Bringing China's Best and Brightest Back Home: Regional Disparities and Political Tensions

Cheng Li

The Chinese leadership recently adopted a "strategy of strengthening China through human capital" with the goal of enhancing the country's international competitiveness in higher education. Largely because of new policy incentives implemented by the government, China has witnessed a tidal wave of foreign-educated returnees to their native country since 2000. Returnees already dominate the political and academic leadership of Chinese higher education. A quarter-century-long effort to train China's best and brightest overseas now seems to have come to fruition.

These new developments, however, may also intensify political tensions between coastal and inland regions within the country and between foreign-educated and locally educated elites. China's well-funded universities are disproportionately located in a few coastal cities, as are foreign-educated returnees. This increasingly uneven distribution of human capital presents a major challenge for the Chinese leadership as it strives to achieve more-balanced regional development.

Introduction

"As knowledge becomes more important, so does higher education."[1] These words appear in a recent World Bank report on higher education that was written by a group of distinguished international scholars headed by Henry Rosovsky, former acting president of Harvard University. The report finds that in today's world, "wealth is concentrated less and less in factories, land, tools, and machinery."[2] Human capital—the resource of knowledge and skills generated in universities and research institutions—is now crucial to national competitiveness. The report estimates that human capital in the United States is "at least three times more important than physical capital."[3]

The Chinese government appears to recognize readily the pivotal role of institutions of higher education in enhancing China's national competitiveness. Over the past few years, the top Chinese leaders have made a concerted effort to improve the quality of human capital in the country. In 1998 Jiang Zemin argued that "China should establish a few world-class universities."[4] In 2001 Zhu Rongji, then premier of the State Council, told the World Forum on the Chinese Economy that China's future emphasis on economic reform would no longer stress attracting financial capital but instead concentrate on attracting human resources and technology from abroad.[5] Soon after becoming general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in fall 2002, Hu Jintao convened a Politburo meeting to focus on China's human resources. He specified that China should allocate more economic resources toward all three "key links" of human capital: training, recruiting, and making use of talents.[6]

Recruiting foreign-educated Chinese nationals has now become the top priority of what Chinese leaders call the "strategy of strengthening China through human capital" (*rencai qiangguo zhanlue*).[7] Since Deng Xiaoping's milestone decision to send a large number of students and scholars to study abroad in 1978, a total of 700,200 Chinese nationals have pursued foreign studies, with a large percentage going to the United States.[8] During the past few years, China has witnessed a tidal wave of returnees to their native country. By the end of 2003, some 172,800 foreign-educated Chinese students and scholars had returned to the People's Republic of China (PRC).[9]

Returnees from studies overseas have already emerged in China as a distinguished elite class, as illustrated by the coining of a new Chinese term, *haiguipai*, to refer to this fast-growing group. The official Xinhua News Agency recently claimed that *haiguipai* had shifted from "being silent" to "becoming mature" as a distinct, elite political group.[10] A quarter-century-long effort to train China's best and brightest overseas now seems to have come to fruition. The ideas, knowledge, skills, and experience that these returnees bring home are likely to contribute to China's coming-of-age in the years to come.

The area most strongly influenced in China by returnees is, not surprisingly, higher education. At present, an overwhelming majority of professors at leading Chinese universities have studied in foreign countries as either degree candidates or visiting scholars.[11] As a matter of fact, returnees already dominate leadership positions in China's higher education. Both Chen Zhili and Zhou Ji, the previous and current ministers of education, respectively, are returnees from study in the United States during the 1980s.[12] More than 50 percent of university-level administrators in the institutions directly overseen by the Ministry of Education are returnees.[13] In addition, 81 percent of members of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), 54 percent of members of the Chinese Academy of Engineering, and 72 percent of team leaders of national technological research projects are returnees.[14]

In addition to their omnipresence in the Chinese educational leadership, Western-trained returnees have emerged in other areas of the Chinese government during the past few years. Examples of these returnees include Vice Minister of Commerce Gao Fucheng (Ph.D., Paris No. 7 University, 1985), Chairman of the China Banking Regulatory Commission Liu Mingkang (M.B.A., London University, 1987), Vice President of the Supreme Court Wan Exiang (J.D., Yale University, 1988), and Mayor of Shenzhen Li Hongzhong (M.P.A., Harvard University, 1997). The presence of Western-educated political elites in China is likely to become even more widespread as the next generational transition of power takes place in about a decade.[15]

However, the current tidal wave of returnees and their growing importance in Chinese cultural and political life reveal some longstanding problems in China's higher education. The influx of returnees appears to intensify political tensions between coastal and inland regions and between foreign-educated and "local" elites. China's preeminent universities are disproportionately located in a few coastal cities, as are foreign-educated returnees. This increasingly uneven distribution of human capital presents a major

challenge for the Chinese leadership as it strives to achieve more-balanced regional development.

Returnees are likely to advance their careers in fields such as university administration, science and technology, foreign trade, banking, and finance. These elites, who generally have acquired their leadership experience in the coastal provinces, have often ascended quickly to higher positions of power. In contrast, Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao, and many top national leaders advanced their careers in inland provinces and have received their leadership experience from within the party organization, the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL), and local administration.[16] The contrast between foreign-educated returnees and China-trained elites not only reflects two distinct and increasingly diverging geographic and occupational career paths of political leaders, but also signifies the potential for conflicts over power and policy between these two groups.

This study examines the promises and pitfalls of China's ongoing campaign to promote an inflow of human capital with the goal of building world-class universities to enhance China's international competitiveness. The first section reviews the Chinese government's policy mechanisms for recruiting foreign-educated PRC nationals, especially to the country's top universities. The second section shows the uneven regional distribution of both well-funded universities and foreign-educated returnees. With a comparative case study of top governmental leaders in two provinces, the third section highlights the differences in educational backgrounds and career paths of provincial leaders between the resource-rich, coastal Jiangsu Province and the resource-scarce, inland Guizhou Province.

Reversing the Brain Drain

For many years after the PRC started sending students and scholars to study in the West, the Chinese government was concerned about their low return rate to their native country. In the mid-1980s, an official Chinese delegation went to Washington to sign a joint statement with the U.S. Department of Education, reaffirming that state- or institution-sponsored students from the PRC have "an obligation to return to their homeland."[17] However, after the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 and the resulting Chinese Student Protection Act issued by the U.S. government, approximately 50,000 Chinese students and scholars obtained permanent residency in the United States. Similarly, some 10,000 PRC students and scholars in Canada and over 20,000 in Australia received permanent residency status, permitting them to stay and work in those countries.[18]

According to official Chinese sources, between 1978 and 1995 a total of 130,000 PRC citizens were sent to study in the United States, and among them some 20,000 (15.4 percent) returned.[19] Of approximately 20,000 students and scholars who studied in Canada during the same period, some 4,000 (20 percent) returned. The return rate of students who went to Australia was the lowest—only 2,500 (6.3 percent) out of 40,000 returned.[20] Understandably, self-sponsored students have a lower return rate than do state- or institution-sponsored students. For example, between 1978 and 1989, of a total

of 22,000 self-funded students who studied abroad, fewer than 1,000 (4.5 percent) returned to China.[21]

Despite concern about the so-called brain drain—the outflow of human capital to other countries—the Chinese government has not closed the door on foreign studies. There are several reasons for the Chinese leadership to continue its liberal policies regarding educational exchanges with the outside world. Perhaps the most important one is the fact that the Chinese government cannot afford to lose this important means of improving China's higher education and catching up on scientific and technological advancements. For Deng and other Chinese leaders, the primary goal behind sending a large number of Chinese students to Western countries and Japan was to "make up for the decade lost" during the Cultural Revolution, when China was almost completely cut off from the international academic community.

Further, the Chinese government considers the brain drain to be temporary and regards people's initial migration decisions as reversible. Many Chinese scholars often cite the case of Taiwan, which experienced a "brain gain" in the 1980s after three decades of brain drain. They argue that a similar reverse flow of human capital is also likely to happen in China.[22]

Incentives for Returnee Scholars

In 1992, the Chinese government announced its guiding policy regarding foreign studies, which remains effective today: "supporting students who want to go abroad, encouraging them to return, and allowing them to come and go freely." In the following year, the Chinese government proposed the so-called 211 Project, which identified about 100 institutions of higher education in the country that should meet the "world standard" in teaching and academic research by the beginning of the 21st century. Between 1996 and 2002, the government put aside a sum of 18.4 billion yuan as "incentive money" to facilitate the project.[23] This amount was the largest investment in higher education in the history of the PRC.

In addition, in the mid-1990s the Chinese government established three programs with the primary objective of recruiting distinguished Chinese nationals to work or study overseas. The first program, the 100 Scholar Plan, set out to recruit 100 foreign-educated returnees to work at the Chinese Academy of Sciences. This plan has significantly promoted international academic exchanges between the CAS and international academic research centers.[24]

Second, the Chunhui (Spring Sunshine) Plan offers short-term (6–12 months) support for PRC nationals with doctoral degrees to work at educational institutions overseas. These individuals receive a salary, free housing, round-trip airfare, and insurance during their short-term work abroad. According to China's Ministry of Education, since the program's establishment in 1996 approximately 7,000 scholars have received grants from the Chunhui Plan.[25]

The third program is called the Changjiang (Yangtze) Scholar Program.[26] Funding for the Changjiang Scholar Program derives from Li Ka-shing and his Hong Kong–based Changjiang Group, Inc. During the first phase of the Changjiang Scholar Program, the PRC Ministry of Education established about 500 Changjiang Special Professor appointments beginning in 1998. Each professor received an annual allowance of 100,000 yuan. Between 1998 and 2003, 537 scholars with foreign educational experience received a Changjiang Special Professorship, accounting for 93 percent of the total recipients.[27] In addition, Li Ka-shing offers 10 million Hong Kong dollars as Changjiang Scholar Awards: one million yuan for the first-prize winner and 500,000 yuan each for three second-prize winners annually.

Striving to Build World-Class Universities

In addition to these inducements for individual scholars, in 1999 the Chinese government started the so-called 985 Project based on a plan outlined in Jiang Zemin's speech at Beijing University in May 1998. The goal of this project is to support the top nine elite universities, including Beijing, Qinghua, Fudan, and Shanghai Jiaotong Universities, and help them become world-class universities over the next 20 to 30 years.[28] To meet this objective, these elite universities are becoming more aggressive in their efforts to recruit scholars and administrators from overseas, including foreign nationals.

For example, Nanjing University announced in 2003 that it would recruit about 300 new faculty members at the level of professor or associate professor from other schools, both from within China and from abroad.[29] President of Zhejiang University Pan Yunhe stated that the hiring of faculty at his university would be "nationality-blind."[30] Similarly, Fudan University and Tongji University have posted job openings overseas, including for the posts of deans of various schools within the universities.[31]

Qinghua University, for its part, has decided to offer 50 endowed chairs to distinguished professors from overseas within the next five years. Thirty-seven of these positions have already been appointed.[32] Qinghua University has also lured some non-Chinese, internationally well-known individuals to come teach. For example, John L. Thornton, former president and co–chief operating officer of Goldman Sachs Group, Inc., a leading investment bank, currently serves as director of the newly established Program for Global Leadership at Qinghua University. He teaches a regular graduate course jointly offered by the School of Economics and Management and the School of Public Policy and Management.[33]

Beijing University, under the leadership of new Party Secretary Min Weifang, who holds a doctorate in education from Stanford University, has launched what can arguably be called the boldest plan for educational reform at any Chinese university. According to the initial plan, the university will fire one-third of current faculty members at the rank of instructor and one-fourth at the rank of associate professor who are academically substandard. These vacancies—along with some newly established endowed chairs—will be filled by instructors from other schools, especially from

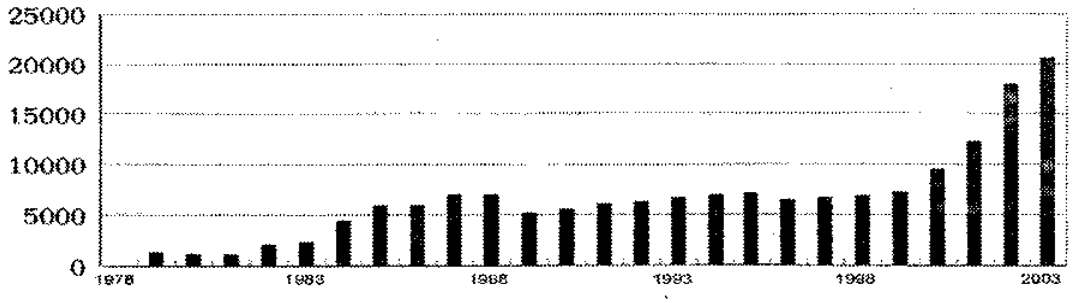
universities overseas.[34] In 1999, for example, 50 people applied for the nine endowed chairs offered by the university. Most applicants were Chinese scholars residing abroad, including six recipients of the prestigious U.S. Presidential Early Career Awards for Scientists and Engineers.[35]

Increasing Rates of Return

These efforts to enhance the status of China's elite institutions appear to be beginning to attract scholars of international distinction. In 2004 Wang Xiaodong, professor of biochemistry at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, was hired as director of the Life Science Research Institute of Beijing. Wang was the first PRC-born scholar to be elected a member of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) in the United States in 2002.[36] After graduating from Beijing Normal University, Wang came to the United States to pursue graduate study in 1985. Wang, 41 years old, is currently the youngest member of the NAS.[37]

Wang's case is probably not representative, but it shows China's effort to recruit some of the world's leading scholars. Recently, a growing number of foreign-educated Chinese students and scholars have been returning to work in China on either a permanent or a temporary basis. Figure 1 shows the changes in the annual number of Chinese students and scholars who returned to China between 1978 and 2003 after studying abroad. The number of returnees has increased significantly since 2000.

Figure 1
Changes in the Annual Number of Chinese Students and Scholars Returning to China after Study Abroad (1978–2003)



SOURCE: *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily), March 2, 2004, 11.

Notably, a large number of returnees are students and scholars who went abroad with private funding. In 2003, for example, the total number of returnees exceeded 20,100. Among them, 2,638 were state-sponsored, 4,292 were institution-sponsored, and 13,200 were self-sponsored.[38] The number of self-sponsored returnees increased by 15

percent in 2003 compared to the previous year, while the number of state-sponsored returnees increased by 7.4 percent.

The reasons behind the recent tidal wave of returnees are multiple and complex. China's robust economic growth, the improvement in its sociopolitical conditions, its growing integration into the world economy, various Chinese government policy initiatives (discussed above), and the difficulty of finding jobs overseas are some factors contributing to this increase. China's Ministry of Education has made a concerted effort to recruit self-sponsored Chinese students who have attained advanced degrees abroad. The ministry not only established a dossier office in 1997 for students pursuing foreign studies—in order to archive the professional information of self-sponsored students—but also set up 55 educational offices in 38 consulates overseas, primarily to help recruit self-sponsored students.[39]

In the early 1980s, when China's best and brightest left to study abroad, some people in China worried that Chinese schools such as Beijing University and Qinghua University would become "preparatory schools" (*yubei xuexiao*) for students who planned to study at universities in the West and Japan. Today, after the return of many Chinese students and scholars, it appears that foreign universities have become the training ground for talented Chinese scholars who will return to China to make their contributions to their homeland.[40] A review of the Chinese study-abroad movement over the past 25 years has proved that people's migration decisions are, indeed, reversible. The flow of human capital is subject to changes in the economic and sociopolitical environment, both at home and in host countries.

Uneven Regional Distribution of Human Capital

Prominence of Returnees in Shanghai and Beijing

The phenomenon of uneven regional distribution of higher educational institutions in China is not new. In the early 1930s, a team composed of international experts and sponsored by the League of Nations spent three months in China to assess its system of higher education. The team raised the issue of "haphazard geographical distribution" of institutions of higher education in the country, since a disproportionate number were concentrated in coastal cities.[41] At the time, 8 of the 15 national universities and 17 of 27 private universities were located in the two cities of Beijing and Shanghai.[42]

Some scholars believe that the factor most responsible for the concentration of colleges in these two cities was the presence of a large number of Western-trained returnees in these areas.[43] For example, a survey of 584 U.S.-trained Chinese conducted in 1925 showed that 34 percent of them lived in Shanghai, and a similar survey of 1,152 U.S.-trained returnees completed in 1937 showed that 28 percent resided in that city.[44] One explanation for this geographic concentration of returnees is that a majority of Chinese students who went to study abroad in the first half of the 20th century were natives of the coastal regions. For example, a study of prominent foreign-educated

Chinese between 1900 and 1949 showed that 60 percent of them were natives of the three coastal provinces of Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu.[45]

During the Mao era some coastal universities were relocated to inland regions, and a large number of educated elites were sent to work in remote areas (*xiafang*). But these relocations and migrations proved to be temporary, and the uneven distribution of human capital in China has largely remained the same.[46] China's recent drive to recruit returnees and to build world-class universities has seemed to exacerbate the regional disparity in human capital in the country.

According to an official report, Shanghai has sent about 80,000 students and scholars abroad during the past 25 years, about 70 percent of whom studied in developed countries including the United States, Japan, England, Germany, France, and Australia. Of these students, 80 percent received doctoral or master's degrees.[47] A study conducted in the 1980s showed that of the total number of Chinese students studying in the United States, Shanghai natives constituted 37 percent of self-sponsored students (holding F-1 visas) and 19 percent of state- or institution-sponsored students (with J-1 visas).[48]

The uneven distribution of locations in which returnees now work is even more significant. By the end of 2002 approximately 50,000 returnees had settled in Shanghai, as reported in the official *People's Daily*.[49] These individuals accounted for one-third of the total number of returnees in the whole country at the time. Moreover, a significant number of returnees have been employed to teach at universities in the city. In 2001, for example, of about 6,000 returnees who worked in the field of education in Shanghai, 90 percent held advanced academic titles. At the 39 institutions of higher education in Shanghai, some 80 percent of presidents, deans, department chairs, and leaders in academic fields are returnees.[50]

Returnees have played an important role in almost all walks of life in the city of Shanghai. Wu Yue, who holds a doctorate in architecture from Harvard University, serves as the chief architect of the Bureau of Urban Planning in Pudong District. Ma Qiyuan, who taught at Harvard, has established an entrepreneurial development park for returnees in Zhangjiang District.[51] In 2003 Tang Haisong (who holds a master's in business administration from Harvard) and Qian Xuefeng (who has a doctorate in law from Yale University) were appointed vice chairs of the foreign trade commission of Xuhui District.[52]

Beijing also has a large number of returnees. By the end of 2003, approximately 110,000 students and scholars from Beijing had studied abroad. Of these, about 40,000 returned to work in Beijing, accounting for almost one-fourth of the country's total number of returnees.[53] In all, Shanghai and Beijing host approximately 58 percent of the total number of returnees in the country.

Widening the Regional Gap?

Table 1 shows the geographic distribution of China's key universities that receive special funding from the 211 Project. Beijing and Shanghai, each of whose populations represents about 1 percent of the national population, are home to 19 (20 percent) and 11 (11.6 percent) of the 95 Chinese universities funded by the 211 Project. Even more strikingly, the shares of the total numbers of institutions of higher education in Beijing and Shanghai that receive funding from the 211 Project are 30 percent and 28 percent, respectively. In contrast, five provinces (Hainan, Guizhou, Tibet, Qinghai, and Ningxia) do not have any universities funded by the 211 Project. Ten other provinces, most of which are located in the inland regions, have one 211 Project–funded university each.

Table 2 shows the geographic distribution of Changjiang Scholars and Changjiang Endowed Chair Professors (well-funded positions created primarily to attract foreign-educated returnees to work in Chinese higher education). Of the total of 846 Changjiang Scholars and 43 Changjiang Endowed Chair Professors, Beijing hosts 228 (27 percent) and 21 (48.8 percent), respectively, and Shanghai hosts 114 (13.5 percent) and 6 (14 percent), respectively. Guizhou, Tibet, Qinghai, and Ningxia Provinces do not have a single Changjiang Scholar in any of their institutions of higher education. Henan, the province with the largest percentage of the overall PRC population (7.3 percent), has one Changjiang Scholar (0.1 percent), who teaches at Zhengzhou University. The entire northeast and southern regions of the country do not have a single Changjiang Endowed Chair Professor.

As a matter of fact, universities in inland regions have few returnees. Among the 7,000 foreign-educated PRC citizens funded by the Chunhui Plan to pay short visits to China, only 200 (3 percent) participated in programs related to the development of China's western region.[54] Recently, the Ministry of Education and the CCP Organization Department have made efforts to recruit more returnees to China's inland and western regions. The Ministry of Education has established an Office of Returnee Affairs that encourages returnees to work in China's western region. The western provinces also have representatives in Beijing in charge of contacting students and scholars abroad.[55] Elite institutions such as Beijing, Qinghua, Fudan, Shanghai Jiaotong, Nanjing, and Zhejiang Universities have all established "sister university" programs with institutions of higher education in inland provinces, with the goal of reducing educational disparities in the country.

A few returnees were even recently appointed presidents of universities in inland regions. President of Qinghai University Li Jianbao, for example, is a returnee with a doctorate in chemical engineering from Tokyo University.[56] However, he continues to hold his post as a professor at Qinghua University in Beijing, underlining the persistent regional gulf in educational experience and opportunities. Among the 2,500 state-sponsored students and scholars sent to study abroad in 2002, for example, only 3 were from Qinghai Province. According to Li himself, the entire province of Qinghai is home to 12 people with doctoral degrees (either foreign-trained or domestically trained), only 8 of whom actually work and live in the province.[57]

Table 1
Geographic Distribution of Key Universities with Special Funding from the 211 Project

Native province	*Key universities (1996–2002)*		*Total number of colleges (1998)*	*Percentage of key universities in total colleges*	*Population (2000)*	*GDP (1999)*
	No.	*%*			*%*	*%*
North						
Beijing	19	20.0	63	30.2	1.1	2.5
Tianjin	3	3.2	20	15.0	0.8	1.7
Hebei	1	1.1	46	2.2	5.3	5.2
Shanxi	1	1.1	23	4.3	2.6	1.7
Neimenggu	1	1.1	19	5.3	1.9	1.5
Subtotal	*25*	*26.3*	*171*	*14.6*	*11.7*	*12.6*
Northeast						
Liaoning	4	4.2	61	6.6	3.4	4.8
Jilin	3	3.2	41	7.3	2.2	1.9
Heilongjiang	3	3.2	38	7.9	2.9	3.3
Subtotal	*10*	*10.5*	*140*	*7.1*	*8.5*	*10.0*
East						
Shanghai	11	11.6	40	27.5	1.3	4.6
Jiangsu	11	11.6	66	16.7	5.9	8.8
Shandong	3	3.2	49	6.1	7.2	8.7
Zhejiang	1	1.1	32	3.1	3.7	6.1
Anhui	2	2.1	34	5.9	4.7	3.3
Fujian	2	2.1	29	6.9	2.7	4.1
Subtotal	*30*	*31.6*	*250*	*12.0*	*25.5*	*35.6*
Central						
Henan	1	1.1	51	2.0	7.3	5.2
Hubei	4	4.2	54	7.4	4.8	4.4
Hunan	4	4.2	47	8.5	5.1	3.8
Jiangxi	1	1.1	31	3.2	3.3	2.2
Subtotal	*10*	*10.5*	*183*	*5.5*	*20.5*	*15.6*
South						
Guangdong	4	4.2	43	9.3	6.8	9.7
Guangxi	1	1.1	28	3.6	3.6	2.2
Hainan	0	0.0	5	0.0	0.6	0.5
Subtotal	*5*	*5.3*	*76*	*6.6*	*11.0*	*12.4*
Southwest						
Sichuan (including Chongqing)	6	6.3	65	9.2	9.0	5.9
Guizhou	0	0.0	20	0.0	2.8	1.0
Yunnan	1	1.1	26	3.8	3.4	2.1
Xizang (Tibet)	0	0.0	4	0.0	0.2	0.1
Subtotal	*7*	*7.4*	*115*	*6.1*	*15.4*	*9.1*
Northwest						
Shaanxi	6	6.3	42	14.3	2.9	1.7
Gansu	1	1.1	17	5.9	2.0	1.1
Qinghai	0	0.0	6	0.0	0.4	0.3
Ningxia	0	0.0	5	0.0	0.4	0.3
Xinjiang	1	1.1	17	5.9	1.5	1.3
Subtotal	*8*	*8.4*	*87*	*9.2*	*7.2*	*4.7*
Military					0.2*	
TOTAL	95	100.0	1,022	9.3	100.0	100.0

NOTES AND SOURCES: For the list of key universities with special funding from the 211 Project, see http://www.china-school.net/info/0351140048.htm and the web site of the Ministry of Education of the PRC, http://moe.edu.cn/ge/211/4.htm. For the total number of institutions of higher education in 1998, see Liu Hong, *China Statistics Yearbook, 1999* (Beijing: China Statistics Press, 1999), 653. For populations, see National Bureau of Statistics of China, *Diwuci quanguo renkou pucha gongbao* (The fifth national census of the population of the People's Republic of China), no. 2, May 15, 2001. For gross domestic product (GDP) data, see http://www.stats.gov.cn/ndsj/zgnj/2000/C08c.htm, tabulated by Cheng Li. Provincial percentages, subtotals, and totals may not reconcile because of rounding.
* This population is registered as members of the People's Liberation Army.

Table 2
Geographic Distribution of Changjiang Scholars and Changjiang Endowed Chair Professors (1999–2004)

Region	*Changjiang Scholars*		*Changjiang Endowed Chair Professors*	
	Number	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
North				
Beijing	228	27.0	21	48.8
Tianjin	39	4.6	3	7.0
Hebei	3	0.4	0	0.0
Shanxi	2	0.2	0	0.0
Neimenggu	1	0.1	0	0.0
Subtotal	*273*	*32.3*	*24*	*55.8*
Northeast				
Liaoning	23	2.7	0	0.0
Jilin	22	2.6	0	0.0
Heilongjiang	23	2.7	0	0.0
Subtotal	*68*	*8.0*	*0*	*0.0*
East				
Shanghai	114	13.5	6	14.0
Jiangsu	86	10.2	2	4.7
Shandong	21	2.5	3	7.0
Zhejiang	33	3.9	2	4.7
Anhui	20	2.4	2	4.7
Fujian	8	0.9	0	0.0
Subtotal	*282*	*33.3*	*15*	*34.9*
Central				
Henan	1	0.1	0	0.0
Hubei	50	5.9	1	2.3
Hunan	21	2.5	0	0.0
Jiangxi	2	0.2	0	0.0
Subtotal	*74*	*8.7*	*1*	*2.3*
South				
Guangdong	29	3.4	0	0.0
Guangxi	2	0.2	0	0.0
Hainan	1	0.1	0	0.0
Subtotal	*32*	*3.8*	*0*	*0.0*
Southwest				
Sichuan	36	4.3	1	2.3
Chongqing	14	1.7	0	0.0
Guizhou	0	0.0	0	0.0
Yunnan	1	0.1	0	0.0
Xizang (Tibet)	0	0.0	0	0.0
Subtotal	*51*	*6.0*	*1*	*2.3*
Northwest				
Shaanxi	56	6.6	2	4.7
Gansu	9	1.1	0	0.0
Qinghai	0	0.0	0	0.0
Ningxia	0	0.0	0	0.0
Xinjiang	1	0.1	0	0.0
Subtotal	*66*	*7.8*	*2*	*4.7*
TOTAL	846	100.0	43	100.0

NOTES AND SOURCES: See http://www.cksp.edu.cn/gb/datasearch/sub2_datasearch_tpjz1_5.htm, calculated and tabulated by Cheng Li. Provincial percentages, subtotals, and totals may not reconcile because of rounding.

This regional gap is likely to become even larger over time for three reasons. First, returnees who are natives of Shanghai, Beijing, and other rich coastal cities are usually unwilling to work in China's inland or western regions. Second, residents in coastal regions have an advantage over those from inland regions, since usually only people from the relatively wealthy regions of China can afford access to Shanghai's and Beijing's increasingly expensive academic facilities. Third, the rich coastal region uses material incentives to attract returnees, capitalizing on the free mobility of professionals that is now possible in the country. This increasingly uneven distribution of human resources severely undermines the ongoing effort by the Chinese government to achieve more-balanced regional development. Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao's strategic plans to develop China's western and northwestern regions cannot be accomplished if human capital continues to be disproportionately located in the coastal cities of Beijing and Shanghai.

Two Different Career Paths for Provincial Leaders?

The regional disparities in human capital in today's China may contribute to two contrasting career paths of local and provincial leaders. Returnees-turned-politicians tend to advance their careers in wealthy coastal regions. They usually have administrative experience and expertise in education, foreign trade, finance, technology, and urban construction. In contrast, domestically educated political leaders often come from inland regions and are more experienced in grassroots administration, youth affairs, social welfare, party organization, and propaganda work than their counterparts in the coastal regions.

Wealthy coastal regions now allocate a large amount of economic resources to train future leaders of their own regions. Zeng Xiangquan, dean of the Labor and Human Resource Management School at People's University, observes that Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen have all identified the attraction and development of human resources as their most important strategic task.[58] As of 2003, the Shanghai municipal government planned to have all civil servants under age 45 take core courses from its master's program in public administration within five years. One-fifth of these civil servants are expected to receive training in both English and information technology, and each year 50 young leaders will work in the Hong Kong government to gain administrative experience. In addition, about 100 leaders will be sent abroad to receive long-term training.[59]

Some foreign universities are particularly interested in training China's local leaders. For example, since 1996 the University of Maryland's Institute of Global Chinese Affairs has trained some 800 young division- and bureau-level officials from China.[60] Since 1998 Singapore Nanyang Science and Technology University has offered a master's program in economic management for Chinese municipal and prefectural leaders. This program has been called the "class of mayors." Using an agreement reached between China and Singapore in 2001, the CCP Organization Department selects 12 high-ranking officers to study in Singapore every year.[61]

Case Study: Jiangsu and Guizhou

The Jiangsu provincial government plans to have its total number of technical professionals exceed 7.8 million, including 360,000 high-level professionals, by 2010. Senior technical specialists should account for 20 percent of the total of technical workers. Educational expenditure should account for 6 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), which is similar to the percentage spent on education in developed countries. Much of this funding will be used for human resource development in the province.[62] Returnees already dominate the leadership of higher education in Jiangsu Province. About 60 percent of deans and presidents of colleges and universities in the province and 80 percent of department chairs are returnees. At Nanjing University, of 223 doctoral advisers, 160 (72 percent) are returnees. Between 1985 and 1997, 90 percent of university-level administrators and 85 percent of college- and department-level administrators at Nanjing University were returnees.[63]

The leadership role of returnees in Jiangsu goes beyond the sphere of higher education. At a time when educational credentials are particularly valued, returnees have naturally taken many important leadership positions in this well-developed province—in both physical and human resources—in the country. Table 3 shows the educational backgrounds of all top governmental leaders (governor and vice governors) of the province. Their characteristics can be better understood if one compares them to those of their counterparts in a less developed province such as Guizhou (see table 4). Several interesting comparisons can be made here. First, among the 10 leaders in Jiangsu, six have had foreign study experience, including two who have received foreign degrees. One of these leaders, Vice Governor Zhang Taolin, studied at Bohn University in the mid-1980s and received his doctorate in agronomy from Jison Liebiesch University in Germany in 1989. A different course of study overseas is exemplified by Vice Governor Huang Wei, who received his doctorate in transportation engineering from China's Southeast University and studied at the University of California at Berkeley as a visiting scholar in the early 1990s. He taught first at the Nanjing Institute of Engineering and then at Southeast University for a period of 15 years and was named a Changjiang Scholar in 2000. In contrast, none of the nine top governmental leaders in Guizhou have studied abroad.

Second, a few Jiangsu leaders advanced their careers through administrative and academic work in higher education. Vice Governor Wang Zhan, for example, has spent most of his career in higher education. He served as the director of the Bureau of Education in Jiangsu between 1995 and 1997 and as vice minister of the PRC Ministry of Education between 2000 and 2004 before being appointed vice governor of Jiangsu in February 2004. Among the nine governmental leaders of Guizhou, only Liu Hongxiu has previous leadership experience in higher education. She served as vice president of Guizhou Normal University for a decade before being appointed vice governor of Guizhou.

Table 3
Educational Backgrounds of Governor and Vice Governors of Jiangsu Province

Name	*Born*	*Native province*	*Current position*	*Educational level*	*University (highest level attained)*	*Year*	*Foreign educational experience*	*Academic field*
Liang Baohua	1945	Jiangxi	Governor	College	Fudan University	1968	None	Journalism
Jiang Dingzhi	1954	Jiangsu	Executive vice governor	M.S.	Nanjing Institute of Science and Technology	2001	None	Environmental engineering
Wang Zhan	1946	Jiangsu	Vice governor	M.A.	Shandong University	1981	None	Chinese
Wu Ruilin	1945	Jiangsu	Vice governor	College	Nanjing University	1970	None	Geology and economics
Zhang Taolin	1961	Jiangsu	Vice governor	Ph.D.	Bohn University; Jison Liebiesch University	1986	Ph.D., Germany; visiting scholar, University of Iowa, U.S.A.	Agronomy
Zhang Weiguo	1953	Jiangsu	Vice governor	Ph.D.	Tongji University (part-time program)	2001	Visiting scholar, University of Pennsylvania, U.S.A.	Management
Huang Lixin	1962	Jiangsu	Vice governor	M.A.; B.S.	Provincial party school; Jiangsu Institute of Agronomy	2004; 1983	Visiting scholar, U.S.A.	Political economy; engineering
Li Quanlin	1949	Jiangsu	Vice governor	M.B.A.	Nanjing University	1998	Visiting scholar, University of Maryland, U.S.A.	Economic management
He Quan	1952	Jiangsu	Vice governor	M.A.	Joint program, Nanjing Normal University and an Australian university	2000	M.A., Australia	Economics
Huang Wei	1961	Jiangsu	Vice governor	Ph.D.	Southeast University	1995	Visiting scholar, University of California at Berkeley, U.S.A.	Engineering

NOTES: B.S. = Bachelor of Science, M.A. = Master of Arts, M.B.A. = Master of Business Administration, M.S. = Master of Science, Ph.D. = Doctor of Philosophy

Table 4
Educational Backgrounds of Governor and Vice Governors of Guizhou Province

Name	*Born*	*Native province*	*Current position*	*Educational level*	*University (highest level attained)*	*Year*	*Foreign educational experience*	*Academic field*
Shi Xiushi	1942	Henan	Governor	College	Beijing Institute of Construction Engineering	1964	None	Engineering
Wang Zhengfu	1947	Guizhou	Executive vice governor	College	Guizhou Institute of Agronomy	1970	None	Agronomy
Gu Qingjin	1945	Jiangsu	Vice governor	College	Guizhou Institute of Agronomy	1967	None	Agronomy
Zhang Qunshan	1953	Hebei	Vice governor	M.B.A.	South China Institute of Science and Engineering	1998	None	Management
Bao Kexin	1952	Zhejiang	Vice governor	College	Beijing Institute of Economics	1982	None	Economics
Wu Jiafu	1948	Guizhou	Vice governor	Graduate program	Central Party School; Guizhou Institute of Agronomy	1985; 1969	None	Agronomy
Lu Zhiming	1952	Guizhou	Vice governor	Graduate program	Central Party School (part-time)	1999	None	Law
Xiao Yongan	1948	Hubei	Vice governor	Graduate program	Central Party School (part-time)	?	None	Political economy
Liu Hongxiu	1947	Guizhou	Vice governor	M.A.	Lanzhou University	1983	None	Arts

NOTES: ? = unknown, M.A. = Master of Arts, M.B.A. = Master of Business Administration

Third, 8 of the 10 leaders in Jiangsu hold postgraduate degrees, including three doctoral and five master's degrees from prestigious universities either in China or abroad. In contrast, only two leaders in Guizhou hold postgraduate degrees. Although three other leaders in Guizhou have attended nondegree graduate programs, all were in midcareer programs at the Central Party School. A number of Jiangsu leaders have also pursued postgraduate studies in recent years, some on a part-time basis. Vice Governor of Jiangsu Zhang Weiguo, for example, took part-time courses at Shanghai's Tongji University between 1995 and 2001. During that period, he served as a top municipal leader in Suzhou and Zhenjiang.

Fourth, all nine vice governors of Jiangsu were born in the province. Governor of Jiangsu Liang Baohua is a native of Jiangxi, but he attended Fudan University in Shanghai when he was 18 years old and has spent almost his entire career after graduation in Jiangsu. None of the 10 leaders in Jiangsu was an "outsider" who transferred from elsewhere. Because Jiangsu is a front-running province in China's economic reform, urbanization, foreign trade, and investment, many of these leaders have had substantial experience in these fields.

In contrast, five of the nine leaders in Guizhou were born in other provinces. Governor Shi Xiushi was transferred from the State Council, in which he served as deputy chief of staff. Vice Governor Bao Kexin was transferred from the State Development Planning Commission, in which he served as the director of the Investment Bureau. Bao will likely return to work in the central government, a path similar to that taken by a number of former vice governors of Guizhou who were transferred from elsewhere to work in the province for a few years. For example, Executive Vice Minister of Finance Lou Jiwei, Vice Governor of the People's Bank of China Guo Shuqing, and Vice Director of the Information Office of the State Council Chen Dawei all previously served as vice governors of Guizhou, and all were nonnative outsiders.[64] The CCP Organization Department sent a small number of promising leaders to work in poor provinces such as Guizhou to gain "local" leadership experience before they were appointed to more important positions. For those vice governors who were born in Guizhou or worked in Guizhou for decades, most (including Wang Zhengfu, Gu Qingjin, Wu Jiafu, Lu Zhiming, and Xiao Yongan) have advanced their careers through rural administrative work as county chiefs.

Fifth, a comparison of top governmental leaders of Jiangsu and Guizhou also shows that the average age of Jiangsu leaders (51.2) is 4.6 years lower than that of their counterparts in Guizhou (55.8). Three vice governors in Jiangsu are in their early 40s, and they all hold postgraduate degrees and have had foreign educational experience. In contrast, all of the Guizhou leaders are in their 50s or even early 60s. Because Jiangsu leaders are younger, have educational credentials, and work in this large province in the country, they are likely to have a much better chance for further promotion than their counterparts in Guizhou.

Implications

All these contrasts between provincial leaders in Jiangsu and Guizhou suggest that the career paths of Chinese political elites are increasingly diverging. Although the diversity of the demographic, educational, and administrative backgrounds of leaders is perhaps a positive development that can potentially contribute to political pluralism in China, the history of contemporary China has shown that differences in the educational backgrounds and career experience of political leaders are often the sources of tensions and conflicts. Western-educated returnees in the pre-1949 study-abroad movements hardly extended their influence beyond academia in the PRC. The lack of formal education of Mao and his peasants-turned-communist-colleagues contributed to constant political campaigns against educated elites throughout the Mao era. China has paid an enormous cost for its internal conflicts during the 20th century.

But China has changed its course since Deng launched economic reform and opening policies in 1978. Deng's decision to send a large number of Chinese students and scholars to study abroad was a pivotal part of his strategic plan to catch China up with the advanced countries in the world. To a certain extent, this strategic plan is more promising today than at any previous time in the history of the PRC, as an increasingly large number of foreign-educated Chinese nationals return to work in their native land. However, some longstanding problems such as uneven regional distribution of educational resources have remained unresolved. The increasing geographic disparity in human resources in China may undermine the country's collective effort to enhance its international competitiveness.

The real coming-of-age for China in the new century largely depends on how the country can establish a more institutionalized means with which decision makers can more evenly allocate both physical and human resources across the country. Equally important, it remains to be seen whether the growing diversity of Chinese political elites will lead to a more accountable, representative, and pluralistic political system, or whether it will instead cause more tensions and vicious power struggles between "down-to-earth locals" and China's self-proclaimed "best and brightest."

Notes

[1] Task Force on Higher Education and Society, *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise*, report drafted by Henry Rosovsky and David E. Bloom (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2000), 9.
[2] Ibid., 15.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Quoted from Pei Zhaohong, "Miaozhun shijie yiliu, gouzhu rencai gaodi" (Aiming to become a world-class university and building talented human resources), *Shenzhou xueren* (China scholars abroad) 1 (2003): 34. Jiang made these remarks at the centennial celebration of the founding of Beijing University in May 1998. *Xinwen zhoukan* (News week), 2003, no. 26.
[5] *Shenzhou xueren*, July 2003, http://www.chisa.edu.cn, July 27, 2003.

[6] *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily), May 24, 2003, sec. A, p. 8.
[7] At the meeting on the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Association of Chinese Students Who Studied in America and Europe, Hu gave a long speech elaborating on the strategy of strengthening China by improving its human capital. *Renmin ribao*, October 9, 2003, 1–2.
[8] This number, which includes students and scholars who studied abroad from 1978 through the end of 2003, is based on the statistics released by the Ministry of Education in February 2004. See http://news.xinhuanet.com, February 16, 2004. The data on the percentage of these students and scholars who went to the United States by the end of 2003 were not available. It was reported by the Chinese Embassy in Washington, D.C., that by mid-2003, the total number of Chinese students and scholars who had studied in the United States since 1978 was 200,000. China News Agency, May 31, 2003, http://taisha.org, July 27, 2003.
[9] Among those 527,400 who have remained abroad, 356,600 are still studying. See http://news.xinhuanet.com, February 16, 2004.
[10] See http://www.xinhuanet.com, February 27, 2004.
[11] Cheng Li, "Guiguo renyuan zai gaodeng jiaoyu lingyu de diwei ji bianqian" (The status and mobility of foreign-educated returnees in China's higher education), *Fudan jiaoyu* (Fudan University journal of education) 7 (January 2004): 26–38.
[12] Chen was a visiting scholar at Pennsylvania State University in 1980–82, and Zhou received a doctorate in engineering from the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1984.
[13] See http://www.xinhuanet.com, February 16, 2004.
[14] Ibid., and *Renmin ribao*, March 2, 2004, 11.
[15] The fifth and sixth generations of Chinese leaders are likely to consist of more returnees than the fourth generation of leaders, who had their formative years during the Cultural Revolution. See Cheng Li, "The Emergence of the Fifth Generation in the Provincial Leadership," *China Leadership Monitor* 6 (spring 2003). For a list of the members and alternates of the 16th Central Committee of the CCP who had foreign educational experience, see Cheng Li and Lynn White, "The Sixteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party: Hu Gets What?" *Asian Survey* 43, no. 4 (July/August 2003): 586.
[16] Li and White, "The Sixteenth Central Committee," 553–97.
[17] Robert L. Jacobson, "China and U.S. Express Concerns over Return of Exchange Students," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 17, 1987, 32.
[18] David Zweig, "To Return or Not to Return? Politics vs. Economics in China's Brain Drain," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 32, no. 1 (spring 1997): 92–125.
[19] Wei Nengtao, "Xin shiqi chuguo liuxue jiaoyu niaokan" (An overview of overseas study in the new era), in *Quanguo chuguo liuxue gongzuo yanjiuhui chengli shizhounian jinian wenji* (The 10th anniversary commemorative collection of the National Research Association of Overseas Study), ed. Min Weifang and Wang Yongda (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2002), 314. The number of U.S.-educated returnees has gradually increased. For example, among 165,000 Chinese students and scholars sent to study in the United States by 1999, about 30,000 (18.2 percent) returned to China. See Jiaoyubu guojisi chuguoliuxue gongzuochu, Shanghaishi jiaoyukexue yanjiuyuan zhili kaifa yanjiusuo (Office of Foreign Studies of the International Division under the Ministry of Education and the Research Institute of Education and Human Resource Development in Shanghai), "Liuxue renyuan huiguo chuangye xianzhuang ji zhengce yanjiu" (Work status of returnees and an analysis of policy), *Chuguo liuxue gongzu yanjiu* (Research on studies overseas), 2000, no. 2: 2.
[20] Wei Nengtao, "Xin shiqi chuguo liuxue jiaoyu niaokan," 314.
[21] Ibid., 438.
[22] Zhu Daming, "Peiyu he fazhan woguo liuxue rencai shichang" (Fostering a market of foreign-educated students in China), in *Chuguo liuxue gongzuo 20 nian* (A review of foreign studies over the past 20 years), ed. Zhang Shuanggu and Jiang Bo (Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999), 287.
[23] For more discussion, see Ministry of Education, "Overview of the 211 Project," http://www.moe.edu.cn/gc/211/4.htm.
[24] *Renmin ribao*, March 2, 2004, 11.
[25] See http://moe.edu.cn, August 17, 2003.
[26] For details of the Changjiang Scholar Program, see the web site of the Education Office of the PRC in the United States, http://www.sino-education.org.
[27] *Renmin ribao*, March 2, 2004, 11.

[28] *Lianhe zaobao* (United morning news), April 11, 2003. The other five schools are Nanjing University, Zhejiang University, Xi'an Jiaotong University, University of Science and Technology of China, and the Harbin Institute of Technology. More recently, the Ministry of Education added another 26 universities to the list of the 985 Project. See *Zhongguo qingnian bao* (Chinese youth daily), December 30, 2003.
[29] See http://news.xinhuanet.com, August 30, 2003.
[30] *Lianhe zaobao*, April 11, 2003.
[31] See http://chinesenewsnet.com, July 31, 2003.
[32] *Shijie ribao* (World journal), October 16, 2002.
[33] See "John Thornton Retiring as President and Co–Chief Operating Officer of Goldman Sachs," http://www.gs.com/, March 24, 2003.
[34] *Shijie ribao*, June 28, 2003, sec. A, p. 10.
[35] *Beijing Review*, April 19–25, 1999, 19.
[36] *Shijie ribao*, May 12, 2004, sec. C, p. 1.
[37] See http://www.xinhuanet.com, April 21, 2004, and http://www8.utsouthwestern.edu/utsw/cda/dept37389/files/144239.html.
[38] See http://www.xinhuanet.com, February 16, 2004.
[39] See http://www.xinhuanet.com, February 16, 2004, and April 21, 2004.
[40] Terence Chea, "Looking Homeward: Business, Social Opportunities Await U.S.-Educated Chinese," *Washington Post*, January 28, 2002, sec. E, p. 1. Also see http://cscse.edu.cn, August 1, 2002.
[41] Suzanne Pepper, *Radicalism and Educational Reform in 20th Century Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 37, 44.
[42] C.H. Becker et al., *The Reorganization of Education in China* (Paris: League of Nations Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, 1932), 148. Quoted from Ruth Hayhoe, "Shanghai as a Mediator of the Educational Open Door," *Pacific Affairs* 61, no. 2 (summer 1988): 255.
[43] Y.C. Wang, *Chinese Intellectuals and the West: 1872–1949* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 367.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Zhang Yufa, "Returned Chinese Students from America and the Chinese Leadership 1846–1949," *Chinese Studies in History* 35, no. 3 (spring 2002): 81.
[46] Pepper, *Radicalism and Educational Reform*, and Hayhoe, "Shanghai as a Mediator," 257.
[47] See http://chinatalents.gov.cn, June 2, 2003.
[48] David M. Lampton, Joyce A. Madancy, and Kristen M. Williams, *A Relationship Restored: Trends in U.S.-China Educational Exchanges, 1978–1984* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1986), 41.
[49] *Renmin ribao*, December 30, 2003, 13.
[50] See http://www.cscse.edu.cn, June 2, 2003.
[51] See http://www.chinanews.com.cn/, January 1, 2003.
[52] *Renmin ribao*, December 30, 2003, 13.
[53] *Beijing qingnian bao* (Beijing youth daily), December 12, 2003, 1.
[54] See http://www.moe.gov.cn, May 27, 2004.
[55] See http://www.taisha.org, July 27, 2003.
[56] *Zhonghua ernu* (Chinese talents) (overseas edition), January/February 2003: 20–25.
[57] Ibid., 23.
[58] *Renmin ribao*, January 30, 2004, 5.
[59] See http://www.china.com.cn, March 6, 2004.
[60] *Yazhou zhoukan* (Asia week) (China), March 20, 2004, 1.
[61] *Guoji xianqu daobao* (International herald) (China), March 6, 2003.
[62] See http://www.chinatalents.gov.cn, July 27, 2003.
[63] The statistics in this paragraph are based on Jiangsusheng Jiaowei, "Cong sigejiehe shang xia gongfu wei rencai zhanlue gu shijin" (Emphasis on collaboration and promotion of human resource development), in *Chuguo liuxue gongzuo 20 nian*, ed. Zhang Shuanggu and Jiang Bo (Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999), 99.
[64] For more information about the leaders of the central government who worked in Guizhou for a few years during their careers, see the excellent database on Chinese elites called the China Vitae, http://www.chinavitae.com/.