

## **“Tapping the Flow: The Global Circulation of Talent and Urban Development in China”**

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## **Abstract**

An increasing number of U.S.-educated Chinese have recently returned to China. Overwhelmingly, Chinese state-run media emphasize the prosperous outlook for these returnees and the state's recognition of their importance for the country's transition to a knowledge economy. As Chinese cities compete for returnees, little is known about the strategies that Chinese municipalities engage in to attract such talent from overseas, or the role that skilled returnees in fact play in the development of Chinese cities in the neoliberal era.

To address these issues, this paper examines the ways in which Chinese cities recruit U.S.-educated Chinese talent to achieve their goal of stimulating urban development, and how these recruitment initiatives in turn affect the migration decisions and reincorporation experiences of the targeted returnees. I draw upon three bodies of social science literature: neoliberal globalization and global city theories, transnational migration, and urban development in China, and conduct a case study of the city of Nanjing in coastal Eastern China by utilizing semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observation, and secondary analysis.

This paper presents its findings in two steps. I first identify the key actors involved in the process of recruiting return migrants and analyze the tensions and politics intrinsic to urban governance at different levels of the Chinese state. I find that municipal

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government officials frequently reference two types of models when envisioning the city's overall development plans: first-tier cities, especially Shanghai due to its geographical proximity, and other cities in the region that have adopted similar programs such as Suzhou, Wuxi and Hangzhou. This suggests that cities situated in close proximity may well face fierce competition to attract talent as they aspire to achieve the economic development and social and political leverage that first-tier cities enjoy. Districts, on the other hand, also compete with each other, as the number of returnees and fundable projects each year are limited.

I then explore the relationship between the talent recruitment programs and the migration decisions and reincorporation experiences of two types of highly-skilled returnees: (1) entrepreneurs starting business projects in the high-tech and advanced-service industries, and (2) scientists and researchers in science and engineering housed in universities and leading innovation projects cosponsored by the governments at the national, provincial, and municipal levels and their home institutions. I find that the boundaries between the two groups are relatively fluid, especially for the scientists and researchers with strong industry connections, as they may easily commercialize their patent into marketable products and become entrepreneurs themselves. I then conclude the paper by synthesizing the intricate relationship among major players in Nanjing's aggressive expansion of its high-tech and innovation industries: municipal and district governments, major research institutions in the city, the private sectors, and the highly skilled returnees.

This paper contributes to the theme of the session and that of the conference in two ways. Firstly, I present the critical case of a major Chinese city for understanding the

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complexities of urban development in the neoliberal era and reassessing the applicability of global city theory based on a non-Western experience. Moreover, this paper links up the macro development in China, the meso-level policies and the micro-level individual decision-making, and demonstrates how specific state development policies affect the relocation of a highly skilled labor force and the construction of a particular type of development model.

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