

Interface City and Open-ended Return: Transnational Practices and Identity Formation among Sci-Tech Returned Overseas Chinese in Hangzhou

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Abstract: This paper examines the transnational practices and identity formation of sci-tech returned overseas Chinese in Hangzhou. Based on in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and policy-text analysis, it argues that their return should not be understood as a linear process of permanent resettlement, but as an open-ended form of return. These actors use Hangzhou as a strategic node for entrepreneurship, career development, and resource conversion, while maintaining overseas legal status, global markets, family arrangements, and future mobility options. Hangzhou therefore functions as an “interface city” that connects local innovation ecosystems, policy resources, overseas networks, and transnational capital. The study further shows that their social connections are increasingly organized around projects, industries, capital, and professional qualifications rather than traditional native-place or kinship ties. Their identity as returned overseas Chinese is produced through the interaction of mobility, local embeddedness, and organizational recognition.

Keywords: sci-tech returned overseas Chinese; open-ended return; interface city; transnational practice

1. Introduction

Sci-tech returned overseas Chinese have become important actors in urban innovation, talent governance, and overseas Chinese affairs. Unlike earlier overseas Chinese communities whose identity was often associated with native-place attachment, family networks, and migration history, this group is more closely connected with global education, professional mobility, entrepreneurship, and knowledge-based industries. However, their return cannot be understood simply as “coming back.” Many return to China for entrepreneurship, research, investment, or platform building, but they often continue to maintain overseas legal status, companies, markets, professional networks, and family arrangements. Their return is therefore neither complete settlement nor temporary stay. This paper uses the concept of “open-ended return” to describe this flexible positioning between local embeddedness and global mobility.

Hangzhou provides a useful case for examining this process. With its digital economy, innovation platforms, venture capital networks, and overseas Chinese service organizations, Hangzhou attracts transnationally experienced talents not primarily through hometown ties, but through project opportunities and urban innovation capacity. This paper explains how sci-tech returned overseas Chinese in Hangzhou conduct transnational practices, become embedded in the local innovation ecosystem, and generate new forms of identity.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Transnational migration studies have challenged the assumption that migrants must choose between assimilation abroad and return to the homeland. Migrants often maintain simultaneous social, economic, and cultural connections across multiple places (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). This perspective helps explain why sci-tech returned overseas Chinese are not simply “back” in China. Their return is better understood as part of an ongoing transnational field in which career, capital, family, and mobility are organized across borders.

Research on transnational entrepreneurship further shows that mobile entrepreneurs draw upon resources from both home and host societies, including knowledge, capital, market information, institutional familiarity, and social networks (Portes, Guarnizo, & Haller, 1999). In the case of sci-tech returned overseas Chinese, their value lies in converting overseas experience and global connections into domestic innovation projects. This is close to Saxenian’s idea of “brain circulation,” in which highly skilled migrants create transnational circuits of expertise, technology, and investment rather than producing one-way brain drain or brain gain (Saxenian, 2006).

Moreover, cities are not passive containers of migration. They shape migrants’ opportunities, identities, and institutional positions through policy regimes, urban platforms, and local infrastructures (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2009). Hangzhou

therefore needs to be understood not merely as a destination for returnees, but as an interface that reorganizes transnational resources through innovation parks, talent policies, entrepreneurial platforms, and overseas Chinese organizations.

Identity formation among returned overseas Chinese is also shaped by flexibility and institutional recognition. Mobile subjects often navigate multiple statuses, family arrangements, and opportunity structures across borders (Ong, 1999), while cosmopolitan practices are embedded in education, profession, business norms, and everyday life (Vertovec, 2009). However, such mobility is never free-floating. It is mediated by organizations, platforms, and infrastructures that shape how people move, connect, and become recognized. In this sense, the identity of Hangzhou's sci-tech returned overseas Chinese is a localized form of transnationalism: it is produced through the interaction between global mobility, urban embeddedness, and organizational recognition (Nowicka, 2013).

3. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design. The primary data come from 35 in-depth interviews with sci-tech returned overseas Chinese in Hangzhou, supplemented by participatory observation and policy-text analysis. The interviewees include returned entrepreneurs, high-tech firm managers, start-up founders, digital economy professionals, and members of overseas Chinese or returned scholars' organizations. The analysis focuses on three dimensions: the mobility trajectories of interviewees, their local embeddedness in Hangzhou's innovation ecosystem, and their identity formation as returnees, entrepreneurs, returned overseas Chinese, and transnational actors.

4. Findings

4.1 Open-ended Return: Between Local Embeddedness and Global Optionality

The return of sci-tech returned overseas Chinese is not a one-time migration decision. Many interviewees described their return as a pragmatic and strategic choice rather than a purely emotional homecoming. Hangzhou was attractive because of its digital economy, entrepreneurial culture, talent policies, venture capital, and industrial opportunities. For some, the decision to return was linked to a specific project, funding opportunity, market opening, or policy window.

However, returning to Hangzhou did not mean abandoning overseas connections. Some interviewees retained foreign permanent residency or overseas legal status, while others maintained overseas companies, international clients, research collaborators, investment channels, or family arrangements. Their companies might be registered in Hangzhou, but their markets, family lives, and professional networks remained transnational.

This pattern reveals a form of open-ended return. Hangzhou becomes a key operational base within a wider transnational strategy, providing policy support, industrial opportunity, social recognition, and organizational access. Return is therefore not the end of mobility, but a new way of organizing mobility.

4.2 Hangzhou as an Interface City

Hangzhou functions as an interface city that connects domestic policy resources, local innovation ecosystems, overseas capital, global professional networks, and public organizations. Unlike traditional overseas Chinese hometowns, Hangzhou does not primarily attract returned overseas Chinese through ancestral ties or nostalgic attachment. Its attraction lies in its capacity to translate global mobility into local opportunity.

This interface function is visible through policy, industry, and organization. Hangzhou provides talent subsidies, entrepreneurship grants, office-space support, settlement services, and administrative convenience. It also offers industrial interfaces in sectors such as digital economy, artificial intelligence, biomedicine, e-commerce, fintech, and advanced manufacturing. Meanwhile, overseas Chinese federations, returned scholars' associations, chambers of commerce, innovation service platforms, and entrepreneurship events provide organizational access.

Through these interfaces, overseas education becomes professional credibility, foreign work experience becomes managerial expertise, international networks become market channels, and cross-cultural knowledge becomes an asset for urban internationalization. Hangzhou is therefore not simply a destination for returnees, but a platform that converts transnational resources into urban developmental capacity.

4.3 From Native-place Ties to Project-based Networks

Traditional studies of overseas Chinese communities often emphasize native-place associations, kinship networks, clan organizations, and hometown attachment. These elements have not disappeared, but they are no longer the dominant organizing logic for Hangzhou's sci-tech returned overseas Chinese. Their networks are increasingly project-based, industry-based, and professionally mediated.

Interviewees frequently built relationships through entrepreneurship competitions, investment roadshows, industrial forums, alumni networks, incubators, research collaborations, and organizational activities. What connected them was not necessarily a shared hometown, but a shared project, technological field, capital interest, professional background, or overseas educational experience.

This does not mean that emotional belonging disappears. Rather, belonging is reconfigured. It becomes less rooted in ancestral place and more attached to professional communities, entrepreneurial circles, and urban opportunity structures. Many interviewees identified with Hangzhou not because it was their hometown, but because it was where their projects could grow and where their transnational experience could be recognized.

4.4 Organizational Recognition and Identity Activation

Overseas Chinese organizations play a more complex role than simple service provision. Organizations such as overseas Chinese federations and returned scholars' associations provide policy information, networking opportunities, event platforms, and public visibility. More importantly, they help activate a public identity.

Many interviewees did not initially define themselves strongly as "overseas Chinese." Some saw themselves primarily as entrepreneurs, scientists, investors, managers, or professionals. However, after joining organizational activities, receiving invitations to public events, or being included in talent-service platforms, they gradually came to recognize the category of "returned overseas Chinese" as useful. It gave them access to networks, legitimacy, and a language for describing their role in Hangzhou's development.

This shows that identity is not merely subjective. It is produced through institutional classification, organizational participation, and public recognition. In this sense, overseas Chinese affairs organizations are not only administrative or service actors, but identity-making infrastructures.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The case of Hangzhou suggests that the study of sci-tech returned overseas Chinese should move beyond the binary of return and non-return. For this group, mobility is not resolved by physical return. Return is only one component of a broader transnational arrangement. The key issue is how they organize resources across borders while becoming embedded in a local innovation ecosystem.

This paper uses the concept of open-ended return to capture this condition. sci-tech returned overseas Chinese use Hangzhou as a strategic node for entrepreneurship, innovation, and resource conversion, while maintaining overseas networks, legal statuses, markets, family arrangements, and future mobility options. Their identity is therefore neither purely diasporic nor purely domestic, but formed through the negotiation of project development, market expansion, institutional recognition, and local participation.

The concept of interface city further highlights the role of urban governance. Hangzhou is not simply a container of returned talent. Through policy support, industrial platforms, organizational networks, and symbolic recognition, the city converts transnational mobility into local developmental capacity. Its attraction lies less in native-place sentiment or ancestral attachment than in its ability to connect global talent, local innovation ecosystems, policy resources, and transnational capital.

The study also shows a shift in the social organization of overseas Chinese identity. The connections of Hangzhou's sci-tech returned overseas Chinese are increasingly organized around projects, industries, capital, professional qualifications, and overseas educational experience rather than traditional native-place or kinship ties. Their belonging is therefore less "hometown-based" and more "platform-based."

In conclusion, the identity of sci-tech returned overseas Chinese is generated through practice. Individuals become "returned overseas Chinese" not only because they have overseas experience, but because that experience is recognized, mobilized, and institutionalized within local urban development. The transformation from hometown-based overseas Chinese to platform-based overseas Chinese offers a useful perspective for understanding overseas Chinese affairs, urban innovation governance, and transnational talent mobility in contemporary China.

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