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# Policy design to attract and retain overseas Chinese returnees during the global talent war – The case of Shanghai

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## Abstract

The ongoing global talent war has intensified the competition amongst domestic governments to attract and retain top talents, representing a major concern for policy decision makers to design attractive policy incentives to increase the attractiveness of cities for talents to pursue employment and entrepreneurship opportunities. This study critically explores the Shanghai Municipal People's government recent policy measures imposed on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2021 to encourage highly skilled overseas Chinese talent to work and/ or pursue entrepreneurship in Shanghai, analysing the practical impacts these policies have had on the employment/ entrepreneurship experiences of returnees. A total of 15 semi structured online interviews were collected toward returnees who have stayed in Shanghai since the policy change, the general consensus amongst interviewees points to the enhancement of push factors, reduction of pull factors, personal/ family factors and negative foreign country factors that had motivated their desire to pursue employment/ entrepreneurship in Shanghai. This study focused on the role of policy design and how it affected talent attraction and retention for returnees to come and stay in Shanghai, recommending key areas for future improvements to address current inefficiencies across policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes.

**Keywords:** global talent war; talent attraction; talent retention; Shanghai policy; returnees; entrepreneurship; employment policy

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## 1.0 Introduction

The global war for attracting and retaining the best talents has become a core concern for major cities across the globalised economic landscape, conceptualised under Harvey's (2014) "global talent war" as major economies and metropolitan cities compete through designing modern, captivating policies to better attract and retain top talents in the global labour market. The increasingly competitive nature of the global talent war is underlined by the apparent shift from

**Received:** June 28, 2025. **Revised:** August 26, 2025. **Editorial decision:** September 3, 2025. **Accepted:** September 17, 2025

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the traditional labour-intensive manufacturing driven economy approach to a knowledge-based economy approach, encouraging the movement of talents across the globe. This is particularly evidential in developing countries like China where drastic economic growth since its economic reform in 1978 has created surging growth rates, GDP per capita has grown over eighty folds from \$156 in 1978 to \$12,556 in 2021 (Macrotrends, 2022), resulting in a growing middle class that represented only 3.1% of its population in 2000 to 50.8% in 2021 according to China Power's (2021) report. Consequently, China's booming middle class population located in metropolitan first tier cities have generated substantial demands for the production and consumption of skilled services based on intellectual capital, accompanying the transition towards a knowledge-based economy with every-growing demand for top talents to facilitate the high levels of desired economic output and skilled employment demands (Liu et al, 2020).

China's economic reform in 1978 under the "open door policy" to attract foreign direct investment had resulted in the establishment of key special economic zones (SEZs), whereby province-level authority on economic administration and privileged policies are granted and designed to foster economic growth, allowing SEZs to fulfil their economic expectations and to stimulate economic growth (Sit, 1985). In June 1990, Shanghai was granted SEZ status with the focus to attract foreign and domestic businesses with free market oriented economic policies, it has since become the sixth largest financial centre according to Reuter's (2021) global financial centre index, representing the most populated and wealthiest Chinese city with rapidly increasing demand for highly skilled talents to maintain its global competitiveness. In recent decades, China has actively stepped up its efforts to enhance the global competitiveness of its SEZs, attracting and retaining top talents through policy designs to reverse the loss of talents suffered during the Chinese migration and diaspora movement during the 1980s, where economic, political and religious concerns had forced top talents to immigrate overseas (Skeldon, 2003). Additionally, despite Shanghai's booming economic opportunities and increasing policy incentives to attract and retain top talents, Shanghai is ranked only 77<sup>th</sup> according to Accenture's (2021) Global Talent Competitiveness Index (GTCI), being regarded to offer lesser attractive propositions for talents in comparison to substantially smaller and lesser populated cities such as Antwerp (48<sup>th</sup>), Bologna (53<sup>th</sup>), Vilnius (70<sup>th</sup>) and Bilbao (74<sup>th</sup>).

The GTCI offers a comprehensive system to measure the attractiveness of global cities for talents across dimensions such as enable (ease of doing business, GDP per capita), attract (presence of Forbes 2000 companies, FDI projects), grow (FDI jobs created, tertiary enrolment), retain (happiness, environmental quality, safety) and global knowledge skills (tertiary educated population, patent applications), representing the leading HR industry benchmark with 68 key variables that covers the 155 largest cities worldwide (Accenture, 2021). In an attempt to improve Shanghai's global competitiveness for talents, the Shanghai's Municipal People's government introduced new policy measures on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2021 to encourage highly skilled overseas Chinese talent to work and/ or pursue entrepreneurship in Shanghai, prioritising the return of overseas Chinese talents to contribute to the growing labour demand of high skilled sectors, optimising the economic development of the city and to minimise the loss of Chinese talents to overseas (Law Info China, 2021). Government intervention to attract highly skilled overseas Chinese talents back to China is explored by Zewig et als' (2006) concept of "reversal of the brain drains", whereby policy designs are economically incentivised to offer favourable opportunities for Chinese returnees from overseas, differing between SEZs due to the distinctive nature of their economies and labour demand but works to re-attract and retain lost Chinese talents from overseas.

## 1.1 Research problem, rationale and questions

The majority of empirical literature have traditionally been limited to the research scope that explores policy design on attracting and retaining foreign/ global talents, exploring how major cities can attract highly skilled foreign talents to drive economic growth and stimulate productive economic developments across both developed and developing countries (Stahl et al, 2012, Koh, 2003; Yahya & Kaur, 2010). Nonetheless, there has been growing research efforts in recent years to recognise the importance of attracting overseas nationals (returnees), particularly in China where substantial numbers of top talents and wealthy individuals went overseas since the 1980s Chinese migration and diaspora movement (Skeldon, 2003; Ho & Ley, 2014), also explored under the concept of the “brain drain” problem by Zewig et al (2006). Subsequently, it is of both research and practical importance to address how policies can be designed to better attract and retain overseas Chinese returnees, as shown in the political agenda of major Chinese cities that have instilled strong emphasis to recognise the skillsets of overseas nationals/ talents, designing attractive economic incentives under a series of “brain drain reversal” policy programmes (Zewig et al, 2006). However, it is apparent that the effectiveness of recent policies designed and introduced to encourage overseas Chinese talent to work and/ or pursue entrepreneurship in Shanghai remains unexplored, representing a research gap that this study aims to address.

Despite strong academic recognition over the intensifying “global talent war” (Harvey, 2014; Beechler & Woodward, 2009), only a few empirical studies have attempted to explore the effectiveness of policy designs to attract or reattract overseas nationals, especially in developing countries where rapid economic growth and demand for high skill labour is ever-increasing including Russia (Waring, 1996), India (Swartz, 2011) and South Korea (Kim & Oh, 2014). A research consensus is established across these studies where returnees are motivated to return to their home nations due to extrinsic drivers including favourable career opportunities, pay and tax incentives (Kim & Oh, 2014). The motivational drivers for overseas Chinese returnees to return to China remains an unexplored research field, particularly in areas of policy design that can help to retain the best talents (returnees), this raises strong research importance given that many countries have failed to effectively retain returnee talents as shown in the context of Australia (Holland et al, 2007), South Korea and Taiwan (Song, 2003). Overall, this research project addresses the current research problem where inadequate numbers of studies have been conducted on understanding and developing the policy design in Shanghai to better attract and retain overseas returnee talents. In order to comprehensively address this research problem, the following research questions will shape the design of research parameters and scope to produce valuable insights that contribute to both the academic and practitioner fields:

1. To what extent and what types of motivational drivers contribute to effectively attract and retain overseas returnees Chinese in Shanghai?
2. How did the recent policy change proposed by the Shanghai municipal government to encourage highly skilled overseas Chinese talent to work and start business in Shanghai affect talent attraction and retention attitudes for returnees?
3. How may the Shanghai municipal government modify its overseas returnee Chinese talent attraction and retention policies to better achieve its desired goals in future policy development practices?

## **1.2 Research aims & objectives**

This research aims to critically explore the policy design and measures introduced in Shanghai to attract and retain overseas Chinese returnee talents, evaluating how recent changes in policy design had influenced the attitudes of these talents to pursue employment or entrepreneurship in Shanghai. In order to achieve this research aim, the following research objectives will be fulfilled:

1. To critically explore how policy design can influence and motivation the attraction and retention of overseas returnees Chinese in Shanghai.
2. To critically explore the practical impacts of the 2021 policy measure to encourage highly skilled overseas Chinese talent to work and start business in Shanghai.
3. To formulate practical recommendations to modify policy design and improve the effectiveness of attraction/ retaining overseas returns Chinese talents in Shanghai.

## **1.3 Structure of study**

This study contains six chapters, the first chapter presents the background of the chosen research topic, discussing identified research gaps and problems in literature, developing a rationale for this study with designated aims, objectives and research questions. The second chapter provides an in-depth review of empirical studies conducted in the field of policy design and attracting/ retaining talents, particularly for overseas returnee talents in the context of China, drawing upon key theories and concepts from existing literature. The third chapter outlines the methodological system that guides the entire research process of the study, discussing the chosen research philosophy, approach, strategy, choice, time horizon, data collection and analysis methods. The fourth chapter presents the qualitative findings from interviews conducted toward overseas Chinese returnee in Shanghai via thematic analysis methods. The fifth chapter critically discusses key qualitative themes identified in collected interview data in relation to empirical literature concepts and theories, addressing research questions and fulfilling research objectives. The sixth chapter summarises key findings of this study with discussion to limitations and implications for future studies.

## **2. Literature review**

This chapter critically reviews empirical studies conducted in the field of talent attraction and retention, drawing upon key theories and concepts used to explain talent mobility in literature. The first section discusses the notion of the global talent war with application of the macroeconomic theory of migration and human capital theory from empirical research (De Jong et al, 2002; Strober, 1990). The role of policy design and its impacts on attracting and retaining talents is explored in relation to talent management literature and the case of Australia's consolidated sponsored occupation program. Empirical academic knowledge on the motivational factors affecting talent attraction and retention is explored with emphasis of Duan's (2012) push-pull theory. The emerging research scope to attract and retain overseas returnees is discussed to offer an alternative perspective in comparison to the traditional literature focus on attracting foreign talents.

The brain drain/ brain theory is discussed from the interpretation of Biene et al (2001), Rizvi (2005) and Gurmessa et al (2017), elaborating on empirical applications of the theory to conceptualise

migration decisions. The key Chinese migration and diaspora movements in recent century is discussed with reference to major historical events and the application of the Chinese diasporic movement framework (Liu, 2005). Past policy efforts/ programmes to attract foreign talents and to reversal the brain drain problem in China is explored with emphasis on the challenges faced by Chinese returnees. The final section of this chapter summarises the key understanding and knowledge of empirical literature, analysing current research themes and problems to shape the research scope of this study, addressing the identified research gap as shown in the proposed theoretical framework.

## **2.1 The global talent war and international talent mobility theories**

The global talent war is a term coined by multinational management consulting firm McKinsey & Co to describe the intense competition to attract and retain talented workers since the 1990s, characterised by an aging work force, accelerated transition into knowledge economies, demographic changes (low birth rates in developed countries) and the emergence of automation and computers that replaces low skilled labour (Beechler & Woodward, 2009). According to Harvey (2014), the global talent war has been intensified due to increasing international mobility of talents in the modern, globalised environment, the ease of international travel and accessibility to information in relation to overseas employment opportunities via the Internet platform overcomes traditional information asymmetry, communication and physical barriers. The causes of the global talent war have long been explored to international talent mobility theories across talent management literature (De Jong et al, 2002; Strober, 1990; Solimano, 2008). The macroeconomic theory of migration proposed by De Jong et al (2002) argues that migrants are subject to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages in home and potential foreign countries, selecting the location where the greatest potential economic opportunities and labour market returns can be obtained.

This is also reinforced in Strober's (1990) human capital theory, indicating that migrants are driven by higher levels of accrue earnings in which shapes migration decisions. The research consensus points to the advantages for talents benefited from the ease of international talent mobility (Solimano, 2008), whilst recognising the negative impacts on companies and countries that are vulnerable to the loss of talents (Tansley & Kirk, 2018), especially due to increased access to more attractive employment opportunities and living conditions elsewhere in the contemporary globalised environment (Solimano, 2008; Tansley & Kirk, 2018). The core focus of empirical studies explores macroeconomic effects of migration, whereby only a few studies have attempted to investigate potential personal factors behind talent mobility, as findings are difficult to standardised due to inevitable variable in personal experiences and needs as shown in the study of personal ambition for the migration of Nepalese nurses (Baral & Sapkota, 2015), personal development needs for Iranian health professionals (Asadi et al, 2018) and career ambitions of Irish football talents to migrate to participate in English professional leagues (Elliott, 2016).

### **2.1.1 The role of policy design to attract and retain talents**

The role of policy design is widely associated with the attraction and retention of talents in empirical literature, especially for determining what type of talents are required and to design

corresponding policy measures to achieve the desired development goals (Harvey, 2014; Cerna & Chou, 2019; Sumption, 2017). According to Harvey (2014), there exist no unified paradigms to guarantee successful attraction and retention of talents, this is due to differences in personal and cultural influences that differentiate the distinctive desires of talents from different backgrounds. Nonetheless, Cerna & Chou (2019) argues that policy design will always play a vital role in talent management, requiring substantial efforts to clearly identify and specify the types of talents desired, actively communicating with clear signals to the global labour market with emphasis on key areas of skills and expertise required. Schneider & Sidney (2009) proposes that policy design in talent management requires a set of fundamental elements that shapes subsequent implementation and policy evaluations, highlighting the importance of selecting suitable policy instruments during the policy formulation stage.

This is evidential in the design of Australia's consolidated sponsored occupation list (CSOL) and skilled occupation list (SOL) as shown in figure 1 below (CXC Global, 2022), summarising a range of occupations/ talents needed to fill skill shortages, providing designated sponsored migration opportunities, universal healthcare, education benefits for migrated talents and corporate tax credits provided to employers for hiring these listed occupations (Howes, 2013). However, whilst Australia's policy design to attract foreign talents have been commonly appraised, the lack of incentives in policy design to pursue long term stay is criticised by Gerstein (2020) to be ineffective in talent retention, failing to address key areas of skills, training and career developments with emphasis on enriching experiences and facilitating continuous growth for foreign talents. Therefore, policy design is acknowledged to play a vital role across the entire talent management process, initiating from the identification of specified talent roles, design of attractive incentives, implementation, monitoring of policy progress and to continuously provide value added incentives to encourage talent retention over the long term (Harvey, 2014).

<h1 style="text-align: center;">AUSTRALIA'S SKILLED OCCUPATIONS LIST</h1> <p style="text-align: center;">March 2022</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Construction Managers</li> <li>● Engineering Managers</li> <li>● Child Care Centre Managers</li> <li>● Health and Welfare Services Managers</li> <li>● Other Specialist Managers</li> <li>● Actors Dancers and Other Entertainers</li> <li>● Music Professionals</li> <li>● Artistic Directors &amp; Media Producers &amp; Presenters</li> <li>● Accountants</li> <li>● Auditors Company Secretaries &amp; Corporate Treasurers</li> <li>● Actuaries Mathematicians &amp; Statisticians</li> <li>● Economists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Environmental Scientists</li> <li>● Geologists Geophysicists and Hydrogeologists</li> <li>● Life Scientists</li> <li>● Medical Laboratory Scientists</li> <li>● Veterinarians</li> <li>● Other Natural and Physical Science Professionals</li> <li>● Early Childhood (Pre-primary School) Teachers</li> <li>● Secondary School Teachers</li> <li>● Special Education Teachers</li> <li>● University Lecturers &amp; Tutors</li> <li>● Medical Imaging Professionals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Telecommunications Engineering Professionals</li> <li>● Barristers &amp; Solicitors</li> <li>● Psychologists</li> <li>● Social Workers</li> <li>● Civil Engineering Draftspersons and Technicians</li> <li>● Automotive Electricians</li> <li>● Motor Mechanics</li> <li>● Sheetmetal Trades Workers</li> <li>● Structural Steel and Welding Trades Workers</li> <li>● Metal Fitters and Machinists</li> <li>● Precision Metal Trades Workers</li> <li>● Panelbeaters</li> <li>● Bricklayers and Stonemasons</li> </ul>

Figure 1: CSOL & SOL March 2022 (CXC, 2022)

### 2.1.2 Motivational factors affecting talent attraction and retention

A large body of empirical literature have been dedicated to explore the motivational factors affecting talent attraction and retention from a private sector employer perspective (Botha et al, 2011; Hunt, 2014; Wilkinson et al, 2019), taking upon a human resource focus to conceptualise the generic motivational drivers for talents to apply and/ or stay at a company. Alternatively, motivational factors affecting talent attraction and retention for cities, countries and public sectors have received comparatively lesser research attention, as Kravariti & Johnston (2020) argues that public sectors are restricted by lower flexibility and higher complexity due to far broader scopes to consider with implications on interrelated disciplines under the multiplier effects model. In terms of talent attraction, multiple studies have attempted to investigate and measure what talents value most when considering relocation to another city/ country for employment, Koh's (2003) study performed a needs assessment on high skilled talents entering Singapore and found that migrant-friendly visa policies, strong economic opportunities, sophisticated legal systems and value-added incentives for shortage occupations were the key motivators for talents to move to Singapore.

The push-pull theory of migration is commonly applied when evaluating the factors motivating and demotivating international talent mobility (Duan, 2012), comprising a range of “push” factors that would discourage talents to stay in their home countries such as political uncertainty, poor

economic conditions and opportunities as shown in figure 2 below (Duan, 2012). Alternatively, “pull” factors motivates talents to migrate to another location given high levels of safety, political stability, freedom, economic prospects, living conditions and availability/ accessibility to sophisticated social welfare services (Duan, 2012). Muntanga et als’ (2021) study applied the push-pull model for talent attraction and retention in Namibia, finding that the shift toward higher levels of push factors would discourage the stay of top talents, as indicated on the continuing economic decline and political instability which have failed to retain talent, this is also reinforced in Shah et als’ (2010) study on the leaving of Pakistani nurses due to ongoing political crisis and economic turmoil.

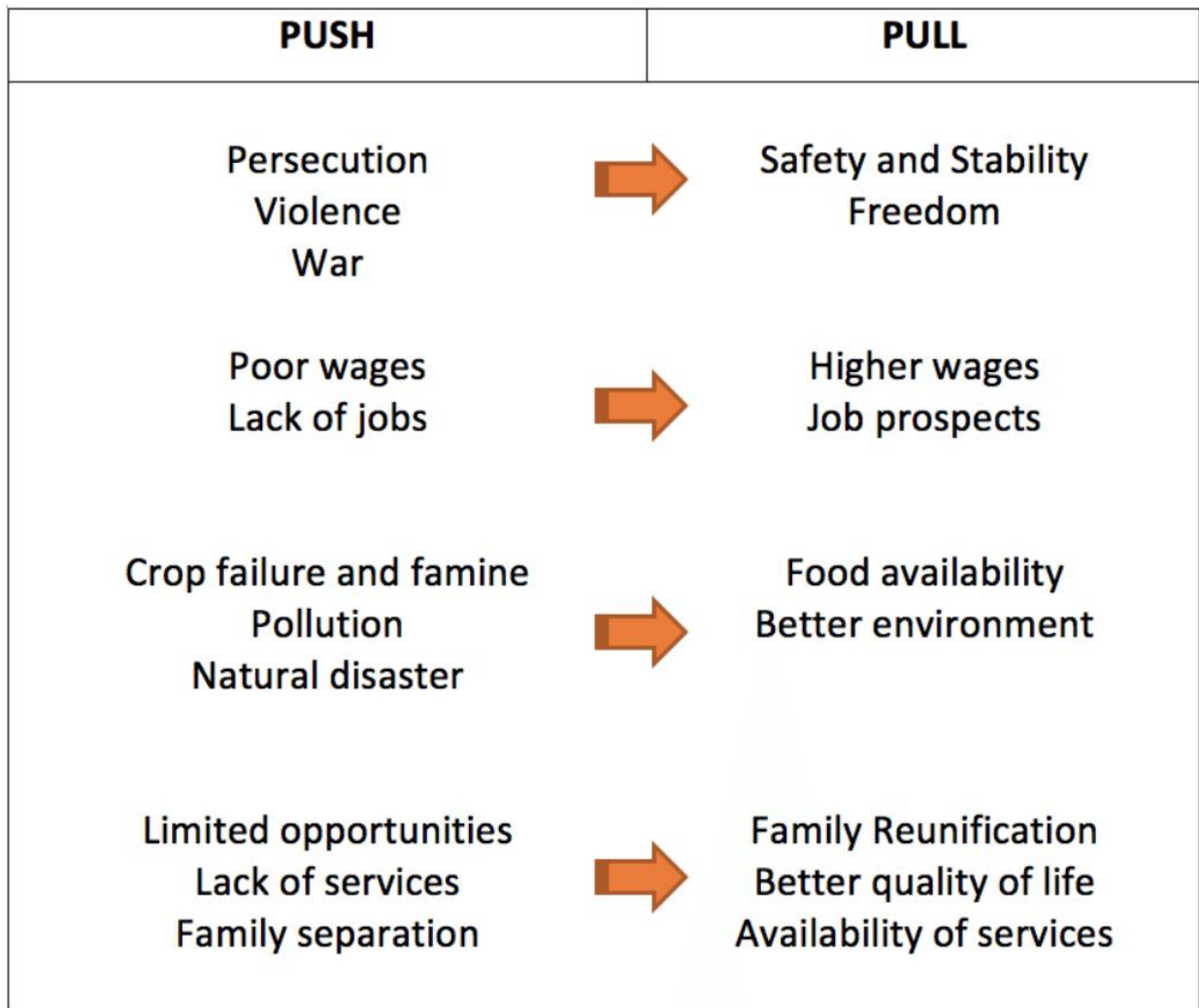


Figure 2: Push-pull theory of migration (Adopted from Duan, 2012)

Similarly, Kajiura’s (2008) study examined the multiple decades long migration of Japanese talents post WW2, proposing that the vicious cycle of talent migration can be reversed given the achievement of continuous economic developments, technological innovation and political

stability, as reflected in Japan's high skilled automotive sector during the 1990s where foreign talents accounted to 27% of the workforce, illustrating the importance of strong pull factors to both attract and retain talents. In consideration to policy driven motivators, Song's (2003) study compared the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of policy initiatives to attract and retain overseas nationals in the country context of South Korea and Taiwan, finding that extrinsic motivational drivers such as better career development opportunities, pay and tax incentives were key to attracting returning talents from overseas. However, empirical literature also points to the inability for countries to effectively retain their returnee talents after attracting them attractive recruitment and selection policy initiatives, indicating the challenges to retaining talent due to a lack of policy emphasis on skills development, training, career and diversity management as found in the context of Australia (Holland et al, 2007).

### **2.1.3 Attracting and retaining overseas returnees**

The returning of talents to their home countries has received increasing academic attention in migrant literature, as Wang & Liu (2016) highlighted the emerging trend where international experience and networks are increasingly sought after by employers over local experience in the globally connected business environment. The return of overseas national talents has been explored in the contexts of tech talents returning to Russia (Waring, 1996), India (Swartz, 2011) and South Korea (Kim & Oh, 2014), recognising the unique competences of overseas returnees to possess technical expertise (know-how), global business skills and awareness of local cultural preferences. Increasing academic recognition over the motivation for talents returning to their home countries points to the favourable economic opportunities/ job prospects in emerging countries that returnees can utilise their ethical, lingual and professional skillsets established from overseas experiences (Mok et al, 2020). In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, diminishing economic opportunities for foreign talents in Europe and North America has resulted in the returning of top talents to their home countries (Jiang, 2010), this is also evidential in the post Brexit environment particularly for the cultural and creative industries which has traditionally relied on foreign talents (Montalto et al, 2021).

In order to accommodate the inflow of overseas returnees, governments across the globe have actively designed corresponding incentives to retain returnees upon their return, recognising their importance to the development of key industries and subsequent knowledge spill over gains on domestic companies and workforce (Trippel & Maier, 2011). The linkage between policy design and stimulated motivational drivers for returnees to return to their home countries becomes an important area of research interest, as policy development to encourage talent migration in the knowledge economy is argued to be the most influential driver given the highly competitive nature of major cities (Wang, 2021). Despite a lack of studies conducted to focus on the policy design in China to attract and retain overseas Chinese talents, Cerna & Czaika (2016) critically explored the highly skilled migration policy changes to attract talent in European states, relating to the case studies of the 2010 Lisbon strategy and the Europe's 2020 growth strategy which were highly successful, strategically designed to promote competitiveness and growth via the specialised skillsets of overseas nationals from outside of Europe, reinforcing the apparent relationship between policy design and capability to attract overseas nationals for the development of knowledge based economies that are driven on innovation and expertise (Liu et al, 2020).

## 2.2 The brain drain/ brain gain theory

The preponderance of the migration of highly skilled and educated personnel is conceptualised under the brain drain theory, commonly referring to the movement of top talents from developing, lesser industrialised countries to developed, technologically advanced countries with more lucrative economic opportunities and better living conditions (Commander et al, 2004). According to Beine et al's (2001) study across 37 developing countries, it is found that the migration of talents (brain drain) plays a moderating role in the growth in formation of human capital and economic growth. Under the perspective of "ex ante brain effect", it is argued that the potentials of overseas migration opportunities would likely encourage investments in education given the expectation of higher returns from migration, formulating higher levels of human capital as talents prepare for migration abroad (Beine et al, 2001). Alternatively, the "ex post brain drain" impact indicates the negative correlation between economic growth and the share of educated people/ talents, whereby high rates of migration will likely result in economic declines/ sluggish growth in contrast to the continuous growth of developed economies which higher shares of migrated talents (Beine et al, 2001).

The opposite of brain drain is conceptualised under the concept of brain gain, defined by Mayr & Peri (2009) as the return of highly skilled talents to their home countries. Mayr & Peri's (2009) study examined the impacts of the brain gain movement of talents returning to Eastern European countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, upon a decade of temporary migration flows of talents toward Western Europe, finding that returnees would return among agents with heterogeneous abilities, contributing to local economic growth and development of knowledge-based industries as demonstrated by higher levels attracted FDI and increased wage levels amongst the local work force. According to Rizvi (2005), the brain drain/ brain gain theory on the mobility and migration of talents has received substantial research attention in the era of globalisation, adopting a postcolonial perspective to consider issues of identity, national affiliations and deterritorialization of cultures. The causes, costs and impacts of the brain drain theory is summarised by Gurmessa et al's (2017) model as shown in figure 3 below, as the brain drain vicious cycle is characterised by family influence, personal preference and disadvantages social environment of home countries, influencing migration decisions and high levels of mobility. Alternatively, the virtuous cycle of brain gain is characterised by the advantages social environment, lucrative opportunities, strong political systema and improved living conditions (Gurmessa et al, 2017).

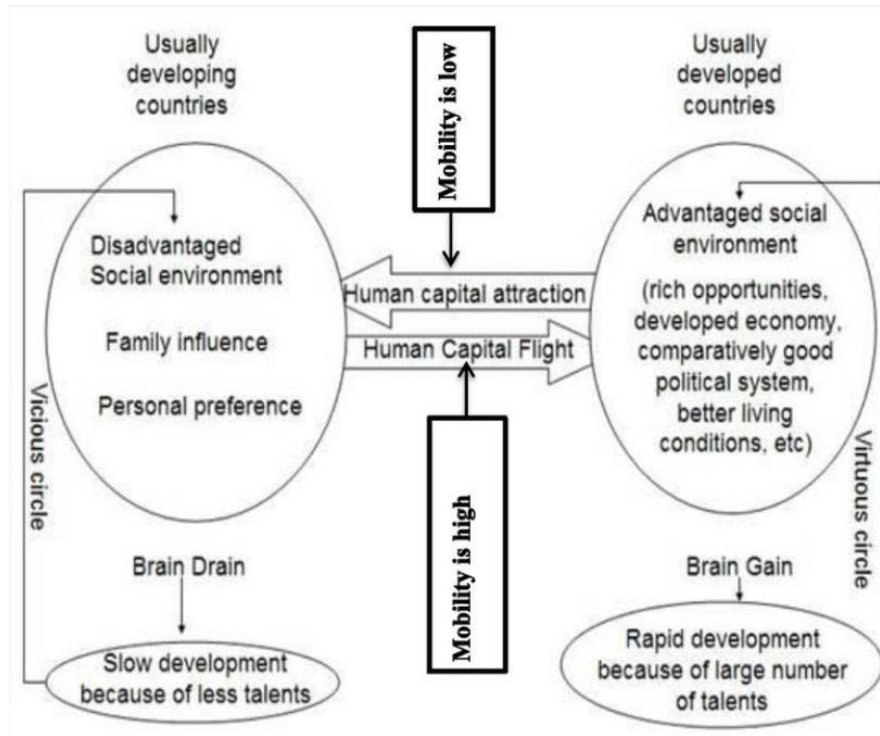


Figure 3: Conceptual model on the causes, costs and impacts of the brain drain theory (Adopted from Gurmesssa et al, 2017)

### 2.2.1 Chinese migration and diaspora movements

According to Tan (2013), China has experienced one of the highest figures of immigration across the globe throughout its 3,500 years of history, representing the third largest diaspora population as over 60 million Chinese nationals have migrated overseas. The first major wave of Chinese migration occurred during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, influenced by the concept of a trade diaspora as traders from Huizhou, Shanxi and Hokkien migrated to South East Asia in pursuit of economic opportunities in major continental ports, representing an era of unregulated movement of merchants and migrants due to loosely controlled cross border movements (Lai, 2004). The second wave of Chinese migration between the mid-19<sup>th</sup> and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was triggered by the opium war, as the Qing government authorised a large exodus of Chinese labourers as slaves, resulting in the start of the labour diaspora which has been heavily criticised across Chinese diaspora literature due to inhuman treatments and working conditions (McKeown, 1999; Kuhn, 2006; Mcgee, 2019). Additionally, increasing recognition over the education opportunities and industrial developments of Western economies in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century initiated a wave of student diaspora, as the wealthiest families sent their children to the US and Europe for high quality education, obtaining professional skills and for better living conditions (Goodkind, 2019).

The third and the largest wave of Chinese migration took place upon the 1978 economic reform, as the new household responsibility system replaced the old people's commune system and loosened the imposed restrictions of Chinese citizens' mobility (Gao, 2022). The transformation of China's economic and political environment during the 1980s had resulted in the emergence of



Stahl et al's (2012) emphasised on the relationship between policy design and talent management of foreign talents.

According to Saxenian (2005), in the early phases upon China's economic reform, China's talent attraction policies were designed to address the brain drain problem since the 1980s, defined as the substantial emigration/ migration of individuals resulted from turmoil within a nation as people seek better opportunities in other countries. Ha et al (2016) further elaborated on China's 1980s brain drain movement and argued that many educated Chinese students and scholars had left the country due to concerns amongst government officials and a highly uncertain political environment, discouraged to return despite the stabilising political environment coupled with rapid economic growth. Therefore, the Chinese government began to actively encourage the return of "brain drained" Chinese talents through the design of relative policies specifically designed to attract overseas Chinese, such as the Young Thousands Talent Programme (Y1000T) that was designed to nurture 1000 leadership figureheads amongst selected returnees as explored in Marini & Yang's (2021) study. However, Marini & Yang's (2021) remain one of the few empirical studies that explored China's policy design to attracting and retaining talents with emphasis on the overseas returnee Chinese population, representing a research gap to address due to inadequate levels of existing studies.

Another key focus of brain drain reversal literature explores the challenges for returning talents, recognising the ever-growing numbers of returnee talents that intensifies the competition for highly skilled jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities, as identified in the case of China under the notion of "brain waste" that refers to Chinese returnee talents who have failed to effectively pursue desired career paths upon returning to China and is commonly referred to as "returnees waiting for jobs" or "hai dai" according to Biao & Shen (2009). Additionally, overseas nationals that have spent substantial periods of time abroad or were born and grew up overseas is found to face acculturation and adaptation challenges (Berry & Sam, 1997). It is argued by Berry & Sam (1997) that overseas nationals might be vulnerable to the sudden cultural change when interacting with other groups in their home country, whereby the capability to adapt and integrate with the local culture would determine the nature of temporary or long-term stay. Kofman (2004) provided a non-economical approach to evaluate the challenges for retuning Chinese talents, emphasising on the influence of social networks and agents involved in the returning process, as gender roles and family values are highly influential in migration decision making as shown in the role of household and caring commitments that would likely restrict the migration decision of Chinese female talents.

### **2.3 Summary of literature and theoretical framework**

The field of talent attraction and retention has received substantial research attention in recent decades, adopting key focuses on attracting foreign talents under private sector/ employer perspectives (Botha et al, 2011; Hunt, 2014; Wilkinson et al, 2019). A number of studies have attempted to measure the motivational drivers for talents to migrate overseas under the push-pull model (Duan, 2012), as well as a range of economic and personal drivers that would impact one's decision to stay or move overseas (Koh, 2003; Song, 2003; Kajiura, 2008). The movement of talents is widely conceptualised under the brain drain theory, whereby a number of studies have recognised the limitations of China economic and political environment, causing a series of migration and diaspora movements in recent centuries (Tan, 2013; Lai, 2004).

Despite increasing academic recognition over the importance of attracting overseas national talents, a research gap is identified where inadequate studies have been conducted on the policy design to attract and retain overseas Chinese talents in the modern, booming Chinese economy, particularly in the city context of Shanghai despite its lucrative economic opportunities. The scope of this study is designed to contribute to the academic field with greater insights on current policies designed to attract and retain overseas returnees are perceived, identifying areas of key motivational drivers desired by these talents and how future policies can be better shaped to fulfil their needs. Moreover, the findings of the study would offer practical contributions as policy makers in Shanghai and other major Chinese SEZs can learn to better attract and retain returnee talents in the midst of the global talent war. A theoretical framework designed in consideration of empirical literature knowledge is presented in figure 5 below.

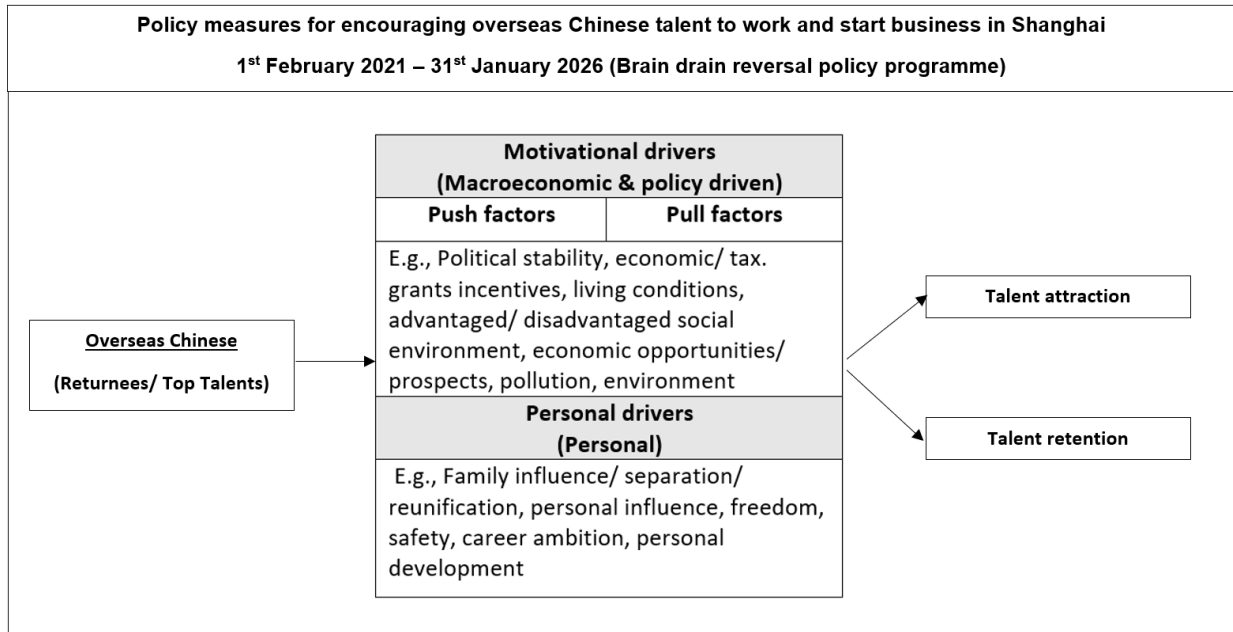


Figure 5: Theoretical framework

### 3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methods and tools used across the entire research process, discussing the rationale behind the selection of each research method/ tool and how it enables the researcher to achieve the research objectives stated in section 1.2. According to Bryman (2008), there exists an extensive range of research methods and tools available for academic studies, offering distinctive functions that requires consideration from the researcher to select the most appropriate methods according to the needs and nature of each study. Subsequently, this chapter adopts Saunders et als’ (2009) research onion methodological system framework as shown in figure 6 below, discussing the chosen research methods/ tools across each research layer that combines to represent the overarching methodology system. This first section discusses the

rationale behind the chosen research philosophy, followed by the research approach, research strategies, research choice, time horizon, data collection/ analysis and ethical considerations.

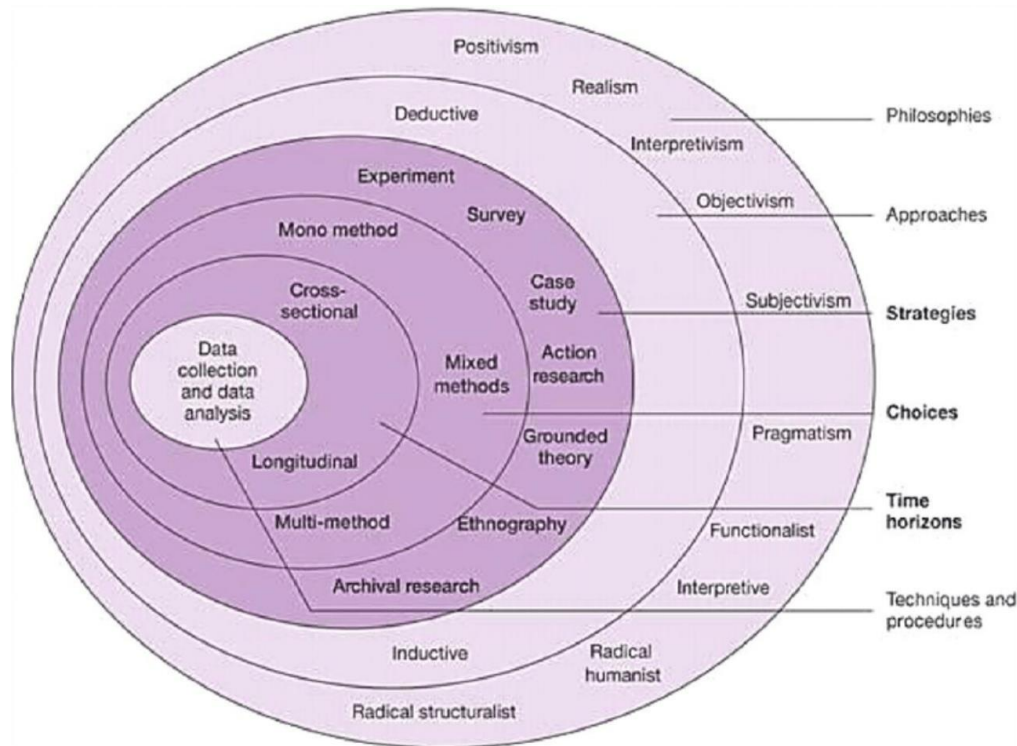


Figure 6: Research onion framework (Saunders et al, 2009)

### 3.1 Research philosophy

According to Holden & Lynch (2004), the philosophy of a research project refers to the overriding belief about how the development of knowledge should be conducted, influencing how data should be gathered, analysed and utilised in order to develop reliable knowledge about the research object/subject. Saunders et al (2009) proposes three major branches of research philosophies that guides the development of knowledge across academic studies, including epistemology, axiology and ontology as shown in figure 7 below. An ontology research philosophy commits to discover the nature of reality through the study of being, accepting that there is a single tangible reality that is constant across time and setting independent of human experience (Welty, 2003). An epistemology research philosophy concerns with how knowledge can be acquired and produced, accepting that the reality can exist outside of independently of the individual mind, allowing researchers to uncover the objective truth whilst recognising different perceptions from individual experiences (Hofer, 2001).

Ontology	Epistemology	Axiology
Management and organisations are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• real, just like physical objects</li> <li>• uninfluenced by how we feel about them.</li> <li>• granular, fixed and structured</li> </ul>	Discover the truth and predict the future through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• observable, measurable facts</li> <li>• causes &amp; effects</li> <li>• laws, rules &amp; generalisations</li> </ul>	Value-free research. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Researcher is detached, neutral and independent</li> <li>• Maintains objective stance.</li> </ul>

Figure 7: Three major branches of research philosophies (Adopted from Saunders et al, 2009)

An axiology research philosophy commits to the researcher’s subjective values, intuitions and personal biases, highlighting the role of the researcher in questioning about the nature and classification of values (Killam, 2013). This research investigates the attitudes of overseas returnee Chinese talents where different perceptions and individual experiences are expected, thus an epistemology research philosophy is adopted and particularly the branch of pragmatist epistemology. This allows the researcher to recognise the nature of reality under the basis that there exist many different ways of interpreting what constitutes as the reality of the socially dynamic world, anticipating that there may be multiple realities and rejecting the notion that a single point of view can accurately depict the entire picture of the researched phenomenon (Denglerova et al, 2011). Similarly, given that there would be high variations in the perception of attractiveness in the policy design of Shanghai’s recent introduction of the overseas returnees’ attraction and retention programme, a pragmatism research philosophy would enable a highly flexible approach to observe and recognise varying opinions amongst Chinese returnees in Shanghai.

### 3.2 Research approach

In order to contribute to the identified research gap where inadequate studies have been conducted to explore the attraction and retention of overseas returnee talents in Shanghai, this research adopts an inductive research approach (bottom up) to formulate new insights in according to gathered data patterns, utilising development of knowledge via research findings to propose practical improvements in future policy designs to better attract and retain overseas Chinese returnees that truly fulfils their needs. According to Hodkinson (2008), an inductive research approach complements pragmatist research studies as it allows flexibility, attends closely to the context of research focus and generates knowledge for relatively unexplored fields. However, the development of knowledge based on close observation requires an objective role of the researcher, avoiding potential personal bias which would decrease the accuracy and generalisability of produced findings (Hodkinson, 2008). Therefore, the researcher ensures accurate collection and observation of data through minimising unnecessary interventions and to adopt an objective mindset at all times, accepting the nature of all collected data.

### 3.3 Research strategy

To gain specific knowledge and in-depth focus on the policy designs to attract and retain overseas Chinese returnees, a case study approach is used to emphasises solely on the city of Shanghai and its recent introduction of the “Policy measures for encouraging overseas Chinese talent to work and start business in Shanghai” on 2<sup>nd</sup> Jan 2021, the full articles 1-39 of the policy (PITH, 2021). The choice of Shanghai as case study is rationalised by its highly developed and economic prosper nature, representing the wealthiest city in China and home to the highest number of overseas returnees due to major policy reforms to prioritise the development of the city’s technological, financial and high skilled sectors over other SEZs (Si et al, 2021). The recent policy change to attract and retain overseas returnees (Chinese talents) on Jan 2021 is chosen as it represents the largest policy change in terms of scale and duration over recent decades, as new benefits are valid between 1<sup>nd</sup> Feb 2021 and 31<sup>st</sup> Jan 2026 (PITH, 2021). The key benefits and changes are summarised in table 1 below.

Table 1: Key benefits and changes to the recent policy measures for encouraging overseas Chinese talent to work and start business in Shanghai (Adopted from PITH, 2021)

Article	Description
1	The development of a talent driven strategy to attract and retain overseas Chinese returnees in Shanghai with more active, more open and more effective overseas talent engagement and to enhance the access of Shanghai to global human resources that fosters innovation and entrepreneurship.
4 & 6	Establishment of the SMHRSS to formulate and organise the implementation of policies with a board consisted of overseas returnees, facilitating an exchange platform between representatives of overseas returnees coming to Shanghai and governing bodies with joint meeting mechanisms.
8	An integrated approach to encourage innovation driven entrepreneurship across the Yangtze River Delta amongst overseas returnees, offering grants, tax incentives and a resource sharing platform to encourage returnees to contribute to the development of the highly important Yangtze River Delta region.
11	Preferential policies designed to ease the applications of overseas returnees in work and entrepreneurship in Shanghai.
12	Establishment of entrepreneurship parks for overseas returnees, offering mentorship guidance and evaluation support for high tech projects.
16 & 17	Guaranteed grants and loans for social start-ups, rent subsidiaries for operation venues and prize awards for innovative tech projects. VC, domestic and foreign capital funds are encouraged to provide loan guarantees for overseas returnees to establish enterprises.
21&22	Overseas returnees with children under the age of 16 are eligible to apply for permanent household registration in Shanghai and related education benefits. Spouses of returnees can apply for Shanghai residence passes for overseas talent.
26	Overseas returnees with foreign citizenship and holds Shanghai residence pass are eligible to participate in social insurances, their spouse and children are entitled to corresponding benefits.
31	The employment of the spouses of overseas returnees will be cared for and given priorities by employers and competent authorities of Shanghai.
32	Fast track in household registration/ purchases, opening of free trade accounts and privileges in customs clearance facilitation.
35	Employers are required to compensate overseas returnees working in Shanghai based on their position and their contribution should their work contracts be terminated.
37	Capital contributions, distribution of profits, capital gains and proceeds from assets disposal of overseas returnees who establishes new business in China may be freely remitted into and out of China in Chinese RMB or foreign currencies.

### **3.4 Research choice**

The nature of this study explores the attitudes of overseas returnees to work or pursue entrepreneurship in Shanghai in accordance to its recent policy change, given that there exist no unified paradigms to measure the impacts of policy design on talent attraction and retention in empirical literature, open questions were used to gather data in accordance to the research design and to address research questions. A mono research choice is adopted as only qualitative data is gathered and analysed, utilising in-depth textual data to potentially open up new insights to address the current lack of academic knowledge and understanding due to insufficient empirical studies conducted on the research topic (Rahman, 2020). The collection of qualitative data helps to create openness and encourage participants to expand on their responses to give rise to knowledge or ideas that were not initially considered, enriching the level of content and context of data gathered to contribute to the research field (Rahman, 2020).

### **3.5 Time horizon**

In consideration of apparent time and resource constraints for this study, a longitudinal time horizon is adopted as primary data are gathered at only one moment in time, research participants took part on a one-off basis and did not conduct interviews more than once (Rindfleisch et al, 2008). Unlike a cross sectional study where participants are observed overtime to identify possible changes in attitudes overtime (Rindfleisch et al, 2008), this study was conducted on a longitudinal time horizon due to limited time available and was sufficient to achieve research objectives.

### **3.6 Data collection and analysis**

Prior to primary data collection, a review of empirical data and articles from reliable, authentic sources including government, industry, company, news and media reports, selecting appropriate sources based on a keyword search on “Shanghai overseas returnees”, “returnee attraction programmes” and “entrepreneurship policies for returnees” within the context of Shanghai between January 2021 to December 2021, representing a twelfth month period prior the start of the research project and indicates the most up-to-date overseas returnees attraction and retention policy programmes. The most frequent policy measure returned was indicated under the “Policy measures for encouraging overseas Chinese talent to work and start business in Shanghai” as shown in table 2 below. The search provided a preliminary basis to formulate suitable questions used in latter primary research collection based on empirical understanding on the research phenomenon, combining with relevant literature to shape interview questions that helps to address identified research gaps and contribute to the research field with new insights. In addition, articles 1-39 of the overseas returnee attraction and retention programme was collected and provided for each research participant to ensure they had complete understanding of the full policy change prior participation in interviews.

Table 2: Preliminary research on overseas returnees attraction and retention policy programmes in Shanghai between January 2021 and December 2021.

Overseas returnees attraction and retention policy programme	Number of citations
Policy measures for encouraging overseas Chinese talent to work and start business in Shanghai	48
Local economic and employment development (LEED) programme for returnees	3
Attracting skilled international migrants/ overseas Chinese talents and professionals to China	2

This study collected primary data via a total of 15 semi structured interviews on targeting overseas Chinese returnee under employment or entrepreneurship in Shanghai for a minimum of 1 year/ since the start of the policy change, enabling the collection of opinions targeted specifically toward the chosen policy design for attracting and retaining overseas Chinese returnees after the recent policy programme launch. According to Guest et al (2006), an interview sample size of 15 would provide sufficient in-depth data to produce generalisable findings. These interview participants were recruited through utilising the personal networks of the researcher, contacting participants via WeChat under a convenience sampling technique, contacting friends and their connected peers to select suitable interview participants who fit the targeted sample parameter (Overseas Chinese returnee & minimum one years of employment/ entrepreneurship) in Shanghai. Interviewee participants were contacted and recruited via WeChat, distributing an information sheet that explains the purpose of the project, the details of the policy change (articles 1 to 39) and a consent form to illustrate their consent to participate.

All interviews were conducted via WeChat to avoid physical interactions during the COVID pandemic, ensuring the safety of all participants and overcoming apparent geographical barriers to accessing interviewees in Shanghai. The interviews were designed in a semi-structured format with open questions, incorporating key parameters as identified in the theoretical framework in section 2.3. All interview data are recorded and transcribed into transcripts, adopting a thematic analysis method to identify key themes within gathered qualitative data, potentially identifying new insights and contribute to empirical academic knowledge. The thematic analysis performed follows Gavin’s (2008) five steps guideline to firstly gain familiarisation with interview data by taking initial notes, reading through text transcribed from audios to ensure accurate translations/ interpretations. Secondly, codes are generated to label the key phrases or sentences that describe distinctive attitudes observed from each interview question. Thirdly, these codes are sorted and organised into themes, patterns are established in relation to the levels of similarities or differences of codes, combining into major themes that umbrellas their similar characteristics. Fourthly, all themes are reviewed to ensure accurate representation of gathered qualitative data, comparing with the initial dataset to eliminate inaccuracies and theme conflicts. Finally, all themes, codes and key meaning phrases are written up with analysis of key themes with application to literature knowledge (Gavin, 2008).

### 3.7 Research ethics

Ethical considerations were addressed and fulfilled as all recruited research participants were given an information sheet and consent form to sign prior taking part, acknowledging their rights to withdraw at anytime and their voluntary contributions to the study. The anonymity of research participants is protected as no personal information were collected and their identity were not disclosed (deidentified) throughout the study, all data were stored with encryption in the personal laptop of the researcher with limited access to only the researcher. All research data are destroyed upon the completion of the study and no physical interactions were conducted with participants. All communications were conducted online to avoid health & safety concerns during the COVID pandemic in Shanghai at the time of the study.

## 4. Results & Findings

This chapter presents the thematic analysis of findings from the 15 interviews conducted, the main themes, sub codes and key meaning phrases from the data collected on each interview question are presented in independent sub-sections in accordance to Gavin's (2008) five steps thematic analysis guideline.

### 4.1 Motivational drivers to return to Shanghai

The motivational drivers for overseas returnees to return to Shanghai was found under the major themes of “enhanced push factors”, “reduced pull factors”, “personal factors” and foreign country factors” as summarised in table 3. Many interviewees claimed that a wealth of economic opportunities, strong employment prospects and improved living standards due to substantial developments on economic infrastructures had motivated their decision to return to Shanghai, reinforcing Duan's (2012) push factor theory as enhanced levels of push factors improve talent attraction. Alternatively, it was also found that returnees were also motivated due to the reduction of traditional pull factors, including the loosening of political restrictions on visa & education requirements and reduced social challenges for non-locals due to higher societal acceptance and ease of integration. The desire for family reunification and personal development were found to be common motivational drivers to return to shanghai, highlighting the need to fulfil family and personal goals outside of work. Limited employment opportunities and unfriendly employment experiences oversea also discouraged their intention to stay as they opted for a return to Shanghai.

Table 3: Motivational driver themes to return

Main themes	Sub codes	Key meaning phrases
Enhanced push factors	Economic opportunities	“Lots of emerging key industries like blockchain, financial services and net carbon”, “the government has spent substantial efforts and money to develop economic infrastructures”, “it is become a hotbed for innovative start-

		ups”, “al the world’s biggest companies are already here or coming here”
	Strong prospects in employment	“There are a lot of jobs available”, “many good, well-paid employment opportunities”, “the ceiling is much higher in Shanghai due to the huge size of the market”, “increasing number of domestic firms are looking to hire returnees with international experience”, “if you have the capability there are no limits on career progression possibilities”
	Improved living standards	“It is not the old, emerging China that used to think about anymore”, “has one of the best living standards worldwide”, “there is no difference in living standards here than in London if you earn enough”, “the quality of living has drastically increased in recent decades”
Reduced pull factors	Loosened political restrictions	“It used to be difficult for us Chinese with foreign nationalities to enter or remain here”, “the strict barriers to come here no longer exist for returnees with minimal university level education”, “the political environment is no longer as uncertain and instable as before”
	Reduced social challenges	“English is spoken everywhere which makes live easier for us who grew up overseas and speak minimal Chinese”, “there are English translated signs everywhere”, “no longer need to be fluent in Chinese to survive here”, “the acceptance for returnees is much higher now than before”
Personal factors	Family reunification	“I have always wanted to come back and visit my parents’ family”, “my parents sent me away to boarding school when I was young and I never got to live with them”, “being with my family is really important for me”, “my parents have retired and returned to Shanghai, I’m here to care for them”
	Personal development	“I believe I can achieve much more in a city that I feel appreciated in”, “there are so many opportunities here for you to fulfil your dreams”, “it is difficult to survive in the fast-paced city life of Shanghai, it pushes you to constantly improve”, “I felt too comfortable with my live and needed a change at somewhere filled with challenges”
Foreign country factors	Limited employment opportunities	“I have struggled to secure long term employment in the UK for a long time”, “lost my job since COVID started and have not been able to find another”, “many big companies are reducing numbers of staff its hard to find a job”, “it feels easier findings a job in Shanghai nowadays than in the UK”

	Unfriendly employment experience	“It feels at times a little discriminating when it comes to the employment scene for Asians in European countries”, “I never really settled into the UK way of life and the work culture”, “racially discriminations happen a lot in my previous workplace”, “the glass ceiling is apparent in foreign countries”
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#### 4.2 Motivational drivers to stay in Shanghai

For the majority of returnees, the satisfaction of push factors including sustained economic developments, increasing income and continuous social developments were key motivators for their desire to stay in Shanghai. Substantial government efforts made to increase the international competitiveness of the city have attracted major foreign firms and employment opportunities, the increasing middle-class size and spending power has made Shanghai a desired location for returnees to realise economic potentials. Substantial improvements made to reduce pull factors were found in the reduction of political uncertainties as shown in the design of long term 5-year plans, the design and implementation of returnees-friendly policies, again reinforcing Duan’s (2012) push and pull factor theory on motivating talent retention. A range of personal factors including family influence, kids starting school, marrying a local and the fulfilment of career and business goals have motivated the long term stay of returnees. Additionally, previous unfriendly experiences, limited employment opportunities and lower chances for spouse to find employment in other countries have prolonged the stay of returnees.

Table 4: Motivational driver themes to stay

Main themes	Sub codes	Key meaning phrases
Enhanced push factors	Sustained economic developments	“Every year you see new economic schemes or programmes to develop existing infrastructures”, “clear government efforts to grow and expand the economy”, “economy has increasingly opened up overtime constantly attracting major foreign firms”, “it’s just relentless in terms of economic developments”
	Increasing income	“Experiencing major year on year salary increases”, “I’m able to make so much more here than where I was”, “the spending power of the locals are growing and its translated onto our business revenue growth”, “Shanghai is the place to be for new start ups when you consider the low start up costs and huge market potentials”
	Continuous social developments	“Social welfare has improved substantially year on year”, “my kids are going to the top schools even on a global standard”, “it is arguably the safest city to live in”, “people

		are so friendly and accepting here, makes you settle in very quickly”, “even the elderlies can speak a bit of English and you can get by speaking English everywhere”
Reduced pull factors	Reduced political uncertainties	“It is no longer the old school government way of controlling everything”, “government plans are set out in five-year periods, enabling you to make long term decisions accordingly”, “if anything it is the least uncertain political environment because the Chinese government stick to their words on development plans”
	Returnees-friendly policies	“It has become quite hassle free to stay here for us”, “my wife and my kids are able to secure benefits like locals”, “we are increasingly accepted and treated like the locals in with friendly policies”, “government is putting much effort to oriented policies for our specific needs here”
Personal factors	Family influence	“My kids are in school here”, “it would be the last option for me to consider moving my family out of their current, routine and organise life here”, “my wife is Chinese and her family is here”, “I don’t think my spouse and kids can settle into live in a foreign place as easily as I can here”
	Achieving career/business ambitions	“Making huge strides in my career and I don’t want to leave it all behind”, “I have become a reputable figure in the industry here”, “my business is set and expanding quickly in Shanghai”, “I intend to grow my start-up here in the long term”, “I have more goals to accomplish before I can go”
Foreign country factors	Limited employment opportunities	“I don’t see myself landing a job with the same pay elsewhere”, “it will be difficult to compete in the west where there are more talents”, “there are limited job opportunities and offers elsewhere”, “the global employment landscape is getting very competitive”
	Unfriendly experience	“I feel very appreciated here unlike before”, “people treat you like a local here because of your appearance, its just different abroad”, “having had unpleasant discriminating experiences, I don’t want to experience them again”

### 4.3 Policy change impacts on attitude and experience in work/ entrepreneurship in Shanghai

The impacts of the recent policy change on the work/ entrepreneurship experience of returnees are summarised in table 5. Many returnees claim that the experienced a reduction in employment challenges, particularly in the application process for work visas due to efficient reforms from governing bodies, the capability for apply for social insurances and permanent household

registration for the family of the returnees have lifted traditional barriers for returnees working in Shanghai. The recent policy change has provided more career advancement opportunities for returnees, as several interviewees claim to have received prioritised focus from employers and they foresee the opportunity of limitless career progressions in a returnee friendly policy environment. Amongst returnee entrepreneurs, it was found that traditional start-up barriers have been reduced due to loosened requirements especially for returnees with foreign nationalities to start a company in Shanghai, joint ventures with local businesses are no longer required for most industries, technical and financial barriers have been reduced with a wide range of applicable loans/ grants from governing bodies. Subsequently, this has increased the survival rates of start-ups as companies started by returnees with policy granted access to capital in comparison to domestic start-ups, benefiting from mentorship and rental support from governing bodies.

Table 5: Policy change impact themes on work/ entrepreneurship attitudes and experience

Main themes	Sub codes	Key meaning phrases
Reduced employment challenges	Easy visa applications	“Introduction of the high-level talent resident passes and R visas are quite easy to obtain”, “it is much easier to come here now than a few years ago”, “anyone with university degrees overseas can apply for the talent visa”, “the visa application process no longer takes months and requires you to go to multiple departments”, “all governing bodies are well informed of new policy changes and conflicts are reduced alongside company HR department”
	Ease of spouse/ kids settling	“My kids have successfully completed the permanent household registration, securing benefits like the locals”, “my wife has also been given a Shanghai residence passes for overseas talent so she can come join me here”, “my family do not speak Chinese but they can settle in easily due to high English fluency in the city”
Career advancement opportunities	Prioritised focus from employers	“It is evidential that employers have given me more opportunities than locals”, “the need for international experience makes us more wanted and appreciated”, “I have obtained quicker promotions in comparison to locals”, “we are given priority access to the newest training and innovation programmes”
	Unlimited career progressions	“The government has invested so much in the economic infrastructure for the tech industries”. “the limits are sky high for us here given continuous government support like grants and resources provided”, “the authorities see us as the backbone of economic development and innovation, giving us freedom to try new things”, “I believe that in a few years I will have achieved all my career ambitions/ goals”

Reduced start-up barriers	Loosened start-up requirements	“It used to be so complex opening a business here”, “having foreign nationalities meant that traditionally you were required to pay more tax and company registration were troublesome, its no longer the case”, “we no longer need to start-up as a joint venture with local businesses in certain industries”, “technical and financial barriers to start up are reduced”
	Availability of grants/ loans	“I have secured three different grants since the policy was introduced”, “there is a wide range of loans and grants available for us”, “more options to secure capital which is vital particularly at this COVID recovery phase”, “there are new grants coming out every quarter”
Higher start-up survival rates	Access of capital	“Better access to capital has helped us overcome cashflow problems”, “we were better able to survive compared to local businesses with lesser privileged grant schemes”, “access the capital is more important than ever and the government is supporting us on that”
	Mentorship/ rental support	“There are many incubator programmes for start-ups from returnees”, “mentorship from industry experts in programmes designed in collaboration with government”, “we have received rental subsidies for our office in the tech park in Pudong”, “six months of rental fees exempted in the innovation park”

**4.4 Policy change impacts on attracting overseas returnees to Shanghai for work/ entrepreneurship**

The recent policy change was found to enhance push factors that increases the attraction for returnees to work or pursue entrepreneurship in Shanghai, as many returnees highlighted the attractive economic environment of the city and drew similarities with London, New York and Hong Kong, becoming a start-up hotbed where tech and innovation driven industries are thriving. The easing of financial controls for returnees with foreign nationalities has made it easier to move money in and out of the country, increasing the attraction for talents looking for short/ long-term employment. The active commitments of the government to refine the develop returnee friendly policies have lowered political uncertainty, improvements in political stability, ease of local integration and the transitioning of the social environment into a wealthy, educated society have increased the attraction of the city via reduction of pull factors. The opportunities for family reunification to care for retired parents living in Shanghai, ease of visa application for spouse and children have smoothen the settling in process and increased the appeal for returnees to come to Shanghai.

Table 6: Policy change impact themes on Shanghai’s attractiveness for returnees

Main themes	Sub codes	Key meaning phrases
Enhanced push factors	Attractive economic incentives	“Shanghai has become a city where people can earn big money just like London, New York and Hong Kong”, “despite being one of the ever-growing economies, future economic developments in plans will attract lots of tech returnee talents”, “business start-up costs have substantially reduced for us in Shanghai”
	Improved financial control	“It is easier to move money in and out of the country”, “businesses are benefited with financial capital support, facilitating growth and spending control”, “encouraged innovation in financial products and services increases private and corporate investment options”, “capital gains and proceeds from investments can be freely remitted into and out of China now in RMB and foreign exchange”
	New start-up hotbed	“It will become the start-up hub of Asia for tech companies due to available grants and shared resources from the government”, “the platform to connect major industry companies and supply chain actors help to establish connections and relationships for start-ups”, “benefiting from tech industry agglomeration for tech start-ups”, “Shanghai is turning into the second silicon-valley for tech start-ups with so much infrastructure developments”
Reduced pull factors	Improved political stability	“Clear visions and goals established in five-year plans are increasing political stability and lowering uncertainty”, “it is unlikely to foresee any sudden major political changes without notice”, “the government has continuously prioritised developments on attracting and retaining returnees”
	Reduced disadvantaged social environment	“China and particularly Shanghai is no-longer recognised as a third world country”, “there are minimal development gaps and differences between life in Shanghai and other global metropolitan cities”, “middle class represent more than half of Shanghai’s reputation, illustrating high levels of living standards”
	Ease of local integration	“Locals are increasingly accepting of returnees who they perceive as top talents to drive local and domestic developments”, “domestic firms are wanting to hire returnees”, “the local society respects and values international cultures as seen in the large numbers of foreigner friendly infrastructures”

Supporting personal factors	Improved spouse/ family settling	“Ease of registering kids into local schools”, “spouse are better able to secure employment opportunities”, “families can experience social welfare benefits via social insurance schemes”, “there are so many elite international schools to choose from”
	Family reunification opportunities	“Easier visa applications will allow returnees to reunite with their Chinese families”, “many overseas Chinese nationals tend to retire in China and it gives more reason for talents to come here and care for their parents”, “ease of spouse and family joining talents in their stay in Shanghai”

**4.5 Policy change impacts on decision to stay long term in Shanghai**

It is apparent that most interviewees claim to have stronger willingness to remain in Shanghai upon the recent policy change, the capability to secure social benefits like the locals in particular were addressed numerous times, especially for the spouse and children of returnees which were major practical concerns and demotivated long term stay prior the policy change. Eligibility for household registration, property purchases, opening of free trade accounts were key policy outcomes that increased returnee retention desires. Continuous economic developments with formation of high-tech agglomerate regions, lucrative economic prospects in innovation driver sector and planned future development programmes increase the desire to stay. The feelings of being wanted and respected from the locals and the authorities also contributed to strong retention motives. However, several returnees claimed that the policy change did not impact their desire for long term stay, as they have already made scheduled departures upon the end of work contracts, some had families abroad and the policy change was not sufficient to change their intentions to leave. Several interviewees claimed that the policy change had minimal practical benefits for them, many proposed reforms were still in the ideation stage and some claimed that the recent strict handling of zero covid protocols had discouraged their intention to stay in Shanghai.

Table 7: Policy change impact themes on long term stay for returnees

Main themes	Sub codes	Key meaning phrases
Stronger willingness to stay	Improved spouse/ family settling	“There are many decent school options for my kids”, “it is easier for us to stay as my wife and family can access social benefits like the locals”, “I used to worry about my spouse’s visa all the time, but this is no longer the case”
	Property purchase/ registration	“We can apply for household registration or make purchases now which is big help to staying here in the long term”, “the opening of free trade accounts for us is influential to my decision to stay”, “acceptance for social insurances since August last year has changed my decision completely, being given medical insurances in public

		hospitals now makes me less worried with potential injuries and high medical costs which would be free in the UK”
	Strong economic prospects	“Continuous innovation driven economic developments are very important”, “the development and transition into a tech agglomerate region will help my business in the long term”, “new economic schemes and development programmes will likely increase future revenue for us”
	Feels wanted/ respected	“I’m very happy here”, “I feel respected and wanted by my company”, “the feeling of being appreciated makes me want to stay”, “the governments, the locals and the workplace are making me very privileged to be here”, “I enjoy being part of the policy design process and long to contribute over the long term”
No/ negative changes	Scheduled departures	“It was never my plan to stay here long term”, “leaving at the end of my two-year contract here and going back to the UK”, “I will head off in two months’ time and transfer back to my previous work location”, “my family is still overseas and I will go back to them once my duties are completed here”
	Minimal realised benefits	“The practical benefits from the policy change is lesser applicable for some”, “for some policies to realise it takes too long and we might not be here by then”, “the process of implementing policies here is never straight forward and takes a lot of time”, “to be honest I don’t feel too much difference on my life or employment”
	Zero COVID policy controls	“The recent lockdown experience was so miserable and I do not want to experience it again”, “no matter how friendly policies have been for us, I will not risk the chance of going through more lockdowns here in Shanghai”, “the zero covid policy has driven lots of returnees and foreigners back home”

**4.6 Future improvements from a policy perspective**

Despite overall improvements on the talent attraction and retention of returnees as reflected in recognition of most interviewees, several major themes were gathered on advising necessary improvements for future policies as shown in table 8. Most interviewees wanted to be more involved and integrated in the policy design process, the need for more two-way communication exchanges via feedbacks and involvement in decision making were highlighted. The current generic categorisation of returnee talents is criticised to lack appropriate policy design that

accustoms to the needs of different types of talents, proposing the need for a refined/ specified category of talents. Under the theme of “identification of changing needs”, it was found that a collective effort is required between governing bodies and returnees through collection of feedback, anticipation of emerging needs from the changing environment and the establishment of designated communication channels. The need to overcome the current inefficient policy implementation process was discussed, as quicker execution processes, the design of monitoring and evaluation tools were needed to accurately measure policy results for future modifications.

Table 8: Future policy improvements themes

Main themes	Sub codes	Key meaning phrases
Integration in policy design	Increase two-way exchanges	“I’m not sure if our feelings and feedbacks are heard sometimes”, “there are designated bodies for us to speak to regarding concerns and policy impacts”, “we would like to speak more about our actual experiences and what we need rather than being passive and letting the government decide for us”, “some policy changes are not effective for us”
	Direct involvement in decision making	“Being involved in the policy design and decision making would help”, “to be heard or known about our desires and priorities regarding work and start-up challenges”, “industry representatives are needed to give accurate portrayal of key industries and how returnees require support on designated areas”
	Specified categories of talents	“The current changes to the talent visa are too generic as talents with special expertise needed urgently should be given more priorities in policy support”, “categorisation of returnee talents is needed”, “we should be able to differentiate the best and the mainstream group of returnees for more effective policy design”
Identification of changing needs	Regular feedbacks	“Our needs are always changing and the government needs to talk to us regularly”, “surveys or interviews for returnees to monitor the results of policy change is needed”, “feedback needs to be collected and used to modify ineffective policy changes”
	Anticipation of new needs	“Government should be more flexible in policy design due to changes in the external environment”, “governing bodies should accept that policy design is a continuous and dynamic process”, “government should play a more active role to help us identify new policy needs”

	Improved communication channels	“More efficient communication channels are needed”, “there should be more frequent communication between governing bodies and returnees”, “we often do not know who to report or enquire to due to limited communication channels”
More efficient implementation	Quicker policy execution	“Policies here have a gap between the date of execution and relevant bodies knowing how to actually execute them”, “a lengthy process to implement policies after announcements of it months in advance”, “some policy changes have still not yet been executed even though I have been hearing about it for almost a year”
	Need to monitor effects from governing bodies	“There is a lack of monitoring mechanisms to ensure desired policy effects come into practice”, “lots of policies are designed from the top but are not effectively implemented accordingly on the ground level”, “feels like some policies are implemented for the sake of meeting the needs of the city level government with limited interests from executed bodies”
	Effective evaluation protocols	“An evaluation system on policy impacts is much needed”, “no one really knows where a policy change has created its desired impacts due to inability of accessing information”, “we have never been asked on our opinions on whether these new policies were actually useful for us”

**5. Discussion**

This chapter critically discusses the major themes and findings from the previous chapter, applying and relating to theories and concepts from empirical studies, addressing key ideas and insights formulated to answer research questions. This chapter is divided into three sub sections that addresses each of the three research questions.

**5.1 To what extent and what types of motivational drivers contribute to effectively attract and retain overseas returnees Chinese in Shanghai?**

The major themes identified on returnees’ motives to pursue employment/ entrepreneurship opportunities in Shanghai reinforced empirical literature knowledge and opened up new insights. The enhancement of push factors and reduction of pull factors themes as shown in table 3 & 4 reinforced Duan’s (2012) push-pull theory of migration, as returnees were motivated to return due to improvements of push side factors including economic developments/ opportunities, attractive employment prospects, higher pay, continuous social developments and living standards, also correlating to the findings of Muntanga et al (2021) and Shah et al (2010) where improved push factors have substantially increased talent attraction. Alternatively, the reduction of pull factors through loosening of traditional policy restrictions, political uncertainties and social challenges

with the introduction of returnee friendly policies have motivated returnees to stay in Shanghai, supporting Gerstein's (2020) arguments over the need for active engagement from government bodies to ensure sustained, enriching experiences for talent retention.

The push and pull factor related themes identified supported the findings of Koh's (2003) study, whereby returnee friendly visa policies, strong economy opportunities and value-added incentives for pursuing employment/ entrepreneurship have contributed to both talent attraction and retention. In terms of talent attraction, a range of personal factors were identified as returnees were motivated by the opportunity to visit their Chinese family whilst pursuing employment/ entrepreneurship in Shanghai, especially for those who grew up overseas and left their families since a young age. This finding reinforced Kofman's (2004) theory of social networks and agents influence, highlighting family as a key role in the migration decision making process which was clearly evidential in the case of Shanghai. Similarly, returnees with their spouse and children settled in Shanghai was a major influence for their intentions to stay long term, especially those married to locals who mentioned it would be difficult to motivate their partners to leave the city.

Furthermore, the ambitions for returnees to fulfil their personal development goals were identified as a major contribution to their intention to stay, achievement of major career accomplishments, strong start-up foundations and networks established, recognition amongst industry peers opened up new insights on how satisfaction of higher self-esteem and actualisation needs (Maslow, 1971) would also motivate talent retention particularly for top talents. The identification of foreign country factors opened up new insights that empirical literature had previously neglected, the changing economic landscape in recent years particularly in the covid recovery era has limited employment opportunities for talents overseas, as many returnees claimed to have struggled to pursue stable employment in recent years and have suffered from unfriendly employment experiences due to their Chinese ethnic background. This opens up the need to consider the wider dynamics of external foreign country environments when exploring the motives for returnees to return, reinforcing De Jong et als' (2002) arguments where talents are subject to evaluate the evaluate the advantages and disadvantages in home and foreign countries.

## **5.2 How did the recent policy change proposed by the Shanghai municipal government to encourage highly skilled overseas Chinese talent to work and start business in Shanghai affect talent attraction and retention attitudes for returnees?**

The main themes and sub codes identified in table 5 indicated key practical changes on the employment and entrepreneurship experiences of returnees, policy change on visa applications have eased the process for returnees with foreign nationalities to enter and stay in Shanghai, overcoming traditional challenges in the complex registration processes. The policy change to offer social insurance benefits and permanent household registration like the locals for returnees, their spouse and children have eased the challenges for settling in Shanghai. Returnee-friendly incentives for employers and increased recognition over the international experience of returnees have resulted in prioritised focus from employers in comparison to local employees, this made returnees feel appreciated and privileged with limitless career progression opportunities, fulfilling the human capital attraction values of the brain gain concept (Rizvi, 2005). For returnee entrepreneurs, the recent policy change has alleviated traditional start-up barriers, a wide range of applicable loans and grants for high-tech returnee start-ups have eased the access to capital, especially in the cast tight COVID recovery phase where many local businesses are struggling to

survive. The provision of government sponsored incubator and mentorship programmes, rental subsidiaries and returnee privileged schemes have aided the survival and growth of start-ups from returnees.

The practical benefits experienced upon the policy change highlight apparent enhancements of push factors which translate into higher talent attraction for returnees (Duan, 2012), long term government plans to develop the high tech sector have substantially increased the attractiveness of economic incentives particularly for high tech start-ups, the easing of traditional policy barriers on money inflow/ outflow and financial innovation have improved financial control for returnees to transfer their capital gains overseas in Chinese RMB or foreign currencies. Alternatively, reduction of pull factors due to the policy change have increased the appeal for returnees, clear visions and goals identified in five-year plans have reduced political uncertainty, incentivising through lower ambiguous changes in future policies, similar to Shah et als' (2010) findings for attracting returnees in Pakistan's healthcare sector. Substantial improvements on the social environment of Shanghai with high quality of living standards and high acceptances for returnees have eased the process of local integration amongst returnees, reinforcing Gurmessa et als' (2017) brain drain vicious cycle theory where support and acceptance from local societies are vital for talent attraction.

A major impact of the recent policy change is reflected in accommodating the employment needs of returnees' spouse and the education needs for their children, enhancing both talent attraction and retention as the provision of social benefits and privileged policy incentives have smoothed the settling of returnees' families in Shanghai, addressing the influence of family and household commitments in the decision for talents to stay (Kofgman, 2004). Nonetheless, continuous prioritised policy focus has made returnees feel wanted and respected, contrasting with previous unpleasant experiences suffered overseas as stated by numerous interviewees which have motivated stronger willingness for long term stay in Shanghai. However, it is evidential that several returnees claim to have not been motivated to stay long term despite recognised benefits from recent policy change, planned departures at the end of work contracts and family influenced decisions have motivated their intention to leave. Nonetheless, several interviewees criticised the lack of realised benefits from the policy change, particularly in lesser specified work or industries where privileged policies were not designed, indicating insufficient consideration for all returnee talents in policy design. The strict zero COVID controls were also mentioned to have discouraged the willingness to stay, opening up new insights on the influence of disaster management planning of authorities which would affect talent retention.

### **5.3 How may the Shanghai municipal government modify its oversea returnee Chinese talent attraction and retention policies to better achieve its desired goals in future policy development practices?**

The recent policy change has received positive recognitions amongst the majority of returnees in relation to the practical impacts on talent attraction and retention. Nonetheless, the key themes identified in table 8 found that a series of improvements were needed to overcome current weaknesses and limitations across the policy design, implementation and monitoring processes. The need for higher levels of integration in policy design was identified as there exists minimal two-way exchanges between decision makers and the recipients of the designed policy, the feelings and feedbacks of returnees were not collected as they have minimal direct involvement across the policy design and implementation processes, conflicting with Cerna & Chou's (2019) recognition

of involvement of talents in policy design for effective talent management. The generic classification of returnee talents has failed to offer policy incentives for key specialised talent roles that are vital to innovation and economic development, failing to effectively attract the best talents through specifying skill shortage professions with designated incentives likewise to Australia's CSOL (CSC Global, 2022).

In order to increase talent retention rates, the need for flexibility in policy design is suggested by Harvey (2014) to continuously provide value added incentives over the long term. Similarly, the key theme of identifying the changing needs of returnees in the dynamic employment and social environment of Shanghai is commonly mentioned, regular feedbacks are needed to exchange new ideas/ concerns regarding the challenges for returnees to stay in Shanghai. Active engagement from governing bodies to communicate, gather feedback and anticipate new, changing needs of returnees is suggested, providing designated communication channels for returnees to interact and communicate with governing bodies regarding their experienced challenges and needs. The need for quick policy execution, monitoring and evaluation tools are suggested as the recent policy change has been criticised as a lengthy process, poorly implemented on the ground level and have limited interests from executed bodies, highlighting the importance of policy evaluation tools and monitoring instruments to ensure desired policy impacts are achieved as suggested by Schneider & Sydney (2009). In consideration of the identified themes for policy design improvements, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. To conduct monthly focus group interviews with returnees to gather their opinions and feedback on the impacts of policy change, identifying key concerns, interests and ideas for future policy modifications/ formulations.
2. To establish a panel consisted of returnee industry representatives and governing bodies to advice on the need for future policy reforms in accordance to changing market trends.
3. To design roles for returnee industry representatives in safeguarding the implementation of policy reforms.
4. To design a set of measurement protocols to evaluate the progress of future returnee specific policies, incorporating both short and long-term goals in the design of measurement parameters.
5. To establish clear accountability of all related governing bodies in future policies, creation of a designated channel for returnees to enquire, report concerns and communicate with the authorities.

## **6. Conclusion**

The recent policy change proposed by the Shanghai municipal government in 2021 was found to have increased the attraction and retention desires of returnees, a range of returnee friendly policies demonstrate enhanced push factors and reduced pull factors to motivate talent migration and retention. Increasing levels of government efforts to prioritise the employment and entrepreneurship opportunities of top returnee talents is evidential, especially in key innovation

and high-tech sectors where traditional barriers have been eliminated with supportive registration policies, availability of grants/ loans/ access to capital, platform of shared resources, rental subsidiaries and mentorship/ incubation programmes have transitioned Shanghai into a high-tech agglomerated region. The easing of employment and education barriers for the spouse and children of returnees have further motivated the desire to move and stay in Shanghai, accommodating the family needs of returnees on top of supporting their career/ personal development ambitions.

However, the design of returnee friendly policies lacks sufficient execution, implementation, monitoring and evaluation efforts from governing bodies, illustrating the need for greater involvements of returnees in the policy decision making, implementation and evaluation processes, ensuring the opinions of returnees are collected and taken into consideration for future policy modifications. Nonetheless, the case of Shanghai's recent policy change shows the active engagement of major cities to try and attract top returnee talents in the midst of the global talent war, as this study reinforced empirical academic knowledge and opened up new insights on what motivates the decision of talents to move and stay at another city, understanding how policies can be better designed and managed to increase returnee attraction and retention desires.

### **6.1 Limitations and implications for future studies**

The findings of this study were limited to the chosen case study of the recent 2021 policy change in Shanghai and offered limited generalisability for other returnee-oriented policy changes. As arguably the most internalisation city of China, the impacts of returnee-oriented policy changes may differ to other Chinese cities where lesser international employment opportunities and international lifestyles exist, highlighting the need for future studies to adopt a city specific focus when exploring the attraction and retention of returnees. Furthermore, given the duration of the policy change which is expected to continue until 31<sup>st</sup> January 2026, the findings of this study are limited to only the first 18 months upon the initial wave of policy changes, capturing only the short-term impacts which are subject to change over the course of the policy programme. Therefore, the findings of this study offer the foundation for future studies to explore the medium and long-term effects throughout the entire policy programme, calling for the need of future longitudinal studies to continuously measure the impacts and experience of returnees in Shanghai, gaining a more comprehensive understanding on returnee attraction and retention through policy design.

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