

State-Driven Migration Infrastructures and the Remaking of Chinese High-Skilled Return Mobility

The recent surge of high-skilled return migration to China reflects a broader transformation in global Chinese mobility. Rather than a nostalgic homecoming or a failed migration trajectory, return is increasingly framed as a strategic move within shifting geopolitical and technological landscapes—a “return to the future.” This paper examines how migration infrastructures actively shape and mediate the return of Chinese biopharmaceutical professionals from Western countries to China’s state-driven innovation hubs. Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2023 in the Yangtze River Delta—including over 60 in-depth interviews and more than 200 hours of participant observation in industry events, recruitment fairs, and professional gatherings—it analyses Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP) as a key node of urban migration infrastructure. It argues that return migration is not simply an individual decision shaped by push-pull factors, but a highly mediated process structured by state-built recruitment ecosystems. Specifically, this paper identifies three primary channels facilitating return: large-scale talent events, digital job-matching platforms, and government-outsourced headhunters. Together, these channels constitute a differentiated recruitment regime combining “soft” symbolic attraction and “hard” targeted extraction of elite expertise. By foregrounding infrastructure rather than individual motivation, this paper contributes to scholarship on migration intermediation beyond irregular migration and cross-border departure. It demonstrates how the Chinese state has shifted from a model of “patriotic professionalism” to project-based, contractual governance, redefining the ideal returnee as a short-term problem-solver embedded in strategic national development goals. In doing so, return migration becomes a site where global hierarchies, nationalist ambitions, and transnational professional subjectivities are renegotiated. This analysis deepens our understanding of how contemporary Chinese migration is reshaped through institutional infrastructures that mediate mobility, settlement, and professional integration across regions and geopolitical contexts.