

Winning the global talent war: A policy perspective¹

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Abstract

Purpose

From a policy perspective, this article discusses the phenomenon of international talent mobility and competition in relation to China's engagement in the "talent war" for attracting, retaining, and managing global talents.

Design/methodology/approach

I adopt an approach combining literature review and international comparative analysis.

Findings

Factors explaining global talent mobility have been predominantly economic. This paper argues that China should also focus on other non-economic incentives, which may prove just as critical for attracting and retaining talents in the long term. The government can learn from the experience of other competing countries in developing a national strategy for attracting and retaining global talents. In particular, global talents of Chinese origin are more likely to be attached to China due to their cultural roots and associated identity. Thus China has an advantage in attracting overseas Chinese who are residents or citizens of other competing countries.

Practical Implications

An attractive policy is key to winning the global talent war and determining the future development path of a nation. The talent policy at a national level should address not only economic factors, but also personal, professional, and institutional factors.

Originality/value

Winning the global talent war is a policy competition among countries. The Chinese Government may succeed in the war for talent by adopting a multi-pronged and long-term talent strategy. This paper calls for China to reconsider its recent reform on permanent residence (Green Card) policy reform from a global talent competition perspective.

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Key words

Immigrants; overseas returnees; policy; skilled workers; Talent

Introduction

The international mobility of talent is an important part of globalisation involving all nations competing for attracting and retaining scarce talents in the global arena (Beine et al., 2008; Vaiman et al., 2012). During the past three decades, China has experienced significant economic growth, gradually transitioning from a global labour-intensive manufacturing base to a knowledge-based economy (Lam, et al., 2013). As a result, attracting and retaining talents has become a vital part of China's competitive strategy in the globalization process (Lane and Pollner, 2008). Increasingly, research has paid attention to the 'war for talent' phenomenon, which has been termed by McKinsey & Company and adopted in the talent management literature (Chambers et al., 1998; Schuler et al., 2011; Vaiman et al., 2012; Schiemann, 2013).

In the past, many have lamented the loss of talents in developing countries, including China, to more advanced countries such as the US (Zweig et al., 1995; Rapaport, 2002; Saxenian, 2006). Historically, a similar phenomenon has also occurred in some developed countries. For example, the Royal Society sparked a national debate in the 1960s when it was noted that there was a loss of British scientists to the US (Royal Society, 1963). A popular term, 'brain drain,' was used to describe a large-scale loss of domestic talents to other countries. Since the 1980s, China has lost a significant amount of its scientists, engineers and technologists to countries such as the US, Canada, the UK and Australia. Recently, increased overseas Chinese talents are looking to move back to China as economic opportunities continue to grow (Saxenian, 2006; Tung, 2008).

Despite the fact that China has a large population of 1.3 billion, it has suffered a significant shortage of highly skilled talents, especially in managerial and technological innovation areas (Farrell and Grant, 2005). This suggests that China will have to offer greater policy incentives to successfully attract talented workers to support the country's further economic development. Some have noted that China is no longer experiencing a brain drain, but has witnessed a brain circulation with an increasing number of returnees possessing high levels of skills (Kuhn and McAusland, 2006; Agrawal et al., 2011). For example, China's IT and engineering sector is now benefiting significantly from talents returning from overseas who would not have the same level of expertise had they remained in China (Saxenian, 2006).

This article discusses the phenomenon of international talent mobility and competition in relation to China's engagement in the "talent war" for attracting, retaining, and managing global talents from a policy perspective. I seek to extend the analysis beyond simplistic economic factors of talent mobility to explore the role of non-economic factors. I begin by

reviewing theoretical perspectives on talent mobility. I then focus on some lessons from other countries that China may incorporate in formulating effective talent policy through addressing non-economic factors and challenges faced by the returnees. I conclude with policy recommendations for China to look for a multi-pronged and long-term approach to attracting, retaining, and managing international talents.

Theoretical Perspectives on talent mobility

The economic literature has long paid attention to talent mobility. Microeconomic theories of migration suggest that potential migrants weigh-up the pros and cons of economic opportunities in the home and potential host country and move to locations they can receive the greatest labour market returns (Sjaastad, 1962). This is consistent with human capital theory on individuals accruing different forms of returns and earnings in relation to their migration decision (Becker, 1964). Borjas (1999) has suggested that potential migrants are rational in their choices and will determine the benefits of staying in a country versus moving to another. Macroeconomic theories of migration find that different levels of labor supply and demand in different nations cause workers to move from low wage and labor surplus countries to high wage and labor scarce ones. This helps to explain why from the 1980s, there has been a large flow of workers moving from China to the US. Indeed, the Chinese-born population in the US has grown from less than 100,000 in 1960 (1% of the total US population) to 1.8 million in 2010 (4.5% of the total US population) with the major influx of Chinese-born workers moving to the US after China's open-door policy and economic reforms (McCabe, 2012).

A classic explanation of migration has been Lee's (1966) revised version of Ravenstein's 19th century laws of migration, known as the 'push-pull model'. Lee (1966) argued that what determines individuals' decision to move are factors in the home country, the potential destination country, and personal factors, as well as intervening obstacles such as migrating distance and relevant immigration policy in the potential destination country. This theory predicts that potential migrants deliberate the costs and benefits of staying versus moving while considering the macro context and their own personal circumstances. In an open society without policy restriction, people may be attracted by positive factors in the destination country that 'pull' them to move such as attractive jobs, quality of life or the opportunity to live closer to families; or they may be forced to move by negative factors in the home country which 'push' them to leave such as civil war, famine, recession or various forms of discriminations. Such push-pull factors vary significantly and are not exclusively economic in nature (Lynton and Beechler, 2012; Schiemann, 2013).

Contemporary research has emphasized the importance of transnational or cross-country contacts and diaspora networks or connections abroad between individuals from the same home country. Diaspora networks facilitate information exchanges and can offer the network participants greater access to markets, investments, social contacts and expertise

in both home and host countries (Kuznetsov and Sabel, 2006). These networks are significant in promoting investment and talent movement to China (Gao, 2003; Biao, 2005; Tong, 2005) as they are trust-based and provide timely market information and referrals to potential organizations, investors and migrants (Rauch, 2003). Saxenian (2006) has noted that China has greatly benefited from new forms of transnational social networks because many overseas Chinese professionals have forged important ties with key institutions and actors. Yet, the experiences of the Chinese diaspora are not uniform across different generations. Those professionals who left China before the mid-1990s hold more connections with China than those who have left more recently (Biao, 2005).

In short, research on migration has revealed that talent mobility, particularly at the international level, is not solely determined by the market force or economic factors. Individual migration decisions are also dependent on the dynamics of a myriad of non-economic factors, including national or regional policies at the macro-level, social networks and institutional factors at the meso-level, and individual circumstances and personal factors at the micro-level (Boyd, 1989).

Experiences from other countries

To win the talent war, it is worthwhile for China to learn from the experience of other countries. To successfully attract, retain, and manage global talents, the “war for talent” often starts with determining the talent gap and prioritizing what type of talent is needed at different levels based on anticipated or planned development goals. The Australian Government has developed a 19 page ‘Consolidated Sponsored Occupation List’ based on recommendations from different assessment authorities targeting a wide range of talents, from neurologists, engineers and barristers to locksmiths, gasfitters, and bed and breakfast operators, to prioritize needed talents (DIAC, 2012). If talent is not clearly specified, it may send ambiguous signals to the global labour market about what skills and competencies are being sought.

The literature has highlighted successful and less successful policy initiatives in various countries. In examining South Korean and Taiwanese returnees, Song (2003) reported that better career opportunities and the challenge in engaging in home-countries' development have been major motivating factors for student-turned overseas talent. Australia has been successful in identifying key areas where the country has skill shortages and holding job fairs and recruitment events in overseas markets as a strategy of sourcing specific talents from abroad (DIAC, 2011). New Zealand has adopted an approach to creating an extensive diaspora network of professionals in different global markets for attracting needed talents (Larner, 2007). The Chinese government may extend these approaches to not only building a global network of talent, but also harnessing this network through recruiting key talents who hold the skills that the country needs. While some initiatives exist in well-known talent hotspots such as Silicon Valley with immigrant associations such as the Chinese Institute of Engineers, there is a need for a more globally integrated strategic network.

Some countries have been successful in attracting, but not in retaining talent. Holland et al. (2007), for instance, find that Australian organisations have been effective in attracting talent through recruitment and selection initiatives, but less successful in retaining talent through skill development, training, career development and diversity management programs. Research on highly skilled British workers in Canada found that their experiences can sometime be difficult because they have to unnecessarily prove themselves or even be re-trained in their profession (Harvey, 2012). This causes a certain degree of despondency among talented workers and can become a key reason to induce turnover in the short-term. However, Harvey (2012) found that the vast majority of British interviewees have remained in Canada because they have been satisfied with the quality of life despite some levels of initial dissatisfaction with their work experience. In other words, quality of life in the host country can lead to talented workers overcoming dissatisfactions with their new workplace.

Recently, the Chinese Government has adopted some policies to attract overseas student-turned “star” talent. For example, in 2008, China introduced a ‘Thousand Talent Program’ aimed to attract 2,000 China-born world-class experts, scholars, and entrepreneurs by offering substantial governmental supported funding and resources. To date, 2,263 professionals have returned to 29 provinces, representing an important but modest contribution to China’s human capital (Zhang, 2012). On the other hand, a growing number of self-initiated returnees with extensive overseas education and professional experience are unable to find employment in China due to their lack of local experience and social capital (Li and Lo, 2012). If China is as committed as it claims to attracting global talent (China Daily, 2013), it may need to consider a set of much broader and more comprehensive national policies for talent at all levels to address the challenges they face.

Challenges for returning Chinese talent

The continuing economic growth in China has witnessed many overseas talents starting to return for aspirations of accomplishments and business opportunities. Although investment in China and return migration began before 2007-2008, the global financial crisis has arguably accelerated this process partially due to the diminishing economic opportunities for migrants in North America and Europe (Zhou, 2008). It is important to recognise that the experience of returnees is not always a rosy picture and the growing number of returned talents has intensified the competition for jobs and business opportunities (Biao and Shen, 2009). As a result, there have been many Chinese returnees who have not been able to start their careers, thus bannered ‘seaweed’ or ‘hai dai (海帶)’, popularly referred to as “returnees waiting for jobs” (Biao and Shen, 2009). In the migration literature, this phenomenon is often termed as ‘brain waste’, describing talented workers who are not finding employment in areas equivalent to their training and experience (Nakamuro and Ogawa, 2010; Harvey and Groutsis, 2012). This also raises the concern of whether Chinese employers are underplaying the importance of international experience and networks and

overplaying the importance of local experience. This is the opposite of other employers who consider that international experience and networks is essential for their operations as well as for the careers of their talented workers (Beaverstock, 2005).

Non-economic factors

The literature suggests that non-economic factors are a significant driver of talent mobility. One important dimension of the 'boundaryless career', for instance, is that individuals are not necessarily moving through traditional career structures, but for personal and family reasons (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001). Carr et al. (2005) remind us that the potential value of many talented workers may be wasted because the local norms in the workplace and local communities discriminate against talent from different cultures. Berry (1992) argues that two important challenges for migrants moving to host countries or institutions are acculturation and adaptation. Acculturation is the cultural change that individuals face when they come into contact with other groups in a host location. Adaptation refers to the strategies the international talent take during acculturation, including adjustment and reaction to fit into the new environment. The factors of acculturation and adaptation are likely to be major challenges which determine the success or failure of the integration of talent into the host system. For the returnees, their challenge may be substantial. Porschitz et al. (2012) have reported that many returning millennial Chinese workers found it difficult reintegrating into China, partially because their expectations and attitudes have changed while living and working abroad, and partially because Chinese employers and the workplace are less open to change and creativity from these millennial returnees. Either way, non-economic factors present a significant challenge in the reintegration experiences of returnees.

The international migration literature has also recognised other non-economic factors in affecting migration and integration experiences. Kofman (2004) has noted that migration research tend to focus on the individual and economic perspective and overlook the influence of gender and family in migration decision-making. She argues that transnationalism and networks have highlighted the significance of social connections and agents who are involved in the migration process. Harvey (2011a) also found that social networks were highly influential when British and Indian scientists were considering moving to the United States, their immediate family members playing a particularly important role. With the integration process, Ho (2006) challenges simplistic causal links between an individual's human capital and his or her employment outcomes. She documents the markedly different challenges of Chinese men and women integrating into Australia with household and caring commitments restricting women's more than men's careers. These examples demonstrate the powerful influence of non-economic factors on the migration and integration experiences of talented workers.

Despite the challenges that some returnees face, from a cultural tradition aspect, China has a clear advantage in attracting overseas Chinese talents to return. The reason for this is that national culture shapes individual cultural identity (Jameson, 2007) and during migration individuals often carry their own cultural identity independent of the mainstream culture in the host country. Overseas Chinese talents often long for the cultural atmosphere in their home country regardless of opportunities and success they have experienced abroad (Chen, 2002). Hence, China has an advantage over other countries in attracting overseas Chinese talents who share traditional Chinese culture and who may prefer their tradition to other alternatives. This is an important advantage given the large pool of Chinese 'student-turned talent' in the western world. Recently, Chinese President Xi Jinping has emphasised the significant value of returning Chinese talent for the country's economic development (Xinhuanet, 2013).

The local and institutional context

Many talented workers are attracted just as much by the city as by the country. The Economist's (2012) liveability survey and Mercer's (2012) quality of living survey are two prominent indicators which carry a significant weight in influencing the mobility decisions of potential talents. Of the Chinese cities, Hong Kong ranked the highest at 31st in The Economist survey followed by Beijing at 72nd. Hong Kong also ranked the highest at 70th in the Mercer survey followed by Shanghai at 95th. However, what is striking in both surveys is the overall low ranking of Chinese cities. In contrast, Chinese cities' positions in business and economic rankings, such as the Globalization and World Cities research network, the Global Cities Index, and the Global Economic Power Index, are very high. Yet, global talent mobility is often influenced by location-related factors such as quality of life. A recent example is the increased severity of air pollution in Beijing in January 2013. When the air quality index reached 755 in Beijing, where readings over 300 is classified by China's Ministry of Environmental Protection as severely polluted, it not only causes dramatic concerns among the local residents, but also affected those who are considering moving to the city. Although this represents an extreme example, it shows how local context is related to the movement of talented workers.

Another challenge that China will face in attracting returnees is the potential negative reception of the local communities. Singapore has faced such challenges, despite its Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong's strong support in attracting global talent. The government has specifically targeted professional and business emigrants as part of its strategy to compete in today's knowledge-based economy (Ho, 2011a). However, the domestic population showed signs of frustration due to concerns that an increasing population would affect local job market, infrastructure, housing and transport costs (Adam, 2013).

A few recent cases in China have also revealed the realistic challenge returnees face in the local context. In one case, a selected Thousand Talent Program (TTP) scientist recruited from

the US served as the Dean for the College of Life Sciences at a southern Chinese university. Yet he job was unexpectedly terminated one year prior to his four-year contract term (Qiu, 2013a). In a second case, a top scientist with U.S. citizenship status under the same TTP program was appointed as the Dean for the School of Stomatology at a university in Beijing. However, the university refused to renew his appointment after the first term despite the fact that the original agreement was to serve at least for two terms; an official explanation for discontinuing the agreed terms from the university was concerns about the scientist's foreign citizenship status (Qian, 2013). In both cases, although the involved universities have provided seemingly plausible institutional reasons, the underlying conflicts between the returnees and the existing talent management and retaining system embedded in the local institutional context appear to be a major challenge (Qian, 2013; Qiu, 2013 a,b). More importantly, these high-profile cases have caused serious concerns among the overseas Chinese-born scientist networks and communities, and may further affect China's effort in attracting future talent (Qiu, 2013b).

Policy recommendations

The prolonged war for talent is neither an academic fad nor a media buzzword, but a realistic competition among nations for scarce human talents. Essentially, the war for talent may be better understood as a 'war on policy' among national governments regarding how to most effectively attract and retain global talents in the form of immigration or returnee policy and associated integration policy. The discussion above has highlighted major factors influencing talent mobility and the challenges China is facing, as well as lessons it may learn from other countries. This section focuses on policies implemented in other countries and provides some recommendations for China.

A proportion of skilled workers are not intending to move abroad for temporary time periods, but permanently. Some Middle Eastern countries tended to prefer a policy of 'attract and replace' rather than 'attract and retain' talents; but this has created significant problems for migrants and their families in terms of obtaining important social rights (Harvey and Groutsis, 2012; Castles and Miller, 2009). This approach may be effective in the short-term, but when competition for global talents increases, all other things being equal, the latter will choose to move to locations which are more favourable in terms of enabling them to integrate. In contrast, Australia has been quick to recognise the different policy approaches needed to attract and retain talents, and has offered a number of incentives to attract global talents by allowing them to move directly as permanent residents, or to transition after two years of employment on a skill-based 457 visa to permanent residency status. Canada has adopted a similar approach with a new start-up visa program introduced in January 2013. This visa offers permanent residency to entrepreneurs who have funding from angel investors, venture capital partners, or a business incubator and aims to attract foreign-born entrepreneurs from the US, which has faced problems with its infamous H-1B visa (Bradbury, 2013).

Balancing lifestyle with economic incentives is another important policy consideration. Ley's (2010) work on 'millionaire migrants' from Hong Kong suggests that many talented Chinese workers find themselves shuttling between Canada for the lifestyle and Hong Kong for the work opportunities. This has led to what Ong (1999) refers to as 'astronaut families' where different family members reside in various parts of the world. While such approaches have, to some extent, enabled certain elite families to balance economic and lifestyle opportunities, the experiences are not representative of most talented Chinese workers. Nonetheless, investing in and promoting lifestyle and institutional constraints in China is important for attracting Chinese talents living abroad and those from other countries who are often attracted to move for a multitude of different reasons, which will change over the period of their life cycles (Harvey, 2011b).

Furthermore, an important consideration for Chinese policymakers is to determine the types of residency or citizenship status foreign workers should receive. China has eight categories of visas that foreign citizens can apply, depending on their activity in China. For potential workers, visa Z is the main route for foreigners wishing to take-up employment in China and it requires support from an employer via provincial or labour authority (Cheng, 2013). Although it is straightforward to apply for a visa Z in China, the government could arguably make it much simpler in the process for talented workers moving to and staying in China. From an integration policy perspective, it has been difficult for foreign workers to obtain residency and citizenship, making it hard for those wishing to remain in China and hold the same rights as domestic workers, which is likely to reduce retention rates.

China should also consider how it may attract its former student-turned talents living abroad. Currently, China does not allow Chinese-born individuals living abroad to hold dual citizenship (Tung, 2008). Many returning Chinese migrants who have lost their hukou status have had precarious residency and work status in China, despite their intellectual and economic contributions to the country. This has led to greater lobbying for dual citizenship, although with no success to date (Ho, 2011b). An alternative policy has recently been undertaken to issue permanent residence status, known as Green Card, to foreigners (People's Daily, 2013). However, it has been noted that China's immigration system issues the most difficult and restrictive Green Card in the world (Zhan, 2012). For example, under the category of investment-based Green Card, the policy requires not only a minimum of \$2 million accumulated and stable investment in three consecutive years, but also stipulates an applicant to have local investment experience. For the skill-based category, the policy requires an applicant to have a minimum of four consecutive years of local technical experience at the time of application. No wonder some Chinese local commentators have joked that the Green Card policy may even disqualify applications from the likes of Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg because they lack of required local experiences (Yan, 2012).

The existing national talent policies restrict China's ability to attract and retain international talents. For example, since the Green Card system's implementation in 2004, there has only

been 4,700 green cards issued by 2011, an average of only 248 per year (Zhang, 2012). In contrast, the U.S. has issued 143,998 green cards in 2012 alone for the skill and employment based category, and among those who received green cards under all categories in 2012, there were 81,784 from mainland China (Monger and Yankay, 2013). Similar to the domestic hukou, or household registration system, the restriction imposed by the green card system in China in relation to the ongoing talent war is likely to suppress a healthy brain circulation (Chan et al., 1999).

If China is serious about attracting international talents ahead of the global talent competition, the restrictive green card policy needs to be significantly relaxed. A favourable green card policy is particularly important in attracting those of Chinese origin who currently hold foreign citizenship in countries like Australia, Canada, Japan, United Kingdom, or the U.S. More attractive policies and regulations are likely to create a much more significant economic and technological impact than a few occasional Thousand Talent Programs with much less financial investment by the government.

Concluding Remarks

Willingly or not, all countries have been involved in the contemporary talent war as part of the globalization process. Only those adopting a proactive approach and offering attractive policies can benefit from the talent competition. It is important not to assume that there is only one reason behind individual mobility decisions. Historically, policy research and practice on talent migration have overly-emphasised economic rationality. Yet increasing evidence suggests that talented workers' migrating decisions are based on a variety of factors. In addition to economic factors, career concerns, sense of accomplishment, and local and institutional context, as well as residency and citizenship considerations are all critical aspects influencing talent mobility and retention. Effective talent policy at a national level should be able to address not only individuals' economic concerns, but also personal and professional factors. China may better compete in the war for talent if it adopts a multi-pronged and long-term talent strategy to attracting and retaining talent.

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