

Spatial Mobility and Sense of Belonging: Micro Trajectories of Chinese Rural Migrants and Returnees

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Abstract

Quantitative migration studies often simplify Chinese rural migration to one-time events, overlooking micro-dynamic trajectories. Based on life history interviews with 33 rural migrants and returnees from the same rural area, this study identifies four trajectory types across urban administrative levels: move-up, move-down, drift-out, and shuttle. Findings reveal migration as a dynamic and continuous state. Crucially, regardless of spatial trajectories, most migrants maintain a strong sense of belonging to their rural hometown. This tension between high mobility and persistent identity affiliation challenges traditional integration narratives, underscoring the indispensable value of a humanistic perspective.

Keywords: Rural migration; Life history; Trajectories; Sense of belonging.

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1.0 Introduction

Since the 1980s, the migration of rural residents to major cities has been the dominant trend in China's population movement. Today, with the advancement of urbanization, the improvement of transportation networks, and the slowdown in economic growth, population migration between rural and urban areas has moved beyond the early phase of rural migrants moving to cities for work and settling there permanently. Outward migration from rural areas, as well as the return of rural migrants, has become increasingly frequent, fragmented, and multidirectional (Wang et al., 2022). During this phase, the Chinese central government has also introduced national-level policies such as the "Rural Revitalization" and "Beautiful Rural Areas" initiatives to support the development and construction of rural regions (Geng et al., 2023).

A large body of quantitative research using aggregated data has provided a general overview of migration patterns and trends at the national level, and numerous regional studies have contributed to the development of regional migration models (Qin & Liao, 2016). However, for statistical convenience, quantitative models tend to simplify migration into a one-time, unidirectional event—"from point A to point B." Census-based survey data typically provide only cross-regional flow charts for inter-provincial and intra-provincial migration, reflecting population movements at a specific point in time (Qi, 2019). It is difficult to say that these provide a comprehensive picture of rural migration in China. Furthermore, quantitative research often overlooks the human significance of the migration process; when migration is reduced to a quantifiable vector event, the individual experiences, emotional journeys, and social significance of migrants

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are neglected. Therefore, we need a micro-level, humanistic perspective to reconstruct the micro-dynamic trajectories of migrants' life courses.

Traditional narratives of migrant assimilation often assume a linear relationship: that long-term urban residence and spatial mobility will gradually erode an individual's original identity and foster a psychological sense of belonging to their current place of residence (Gratton et al., 2007). However, when migration is no longer a one-time journey from point A to point B, but rather manifests as continuous, fragmented movements and returns between cities at different administrative levels, this classic theory—that "length of residence determines a sense of belonging"—faces a challenge. Complex micro-spatial trajectories often place migrants' minds and bodies in a tug-of-war between "mobility" and "place." (Brown et al., 2015) This raises a question that macro-level quantitative data cannot answer: in dynamic, long-term spatial mobility, where exactly does migrants' subjective self-identity point to? What tensions exist between high spatial mobility and long-lasting regional belonging?

The primary objective of this study is to explore, from a humanistic perspective, the complex interactions between the spatial mobility patterns of rural migrants and returnees in China and their sense of belonging throughout their life courses. This study identifies the following three specific research objectives: First, to identify and categorize the types of trajectories of rural migrants; second, to determine how these different patterns of spatial mobility influence migrants' sense of belonging to their hometowns; finally, to establish a theoretical understanding of migration as a "continuous dynamic state" rather than a "one-time event."

2.0 Literature review

Traditional research on migration often simplifies the migration of rural migrants in China into a unidirectional, linear process toward major cities. Most research methods rely on quantitative data surveys conducted at national or interprovincial level (W. Li et al., 2023); Majority of them adopt metropolitan-centric approach (Sun et al., 2022). Issues such as rural migrants' adaptation to large cities (X. Li et al., 2025), access to public services (Zou & Deng, 2022), and crime rates (Liu & Shen, 2026) are thus examined. However, recent literature indicates that the mobility of rural migrants in China has entered a new phase characterized by high fragmentation, multidirectional re-migration, and return (Zhang et al., 2025). To capture this transformation, research in recent years has increasingly adopted a micro-level perspective. The focus of analysis has shifted from static cross-sectional events at a large geographical scale to perceptions and experiences at the individual or community level (Zhou & Tang, 2022). However, existing research faces limitations when adopting these micro-level perspectives: traditional frameworks tend to homogenize specific urban areas as single, permanent destinations, in other words, a given city may serve merely as a temporary stopover in the migration process, and temporary settlements may differ in administrative level and geographic distance, leading to potentially vast differences in individual experiences and perceptions.

Traditional linear assimilation theories typically assume a positive correlation between geographic settlement and individual psychological integration; they argue that long-term residence in a destination or upward social mobility will diminish identification with one's hometown while fostering a sense of belonging to the destination city (Gratton et al., 2007). In the process of urbanization, as transportation networks become more convenient, the geographical distances people migrate, and the frequency of their movements have dramatically changed. This unidirectional logic of "time fostering identity" has begun to fail. Literature on trans-locality has increasingly appeared in recent migration studies. This perspective suggests that migrants' self-identity is not tied to a single place but is simultaneously rooted in dynamic networks of mobility (Markov, 2015). However, existing research on trans-local identity still largely relies on static, cross-sectional quantitative data, overlooking migrants' life trajectories and dynamic mobility. It fails to explore how migrants' sense of belonging dynamically shifts along their spatial trajectories as they move back and forth between places.

To address the shortcomings of existing research, this study establishes an analytical framework that integrates "spatial trajectories" and "sense of belonging." By analyzing life history data from 33 migrants and returnees from the same village, through qualitative data, it clearly demonstrates how physical mobility and sense belonging mutually influence one another in an era of frequent movement.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Sampling

The participants in this study included 33 rural migrants and returnees from Shuangfeng County, Hunan Province. Hunan Province is a historical source of out-migration, primarily targeting the economic center of neighboring Guangdong Province (Figure 1). The field survey was conducted in two phases: the first, from March 25 to April 11, 2023, during which 19 respondents born in Shuangfeng County but currently residing in Guangzhou were interviewed. The second phase was conducted from May 1 to May 7, 2023, with survey locations in Loudi City, Hunan Province, and Shuangfeng County itself. During this period, a total of 14 migrants who had moved within Hunan Province and returnees were interviewed.

The survey employed snowball sampling approach, and all interviews were conducted in person. Prior to the formal interviews, the researchers obtained informed consent from the participants through both written signatures and verbal agreements. All personal information has been de-identified in this paper; the subsequent analysis refers to participants only by their code names.

3.2 Data collection

During the interviews, participants were asked to narrate their life histories, beginning with childhood memories and ending with their current place of residence. Throughout the process, researcher guided the participants and fully documented the key spatial nodes and temporal milestones in their migration journeys. The analysis of migrants and returnees in this study is based on Huiming Du's life-history framework for urban-migration interviews (Du, 2018). Each respondent's geographic move is strictly classified and coded

according to China's official urban administrative levels (county, prefecture-level city, provincial capital, and municipalities directly under the central government) to capture institutional resource disparities across different migration destinations accurately. The face-to-face interviews averaged 47 minutes, ranging from 15 to 134 minutes.

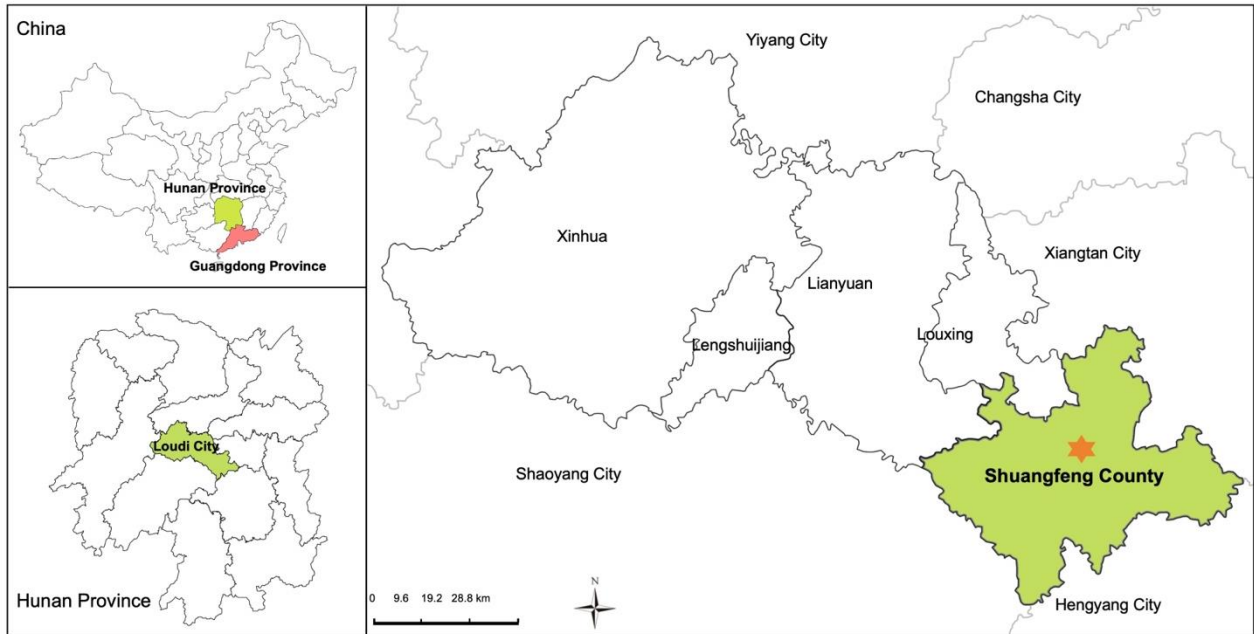


Fig. 1: Study area: Shuangfeng county

3.3 Data analysis

All audio recordings were digitized and transcribed. This study employed the timeline mapping method to conduct a longitudinal qualitative analysis of the texts. The first step involved cross-referencing and integrating each interviewee's geospatial migration nodes with their life-course timeline to map their individual geographic movement trajectories. The second step involved a cross-sectional comparison of 33 life history trajectories, coding each instance of movement to derive four micro-geospatial mobility patterns ultimately. The third step involved conducting a correlation analysis between these four spatial trajectory models and the "sense of belonging" subjectively reported by some interviewees, thereby revealing the inherent tension between physical migration paths and the reconstruction of psychological identity.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Descriptive result

The average age of the 33 respondents was 46; the median age was 47; 46.7% were male; 21.2% were only children; 63.6% had received higher education or vocational education; 21.2% were unmarried; 19 of them currently reside in cities outside their home province, accounting for 57.6%; 12 had returned to their hometowns, accounting for 36.3%; 2 resided in cities within the province near their hometowns, accounting for 6.1%. Among all respondents, only 6 migrants living outside the province reported a sense of belonging to their current city of residence, accounting for 18.2%; The remaining 27, including 12 returnees, 13 migrants to cities outside the province, and 2 migrants to cities within the province, all reported a sense of belonging to their hometowns (see Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive result

	Frequency	Percent
Age(mean)	46.7	
Gender(male)	14	42.4
Hukou type(rural)	4	12.1
Parents in rural area(yes)	24	72.7
Only child(yes)	7	21.2
Education		
Middle school	7	21.2
High school	5	15.2
College or above	21	63.6
Marriage(no)	7	21.2

Migration type		
Inter-provincial	19	57.6
Intra-provincial	2	6.1
Return	12	36.3
Belonging to hometown(no)	6	18.2
Total	33	100

4.2 Mapping migration in time and space

Based on the migration trajectories reported by the 33 respondents and key life events extracted from their narratives, a comprehensive diagram (Figure 1) was created. We created migration trajectory diagrams for each respondent; however, due to space constraints in this article and the length of the diagrams, we present the most representative four respondents. These diagrams also illustrate the four migration patterns that will be detailed in the following subsection. In the figure, the X-axis represents time, and the Y-axis represents space or geographical levels based on administrative divisions. Along the x-axis, key life events described by the respondents and their corresponding time points are also marked on the migration trajectory map.

The life history survey also collected extensive data on the migration trajectories and return flows of migrants and returnees. Based on mobility characteristics after leaving Shuangfeng, 33 migration trajectories were categorized into four types, and a topological structure of spatial mobility within the sample was further constructed (Table 2).

Table 2. From migration trajectories to a typology of spatial mobility

	Frequency	Sample Code		Frequency	Sample Code
Move up	13		Drift out	4	
2	3	01JH, 03ZR, 18HC	212	1	06WL
2+	4	05LX, 13LY, 14HY, 17HY	121	1	11JZ
12	4	07YZ, 08ZF, 09CY, 19QJ	2212	1	12JY
12+	2	04XT, 10ZY	121+	1	21WQ
Move down	9		Shuttle	7	
2+0	3	23CZ, 26ZH, 27ZD	10202	1	02QS
2+10	1	24WY	1202	1	15YE
1+0	1	25YQ	10102	1	16FL
121+0	1	28YL	20202	1	20SE
120	2	30ZB, 32XH	202020	1	22WH
20	1	31ZQ	2020	1	29LK
			1012120	1	33JR
			Total	33	

Note: 0 represents a single migration back to the hometown; 1 represents a migration to a city within the province; 2 represents a migration to a city outside the province; + indicates that a particular type of migration occurred more than once.

4.3 Fourfold typology of spatial mobility

Based on the migration trajectories observed across the entire sample, we have categorized spatial mobility into four types (Figure 2): move-up, move-down, drift-out, and shuttle. The greater the number of spatial units a migrant crosses, or the more moves they make, the higher their spatial mobility. From the respondents' perspective in this survey, returning to Loudi also means returning to their hometown.

"Move-up" refers to migration from a lower regional level to a higher one, that is, moving from Shuangfeng or Loudi to other cities within the province or to cities outside the province. This migration trajectory is very common among young people. Those who have attained higher education or achieved greater personal development often maintain this migration pattern rather than shifting to other patterns. This is a unidirectional upward pattern; due to the few migration instances and the few hierarchical levels involved, it exhibits the weakest migratory mobility and the least migration-related life experience.

"Move-down" refers to migration from a larger spatial level to a smaller one. In this study, it refers to moving from a city outside the province to a city within the province, returning to one's hometown, or moving from a city within the province back to one's hometown. This migration pattern is most common among returnees. Those who maintain this migration pattern typically have a solid foundation in their hometown, such as stable family relationships, housing, or a career there. In our sample, returning home appears to be a rational choice made after weighing the pros and cons of life in the hometown versus urban life. We did not observe a pattern where successful individuals remained in the city while those who failed returned to the countryside.

"Drift-out" refers to a pattern in which individuals, after leaving their hometown, undergo multiple migrations within and outside the province while consistently maintaining a distance from their place of origin. In other words, individuals classified under this migration type have experienced three or more migrations. After leaving their hometowns, they never returned to stay for more than a year. Thus, individuals in the "drift-out" pattern appear to harbor a firm resolve to distance themselves from their hometowns.

The "shuttling" pattern is characterized by repeated migration between the hometown and cities within or outside the province after leaving home. The living conditions of individuals in this pattern exhibit fragmentation in both space and time. Based on observations of the sample, it can be inferred that migrants following this pattern typically engage in unstable or non-permanent employment, resulting in unstable income and uncertain work locations. Their families usually remain in their hometowns, while they themselves travel to cities to work. Should they encounter unemployment or family issues, this may lead to a temporary return home. Once these temporary problems are resolved, they choose to temporarily leave their hometowns again and head to cities to seek new employment opportunities.

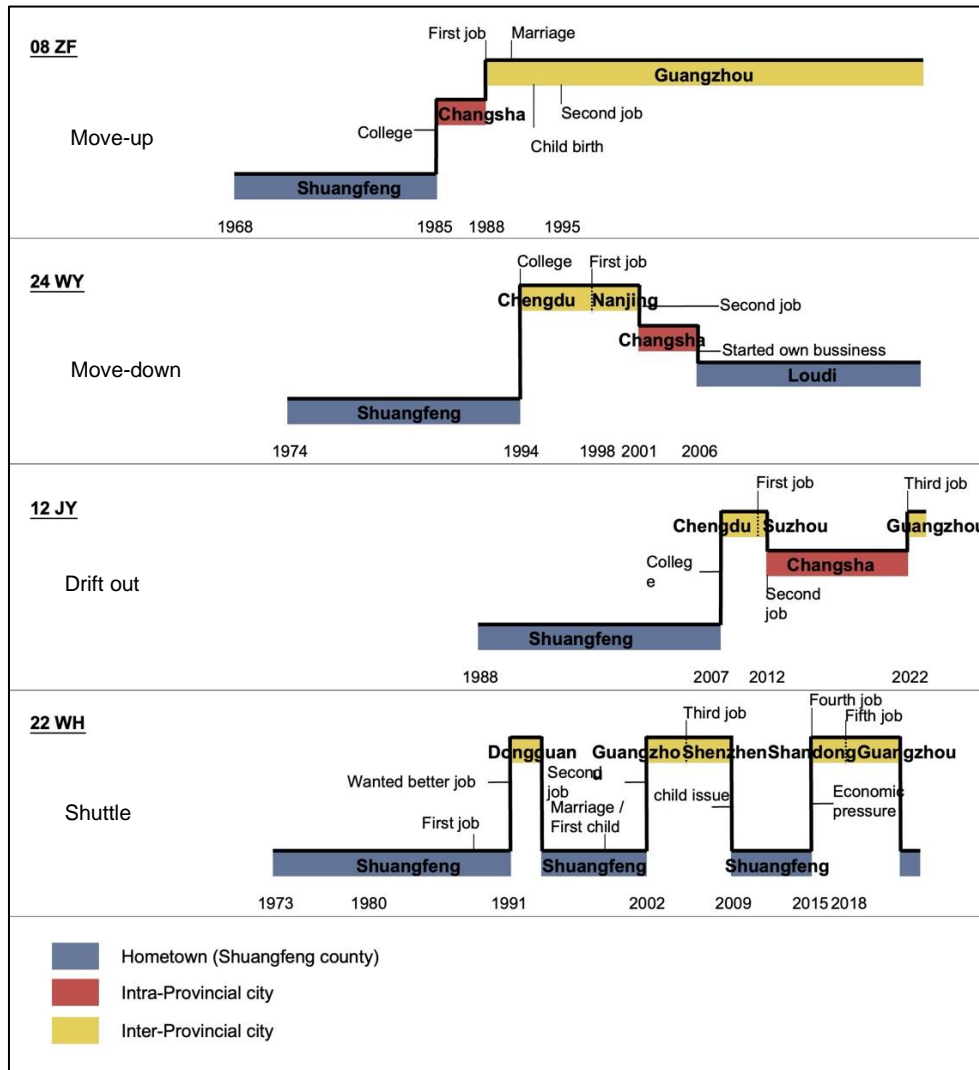


Fig. 2: Fourfold typology of spatial mobility

4.4 The paradox of belonging

Regarding the distribution of the subjective sense of belonging, the sample showed clear group differentiation. On the one hand, some results were consistent with traditional empirical expectations: participants who chose to return to their hometowns (the "move-down" model), those in the highly spatially fragmented "shuttle" model, and those residing in neighboring cities within the province generally reported a sense of belonging to their hometown. At the same time, six migrants who had established themselves in major cities outside the province and belonged to the "move-up" pattern reported a sense of belonging to their current city, demonstrating a classic linear assimilation pathway.

However, the focus of this study lies on those participants who live in major cities outside the province, belong to the "move-up" patterns, yet still identify with their rural hometowns. Although this group has been geographically separated from their hometowns for a long time and has even achieved better career development in the city, their subjective identity has not been assimilated by the city as predicted by traditional theories; instead, it remains firmly anchored in their rural homeland, transcending spatial barriers. To delve deeper into this counterintuitive mechanism of trans-local identity, this paper attempts to unfold the narrative by integrating their life-history recording.

The life history of the respondent 13LY provides an excellent microcosm for understanding this nonlinear process of psychological assimilation. At the age of 11, 13LY moved with their parents to Guangdong Province, where they completed their education from middle

school through college in Foshan and Guangzhou. Eventually, they found employment in Foshan, got married, and purchased a home there. In traditional linear assimilation theories or quantitative models, this complete trajectory—involving a family relocation, local education, and the acquisition of assets—is typically viewed as definitive proof that the individual has been "thoroughly assimilated" into the city. However, in the interview, 13LY explicitly refused to identify Foshan or Guangzhou as "home," instead firmly anchoring their subjective sense of belonging in their rural hometown, Shuangfeng County. In 13LY's narrative, this counterintuitive trans-local anchoring is driven by the social atomization and emotional alienation characteristic of megacities.

In contrast to the cold indifference of urban life, the warmth of friends and relatives back home, along with childhood memories, constitute an emotional anchor she cannot sever. For her, the big city is merely a place to earn a living; she plans to return to her hometown permanently after retirement. This case powerfully demonstrates that mobility—and even long-term urban settlement—does not necessarily decrease rural identity. On the contrary, while migrants integrate economically into the urban production system, the social and emotional friction they encounter strengthens their sense of identity with their hometown.

5. Discussion

This study integrates spatial mobility trajectories with the psychological sense of belonging into a unified life-course framework to examine changes in rural migrants' sense of belonging in the era of mobility.

Empirical findings from a micro-level perspective indicate that rural migration is by no means a single, unidirectional movement from hometown to the destination place, as assumed in traditional research, but rather a continuous dynamic state characterized by multidirectional flows, re-flows, and temporary return migrations (Markov, 2015).

These findings strongly refute the classic "Linear Assimilation Theory." Traditional theories typically assume that long-term spatial settlement and upward mobility inevitably lead to comprehensive psychological integration into the society of the destination place (Gratton et al., 2007). However, against the institutional backdrop of China's transition period, the emotional isolation (Niu & Zhao, 2018) resulting from urban atomization has undermined the inevitability of this linear transformation.

Micro-level empirical evidence, as exemplified by the case of 13LY and others, indicates that spatial mobility has become a persistent dynamic phenomenon. Migrants' self-identity is not a binary choice between "city" and "rural," (Crawley & Jones, 2021) but rather an active selection within a network of mobility (Gielsing et al., 2017), reconstructing a sense of trans-local belonging that transcends geographical barriers.

6. Conclusion & Recommendations

In summary, based on longitudinal life history data from 33 migrants from the same hometown, this paper identifies four micro-spatial mobility patterns among rural migrants in China (move-up, move-down, drift-out, and shuttle). It reveals the complex relationship between physical displacement and the sense of belonging.

At the practical and policy levels, these findings offer valuable insights for the current "Rural Revitalization" strategy. Macro-level policies should no longer view "migrant work in cities" and "returning to one's hometown for development" as mutually exclusive alternatives. However, they should instead consider this vast mobile population whose "bodies are in metropolises, but hearts remain in their hometowns." They are not passive urban outsiders, but rather "translocal agents" capable of leveraging urban-rural networks to channel financial resources, information, and emotional support back to their rural communities. Future policies should break down rigid administrative barriers and provide more inclusive institutional support for these trans-local connections, thereby truly transforming high population mobility into a practical driving force for rural development.

This study is limited by its single-village sample and its reliance on retrospective memory. Future research should include diverse regions to further validate these trajectories.

At the end of the article, LY mentions that her emotional connection to her hometown is a particularly vivid memory for her, while her emotional detachment from the city has prevented her from developing a sense of belonging there. As a suggestion for future research, the emotional bond between people and places could serve as a focus for subsequent studies.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to the fields of human geography, migration studies, and environmental psychology.

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