

World of knowledge

Self-initiated Western Migrants in Taiwan: Cultural Capital and Cross-border Career Ladders

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Historically, most cross-border human migration has entailed movement from less- to more-developed countries in pursuit of better economic opportunities. This is no longer the case in Taiwan, Korea, India, and China—countries that at one time suffered considerable ‘brain drain’ in the form of students attending Western universities for advanced study and staying to work in long-term jobs. Now enjoying intense economic growth, integration into the global economy, and more liberal political policies, these Asian countries are attracting high-caliber talent from developed countries as well as indigenous talent wanting to ‘go back home’. Past researchers of Asian migration have generally focused on return migrants and company expatriates from Western countries, but there is little research on the current reverse brain drain consisting of well educated but non-corporate elite Western professionals.

In Taiwan, these Western professional migrants are representative of workers interested in gaining overseas experience, now popularly referred to as OE. The growing acceptance of OE is one result of the openness of international borders that occurred in the late twentieth century, an openness that was taken advantage of by Western youth and professionals seeking adventure, wanting to escape their settled lives via



travel, and willing to take advantage of the availability of short-term contractual employment and temporary work visas in foreign countries. For an increasing number of Westerners, OE represents a more attractive means of knowledge acquisition, individual enrichment,

and collective human resource development than corporate overseas assignments. For some, this is a golden period for people wanting to pursue personal odysseys in the form of boundary-less global careers, as opposed to the more common organizational careers pursued by many expatriates employees of multinational

corporations.

Taiwan has been an export-oriented country since the 1960s. In the 1980s it became a major player in global production chains, and was consequently described as an ‘economic miracle’ by Western analysts. Since the mid-1990s Taiwan has played an important role in the global information technology (IT) industry. It has earned strong reputations in both original equipment manufacturing (OEM) and original design manufacturing (ODM) for American and European personal computer vendors and cellular phone companies, and is now making a focused effort to create its own brand name products for global consumption. As a result, the country is attracting both non-indigenous global talent and Taiwanese who have spent time studying and/or working overseas. Over the past two decades, Taiwanese firms have developed an ethnically oriented system of global talent searches aimed at maintaining global competitiveness, with Western migrants filling staff positions in technical writing, international sales, marketing, and related departments. Employers are interested in exploiting Westerners’ home cultural capital—language skills (mostly English) and knowledge of Western culture. Returning Taiwanese are more likely to hold managerial positions, while Asian, Eastern European, Russian, and Latin American migrants tend to be hired as engineers.

Self-initiated moves to Taiwan by Western professional migrants—primarily young and single Caucasian males—are generally made by foreign students with degrees in Asian studies and by economic opportunity seekers facing limited job prospects or adverse economic environments in their home countries. They consider Taiwan a ‘land of opportunity’ due to the ease of finding jobs with indigenous companies, which give them opportunities to actively practice their Chinese language skills while learning Taiwanese management practices. Taiwanese firms use these generally inexperienced Westerners to perform tasks in product management, sales, marketing, and public relations, and take advantage of their foreign employees’ cultural capital to enhance their international images and to facilitate business transactions.

Despite the variation in salaries earned by Western professional migrants, many consider their jobs in Taiwan as superior, more challenging, and having greater potential compared to the jobs they would qualify for in their home countries. In many cases they accumulate Taiwan-centered cultural capital and build social networks that support their long-term cross-border career efforts. Options for Westerners who gain work experience in indigenous Taiwanese firms include returning home, changing jobs in Taiwan, working for Taiwan-based subsidiaries of foreign firms (in some cases earning the equivalent of expatriate salaries for overseas postings), starting entrepreneurial ventures in Taiwan, or moving back and forth between Asia and the West according to changing economic conditions.

Based on my research, I suggested that cultural capital—language and knowledge of a society and its ways of doing business—is an important but neglected aspect of global talent. This is true even for engineers hired to provide input to companies wanting to develop products for foreign markets. Moreover, cultural capital is an important resource for professional migrants wanting to establish successful cross-border careers. It is especially important when they lack social capital, although social and cultural capital are mutually convertible. In contrast to past studies that emphasize the importance of social capital among migrants, I

showed that Western professional migrants use the cultural capital that they bring with them to find jobs in Taiwanese firms focused on foreign markets, then acquire local cultural and social capital to support their cross-border career interests.

Statistics for Professional Migrants Living in Taiwan in 2007: Country of Origin by Profession

Profession Origin	Government	Business	Engineer	Accountant	Lawyer	Journalist	Teacher	Doctor	Nurse	Missionary	Mechanic	Sailor	Other	Total
Asia	4	2550	1650	13	4	17	786	251	12	653	1077	187	10992	18196
Japan	0	1600	672	2	0	9	560	10	0	63	66	1	2163	5146
Other than Japan	4	950	978	11	4	8	226	241	12	590	1011	186	8829	13050
The West	1	1001	633	6	18	18	4283	21	3	966	26	2	2531	9509
US	0	470	274	2	12	11	1899	13	2	681	5	1	1161	4531
English-speaking (Other than US)	0	237	149	3	4	6	2221	4	0	91	4	1	798	3518
Non-English speaking	1	294	210	1	2	1	163	4	1	194	17	0	572	1460
Others	0	200	124	0	2	4	940	7	6	154	38	165	1283	2923
Total	5	3751	2407	19	24	39	6009	279	21	1773	1141	354	14806	30628

Source: Department of Statistics, Taiwan Ministry of the Interior (retrieved October 11, 2008, from <http://www.moi.gov.tw/stat/year.aspx>).

Notes: Asian countries—Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Korea, India and Singapore. Western English-speaking countries—US, Canada, UK, Australia. Western non-English-speaking countries—France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Austria, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Sweden, Spain, Portugal, Denmark, Norway, and Finland.

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