

## Key Takeaways for “Gao Huajian and the China Talent Returnee Problem”

Physicist Gao Huajian’s return to China after decades of research abroad is the latest example of a “reverse brain drain” viewed widely as a loss to the United States.

- Gao’s celebrated return to China was preceded by the voluntary return of other high-level scientists across a range of academic disciplines.
- While “patriotism” to China and “racial bias” in the U.S. are cited as causes, other—more tangible—inducements by Beijing play an outsized role.

Popular wisdom notwithstanding, the authors argue that “returned” Chinese scientists may not be an absolute loss to the United States nor an unqualified gain for China.

- Data shows that the top strata of diaspora scientists, as a whole, are less motivated to return to China than their lower-ranked peers, and those who do return produce less than before.
- The loss to the United States must also be measured against the effect of PRC programs to channel diaspora achievements “back” to China—while the donors are still abroad.

Gao Huajian’s career demonstrates how China’s diaspora scientists may further Beijing’s domestic research agenda legally and without intended malice toward the United States

- During his 40-year tenure abroad, which included some sensitive appointments, Gao simultaneously served at multiple PRC universities and state key laboratories.
- Gao’s contributions to China are also evident in his coauthorship of papers with PRC scientists and training of Chinese students and postdoctoral scholars..

The talent loss problem can be managed by solutions that take into account the complex dynamics underlying it.

- Offer higher salaries, fast-track U.S. citizenship, promote research security, and explore other retention techniques that mirror the PRC’s foreign “talent” strategies.
- Refocus intelligence priorities to better support U.S. technological competitiveness by identifying bad actors and one-sided “exchanges.”
- Finally, restore U.S. scientific leadership by *promoting domestic research*, so that the losses incurred through unwanted leakage matter less.

### For more information:

- Download the report: <https://cset.georgetown.edu/publication/gao-huajian-and-the-china-talent-returnee-question/>
- Contact us: [cset@georgetown.edu](mailto:cset@georgetown.edu)