

# The Portable Hometown: Social Networks, Moral Space, and the Making of Nostalgia among Rural Migrants in a Jiangxi Town

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**Abstract.** Existing scholarship affirms that nostalgia matters for rural revitalization, yet treats it either as a self-evident concept or as a purely psychological emotion, leaving both its social genesis and its pathway to rural reconstruction a black box. Drawing on two months of fieldwork and twenty in-depth interviews with fifteen rural-to-urban migrants from Zhaochen, a relatively isolated town in Jiangxi Province, this study reconceptualizes nostalgia as an overdetermined dependence on a kin-native-place social network—a "portable hometown" that migrants carry with them. Three mutually embedded mechanisms produce and sustain this dependence: the deep embedding of the network in migrants' livelihood practices; a family-centred moral space that lowers the cost of maintaining and reactivating ties; and the interaction of individual and significant others' life courses. The paper then argues that the way nostalgia drives rural reconstruction continues its genesis rather than forming a separate process: acts such as repairing houses, donating, and restoring ancestral halls are a "performance of identity" that copes with the anxiety nostalgia generates. Urban integration and rural revitalization thus emerge as two sides of one problem.

**Keywords:** Nostalgia; rural-to-urban migrants; social networks; identity; rural revitalization.

## 1. Introduction

Modernization is commonly narrated as the replacement of older, stagnant social forms by fluid ones, with the decline of village communities treated as a transitional cost of progress. As Bauman observes, fluid modernity loosens established networks so that labour can circulate as a commodity [1]; the market's drive to detach the economy from older social relations is what Polanyi calls disembedding [2]. On this logic, market expansion is structurally opposed to traditional communities, and the tension between the village community and modernity follows directly.

Faced with this tension, scholarship has largely framed the rural-migrant question as one of urban integration, tacitly accepting the village's dissolution and neglecting how migrants relate to home—though the two are one problem with two faces. Meanwhile a counter-current accompanies out-migration: customs become collective events, and migrants of all means invest in houses, roads, and ancestral halls that yield no economic return. Nostalgia is the force at work, yet it has been treated as self-evident or merely psychological, leaving both its genesis and its pathway to rural reconstruction a black box. This study analyses both, situating nostalgia within the social networks, moral life, and life courses of the village community.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Rural Community

Agriculture is not homogeneous: terrain, methods, and associated activities shape rural relations, so that Chinese villages differ regionally, and any village is best understood as a composite of mutually shaping elements. Tönnies distinguished the organic community (*Gemeinschaft*) from the mechanical society (*Gesellschaft*), with community resting on ties of blood, place, and mind [3]—ties that, in southern single-surname villages, fuse into one. Durkheim drew the contrast in the opposite sense,

treating the division of labour as organic and modern and similarity-based solidarity as mechanical [4]; yet traditional solidarity has proved more resilient than he allowed, because social relations are themselves shaped by morality. Village communities retain a morality enforced by the threat of heaven's punishment, ancestors, and conscience, bound up with a precarious peasant livelihood that, in Scott's terms, produces a survival ethic oriented to reducing risk rather than maximizing gain [5]—an ethic that gains new value for migrants as society becomes a risk society.

## 2.2. Nostalgia: Concept and Genesis

Nostalgia has a long history in China, from the *Book of Songs* onward. In the West it was first medical: as Wang Xinge and colleagues trace, it shifted from a curable disease in 1688 to an incurable affliction and finally, in the nineteenth century, to a general predicament of modern life, splitting into a strand on the remembered past and a strand on the concrete home [6]. The mechanism of modernity clarifies its genesis. Beck describes individualization as a process of disembedding, detraditionalization, and re-embedding that unsettles self-belonging [7] — at root a question of identity. As tradition dissolves, the certainty it once provided is lost, undermining what Giddens calls ontological security; identity, formed reflexively in practice, is destabilized when daily life becomes fragmented [8]. Yet such accounts remain largely psychological, neglecting the social relations within which nostalgia forms and treating its effect as automatic. Both gaps can be addressed by examining nostalgia from within the village community.

## 3. Field Site and Methods

The field site is Zhaochen, a town of about fifteen thousand in northwest Ruichang, Jiangxi, near the Hubei border. Mountains long isolated it—a tunnel opened only recently—so it interacts more with neighbouring Hubei than with eastern Ruichang, forms a Gan-dialect island in a Mandarin region, and saw large-scale out-migration only after reform and opening. Its principal lineages are Ke and Huang, from which interviewees are mainly drawn. The study uses participant observation and in-depth interviews over two months of fieldwork; twenty interview records were collected from fifteen rural migrants, mostly over thirty, spanning the second and third generations (the "second generation," after Wang Chunguang, are those who left in the 1990s [9]). All names are anonymized; Table 1 profiles the interviewees.

**Table 1.** Profile of interviewees (anonymized).

| Code | Sex | Age | Migration summary                                                        |
|------|-----|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| BS   | M   | 57  | Local schooling; farm work, then township and municipal posts            |
| KH   | M   | 30  | Raised in Guangzhou; internet commerce there                             |
| ZF   | M   | 54  | Guangdong (1992) → Shanghai (1998) → own business (2009) → Zhejiang      |
| ZY   | M   | 55  | Guangdong furniture (1994); transport at home; furniture in Suzhou       |
| QF   | M   | 60  | Carpentry; aluminium windows in Beijing (1994); decoration; catering     |
| ZS   | M   | 48  | Wenzhou footwear (1992); shoe soles elsewhere; own factory (2019)        |
| KL   | M   | 40  | Footwear in Fujian at 15; moulds in Guangdong; Zhejiang; decoration      |
| HS   | M   | 44  | Fujian footwear (1999); Hebei and Beijing; milk-powder business (2017)   |
| XS   | M   | 43  | Guangdong electronics; sales in Hangzhou and Xiamen; returned 2021       |
| CG   | M   | 26  | Schooled in Ruichang; university and work in Beijing                     |
| SL   | M   | 54  | Fujian and Guangdong furniture (1990); aluminium windows; local ventures |
| ZR   | M   | 52  | Rural teacher; then a government post in Ruichang                        |
| HY   | F   | 51  | Printing in Fujian at 20; then Beijing; homemaker                        |
| ZD   | M   | 35  | Decoration in Beijing (2005); contracting since 2012                     |
| CL   | M   | 54  | Varied trades since 18; aluminium windows; decoration; returned 2024     |

#### 4. The Genesis of Nostalgia: An Overdetermined Mechanism

Most interviewees left with vague aims yet, decades on, hold a firm attachment to home that strengthens with age—though the years spent away exceed those spent at home and should leave the deeper mark. The puzzle is that any single explanation of nostalgia—geography, networks, or culture—applies equally to the cities where migrants live longer. A residual remains that single-factor accounts cannot absorb. Following Althusser's overdetermination [10], nostalgia is best understood not as the product of one basic element but of multiple factors that interpenetrate and mutually reinforce one another, unified within the village community while remaining weakly connected in the city.

##### 4.1. The Double Embedding of the Social Network

Although Durkheim linked social integration to suicide rather than nostalgia [11], the parallel is clear: integration in the native place fosters attachment, longing, and an obligation to return, while urban ties remain emotionally thin [12]. Integration alone, however, cannot explain why ties to the village do not loosen over decades of migrant work; the answer lies in how the network is built and used. What matters is not merely exchange but its governing norms; as Granovetter argues, economic action is embedded in social networks [13]. In Zhaochen the network is embedded with kin-and-native-place relations: villages are largely single-surname and intermarried, so fellow villagers are addressed by kin terms fixed by generational order, and kinship, co-residence, and friendship overlap into one fused network.

More decisive than this construction is the network's continued use during migration. In the early reform period, a functioning labour market had not developed; information barriers and language differences kept migrants out of it, so scarce jobs were obtained through personal ties (Table 2). Failed moves were common and migrants' capacity to absorb risk was low, so they fell back on the survival ethic and on kin who could offer a foothold, job information, and skills—uses that, far from loosening, tightened reliance on the network and made it a "portable hometown." The village migrants long for is also rooted in land: parents and children remain in the home place—children for schooling under the household-registration system, the elderly for reasons of health, language, and their own networks—so returning migrants cluster there in space and time, reactivating the wider network through the elderly as a hub. Longing for home as family thus becomes longing for home as the native place.

**Table 2.** The kin–native-place network in migration.

| Theme                  | Speaker | Excerpt                                                                                                                   |
|------------------------|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Aimless departure      | XS      | "It was mainly for fun, chasing the trend ... all my friends had gone, so I followed them to Guangdong."                  |
| Aimless departure      | KL      | "Many fellow villagers were over there, so we went together ... wherever they went, I went too."                          |
| Firm attachment        | ZS      | "Our idea was simple—go out, earn some money, come back, and live a little better."                                       |
| Firm attachment        | HS      | "I never thought of settling outside ... once you'd saved a little, you'd improve the family's life back home."           |
| Knows city better      | CL      | "I probably know Beijing better than my hometown."                                                                        |
| Jobs need connections  | ZY      | "To get into a factory you needed connections, a guarantor, a deposit, your ID handed over—you couldn't find work alone." |
| Jobs need connections  | XS      | "Many people and few factories ... many of us couldn't even speak Mandarin, so going out on your own didn't work."        |
| Failed venture, return | HS      | "I had no ID, couldn't get into a factory, stayed a month or two, and came back."                                         |

|                        |    |                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------|----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Failed venture, return | CL | "I worked there over a year, but around 1989, amid the broader downturn, the factory lost its business, so I came back." |
| Kin-assisted move      | ZS | "My father said here we have many fellow villagers and relatives—you won't starve."                                      |
| Kin-assisted move      | KL | "My aunt was here, so I came through her; her family gave me a place to land."                                           |
| Skills via ties        | ZD | "For decoration you start as an apprentice ... relatives and friends bring you out and you learn."                       |

## 4.2. The Family-Centred Moral Space

Every network is embedded in a moral space—a shared, non-physical field of expectations about others' conduct. The village's moral space is distinctive in two ways: it is "thicker," and it operates with the family, not the individual, as its unit, so that a member's conduct shapes others' view of the whole family. Interaction therefore proceeds in family blocks: shame and honour are shared, parents press or act for absent children, and gifts are exchanged in their names, so that a migrant's ties can strengthen even when he is absent (Table 3). This propagation deepens reliance without the migrant's awareness, raising the resilience of nostalgia.

Within this space the obligation of mutual aid is embedded almost unconditionally, generating a basic trust that locally built ties cannot match help can be asked without strong prior contact and without fear of damaging the relationship, and returns are expected at the family level over the long run rather than immediately (Table 3). Urban ties, by contrast, are instrumental and fade once exchange ends, whereas a dormant village tie can be reactivated in a single phone call. It is this low-cost reactivability that lets nostalgia endure for decades.

**Table 3.** The family-centred moral space.

| Theme                         | Speaker | Excerpt                                                                                                   |
|-------------------------------|---------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Family is the unit            | KH      | "For a wedding ... the real focus is the parents' generation; my parents will hold it in the village."    |
| Honour and shame shared       | SL      | "However much money you have, if you don't do good for your hometown, no one remembers you."              |
| Parents act for children      | KH      | "If you don't return yourself, your parents will return on your behalf."                                  |
| Unconditional mutual aid      | ZF      | "If it's someone from our hometown or our kin, we help ... you don't think about whether they can repay." |
| Unconditional mutual aid      | ZS      | "As long as I can afford it I give ... I never thought about getting it back."                            |
| Refusal is punished           | ZY      | "If he knows you can help and you don't, won't he be angry?"                                              |
| Family-level, long-run return | SL      | "Maybe they'll think, 'his father helped me, we can help his descendants.'"                               |
| Instrumental urban ties       | ZS      | "Many relationships are built on interest ... if you don't keep in touch, they fade."                     |
| Instrumental urban ties       | CL      | "Outside it's all play-acting ... hometown people have known you since childhood, inside out."            |

## 4.3. The Interacting Life Course

Early in this century Wang Chunguang found second-generation migrants to have weaker hometown attachment [9]; the second-generation interviewees here diverge sharply, almost none doubting their identity and most willing to retire to the village. The likeliest explanation is that attitudes shift over

the life course. If nostalgia tracks dependence on a developing network, it too changes with time—and an individual's life course interacts with those of significant others.

Early on, migrants position themselves as economic providers: long hours and co-worker company leave little room for longing (Table 4). With age, incomes stabilize, free time grows, and expectations of further gain fall; the role shifts from provider to companion, and—in Maslow's terms, once lower needs are met—the need for belonging comes to the fore [14]. Free time in particular intensifies nostalgia. The life cycles of significant others reinforce this: children's senior-secondary years and parents' old age both pull migrants home, the latter most sharply after a parent's death (Table 4). Nostalgia thus arises when the felt need for the network outruns the security it currently provides.

**Table 4.** Life course and the timing of nostalgia.

| Theme                 | Speaker | Excerpt                                                                                           |
|-----------------------|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Gruelling early years | HS      | "From 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. ... no Saturdays or Sundays like now."                                    |
| Drive fades with age  | HS      | "That drive to struggle outside fades; working near home is fine, the main thing is being close." |
| Empathy with parents  | XS      | "Now you're a parent yourself—you understand your parents' hardship; before, you didn't."         |
| Fear of loss          | XS      | "The time we can really spend with them isn't much ... mainly I'm afraid of losing loved ones."   |
| Urban isolation       | XS      | "The city feels stifling and lonely ... you may not even know who lives across the hall."         |

## 5. From Effect to Cause: How Nostalgia Works

Nostalgia is a latent drive. Like Benjamin's angel of history, it faces the wreckage of the past yet orients toward the future [15]: the "lost" home retrospectively marks where home lies. The drive to build the village and the experience of nostalgia are therefore two faces of one thing, and the mechanism of effect continues the genesis rather than starting afresh.

To manage the anxiety nostalgia brings, migrants undertake visible acts—a performance of identity that converts an unmasterable feeling into something measurable and displays belonging to self and others. Repairing the rural house is the central instance: widely admitted to be inefficient, it persists as a symbol that home remains, and return is possible (Table 5). Roads, donations, and ancestral halls work the same way, as a kind of "taking sides."

This performance is doubly constrained—against doing too little and too much. Ostentation invites envy and endless requests for help, so the norm is to "seek no merit, only avoid fault," contributing at the common level (Table 5). Because most avoid standing out, collective projects require village elites willing to bear the "ostentation" of initiating them. Elites act from a whole-village rather than single-family perspective, recover lost collective land, and stage collective events to embed the young in the network—reproducing nostalgia in the next generation (Table 5). Yet each family's effort to raise its own standing also improves the village as a whole.

**Table 5.** The performance of identity and its limits.

| Theme                 | Speaker | Excerpt                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------|---------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| House as symbol       | KH      | "Fixing a rural house is inefficient—you might spend 500,000 and live in it five to seven days a year."  |
| House as symbol       | CL      | "With a house in your hometown you'll come back; without a home you'll only stay outside."               |
| House as symbol       | QY      | "This is our ancestral home ... if our generation doesn't care, the next won't take it seriously."       |
| Stay low-key          | QF      | "I offer good cigarettes—and at once, 'Made a fortune now, smoking good cigarettes!' What tone is that?" |
| Stay low-key          | QF      | "I donated to the school during the epidemic ... rumours spread—'why donate there, not at home?'"        |
| Cannot refuse to give | HS      | "You can't not donate a bit—you'd feel bad."                                                             |
| Elite initiative      | SL      | "If others won't pay, CL and I pay for hometown affairs."                                                |
| Whole-village view    | CL      | "A village without even an ancestral hall loses face for the whole village."                             |
| Whole-village view    | QF      | "The river isn't a river, the fields aren't fields ... that is the pain of our generation."              |
| Embedding the young   | QF      | "We advocate a New Year meal—a platform for communication."                                              |

## 6. Conclusion

Nostalgia is, at root, a dependence—directed not at the village as geography but at the social network that marks the community and used across the life course: built in childhood, used in early adulthood, rediscovered in middle age, relied upon in old age. The network earns this place because interlocking factors give it a resilience other networks lack: traditional ethics furnish a basic trust that allows low-cost reactivation, and the life course shifts what migrants draw from it—resources when young, care and companionship when old.

Reliance on the network is thus a matter of interest as well as sentiment; many migrants sustain their urban livelihoods precisely because of it. Nostalgia and urban integration should therefore not be opposed: strategic reliance on the native-place network both helps migrants establish themselves in the city and impels them to return and rebuild the village. The urban integration of rural migrants and the revitalization of rural communities are two faces of one problem, and entering through nostalgia opens the possibility of pursuing both at once.

Two limits remain. The site is a single, relatively isolated town whose strong internal solidarity may make the giving-back pattern more local than general; and, given the norm of "returning to one's roots," interviewees may have overstated their longing and contributions. Both invite broader research.

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