

# Rural Roots, Urban Dreams? The Dilemmas of Migration, Place Attachment, and Social Mobility for Contemporary Youth

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**Abstract:** In contemporary societies marked by rapid urbanization and entrenched regional disparities, rural-to-urban migration has become a dominant narrative of social mobility for youth. This paper critically examines the multidimensional dilemmas faced by young migrants from rural and small-town backgrounds as they pursue the “urban dream.” Drawing on concepts such as place attachment, social capital, and precarity, the study explores the structural drivers of migration, the emotional and institutional barriers to integration, and the contested outcomes of mobility. While cities offer opportunities for economic improvement and personal development, the migration process often entails emotional dislocation, stigmatized identities, and fragile gains. Many migrants experience “suspended mobility,” in which material advancement is decoupled from symbolic or social inclusion. Others return to their hometowns, not necessarily as a result of failure, but as a strategy of re-rooting and redefinition in the face of structural ceilings and urban precarity. The paper argues that mobility for contemporary youth is not linear nor unidirectional, but rather negotiated through adaptive strategies, shifting values, and reconfigured aspirations. It calls for a reconceptualization of mobility that incorporates affective, spatial, and relational dimensions. The findings highlight the need for policy reforms that promote regional equity, reduce institutional exclusions, and support diverse forms of youth agency. Ultimately, understanding how youth navigate the tensions between rural roots and urban dreams offers critical insights into the geography of inequality and the evolving meanings of success.

**Keywords:** youth migration, social mobility, place attachment, urban inequality, rural-urban dynamics, precarity, hukou system

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## 1 Introduction: Setting the Stage

Every year, during the Spring Festival migration—the world’s largest annual human migration—millions of young people travel from China’s megacities back to their rural hometowns. Among them are former “小镇做题家” (small-town exam warriors), individuals who excelled in the education system to escape rural constraints, only to find themselves struggling with alienation, precarity, and an ambiguous sense of achievement in the city. Their journeys reflect more than seasonal reunion; they symbolize a deeper social tension between rural roots and urban dreams.

In an era of rapid urbanization and global mobility, cities have become powerful symbols of modernity, opportunity, and social advancement. For youth—particularly those from rural or underdeveloped regions—migration to urban centers is often perceived as the primary pathway to socioeconomic mobility (Chan & Buckingham, 2008). Youthhood, as a critical phase in the life course, is marked by aspirations for independence, identity formation, and class transition. However, the process of rural-to-urban migration is rarely linear or unproblematic. The promise of mobility is frequently entangled with emotional displacement, institutional exclusion, and structural inequalities.

This paper explores the multi-dimensional dilemmas faced by contemporary youth engaging in rural-to-urban migration. While urban areas offer potential gains in income, education, and career prospects, migrants often experience emotional dislocation, cultural marginalization, and persistent barriers to full social incorporation. Place attachment—defined as the emotional and symbolic bonds between individuals and specific localities (Gieryn,

2000)—complicates the pursuit of mobility, while structural impediments such as the hukou system, limited access to social capital, and precarious labor markets further constrain outcomes.

I argue that youth from rural or small-town backgrounds experience a core dilemma in their pursuit of upward mobility: they must navigate between structural push-pull forces, deep-rooted emotional ties to home, and the uncertain realities of urban life. This dilemma not only shapes their life strategies and subjective well-being but also reveals enduring spatial inequalities in social mobility.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section II investigates the economic and symbolic forces sustaining the urban dream; Section III analyzes the emotional, social, and economic dilemmas of migration; Section IV evaluates the tangible and intangible outcomes of such mobility; Section V examines youth agency and adaptive strategies; and Section VI concludes with policy and theoretical implications.

## **2 The Pull: Why the “Urban Dream” Persists — Driving Forces for Migration**

Despite mounting evidence of hardship and marginalization, the allure of the “urban dream” remains powerful among contemporary youth, especially those from rural and small-town origins. This persistent aspiration is shaped by a convergence of structural opportunities, symbolic imaginaries, and personal ambitions, which together construct cities as spaces of possibility and escape. Understanding these driving forces is essential to contextualizing the dilemmas explored later in this paper.

### **2.1 Structural Pull Factors: Uneven Development and Policy Biases**

At the macro level, urban centers in countries like China, India, and Brazil represent concentrated zones of economic growth, high-value employment, and infrastructural development, a result of decades of policy-driven urban primacy (Logan, 2002). The urban-rural opportunity gap remains stark: cities offer diversified job markets, higher wages, advanced educational institutions, and comprehensive public services—including healthcare, transportation, and cultural amenities (Chan, 2010). In contrast, rural and peri-urban areas often suffer from underinvestment, industrial decline, and limited institutional support.

Moreover, national development strategies frequently privilege urban agglomerations as engines of modernization and global competitiveness. China's “urbanization-led development” strategy, for instance, channels fiscal and infrastructural resources disproportionately toward coastal megacities and provincial capitals. Such state-structured inequality entrenches migration as a necessity for upward mobility.

### **2.2 The Symbolic Power of the City**

Beyond material benefits, cities occupy a symbolic centrality in modern imaginaries. As Bourdieu (1984) suggests, spatial hierarchies mirror social hierarchies: cities are sites where symbolic capital—cosmopolitanism, modern lifestyles, access to high culture—is accrued and displayed. Youth raised in small towns often internalize narratives portraying the city as a place of self-actualization, autonomy, and liberation from restrictive traditional norms.

Media representations reinforce these imaginaries. Television dramas, social media influencers, and returning migrants frequently construct the city as a realm of endless opportunity, selectively highlighting urban consumption, nightlife, and career success while obscuring precarity or alienation. Such representations contribute to what Appadurai (1996) calls “imagined worlds”—affective geographies that shape aspirations even before one migrates.

## **3 The Cost and The Barrier: Navigating the Dilemmas of Migration**

Migration, while promising social mobility, also entails a complex and often painful reconfiguration of identity, relationships, and belonging. For many rural-origin youth, the path to urban integration is not simply blocked by external structural barriers, but also burdened by internal contradictions—emotional dislocation, cultural misalignment, and precarious existence. This section dissects three major dimensions of these dilemmas: emotional, social, and economic.

### **3.1 Emotional Dilemma: Place Attachment, Dislocation, and Identity Tensions**

Although cities are often imagined as sites of liberation, migration severs deep-rooted emotional ties. The concept of

place attachment refers to the symbolic, cultural, and affective bonds between individuals and specific geographic locations (Gieryn, 2000). For rural youth, hometowns are more than places of origin—they are spaces imbued with memory, kinship, and identity.

Leaving these spaces may provoke longing, nostalgia, and loneliness, especially in the initial period of migration. These feelings are not merely psychological but have social consequences: migrants may experience alienation, a loss of cultural grounding, and difficulty establishing new identities in unfamiliar urban environments.

Many migrants experience what sociologists describe as “double marginality” or “dual estrangement” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994)—feeling neither fully at home in the city nor entirely belonging to the hometown they once left. As their values, lifestyles, and social networks evolve, they may find themselves distanced from rural peers, while remaining outsiders in the city’s dominant urban culture. This delocalization of identity leaves them caught between worlds.

### **3.2 Social Integration Dilemma: Capital Deficit, Institutional Exclusion, and Spatial Segregation**

Urban integration is not just a matter of individual adjustment; it is shaped by social capital structures and institutional access. Unlike urban-born youth, rural migrants often arrive in cities without weak-tie networks—those crucial for job referrals, housing, or bureaucratic navigation (Granovetter, 1973). Their existing strong ties (family, neighbors) are geographically distant and often socially limited in terms of resource leverage.

Moreover, structural exclusion persists. China’s hukou (household registration) system, though reformed in some cities, still restricts access to public services such as subsidized housing, education for children, healthcare, and pensions. This entrenches a de facto urban-citizen vs. migrant dichotomy, reinforcing feelings of second-class status.

Migrants are also burdened by stigmatized rural identities, especially in elite urban spaces. Discriminatory assumptions about accents, dress, etiquette, and even educational backgrounds often relegate them to peripheral roles both socially and symbolically. In some cases, this leads to internalized inferiority or self-censorship, further undermining social confidence and integration.

Compounding these issues is residential segregation. Many youth migrants reside in urban villages, dormitory compounds, or outskirts where infrastructure is poor and social mixing minimal. These liminal spaces reproduce the marginality of their social position and limit upward mobility through spatial and symbolic distancing from urban cores (Wu et al., 2013).

## **4 The Outcome: Social Mobility Gains, Limitations, and the Question of "Success"**

The dominant migration narrative often presents rural-to-urban mobility as a linear path toward prosperity and class ascension. However, this trajectory is rarely straightforward. For many youth migrants, the outcomes of migration are partial, fragile, or ambiguous, marked by modest gains, persistent ceilings, and shifting notions of success. This section critically evaluates the gains, constraints, and redefinitions of mobility through migration, concluding with a reflection on the contested meaning of “returning” home.

### **4.1 Incremental Gains: Material Improvement and Future Potential**

Despite numerous challenges, rural-origin youth do report tangible material improvements post-migration. These gains are often incremental and relative rather than transformative. In purely economic terms, young migrants may experience increased personal income, improved consumption capacity, and the ability to remit money to families or accumulate modest savings. Some use these savings to finance home renovations, weddings, or children’s education, fulfilling both individual goals and family expectations.

Beyond the financial, urban life may also offer expanded social horizons and personal development. Migrants often describe acquiring new skills, professional experience, and greater self-confidence. For youth who come from highly homogeneous, surveilled rural environments, cities offer anonymity and space for identity experimentation—a key dimension of personal autonomy and psychological growth (Giddens, 1991).

Another critical outcome lies in the potential for intergenerational mobility. Even if the migrant themselves remains in

precarious conditions, their children may benefit from improved educational resources and a more cosmopolitan cultural environment, effectively “investing” in the next generation’s chances of class mobility.

## 4.2 Constraints and Ceilings: When Mobility Stalls

However, these gains often coexist with deep structural constraints that limit upward movement. As discussed earlier, institutional exclusions (such as the hukou system), labor market segmentation, and social discrimination form a set of glass ceilings that are difficult to break through. Even among educated migrants, many find themselves permanently suspended in low-status positions, unable to translate their credentials into status or recognition.

This phenomenon—described by some scholars as “suspended mobility” (Fan, 2022)—is particularly salient in the context of neoliberal cities, where formal equality masks structural exclusion. Economic improvement may not be matched by symbolic or social advancement; youth remain outsiders in both workplace hierarchies and cultural spaces.

Worse, for those engaged in precarious or informal labor, mobility gains are highly reversible. A single life event—injury, unemployment, family emergency—can rapidly erode years of effort, returning migrants to survival mode. In such cases, the emotional toll of migration may outweigh its material benefits, producing a sense of regret, shame, or resignation.

## 5 Agency Amid Constraints: Youth Negotiating Pathways and Evolving Meanings of Mobility

While structural inequalities shape the contours of youth migration, young people are not passive victims of circumstance. Rather, they often display remarkable adaptability, creativity, and resilience in navigating urban life and redefining what mobility means. This section explores the strategic actions youth migrants take to cope with uncertainty, reconstruct networks, and reimagine success, thereby exercising agency within constraints.

### 5.1 Strategic Adaptations: Diversifying Mobility Practices

Faced with exclusionary structures, many youth adopt non-linear and flexible migration strategies. Seasonal and circular migration remains common, allowing individuals to balance urban work with rural familial obligations. Others engage in dual-location lives, maintaining ties in both city and countryside—living with kin in rural areas while working in adjacent towns, or traveling frequently between hometowns and urban centers.

A growing number of youth experiment with digital livelihoods, such as livestreaming, e-commerce, or remote freelancing. These activities enable them to bypass traditional labor hierarchies and forge hybrid forms of work that link urban markets with rural living (de Kloet & Fung, 2017). Such strategies reflect a shift away from singular “urban futures” toward more plural, negotiated life paths.

Some returnees engage in local entrepreneurship, leveraging accumulated skills and social capital to start businesses in rural areas—particularly in tourism, education, or agriculture. Though often fragile, these efforts demonstrate a desire to root economic activity in familiar landscapes, and to convert migration into local advantage.

### 5.2 Rebuilding Social Capital: Networks, Solidarity, and Belonging

Youth migrants also actively cultivate alternative social networks to compensate for the urban capital deficit. These include same-hometown associations, online support groups, or labor solidarity networks. Such forms of bonding provide not only practical help—e.g., job referrals, housing tips—but also emotional support and a sense of collective identity.

In some cases, migrants reconstruct “intentional communities” with roommates or coworkers, producing new relational forms of belonging beyond family or hometown ties. This reflects a move from inherited to constructed social capital, aligning with the changing conditions of youth subjectivity under late modernity (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

## 6 Conclusion: Dilemmas, Inequities, and Future Directions

This paper has examined the complex landscape of rural-to-urban migration among contemporary youth, highlighting how the pursuit of social mobility is embedded in a multidimensional dilemma—one that entangles economic aspirations, emotional attachments, and structural constraints. While cities continue to represent the symbolic and material promise of advancement, they also reproduce systems of exclusion, precarity, and alienation that shape the everyday realities of

rural-origin youth.

Through analyzing the structural drivers of migration, the emotional and institutional obstacles to integration, the partial and fragile nature of mobility outcomes, and the adaptive strategies of youth, this paper argues that mobility is no longer reducible to a linear ascent. Instead, it unfolds as a contingent, negotiated process, shaped as much by affect and place as by class and capital. The title's central question—"Rural Roots, Urban Dreams?"—does not admit a simple answer. Rather, it invites recognition of the persistent structural imbalance between regions, and the emotional and cultural weight of rural belonging, both of which challenge the dominant model of urban-centered upward mobility.

Importantly, this analysis foregrounds the geographic and institutional inequalities embedded in contemporary development. Systems such as the hukou regime, urban labor segmentation, and symbolic stigma not only restrict migrants' opportunities, but also render their success fragile and conditional. A critical sociology of migration must thus integrate place, emotion, and identity into the study of social mobility, moving beyond economic indicators to capture lived experience.

Understanding and addressing the dilemmas faced by today's mobile youth is not only an academic exercise. It is a moral and political imperative—one that speaks to the future of social justice, regional equity, and what it truly means to "move up" in a rapidly changing world.

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