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Cityzenship: How Are Cities - not Nations - Remapping China's International Education and Returnees

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ABSTRACT

Studying abroad is often described as a journey between countries: leaving China, going to a host country, usually a "developed" western country, then returning. This brief argues that, for many Chinese graduates who studied overseas, the key question is not only which country they go to, but which city they can build a life in after they come back. Returning to China is rarely a simple homecoming; it often means trying to settle in megacities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, where good jobs, services, and status are concentrated. The brief introduces the idea of "cityzenship" to show why a city lens is crucial for understanding return migration to China's megacities. On the one hand, these cities offer a sense of belonging and membership tied to lifestyles many returnees associate with "developedness", a concept often used to compare countries, but increasingly used by returnees to describe city-level differences within China. On the other hand, megacity governments actively attract returnees through talent programmes and hukou pathways that recognise overseas degrees as administratively legible markers of "quality," speeding up settlement or widening eligibility so international credentials can be converted into city-based rights and access to public services.

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Study abroad is often narrated through a geographical imagination in which "international education" is a journey from "home" to a developed country. In this narrative, capital is accumulated abroad through foreign credentials, language acquisition, and cosmopolitan exposure, and the meaning of mobility is measured against national difference: developed versus developing, Global North versus Global South, citizen versus non-citizen (Fong 2011;

Beech 2014). While national-level analysis remains dominant in studies of international education mobilities, it also obscures a crucial empirical and analytical fact: aspirations, anxieties, and life plans are frequently organised less by countries than by cities, and by what cities can do for a life course. Post-study mobility is often shaped not only by national residence and formal citizenship, but by jobs embedded in specific labour markets, welfare entitlements administered by local governments, schooling pathways tied to local eligibility, and social networks concentrated in a small number of urban nodes. When these mundane infrastructures of life are placed at the centre, international education begins to look less like a linear movement between nations and more like a conversion mechanism that connects transnational mobility to urban membership and, through that, to class formation and social reproduction.

This shift in scale becomes especially salient in the moment of "return." Return is rarely a simple national homecoming, even when it is narrated as such. For many overseas-educated Chinese graduates, returning does not mean going back to a hometown; it means moving into a domestic hierarchy of urban destinations, particularly top-tier megacities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, where employment opportunities, institutional resources, and symbolic prestige are concentrated (Wang 2023). The decisive questions after overseas study are therefore often not exhausted by "whether to come back to China," but articulated through an urban calculus: which city is livable, which city is worth the cost, which city can be entered under what settlement conditions, and which city offers a credible future. In other words, return is best approached as a double movement: a transnational border-crossing back to China that is folded into an internal-urban mobility across city membership regimes. The analytical payoff of treating return in this way is that it makes visible a second geography—one that sits beneath the headline story of "coming back"—through which belonging and inequality are produced in distinctly urban terms.

A nation-centred account that treats "China" as the natural container of return can easily slide into methodological nationalism, in which the nation-state is taken as the default scale of social life and the primary unit through which belonging, mobility, and development are interpreted (Beck 2007). This assumption is not merely a conceptual habit; it is reinforced by the institutional organisation of migration governance, education systems, and statistical imaginaries that render people legible through national categories. Yet returnees' trajectories reveal that, in contemporary China, many of the resources that make a life possible are organised through city-specific regimes, and that the experience of inclusion is often negotiated at the level of the city rather than the nation. The border-crossing event of "return" may be nationally defined, but the longer and more consequential process of "settling down" is frequently urban and place-bound: it is mediated by local household registration arrangements, city welfare architectures, housing markets, and public education systems that tether life chances to membership in particular cities. To analyse return primarily as a national event is thus to risk missing how the social meaning of mobility is realised through the differential governance of urban membership.

To bring the city into analytical focus requires more than treating it as a destination point, requiring a conceptual vocabulary that can capture the city as an active, relational formation. An assemblage approach is useful here because it helps conceptualise the city as a dynamic configuration of networked relations among people, infrastructures, institutions, markets, and discourses—relations that are territorially anchored yet extend beyond the city through translocal circuits of capital, corporate organisation, policy benchmarking, and professional mobility (Wang 2023). The city, in this sense, is not merely where returnees "live" after coming back. It is an arrangement of opportunity and governance that can recognise, reward, include, or exclude. It is also a material and symbolic environment through which "global" life can be continued domestically: through workplaces connected to transnational circuits, through consumption landscapes that sustain cosmopolitan routines, and through dense peer networks of globally oriented professionals. Treating the city as assemblage therefore makes it possible to analyse how international experience is re-embedded within domestic urban infrastructures, and how the boundaries of belonging are drawn through city-specific institutional arrangements. An assemblage thinking of city also helps understand returnees' meaning of "developedness". For international Chinese student returnees, development is frequently encountered as an everyday condition: a felt sense of reliability and predictability produced by infrastructures and institutional routines—transport systems that work, public services that are legible, neighbourhood amenities that feel stable, and credible pathways for planning education, work, housing, and family life. These conditions are unevenly distributed within China. They are concentrated in particular city assemblages and, within them, in particular districts. Consequently, the geography of "development" is not exhausted by national rankings; it is internally stratified and urban. The city becomes a key scale at which developedness is lived, compared, and pursued. Returnees' development talk thus often takes an urban form: not only whether one is "in China" or "abroad," but whether one is in a city that offers global opportunities, institutional privilege, and a cosmopolitan everyday, and whether the costs of accessing those advantages are bearable.

Another key concept for examining return migration of international Chinese students to megacities in China is cityzenship. Cityzenship shifts the question from national citizenship—an all-or-nothing status anchored in the state—to city-level membership as a stratified and place-specific achievement (Wang 2023). For many overseas-educated Chinese returnees, the aspiration is not reducible to acquiring a foreign passport or legal residency abroad. Rather, it is to secure a developed-world standard of life while remaining nationally and culturally Chinese, and to do so by entering a particular urban assemblage that promises global opportunities, institutional privilege, and cosmopolitan everyday life. Cityzenship captures this aspiration precisely because it treats the city as a membership-producing formation: a site where rights, recognition, and life-course security are assembled through local institutions and everyday practices, rather than guaranteed by national belonging alone.

Seeing cityzenship as a membership package first helps clarify why international education matters after return—not as an abstract enhancement of "human capital," but as a resource that can be converted into urban membership. International education produces globally

legible credentials and dispositions—degrees, language competence, and cosmopolitan familiarity—that can function as forms of capital upon re-entry. Yet the payoff of these resources is not automatic. Their value depends on conversion: whether and how they can be translated, within particular cities, into employment opportunities, institutional recognition, and ultimately stable membership. On the one hand, overseas credentials are evaluated within city-specific labour markets, where certain sectors and employers confer not only income but also recognised status and mobility trajectories. On the other hand, megacity governments also actively produce differentiated routes of incorporation through talent programmes, settlement/hukou schemes, and bureaucratic eligibility designs that make some forms of capital count more than others. Hukou acquisition offers a good example of this institutionalisation. Megacity hukou is usually valued as a city-based membership that links residence to a bundle of place-bound rights, including access to welfare provision, public education, and other key services. While it is very difficult to obtain for migrants particularly in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, overseas credentials are administratively legible signals of "quality". Targeting overseas returnees, the megacity governments usually shorten settlement time and expand eligibility to ease the institutional hurdles. In this sense, international education is converted, through city institutions and labour markets, into membership-based security that can stabilise life courses and enable intergenerational social reproduction.

At the level of everyday experience, a city-level analysis also highlights how megacities in China provide dense infrastructures through which "global" life can be domestically sustained: internationalised workplaces, transnational consumption landscapes, bilingual service encounters, and peer networks of similarly mobile professionals (Wang and Qi, 2025). Within these urban worlds, returnees often enact a recognisably cosmopolitan lifestyle through everyday practices—where they live, where they socialise, what they consume, how they present themselves, and what kinds of futures they imagine as normal and desirable. Such practices can be read as a form of lived developedness, in which the city becomes a proximate substitute for "the developed world" through its amenities, cultural cues, and institutional rhythms. Therefore, cityzenship refers to a composite form of membership that is simultaneously institutional, socio-economic, and cultural. Institutionally, cityzenship is bound up with locally administered entitlements—household registration, welfare access, eligibility for public services, and the bureaucratic legibility that turns residence into recognised belonging. Socio-economically, it is sustained through positioning in city labour markets and housing regimes that determine whether urban life can be stabilised rather than improvised. Culturally, it is enacted through everyday practices and interactional recognition: the ability to inhabit particular neighbourhoods, workplaces, and consumption spaces as if one "naturally" belongs there, and to be treated accordingly.

Taken together, the city turn provides a concise way to reframe international education and return beyond a country-centred geography of aspiration. If the conventional narrative maps developedness onto national territories, returnees' trajectories suggest a different cartography in which developedness is pursued, experienced, and secured through city membership regimes. International education operates as a conversion mechanism: it transforms family

resources into globally legible credentials; those credentials are then translated—through city labour markets, talent infrastructures, and hukou pathways—into durable forms of urban membership; and urban membership anchors intergenerational security through access to welfare, housing, schooling, and networks. The outcome is a remapped geography of global belonging that is not only a hierarchy of countries, but a hierarchy of cities—inside and beyond China—through which global experience is sorted and inequality is reproduced. In this perspective, "developed China" is not simply a national achievement to be measured in aggregate; it is a place-bound condition unevenly distributed across urban assemblages, and increasingly accessed through the stratified politics of cityzenship.

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