

## Better Brain Drain than Brain in the Drain<sup>1</sup>

By: Ms. Le Hoang Anh Thu\*

Glancing back at myself about four years ago when I packed the luggage for my first-ever trip to a foreign country to study in Japan, Japan was then in my mind a completely mysterious country that seemed too far away from home. During my first few days here, looking at the dumb dark mountains from the student dormitory's windows, I recognized how far I was from my hometown where no mountains can be seen, no silent spaces can be found, and there is nothing but skyscrapers and the dominant sound of the traffic hum. However, as if Japan has been drifting closer to Southeast Asia during my last four years here, I now feel that the distance between Japan and Viet Nam is surprisingly short, and a flight back home is not worth a week's advance packing any more! I imagine that in the entire world, there are about 40,000 Vietnamese students studying outside Viet Nam, and even more students from other countries studying outside their home countries.<sup>2</sup> We are little spots in a massive flow of students connecting countries, and part of an issue called the student brain drain that is attracting the attention of scholars and governments in many countries.

### What urges them to go?

In this era of globalization, people move freely around our globe like air and water. However, many theories of migration point out that people consider the minus and the plus factors of both the origins and the destinations, and their decision on whether to move or not is mainly based on those minuses and pluses. Some factors can be pluses for some people but minuses to other people.<sup>3</sup> As we are talking about student migration, plus factors can be world-class education, school facilities, or for some young students, the chance to meet new people and have new adventures to challenge themselves.

The reasons why students go abroad and fail to go back to their home countries after the successful completion of their studying programs are varied. Many research projects have been devoted to finding out the factors that tear students from their home countries. Countries like India, People's Republic of China (PRC), and the Philippines every year send young people to advanced countries to study, and later see only a portion of them come back. The rest either go to other countries to work or to continue their education, or they stay permanently abroad and work in the countries where they went to school. Governments think that they have lost these brilliant brains and that it is unfair that the cost to educate these young people just vanished along with them to other richer and aging countries, where they will contribute to developing already-advanced techniques and economies.

Governments are less concerned about why students in developing countries choose to go abroad to study, rather than staying in their home countries to finish their education. Certainly, the reasons are varied. I wanted to study in Japan because I fancy the facilities of my current school in Japan, which are far better than any in the schools I had attended in my home country. A lot of my friends chose to go to Singapore to study information technology and natural sciences because they believed they could get better training there. Others

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<sup>1</sup> Gandhi, Rajiv (Prime Minister of India). Quoted in *The Economist*. 2005. Survey: Higher Education, Wandering Scholars. 10 September.

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<sup>2</sup> Pham, Thi Ly. 2005, 7 October. 250 trieu USD do bien moi nam? *Tuoi Tre Newspaper*. Available: <http://www.tuoiitre.com.vn/Tianyon/Index.aspx?ArticleID=87792&ChannelID=13>

<sup>3</sup> Lee, Everett S. 1996. A theory of Migration. In *Theories of Migration*, edited by Robin Cohen. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.

wanted to go to England because of that country's fascinating culture and its world-class education institutions.

### **What pulls them home?**

Actually in this era of globalization and transportation, it is an evitable fact that people will move out of their homelands for other destinations. Let us remember that human beings were mobile even when travel was life-threatening. Therefore, it is remarkable to see that people take for granted the fact that a Japanese camera is made in the PRC, while the fact that a Chinese student remains in Japan to work after his studies are complete is a worrisome sign. Developing countries, however, are totally right to worry, because they have lost their brainpower and the money used to educate these young people. Some figures can be listed here to see why student brain drain worries developing countries. During the 1950s and 1970s, more than 80% of students from Taipei, China that were studying abroad failed to return.<sup>4</sup> Only 18.8% of Chinese students studying in the United States came back, which is even more worrisome given that 53.3% of all Chinese students studying abroad are in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

Governments are especially concerned with how to make them return home after finishing their studies. While patriotism is definitely a factor that draws students home, it is not enough, because patriotism can be shown no matter where people are living. The media and governments frequently encourage students to return so they can contribute to their developing home country (footnote 4).

It follows that if the decision to migrate for education is an individual process in which the plus and minus factors are weighed, so is the decision to return home or to remain abroad. Therefore, in order to tackle the brain drain, governments should focus on who remains inside the countries, not on those who are abroad. In other words, in order to attract talents to return, governments should create more pluses to attract them home. This has been the case in Taipei, China and Singapore. Both countries experienced the loss of talent years ago. After their rapid development, both countries were successful in attracting their lost brains back home to contribute further to expanding the economy (footnote 4). Singapore especially has become the region's hub of brains. So what happened in reality is somewhat different from what was expected. Talent will return to its home country after the economy has developed and can provide an advanced environment for highly educated people to feel encouraged and motivated enough to work there. Massive returning will not happen when the environment inside home countries has not improved as expected by the would-be returnees.

Therefore, instead of saying "if we have those people return from overseas, we can develop our economy," it might be more accurate to use economic development as a pretext for the return of people who received advanced education in developed countries. Developing countries should make full use of their internal powers and abilities to develop their economy and build schools and educational institutions with good enough quality to satisfy their young generation's thirst for knowledge and training. Again, we return to the example of Taipei, China, which is a highlighted lesson for other developing countries who are suffering from brain drain. After advancing its economy to a developed country's level, Taipei, China improved its housing and built advanced workplaces, research institutions, and laboratories to attract their citizens back from abroad. The people came back because

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<sup>4</sup> Tsay, Ching-lung and Ji-Ping Lin. 2003. Return Migration and Reversal of Brain Drain to Taiwan: An Analysis of the 1990 Census Data. In *Migration in the Asia Pacific: Population, Settlement and Citizenship Issues*, edited by Robyn Irelade, Charles Hawksley, and Stephen Castles. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.

<sup>5</sup> Keren, Luo. 2003. China's Changing International Migration Trends. In *Migration in the Asia Pacific: Population, Settlement and Citizenship Issues*, edited by Robyn Irelade, Charles Hawksley, and Stephen Castles. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.

conditions in Taipei,China became suitable for both working and living, and they have actually played a very important role in Taipei,China's economy.<sup>6</sup>

### **In the long run**

Even though the number of returnees is still smaller than expected, their contribution is very important. They return either as fresh graduates, or as professionals who have spent a few years abroad, and have not only the knowledge that a graduate has, but also invaluable experience, a good working attitude, and networks.

History has shown that when there is a stream of people moving from one origin to one destination, there will be a counter stream back to the origin (footnote 3). Since this is not an essay on the theory of migration, I will not go deeper in explaining this statement. In the long run, brain drain might be only a temporary issue. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, an experienced returnee can be worth more than a graduate. Instead of coming home and starting a career by finding a job and re-adapting to their home environment, an experienced returnee can return permanently or just temporarily, bringing capital, experience, and networks with him. Many Vietnamese people who left Viet Nam more than thirty years ago have now returned because they believed there are some opportunities for them back in Viet Nam. They have come back to set up their own businesses and to serve as links between Viet Nam and their host countries. Therefore, if a student goes abroad to study in a college and fails to come home for years afterward, it does not mean his home country has forever lost him to another country, only that it might have to wait for him to come back with greater value in the future.

Brain drain is not found only in developing countries. Even in developed countries like the United States or some European countries, brain drain also exists. We can understand that brain drain is simply a signal of some "minus" factors occurring in the economy or society of one country. Therefore, brain drain should be seen not as a problem for developing countries, but rather as a social fact. The problem is not the number of students that go abroad and fail to return, but rather the domestic situation that leads to the majority of overseas students deciding to remain abroad, as well as the state of the domestic education system that leads to the young people's preference to study and build their careers abroad.

Asia is predicted to be the next hub of migrants, even exceeding the United States. According to a program on BBC Radio,<sup>7</sup> the PRC is now trying to attract brains from neighboring countries in Asia, and will then turn its eyes for talent to other continents, including Europe and North America. Many recent examples have shown that former brain-losing countries have actually become a magnet for intellectuals by creating opportunities for them. Opportunities are what take people away, and also what bring them home.

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<sup>6</sup> O'Neil, Kevin. 2003. *Brain Drain and Gain: The case of Taiwan*. Available: <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=155>

<sup>7</sup> *BBC Radio 3*. 2006, 15 November. Arts Talk: Arts and Ideas Podcast.