### **Overcoming barriers to organizational learning from returners**

The impediment to organizational learning from the three factors identified in the research in German multinational companies is particularly powerful because they are interrelated. The lack of interest shown by top management in the learning that could be drawn from the returned expatriate manager is linked to the absence of active strategies to elicit the knowledge and to put in place processes for other employees to make sense of and find ways of applying the ideas to their work. The inappropriate job assignment is also related to the lack of top management interest and absence of strategies for using the expatriates as learning resources after their return.

The linkage between these three factors can be turned into an advantage in China. It is precisely by working on these interrelated factors that China can avoid wasting the resource it is seeking to attract back to the country to improve the performance of the economy. An active interest needs to be taken by senior

management in the knowledge returners bring to China, strategies for eliciting that knowledge need to be put in place and used by senior managers and by other colleagues; and the returners must be put into the appropriate positions for their knowledge to be used and shared.

The practical questions therefore are:

1. How to ensure that senior managers and colleagues really are interested in learning from the returners?
2. What kinds of processes should be put in place in order to enable the learning to happen? And,
3. What kinds of positions are appropriate for the returners?

The key to answering these practical questions lies in formulating strategies at the individual, organizational, and government levels based on two essential premises:

- The knowledge of all partners is equally important in the process of organizational learning; and all involved are agents of organizational learning (Friedman, 2001).
- All involved must understand that knowledge acquired in one setting cannot simply be applied in another—the sharing of knowledge is an interactive process that leads to the creation of new knowledge (e.g., Nonaka, Toyama & Reinmölle, 2001; Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Tsui-Auch, 2001).

The level of interest of local employees in learning from the experiences generated abroad is likely to be commensurate with the level of interest shown by the returners in the local knowledge. The returners must recognize that they are not teachers but co-learners in the process of discovering how to draw the relevance out of foreign knowledge to the new context. The returners cannot expect to effect changes by lecturing their local employees about so-called best practices discovered abroad, nor can they unilaterally impose practices that have worked well in a different setting and expect them to have a positive impact locally. Such lectures are likely to appear arrogant and insensitive, because they devalue the local knowledge rather than linking into it. Unilateral impositions of external practices tend to be resisted by those whose jobs are affected when they do not see the advantages of trying out new ideas or when they feel unsafe doing so (Schein, 1991).

Equally, the local employees must conceive of themselves as agents, not recipients, of knowledge creation and organizational learning. This entails actively seeking to discover the relevance of knowledge generated abroad, rather than labeling it as irrelevant because it does not easily fit into the Chinese context. Local employees cannot leave the responsibility entirely to the returners. Only if the two groups value each other will local employees overcome their disrespect for the knowledge of the “turtles from the sea,” and the returners, too, will set aside their bias against knowledge they have labeled as coming from the “turtles from the puddle” (Wang, 2002; Wei, 2002).

Proceeding on the basis of these two premises is particularly important because the process of organizational learning is not just a cumulative one of adding new layers or pieces of knowledge to the store of available knowledge. Doing new things or doing old things better often requires unlearning old practices that were effective in the past but no longer appropriate in the current circumstances (Hedberg, 1981). To the extent that the implementation of new ideas will require unlearning old practices in the Chinese organizations, it will be easier for employees to discard those practices and try out the new if they have had a role in generating the new knowledge with the returners.

Organizations must therefore pursue strategies based on the returners engaging in dialogues and experiments with other members of the organization in order to explore how the foreign ideas could become useful in the local setting. Such a strategy entails figuring out how the new ideas can most effectively be combined with existing knowledge in the organization. The Chinese returners and their local colleagues must help each other share and understand each other’s knowledge. As Nonaka has pointed out throughout his work, the process of creating new knowledge involves combining the tacit and the explicit knowledge held by individuals, knowledge that they are often not even conscious of having, and can only formulate by interacting with others (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, Nonaka et al., 2001). For returners and local managers, a first step in this direction lies in explaining the explicit knowledge they have available in various codified forms (written manuals, regulations). More importantly, it implies that both have to make the effort to formulate their tacit knowledge or illustrate it by modeling it in their behavior so that they learn from each other. Out of that knowledge sharing process, they will generate new knowledge that is appropriate for the context. Only then will the members of the organization, returners as well as local

employees, have knowledge that they believe is truly useful and valuable, knowledge they will use and embed in the organizational memory.

The two key premises also have implications for the jobs in which Chinese returners can be most effective as agents of organizational learning. They must be in positions of authority in order to have the necessary status to introduce changes and make policy decisions in organizations. But authority alone does not suffice for the successful introduction of ideas in organizations. It is essential that the returners have positions that link them into team-working relationships with local employees, rather than isolating them on pedestals from which they are likely to make errors that are costly to the organization and damaging to their individual credibility. For example, companies in Poland, Latvia and Czechoslovakia experimented with pairing Western and Eastern European managers in “tandems” as a means of stimulating mutual learning and creating new knowledge by combining Western expertise with Eastern European local knowledge (Kessel & Dörr, 1998, Rudolph & Hillmann, 1998b).

## **Conclusion**

From the research on the dynamics of organizational learning, particularly on the barriers to such learning and the factors that have impeded returned expatriates in Western multinational companies from contributing to organizational learning, it is possible to formulate recommendations for government policy, for organizational strategy and for returners themselves in China.

**Government policy:** Policies at the national and provincial level have focused on attracting highly skilled Chinese returners by offering them preferential treatment for setting up their own companies or for joining existing organizations in high positions. There are three primary drawbacks to current policies in terms of organizational learning. First, the preferential treatment tends to create tension between returners and local employees, promoting envy and competition rather than cooperation between them (Wang, 2002). The negative impact of preferential treatment is particularly unfortunate when one discovers that returners indicate that the preferential treatment is rarely a particularly significant factor in their decision to return. The stronger motivating factors are the career opportunities afforded by a rapidly growing economy (particularly at a time when other economies are stagnating), the problems of being a minority abroad where glass

ceilings block promotions into top jobs, and a sense of patriotism (Beech, 2000; Kirby, 2002; Liang, 2002; Wilhelm & Biers, 2000).

Second, the policies value knowing instead of learning. The returners bring with them knowledge gained abroad, but they need to learn how to use that knowledge in the local context. Furthermore, the returners often have specialized forms of expertise, not the general management experience needed to establish sustainable enterprises or to lead change in existing organizations, so they have to learn to broaden their knowledge and skills in order to be effective in their new roles and responsibilities in China.

Thirdly, there seems to be insufficient attention and commitment in the current policies and regulations to achieving the depth of organizational learning and change that are required to support the kind of entrepreneurial spirit the government professes to want in order to make Chinese companies competitive in the global marketplace. Almost half the returners are leaving again after trying to bring their ideas into China, many of them because they feel that the bureaucracy is daunting, the public sector is still controlled by interest groups resistant to change, the legal system remains flawed, and too little respect exists for intellectual property (Kirby, 2002; Cheng, 2001; Clendenin, 2002).

Possible ways of overcoming these drawbacks and improving government policies would include:

- Revising regulations and procedures to increase flexibility and nurture entrepreneurship instead of specifically limiting preferential treatment to returners.
- Promoting the value of learning rather than knowing in policies and programs, and stimulating returners and local employees to participate in these programs together. Management development programs with an emphasis on organizational learning and change are especially important.

**Organizational strategy.** Chinese organizations in the public and private sector are competing with foreign multinational companies and international joint ventures for returners (Cheng, 2001; “Tapping New Avenues,” 1997; “NPC Deputy Warns,” 2002). Many multinationals first relied primarily on expatriate managers they sent from their operations in other countries, then tried localizing management jobs, but the localization policy was hampered by a lack of managers in China with sufficient skills and experience to meet the world

standards. These multinational companies have discovered the valuable pool of returners, who are less expensive than expatriates and more highly skilled than the local workforce. (Cheng, 2001; McComb, 1999). Many returners find the multinational companies attractive employers, because they offer high salaries and western management career paths. Joint ventures with foreign companies and other private companies with rapid growth and better working conditions than state-owned organizations are also successfully recruiting returners (Ajello & Tang, 1999; "Returned Overseas Scholars," 2001). In other words, it appears that the organizations that have the greatest need to learn how to operate differently are experiencing the greatest difficulties in attracting returners.

Organizations in the public and private sector could attract, retain, and benefit from returners in a combination of ways, drawing insights from the experience of transforming large, European-based bureaucratic multinational companies (Berthoin Antal, Krebsbach-Gnath, Dierkes, 2003).

- Leaders at all levels of the organization should create and use windows of opportunity for awakening a need to learn, so that members of the organization feel a strong urgency for challenging their traditional ways of doing and seeing things. The entrance to the WTO offers a window of opportunity, but only if people in the organization understand the immediate requirement for learning and change. A change in leadership or a potential major threat also represent windows of opportunity to stimulate organizational learning (Weber & Berthoin Antal, 2001).
- Leaders at all levels of the organization should seek out members of the organization willing to engage in change, "internal outsiders" who are often found in units or functions that seem to be outside the mainstream or on the periphery of the organization (Berthoin Antal & Krebsbach-Gnath, 2002). If several returners (not just one or two tokens) are invited to join forces and share the leadership with members of the organization who think along different lines, the necessary critical mass will be achieved. Together, they will be effective teams of learners and drivers of change.
- Leaders at all levels of the organization should create platforms for sharing and creating knowledge, so that returners and other members of the organization feel valued and so that they can discuss mistakes from which they can learn together without fear.



**Individual returners.** It is exciting and flattering for young people who have studied and worked abroad, investing time and energy in developing their knowledge and skills, to be actively sought out and recruited back home with promises of special status. The opportunity to make an impact in a transformation economy is highly motivating, all the more so if it is one's own country. And the perspectives for achieving success in a rapidly growing economy are stimulating. It is all too easy for individuals to overestimate themselves and underestimate the knowledge and skills of local employees when national and local authorities woo and praise them so warmly. Impatience and arrogance are frequent traps for returners who are of course eager to make their mark and prove that they can fulfill the high expectations of change. However, experts, especially those in technical domains whom China has particularly sought to bring back, generally have little experience in managing change processes, and little awareness of the importance of organizational politics in generating support for their ideas. As a result, they often generate resentment instead of interest and respect among their local colleagues and employees, whether they are in existing organizations or creating start up ventures (Wang, 2002; Iredale & Guo, 2001).

Individual returners who want to become effective agents of organizational learning in companies they found or organizations they join should:

- Enter into their responsibilities and bring their skills and expertise into the organization with an attitude of learning. If they exhibit curiosity and respect for the knowledge of others, they are more likely to encounter curiosity and respect themselves, instead of building resentment. By using the insights they gain from local employees about the organizational culture and procedures, they will be in a better position to develop ideas that work.
- Develop their political savvy and learn how to build coalitions to launch and implement their ideas. Initiatives for change run out of steam if they do not have support from different sources and different levels of the organization. Sustainable initiatives require strong top manager as sponsors who have the status to assure legitimacy and access to resources, and champions at lower levels of the organization who have the knowledge and networks to actually make sure things happen (Berthoin Antal 1992). Returners have to supplement their expert knowledge by investing in building relationships with others who can become sponsors and champions in getting the organization to learn new ways of seeing and doing things.

In summary, the strategy that the Chinese authorities is pursuing to stimulate Chinese citizens who have studied and worked abroad to return and prepare the economy for global competitiveness is a very promising one. The scale of the challenge is large, but the pool of qualified people to attract back to China to help meet this challenge is large as well. However, the track record of the past few years has shown that simply bringing back significant numbers of experts from abroad will not suffice. The strategy will only succeed if flanking measures are introduced to enable these individuals to stimulate and implement organizational learning processes in existing organizations and in new ventures. The ability of returners to achieve the desired scale of change will depend on close cooperation with their local compatriots, because organizational learning requires creatively combining the knowledge and experience gained abroad with the knowledge and experience rooted in the local context. The “turtles from the sea” need the “turtles from the puddle” and vice versa. The coming years should provide answers to an intriguing question: Will China prove itself to be more successful in putting effective strategies in place to tap the knowledge gained abroad by its returners than many multinational companies have been in drawing on their expatriates to stimulate organizational learning after they return from foreign assignments?

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