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REVIEW ARTICLE

A thematic exploration of upward social mobility among returning youth in county-level towns in China

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Abstract

Research on returning youth in China's county-level towns and surrounding rural areas has expanded, although findings on social mobility remain dispersed across migration, rural revitalization, the digital economy, and social stratification. Studies often group returnees and rely on cross-sectional cases, providing limited evidence on how county institutions and local networks affect the resources young people bring back from cities. This systematic thematic review draws on 365 Chinese- and English-language sources published between 2020 and 2025 and retrieved from China National Knowledge Infrastructure, Wanfang Data, and Web of Science. Following a selection process informed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), we coded return motives, mobility pathways, and gaps in the literature. The evidence associates mobility outcomes with county labor markets, digital technologies, and the resources available to different returnees. Lower living and entry costs, family support, and institutional employment can create opportunities, while narrow industrial structures, uneven public services, and dense local networks can restrict them. Digital platforms broaden market access while exposing some returnees to volatile traffic allocation and changing platform rules. Outcomes differ by return motive, employment route, family situation, and available resources. Returning home does not necessarily lead to upward mobility. Longitudinal evidence and direct comparisons between returnee groups remain scarce.

Keywords: Youth return migration; Upward social mobility; Digital technology; County-level towns, China, Social stratification

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1. Introduction

Return migration from large cities to smaller places has attracted attention in research on urban and regional change, raising questions about the relationship between spatial movement and social mobility (Champion, 1989). Movement away from large cities may change access to employment, family support, and public services, making the conditions of return central to its social consequences. In China, this pattern is closely connected to county-level development and to young people who leave their home counties for education or employment and later return (Hu, 2018). In this article, we

focus on county seats and nearby towns in China, together with their rural hinterlands, rather than on villages alone. For this review, the youth refer to people aged 14–35 years, consistent with China's *Medium- and Long-Term Youth Development Plan (2016–2025)* (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & State Council, 2017). Returning youth are members of this age group who grew up in county-level areas, spent a substantial period studying or working in larger cities, and subsequently returned to their home counties, either to a county seat or to a rural settlement. Educational credentials, work experience, cultural capital, and digital skills acquired in cities may create opportunities after return, although their value depends on local institutions and social relations. Whether these resources result in lasting upward mobility remains uncertain.

Existing research identifies uneven industrial opportunities, public-service capacity, and local networks as factors that may constrain the use of acquired resources and long-term settlement (Cao *et al*., 2021; Deng, 2023; Wan, 2025). Studies also tend to group distinct experiences: voluntary and constrained return, public-sector employment and market entrepreneurship, and return to county seats versus villages. Most evidence comes from cross-sectional research or individual cases, making it difficult to establish whether initial occupational or income gains become durable class mobility. The circumstances under which return produces sustained advancement rather than temporary gains therefore remain poorly understood.

Accounts of counter-urbanization, capital conversion, and rural gentrification address different aspects of return, but few studies examine how county institutions jointly shape the value of resources acquired in cities. The conditions under which a geographical return translates into a more secure class position therefore remain uncertain.

This review addresses three questions: (i) what conditions and motivations shape youth return to county towns and surrounding rural areas in China; (ii) through what pathways do returning youth pursue upward social mobility; and (iii) where do theoretical and methodological gaps remain? Because much of the relevant evidence is published in Chinese, its inclusion allows locally grounded findings to be examined alongside international scholarship on migration and social mobility. Research on migration, capital, social networks, and county development provides complementary perspectives on return and its class consequences. Research on migration and counter-urbanization describes movement away from metropolitan centers, but geographical return does not establish social advancement (Champion, 1989; Massey *et al*., 1993). Bourdieu's (1986) account of capital raises a different question: whether qualifications, work experience, and social ties acquired in cities retain their value in county labor markets. Studies of social networks show that access to information and local opportunities depends on relationships and credentials (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1983). Research on urbanization, stratification, and return entrepreneurship in Chinese counties further identifies the importance of family resources, public institutions, and policy implementation (Cao *et al*., 2021; Deng, 2023; Li, 2021). Together, these perspectives point to a practical and theoretical distinction between returning to a familiar place and obtaining a more secure social position. This review organizes that question around county institutions and labor markets, digital mediation, and differences among returnees. The framework supports comparison across studies without assuming that all returnees experience similar outcomes. Comparable movements from metropolitan centers to smaller cities, towns, and rural regions feature in broader debates on migration systems and rural demographic change (Farrigan *et al*., 2024; Massey *et al*., 1993; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2025), but their institutional meaning differs across welfare regimes, labor markets, and systems of local governance. County towns and their rural hinterlands in China provide a setting in which to examine how spatial return intersects with class mobility under a distinctive urban-rural institutional structure. The findings may not transfer directly to other settings, but the mechanisms identified here offer a basis for comparison with research on return migration and peripheral development elsewhere.

2. Data and methods

2.1. Data sources

We conducted a systematic thematic review of research on returning youth and upward social mobility in the county towns and rural hinterlands in China. The selection process is summarized in a flow diagram informed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement (Page *et al*., 2021) (Figure 1). China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), Wanfang Data, and Web of Science (WoS) were searched because the topic is rooted mainly in Chinese-language scholarship but also has an international literature. We did not estimate a pooled effect size because the corpus combines qualitative studies, quantitative analyses, theoretical papers, dissertations, and policy documents that do not share a common outcome measure. We used thematic synthesis to compare the evidence and theoretical arguments concerning return motives, mobility

pathways, identity reconstruction, structural constraints, and unresolved questions.

2.2. Search, eligibility, and evidence appraisal

The search covered publications from 2020 through 2025. During this period, rural-revitalization and digital-rural initiatives progressed from strategic planning to broader implementation (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & State Council, 2018; General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & General Office of the State Council, 2019; Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs & Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, 2020; Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission *et al.*, 2022), alongside national reporting on digital-economy and digital-rural development (China Academy of Information and Communications Technology, 2023, 2024).

The Chinese search string combined ("返乡青年" [*fanxiang qingnian;* returning youth] OR "县域青年" [*xianyu qingnian*; county youth]) with ("社会阶层流动" [*shehui jieceng liudong*; social stratification/mobility] OR "县域发展" [*xianyu fazhan*; county development]). The English search string combined (youth return migration OR rural youth) AND (upward social mobility) AND (county-level revitalization OR county development).

We included Chinese- or English-language journal articles, doctoral and master's dissertations, and official policy documents if they examined returning, county, or rural youth and addressed at least one aspect of social mobility, stratification, county development, employment, entrepreneurship, identity, or digital practice. We excluded duplicates, records unrelated to return migration or county-level youth, sources lacking a substantive connection to sociology or social mobility, non-academic commentary without analytical value, and reports whose full text could not be retrieved. More specifically, eligible sources had to identify returning or county/rural youth, situate them in a county seat, town, or rural locality, and discuss mobility or a plausible mobility-related mechanism. Relevant outcomes and mechanisms included employment and income, occupational status, entrepreneurship, educational resources, institutional access, identity, and digital livelihoods. We considered studies of mixed-age populations only when findings for youth could be distinguished; the 14–35 age range was a reference point rather than a strict criterion for the original samples. We did not include accounts of city-to-city migration without a county-level component, general rural-development reports with no identifiable youth population, and descriptive publicity lacking substantive analysis. Official policy documents provided institutional context rather than direct evidence that a program had improved social mobility.

The database searches identified 1,762 records (WoS = 747; CNKI = 465; Wanfang Data = 550). After 982 duplicates were removed, 780 were screened for titles and abstracts, and 127 records were excluded. Of 653 reports sought for retrieval, 144 could not be obtained, leaving 509 for full-text eligibility assessment. A further 144 were excluded as irrelevant (n = 83), outside the sociological scope (n = 18), or non-academic or insufficiently analytical sources (n = 43), yielding 365 included sources, of which 338 were Chinese-language and 27 English-language publications (Figure 1).

We screened records against the prespecified eligibility criteria. Screening was not conducted independently by two reviewers, so no inter-rater agreement statistic is reported. To account for differences in evidentiary strength, we gave the greatest weight to peer-reviewed empirical studies when assessing mechanisms and associations; dissertations were used where they supplied otherwise unavailable empirical detail, while policy documents were used primarily to establish institutional and policy context. Because the corpus combines qualitative, quantitative, theoretical, and policy materials, an intervention-style risk-of-bias score would not be appropriate. Instead, evidence was assessed using three criteria: source type and evidentiary status; transparency of research design, sampling, and data; and direct relevance to the review questions.

The included studies also did not consistently report whether return involved rejoining a parental household or relocating an independently formed city-based family. The literature does not support a reliable estimate of the relative frequency of these family trajectories; we therefore identify their omission as a reporting gap.

2.3. Data analysis

We synthesized the 365 sources using thematic analysis, without statistical pooling. We initially coded return motivations, employment and entrepreneurial pathways, structural constraints, identity processes, digital mediation, and subgroup differences, and then organized these codes around the three research questions. We assigned greater weight to findings reported in several empirical studies or research designs and treated claims drawn chiefly from policy documents as contextual rather than causal evidence. Contradictory findings were retained and considered in relation to locality, sample composition, employment route, and research design. This approach allowed recurring patterns to emerge while retaining differences between county settings and returnee groups.

Social mobility is a long-standing sociological concern,

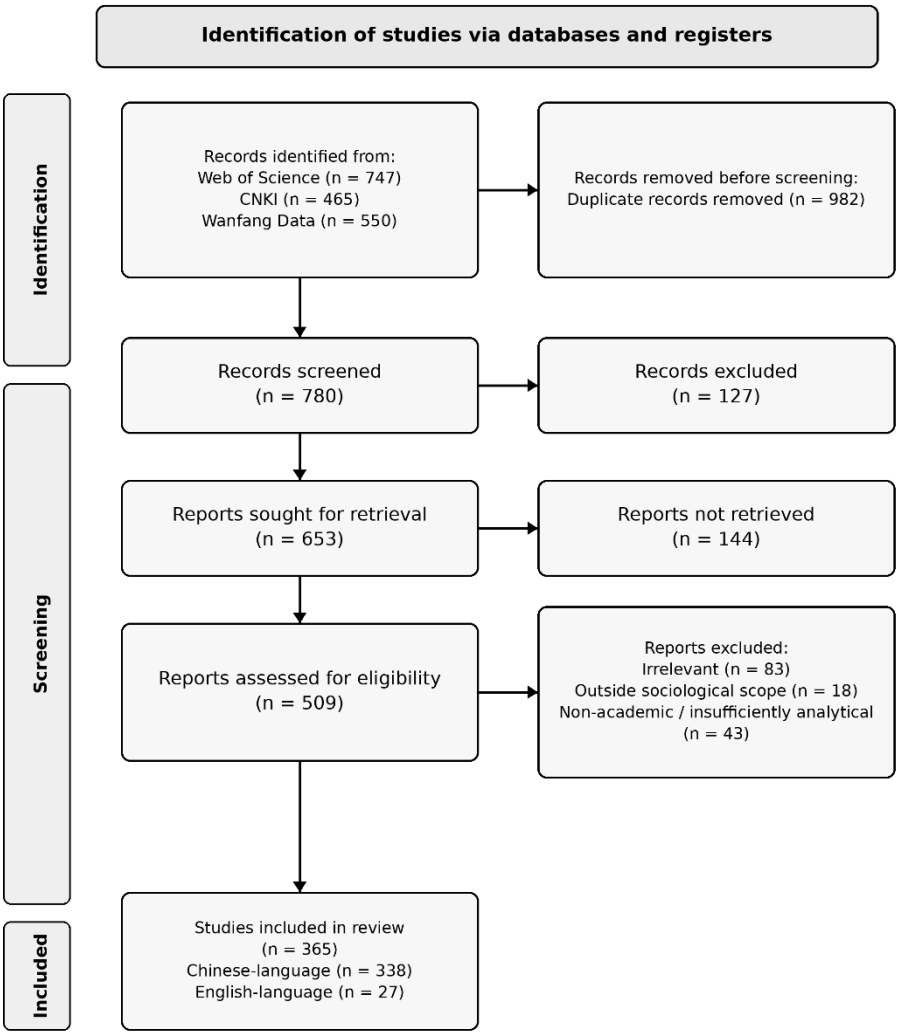


Figure 1. Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 flow diagram of the literature selection process, 2020–2025
Abbreviation: CNKI: China National Knowledge Infrastructure

but research focused specifically on returning youth in Chinese county towns and rural areas expanded rapidly after 2020. Across the corpus, research shifted from general accounts of return migration and rural revitalization toward closer examination of mobility mechanisms, identity, digital platforms, and subgroup differentiation. Annual publication counts rose from 31 in 2020 to 88 in 2024, with the largest year-on-year increase occurring in 2022 (Figure 2). This rise coincided with greater policy attention to rural talent and digital rural development, although publication counts alone cannot establish a causal relationship between policy agendas and academic output. The five years shown in Figure 2 account for 315 of the 365 included records. The summary data classify another 50 records as 2025 publications, but neither the final search dates nor the completeness of 2025 indexing is documented. We therefore excluded 2025 from the annual comparison shown in Figure 2. Chinese-language studies account for 338 of the 365 included sources (92.6%). A review confined mainly to English-language publications would therefore overlook much of the available evidence. This concentration underscores the need to examine how established mobility theories apply to county institutions, unequal urban–rural services, local networks, and platform-mediated work.

2.4. Thematic synthesis

From 2020 to 2022, studies paid increasing attention to how returning youth negotiated their social positions, moving

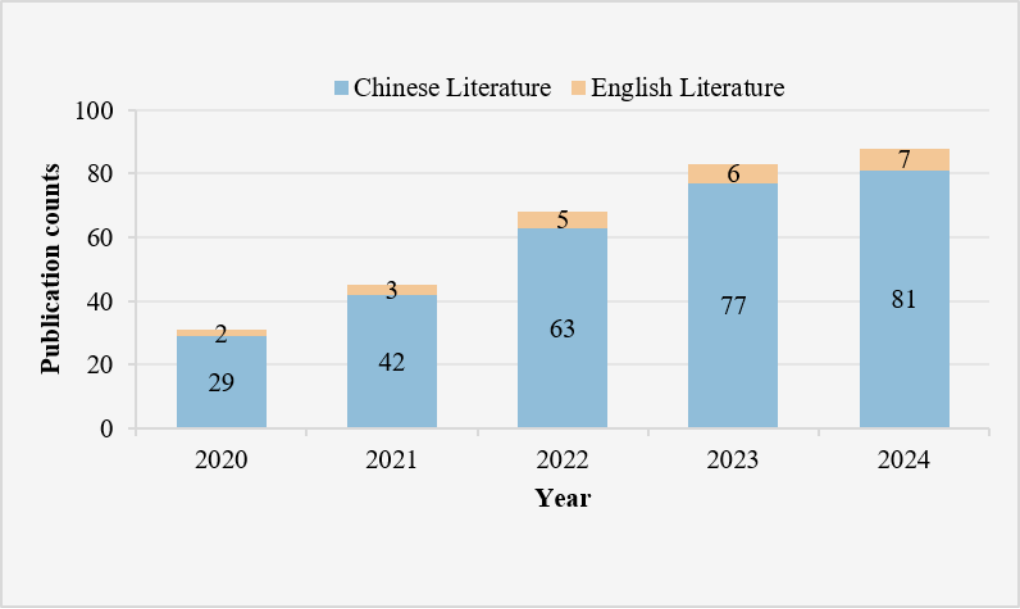


Figure 2. Annual publication counts of studies on returning youth and social mobility in China (2020–2024)

beyond accounts of return as a labor-flow phenomenon. Stratification, spatial, and individualization perspectives brought changes in class position more directly into analyses of return migration. Zhang (2022), for example, conceptualized return as a process of disembedding and re-embedding across rural and urban settings, while Guo and Yu (2023) used China General Social Survey (CGSS) 2021 data to examine the relationship between parental resources, human capital, and intergenerational and spatial mobility. Between 2023 and 2025, more studies examined individual mechanisms and variation in returnees' experiences. Topics included platform dependence, partial integration into local livelihoods, digital practices, occupational identity, and the socialization dilemmas discussed by Wan (2025). Policy research also examined the composition and coordination of entrepreneurship instruments (Deng, 2023).

3. Findings

3.1. Western theoretical foundations

Counter-urbanization theory identifies reversals in metropolitan concentration and provides a language for understanding movement from large cities toward smaller places (Champion, 1989). Research on rural gentrification examines how in-migration and investment reshape rural class relations (Phillips, 1993). Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital is relevant because it asks whether educational credentials, economic resources, cultural competencies, and social ties acquired in cities can be converted into status after return. Social-capital research similarly showed how network structure and relational resources affect access to opportunities (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1983; Putnam, 2000). Chinese stratification research emphasizes occupation, education, institutional position, and the changing composition of middle strata in mobility trajectories (Li, 2018, 2019, 2021; Lu, 2010). These perspectives are useful starting points, but they were developed for different social settings and do not, by themselves, explain how county-level institutions mediate the conversion of resources after return. Applying these perspectives to return migration requires attention to the institutions and labor markets of Chinese counties. Counter-urbanization explains the direction of migration more easily than the class consequences of return. Rural gentrification research concerns changes associated with in-migration and capital investment. Many returnees in Chinese counties, by contrast, are locally born young people whose opportunities depend on family networks, recruitment systems, and unequal public services. Capital-conversion theory remains useful, but the reviewed studies show that the local value of urban-acquired capital depends on hukou-related access, public-sector recruitment, relationship networks, industrial structure, and the organization of county labor markets (Cao *et al.*, 2021; Hu, 2018; Wan, 2025; C. G. Wang, 2023). Digital platforms introduce further opportunities and risks by opening markets beyond the county while exposing returnees to algorithmic dependence and unstable earnings. Taken together, the findings specify institutional, spatial, and

technological conditions that bear on the relevance of these theories to county towns and rural areas in China.

3.2. An analytical framework for returning migration to county-level towns in China

Three themes recur across the Chinese-language literature: county space, digital technology, and differences among returnees. We used these themes to organize the review, without proposing them as an established middle-range theory. County space includes the institutional, economic, and relational features of local settings; digital technology refers to the opportunities and constraints created by infrastructure and platforms; and differences among returnees include resources, motives, life-course position, and strategy. These dimensions overlap in practice. For example, the value of a given qualification or digital skill may depend on whether a returnee enters a county public institution, starts a platform-dependent business, settles in a county seat or a village, and can draw on family or local networks.

County-level space has institutional, social, and geographical dimensions. It combines county seats, towns, and rural hinterlands in an urban–rural interface that can both enable and constrain mobility. Several studies identify lower living costs, family support, local familiarity, circular mobility, and expanding service economies as sources of opportunity (C. G. Wang, 2023; Y. Wang & Yang, 2023). For returnees who possess recognized credentials or can access growing local sectors, the county may provide a lower-cost environment in which urban-acquired skills can be used. Other studies identify limited industrial diversity, uneven education and health services, and dense relationship networks as constraints on long-absent returnees (Cao *et al*., 2021; Wan, 2025; Xu & Wang, 2021). The studies also distinguish return to a county from return to a village. County seats, small towns, and villages have different labor markets, public services, network structures, and routes of social incorporation. These differences affect whether an initial return can develop into long-term settlement.

Digital technology changes how spatial constraints operate, although it does not remove them. Research on mobile payment and county economies suggests that digital infrastructure can reduce transaction costs and connect local economic activity to wider markets (Yin & Wu, 2023). Research on rural entrepreneurship and short-video commerce also finds that e-commerce, live streaming, and digital media can expand market access, visibility, and occupational experimentation (H. Luo & Ji, 2025; Zhuang *et al*., 2023). For some returnees, these tools reduce dependence on local commercial channels and make it possible to connect county-based production with national consumers. The gains from digital access are also subject to constraints. Platform rules, traffic allocation, price competition, supply-chain weaknesses, and changing algorithms can transfer dependence from local intermediaries to digital platforms. The balance of opportunities and risks depends on business models, skills, local production capacity, and the terms on which platforms allocate access to markets.

The circumstances and consequences of return vary among young people. C. G. Wang (2023) distinguished voluntary, constrained, policy-attracted, and oscillating forms of return, suggesting that the conditions under which young people return may influence their resources, risks, and prospects for mobility. Zhang (2022) showed that return can involve identity reconstruction across rural and urban experiences, while Li (2021) situated such trajectories within broader changes in China's stratification structure. Available studies associate education, occupational skills, family resources, employment sector, family stage, and destination within the county with differences in mobility outcomes, including upward mobility, relative stability, and subsequent departure. A person who returns for a public-sector post enters a different institutional environment from an entrepreneur dependent on uncertain market demand, just as a returnee living with parents faces a different household economy from one relocating with a spouse and children. Treating returnees as a uniform group obscures these differences and limits the conclusions that can be drawn about their mobility.

4. Discussion

County institutions and local labor markets condition the value of resources that young people acquire before returning home. The reviewed evidence points to contrasting routes: public-sector employment may translate recognized credentials into stable income and occupational status, whereas entrepreneurship depends more heavily on market demand, household support, and platform rules. Access to schooling, health care, and housing also bears on whether occupational gains translate into lasting settlement, while changes in lifestyle and identity may precede any measurable shift in class position. The following discussion considers these pathways and constraints together, with attention to the limits of the predominantly cross-sectional evidence.

4.1. Pathways to upward social mobility

The literature treats policy support as one condition that can facilitate upward mobility. Deng (2023) classified returnee entrepreneurship policies into supply-, demand-, and environment-oriented instruments and identified an uneven mix across policy tools. Financial subsidies,

business services, tax measures, training, access to facilities, and local talent programs can lower the costs of return or entry into entrepreneurship, yet their effects depend on implementation capacity and the match between policy instruments and the needs of small ventures. Funding has limited value where technical guidance, stable demand, professional services, or access to suitable premises remains weak. The literature also points to substantial regional differences: fiscally stronger counties are better positioned to convert policy promises into continuous services, whereas less-resourced counties may offer formal incentives that are difficult to sustain. Policy adoption therefore provides little evidence, by itself, of effective resource access or improved class position.

Access to public services can determine whether a returnee remains in the county. Social insurance, health care, children's education, housing, cultural services, and administrative convenience affect the household costs of remaining in county-level areas, particularly after marriage or parenthood. Improvements in these services can reduce the disadvantages associated with leaving a large city and strengthen the practical basis for long-term residence. Conversely, gaps in education or medical services may become more salient as returnees' family responsibilities increase. Some studies report renewed departures when the county no longer meets household expectations, especially those related to children's education and intergenerational mobility. Here, renewed out-migration refers to a later departure from the county after an initial return. Because studies rarely distinguish those rejoining their parents from those relocating with an established family, the available evidence does not support an estimate of their relative frequency.

Employment and entrepreneurship are the mobility pathways most often discussed in the literature. Positions in public institutions, education, health care, and other professional sectors are often described as relatively stable because they combine regular income, formal status, and locally recognized credentials. In county settings where institutional position carries social and economic value, such employment can help convert higher education into durable occupational standing. It may also provide access to social insurance and clearer promotion pathways, making the resulting mobility less vulnerable to short-term market fluctuations. Market employment offers less predictable prospects than institutional employment. Its returns depend on the composition of county industries, firm quality, occupational segmentation, and the extent to which qualifications acquired in cities are recognized locally. The distinction extends beyond income to employment security, social recognition, and the longer-term value of accumulated resources.

Entrepreneurship offers another route, particularly when returnees combine local resources with commercial knowledge acquired in cities. Studies of new agricultural occupations and rural entrepreneurship describe branding, standardized production, tourism, and service-sector innovation as ways of raising the value of local products and creating new occupational roles (Xia, 2020; Zhuang *et al.*, 2023). Digital payment, e-commerce, live streaming, and short-video marketing can extend customer reach beyond county boundaries and reduce reliance on conventional local channels (H. Luo & Ji, 2025; Yin & Wu, 2023). These tools can link county producers to distant markets, although the evidence of sustained gains is mixed. Low margins, homogeneous competition, weak supply chains, and dependence on platform traffic can make gains unstable. A business may raise income without securing occupational status, and a fall in platform visibility can quickly reverse earlier gains. Digital entrepreneurship therefore offers a possible mobility pathway without guaranteeing lasting advancement.

4.2. Social identity reconstruction

Studies also examine perceived mobility through identity, lifestyle, and symbolic consumption. Urban experience can reshape returnees' expectations of leisure, education, consumption, professional life, and self-presentation, producing a cultural orientation that differs from that of some long-term local residents. S. Luo (2023), for example, showed that second-generation rural residents who settle in county towns may adopt middle-class lifestyles even when occupational advancement and stable income do not fully support that identity. Research on rural vloggers links media practice to occupational identity (Y. Wang & Yang, 2023). Short videos made by returnees also shape how rural life and nostalgia are represented and shared (M. Luo, 2025). This literature cautions against treating subjective and objective mobility as the same thing. Coffee consumption, cultural products, private training, housing choices, or a carefully curated online identity may express an aspiration to middle-class belonging, but such symbols alone do not demonstrate durable changes in occupation, income, authority, or security. Such practices may nevertheless alter local consumption and create new distinctions within county society. Tension between urban-acquired dispositions and local norms can produce both cultural innovation and a sense of marginality, particularly when returnees' preferred lifestyles are not matched by local employment opportunities or public services.

4.3. Structural factors affecting upward social mobility

Structural constraints help account for variation in post-return mobility. Many county economies still provide a narrower range of high-skill occupations than major cities, and entrepreneurial opportunities can be constrained by small markets, weak supply chains, low value-added production, or platform dependence (Zhuang *et al*., 2023). Public-service gaps may also affect whether a household can sustain settlement as education, health, and care needs change over the life course. Access to local networks may further shape these outcomes. Studies of county urbanization and media representation indicate that returnees may occupy ambiguous positions between local familiarity and prolonged absence: they possess knowledge of the locality but may no longer be fully embedded in the relationship networks through which information, trust, and opportunities circulate (Cao *et al*., 2021; Xu & Wang, 2021). Wan (2025) describes a related disconnection from the older generation's combined worker-farmer livelihood pattern, in which returnees have acquired urbanized expectations but cannot always locate a stable social position within the county. These conditions can produce partial or semi-embedded incorporation rather than straightforward reintegration. Mobility can also move in different directions at once: income may rise while occupational security, local recognition, access to services, or family stability does not. Income measures alone cannot establish whether return has produced a lasting improvement in class position.

4.4. Research limitations

Few studies track returning youth through changes in employment, household formation, or subsequent moves, leaving the longer-term sequence of social mobility unclear.

Theoretical work has not yet explained how county institutions shape mobility across different contexts. A central unresolved question concerns the conditions under which economic, cultural, social, and digital resources acquired in cities become valuable after return. Existing studies identify hukou-linked institutions, public-sector opportunities, relationship networks, industrial structure, family resources, and digital platforms, yet they rarely show how these mechanisms work together or how their relative importance varies across counties. The contrast between county seats and villages is also underdeveloped despite clear differences in labor markets, public services, network density, and access to administrative resources. Studies sometimes infer mobility from the possession of resources without establishing how local institutions make those resources valuable. Methodological weaknesses further limit the available conclusions. Cross-sectional designs and small case studies dominate, while large-sample longitudinal research remains limited. These designs can identify associations involving return, employment, digital skills, consumption, and perceived mobility, but rarely establish causal direction. A positive association between digital competence and social position, for example, may reflect the effect of digital skills, the selection of already advantaged youth into digital occupations, or both. Similar caution applies to entrepreneurship: stronger family resources or previous business experience may influence both the decision to return and the chance of success. Likewise, studies documenting symbolic consumption rarely test whether changing lifestyles are accompanied by sustained gains in occupation, income, or social status. Longitudinal evidence is needed to distinguish short-lived gains from stable advancement or subsequent downward mobility and to support stronger causal claims.

Another limitation concerns the treatment of returnees as a homogeneous population. Return motives, employment routes, industry, destination within the county, family stage, and household composition can all change the course of mobility. Existing classifications distinguish voluntary, constrained, policy-attracted, and oscillating return (C. G. Wang, 2023), but later studies rarely compare these groups directly or separate return to a county seat from return to a traditional village. This matters because "returning to the home county" may mean taking a public-sector post in the county town, entering local services, running an e-commerce business, farming, or participating in village governance. Each route carries a different mix of resources and constraints. The literature also seldom reports whether young people return to live with parents or relocate with an independently formed spouse-and-child household. Their relative frequency cannot be estimated reliably from the included studies. This missing information matters because housing costs, children's schooling, elder care, spousal employment, and family support can shape both the decision to return and the durability of settlement.

This review is limited by the absence of independent duplicate screening, which prevented the calculation of inter-rater agreement. Most included sources are in Chinese, and the corpus comprises empirical articles, dissertations, theoretical studies, and policy documents. The range of source types supports thematic comparison but precludes a pooled estimate of mobility effects. In addition, many studies report age, household composition, and class position in ways that are not directly comparable. These features limit causal inference and direct comparison across studies. The absence of database-specific final search

dates and an itemized list of all 365 included sources limits reproducibility and prevents verification of coverage in 2025.

4.5. Future research directions

The durability of returns from digital work remains an important empirical question. Research should examine whether platform access, digital skills, and online visibility lead to lasting occupational gains or deepen dependence on algorithms, traffic allocation, and precarious digital work. Their effects should be assessed alongside local industrial structures and social networks.

Follow-up research is needed because return often coincides with education, work, marriage, parenthood, housing, and obligations between generations. Studies that follow class position before and after return could test whether early gains last and compare trajectories across county seats, towns, and villages. Repeated observation would reveal mobility trajectories that one-time surveys cannot capture.

Comparisons should separate voluntary and constrained return, public-sector employment and market entrepreneurship, traditional industries and digital sectors, and settlement in county seats and villages. Household composition also matters, including whether returnees live again with parents or move with spouses and children. These distinctions would reduce the risk of generalizing from a narrow range of cases.

Mixed evidence could distinguish measurable changes in status from shifts in identity and household expectations. Panel surveys could track employment, income, occupational status, networks, housing, and family transitions, while repeated interviews and case follow-up could show how resources are converted in everyday life. Mixed-methods designs, including qualitative comparative analysis when appropriate to the question, should be chosen to address specific research questions rather than to increase the number of methods used.

Policy research needs to assess implementation and outcomes, as well as the range of available measures. Comparisons across eastern, central, and western counties could examine how fiscal capacity, industrial structure, public services, and administrative implementation alter the effects of entrepreneurship and employment programs. This would help identify which forms of support are associated with lasting settlement and mobility under different county conditions.

Research drawing on sociology, economics, communication, geography, and management could examine shared empirical questions from complementary perspectives. The value lies in using their concepts to explain class structure, migration, spatial change, and platform-mediated work, while making clear where those explanations differ.

5. Conclusion

Research on returning youth connects changes in China's urban–rural relations with wider patterns of social stratification. Return does not guarantee upward mobility, and income alone does not establish whether a person's class position has become more secure. Counties may offer lower entry costs, institutional jobs, family support, and familiarity, but they may also provide fewer high-skill opportunities, uneven public services, and networks that are difficult to re-enter. For entrepreneurs, digital technologies may widen access to consumers while increasing exposure to platform decisions. The balance of opportunities and constraints varies with return motives, occupation, family stage, skills, and destination within the county.

The reviewed studies link post-return mobility to the resources young people bring with them and the opportunities they encounter locally. County labor markets, digital platforms, and family networks influence the conversion of educational and occupational resources into social position. Their effects also vary across county seats, towns, and rural communities. Current evidence is limited by short time horizons, weak causal identification, broad subgroup categories, and poor reporting of family relocation. Consequently, temporary occupational gains remain difficult to distinguish from lasting changes in class position. Longitudinal studies with clearer subgroup definitions would allow future work to identify more precisely when return expands, stabilizes, or narrows young people's longer-term opportunities.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: Mimi Shao, Azlina Abdullah, Abdul Hafiz Ab Rahman
Methodology: Mimi Shao

Supervision: Azlina Abdullah, Abdul Hafiz Ab Rahman
Writing: Mimi Shao

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data

The dataset underlying this review (the coded bibliography of the 365 included sources) is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

AI tools statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used AI-assisted tools for language polishing and grammar correction. The author reviewed and edited all content and takes full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the publication.

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