

REGULATION OF RETURN MIGRATION IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. The Chinese experience in regulating return migration demonstrates successful practices in attracting highly qualified personnel to the economy in order to protect national technological sovereignty. The purpose of the study is to identify and systematize the key factors that ensure the effectiveness of the Chinese model of managing the return migration of highly qualified personnel, in order to determine the possibilities of adapting the most successful practices to the conditions of other countries.

Materials and methods. The theoretical analysis is based on a neo-institutional approach, network theory and the theory of digital public administration. The empirical part uses the method of document analysis: official statistics from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, reports from the Center for Research on Chinese Globalization, the Blue Book of Global Talents, and data from the Chinese recruitment platform Zhaopin.

Results and conclusions. A three-level management model for the return migration of highly qualified specialists in China has been presented. The national (elite) level is aimed at attracting scientists with high publication activity, top managers and engineers of the high-tech sector; the regional (main) level is aimed at mass attraction of young researchers, as well as specialists with work experience with a scientific degree; the local (stimulating) level is aimed at entrepreneurs – graduates of foreign educational institutions, participants in acceleration programs. Support measures for returning migrants from among highly qualified personnel include one-time lifting payments, housing subsidies, tax holidays, access to venture financing, as well as assistance in solving social and household issues.

The effectiveness of the model is confirmed by the following quantitative indicators: the return of more than 4.5 million graduates of foreign educational institutions in the period from 1978 to 2023, the return of more than 16 thousand scientists and technical specialists in the period from 2008 to 2018, as well as qualitative ones – an increase in the publication activity of scientists after their return, an increase in the last authorship index and a strengthening of leadership positions in national scientific and technical projects.

Discussion. The promising areas are the study of the factors of re-emigration and the analysis of the narratives of compatriots after their return. The experience learned can be useful for Russia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as other countries interested in attracting highly qualified personnel.

KEYWORDS

Return migration, repatriation policy, highly qualified migrants, human capital management, transnational and cross-border cooperation, networking, and the return of compatriots.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

All the authors participated in the writing of the text of the manuscript and the formulation of conclusions. Dr. Nikolaos Nikolakakis participated in the development of the research concept. The data has been processed and analyzed by Kononova D. S.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

USE OF AI TOOLS DECLARATION

All authors declare that they have not used Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools for the creation of this article.

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ИССЛЕДОВАТЕЛЬСКАЯ СТАТЬЯ

РЕГУЛИРОВАНИЕ ВОЗВРАТНОЙ МИГРАЦИИ В КИТАЕ

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Введение. Китайский опыт регулирования возвратной миграции демонстрирует успешные практики привлечения высококвалифицированных кадров в экономику в целях защиты национального технологического суверенитета. Целью исследования является выявление и систематизация ключевых факторов, обеспечивающих результативность китайской модели управления возвратной миграцией высококвалифицированных кадров, для определения возможностей адаптации наиболее успешных практик к условиям других стран.

Материалы и методы. Теоретический анализ базируется на неoinституциональном подходе, сетевой теории и теории цифрового государственного управления. В эмпирической части использован метод анализа документов: официальная статистика Министерства образования Китайской Народной Республики, отчеты Центра исследований глобализации Китая «Синяя книга глобальных талантов», данные китайской рекрутинговой платформы Zhaopin.

Результаты. Представлена трехуровневая модель управления возвратной миграцией высококвалифицированных специалистов в Китае. Национальный (элитный) уровень ориентирован на привлечение ученых с высокой публикационной активностью, топ-менеджеров и инженеров высокотехнологического сектора; региональный (основной) уровень – на массовое привлечение молодых исследователей, а также специалистов с опытом работы, имеющих научную степень; локальный (стимулирующий) – предпринимателей-выпускников зарубежных учебных заведений, участников акселерационных программ. Меры поддержки для возвратных мигрантов из числа высококвалифицированных кадров включают единовременные подъемные выплаты, жилищные субсидии, налоговые каникулы, доступ к венчурному финансированию, а также содействие в решении социально-бытовых вопросов.

Эффективность модели подтверждается следующими количественными показателями: возвратом более 4,5 млн выпускников зарубежных учебных заведений в период с 1978 по 2023 г.; возвращением свыше 16 тыс. ученых и технических специалистов в период с 2008 по 2018 г., а также качественными – ростом публикационной активности ученых после возвращения, увеличением показателя последнего авторства и усилением лидерских позиций в национальных научно-технических проектах.

Обсуждение. Перспективными направлениями являются: исследование факторов повторной эмиграции и анализ нарративов соотечественников после возвращения. Изученный опыт может быть полезен для России и Объединенных Арабских Эмиратов, других стран, заинтересованных в привлечении высококвалифицированных кадров.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

Возвратная миграция, репатриационная политика, высококвалифицированные мигранты, управление человеческим капиталом, транснациональное и трансграничное сотрудничество, сетевое взаимодействие, возвращение соотечественников.

ФИНАНСИРОВАНИЕ

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■ INTRODUCTION

Global trends are creating new challenges for developed countries related to the constant search for highly qualified personnel capable of contributing to advanced scientific and technological development. The World Economic Forum points out that most of the 20 fastest-growing professions projected for 2025-2030 are related to digital technologies.¹ Although automation can replace about 30 percent of existing jobs, it is expected to create 130 million new jobs, highlighting the significant transformation in employment under the new productivity system². External labor migration is a generally recognized form of combating personnel shortages, as well as the opportunity to attract highly qualified personnel to the economy. Against the background of the formation of a new paradigm of mobility of highly qualified personnel, the state regulation of the process of return migration of compatriots does not lose its relevance.

In scientific literature and management practice, the terms «regulation of the return migration process» and «repatriation state policy» are often used interchangeably, which, according to the authors, requires terminological clarification. They are united by the fact that in both cases we are talking about the purposeful activity of the state to create institutional, economic and social conditions for relocation and further integration into the national economy and society of a wide range of compatriots. In the case of the repatriation policy, the aspect of returning to the historical homeland and reunification with an ethnic community is implied, even if the person moving did not have the citizenship of that country (for example, the repatriation of ethnic Germans to Germany). Return migration involves the return movement of its citizens after a long stay outside their country.

As part of the state regulation of the return migration process, priority social and professional groups

¹ The future of professions. – URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/7924305?erid=F7NfYUJCUnETRyKUMaGR> (Accessed: April 23, 2026).

² Global Talent Flow: Trends and Prospects 2025 Center for China and Globalization. – URL: <http://en.ccg.org.cn/archives/89057> (Accessed: February 25, 2026).

of compatriots can be selected, whose return is necessary to achieve national goals. An example of such a policy is China, which promotes the recruitment of highly qualified personnel from among its compatriots who have accumulated social, economic, and cultural capital while living outside their home country.

In China, return migrants, who are citizens who have returned to the mainland after living abroad for more than two years for work and study purposes, are also referred to as «haigui» which is composed of the characters for «sea» and «abroad» and is a homophone of «sea turtle». This term carries a metaphorical meaning: just like sea turtles that are born on land and swim into the ocean, Chinese citizens travel abroad to acquire knowledge and skills, and then return to their homeland as highly skilled professionals. This term not only carries a unique cultural significance but also reflects the government's focus on the return of its own workforce.

A similar task of returning highly qualified compatriots is relevant for Russia as well³. Despite the declared value of returning compatriots [1], the effectiveness of support measures remains controversial [2; 3], and the ongoing staff shortage forces employers to use the tool of pendulum migration [4] and resort to the search for low-skilled specialists [5], including in the labor markets of South Asia [6]. The Chinese model of managing return migration also becomes particularly relevant in the context of the formation of ambiguous assessments of the Russian host society [7; 8] and the existing demand for improving adaptation policies [9].

In the case of China itself, the effectiveness of existing management practices is supported by available statistical data. According to official statistics from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, more than 4.5 million individuals who have received education and professional experience abroad have returned to China since 1978, accounting for over 60% of the total number of Chinese students who have studied abroad⁴. These figures encompass a wide range of returning graduates, not all of whom meet the strict criteria for highly skilled professionals. However, this group represents a pool of talent that can be tapped by managers to meet their specific needs.

According to the Zhaopin recruitment platform for 2025, the total number of return migrants seeking employment in China, including fresh graduates and experienced professionals, increased by 5% compared to 2024 and by 1.5 times compared to 2018. The interest of graduates from foreign educational

institutions who have just completed their studies is notable. The number of return migrants from this category increased by 12% in 2025 compared to 2024 and reached an all-time high, exceeding the 2018 figure by 2.25 times⁵. The data presented reflects the statistics on the return of predominantly highly qualified personnel from among graduates of foreign educational institutions and specialists with international experience, who are the target of China's government policy to support return migration, and does not cover other groups from the multimillion-strong Chinese diaspora outside the country as a whole.

The model of managing return migration is synchronized with the development of the concept of «new productive forces» which defines China's priorities for advanced technological development. The key component of the «new productive forces» concept is the implementation of artificial intelligence. The essence of the ongoing structural economic reform is to focus on industrial innovation to create breakthrough technologies, which in turn will help modernize traditional industries and establish high-tech, intellectual, and environmentally friendly industries⁶. In this context, the return migration of highly skilled professionals, including those with expertise in artificial intelligence, robotics, and big data, is of strategic importance for ensuring technological sovereignty.

The study focuses not only on the study of the management model of return migration in China in the dichotomy of «efficiency-inefficiency» but also on the analysis of the tools and mechanisms that shape the selection, stratification, and reintegration of a diverse social group of return migrants in the context of existing geopolitical turbulences and technological challenges.

The purpose of this study is to identify and systematize the key factors that ensure the effectiveness of the Chinese model of managing the return migration of highly qualified personnel, in order to determine the possibilities of adapting the most successful practices to the conditions of other countries.

In this study, highly qualified personnel refer to Chinese citizens who are the target audience of government programs to support return migration, namely:

- scientists or researchers who have received a PhD degree from leading foreign universities and have a proven publication record in scientific peer-reviewed journals or patents;
- engineers and technical specialists who have at least three years of experience in high-tech sectors

³ On Measures to Facilitate the Voluntary Resettlement of Compatriots Living Abroad in the Russian Federation: Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 637 dated June 22, 2006. – URL: <https://base.garant.ru/189653/> (Accessed: May 15, 2026).

⁴ China sees slight drop in overseas returnees in 2023(2023) China Daily Information Co. – URL: <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/hk/article/379062> (Accessed: February 25, 2026).

⁵ Opportunities, policies lure overseas talent back (2026) China Daily Information Co. – URL: <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202602/11/WS698bc411a310d6866eb38928.html> (Accessed: February 25, 2026).

⁶ Xinhua Commentary: «New productive forces» a winning formula for China's future. – URL: <https://english.news.cn/20230921/f52c169eb15e4e0da59b59c6f0c862b8/c.html> (Accessed: February 25, 2026).

(innovation management, engineering, STEM) outside of China and have proven results in the form of patents or completed projects;

- top managers and executives who have at least three years of experience in large corporations, primarily in the high-tech sector.

Based on scientific and public demand, the relevance of studying the management practices of the Chinese model of return migration is confirmed in order to possible application of certain innovations.

■ LITERATURE REVIEW

A theoretical analysis of foreign scientific literature on return migration in China allows us to identify six key research areas.

The first research area focuses on the evolution of management approaches to return migration. Since the mid-20th century, China's approach to return migration has evolved from accepting ethnic Chinese refugees to modern programs for attracting highly skilled professionals [10]. Through a comparative analysis of China's and India's management models, researchers identify two distinct strategies that shape the institutional design and management innovations in each country. China prioritizes the return of foreign talent, while India leverages transnational diaspora networks as agents of «return» [11]. This study demonstrates that China is transitioning from the concept of «brain drain» to «brain circulation», emphasizing the physical return and management of human capital.

The second research area is based on the establishment of social, economic, and psychological determinants, shaping factors, and motives for return. Using the classical «attraction-repulsion» model, researchers derive a formula for the combination of active and passive factors that influence return: employment status, income, family circumstances, land ownership, and family labor⁷.

There are generational differences that contribute to return migration: for older generations, housing ownership is important, while for younger generations, economic factors are more significant [12]. Based on the study of the elderly age group, a classification of return migrants was developed based on their intentions: family-oriented, seeking a comfortable retirement, and settled return migrants [13]. Returned graduates of educational institutions have advantages based on their family background [14].

Qualitative research (interviews with return migrant doctoral students) demonstrates the gender specificity of return migration: women's decisions are influenced by family and emotional factors, while men's decisions are influenced by career and economic factors [15].

The third research area focuses on rethinking the voluntariness of return migration. A study of the

experiences of young Chinese scientists in the field of STEM education (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) reveals that for many, the act of returning was a necessary response to the challenging labor market, racial discrimination, and difficulties in legalizing their status [16].

This issue is becoming more relevant in the context of the current geopolitical situation, particularly in the context of China-U.S. relations. Chinese graduate students have reported an increase in xenophobia and Sinophobia in the host society [17]. Surveys of Chinese returnee scholars who have returned from the United States since 2018 have shown an increase in anxiety and fear for the future [18].

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a powerful catalyst for return migration. The impact of restrictive measures on the mental and physical well-being of returning students has been studied [19], as well as the role of mobile media in overcoming the obstacles to cross-border mobility during this period [20]. The concept of «unintentional transnationalism» has been introduced into scientific discourse, which refers to the need for skilled professionals to maintain transnational connections due to visa restrictions and employment instability [21].

The fourth research area is related to the analysis of government policies and the evaluation of the effectiveness of existing programs for attracting highly qualified specialists. China has an active policy of managing return migration, and the «Thousand Talents» program is one of the tools used to implement this policy. However, researchers have expressed mixed opinions about the effectiveness of this program. While scientists who return under the «Thousand Talents» program have access to increased funding and the opportunity to join large research teams, they may not always demonstrate a high level of productivity or quality in their research [22]. On the other hand, return migrant researchers continue to support transnational scientific cooperation and publish papers with a higher impact factor than their domestic counterparts [23]. However, international qualifications are not always a guarantee of successful employment in China's highly competitive labor market, as it requires a combination of acquired intellectual capital [24].

The fifth research area combines the results of the analysis of the territorial imbalances in the settlement of return migrants. A «two-core and multi-center» model of the distribution of return migrants has been formed, with Beijing and Shanghai dominating [25]. The main factors influencing the choice of territory are the size of wages and housing prices, as well as the availability of urban infrastructure. Returned professionals under the «Thousand Talents» program are concentrated in several coastal provinces of China [26]. After returning, scientists usually choose their place of residence based on academic opportunities rather than economic

⁷ Ren, Y., Shi, W. (2017). Determinants and effects of return migration in China. *Population Research* (Peking, China), 41 (2), 71–83.

development. Young researchers also consider the availability of research investments [27].

The sixth research area focuses on the process of reintegration of return migrants, particularly through the lens of returning researchers. The concept of a «virtual transnational diaspora» is proposed, which refers to a stable network of highly skilled professionals who, while physically residing abroad, maintain intense intellectual and business ties with their home country through joint projects, remote knowledge transfer, and technology [28]. The concept of a «virtual transnational diaspora» highlights the need to rethink traditional approaches to state regulation of return migration, as a compatriot who supports on-line interactions may not have sufficient motivation to physically relocate and reintegrate, and may remain a resident of another country.

A high level of anxiety is observed among returning researchers in the field of natural sciences and humanities [29]. A study of the social well-being of unmarried female doctoral students shows how various contextual factors shape career decisions, leading to a search for a balance between long-term aspirations and increasing competition [30]. Based on a study of the career trajectories of PhD graduates at educational institutions in the Greater Bay Area in China, a typology of strategic approaches to the decision to return has been identified: academic connections, financial considerations, risk reduction, and institutional culture [31].

Existing studies tend to analyze individual aspects of stimulating return migration (institutional conditions, diaspora ties, and digital technologies) without combining them into a unified picture of government policy. The question of how China has developed a comprehensive system for managing the return migration of highly qualified personnel, which includes multi-level support measures, work with compatriots abroad, and digital tools, remains underexplored.

■ MATERIALS AND METHODS

The theoretical and methodological basis of the study is the integration of the neo-institutional and network approaches, as well as the concept of digitalization of public administration.

The combination of these approaches allows us to analyze the extent to which the Chinese model performs the functions of a strategic manager who purposefully forms institutional rules, network interactions, and digital infrastructure for managing the human capital of return migrants. Human capital management refers to a set of measures aimed at further developing the competencies and social connections of return migrants, and social capital is considered an integral part of human capital in the context of transnational interactions.

The first theoretical approach used is the *neo-institutional* approach. The study of government

programs for supporting return migrants within this approach provides insight into the functioning of formal institutions that create new incentives for highly qualified personnel, including their integration into the social and cultural environment.

Chinese public discourse uses powerful patriotic narratives that provide moral grounds for returning to one's homeland. The government's mandate for universities, research centers, and large corporations to include return migrants in their own development programs is reflected in the concept of forced isomorphism by DiMaggio and PJ Powell [32]. The essence of this concept is that organizations that depend on a single source of resources (in this case, the state that distributes grants and preferences) strive for institutional similarity by replicating the prescribed «rules of the game» in their efforts to regulate return migration.

The second theoretical approach used is network theory, which focuses on the study of the social capital of returning migrants embedded in their transnational connections. The theory of «structural holes» by R. Burt is applied, according to which the key source of competitive advantage is not so much the possession of connections as such, as the ability of an actor to connect previously unrelated social groups, closing the so-called structural holes – gaps in social networks. The actor takes the position of an intermediary («broker») and gets the opportunity to establish control over information and resource flows between groups [33]. In this study, the state is considered as a similar «broker» that creates and oversees associations of return migrants and implements digital platforms; it connects disparate communities of return migrants both with each other and with local institutions, which allows the state to significantly direct the flows of transnational social capital in line with national priorities.

It is proposed to include in the theoretical framework the concept of digitalization of public administration, which is not an independent theory, but rather an objective process of transformation of management practices based on the use of the latest information technology achievements. Such a conceptual solution will help in the framework of the study to analyze the use of big data and digital platforms to form mechanisms for the selection, attraction and further reintegration of returning migrants. Recruiting platforms that interact with official databases of government institutions play a special role in the Chinese model of public administration. Thus, recruitment platforms are becoming one of the areas of soft management, which makes it possible to compare deficient competencies and the professional level of returning migrants using modern technologies.

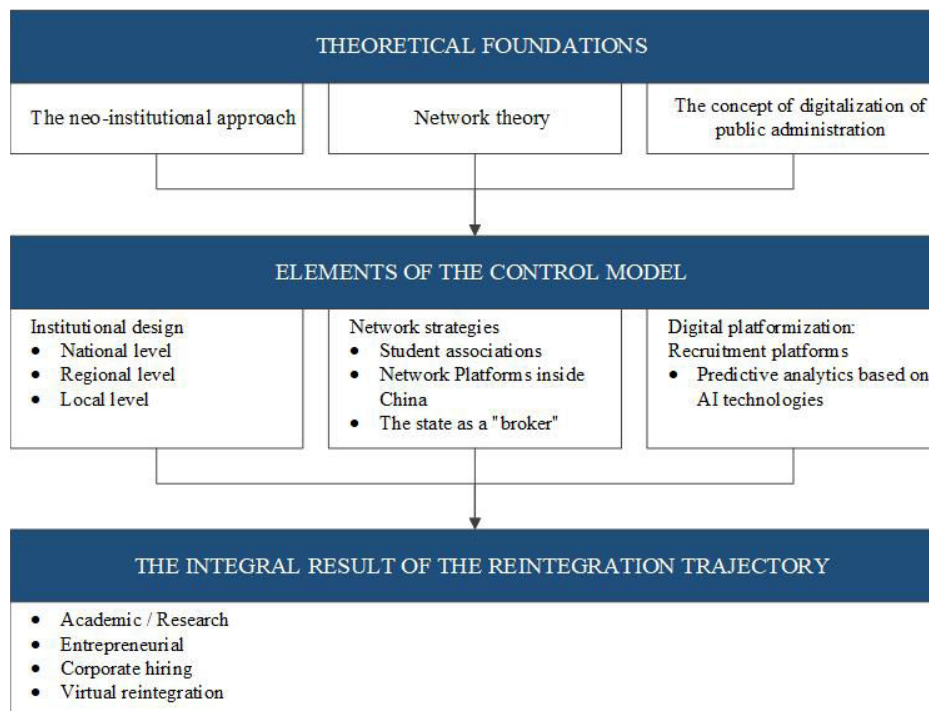
The operationalization of theoretical approaches, as well as concepts, and their projection onto specific models of return migration management in China is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 – Operationalization matrix of theoretical approaches and concepts to the analysis of the management model of return migration in China ⁸

Theoretical approach	Analytical focus	Model element (level/direction)	Contribution to career paths
The neo-institutional approach	Designing rules and incentives	A three-tier model for managing return migration and attracting highly qualified specialists in China	Sets the formal framework for 4 career paths: Academic; research; Entrepreneurial; hiring in the commercial sector
A network approach	Managing transnational relations and social capital	Strategic directions: 1. Networking with the Chinese student community abroad; 2. Formation of network platforms within China	Provides access to trajectories through social connections, especially important for corporate (hiring) and virtual reintegration
Digitalization of public administration	Employment through digital platforms, predictive labor market analysis (search for scarce competencies)	Employment platformization (recruitment platforms, big data analysis)	Accompanies all career paths

The logic of the subsequent analysis is organized as follows: first, the architecture of return migration management is investigated within the framework of a non-institutional approach, then the strategies of the state for the formation and use of the social capital of the diaspora are analyzed through the prism of network theory, then the mechanisms of platform employment are considered based on the concept of digitalization. Four career paths for the reintegration of returning migrants are identified as an integral result.

The described logic is visualized in the form of a conceptual scheme in Figure 1. The model reflects the author's approach to integrating the above-mentioned theoretical projections, which forms a management ecosystem. The proposed model is a theoretical novelty of the study, due to the fact that it combines the elements of the Chinese case of return migration management into a single framework.

**Figure 1** – A conceptual model for managing return migration in China, developed on the basis of a synthesis of a neo-institutional and network approach, as well as the concept of digitalization of public administration⁹⁸ Compiled by the author.⁹ Compiled by the author.

The empirical basis for the study of the phenomenon of return migration in China was the analysis of the following documents:

1. Official statistics of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. The information includes data on the number of Chinese citizens who have traveled to foreign countries for the purpose of studying, as well as those who have returned to their homeland.

2. Analytical reports. The China Globalization Research Center annually publishes the «Blue Book of Global Talents», where you can, among other things, find information about highly qualified returning migrants, including for analyzing employment by economic sector.

3. Data from the Zhaopin recruitment platform. China's largest portal publishes information on the dynamics of the number of returning migrants, geographical distribution, and employment in high-tech sectors.

The study was conducted using the document analysis method, which is used to study government programs to facilitate the return of highly qualified personnel, and regulatory legal acts on various aspects of return migration. The method of secondary analysis of statistical and empirical data is used to capture trends in return migration. The comparative analysis makes it possible to analyze the possible disadvantages of the management model of return migration, as well as the differentiation of various social groups of return migrants.

Limitations of the study. During the assessment of the effectiveness of Chinese return migration management, the authors faced a situation of a decrease in the amount of publicly available information about the re-migration of returned Chinese residents. Obviously, this is due to the desire to protect national security interests against the background of instability in Sino-American relations. This situation creates limitations for the scientific analysis of the problem under study.

■ RESEARCH RESULTS

In accordance with the logic outlined, the study consistently presents institutional design, government network strategies, digital platformization, and career paths.

The analysis makes it possible to identify a model of return migration management at three levels of institutional design for human capital management, differing in administrative affiliation, target categories of return migrants, as well as strategic goals. The definition of «highly qualified specialist» is the core of the target audience, where at each of the management levels these criteria are either applied directly or supplemented taking into account the tactical tasks of a particular level.

1. Central (elite).

Regulation of return migration at this level is implemented by the State Council of the People's

Republic of China and the relevant ministries in charge – the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of the People's Republic of China and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of the People's Republic of China.

The object of managerial influence in the framework of return migration management at this level are the following categories of highly qualified personnel, strictly conforming to the definition, namely:

- scientists with significant scientific achievements and high publication activity in international journals with high ratings;
- top management, heads of research units in large corporations with at least 10 years of experience;
- engineers and technicians with experience in high-tech sectors.

The strategic goal of this level is to provide access to transnational scientific networks, scientific breakthrough in critical industries, and create a core of qualified personnel to ensure strategic technological sovereignty.

2. Regional (main).

This level of government combines both programs in cities of central subordination (administratively equivalent to provinces) and programs in cities of subprovincial importance, which have expanded powers within the prefecture level.

The objects of management influence are:

- returning migrants who are interested in finding employment in a particular region and plan to contribute to the development of innovation clusters;
- specialists with 3 to 7 years of work experience in foreign corporations and research centers;
- young scientists with PhD degrees from foreign universities, preferably included in reputable international rankings.

The strategic goal of this level of management is to ensure the massive attraction of highly qualified personnel to the territory, increasing the competitiveness of the regional economy through the development of regional innovation clusters.

As a feature of the regional level, it is worth noting that regional programs focus on various economic aspects: either finance and basic science (the Shanghai case), or industrial cooperation (Shenzhen). Regions compete for highly qualified personnel, which, on the one hand, leads to duplication of measures, and on the other hand, creates the need to find unique specialists.

3. Local (stimulating).

Return migration is managed at this level in urban areas, technology parks, and new technology development zones.

The objects of managerial influence are:

- graduates of foreign higher educational institutions planning to open their own business;
- entrepreneurs who have ideas for startup projects to create an innovative product;

– participants of contests/acceleration programs;
 – entrepreneurs are researchers with patents and experience in successful commercialization of developments.

At this level, not all recipients of support can formally meet the strict criteria for highly qualified personnel. Support programs at the local level are aimed at cultivating future specialists and entrepreneurs from among motivated returning migrants, thereby expanding the talent pool for the national economy.

The strategic goal at this level is to create an innovative ecosystem, successfully commercialize technologies, create new jobs, and support entrepreneurial activity among returning migrants. The

effectiveness of the model cannot be reduced solely to the scale of the return flow – it can also be seen in the qualitative characteristics of the attracted staff. For example, one of the results of the «Thousand Talents Plan» was that from the late 1990s to 2018, about 16,000 scientists and technical specialists returned to China¹⁰.

A special feature of the return migration management model in China is the use of targeted state talent selection within the framework of the repatriation policy and the creation of various trajectories for attracting and further social mobility for different categories of highly qualified personnel. Table 2 shows a three-tier model for managing return migration and attracting highly qualified personnel in China.

Table 2 – Three-tier model for managing return migration and attracting talented professionals in China¹¹

Management level	Target categories of return migrants	Implementation tool/example	Support measures for adaptation
Central (elite)	Scientists with high publication activity; Top managers with more than 10 years of experience; Engineers in the high-tech sector	Targeted government programs with a package of financial and social incentives/ Example: «Qiming» (Qiming), an updated plan for attracting high-level foreign experts from among former compatriots	One-time uplift payment: Young talents: 1.5 million yuan (about 17 million rubles) 19.1 million rubles). Established specialists and entrepreneurial researchers: 3 million yuan (about 34 million rubles), as well as further research support. Housing subsidies of at least 1.5 million yuan (about 17 million rubles). Social reintegration measures: Employment of the spouse; Placement of children in educational institutions; Coverage of relocation expenses; Support for legal status; Medical insurance
Regional (main)	Highly qualified personnel with 3 to 7 years of experience; young scientists	Regional grant programs with social reintegration measures/ Example: Shanghai's Magnolia of Talents Project In Pujiang	Starting grants (300,000 – 1 million yuan, or about 3.4 million rubles – 11.2 million rubles). Providing social reintegration measures: allocating subsidies for housing, simplifying household registration (hukou), supporting employment
Local (stimulating)	Graduates of foreign universities who are planning to start their own business; entrepreneurs with startups; participants in accelerators	Using a competitive mechanism/ Example: Shenzhen Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition	Tax holidays, incubator offices, simplified visas, access to venture financing, and early-stage grants

¹⁰ How China is vying to attract the world's top scientific talent. *Nature*. 2025. Vol. 642. P. 556. – URL: <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-025-01750-4> (Accessed: April, 23, 2026).

¹¹ Compiled by the author based on an analysis of the following sources: Shi, D., & Liu, W. (2023). Has China's Young Thousand Talents program been successful in recruiting and nurturing top-caliber scientists? *Science*, 379 (6627), 62–65. – URL: <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abq1218>; Yang, L., & Marini, G. (2019). Research productivity of Chinese Young Thousand Talents. *International Higher Education*, 97, 17–18. – URL: <https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2019.97.10944>; Cao, C., Baas, J., Wagner, C., & Jonkers, K. (2020). Returning scientists and the emergence of China's science system. *Science and Public Policy*, 47 (2), 172–183. – URL: <https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scz056>; Zweig, E.D. China's Talent Programs: Lessons for the United States? – URL: https://nap.nationalacademies.org/resource/27787/ZweigITPCCommissioned_Paper.pdf; Official website BQ Talent. – URL: <http://bqtalent.com/>; Официальный портал Правительства Шанхая. – URL: <https://english.shanghai.gov.cn/en-InternationalTalentNode/20241122/37f204f706e14bea94cfc2c12cc78a8.html>; Official website of the People's Government of Guangning District. – URL: <https://szgm.gov.cn/>. (Accessed: February, 12, 2026).

At the institutional level, the state is not just a regulator, but a strategic manager who forms target categories of returning migrants for each management level, allocates resources and coordinates the interaction of agents (universities, research associations, corporations) through a system of grants, subsidies, and administrative preferences.

A characteristic feature of this design is the multiplicity of programs (there are more than 43 at the national level alone, and over 200 at the subnational level)¹² implemented in both the public and private sectors. The balance of private and public allows for a flexible approach: on the one hand, the payment of significant amounts as lifting funds and for further development, on the other hand, institutional support – assistance in all aspects of social life, into which the returning migrant needs to reintegrate.

The effectiveness of return migration management in China can be represented in the qualitative characteristics of the compatriots involved.

At the national level, the Thousand Talents Plan program, which operated from 2008 to 2018, attracted more than 16,000 highly qualified scientists and technicians, while during the same period the number of returning professors exceeded the total for the previous 30 years (1978–2008) by more than 20 times.

More than half of the returning scientists had PhD degrees from the world's top 100 STEM programs. After their return, their scientific productivity increased – the number of publications increased by 27% compared to other researchers from China who remained abroad, and by 144 in terms of recent authorship¹³. In the research teams where the returnees work, there is an increase in productivity among Chinese colleagues who did not have foreign experience. By 2023, more than 70% of the heads of national scientific and technical projects, as well as presidents, deans and heads of departments, have returned from foreign countries. Thus, the impact of return migration on the national scientific ecosystem is confirmed.

At the regional level, for example, over 135,000 highly qualified personnel were attracted in Shanghai from 2019 to 2023, and more than 4,400 returning migrants received grants totaling almost 900 million yuan under the Pujiang Talent Program¹⁴.

Based on the analysis, three strategic areas of human capital management of returning migrants from among highly qualified personnel can be identified. They are embedded in a three-tier institutional design and cover the following aspects:

1. Networking with the Chinese student community abroad.

Associations of Chinese students and scientists in foreign countries (Chinese Students and Scholars Association – CSSA), which operate at most major foreign universities, play an important role. Formally an independent non-profit organization, CSSA organizes job fairs with the participation of Chinese companies and government agencies, holds strategic sessions and distributes information about support programs. With the help of CSSA, potential returning migrants receive up-to-date information about employment conditions at home, and employers provide direct access to the target audience of highly qualified personnel abroad.

2. The formation of network platforms within China.

In parallel with foreign networks, return migrant communities operate in China itself, providing channels for professional communication, experience exchange and mentoring, which accelerates the reintegration of Haigui into the academic and business environment. The platforms serve as a link between returning migrants and government institutions, facilitating their inclusion in professional communities and ensuring their interaction with potential employers and research centers. Unlike nationwide digital recruitment systems, these communities are often formed at the regional and local levels – around specific technology parks, research clusters, or municipal support programs – thereby directly closing the network resource to the lower floors of the three-level model.

3. Digitalization and platformization of employment.

Special job search platforms have been created, the strategic role of which is in brokerage. The platforms provide communication between disparate networks of returnees and employers. The digital platform was created to unify the employment system (job monitoring, candidate selection algorithm, data collection on specialists of various profiles). The state performs the functions of a strategic manager through a digital infrastructure based on artificial intelligence technologies, bringing together the supply and demand of highly qualified labor and promptly responding to changing industry personnel needs.

The effectiveness of platform solutions can be indirectly tracked based on data from the Zhaopin platform. In 2025, the number of applicants from among returning migrants increased by 12% compared to 2024, reaching a historic high. The total number of

¹² Zweig E.D. China's Talent Programs: Lessons for the United States? – URL: https://nap.nationalacademies.org/resource/27787/Zweig_ITP_Commissioned_Paper.pdf (Accessed: January, 18, 2026).

¹³ How China is vying to attract the world's top scientific talent. Nature. 2025. Vol. 642. P. 556. – URL: <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-025-01750-4> (Accessed: April, 23, 2026).

¹⁴ Shanghai Pujiang Talent Program welcomes overseas returnees. english.shanghai.gov.cn, 22.11.2024. – URL: <https://english.shanghai.gov.cn/en-InternationalTalentNode/20241122/37f204f706e14bea94cffe2c12cc78a8.html> (Accessed: January, 18, 2026).

applicants from among returning migrants increased by 2.25 times compared to 2018¹⁵

The described institutional architecture and network strategies create conditions for the professional reintegration of returning migrants. Based on the neo-institutional approach and the concept of «the state as a strategic manager», four main trajectories of the reintegration of return migrants into the labor market can be identified:

The first trajectory is reintegration into the field of science and research.

The choice of this trajectory is most relevant both for established scientists with knowledge in the field of priority industries, as well as for young researchers with PhD degrees and postdocs. Returning migrants can gain access to an academic trajectory through participation in government programs at various levels of return migration management. Returning researchers gain access to equipped laboratories and have the opportunity to join research teams. The possibilities of grant financing in natural and technical sciences up to 3 million have also been identified, yuan annually (in terms of the current exchange rate of the Russian ruble, about 34 million rubles).

The second trajectory is reintegration into entrepreneurship.

This trajectory is focused on the creation of innovative start-ups, mainly in high-tech fields. The main institutional channel of interaction is programs at the regional and local management levels, impact through partnerships with venture capital investment funds, as well as involvement in business incubators and technology parks.

The third trajectory is the reintegration into hiring in the commercial sector.

This career trajectory is relevant for specialists who have developed competencies in high-tech sectors of the economy. The government interacts with such specialists through job fairs, which are organized by associations of Chinese students and researchers abroad. Market mechanisms for increasing the interest of such specialists remain predominant – through recruitment platforms (for example, Zhaopin), as well as through corporate recruitment programs for the largest companies in China (Alibaba, Huawei and others).

The fourth career path is virtual reintegration.

The trajectory is not so much a direct result of institutional design as an objectively existing form of professional engagement. This trajectory can be followed by specialists who have remained involved in international projects or have retained links with research centers. As a rule, these are scientists and engineers who do not plan to lose their well-established transnational ties and do not plan a complete relocation. This phenomenon is called «brain connections», which implies the transnational contribution of the diaspora without physical return.

In the early 2000s, there was a steady trend of students leaving China abroad, but a turning point occurred in 2019. Since that period, the number of returning migrants who have received education has consistently exceeded the number who have left for training. A steady surplus indicates the effectiveness of institutional design, at least in the field of academic mobility.

If in the early 2000-ies, the annual number of departures has consistently exceeded the number of returnees, forming the phenomenon of «brain drain», then after 2009, the trends began to converge, and

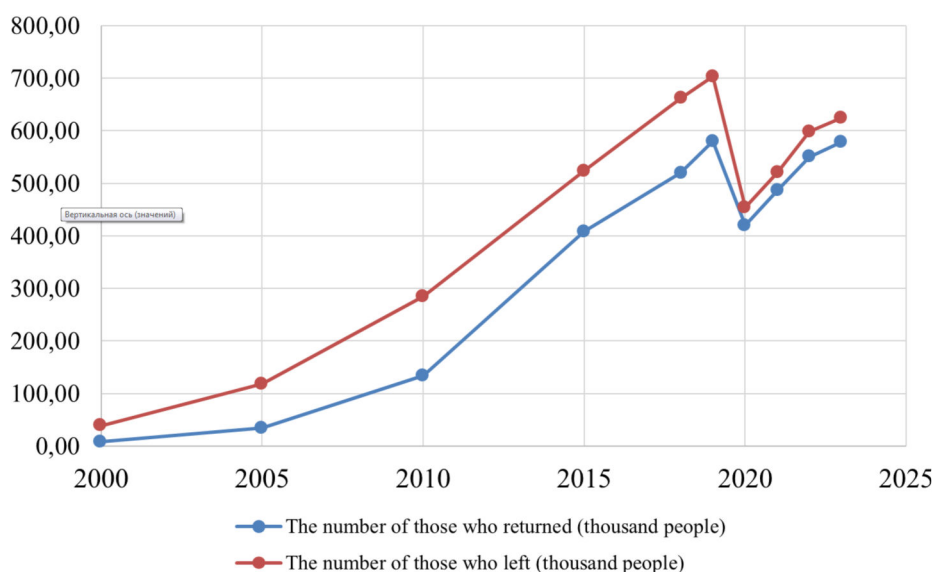


Figure 2 – Dynamics of the number of Chinese students who left and returned after studying in foreign countries in 2000–2023 (thousand people)

¹⁵ China Daily (11.02.2026): Opportunities, policies lure overseas talent back. – URL: <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202602/11/WS698bc411a310d6866eb38928.html> (Accessed: February, 25, 2026).

2019 for the first time in recent history, the annual number of returns consistently exceeds the number of people leaving. The peak «gap» in favor of outflow was observed in 2006 (about 134 thousand people), while by 2023 there was a steady «surplus» of return, exceeding 50-70 thousand people annually. This turning point is a key indicator of the effectiveness of the described institutional design.

Active management of return migration in China is also shaping changes in the labor market, as the government redirects flows of highly qualified personnel to strategically important industries.

An analysis of data from the Zhaopin recruitment platform shows that in sectors of the economy where artificial intelligence and robotics are actively used, employers are experiencing a shortage of personnel and are potentially interested in employing returning migrants. In the first and third quarters of 2025, the number of vacancies for AI product managers increased by 178% compared to the same period last year. The number of resumes is also increasing: in the field of artificial intelligence – about 35%, robotics – 75%, the use of new materials – 90%¹⁶.

The return migration management model faces management challenges that create a structural imbalance in the labor market. The proportion of returning migrants who have received humanitarian and business education remains significant. An oversupply is being created with a shortage of personnel in high-tech industries. Companies in high-tech industries compete for a limited number of specialists, offering significant salaries and social privileges, while specialists with soft competencies remain unclaimed¹⁷.

Signs of the territorial distribution of returning highly skilled migrants are confirmed by the latest data for April 2026: about 12 million Chinese moved from megacities and from abroad to county centers and small towns, initiating entrepreneurial projects, restoring local production facilities or joining remote work in high-tech companies. Returning migrants choose not only Beijing and Shanghai, but also second- and third-tier cities such as Chongqing, Chengdu and the Greater Bay Area, which has a positive impact on the development of local infrastructure.

According to a sociological study published on the HiredChina portal, highly qualified specialists who have left global centers reproduce in their interviews several overlapping motives for returning:

- the availability of institutional support «on the ground» (premises, first contracts, mentoring);
- access to modern laboratory and digital infrastructure;
- the feeling of being in demand for one's own competencies;

– the desire to raise children in their native cultural environment.

As confirmation, the opinions of individual returning migrants are given below:

A 34-year-old man, an IT specialist who returned to Chengdu from the USA:

«I used to think that my career was possible only in Silicon Valley, but now I see that here in Chengdu, I can not just work, but create something of my own. The local authorities helped with the office and the first contracts, and this is a completely different level of support than I expected».

A 29-year-old woman, an entrepreneur who returned from the UK to Hangzhou:

«Many of my friends were afraid to return because they thought there were no prospects here. But when I saw the conditions for startups, I realized that it was even more interesting than staying in London. I feel that my knowledge is truly needed here».

A 41-year-old robotics engineer who returned from Germany to Shenzhen:

«I left when there was nothing here, but now the labs are better than in Europe. Plus, I'm home, and my children are growing up in their own culture. That's worth a lot»¹⁸.

The Chinese model of regulating return migration not only encourages physical return, but also encourages professionals to choose to pursue their careers within the national innovation ecosystem, often outside of major cities.

■ DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed the specific features of the Chinese model of regulating return migration: the presence of a three-tiered institutional architecture for different target categories of necessary personnel, the presence of a brokerage position in the diaspora's network structures, and the implementation of digital platforms that provide predictive analysis of personnel needs based on the use of artificial intelligence technologies. The existing configuration of management practices allows not only to regulate migration flows but also to actively direct them towards national priorities.

The innovation of the Chinese model lies not in the instruments of stimulation themselves, but in the formation of a holistic system of strategic management of human capital, which is revealed in this study. Thanks to the open data on the Internet about the process of promoting highly qualified return migration, it is possible to see not only the scale of return of certain categories, but also the qualitative effects expressed in the consolidation of scientific teams and the circulation of knowledge.

¹⁶ Zhaopin.com (2026). – URL: <https://www.zhaopin.com/> (Accessed: March, 05, 2026).

¹⁷ Center for China and Globalization (CCG). Blue Book of Global Talent: Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Students Studying Abroad (2023). Beijing: CCG Press, 2023. – URL: <https://www.ccg.org.cn/archives/70043> (Accessed: March, 05, 2026).

¹⁸ HiredChina. Return Migration Economy: 12 Million Chinese Return to Rural Areas and Counties. 12.04.2026. – URL: <https://www.hiredchina.com/articles/20260412-return-migration-economy> (Accessed: March, 05, 2026).

The key contradiction in China's return migration management model lies in the conflict between the principles of academic freedom, international knowledge exchange, and national security imperatives that require confidentiality and protection of state interests. Despite the positive trends in knowledge circulation, it should be noted that the implementation of the return migration model in China is taking place against the backdrop of geopolitical turbulence, which could potentially lead to increased institutional.

In these circumstances, for some potential return migrants, the decision to return may be forced. In academic discussions, this contradiction has been referred to as «dual loyalty» where there is a tension between the demands of the state and the international scientific community. Return migrants are expected to publish research in international peer-reviewed journals, but as regulations become stricter, valuable academic connections may be lost. As regulations become more stringent, «dual loyalty» may become a dangerous phenomenon and lead to the re-migration of highly skilled professionals.

Formalization and control over existing social networks have certain *limitations*. Naturally organized social relationships in the professional environment are based on common interests, trust, and solidarity, which can further develop informally, not only for solving governmental tasks.

On the contrary, government digital platforms for interacting with return migrants can stimulate critical reflection on government policies. Informal channels, such as messaging apps, social media groups, and professional communities, remain popular and generate alternative narratives. Therefore, it may be more effective to integrate government information modules into existing ecosystems rather than replace them.

Graduates of local higher education institutions and returning graduates of foreign educational institutions are more likely to apply for positions with higher starting conditions. This asymmetry in starting conditions can potentially increase competition in the labor market. Managing potential conflicts within individual elite groups in China is a challenge that requires the use of mechanisms for bringing members of a social group closer together, joint projects, and transparent career development mechanisms. The primary goal of addressing this challenge is to create a transparent management system that does not create significant advantages for one social group at the expense of another.

Support for entrepreneurial projects is also concentrated in areas that are conceptually suitable for the «new productive forces» There are various problems with access to infrastructure projects for return migrants, such as bureaucracy and a lack of mentorship programs. Most entrepreneurs rely on their own savings at the beginning of their entrepreneurial journey, rather than on existing support infrastructure,

which potentially indicates a gap between the target categories of return migrants and the established institutional design. Entrepreneurial activity exacerbates territorial inequality. There are magnet cities, such as Beijing (Zhongguancun), Shanghai, Shenzhen, Hangzhou, and Guangzhou, where opportunities for high-tech startups are concentrated. Peripheral areas, despite the offered benefits packages, are not competitive due to a lack of a comfortable urban environment, developed human resources, and venture infrastructure.

The model of managing return migration does not fully focus on the gender component of the motivation of return migrants, which leads to an underutilization of women's potential. Standard economic incentives for return, which are primarily based on economic feasibility, do not always have an impact on women. Not all government or private programs offer solutions to household issues, which can exacerbate the psychological discomfort of female return migrants during their reintegration process, regardless of their marital status.

A critical analysis of the model of return migration management within the framework of this study allows us to formulate theoretical and practical implications. There are three main theoretical implications. The concept of «the state as a strategic manager» of human capital management among return migrants is developed, showing the possibilities and contradictions of strict government regulation. By using a theoretical approach based on social networks, it is possible to identify the mechanisms of co-optation and attraction of return migrants, as well as the resistance of informal structures. The study further develops the idea of the consequences of the «brain circulation» process: return migration creates new social contradictions (increased inequality, tension between return migrants and the local community, and conflict of loyalties).

Based on the identified contradictions, we can identify several promising areas for developing a model for managing return migration in China:

1. Focusing not only on attracting and primary social adaptation, but also on retaining return migrants and their successful reintegration into Chinese society.
2. Developing mechanisms for the cohesion of return migrants and the host professional community through the development of mentorship institutions and joint project programs.
3. Establishing flexible formats for international cooperation, particularly in the academic field, while maintaining China's national security priorities.
4. Revising strategies for informing return migrants about support measures and integrating government digital platforms into existing professional community communication ecosystems.
5. Analyzing support programs for various categories of return migrants who are vulnerable in

the labor market, such as providing flexible career paths and assistance in balancing career and parental responsibilities.

6. Promoting the territorial redistribution of talent by creating a comfortable environment not only in major financial hubs but also in the periphery.

■ CONCLUSION

The study of the Chinese model of return migration as part of the overall strategy for developing human potential provides insight into managerial innovations in the context of digital transformation. The Chinese case of managing return migration demonstrates that the management of human capital now requires going beyond traditional managerial practices, including HR management. To successfully attract labor resources in a changing geopolitical environment, it is necessary to design complex institutional environments, create social networks through transnational cooperation, and automate the process of finding highly qualified personnel.

The conceptual model presented in this study demonstrates that each of the identified career trajectories is a natural product of the interaction between institutional rules, network resources, and digital infrastructure:

- the academic trajectory relies on national grant programs and scientific associations;
- the entrepreneurial trajectory relies on local business incubators and venture capital mechanisms;
- the employment trajectory relies on digital recruitment platforms and job fairs;
- the virtual reintegration trajectory relies on transnational professional networks.

The novelty of the presented model lies in identifying the systemic logic that connects incentives, networks, and technologies into a holistic mechanism for strategic human capital management. Predictive analytics and machine learning algorithms on government recruitment platforms help the government adapt to changes in the labor market and redirect human capital to the most critical sectors of the Chinese economy.

Recommendations for further development of the return migration management model in China may be useful for Russia. Currently, Russia is just entering the race for talent, and changes in state repatriation policies can be predicted. However, the development directions can be adapted to the practices of Russian public administration and the current social reality.

Currently, the Russian state migration policy is focused on promoting repatriation, which involves facilitating the voluntary resettlement of compatriots living abroad and their reunification with their historical homeland. The task of developing a specific support program for return migration, targeting citizens who have received education and professional experience abroad, remains relevant and requires further conceptual development.

At the same time, the management model for repatriation policy in Russia is differentiated by region, which independently form support measures for return migrants, which often leads to non-systematic solutions and a lack of a clear «customer journey» for compatriots, from relocation to adaptation.

An analysis of the Chinese model in the context of the current Russian reality allows us to identify a number of key lessons for possible study:

1. Attracting businesses and digital platforms, as well as promoting the formation of social networks – associations of compatriots and professional communities abroad with the participation of the state.
2. Creating regional points of attraction for highly qualified return migrants, which will be competitive compared to Moscow and St. Petersburg.
3. Forming target categories of return migrants, as well as developing benchmarks for regions on successful integration and retention.
4. Providing comprehensive support for return migrants to reintegrate their family members, including assistance in finding employment for spouses, enrolling children in kindergartens and schools, and helping them access healthcare services, among other social and domestic aspects.
5. Utilizing the institution of mentorship and guidance for return migrants, including those planning to commercialize innovations.

The Chinese model may also be of interest to countries that actively attract talent, such as the United Arab Emirates. For this country, which implements «golden visa» programs and creates innovative hubs, adapting Chinese approaches to managing return migration could be beneficial for developing incentives to encourage Emiratis who have received education abroad to return, as well as for creating ecosystems aimed at retaining highly skilled professionals. In addition, China's experience in using digital platforms and online communities for the labor reintegration of return migrants resonates with the concept of «smart government» which is being actively implemented in the United Arab Emirates. The goal of this concept is to improve the efficiency of public administration and create an integrated management system.

Returning to the model of return migration in China, it is worth noting that sustainability and adaptability will depend on reflecting on the «uncomfortable data» of secondary migration and finding a balance between government regulation and preserving the freedom of choice for return migrants, as well as between the challenges of maintaining national technological sovereignty and the need to support transnational knowledge transfer.

Quantitative indicators of return show the effectiveness of the current management model, while critical analysis reveals systemic contradictions. A key feature of the Chinese model is its exceptional focus on highly skilled personnel. At the same time, China is one of the largest suppliers of labor to global

labor markets. For example, in Russia, the Chinese have long been the largest group in the labor market. The Chinese government has not shown any interest in returning low-skilled workers, which highlights the importance of professional status in Chinese society for access to certain economic and social benefits. Millions of Chinese people who work around the world are likely to face difficulties in adapting to their new home when they physically return, which can make their social status vulnerable. The study of China's return migration model contributes to the ongoing discourse on social inequality in China.

Additional research areas that will provide an in-depth understanding of the process of managing return migration in China include:

- research on the narratives of return migrants after relocation and a certain period of residence in China to assess the level of satisfaction with the relocation, the stability of employment

status, and the formation of experience of reintegration into society;

- study of the interaction between agents (representatives of the community of return migrants and the host community) and the emerging social practices, for example, within the same organization;

- consideration of the phenomenon of persistent transnational intellectual connections without physical return to the country, with virtual cooperation and knowledge transfer to Chinese society.

- analysis of the regional distribution of return migrants and the motivational factors that determine the choice of a particular territory;

- study of gender/ethnic/professional aspects and their impact on the specifics of the post-adaptation period.

These areas are universal and can be used to study the Russian experience of managing the return migration of compatriots.

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