4. HAIGUI: A KEYWORD FOR 2003

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Doing a keyword search for haigui (海归) at sina.com.cn, there are 3,830 entries and if you do a related keyword search for haigui (海归) at yahoo.com.cn, you’ll find 3,844 entries.

Hai for ‘sea’ and gui for ‘return’, haigui is a new Chinese word combination that means a return to China from overseas. Specifically, it is a liuxingyu (pop term) that refers to the recent trend in which tens of thousands of Western-educated Chinese intellectuals return to China to contribute to the Motherland.

A brief history of haigui
In recent Chinese history, there have been three waves of haigui; the first in 1949 and 1950 when the New China was founded, the second in 1997 and early 2000 when the Internet craze swept through China and the third in late 2001 and the present. Haigui could be traced further back to the early 20th century when many famous writers went back to China after they completed their studies overseas, including Lu Xun (Japan), Guo Moruo (Japan), Hu Shi (the US), Lao Se (Britain), Qian Zhongshu (France) and others; the progenitors of the New Culture in China.

Of the 458,000 people who went overseas after the gaige kaifang (reform and open-up) policy introduced at the end
of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, 140,000 have
returned, with more than 30,000 in Beijing, 32,000 in
Shanghai, and the rest throughout the country, mainly
concentrated in the coastal cities such as Shenzhen, still one of
the first choices for many. Another source has it that, of all the
Chinese students overseas, 60 per cent have expressed their
wish to go back and fuwu (serve) the country.

In the Australian context, the haigui phenomenon began
in the mid-1990s when most of the post-Tiananmen Square
incident students secured their permanent residency in
Australia and went back (most of them males) in search of
wives or to bring back their families long living in separation.
As far as I know, this is only temporary for they came back to
Australia as soon as they achieved their purposes.

As a term, haigui is almost unknown in the Australian
Chinese community. It was only towards the end of last year
that I was made aware of it and lately I had the amusing
experience of observing a number of friends mystified by its
meaning when I mentioned it to them deliberately.

**Why haigui and who haigui?**

One of the main reasons for haigui cited by the China News Net
(Zhongguo Xinwenwang) is financial. In its own words, ‘There is
a great qianjing [prospect, also money prospect] for the haigui
wave after [China entered the] WTO,’ as more and more
Chinese students currently studying in the US ‘have gradually
changed their perception that they must somehow stay for
further development in the United States of America and they
now regard China as an employment market with an extremely
great potential’.

There is financial incentive galore. The Central
Government asserted that it would provide a kuaichedao (fast-
track) for talented people overseas and the core of the
Government policy was ‘supporting … study overseas, encouraging
a return to China and freedom of staying and leaving.’ In 2002, more than 20 delegations from eight provinces
and cities in China went overseas to recruit students.
Head-hunting for the best people, universities in Beijing, for example, offer prospective professors annual salaries in the range of 100,000 yuan (equivalent to $AUD16,000), 10 times more than a factory worker in China, plus free three-bedroom accommodation and a one-off settlement fee of 100,000 yuan and a scientific and technological research fee ranging from 100,000 to 500,000 yuan.¹³ According to one source, the famed Tsinghua University in Beijing offers one million yuan ($AUD160,000) to 28 scholars from abroad as guest professors for three to four months each year working in the Economic and Management School of the university.¹⁴

A living example in Melbourne is a friend of mine who has recently decided to leave Australia, having quit his secure job at IBM in favour of his new position as a general manager in Shanghai. Asked why he made this decision, he said, ‘I’m now in my mid-30s. It’s either now or never. Australia is basically meant for the old. Instead of getting stuck in a nine-to-five job for ever without much prospect, I have a better future in China. Plus there is much more fun in Shanghai, too’.

Among those who haigui, there are people who are temporary visitors to Australia and elsewhere in the West. Of many I have met, there is a similar perception as expressed above: Australia is too quiet for anything. If you visit the country as a tourist, it is fine because you get nice scenic spots, great sunshine and a clean environment, but you can’t rely just on those for a living. You need something more. These temporary visitors are not ordinary people; they are company executives, directors, university presidents, highly placed officers, publishers and senior editors, professors and senior engineers, who, unlike those in 1989, would not easily give up their current positions in China in favour of the so-called ‘freedom’ in Australia and the West. In fact, many of them have negative views about, say, America. I met a senior official from the Ministry of Finance in 1999 at a dinner at which he told me of the impressions the US left on him: ‘America is a backward country. We shall beat them in 10 or 20 years’. It is a view shared by many intellectuals in China. And they often dismiss
Australia as a country whose only advantages are clean air, blue sky and little else.

It is not just business people who *haigui*. Writers do, too. In a recent interview with a mainland-based writer, it is revealed that writers have flocked back, such as Hong Ying (Britain), Yan Geling (US), Liu Suola, Zhang Xinxin, Xu Xing, Ya Ding (France) and Leslie Zhao (Australia),\(^{15}\) including even those who were dissidents in the past, such as poets Huang Xiang (based in the US), who wished to go back, and Bei Dao (US), who recently went back. In the words of the well-known Chinese dissident, editor of online magazine *China Monthly*, Su Xiaokang, he is unable to ‘adapt to the West’ and he admits that, for him, China is still ‘the source of power and artistic inspiration’.\(^{16}\)

Wang Gan, editor of an anthology entitled *A Collection of Haigui Women Writers*, said that, in their writings, they express collisions and conflicts between Eastern and Western cultures and a more genuine consciousness of *bentu*,\(^{17}\) and do not just one-sidedly try to *jiegu*\(^{18}\) with, draw themselves close to and identify with the Western cultures.\(^{19}\) Hong Ying put it more directly, ‘China is my motherland and it is not possible not to return [to her]. There are no people who do not want to return. Temporarily living abroad is only possible because of [their] fate’.\(^{20}\)

Another living example is Tang Yuanfeng, who was working in a big company in London but found it hard to be accepted because of cultural differences. At lunch-time, when everyone produced their sandwiches, he took out his lunchbox containing instant noodles, to the amazement of all his English colleagues, who made fun of him. Tang said he had got used to the Western way of working before he went to Britain but he could not possibly change his ‘Chinese stomach’.\(^{21}\) Cheng Jieping decided to return to China after he received his Master’s degree in Law at Cambridge because he realised he would never be accepted as a Chinese by the right-leaning middle class, represented by lawyers and the like\(^{22}\) in London.

However, when I told my general manager friend mentioned before of this story, he said it was not true here in
Australia. Where he worked, he drank tea while his colleagues drank coffee, both cultures coexisting without any problems. The problem, though, is his perception that the senior management is all controlled by yingguoren (the English people), with junior positions held by Greeks and Italians, and his realisation that as a Chinese he is never going to get beyond 'the granite ceiling'.

It would be interesting to speculate whether they have been pushed back by the West or pulled back by China, or both, although being pushed back is certainly a strong feeling I got back in 1996 as I told an interviewer from the Sydney Morning Herald and, now, I feel only unwanted by either as I age beyond my use-by date. And it would also be interesting to speculate about what loss this would bring to the Western countries where these haiguipai were educated and, as far as I know, the sharpest criticisms of the West often come from the haiguipai because they are acquainted with the dark aspects of the societies they were temporarily tied to before they severed that connection, again temporarily.

**Ban haigui**

Ban in Chinese means ‘half’ and ban haigui, my own coinage, means half haigui. In a sense, most of these haiguipai are ban haigui, such as Hong Ying, who spends six months of each year in Beijing and six in London. There is an issue of duality involved, which is that most of these haiguipai have one thing in common: they are citizens of other countries. Hong Ying holds a British passport and Leslie Zhao holds an Australian passport, which is very important, as a friend of mine said: ‘Once there’s something wrong politics-wise in China, I can exit any time I want to because I enjoy immunity as a foreign citizen’. Another friend of mine, a professor now based at Shenzhen University, decided to go back to China only after he secured his Australian permanent residency, a common practice these days.

Business people tend to be ban haigui as it gives them the opportunity to move between countries and cultures. It’s an age-old practice by Hong Kongese and Taiwanese business people, who leave their wives and children in Australia and
elsewhere to zuo yiminjian (sit through a migrant’s prison) while they make their money at home, occasionally visiting their families overseas. These days, the practice has passed on to the mainlanders with more and more rich people sending their children to private schools in Australia and other countries, among whom were some corrupt officials who laundered their money this way.

The ban haigui is also shown in the choice of locations. Many opt to go to Hong Kong instead of mainland China for its relative political freedom and lucrative remunerations. In 2002, I went to the Hong Kong International Literary Festival and met a number of Chinese double-exiles who had moved from Melbourne and other cities in Australia and were working in private schools in Hong Kong. One of the main reasons cited for this was a much better annual salary, equivalent to $A180,000 with a lower tax rate (about 13 per cent)!

This ban haigui phenomenon reflects a deep distrust among them of the potential instability of the Chinese political system and a psychological split with the West where they can’t live very comfortably as intellectuals. As Hong Ying put it, she lives a ‘solitary hermit’s life [in London] and, apart from what I have to do to promote my books in association with my publishers in the States and Europe, I refuse to see anyone and I only stay with my family and a few very close friends’. She summed it all up by saying, ‘In my opinion, world culture is in a state of confrontation. Both my Ananda and K are about conflicts between Chinese and Western cultures and the difficulty to adjust. Even between lovers, communications are hard’.27

With Hong Kong’s return in 1997 to mainland China as a symbol, the haigui trend can best be described as part of a centripetal force represented by the colour yellow, succinctly summarised in a song by the Hong Kong pop singer, Luo Dayou, who said, ‘Don’t ever forget my face that will never change its yellow colour’.28 In this pull towards the Motherland, even those still based overseas are dubbed haiguipai writers, such as Zhang Ling, a Canada-based woman writer, and Yan Geling,
because they write in Chinese and have their work published on the mainland and in other parts of the Chinese-speaking world. This spiritual *haigui*, in my opinion, is also *ban haigui*. By extension, nearly all the Chinese writers who migrated overseas in the past decade belong to this category, including Ha Jin (US), Qiu Xiaolong (US), An Chee Min (US), Shan Sa (France) and Cheng Baoyi (France), perhaps with the exception of Gao Xingjian, the Nobel Prize winner, who vehemently denied any connection with China by saying he has ‘nothing to do with that country at all’.\(^3\) I say this because their work represents a spiritual return to the Motherland in their use of Chinese resources and their overwhelming concern for things Chinese, although I critique them as cultural cooks catering to the Western taste.\(^3\)

*Ban haigui* can be a positive thing, as shown by some artists from Australia, such as Julian Yu, the Australian-Chinese composer who recently toured China with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra showcasing his musical compositions; Du Jigang, the Melbourne-based Australian-Chinese opera singer, who sings in China and Australia; as well as artist Guan Wei, who is going to exhibit in China late this year. Their links between the East and the West can only be enriching to both.

Writers and artists apart, other intellectuals I know in Australia also belong to this category of *ban haigui* in that they are culturally connected to China through television or the Internet and are kept apart from where they live. In the celebration of the Year of the Sheep, I noticed that many spent the Chinese New Year's Eve watching the *Big Show* on television received from the satellite dish, although my subscription to Foxtel gave me no access to it. With instant access to things Chinese on TV, they seem to be living in an enclave: China inside and Australia outside as soon as the door is closed behind them.

Perhaps the most symbolic act of *ban haigui*, a process of severing and connecting, was done by artist Sheng Qi, now based in Beijing, when he cut off his little finger and buried it in a flowerpot in Beijing before leaving for Rome and London.
more than a decade ago. He said, ‘The process of severing a part of my hand will stay with me through my whole life’, because, as one critic says, ‘although his body drifted abroad, a part of him, his soul, was still deeply rooted in China’.

**Bu haigui**

Bu is ‘no’ and *bu haigui* means refusing to return to China. In my recently published novel, *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*, characters are stuck in a state of betweenness, some trying to *haigui* and failing, others altogether *bu haigui*. Interestingly, one group of people who *bu haigui* is children of the *haiguipai*, born and brought up overseas but having to follow their *haiguipai* parents back to China reluctantly, as they find it harder to adapt to the Chinese situation. Used to the Western laissez-faire educational system, many children find the Chinese one harsh and inhumane. For example, they are not allowed to move their hands and legs freely in class, are given too much homework to do, are frightened by their teachers’ scolding of other classmates, are criticised for being unable to speak fluent Chinese, are not allowed to run around on the school lawn as it is expensive to maintain the grass, and they do not have Chinese children for friends because of cultural differences. They end up living an isolated life at home, keeping contact with their friends back in the US or Canada and wanting to go back. As a result, some parents have to return to their adopted countries and others are prevented from *haigui* by their children who strongly object to their return.

One 10-year-old said to his parents, ‘You two can go back but I won’t. I can live here by myself and I can heat my rice with the microwave.’ Another boy said, ‘Dad, as long as I don’t have to go back to China, I shall study hard here and listen to you, including learning Chinese and playing piano [as he hates these last two].’

And, of course, there are others who cannot go back to China or will not go no matter what and this does not get reported because it is the dark side of the moon. Not long ago, I met some erstwhile political dissidents who came before and
after the Tiananmen incident. They, I might say, are still sort of ban haigui because they are dealing in business related to China although their applications for visas were constantly rejected by the consulate in Melbourne because their names were on the black list. For the foreseeable future, they will not be able to get out of this limbo, condemned to living a life of dualities.

A recent party at a friend's house in Melbourne reminded me of another reality I had almost forgotten. My friend came to Australia about 15 years ago but when I asked whether he had gone back to China, he said no. Why? He said there was no need as all his family members had gone overseas. He then insinuated that the services in China were not up to standard. I recalled, belatedly, that I had met a number of people like him who claimed that there was no urge for them to go back at all and I happened to know that most of these people were not doing very well, some were on Centrelink payments and others were suffering from work-related injuries, their stories not documented either in Australia or in China. Even those who went back in the mid-1990s came back to Australia without much success, their relationships broken down. Large numbers of cases involving domestic violence and divorce in 1996 and 1997 in Melbourne, for example, attest to this new crisis.

End of the story
Recently, I have watched a number of television dramas made in China and noticed one intriguing phenomenon. In most of them, related to corruption and drug-smuggling or business adventures, Chinese mainlanders and haiguipai play good guys and bad guys but the haiguipai are invariably portrayed as bad guys, such as the drug-producer, Cong Ke, who returns from his studies in Japan in shenghuoxiu (Life Show), and Yang Chun, the murderer from America in heibing (Black Ice). I suspect that is a subtle refraction of a hidden resentment and jealousy towards the haiguipai, who, among ordinary people in China, seem to have it both ways: enjoying a safe exit overseas and reaping the benefits of the recent economic boom and government favouritism. As one commentator says, against the
haiguipai, there is also a bentupai (native group) or even tubie, who are given only half the benefits to enjoy, and are thus unfairly treated. Another points out that some haiguipai return to China because they have to as they are not quite successful overseas and then the halo around their head disappears after a while when they fall far short of expectations. Some even blame the haiguipai for causing the Internet melt-down and the plunge in the stockmarket, calling them haigui (sea turtles), a homonym for haigu.

But, of course, there is another group of people who are currently streaming out of China into private schools in Australia and other countries, supported by their rich or nouveau riche parents, but that will be a topic for a separate paper.

In any case, haigu as a keyword for 2003 is inevitable as China has entered into the 21st century and the WTO, becoming stronger each year, economically if not politically. In fact, control of the Internet in China reached its peak on 15 January, 2003, when all the poetry web sites (108 of them) were shut down because of the discovery of Falungong-related news posted online. One Chinese source based in the US quoted the New York Times as saying that China had ‘the worst Internet censorship in the world’. It would be interesting to see whether these haiguipai attracted by the economic freedom in China will continue to stay despite the political non-freedom.

On my recent visit to San Francisco, I met a Chinese grocery store owner in Chinatown. I asked him where I could find an Internet café, having failed to find any there. He said he did not know as he was too busy minding his shop, working more than 12 hours a day. Then he said to me, obviously taking me for a mainlander, ‘America is no good. When you go back, tell them not to come to America.’

‘But why did you come? And why did you not return?’ I said.

‘I’d very much love to return but my children are too small’, the man said.
Footnotes

1 Sun Quan. The Third Wave of Chinese Return: ‘China has truly changed!’ See http://community.tigtag.com/community/overseas/12503_7_6.html《第一次海外华人回归潮“中国真的变了!”》(Please note that all the titles in English of the Chinese articles throughout the footnotes and quotations in the main text are Ouyang’s translations.)


3 Haigui in China has reached 140,000. http://www.ccw.com.cn/htm/work/News/02_8_15_5.asp《中国“海归”达14万 创办企业近4千家》


9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.


12 Haigui in China has reached 140,000. http://tech.sh.sina.com.cn/it/m/2002-08-14/1658132340.shtml《北京高校争聘“海归”教授》

13 Universities in Beijing are vying with each other to engage haigui professors. 31 December, 2002. http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/EDU-c/254980.htm《北京高校争聘“海归”教授》


15 See Wang Gan, Winning Men’s Eyeballs: Why Do Women Write?

In Chinese, *bentu*, literally ‘this land’, means one’s native country. — Ouyang’s note.


See Hong Ying at http://learning.sohu.com/46/77/article200847746.shtml


Ibid., p.32.

Ibid., p.32.


One source says that Australia tops the list as the most favoured place for studies for people in Shanghai, followed by New Zealand and Britain. Investigative report issued on the status of overseas studies from China. p.55. *The Australian Chinese Age*, 31 January, 2003.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Xiaohaigui haipa guonei laoshi (Small haigui are frightened of teachers in China). 22 August, 2002. The web address for this article, “小海归”害怕国内老师, is no longer in existence, suggesting the article has been removed from the Internet.

Embarrassing situation encountered by haigupai children. The web address for this article, 海归子女教育遭遇尴尬, is no longer in existence, suggesting the article has been removed from the Internet.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

See http://news.xinhuanet.com/ent/2002-10/18/content_601046.htm, based on the novel by Chi Li bearing the same title.

See http://www.ahtv.com.cn/gb/content/2001-10/29/content_12305.htm

Tubie, earth turtles or freshwater turtles, a pejorative term for China-educated intellectuals as opposed to the foreign-educated haigui, sea turtles. Successful haigui people give a piece of their minds. 17 January, 2003. The web address for this article, 成功海龟人士谈心得, is no longer in existence, suggesting the article has been removed from the Internet.

Hui Feng. Let haiguipai and bentuipai go to hell. The web address for this article, 让海归派本土派见鬼去吧, is no longer in existence, suggesting the article has been removed from the Internet.

Qiu Wei. Let haigui disappear. D:\My Document\Other People's Writing\让“海归”消失.htm

Wei Cheng. Seeing through China: talking about the ups and downs of haigupai. The web address for this article, 透视中国：海归派沉浮谈, is no longer in existence, suggesting the article has been removed from the Internet.
