



# What Diaspora Executives Learned When They Returned Home

*By Antoine Tirard and Claire Lyell*

**T**he tide of brain drain from developing to developed nations has turned as a growing number of highly skilled Indians, Chinese, Brazilians or Nigerians flock back to their countries after a long time away. They left, either as children with their émigré parents, or for study and early career opportunities. They return, in search of identity, of bigger opportunities, to look after ageing parents, to seek their roots, or a combination of these. The countries they leave are certainly the losers in this transaction as

these are typically the very brightest and best.

In this article, we wanted to see what happens when these individuals hit the ground “back home”. What are the challenges? What are the chances of success and of staying in this new “home”? Has the period away been of value in making them successful on home terrain? Is it worth the upheaval? Is more value created in the global scheme of things? Our subjects have experienced a variety of situations and reactions, displaying a great complexity of context. Through their stories, we hope to find some

wisdom and advice for those contemplating this sort of journey towards repatriation, and for anyone who is considering employing a re-pat.

Perhaps our most classic case is that of Marta, who is the Founder and CEO of Wasi Organics, in Peru. She left her home country for study in Spain as a high-school graduate, and went on to increasingly senior marketing roles in consumer driven companies, including L'Oréal, American Express and Burger King, across Europe and the USA. She took a year in the middle of this 20 year expatriate stint to do an MBA at INSEAD, which further broadened her already very global outlook. Having initially left Peru because of the glass ceiling, ironically Marta found herself working for a couple of years in Saudi Arabia where she had to conform to local customs and dress and behave as was expected of a woman in that environment. While she enjoyed the challenge, she realized that she didn't fit. As she did increasing amounts of travel, and she found herself married with two small babies, her tolerance for the busy executive lifestyle dwindled.

### Putting the Puzzle Together

The trigger for Marta contemplating a return to Peru was when a headhunter in London invited her to lunch, offering her the chance to take a CEO position. While she was tempted by this particular opportunity, she was intrigued that she was now perceived as a potential CEO, and she started to think hard about what she really wanted to do. It was not long until she concluded that she wanted her own business and to give back in some way to her own country. This was Marta's twentieth year in Europe and at that point, eight years ago, she returned home.

She had expected the transition to be difficult, but in fact she was "completely lost". For three years she decided to go with the flow and not attempt big professional activities, as getting used to being back was "just too much". The three biggest challenges, as she describes them, were "Getting a satisfying job" (never happened), "Engaging the kids and settling them" (achieved, but easier for one than the other) and "Getting a social life" (not as easy as



Name  
**Marta**

Time Lived Abroad  
**20 years**

Lived In  
**Spain, United Kingdom**

Came Back To | Since  
**Peru | 2008**

Current Job  
**CEO, Wasi Organics**

expected). It took a while, but eventually Marta was able to put the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle together and create her own "not just for profit" company. Her giving back consists of working with small farmers to create excellent organic food products, taking advantage of the huge biodiversity and purity of the environment in Peru.

She realised that, despite 20 years' experience, a little startup is not so easy to make work in this country. She had to fine-tune her skills to a level she could not have imagined and, coming from abroad, it was a big stretch culturally. She hints at the bureaucracy and highlights the difficulty of dealing with people who say yes but don't do it. Another huge struggle has been the perception that her employees and collaborators have of her direct, no-nonsense and demanding personality. While this worked wonders in her former companies, she believes it is only because she has a much "softer" business partner that they are still in business. Of course Marta adapted her style somewhat, once she realised the problem, and has found ways to soften her approach, without compromising her grit and resilience.

While she is currently focusing on meeting milestones with her investors, Marta is open to more social entrepreneur opportunities and plans to seek a lifestyle between Peru and Europe. Her children's study and future life is more likely to be in that continent, so she plans to build her professional life to straddle the

geography.

Her advice to those contemplating a return to Peru is to practice yoga and meditation! She recommends to enjoy the best things in life and to see the glass as half-full. She emphasises that trying to change everything does not work and there is a huge grey area between imposing and giving up.

In a different part of the world, in the Philippines, lives another type of expat. Ferdinand is of Filipino ethnicity but was actually born and raised in the US, his parents having immigrated during the 1950's. His big difference is that he was raised as an American, with his parents even refusing to teach him Tagalog, due to fears of racism and discrimination.

Ferdi's study and experience lead him into increasingly senior roles in training and off-shoring in large corporations. He became known as the Philippines expert, as his ability to empathise and understand the Filipinos is high, but he is, nevertheless, despite appearances, a foreigner. When dealing with Western clients or colleagues he struggles to convince them that things are so different and difficult, in this island nation, where most people speak disarmingly fluent English, despite having attitudes and behaviours that are profoundly Asian. Passion frequently outweighs reason and this causes much consternation.

### Yellow Outside, White Inside

The main struggle comes from the fact that Ferdi looks like a Filipino, but he is not treated as one by his employees. He has now been in the country for several years, building an ambitious company, Doctourz, which aims to offer greater choice in medical services. Despite his role as beneficent employer, and as a talented connector of people with opportunities, he is stuck with staff who will not treat him with the disproportionate “on a pedestal” respect afforded to white expats, but also refuse to communicate with him as a fellow countryman. He solves this by persevering in his work, and surrounding himself by a small but faithful “tribe” of like-minded re-pats and others. They can rejoice and commiserate on their lives as

Name  
**Ferdinand**

Time Lived Abroad  
**40 years**

Lived In  
**United States**

Came Back To | Since  
**Philippines | 2007**

Current Job  
**Co-Founder, DOCTOURZ**

“bananas”, as they are affectionately known (yellow on the outside, but white on the inside!)

Ferdi believes that working in the Philippines is definitely still an opportunity, both financially and operationally, but admits it is huge a daily struggle. However, he says while it is difficult it is something he knows how to manage, and this makes it all “worth it”.

Does he see a future in the Philippines? Next year he is marrying his Filipino sweetheart, and this may attach him further to the country. He is also aware that most Filipinos, and he seems to count himself among them, have a soft spot for their homeland, and a deep attachment that means many of them return for the latter part of their lives, even if they have spent decades away working overseas. With his own company growing, and his established status as CEO, his struggle is diminishing, and the fruits of his labor are ripening. He is gradually being eased up onto the pedestal, and things are getting easier daily. This looks like a successful integration, though it has been neither swift nor simple.

While Ferdi has been back in the Philippines for almost 10 years in total, our next subject, Bambina, has only been back there for a few months. This Filipina-Spanish mestiza had spent a total of 30 years away from the Philippines, in many locations across Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Much of this time was spent pursuing a career in the

luxury goods industry and public relations. Her studies of journalism and art history have served her well, as had her remarkably international childhood, full of visits to her home from diplomats, journalists and other dignitaries from all over the world. Although she had not travelled overseas much as a child, her first choice for university was the US, where she had gained places in prestigious colleges and universities. However, conservatively, her parents refused to let her take these up, as she was only sixteen years old at the time, and they felt it was too far for her to go alone. Unperturbed, Bambina chose to go to study in Paris, after her Bachelor's degree, and thus started a period of several years of study and work in Europe and then Hong Kong, mostly in the luxury goods industry, most notably as head of business development of the jewellery business of Chanel HK.

### Resiliency and Grit

For the many years when she “followed” her expatriate (now ex-) husband, Bambina used her resourcefulness as well as her talent to garner all kinds of interesting writing and project work. After a protracted divorce, Bambina found herself stranded in South Africa, with no official right to work, but needing to support her children and her new solo lifestyle. This was a challenge she rose to, ensuring a constant flow of freelance journalistic and media consulting projects.

As her girls grew up, she began to consider where should be the next move. While she might have been very happy to go and live and work in Spain, she decided that the economy in Europe was not buoyant enough, and chose to return to her home country. This has not been an easy transition, despite appearances. Bambina states that she is grateful for the fact that the Philippines is one of the rare cultures that rewards and values resiliency and grit, so that seems to go strongly in her favour.

Slipping back into comfortable childhood friendships has been superficially easy, but it has been harder to feel “aligned” with those same people, however welcoming they are. Little by little she is finding the right level

Name  
**Bambina**

Time Lived Abroad  
**30 years**

Lived In  
**France, Hong Kong, South Africa, Jordan, Guam, Mauritius, UK**

Came Back To | Since  
**Philippines | 2015**

Current Job  
**Investment and Events Director, Manila House Private Members Club, Freelance columnist and media consultant**

socially, feeling thankful that she comes from a certain class that allows her to move in a fluid way among all kinds of influential and interesting people.

While there was a significant professional project from the very beginning of her return to the Philippines, Bambina has juggled freelance work with more long-term work, and spent a brief but professionally significant and happy period until recently, working as the head of communications for the APEC Business Advisory Council during the Philippines' chairmanship of APEC. She also held the role of lifestyle editor of one of the Philippines' major newspapers until very recently, having left due to professional differences. This break is no doubt emblematic of the tensions of a return, the culture clashes inevitably rearing up, and a sign that Bambina will not have an easy path to professional security. It is heartening to see her fighting to build a life that is in line with local conditions, but on her own terms. This is surely the challenge of any returner. And one which is long in the making.

Another recent returner is Yang, who has only been back in his native China since the Spring of this year. He is still definitely in the “honeymoon” of his return, wide-eyed at the noisy market in his street, where he can “buy breakfast of any kind whenever he wants”, and

geographically challenged in the mega-city that is Shanghai.

Nothing indicated that Yang would have a taste for travel and exploration. His parents were both in the Chinese military, and forbidden to travel at all, thus it was surprising that he chose to study English at university – less so when one discovers that he chose the subject he found most difficult, as a special challenge to himself.

Name  
**Yang**

Time Lived Abroad  
**14 years**

Lived In  
**United Kingdom**

Came Back To | Since  
**China | 2016**

Current Job  
**Partner, Managing Director,  
Yaozhi Asset Management**

During university, he did an internship in a significant local consulting company and noticed that "everyone in the glass offices around me had either a pretty decent education or else 20 years' experience in the industry". He decided to fund education. On graduation his father gave him a gift of thirty thousand dollars, and despite the lure of Beijing real estate, he decided to spend it on British education.

Yang was welcomed kindly in St Andrews, but struggled with all kinds of cultural challenges. He went to the pub for the first time, and, not knowing how or what to order, he copied his friend and ordered a G&T! Through sheer inexperience he continued to order the same thing for months. Stumbling from one cultural gap to another, Yang made huge progress and performed well academically, even embarking on a PhD, though that was later to prove materially impossible to complete.

### Novelty and Unfamiliarity All Around

Early years of work were in companies that were able to exploit his foreign status. He grabbed every opportunity possible and finally started being able to approach headhunters, which coincided with a trend for offering "diverse" candidates. For once, Yang's "foreignness" was a plus! This led him to an opportune graduate role at Reuters and from here on his upward mobility was unstoppable.

As the only Chinese in Reuters Europe, and, following a chance conversation with a friend, Yang started to specialise in Renminbi, exploring ways of supporting banks in facilitating cross-border deals. His high intellect and curiosity, coupled with his abilities in networking, meeting and questioning the right people, allowed him to advance, even collaborating and signing agreements with significant ministers and decision-makers in both China and Europe. His proudest moment was being quoted by Bloomberg, while working at Reuters.

Yang could have endlessly pursued his role in the UK, as a rainmaker, a star at Reuters, and advisor to a prestigious Cambridge foundation. But a few months ago, some Chinese friends asked him to join them back in Shanghai, and Yang became a partner in Yaozhi Asset Management Co., an investment fund. Novelty and unfamiliarity is all around, but Yang's thirst for learning and knowledge is helping him once again. He even asked his new partners for an assistant to help him to navigate both physically and practically around his new city. He talks more like a new ex-pat, than a native of this country.

Not content with changing sector, status and country, Yang never rests, and has even begun studying the cello. He does not know yet whether he will stay in China definitively, but he does understand that, for now, he is going to need to work incredibly hard in order to fit into the Chinese working culture. He suggested, a few weeks back, that he might take a break in order to go and deliver some lectures at the Cambridge foundation, and was told that it would not be appropriate for him to take a break at this point. Yang accepted this

## Four Key Challenges to Expect When Landing Back Home

- 1. Underestimating the Need to Readjust.**  
Don't assume "I'm just going back and I know the ropes here". It will not necessarily be a swift and smooth reintegration. Novelty and unfamiliarity will be all around and you may initially feel like a stranger in a strange land.
- 2. Experiencing Frustrations in Daily Life.**  
Lack of predictability in daily life events is omnipresent. Things can take longer than you expect and cost more than you budget for. Depending where you are landing, you may experience heavy traffic, bureaucracy, or even power cuts.
- 3. Getting a Social Life.**  
It won't be as easy as expected. Reconnecting with your childhood friends can be superficially simple but it will be harder to feel fully aligned with those same people who may not relate to your other life experiences overseas.
- 4. Gaining Professional Acceptance.**  
The knowledge, skills and style you have acquired overseas won't automatically apply or be effective in your new work environment. In Asia, staff and co-workers may label you as 'banana' (yellow on the outside, white on the inside) and refuse to treat you as a fellow countryman-woman.

contrasting attitude, despite its clash.

What he would recommend to those considering a return to a home country or indeed to China? He answers that people should ask themselves the following questions: Are you motivated? Are you flexible enough to adapt back to this extraordinary culture? And do you have friends who are aligned with your thoughts feelings and experience? If so, then go ahead and live a great adventure. Yang is still in the early stages of his adventure, but it would seem that he is going to make a success of his repatriation, however hard that might be.

Finally, we look at Ike, a serial entrepreneur and seller of highly successful businesses. He was born in Nigeria into a diplomatic family, and spent his nomadic childhood building his very first companies – selling popcorn to his friends at movie nights in Zimbabwe, and cold drinks to the inhabitants of his residential towers in Nigeria. This beginning clearly predisposed him to a lifestyle of travel beyond the national borders and with entrepreneurship featuring strongly. Of our five subjects, Ike has been back home for the longest time. He seems the most settled and, on reflexion, enthusiastic about his return.

Having ended up in the US for his studies, almost by coincidence, he found that he really enjoyed the contrast afforded by different approaches, and the chance to make close friends and connections in both his cultures. Ike states repeatedly that he believes he was dealt "an incredibly lucky set of cards in life", with a Silicon Valley education, an engineering qualification and a taste for business. This was the magic combination for success in a series of start up companies. Having navigated several national cultures before, it was easy for him to manage the two worlds of engineering and business to advantage. When quizzed on what drove him to create, Ike talks about a lack of fear. With mostly a laugh, he said that "if you have been put alone on a plane from Harare to London, aged nine, and had to get yourself from

Name  
**Ike**

Time Lived Abroad  
**22 years**

Lived In  
**Zimbabwe, United States**

Came Back To | Since  
**Nigeria | 2014**

Current Job  
**Board Member and Head of Strategy & Corporate Development, eTranzact**

Heathrow into central London, and then onto a train to South Devon, finally hailing a taxi to a new boarding school, you can probably find the courage to start your own new company!”

### Rosy Childhood Memories

Having sold his first company, and trying but rejecting retirement, Ike decided to go to business school at Wharton. What he loved were the conversations that never mentioned “too ambitious” but were always full of possibility and aspiration.

It was about the time that Ike and his wife were expecting their second child that they started to contemplate a return to Nigeria. The couple felt that it was really important for the children to have a strong identity of who they were and of their roots. They could see fellow expatriates in the US allowing their children to grow up with a mixed sense of identity and did not wish this for themselves.

The first attempt to return was cut short at the last moment by the last big crash. Frustrated but not deterred, he set up another company. He reflects on the benefits of career “spaces”, as opportunities to reflect, and open up to other possibilities. In this case, through advice from Nigerian friends, he began to look for a job through a private equity fund in Nigeria, on the basis that “everything takes twice as long there, and that can burn a lot of money!”

For the past two years, Ike has been back in Nigeria working with eTranzact, an exciting company in the payments area of finance. He went ahead alone, his wife and children following quickly, as they preferred to be together, rather than worry about the Ebola scare engulfing the nation at the time. Indeed the first “benefit” that Ike cites, when talking about the transition, is the close family life, and no need to worry about incidents while far away.

Settling has been slow for all, although it certainly helps to understand the stages of adjustment that all of them go through. Ike feels confident he has chosen to work in a

## 7 Tips for Those Considering Moving Back Home

- 1. ANSWER THE WHY QUESTION:** Find out, or clarify, what your reason is for returning. Ask yourself “How motivated am I?”, “What is my vision?”, “Am I flexible enough to adapt to the culture?”. This may require going through a solid introspection and eliminating rosy childhood memories.
- 2. HAVE A PLAN BUT KEEP AN OPEN MIND:** You need to come back with a plan while setting realistic targets. Your expectations may not be met and you will have to adjust your goals or your timing. Keeping an open mind, being creative and embracing change will play a huge part in your success.
- 3. BE PATIENT AND STAY OPTIMISTIC:** Anticipate you will go through numerous frustration and emotional highs and lows. Understand the stages of adjustment that all of returnees go through. Exercise your patience muscle, persevere and keep an optimistic mind.
- 4. FINE-TUNE YOUR SKILLS:** Be prepared for a cultural stretch. Your new working environment will not understand or embrace your ways of doing coming from abroad. Fine-tune your skills and adapt your style with a view to gain acceptance while not losing your competitive edge.
- 5. SEEK SUPPORT :** If you repatriate back to a country where you have family ties or prior experience, reconnecting with past contacts can provide nuanced insights into the local context and curtail the process of acting and thinking like a foreigner. Ask your new friends or colleagues to help you navigate both practically and socially around the local culture.
- 6. ACTIVELY NETWORK:** Many major cities have vibrant communities of returnees who provide a familiar reminder of the experience of living abroad. Network with other returning business people who can give you valuable advice. Establish relationships with individuals who can serve as professional mentors, business partners, and a social support system.
- 7. TAKE IT EASY AND ENJOY :** Trying to change everything won't work so it will help if you can maintain a balance between persistence and giving up. Follow Marta's advice to practice yoga and meditation. Enjoy the best things that your new context brings.

promising sector, and is far from ready for retirement. He never once mentioned the inconveniences of his new life in Africa, but focused more developing new talents and new businesses in his home country.

When quizzed on the advice he would give to

people returning, he suggests that they "find out why", going through a solid introspection, eliminating rosy childhood memories which tend to be wrong. By reducing the stress, and planning well, as he did, by avoiding another start-up, you have more chance of enjoying the process, however frustrating it might be in some ways. He strongly encourages those who have the inclination to take the step once they've gone through this thinking process. While Ike does not project beyond the time when his children would go to university, one senses that he really is happy in his home country and more than motivated to continue to develop talent and ideas in this extraordinary place.

Our five subjects, from four continents, lived their repatriation in different ways. While all of them are making progress, it would seem that this is slow and challenging, whatever the attitude of the individual, though it surely helps to be optimistic and flexible.

Recognising the need to change is most certainly a fundamental of good leadership, and not unique to those who choose to return. In almost all of our stories, we encountered individuals who had experienced and embraced change when they were very young. So it might be reasonable to ask the "chicken or egg" question here: Do they courageously tackle their return precisely because they were born with that courage? Do they make it work, because they have learned to reflect openly and from

different perspectives? Does that perspective come because of or thanks to the international moves? We may never know, but it seems an increasingly common theme in our research is one's destiny set in early childhood. Do the values and experiences our parents pass on give us a clear path through life, or do we really blaze a trail ourselves? Yang's story would seem to reflect the possibility that you can get past your predefined destiny, but maybe his parents transmitted a certain sense openness to change which we don't know.

It is easy to see the value that comes from these departures and returns, but not so easy to see that the value translates in situ on homecoming. Less than half of our subjects are in prominent corporate jobs in their home countries, though this does not appear to for any reason other than lifestyle choice and perhaps a desire to be in control of an uncontrollable environment. Do they fare better at "home" because of their experience elsewhere? Probably the empathy they have derived from experiencing so many world-views is helping them, but the sum of positives and negatives does not seem to be really so clearly defined.

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