

# *Should Chinese PhD Graduates of America Return to China: Three Main Perspectives*

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**Abstract:** The question of whether Chinese PhD graduates of America should return to China is a debatable questions. There are increasing number of Chinese students studying abroad, particularly in America, and the rise in the number of returnees. However, there are also many challenges faced by Chinese students studying in America, such as language barriers and cultural differences. The three main factors that may influence the decision to return to China, including career development, convenience of life, and emotional well-being. However, from a general perspective, despite the challenges they may encounter when coming back to China in the first place, such as reduced connection with American professionals, restrictions in access to overseas internet and re-adaptation in the academic environment, it can be seen that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages in a long-term perspective if they choose to come back to China.

## **1. Introduction**

Studying abroad has been a mainstream choice for many Chinese students, the number of Chinese international students surged from 39,000 in 2000 to 703, 5000 in 2019, and the number of returnees also rose from 9,000 in 2000 to 580, 3000 in 2019 accordingly, with an increase in returnees rate of 23.3% to 82.5%. [1] Referring to the PhD level, pursuing a PhD degree is generally difficult for most students, especially those studying using a second language. [2] America is one of the most favoured studying destinations for Chinese PhD students, the number of Chinese students receiving research doctorates in America increased year by year, from 4,222 in 2012 to 6,664 in 2022. In 2022, Chinese students accounted for 34.88% of all international students with PhD degrees in America. [3] The returnee rate of Chinese PhD graduates remained low. Approximately 87.2% of the Chinese with STEM doctorates in America between 2005 and 2015 chose to stay in America, ranking third after Iran and India among all international students. [4] However, there has been an increasing number of high-level academic returnees from America in recent years, due to the tense investigation of Chinese researchers with the excuse of fighting against economic espionage and intellectual property theft, in spite of numerous criticisms of the policy. Therefore, a significant research question arises: Should Chinese PhD graduates of America return to China? Returning to China from an American PhD program has both advantages and disadvantages. Although there are many challenges for Chinese PhD students coming back to China after graduation, it can be notable that they should return for better long-term development. This paper will examine the pros and cons of coming back to China in different aspects and explain why

they should return to China after graduation.

## 2. Career Development

Firstly, the PhD returnees can expand their academic social networks, they normally have established a strong connection with American colleagues and supervisors during their roughly 4-6 years of study. [5] Although coming back to China means they would reduce their connection with American professionals and scholars, it allows them to leverage their academic networks to get acquainted with more Chinese professionals and scholars. With the rapid development of Chinese research collaboration internationally, Chinese professional and scholars can provide the returnees with sufficient academic and career supports in many cases. [6]

Secondly, another factor they should consider is the job opportunities in China. Although they may get relatively lower salaries in China compared with that in America currently, with the rapidly growing economy, China has proposed various policies attracting scholars from overseas universities, including the 100 Talents Program, 1000 Talents Program and Yangtze River Scholars Program, which provide substantial financial and academic supports for the overseas scholars, hence, they can also get a decent salary considering the lower cost of life in China. [7] In addition, the PhD graduates from the US have a certain prestige in the job market compared with those getting a PhD degree from other areas. [8]

Thirdly, academic environment, although America is better than China in the aspect of academies, China is catching up fast. Chinese scholars produced 23.4% of the scientific papers around the world taking up 23.4%, which exceeded the number of Americans between 2018 to 2020. [9] Regardless of the restriction on overseas internet access in China, it is not hard for the researchers to utilise VPN to cope with it. [10] Therefore, the PhD graduates can work in a prospective academic environment as well.

Lastly, it can be seen that China will become the world's largest economy shortly. [11] Students believed that China would be able to realize its aim of national rejuvenation within a few decades due to rapid economic development and good governance. [12] They are also keen to contribute to the further development of China, which in turn would improve their career prospects. [12] On the other hand, crimes targeting Asians including Chinese have been rising in America in recent years; moreover, in American Universities, various American universities have prohibited Chinese from applying and studying for certain important subjects which are mainly STEM fields; furthermore, many students were also investigated on suspicion of being spies. [12] As a result, although the academic environment in America may be better currently, many Chinese students especially those with a high level of academic achievement would consider returning to China for a stable working environment.

## 3. Life Adaptability

Firstly, many Chinese PhD graduates were only one child of their parents, in the Chinese traditional culture under the influence of family, they have a concept that people should not stay far away from their parents, hence, both their parents and they may think they should stay close to each other. [13] Secondly, the convenience of life in China is far superior to that in America, with the development of e-commerce, and mobile payment, residents in urban cities can easily access all the life services, like food delivery, express and maintenance. [14] Lastly, despite the IELTS or TOFEL requirements for entry into American Universities, language remains a crucial barrier for Chinese students studying or settling down in America. [15] By contrast, they would express their emotion, moods and attitudes more accurately and efficiently using their mother tongue. [16]

## 4. Emotionality

Firstly, based on the model of immigrant subjective well-being, the emotional value is significant to increase the happiness of immigrants. [17] Therefore, the sense of identity is vital to those who settle in America as a Chinese PhD graduate. Part of Chinese PhD students may feel socially isolated and excluded when studying in America. [18] Returning to China can provide them with a better sense of identity, which cannot be measured in monetary value. Secondly, under the influence of patriotism and ideology, Chinese people have yearned for the “roots” in the motherland since childhood. [19] Although the PhD graduates may master the American language and have a good integration into the local culture, it is inevitable for them to feel strangeness or even alienation, which would inspire them to live where the people are similar to them, this type of belonging is not available in the country of migration. [19] Consequently, they would be eager to return to China.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper critically argues the research question of whether Chinese PhD graduates of America should return to China from three aspects that are career development, life adaptability and emotionality. The choice of whether to stay or leave is a personal issue, and the answer to it can be diverse from the views of different stakeholders. For example, if the PhD graduates have established a comprehensive social network in America, and have a good integration into the local culture, it is a good choice for them to stay. However, from a general perspective, despite the challenges they may encounter when coming back to China in the first place, such as reduced connection with American professionals, restrictions in access to overseas internet and re-adaptation in the academic environment, it can be seen that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages in a long-term perspective if they choose to come back to China.

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