



Beyond Migrants and Stayers: Reimagining Rurality as a Dynamic Space of Mobility

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Abstract

This article examines rural youth mobility in China through Yu's story, a young woman who simultaneously calls three places 'home'. First, the story unsettles conventional categories of stayers and leavers in the migration framework. Yu's trajectory highlights how negotiations between family responsibilities and structural constraints, rather than just individual aspirations, become the key determinants of rural youth mobility. Second, it challenges the stability and fixity assumptions embedded in the cultural construction of rurality. By focusing on Yu's transportation practices, from electric bike rides within the village to long-distance bus journeys between towns, the article reveals how rural places are traversed in the complex and dynamic process of everyday mobility, showing how the appearance of stability in rural life is inherently dynamic and fluid. The article argues for recognising rurality as a generative space of connection and mobility, challenging urban-centred assumptions about rural youth mobility.

Keywords: *mobility, immobility, rurality, rural mobilities, everyday mobilities, rural youth, rural China*

The Mobility Story of Yu

I met Yu at River School in River Village when I was doing four months of ethnographic fieldwork there as part of my PhD project. She was a new full-time substitute teacher on a one semester contract. She lived so close to the school that she could clock in for work without even leaving the house as the GPS-connected system sometimes misrecognised her home as the school. Her father would prepare lunch every day and she would join him for lunch break. Thus, I asked her without a second thought, "So, you're a local here, right?"

"No, I'm not local," unexpectedly, she refused the wording immediately. She explained that River was her Dad's home. She added that she also had another two homes in Flower and Blue; Flower was her Grandma's home, and Blue was her Mum's home (all names of people and places are pseudonyms). Blue was about 20 kilometres from River; Flower was around 150 kilometres; and the distance between Blue and Flower was about 130 kilometres.

She was born in River Village, and her household registration (*hukou*) was recorded there with her father. She moved back and forth between River, Flower, and Blue, living with different family members throughout her primary and high school education. This was in part due to restrictions on migration and access to social services through the *hukou* system. She began primary school in River, transferred to Flower to live with her grandmother, returned to River and lived with her father for middle school, and later attended high school in Blue where she lived with her mother.

This pattern of movement continued into adulthood. While preparing for teaching exams, she took temporary jobs in all three places for different reasons. In Blue, she worked in shops; in River, she briefly filled a substitute teaching role; in Flower, she joined a private tutoring institution while caring for her grandmother as she recovered from surgery. Later, back in Blue, she accepted a similar tutoring position while living with her mother to save money. Therefore, she travelled a lot between the three places, and within each place, not only for periodic stays to work or study, but also for visiting family and friends.

Yu's everyday mobility was sustained mainly through three modes of transportation: electric bike (e-bike), public bus, and carpool. Her favourite was the electric bike. During my fieldwork, she often gave me a ride to the night market seven kilometres away or the parcel pickup point three kilometres from the school. "*My little electric donkey is the best*" she would exclaim loudly over the whooshing winds while we rode together. In River, the e-bike was essential. Only a few main two-lane roads were paved and the rest wound through the village like fine, unpaved capillaries creating a maze of narrow paths. She also rode between River and Blue, a twenty-kilometre trip each way. She preferred the independence of the e-bike to waiting for buses. She knew where to park and recharge the battery and could borrow a family member's e-bike that could handle longer distances.

For trips over a hundred kilometres, like River to Flower, she relied on public transport or asked other people for a lift. She preferred public transport because she always had terrible carsickness in private cars, and she did not like to ask people for help. In her experience, most of the time, River's bus system worked reasonably well. But during my fieldwork, one weekend we had a lunch appointment in the city. That day, she had not realised that the bus service was suspended. After waiting and complaining with others at the stop, she suggested using a ride-sharing app to reach a close public transit hub. From there, she caught a bus and eventually made it to the lunch – a tired, chaotic experience, but she was proud of her wisdom as she was the one who proposed to use the app, and they were lucky enough to get a ride. She concluded her commute story with a proud remark: "*I'm an experienced person*".

Rural Mobility Beyond Migration Categories

Yu's remarks of "*No, I'm not a local person*" and "*I'm an experienced person*" show her rural identity is deeply entangled with her mobility experiences. It cannot be captured by conventional categories such as place attachment (i.e., stayer) or migration intention (i.e., leaver) (Nugin, 2020), as she built connections between places by moving within, through, and across rural places (Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014).

First, her movements were not for migration purposes, nor were they directed towards a city. Her life trajectory was a result of negotiations between family care arrangements and the hukou regulations. Each move, from River to Flower to Blue, for primary, secondary, and high school depended on how the family balanced caregiving responsibilities with hukou constraints at the time. As a child, she did not fully understand these decisions, which resulted in constant shifting with changing family jobs and locations, evolving relationships, and varying degrees of hukou enforcement across different periods. Despite the complexity, family and hukou proved to be the key determinants for her moves in her school years. Another driving force of Yu's mobility was family network and obligation, especially in her adulthood. Her decisions about jobs were closely tied to where her family members lived. For example, the reason she took a temporary job in Flower was so she could be with her grandmother more often after her surgery. Her job in Blue was low paying, but she could live with her mother to save rent. Her family ties across Flower, Blue, and River formed both her basic travel routes and were a factor behind her movements, creating a personal geography that underpinned her mobility.

Hence, Yu's connections to places were layered and across multiple places based on family ties. Although she refused to be called "*a local*" to River, she identified River as her old home or Dad's home; Blue and Flower were associated respectively with her mother and grandmother. Thus, Yu simultaneously belonged and did not belong to River, Flower, and Blue. Each site was both familiar and unfamiliar, both a place of return and a place of distance. This paradox challenges the common framing of rural mobility as either leaving the village for urban opportunities or staying rooted in a home community (Nugin, 2020). Teacher Yu's experience exemplifies the complexities of life with family and laws: her mobility is not a linear trajectory from village to city, but an ongoing process of circulation, negotiation, and entanglement across multiple rural places shaped by family ties and structural conditions.

Everyday Rural Mobilities

Yu's mobility also unfolded in small, everyday rhythms rather than just travel across great distances. Similar to rural experiences in other places (see for example Goodwin-Hawkins, 2015; Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014), mobility was an essential part of daily living in River. Yu's "*little electric donkey*" was not only a practical tool but a way of knowing and inhabiting the village. The e-bike connected paths, ponds, and fields through a network of narrow capillary roads. Riding became a sensorial and social experience as well as a way of feeling and knowing the place—in different weather, with different people, or through lending the e-bike to others. This shows that mobility is not just movement between places, but a process through which places themselves are continually made—through the gathering of people, objects, and technologies in particular moments (Sheller & Urry, 2006); it generated different experiences and feelings about the place. For Yu, compared to sitting in a car, she had more sense of control while bicycling. Use and need of the e-bike made visible how mobility was entangled with the village's physical and social geography such as the road conditions and the spatial positioning of homes, re-enforcing that rural roads "*bear stories and shape them too*" (Goodwin-Hawkins, 2015, p. 171). Thus, recognising the types of mobility happening within one rural place helps to challenge the notion of rural immobility or fixity. This perspective highlights ongoing entanglement of social relations, spatial practices, and meanings in the dynamic process of rural mobility.

Yu's story also highlights complexities of mobility and immobility. Her movements between three houses in three places with different family members, provided her multiple spatial moorings (Adey, 2006), offering places of rest, support, stability, and security—in other words, multiple homes each with their own inter-personal connections and familiar surroundings. Each home served as a spatial mooring for her to stay, to be immobile, while at the same time enabling the fluidities for her to be mobile in other ways. Her statements of "*not a local*" but "*an experienced person*" give vivid examples of how "*moorings becoming mobilities and mobilities becoming moorings*" (Adey, 2006, pp. 86–87). She rejected being categorised into, or fixed into, a single place but recognised her experiences of moving around as a positive. This can be seen in her knowledge of how to manage a 40-kilometre commute round trip by e-bike and her pride at problem-solving by using a ride-sharing app. Everyday mobilities, especially long-distance commuting, provided her with a sense of stability and fostered enduring connections with different places.

To challenge the dominant cultural construct of rurality as stability, rootedness, and attachment to place (Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014), this article celebrated Yu's story to illustrate the complexity of rural mobilities. First, her life trajectory offers an alternative to migration-centred narratives. Yu's movements reveal how negotiations between family responsibilities and structural constraints, rather than just individual aspiration, shape rural youth mobility. Also, her trajectory was exclusively in and between rural places which challenges the assumption that mobility is inherently urban or towards urban. Second, by focusing on the transport dimensions of her everyday movements, Yu's experience shows how mobility is essential to rural life, actively

shaping ongoing processes of place-making while complicating the binary of mobility or immobility. Her movements among three homes blur these boundaries as each place provides both stability and the potential for further movement. By foregrounding these dynamic forms of rural mobility, this article highlighted the generative power of the rural in shaping lives and spaces. As I have argued elsewhere (Zhong, 2024), there is a need for reimagining broader social and structural configurations of rurality. Recognising the complexity of rural mobilities offers a critical lens for challenging urban-centred migration frameworks and for revaluing the creative, productive dimensions of rurality.

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