

The Thousand Talents plan also includes a popular short-term option for scientists who are reluctant to sever ties with the West altogether. The awardees who select this route keep their overseas academic jobs and obligations while working up to three months per year — usually during the summer break — at a Chinese host institute.

Those moving back should consider the scientific opportunities and family-friendly provisions of, for example, the Thousand Talents plan, which often includes premium medical service, free insurance and eligibility to purchase property at discount rates. But they should also be aware that a successful application is no guarantee of a permanent job in science. The tenure track to a permanent academic position — so familiar in the United States — is widely absent in China. In the past, says Chen, pretty much anyone who obtained a PhD could look forward to a job for life. But leading universities in Beijing and Shanghai have begun to evaluate junior faculty members' performance after five years and to make promotions to permanent positions on the basis of those evaluations.

The Chinese government — always struggling to reconcile communist ideals with the transition to a market economy — is aware of the grumbling within its



"I do tell my students that it's a good time to do science in China — but I also tell them about the downsides."

Gong Chen

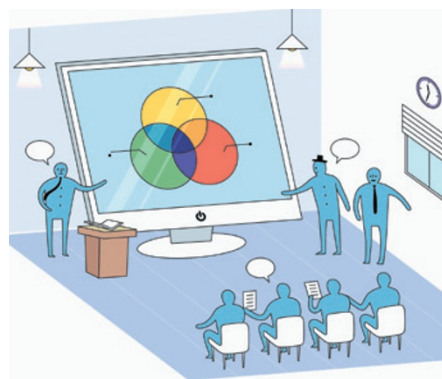
academic institutions. But the Communist Party has made it clear that bringing back the best is crucial to the nation's economic development. During his 2007–12 term as head of the Communist Party's organization department, Li Yuanchao stressed that bringing back expatriates was a "strategic investment". Critics say, however, that if China really wants to bring back the best, it must overhaul its science culture and its academic institutions to embrace democratic pluralism and improve transparency. The idea is that more returnees from the West would not just help the development of Chinese science, but that of society as well. "The inflow of young science talent from abroad," says Chen, "will help shape our nation." ■

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COLUMN

A powerful narrative

Scientists should find engaging ways to present information to their target audience, says **Yoshimi Rii**.



Last summer, I took part in an unfortunate episode on the first day of a teacher workshop. Along with three other scientists, I gave talks to schoolteachers on the use of real-time scientific data in the classroom. Because we didn't want to talk down to our audience, we kept to the standard scientific format for our presentations, with minor adjustments to specific jargon. As the day went on, however, it became apparent that we had missed the mark.

"Why do scientists' presentations all look the same?" said a teacher to me during the break. "It's like you guys all get the same template." Her words struck me like a 10-tonne anvil. She was right. Where was the creativity?

Most of us at one time will have attended a talk about what should have been an engaging topic, only to find ourselves being lulled to sleep. Most likely, the speaker was using PowerPoint or Keynote. There are better approaches.

MAKING THE DISCONNECTION

The user-friendly nature of software such as PowerPoint allows anyone to make a presentation without much thought. Type in a few talking points, throw in some pictures and voilà! Here's my cookie-cutter talk. Never mind that there's too much information on some slides — they're bulleted, so they must be easy to understand! The plot makes five or six points, but hey, it's colourful and impressive, so that's OK, right? And let's not worry about those bumpy transitions, never mind the lack of a coherent narrative.

Reliance on bullet points and complicated graphs has caused many to become lax at applying important performance skills. Disconnected from the public, scientists often forget to explain what to them is everyday lingo. Last September,

at a press conference at the University of Hawaii in Manoa for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Working Group I Report, scientists showed modelled rises in sea level from now until 2100. I watched the eyes of the reporters roll backwards in their sockets.

Because slides are easy to recycle from one presentation to another, researchers often give a talk on autopilot using slides that they've shown hundreds of times before. If the presenter is disengaged, how can they expect the audience to listen?

BREAKING BAD

On the second day of the teacher workshop, we decided to scrap our prepared talks and start afresh. I placed a quote from *Moby Dick* in the title box and was rewarded with a smile from an English teacher in the audience. I then tossed a microbe-shaped stuffed toy to a teacher in the front row to open up a discussion about bacteria and phytoplankton. We asked them how they wanted to illustrate these concepts to their students. For the remainder of the workshop, the talks became less structured, more interactive and better appreciated. I vowed never to rely on cookie-cutter presentations again.

Last October, I found myself at a foundation symposium with an audience of retired doctors, professors and other distinguished society members who had made donations in support of research at the university. I sat next to one donor, a 90-year-old veteran who was part of the highly decorated 442nd Regimental Combat Team in the Second World War. As part of the symposium, senior scientists and I were invited to give talks on exciting research being conducted at our university. I was nervous.

But I found myself breathing a sigh of relief. In the first talk, a scientist studying the history of calendars opened up a star-studded umbrella. Another scientist presented a beautiful slide show of mushroom pictures and riveted the audience with accounts of his hunts in unusual places. At the end of the symposium, the veteran next to me grabbed my hands and said, "I feel great knowing that my money has made all of this possible. Thank you." We relayed our message that day, and without the aid of a single graph. ■

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