

The War for Chinese Talent in America: The Politics of Technology and Knowledge in Sino-U.S. Relations, by David Zweig. 200 pp. Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, 2024. US\$26.00/£22.00 (paper, e-book).

David Zweig has spent more than thirty years documenting China's talent mobility, beginning with his landmark 1990s survey of PRC students in the United States and exemplified in the influential monograph *Internationalizing China: Domestic Interests and Global Linkages* (Cornell University Press, 2002). He established the now-standard interpretation of returnees as a critical human-capital investment that helped to power China's rise. His new book, *The War for Chinese Talent in America*, is the most recent addition to that scholarship and a sharp pivot: Zweig shows how what once looked like an apolitical development has morphed

into a high-stakes arena of great-power competition, overshadowed by national-security anxieties and escalating US-China geopolitical tensions.

The book's core argument centers on what Zweig calls China's "Diaspora Option"—a state-led effort since the mid-1990s to mobilize Chinese nationals and ethnic Chinese scientists living abroad to contribute to China's technological and economic development. At the heart of this strategy are talent recruitment programs such as the Thousand Talents Plan, which incentivized highly trained overseas professionals to return—or at least collaborate from afar. While these programs were initially celebrated as part of China's modernization project, they quickly drew criticism from the US government, particularly under the Trump administration.

In the book's opening chapters Zweig reconstructs the early policy debates within the Chinese Communist Party, showing how Party leaders came to view reversing China's long-standing issues of brain drain as the most cost-effective way to leapfrog technological bottlenecks. Beijing has developed various talent recruitment program since then. Yet by the late 2010s, Washington's strategic lens had flipped: recruitment incentives that once seemed like ordinary tools for China's economic modernization were reinterpreted as conduits for espionage and intellectual-property theft, culminating in Washington's China Initiative—the counterespionage program of the US Department of Justice.

The six case studies presented in the book are meticulously selected and offer an unprecedented inside look into the human and political complexities of the China Initiative. What sets the book apart is not only the empirical depth of each case but also the unique perspective Zweig brings to it. As an expert witness in some of the legal proceedings, Zweig had access to private documents, testimonies, and defense narratives that are rarely available to scholars or the public. This vantage point enables him to move beyond surface-level commentary and to deliver analytically rich portraits of individual scientists caught in the crosshairs of geopolitical tension. Zweig categorizes these cases into three groups: those clearly guilty of wrongdoing, those not-so-guilty who may have committed administrative lapses or minor disclosure errors, and those who are entirely innocent yet unjustly accused and professionally damaged. This tripartite framing not only underscores the range of motivations and outcomes across cases but also resists the temptation to homogenize Chinese scientists as either victims or villains—reinforcing the book's commitment to analytical rigor and ethical nuance.

One of the most commendable aspects of the book is the author's balanced and clear-eyed treatment of a highly politicized and emotionally charged topic. David Zweig refrains from taking a simplistic or one-sided stance. Instead, he thoughtfully critiques both the lack of transparency on the Chinese side—especially in the operation of talent recruitment programs like the Thousand Talents Plan—and the racial profiling embedded in the US Justice Department's China Initiative, documenting how ethnic Chinese academics—US citizens included—were

disproportionately targeted. The result is a sober diagnosis of a policy spiral in which mistrust begets securitization, which in turn corrodes the very openness that underpins scientific progress.

Zweig argues convincingly that scientific collaboration and national security are not mutually exclusive but require careful calibration and institutional safeguards. In this regard, *The War for Chinese Talent in America* is not simply a work that critiques but also a call for more nuanced policymaking—one that acknowledges the legitimate security concerns of the United States while safeguarding the openness and inclusiveness that have long underpinned the American research enterprise. This even-handed approach allows Zweig to inject much-needed nuance into a debate often flattened by political rhetoric and national security concerns. By acknowledging the structural opacity of Chinese science policy while simultaneously exposing the US government's prosecutorial overreach, Zweig offers readers a more complete and intellectually honest account of the complex dynamics shaping transnational knowledge flows and talent mobility under securitization.

The book's brevity is both a virtue and a limitation. Readers looking for sector-specific variation—say, how collaborations in the life sciences differ from semiconductor research—will find the book's brevity unsatisfying. Likewise, while Zweig calls for balance between openness and security, the mechanisms he proposes (e.g., standardized disclosure templates) receive less space than they merit.

In sum, *The War for Chinese Talent in America* is essential reading for anyone trying to understand how cross-border talent flows sit close to the heart of US-China strategic rivalry. Zweig provides not only a sober diagnosis and geopolitical analysis but also an intimate portrait of scientists whose careers—and lives—have become collateral damage.

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