Beyond 'Making It': Disillusionment, Adaptation, and Transformation of Young Urban-to-Rural Migrants in China

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Abstract

In contemporary China, young people face mounting pressures from rapid urbanization, credential inflation, rising living costs, and intense labor market competition. In response to the limitations of urban life, a growing minority of young urbanites are seeking alternatives by relocating to rural areas—a phenomenon now closely watched in the context of China's rural revitalization agenda.

This study moves beyond push-pull explanations and the prevalent rural revitalization discourses to examine the everyday realities, tensions, challenges, and transformations experienced by young urban-to-rural migrants. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with twelve urban youth who left diverse careers to settle in Hejia Village, Fujian Province, complemented by interviews with local villagers and young urban-to-rural migrants in neighboring villages, the research explores processes of adaptation, disillusionment, and transformation. Through thick description, the study reveals how young migrants confront the gap between their idealized visions of rural life and the complex realities they face: unstable income, limited infrastructure, ambiguous social positioning, and the fragmentation of both migrant and local communities.

Rather than recounting a conventional success story of urbanites "making it" in the rural, this study shows that the journeys of young migrants in Hejia Village are characterized by pervasive disillusionment and ongoing negotiation. Only a few migrants earn more than they did in the cities, and many find that economic success comes at the cost of sacrificing their ideals. For most, disillusionment marks not an endpoint, but a turning point - prompting more pragmatic, sustainable strategies and experimentation with alternative models of rural living.

Hejia Village emerges as a site of ongoing social experimentation, where the pursuit of autonomy, community, and meaning continuously collides with rural reality. Ultimately, the study argues that for most urban youth, rural migration is not a final destination but an open-ended journey—one that reveals both new possibilities and inherent limitations for youth mobility and rural revitalization in China. By focusing on the nuanced experiences of ordinary young people, this research sheds light on the everyday dilemmas and aspirations of a generation searching for alternatives beyond the conventional urban success framework.

Introduction

The Puzzle

In contemporary China, young people are navigating a landscape shaped by rapid urbanization, credential inflation, rising living costs, and declining employment rates. The anxious young people have come up with the term "inward spiral" or "involution" (neijuan 内卷) and "lying flat" (tang ping 躺平) to describe their aimless living and working conditions (Tong and Liu 2024). "Lying flat" refers to a simple lifestyle without effort and reflects the mental confusion and disillusionment of young people, and "inward spiral" refers to a state where individuals feel trapped in a vicious cycle of competition.

While both terms reflect widespread anxiety and disillusionment among youth, a growing minority are charting a different path: moving from cities to rural areas in search of alternative possibilities. Although urban-to-rural migration is not a mainstream internal migration in China compared to rural-to-urban and inter-urban migration, urban-to-rural migrants themselves have received significant public attention as their pursuit intersect with China's rural revitalization agenda with the aim of urban-rural integration and serve as a point of resonance for urban youth worn down by relentless city pressures but unsatisfied with "lying flat" as a response (Ban 2023, Yuan 2023, Sun et al. 2024, Tang 2020). Understanding young urban-to-rural migrants matters because their experiences illuminate new possibilities for young people's adaptation, agency, and community under changing social and economic conditions.

Using interview and ethnographic methods, this study explores the lives of twelve young people who have left their urban professions—ranging from data analyst and sales to café manager and new media editor—and relocated to Hejia, a rural village in Fujian province. They were all born after 1990 and are from lower- and middle-class families. To broaden perspectives on local dynamics, I also interviewed three local villagers and three urban youth from neighboring villages who interact frequently with Hejia's migrants.

For the purposes of this research, "young urban-to-rural migrants" are defined as Chinese citizens between eighteen and thirty-five years old who previously lived in urban areas and have moved to and resided in a rural setting for at least six months. Here, "rural" refers to village-level

administrative districts, typically marked by low population density, ongoing reliance on agriculture, traditional customs, and limited public infrastructure.

Existing research on young urban-to-rural migrants has paid considerable attention to the reasons for migration and to policy frameworks, especially within tourism and cultural studies or rural revitalization discourses (Luo 2023, Mao 2021, Jiang and Deng 2020). However, these studies often neglect what happens after arrival—how young migrants adapt, negotiate, and redefine their lives in rural settings. By focusing on these overlooked aspects, this study asks: What happens after young people relocate to the countryside, and what everyday realities and transformations follow? Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, this research seeks to move beyond origin stories and arrival moments, providing a nuanced account of contemporary youth migration and rural life in China.

Site: Hejia Village

My interest in young urban-to-rural migrants in China stems from three months living and researching in Hejia Village, located in Ningchuan County, Fujian Province. Hejia is a mountain village with over 700 years of history. Like many rural areas in China, it has experienced dramatic depopulation—by 2016, fewer than a dozen residents remained. In recent years, however, Hejia has been transformed by a wave of migrants - predominantly Millennials and Generation Z, aged 18 to 45 — who have been drawn to the village by a cluster of creative and rural revitalization initiatives. The village now boasts more than 100 permanent residents, including over 30 long-term urban-to-rural migrants who run small businesses in creative industries, agriculture, and especially hospitality[1].

Hejia's transformation from a remote, nearly abandonment village to a thriving tourism and lifestyle hotspot reflects the intersecting forces of national rural revitalization policies, local innovation, and a degree of luck. As a recognized pilot site for government and artistic intervention, Hejia has drawn significant media and scholarly attention, bolstered further by the

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[1] According to the Ningchuan Culture & Tourism WeChat Official Account, Hejia's permanent population is reported as over 200. However, all three local villagers I interviewed estimated the population to be just over 100, noting that numbers increase during holidays and summer breaks when children and young people return. Based on my observation, 100 is a more accurate reflection of the local permeant residents.

surge of local tourism (Ding 2022, Feng, Yan, & Liu, 2023). The village has seen a dramatic surge in rural tourism, growing collective income, and rapid spatial and social change. My fieldwork in Hejia, conducted as an intern at the Ningchuan Rural Regeneration Research Institute from January to April 2024, allowed me to observe these processes first-hand, engaging both with migrants and locals.

While Hejia Village has gained nationwide attention as a "model" for rural revitalization, it is not entirely unique - many villages in China now host Institutes of Rural Revitalization as part of a broader national agenda[2]. Unlike other so-called migrant villages, which are often populated by affluent middle-class families or digital nomads who frequently move between locations, most of Hejia's migrants are young people from middle- or lower-class backgrounds who choose to settle in the village rather than travel back and forth between villages or between the village and the city (Ma and Xu 2016, Tang 2020, Xu and Wen 2023, Yuan and Liu 2023). What sets Hejia apart, however, is its relatively higher level of prosperity and popularity, achieved through the combined efforts of local residents, urban migrants, the Institute and state support. In this sense, Hejia exemplifies broader patterns of urban-to-rural migration and government-led revitalization initiatives. Yet, the specific mix of resources and exceptional public attention in Hejia means that not all its experiences can be fully generalized to other villages.

Literature Review

Internal Migration in China: Background and Definitions

Internal migration is one of the most widely researched topics in Chinese migration studies, largely due to its significant scale and deep social impact. Traditionally, the dominant pattern has been rural-to-urban migration, fueled by the rapid expansion of urban economies and labor markets. As of 2024, the total number of migrant workers, primarily rural migrant laborers, in China had reached 299.73 million according to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2024). Furthermore, in 2021, China's urban population reached 901.9 million, representing 64% of the total population, and this percentage had increased to over 66% by 2024. This process of

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[2] There is no official data on the number of Institutes of Rural Revitalization across China. However, Professor Gao, Dean of the Ningchuan Institute of Rural Revitalization, and his team alone have been affiliated with over seven such institutes in Fujian Province, with many more established in other provinces as well.

urbanization has contributed substantially to the nation's economic development by mobilizing rural laborers for work in cities.

However, despite these economic gains, scholars have identified that the "urbanization of people" - meaning improvements in the well-being and social integration of rural and migrant urbanites, has lagged behind the "urbanization of space" or "urbanization of capital." In other words, while cities have rapidly expanded their infrastructure and attracted investment, many migrants themselves have not experienced parallel improvements in quality of life or social inclusion (Friedman 2022). The main consensus among researchers is that the majority of rural migrants in urban areas live second-class lives, with severely limited access to urban benefits and opportunities. This is primarily due to the hukou (household registration) system, which maintains a sharp divide between urban and rural residents. The hukou system denies rural-to-urban migrants' full urban citizenship and access to public services by tying entitlements to an individual's place of registration – typically their place of birth or family origin. As a result, many migrants are excluded from urban education, healthcare, and social welfare programs. This has led to widespread social issues such as "left-behind children" —minors whose parents migrate to cities for work, leaving them in their hometowns with relatives or on their own—and has contributed to the fragmentation of families across rural and urban China (Chan 2013, Su and Tesfazion 2018).

While much existing scholarship has focused on the large and often circular flows of rural-to-urban migrants, this study instead directs attention to the much newer and comparatively smaller group of urban-to-rural migrants. Urban-to-rural migration is often conceptualized as a form of "counter-urbanization" because it reverses the dominant pattern of migration in the context of rapid urbanization (Sun 2020). Nonetheless, the scale of the flow of rural-to-urban migrants remains relatively small - estimated at around 13 million people in 2024 – when compared to China's 299.73 million rural migrant workers [3].

Although the study of urban-to-rural migration is a relatively recent development in Chinese scholarship, it has been widely researched in highly urbanized countries such as those in Europe, the United States, and Japan. International scholars have used categories like "lifestyle

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[3] According to National Bureau of Statistics of China and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs

migration," motivated by the search for authenticity, personal growth and a higher quality of life, or "amenity migration," motivated by the desire for a better natural and social environment (Klein 2020, Osbaldiston 2012, Stockdale and Catney 2014, Steinfuehrer et al. 2024, Yasuo et al. 2021). However, this study intentionally moves beyond such typologies, recognizing that broad analytical concepts such as "authenticity" may not adequately reflect the specific social, economic, and cultural realties faced by urban-to-rural migrants in Hejia. Instead, this research grounds its findings in the local context and centers on the nuanced, lived experiences of China's urban youth, focusing on their individual migration journeys rather than fitting them into predefined categories or overarching theoretical frameworks.

Urban Youth: Work, Aspirations, and Disillusionment

Urbanization, coupled with the mainstream value that one will be better-off living in urban versus rural areas, has resulted in the vast majority of young people in China choosing urban work and life after finishing their degrees, regardless of their original hukou status. In 2024, the number of Chinese college graduates reached 11.79 million, a new record (Liepin 2024). Despite this, young Chinese citizens face mounting difficulties: an employment rate that is gradually declining, persistent threats of underemployment or unemployment, and soaring costs of urban living, including rent and consumption.

To achieve stability and social welfare, many young people opt to compete for civil service positions or to extend their education in graduate school. This leads, paradoxically, to ever more intense competition for jobs and to credential inflation. In this societal context, many contemporary Chinese youth experience feelings of futility and entrapment—what is commonly referred to as an "inward spiral" (内卷). The term describes an environment of endless, meaningless competition in which even increased effort does not result in better outcomes (Tong and Liu 2024). Another equally popular term, "lying flat" (躺平), entered web media discourse in 2021 and refers to a lifestyle that seeks radical simplicity and non-competition. These terms, "inward spiral" and "lying flat," reflect youth's disillusionment, a common sentiment in the face of intense urban pressures (Zhou 2022).

Urban-to-Rural Migration in the Era of Rural Revitalization

Policy Landscape and Recent Trends

Although it is not yet a mainstream choice, China has witnessed a steady increase in urban-to-rural migration following the launch of the Rural Revitalization Strategy in 2017, particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic. By 2024, the number of people returning to villages or moving to rural areas to start businesses across China approached 13 million. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs predicts that this figure will surpass 15 million by 2025.

The rural revitalization strategy was designed to promote integrated urban-rural development and the modernization of agriculture and rural society. Its goal is to address five major rural challenges: the rapid loss of agricultural production resources (such as labor and land), the accelerated aging and weakening of rural social actors, growing rural housing vacancies and land waste, severe ecological degradation, and persistent poverty in rural communities (Liu et al. 2020). While the rural revitalization strategy is now recognized as a pillar of China's broader economic and social development policies, this study moves beyond the policymaking perspective. It does not seek to reinforce the framework of rural revitalization or to make policy recommendations. Rather, it centers young urban-to-rural migrants, foregrounding their everyday lives and the personal transformations they experience in the migration process. From this perspective, rural revitalization is understood not simply as a spatial transformation, but also as a profound transformation of people themselves.

Literature on Young Urban-to-Rural Migrants

A large body of literature has emerged on young urban-to-rural migrants, most of which is framed in terms of analyzing push and pull factors, the challenges of migration, the social functions of migrants, and the effectiveness of related policies. These studies often aim to offer policy recommendations to facilitate and sustain urban-to-rural migration (Hunasutu 2024, Wang and Chen 2022, Xu and Wang 2021, Tang 2022). In many such works, individuals are presented as abstract symbols or indicators of the success or failure of rural revitalization, leading to the frequent neglect of the transformative experiences, tensions, emotions, frustrations, and everyday realities faced by urban youth migrants. In terms of research subjects, most studies focus either

on "returnee youth," who return to their hometown or home villages, or youth who are newcomers to their adopted villages. Because this study focuses on urban youth migrants who have moved to villages with no prior family connections, it is crucial to clarify the distinction between returnee youth and urban youth migrants. These two types of migrants differ significantly in terms of economic, social, and migration backgrounds, and thus their migration experiences are not directly comparable.

Returnee youth （返乡青年）currently make up the largest proportion of urban-to-rural migrants in China. Although commonly referred to as "youth," this group generally ranges from 30 to 40 years old, with the trend moving toward even younger demographics. Most returnee youth hold only a middle or high school diploma and lack advanced technical skills (Dong 2022, Huang 2023, Wang 2021). The domains of entrepreneurship for returnee youth mostly combine the service sector with primary industries like farming business. Examples include leisure agriculture, intelligent agriculture, agricultural service sectors, and rural life services (Hunasutu 2024).

For returnee youth, the engine of urban-to-rural migration is the combination of returning home and seeking livelihood (Dong 2022). Their initial capital in the village often consists of both urban social capital—including friends, networks, and urban resources—and rural social capital, such as family, local networks, economic, emotional, and technical support (Huang 2023).

New Villagers: Definition, Social Influence, and Migration Challenges
This study focuses on urban youth migrants - the so-called "new villagers" (新村民) - who were born after 1990. The term "new villager" is widely used among local villagers, migrants, and the official media, and is defined here according to Tang's (2022) description as: "Those who come from cities or hold non-local household registration, are not originally from the village, but have worked, started businesses, or lived in the village for more than half a year. This group includes entrepreneurs, ecological farmers, artists, scholars, freelancers, retirees, as well as individuals engaging in rural public welfare."

New villagers tend to be highly educated and possess strong economic resources, which can increase the human capital available to rural communities and generate additional developmental

opportunities (Yuan 2023). Furthermore, new villagers are typically more concerned about ecological protection and are both willing and able to promote more environmentally friendly rural production and lifestyles. Although some new villagers can be described as "elites," many of my informants describe themselves as "grassroots" individuals, and several openly reject the elite urban culture (Tang 2020). Unlike returnee youth, new villagers lack rural social capital and must mainly depend on governmental support to run their businesses and establish services (Hunasutu 2024).

Shared Push and Pull Factors

Despite having different backgrounds, urban youth migrants and returnee youth share a number of common push and pull factors. The main push factors include the extreme competitiveness and high pressure of urban workplaces, high costs of living, the urban culture of overconsumption, traffic congestion, pollution, a lack of social integration, and a prevailing sense of alienation and rootlessness (Ban 2023, Sun 2024, Wang 2021, Jiang 2020). Pull factors for both groups include the allure of rural scenery, a relaxed and slower pace of life, and the opportunity to pursue self-realization (Ban 2023, Mao 2021, Sun 2024, Wang 2021). For returnee youth, reuniting with family and enjoying the intimacy of family life is an additional pull factor (Luo 2023).

Importantly, the Covid-19 pandemic acted as both a catalyst and an inflection point, simultaneously intensifying the pressures of city life while increasing the appeal of rural living. As a push factor, the pandemic exacerbated urban job insecurity, heightened anxiety, and exposed the vulnerabilities of densely populated environments. As a pull factor, it enhanced the attractiveness of the countryside, which was perceived as safer, healthier, and more conducive to personal reflection and alternative livelihoods. Overall, Covid-19 prompted many young people to revisit their ideals for a good life and marked a broader economic transition from prosperity to stagnation (Huang 2023).

Structural Factors and the Material Basis for Migration

Urban-to-rural migration has become increasingly feasible for youth due to the development of telecommunications, the internet, improved transportation, and road construction, all of which have increased rural-urban mobility and connectivity. In addition, as the significance of land for

traditional agricultural production has declined for ordinary rural families, many youth entrepreneurs now acquire the right to manage rural land through rental payment to local farmers. This access to management rights, rather than ownership, constitutes the material basis for youth entrepreneurship in the countryside (Mao 2020).

Local governments have implemented policies to further encourage youth migration to rural areas, including investments in basic infrastructure to lower early operating costs, as well as a range of policy incentives to help youth develop markets, reduce costs, and access loans and insurance. Some policies reward youth with public recognition, branding support, or direct financial assistance (Mao 2020, Sun 2020). Changes in urban consumption patterns and the rise of rural tourism have also opened up more economic opportunities for migrants.

Recent research by Luo (2023) demonstrates that the number of youth entrepreneurs born after 1990 has grown, with many choosing low-threshold, small-scale businesses that feature flexible schedules, light labor, low investment, and reduced risk—primarily in online and new consumer industries. Most youth rely on a combination of loans and family support to fund their ventures. Huang (2023) notes that while changes in the outside environment can initially attract youth to rural areas, it is the long-term availability of career opportunities and a supportive policy environment that determines whether they stay in rural. A stable and supportive business environment that guarantees basic public infrastructure, individual rights, and fair competition is crucial for entrepreneurial success, but such conditions are often lacking in rural China.

Challenges for Urban Youth Settling in Rural Areas

Scholars have identified a range of challenges that urban youth encounter as they settle in rural areas. Foremost among these is the issue of land, which remains a fundamental hurdle since the ability to reside and operate in the countryside depends on securing rights to rural land. According to China's Constitution, the Land Management Law, and the Property Law, collective rural land ownership is held by the village collective, and peasants have contract and management rights, but urban residents can only access management rights through leases or mortgages. In practice, the lack of secure rights and the complicated and often ambiguous procedures for transferring land rights create significant uncertainty, making it difficult for

migrants to invest in rural businesses with confidence (Han 2017, Zhou and Deng 2020, Yuan 2023).

In addition to land, funding and staffing are major obstacles for urban-to-rural migrants, as starting a new business requires both money and people, and fundraising and hiring are more difficult in rural environment (Wang 2021). Moreover, while rural rents are typically lower than in cities, material costs for businesses can be higher as goods are often sourced through intermediaries rather than directly from manufacturers, resulting in increased expenses for labor and transportation (Huang 2023). Furthermore, rural infrastructure, including transportation, delivery, and construction, remains less developed than in urban settings, often resulting in operational delays.

Cultural conflicts also pose significant challenges. Urban migrants, accustomed to clear social boundaries, sometimes feel uneasy when local villagers drop by unannounced, breaching the privacy they expect (Yuan 2023). Migrants also face negative public opinion rooted in the stigmatization of rural area from family members, peers, and even local residents, who may see them as "losers in the city" (Wang and Pei 2021, Yuan 2023). Although gradual integration between migrants and locals occurs through ongoing interaction, deeper forms of integration remain limited. Issues surrounding the allocation of economic benefits and the power imbalance in land negotiations persist; under China's dual urban-rural structure and collective rural land ownership policies, migrants often participate as tenants rather than community "insiders" (Yuan 2023).

Such tensions emerge when urban legal frameworks and notions of social order confront the close-knit, acquaintance-based society of rural China. Huang (2023) finds that even market reforms meant to create orderly commercial spaces for returnee entrepreneurs do not always succeed. For example, when informal, lively rural markets were converted into regulated spaces, transaction volumes did not increase because the new format did not align with villagers' consumption habits. Rural markets are as much about social interaction, information exchange, and performance as about economic transactions.

Shortcomings in rural governance can further complicate resettlement. Although urban youth benefit from policies like reduced utility costs and favorable loans, their entrepreneurship is

hampered by a lack of transparency in government support for new enterprises. Urban youth are less concerned with basic incentives and more with sustained governmental backing and the broader creation of high-quality employment opportunities. Yet, as Huang (2023) notes, while social policy can encourage initial migration, ongoing support is too often delayed and insufficient after migrants have settled.

These challenges—spanning land rights, business operations, cultural integration, and policy support—reveal the complex landscape urban youth must navigate when relocating to rural China. My fieldwork in Hejia not only confirms many of the obstacles outlined in existing scholarship but also illuminates the specific ways these dynamics play out in practice. By focusing on the lived experiences of both migrants and locals in Hejia, this study aims to deepen understanding of how national trends intersect with local realities, and to identify factors that may enable or constrain successful integration and sustainable rural living.

Urban Migrants' Socioeconomic Impacts and Community Relations

Most academic studies focus on the impacts of urban migrants as a group, such as revitalizing local communities, renewing demographic structures, fostering creative industries, promoting rural-urban integration and preserving cultural heritage.

The arrival of new villagers has had several profound effects on local rural communities in China. On the positive side, new villagers have boosted economic growth, introduced new lifestyles, and created new avenues for income and opportunity. However, their presence has also raised the cost of living, such as housing prices and rental rates, and in some cases has crowded out local job opportunities. The ecological and environmental values advocated by new villagers such as farming without pesticides and chemical fertilizers can disrupt traditional agricultural practices and resource management methods. Migrants' higher knowledge, income, and differing values often spark tension and conflict with locals, sometimes even resulting in social division (Yuan 2023).

Economic links between new villagers and residents are primarily based on renting housing or labor. However, the distribution of economic benefits remains unequal. Those who have already moved to nearby cities and no longer live in the village are the main beneficiaries of rental

income, while those who stayed behind and have no extra property available cannot benefit from this new economy. New villagers typically employ few local workers, and most business ventures by new villagers are unstable, rarely advancing beyond the subsistence stage. For example, in Cenbu Village, in a sample of five organic farms, three have changed ownership more than twice, and local villagers held fewer than fifteen stable jobs out of seventy available positions among all fifteen migrant-run businesses (Yuan 2023).

Village-Level Studies: Hejia and Ningchuan County

A review of the literature shows that most recent studies on Hejia and Ningchuan County in Fujian Province have focused on spatial planning, ecological resource management, and the performative aspects of rural revitalization. However, there is very little attention to the lived experience or changing subjectivities of migrants themselves (Chen and Zhang 2023, Feng and Zi 2023, Huang 2022, Pan and Wu 2022, Deng et al. 2022). Among these studies, only Feng and Zi (2023) addresses Hejia Village specifically, and their emphasis is on spatial and ecological organization, relying exclusively on secondary sources and presenting inaccurate demographic data. Overall, the presence, life experiences, and aspirations of new urban-to-rural migrants are treated as mere context, not as the subject of serious inquiry. In most of this literature, the arrival of "new villagers" is viewed as a background or structural occurrence, rather than as a lived and dynamic social process.

Argument

Recent scholarship on urban youth migration to rural China has predominantly focused on motivations, mechanisms, and policy frameworks, particularly from the perspectives of tourism studies, cultural studies, and rural revitalization. Yet, these studies often overlook the everyday lived experiences and ongoing negotiations that young migrants face after their relocation. Notable exceptions, such as the work of Yuan (2023) and Huang (2023), foreground how young migrants navigate new opportunities and challenges, reshaping their aspirations, values, and identities within rural contexts. These challenges—ranging from land rights and business

operations to cultural integration and policy support—reveal the intricate and dynamic landscape encountered by urban youth in the countryside.

Building on and extending the work of Yuan and Huang, this study centers the migrants' own voices and experiences, focusing on the challenges, tensions, and structural as well as cultural conflicts these youth encounter. The study asks: What happens after young urbanites move to the countryside? What disillusionments do they face, and how do they respond?

Rooted in fieldwork from Hejia Village, this research moves beyond push-pull explanations and the prevalent rural-urban integration or rural revitalization discourses. Through thick description, the study traces the richness of these journey, focusing on ongoing processes of interaction, disillusionment, adaptation, and transformation. Rather than merely assimilating into existing rural life, young migrants in Hejia are engaged in a form of social experimentation. Hejia thus emerges less as a static "home" and more as a dynamic space for exploration, accumulation, transformation, and the pursuit of alternative ways of living—a site where ideals confront reality and where action supersedes utopian visions.

A central finding of this study is the pervasive sense of disillusionment experienced by urban-to-rural migrants—an experience that stands in sharp contrast to the romanticized narratives of "rural return" promoted in policy and popular media. Importantly, this disillusionment rarely marked the end of the migration journey. Instead, for many it was a turning point, prompting a process of compromise, adaptation, and the search for more pragmatic and sustainable approaches to rural living. For some, this meant forging new communal ties or reevaluating their ideals; for others, it ultimately led to leaving Hejia Village in pursuit of new possibilities elsewhere. Among the twelve urban youth in this study, only one, Pei, intends to remain in Hejia long-term, while most continue to view rural life as one stage in an ongoing search for meaning, value, and possibility.

The stories and struggles of these young migrants, drawn from both lower- and middle-class backgrounds, shed light on the everyday realities and shared anxieties of China's urban youth in the post-COVID era. Through their migration journeys, urban youth challenge mainstream success frameworks and the urban–rural divide, while actively experimenting with new ways of living. Furthermore, as this research shows, these movements are not only transformative for the

migrants themselves; the presence of urban youth in Hejia is also reshaping local development, altering community dynamics, and stimulating new discussions of identity and pride among rural residents. In this way, urban-to-rural migration emerges as a multi-layered, reciprocal process—one of mutual transformation for both people and places.

Methodology

Methodological Approach

In this study, "young urban-to-rural migrants" are defined as Chinese citizens between eighteen and thirty-five years old who have previously lived and worked in urban settings and have resided in rural Hejia for at least six months. This operationalization is informed by the concept of 'young adulthood' and prevailing definitions of migration in China (Arnett et al. 2014, Chan 2013, Yao 2001). To provide an in-depth understanding of these complex transitions, I employed an ethnographic approach, grounded in three months of participatory observation in Hejia Village from January and April 2024, during my internship at the Ningchuan Rural Revitalization Research Institute.

My fieldwork began with general observation of the people in the village, after which my focus gradually narrowed to urban-to-rural migrants – individuals with whom I most closely interacted and resonated, and whose migration journeys and rural lives are in dynamic stages of change and possibility. I engaged with urban-to-rural migrants daily across multiple settings: working alongside three urban-to-rural migrants at the research institute; dining at their restaurants and coffee shops; and participating in social life at the art studio, bookstore, camping site and theatre. Over the course of my fieldwork, I met all urban-to-rural migrants in the village and developed close friendships with most of them. We spend many free times together and shared many experiences included hiking, playing board games, making trips to the city, tasting new coffee beans and dishes, late-night conversations and discussing visions for the village's development. These relationships have continued beyond my fieldwork, and I have returned to visit Hejia and plan further visits.

For this study, I focused on twelve young Chinese adults (aged 26–35, all born after 1990) who moved from various urban areas across China to settle in Hejia Village. Participants were selected based on diversity, representativeness, and personal rapport, aiming to capture a comprehensive picture of urban-to-rural migrant life in the village. I interacted with all twelve participants for three months in person and developed friendships with each. This group represented a range of backgrounds: seven held urban hukou and five rural hukou; there were seven women and five men, including one married couple and two additional married individuals. Nine arrived during the pandemic years (2022–2023), while three relocated in early 2024. Their rural livelihoods included running businesses, participating in rural development projects, and engaging in creative work.

To broaden the perspective on village life, I also conducted interviews with three local villagers who regularly interact with migrants, as well as three additional young migrants from neighboring villages who maintain close connections with urban migrants in Hejia. In total, I conducted 22 in-depth, semi-structured interviews in Mandarin with 18 participants, each lasting between one and two hours. These interviews were carried out online via Zoom from January to June 2025, while I was based in Chicago. Conducting interviews as an independent researcher – rather than as an intern representing the research institute- allowed for more open and candid conversations with the urban-to-rural migrants than had been possible during my earlier fieldwork. At last, to protect personal privacy, all names in this study are pseudonyms, including those of informants, key figures, and the study site.

This study focuses on a single village rather than comparing multiple sites, primarily due to constraints in the timeframe for completing a master's thesis and my own familiarity with the field. Employing a community study and ethnographic approach enabled me to develop a comprehensive understanding of the village where urban migrants reside. By fully immersing myself in the daily life of Hejia, I was able to observe, participate in, and experience the interactions between different cultural backgrounds and social networks. During the pilot interview stage, I spoke with urban-to-rural migrants in other provinces and quickly realized that their lives were markedly different from those in Hejia. The communities these migrants settled in, the resources they shared, their aspirations, and the specific challenges and opportunities they encountered all varied considerably across locations. These differences underscored the limited

value of cross-provincial comparison for this study and highlighted the importance of in-depth, site-specific research. My immersive ethnographic experience in Hejia allowed me to capture nuances that would be difficult to perceive without being physically present in the village context.

Primary Informants: Hejia Urban-to-Rural Migrants

Name	Age	Gender/ Marital Status	Education	Hukou	Occupation in the Village	Occupation in the City	Arrival Year[4]
Deng	30	Female/ Married	Master	Urban	Restaurant and coffee shop owner	Civil service exam instructor	2023
Fang	32	Male/ Married	Bachelor	Urban	Restaurant and coffee shop owner	Food Delivery Operations Manager	2023
Shen	33	Male/ Married	Middle School	Urban	Bakery Owner	Manager of a bakery	2022
Pei	33	Female/ Unmarried	Bachelor	Urban	Craft beer shop owner	Architectural Designer	2023
Jiang	28	Female/ Unmarried	Bachelor	Rural	Agricultural entrepreneur	Data analyst	2022
Xu	34	Male/ Unmarried	Bachelor	Urban	Operator of education tour and guest house	Social worker, founder of an education company	2023
Kang	26	Male/ Unmarried	Master	Urban	Research institute staff	E-commerce operation	2023
Yao	28	Female/ Unmarried	Bachelor	Rural	Research institute staff	New media editor	2022
Zhou	28	Female/ Unmarried	Bachelor	Rural	Research institute staff	Property leasing	2024
Yuan	31	Female/ Unmarried	Bachelor	Rural	(former) Research institute staff	Real estate marketing	2022 (left in 2024)
Cai	35	Female/ Married	PhD	Rural	Writer, filmmaker, museum operator	PhD in Chinese Literature	2024
Meng	27	Male/ Unmarried	Master	Urban	Filmmaker and researcher	Video editor	2024

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[4] Covid-19 Pandemic in China started in December 2019 and the Zero Tolerant Policy ended in January 2023.

Other Informants: Local Villagers and Urban-to-Rural Migrants in Nearby Village

Name	Role (Arrival Year)	Age	Gender/ Marital Status	Hukou	Education	Occupation in the village	Occupation in the City
Huang	Urban-to-rural migrants (2022)	24	Female/ unmarried	Urban	Bachelor	Arts and education entrepreneur	Student
Zhang	Former urban-to-rural migrants (2023 -2025)	34	Male/ unmarried	Rural	Associate	Guest house and coffee shop worker	E-commerce operation
Chen	Former urban-to-rural migrants (2023-2025)	30	Female/ unmarried	Urban	Bachelor	Coffeeshop	Sales
Liu	Local villager	41	Male/ married	Rural	Middle school	Owner of a yellow rice wine brewing studio	Construction worker
Wu	Local villager	46	Male/ married	Rural	Middle school	CEO of the Hejia Rural Cooperative	Owner of supermarkets
Shu	Local villager	41	Male/ unmarried	Rural	Middle school	Guesthouse owner	Construction worker

Positionality

My engagement with Hejia was shaped by multiple positionalities. I had three roles in the village: an intern at Ningchuan Institute of Rural Revitalization, a college student who is from Beijing studying in the U.S., and an independent researcher. I was known to most people in the village as an intern from the institute as I entered the village through the institute, and I built rapport with most people in the village initially as an intern at the institute. I was then a college student from Beijing and someone who was studying in the United States. My college credentials set me apart from the local villagers and my study abroad experience set me apart from other interns in the institute and urban-to-rural migrants. I explored the village and interacted with the people due to personal curiosity. Born in 2001, I am also a part of the very age group I studied, sharing their historical context and social pressures. Lastly, I was also an independent researcher who aimed to understand Hejia Village as a community and the phenomenon of urban-to-rural migrants.

Like many urban-to-rural migrants, I am from the city, I have received a college education, and am interested in the village as an alternative to urban life. However, unlike the urban-to-rural migrants in Hejia – many of whom are uncertain how long they will remain – I knew even before I came to the village that my stay would be limited to three months, the duration of my internship at the Ningchuan Institute of Rural Revitalization. While urban-to-rural migrants must find ways to earn a living in the village, my own experience was shaped by the security of a stable salary, office work, and institute-provided housing. This allowed me to prioritize learning and observation over the economic pressures faced by most migrants. Although urban-to-rural migrants are not as fully established in the village as the long-term local villagers, they are nonetheless more embedded than I was: they live and work in the village, build relationships, create businesses, attracted tourists, and became part of the ongoing development of the community. By contrast, my engagement in the village – as an intern and temporary participant – was necessarily more limited and transient.

About Hejia Village

Hejia Village is a mountain village situated at an altitude of 830 meters in Ningchuan County, Heping City, Fujian Province. Located about 40 miles from Heping city and 90 miles from the provincial capital Fuzhou (8.5 million population). The completion of a new freeway in 2018 shortened the commute from Ningchuan County to Fuzhou to just one and a half hours, opening up the region to increased mobility and tourism. With a history spanning over 700 years, Hejia Village once flourished with a population of more than 700 in the 1980s. However, like many rural areas across China, the village saw significant out-migration as residents moved to cities for work and business opportunities. By the 2010s, fewer than twenty residents remained and much of the farmland was left fallow.

Hejia's transformation began around 2015, marking the start of broader cultural and creative revitalization efforts led by Ningchuan County. Historically, Ningchuan was one of Fujian's 18 provincial-level poverty-stricken counties, but by 2019, it had achieved comprehensive poverty alleviation. Rural tourism became a pillar of this transformation: In 2019, Ningchuan County received over 6 million tourists, more than 60% of whom participated in rural tourism. Hejia Village quickly leveraged its well-preserved Ming-era architecture and scenic mountain setting

to attract tourists. Government-initiated projects restored traditional buildings and developed tourism-oriented facilities. The implementation of local policies supporting rural revitalization further boosted growth, and by 2022, Hejia was designated a model village for rural revitalization, receiving additional policy and financial resources.

Today, Hejia has a permanent population of over 100 residents, including 31 urban-to-rural migrants. The village has become a hub for entrepreneurship and social innovation, hosting 31 businesses focused on agriculture and tourism. Of these, 24 are owned or operated by urban-to-rural migrants, while another 7 remain in local hands. The Hejia Cooperative, founded by locals in 2021, now has over 50 members (migrants and locals) and works closely with migrant-run enterprises to manage land, resources, and collaborative projects, including the reclamation of over 500 acres of fields by 2024.

Many local villagers run homestays, restaurants, and orchard-based businesses —seven homestays have been opened by villagers, while both migrants and locals frequently operate multiple ventures at once. The influx of tourism has also enabled informal economic activities, such as weekend markets where villagers sell food and crafts.

Hejia's tourism sector has experienced remarkable growth in recent years. In 2023, the village welcomed approximately 750,000 tourists and generated over 15 million yuan in tourism revenue. The peak season, highlighted by over 1,600 persimmon trees against a backdrop of ancient architecture, has attracted as many as 8,000 vehicles and more than 30,000 visitors in a single day. Under the lead of local government and the Ningchuan Institute of Rural Revitalization, local persimmon industry itself has been repositioned through cultural initiatives—combining sightseeing, photography, and creative product development—to diversify local income streams. As a result, the collective income of the village rose to 531,600 yuan, with per capita disposable income climbing to 29,200 yuan in 2023 compared to just 7,600 yuan in 2017. Average net income per farmer has also increased significantly, reflecting rural revitalization's impact on livelihoods.

About Urban-to-Rural Migrants in Hejia

Currently, 31 long-term urban-to-rural migrants are living in the village; the number exceeds 40 if adding all the interns and volunteers from different organizations. Four among the thirty long-term migrants travel back and forth between the village and the city; they are all 40+ and do not rely on their business in the village for living. Historically, the number of arrivals and departures of migrants can be separated into two phases, pre-COVID and post-COVID. COVID started in January 2021, and 2021 and 2022 are the years with the highest number of departures with five departures in 2021 and six departures in 2022. Zero COVID Policy officially ended in January 2023, and 2023 was the year with the highest number of arrivals, with 15 arrivals. Regarding the type of migrants, Hejia's first wave of urban-to-rural migrants are all artists.

From 2018-2019, Hejia had attracted seven artists. It was also these artistic migrants that started the Hejia Creative Market (2018-2019). The year 2020 marked the first departure of migrants, three of the first five migrants left the village. With the establishment of Ningchuan Research Institute in 2021 and the development of rural tourism, the composition of the migrant community has changed from artists as the majority to entrepreneurs and rural revitalization-related migrants as the majority. With the media attention, academic and government resources brought by the research institute, and the various businesses brought by the entrepreneurs, Hejia has entered its fast-developing period of rural tourism. As more local villagers are returning and most land is leased, the number of migrants is expected to grow at a slower rate after the year 2024.

Age wise, the majority of the urban-to-rural migrants in Hejia are young people, predominantly Millennials and Generation Z. Their business includes coffee shops, restaurants, music bars, breweries, hotels, milk tea shops, tea shops, camping grounds, bookstores, Community Supported Agriculture, etc. Besides the urban-to-rural migrants who live in the village for a long term, each business also hires volunteers, interns, and workers and many of them are also from the city. Many of the young urban-to-rural migrants were particularly proud of their role as a bridge connecting the rural and the urban, bringing and adapting their urban skills, urban goods, and urban way of living to the rural settings, as well as attracting and influencing more urban young in joining them. Other three nearby villages in Ningchuan County have also attracted urban young migrants who started businesses or work with the organization.

In terms of spatial distribution, most urban-to-rural migrants live in the center of the village, while local villagers mainly reside on the outskirts. According to Wu, both a local and the CEO of the Hejia Cooperative, this arrangement arose because the old houses in the village center are inherited and have complicated ownership, making it difficult for locals to reclaim them. As a result, locals often choose to build new houses on the village outskirts. Meanwhile, the government renovates the old houses in the center, which are then allocated to urban-to-rural migrants. As Wu explained in detail:

> That's the situation with our old houses: they were handed down by our ancestors. As families grew, there simply weren't enough rooms, so each branch had to split off and build new houses further out. This is a natural process of family management—expansion is inevitable. Most of the old houses in the center are co-owned by several brothers, so it's difficult for one person alone to fully utilize or renovate them. That's why it actually makes sense for the government to step in, renovate the old houses, and then allocate them to the new villagers.

The term "new villager" refers to urban migrants who have moved to and now reside in the village. Wu's account highlights that the spatial transformation of Hejia Village is shaped by historical, governmental, and social forces, involving the participation of local residents, the government, and migrants. As the CEO of the Hejia Cooperative, Wu frequently collaborates with the local research institute and maintains close alignment with government officials. However, the transformation has not been as smooth as Wu suggests. In practice, tensions have emerged—many local residents have expressed dissatisfaction, particularly over the demolition of their old homes, and some express dislike toward urban migrants for occupying the village center. This central area attracts the most tourists and holds the greatest potential for economic gain, making it a site of contention.
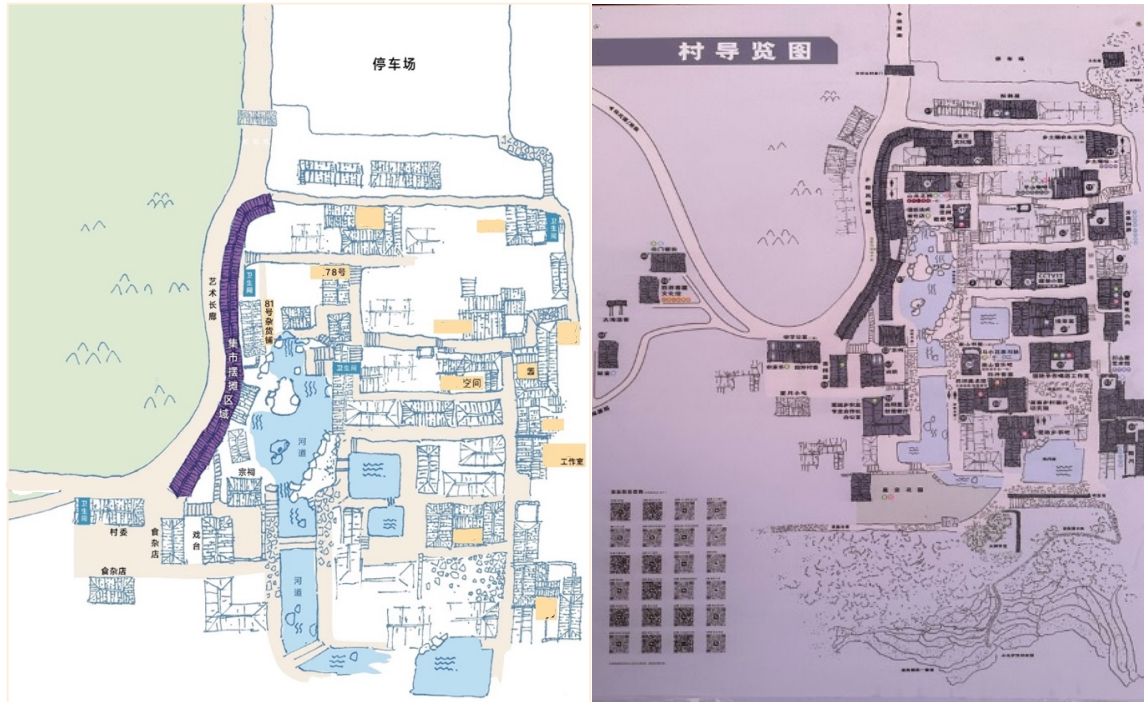
*Left - A map of Hejia designed by migrant Yi in 2018. The map marks the businesses and public space in Hejia,
buildings marked with yellow boxes were spaces where new migrants commune.*
Right – A map of Hejia designed by migrant Yi in 2024.

Limitations

Due to time constraints, this study—while informed by international scholarship—is not in direct
conversation with the broader literature on urban-to-rural migration from other countries. As a
result, the study lacks a robust comparative perspective that could illuminate how different stages
of urbanization, historical trajectories, rural-urban relationships, and national policies shape
urban-to-rural migration experiences in diverse contexts. Additionally, Hejia is a relatively small
village with just over 100 residents, and its story is shaped by specific factors such as diverse
resource bases, significant government support, and its popularity as a tourist destination. These
elements combine to make Hejia's case distinctive and less easily generalizable to other contexts.
Nevertheless, despite these limitations and the particular character of the site, focusing
intensively on a single community has allowed for an in-depth exploration of the processes of
settling in, disillusionment, adaptation, and transformation. By illuminating the journey of urban-
to-rural migration, and interactions and connections among multiple actors and organizations
within the village, this study offers insights into pressing social questions faced by China's urban
youth: What alternatives exist beyond "inward spiral" or "lying flat"? What does it take to enter

and settle in a village? What might the journey look like for those leave the city? And what does rural life in contemporary China entail?

Data & Findings

Why Leave the City: Urban Exhaustion and Disillusionment
As literature shows, for many young people in contemporary China, the city is no longer an automatic symbol of opportunity or fulfillment. Instead, it is a place where work often feels meaningless, social and economic barriers are high, and the pressures of "success" and belonging have become alienating or dispiriting. This section unpacks the main push factors that drive urban youth to consider leaving the city for rural life. Through the migrants' own words, we see how city life is experienced as exhausting, unsatisfying, and at odds with both material advancement and deeper personal values.

While the concepts of "push" and "pull" factors are a familiar analytical framework in migration studies, here I use them mainly to situate my case within both scholarly and everyday understandings of why young Chinese leave the city. Rather than treating these factors as a complete explanation for migration, I present them as context-specific—shaped by the subjective experiences and values of my informants and filtered through their own narratives of urban exhaustion and aspiration. The central focus of this study is not the migration decision itself, but what unfolds afterward: how young migrants negotiate identity, opportunity, and belonging in the rural setting, and how they navigate the gap between ideals and realities.

Restricted and Meaningless Urban Life
Jiang is 28 years old and has stayed in Hejia Village for three years, working as the manager of the "Homeland" Bookstore and as an agricultural entrepreneur [5]. She grew up in a village in the northern part of China until middle school. After she graduated from university, she worked as a commercial data analyst in Shanghai for two years. Although her parents are not farmers, Jiang

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[5] "Homeland" bookstore was established in 2021 through the Executive Dean of the Ningchuan Institute of Rural Revitalization invitation. With the goal of promoting rural culture, "Homeland" have multiple sites across rural China.

still developed an intimate relationship with the soil as her family grows vegetables in their backyard. Jiang remembers the good taste of those self-grown vegetables and recognized the value of ecological agriculture early on.

Working in the city, Jiang felt she was confined to the office, and almost everything became secondary, including the sunlight. She wanted to escape such a situation and wondered if any jobs in the city would allow her to arrange work freely.

> The pressure of the city is something I don't understand. Every morning, I can't see the sun, and at night I can't see the sun either. Only during the day, when I go out for meals, I can steal a moment of sunlight. I don't understand what the meaning of this kind of life is. I really don't know why I have to live like this. Before I started working, I could see the sun every day. Back then, my biggest obsession was the fact that I couldn't see the sun anymore. I was always inside the office, and in those office buildings, even if there are windows, the sunlight can't really come through—it's just that dim light, the kind of light refracted by glass. I felt like even the light had become secondary. I felt like it couldn't reach me anymore.

> At that time, I really wanted to escape. My first thought was: in the city, isn't there a kind of job where I could arrange things freely for myself? Later, I realized that those kinds of jobs were simply out of my reach; the only options I had were routine, step-by-step jobs, so eventually I gave up. After giving up, I thought I would go back to the countryside and see what it was like and try starting a business there as a young person. Since I will be starting my business, I could adopt a light operation model with low asset investment.

Jiang's strong reaction and thoughtful reflection of the fact that she could not see the sun and how she could only feel it at second hand shows how much she appreciates and values nature as well as the "experience" itself. Jiang's confusion about the pressure of the city stems from her realization that the job and the life in the city have alienated her from the things that she greatly values. Furthermore, Jiang felt that her job as a business analyst is meaningless as she felt that the only purpose behind her work was making money. For Jiang, money alone does not provide meaning.

When I asked Jiang why she can't find a job that she could arrange her time freely, she responded that back then she was afraid of approaching others to pitch her ideas or to collaborate as she felt she doesn't have much besides her data analysis skills to offer. At the same time, living in Shanghai, Jiang felt alienated from the big city.

> Similarly, I felt that such a big city was very unfamiliar to me. On weekends, we would just stay at home, and I didn't know anyone. I felt like I couldn't do anything on my own—I needed a team, or at least someone to work with me. But I didn't post on social media or share my ideas online, so how could anyone know about me or what I wanted to do? I just couldn't find any partners. That was my mindset back then.

For Jiang, city seems like a place that exhaust her energy and courage rather than a place that she could practice her social skills and builds her credentials. Jiang was in a social dilemma where she was afraid to do things alone but was also afraid to reach out to others. "Didn't know anyone" shows that Jiang have almost no solid social connection in Shanghai.

Drifting with Belonging, Age Anxiety and the "Nothing to Lose" Rationale

Like Jiang, Shen also felt alienated in the city. Shen was born in 1992 in a village in Jiangsu province. Shen's mother is mentally ill, and his father work as manual labor with no formal contract. Shen moved to Hejia in 2022 and opened a French bakery. Shen quit school at age 15 and began working first as a construction worker, then as a baker. He worked as baker in Hangzhou for many years but continued to feel out of place in the city. Searching for a sense of belonging, he twice tried to open a bakery shop in his hometown, but both attempts failed.

> I never really felt at home in the city, you know? When I was working outside, I didn't really have any friends either. I always felt like I was drifting and constantly wanted to go home, especially since my parents were also back in my hometown. At that time, I thought about going back home, because it was just impossible to settle down in the city. In reality, getting household registration [in Hangzhou] was unlikely, and housing was just way too expensive compared to my income.

Shen's struggle reflects the reality for many young people in China's cities: despite years spent working in urban environments, they grapple with isolation and the high cost of living, making the prospect of buying a home and truly settling down seem unattainable. Different from Jiang, Shen is determined to change his current situation by starting his own business, and opening up a bakery shop in his hometown was his attempt.

> I realized that working in the city all the time didn't really allow me to save much money—unless you were really frugal, but even then, you couldn't save much. Honestly, before I knew it, more than ten years of my youth had passed; I went from being a teenager to almost thirty years old. It feels like there's no end in sight, you know? I felt that if I kept going, my salary would just stay like this, and even if it increased, there would always be a limit. In the end, I didn't want to spend my life like this, to just let it all pass by. Besides, I didn't have much to lose anyway—there was really nothing to lose. So why not just do what I want to do, you know? For ordinary people like us, from families at the bottom of society, there's nothing to lose. Our families don't have anything to begin with, and if you try, maybe there's a chance—if you don't, then things just stay the same."

Reaching thirty, Shen felt the urge of "making it" and want to break the status quo to earn more money and experiencing new things. Like Shen, many urban youth migrants' leave the city as they felt they have reached the age to plan for their future seriously otherwise their life is going to stay the same. Shen's courage of starting a business stem from his deep realization of his disadvantaged social position and there's no family capital that he can inherent.

Yao shares a similar "nothing to lose" mindset with Shen. Yao was born in 1997 in a town in Hunan Province. Her parents are small businesses owner. Yao came to Hejia in 2022 and is now the general secretary of the Ningchuan Research Institute of Rural Revitalization. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in journalism, Yao worked as an editor at three cultural media companies in Changsha and Beijing. When making the decision of leaving the city, Yao did not face much social resistance as she does not have much in the beginning.

> I don't have much to give up. I don't have advanced degrees - I'm a very ordinary person in terms of social credentials. My family doesn't have much capital in the city, so there's

not much for me to lose. I'm starting from scratch. In contrast, someone who previously applied to the Ningchuan Institute of Rural Revitalization was a Fudan University graduate student. Her family had enormous expectations for her, so she faced tremendous social resistance. I don't have much chance of winning in that game - the game of competing for social resources, status and fame: attend a good university, get a good job, good marriage, good family, then have a successful child who repeats the cycle.

Describing herself as "ordinary", Yao distinguishes herself from the graduate student at top university, highlighting the role of credential inflation in contemporary China, which educational credentials closely parallel social status. With lower credential and less social capital, Yao finds herself freer to make unconventional life choices, less constrained by societal expectations.

At the same time, "ordinary" reflects a shared identity among many urban-to-rural migrants. None of the informants described their urban life or social standing using words like "excellence" or "successful". Born in rural areas and lack both capital, high credential and strong social connections, individuals like Yao, Shen and Jiang have never been at the center – if not outright at the margins – of urban society. Their marginal status makes them acutely aware of their place in the social hierarchy and the harsh realities of urban life. For them, dreaming big is not a realistic option when simply saving money in the city is a struggle.

Rejection of Elitism and Overconsumption

Working as an editor of topics from urban memory to architecture to traditional culture, Yao has long been interested—both personally and due to her work in new media—in issues surrounding rural areas and young people's choices and she work with the goal of expressing her voice and raise public attention to these topics. However, Yao resigned her job as her 'commoner' orientation was challenged by her boss' elite orientation. Yao recalled her significant clash with the editor-in-chief:

> I pitched a story about art empowering rural revitalization and shared some of the cases I wanted to write about—for instance, an artist from Shijiezi Village in Shaanxi, who, after returning to his hometown, inspired the villagers to make sculptures and clay figures together, and even held an exhibition abroad. I thought things like this were very interesting and meaningful. But my boss dismissed the value of my pitch.

He brought up an architect he knew who did a project where village land was used to build villas for wealthy urban parents to retire in, and after those were built, the villagers were given some new houses to live in, and some villagers ended up working as domestic helpers for the wealthy. I don't remember exactly what I said at that point, but I know I challenged him. That was when I finally saw through my boss's hypocrisy. Isn't our company called "Who's the Most Chinese"? They claim to promote Chinese culture or project this cultural sensibility. I know I have a kind of 'commoner' orientation (平民主义), while he is all about elitism—he clearly wants to join the ranks of the elite, and believes everything must cater to them. At that point, I'd had enough. My pitch didn't get approved, but I didn't care anymore—I wasn't going to keep working there anyway."

Yao's value conflict with her boss and her resignation after the conflict shows Yao's action and decision is heavily value-oriented, and her value is what she called "commoner". Commoner here refer to the peasant or the public in general term, especially those who doesn't have much capital and power. Besides the conflict, the desire of getting close to nature and making real changes by taking action and participating in rural revitalization instead of writing alone was another drive of Yao's resignment. The "commoner" orientation or the "grassroot" status was widely shared by many urban youth migrants in Hejia Village as most migrants are from lower to middle class and many have a rural upbringing.

Like Yao, many urban-to-rural youth migrants (mostly from middle or lower class) experience explicit discomfort with the city's elite culture. Jiang echoed strongly with Yao's discomfort and fear of elitism.

In the city, everyone puts on this 'elite' mask—you have to present yourself in a carefully packaged way. Even if you are selfish and want something for yourself, you still have to come up with a lofty reason for it. But in the countryside, people are really straightforward; if someone has a little scheme, you can see right through them. Compared to these two types of people, I might be more suited to the countryside. For me, what I'm really afraid of is that elite attitude; I'm not afraid of very simple or even very rough values, but I am afraid of things that are packaged as elite. In my experience, these so-called elites are always self-interested, and I am especially wary of people who

are self-interested. Even in the countryside, when I say I've suffered grievances or been exploited, it was also by this type of person—so they exist everywhere, and I'm always wary of them. But the chances of encountering them in the city are higher, so I prefer interacting with people in the countryside.

It's actually not about labeling a group as elites, but rather about an underlying metaphysical behavioral logic. Anyone who refuses to get grounded, who just talks in broad, empty terms, and at the same time looks down on others who are doing real, practical work—for me, that's a sign of elitism and selfishness.

Jiang's wording of "mask" and Yao's wording of "hypocrisy" describing the "elite" reflect their desire for authenticity. For Jiang, elitism is an individual who are "self-interested" and not grounded. Jiang's attitude and interpretation toward "elitism" shows the two shared characteristic or values of urban youth migrants' – altruistic and practical. Urban youth migrants are altruistic as they value connection, community and collective effort. They leave the city in search for an alternative way of living and for some an escape from the urban "elitism". Contrast to the "self-interested" and the metaphysical behavioral logic, urban youth migrants' behavioral logic are grounded in action and practical terms. Although some migrants perceive oneself as more grounded than others.

Lastly, both Jiang, Shen and Yao stated that it is hard to save money in the city due to the high living and social expense. As Shen stated, "the city is a place of consumption. If you don't spend money, you're stuck at home. Every venue feels the same—endless spending. No matter how much you work, you can't save." Urban youth are not anti-moneymaking or profit driven life, but are anti the expensive living in the city and the consumerism culture in the city which monetized almost everything and narrowed their choice of life including how to social, what to do, where to go, etc. As urban youth enter the workforce, they quickly realized that the money they made through job is inadequate for a secure future and a quality life in the city, including owning a house, starting a business, taking care of parents, having kids, etc.

Taken together, these stories illustrate a shared logic among urban youth migrants: city life offers neither the economic security nor the fulfillment that many hoped for. Their narratives move beyond simple economic explanations, foregrounding exhaustion with routine, consumerism,

elite culture, and the sense of being boxed in. For many, the absence of constraints—social, economic, or familial—enables them to leave, while the quest for meaning, authenticity, and future possibility drives them toward rural alternatives. These push factors, in all their complexity, form the backdrop for understanding the choices and aspirations of China's new generation of urban-to-rural migrants.

Why Come to and Stay at Hejia Village?

Hejia Village attracts urban youth because of its modernized infrastructure, policy and government's support, natural environment, key figure and organization, a young and diverse community and its ability to make money locally. Urban youth migrants leave the city with similar reasons but came to the village with various reasons and motivations, which reflect their positionally, skills and social network.

A modernized rural environment provides the basic amenities urban youth migrants need to maintain their modern lifestyles within the village. Rural revitalization as a national strategy legitimizes and encourages urban-to-rural migration. At the local level, Ningchuan County initiated housing project and offers various benefits to attract migrants, with the aim of encouraging long-term settlement. On average, monthly rent is ten RMB per square meter, with most urban youth migrants paying between several hundred to a thousand depending on the size and lease terms of the house. In comparison, the average monthly rent of a one-bedroom apartment in the suburbs of Beijing is between 4,000 to 8,000 RMB. Additionally, the village committee serves as a property manager, resolving issues related to gas, electricity, water and the regular maintenance of houses.

The spaces created by rural population loss, the modern infrastructure renovated by the government, favorable local policies related to rural revitalization (such as low rents), and centralized management of land and properties have provided opportunities for young people to live and start businesses in the countryside. Furthermore, the wide space of the countryside offers diverse opportunities for youth, including exploring new lifestyles and career directions, exploring personal value, and exploring business opportunities.

Urban Youth Migrants Enter the Village through Key Figures and Organizations

Key figures and organizations provide resources and network for urban youth migrants to work and live in the village, as well as offering the philosophical framework that justify the value of village and self-realization and freedom.

Scholars and practitioners Professor Gao (rural development scholar and the Dean of Ningchuan Rural Revitalization Research Institute) and Meng (the chief planner of Ningchuan County's traditional village cultural and creative industry project) are the most influential figures among urban-to-rural migrants. Gao and Meng are both affiliated with the government and have created local organizations in Hejia. Gao's Ningchuan Institute of Rural Revitalization was established in 2020 and funded by the local government, links governmental, commercial and academic resources. Meng's cultural projects since 2017 laid Hejia's tourism foundation. Five participants cited Gao as a direct influence and two cited Meng as either direct or indirect influence. Both Gao and Meng focus on young people and use social media as their main channel of communication. Gao's affiliated Bilibili channel (with over 2 million followers) promotes rural value, while Meng's Douyin acount –China's version of TikTok, with more than 1.9 million followers - champions self-discovery. Urban youth are drawn to their visions.

Gao and the Ningchuan Institute of Rural Revitalization

Gao's Ningchuan Rural Revitalization Research Institute, along with affiliated organizations such as the "Homeland" Bookstore, provides a platform for urban youth to engage with and work in rural development. Gao, a prominent economist and a leading figure in the rural revitalization movement, offers a rural-centered historical narrative that both explain the underdevelopment and stigmatization of the countryside and acknowledges the contributions and sacrifices of rural communities to national development.

Gao's account has become an important analytical tool for reimagining rural issues and futures. It has deeply resonated with many young people despite backgrounds. Rural background youth once felt ashamed of their origins felt emancipated and therapeutic through Gao's account. Urban background youth found an alternative explanation of the urban dilemma.

Inspired by Gao's work, numerous youths have joined the rural revitalization movement—including all four urban migrants employed at the Ningchuan Institute in this study.Gao's influence also extends indirectly to four other informants—Fang, Deng, Jiang, and Cai—who share a belief in the importance of rural revitalization. His message has struck a chord with many disillusioned urban youths who feel trapped in the "inward spiral" of city life, yet see no clear alternative or guidance. Hejia village, as a result, becomes a compelling site for study: it attracts urban youth from diverse backgrounds, each bringing their own questions, confusions, and values, all in search of meaning and direction in the face of urban disillusionment

Zhou was born in 1997 in a village in Jiangxi Province. Both of her parents are farmers. Zhou came to Hejia in 2024 and work as the finance for Ningchuan Institute of Rural Revitalization. After graduating with a degree in business administration, Zhou worked as real estate sales as she wanted a job that is in constant change. Zhou took a gap year during Covid to adjust from a small surgery which resulted from her bad living habit such as stay up late and eat delivery food. During the gap year, Zhou saw Professor Gao's video on Bilibili through algorithms' recommendation. Zhou watched all of Gao's lectures and courses for more than half a month and bought all of his books.

> I finally came to understand <u>why my parents were so poor</u>. Growing up in the countryside, I used to feel <u>a sense of resentment</u>—you know? I resented my parents for being just farmers, for why our family was so poor, and for why we had to endure so much hardship. What I didn't realize was the broader historical and policy context behind their struggles.

> Especially since I was born in the 1990s, it wasn't until I listened to Professor Gao talk about the aftermath of the Reform and Opening Up, such as the collapse of township enterprises and the burdens placed on rural areas, that I understood. He also explained why the "Three Rural Issues" were raised later[6]. He put that period of time into perspective—not to say, "you people are no good," but because, at that stage, that was the direction the country needed to develop. Even though a history book might summarize everything in just a sentence or a single policy, impacting countless people, it's important

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[6] The Three Rural Issues refer to the interconnected challenges facing agriculture, rural areas and farmers.

to consider the background behind those experiences. Only then can you realize that the country often had no other choice at the time, or that such consequences resulted from inexperience. That realization has allowed me to come to terms with my own life.

Frankly, every stage of China's rise has truly been built upon the lifelong efforts and struggles of so many people. That's why I now feel that there can be another path in life. I have this sense of a safety net: no matter how bad things might get for me elsewhere; I can always return to the countryside. For those of us born in rural areas, the countryside will always be there as a final support.

For Zhou, Gao served as both a mentor and a kind of therapist—someone who not only acknowledged her negative emotions, such as resentment, but also helped her move beyond them. Gao did so by broadening Zhou's perspective, unpacking the historical and structural forces that shaped the underdevelopment of rural areas and the poverty and marginalization of farmers.

Gao's narrative, often tied to grand historical frameworks, offers urban youth a sense of hope and agency in the face of realities that once left them feeling disillusioned and confused. Through abstraction and theorization, these young people find ways to reconcile with aspects of reality they find unsatisfying, such as the hyper-competitive job market and the persistent stigmatization of the rural. Finally, Gao provides a sense of emotional security by reframing the countryside as a place filled with value and opportunity—offering urban youth not only an intellectual reframing but also a potential path forward.

Zhou's decision to participate in rural revitalization was also influenced by Professor Gao. She was inspired upon learning that Professor Gao was personally involved in rural revitalization despite his high status. As an authoritative and an influential figure, Professor Gao's engagement with rural revitalization further affirmed the value and potential of the countryside, as well as the legitimacy of the revitalization effort itself. It is worth noting that all four migrants working for the Ningchuan Institute of Rural Revitalization place great trust in authority figures, including Professor Gao and the government. The research institute itself is also the most authoritative and influential organization in Hejia Village.

Zhou was also attracted to rural revitalization work as she likes the uncertainty and potential and rural revitalization is supported by national policy. On the other hand, Zhou also acknowledges that what she earned in the city is not as much if extracting all the spending and the precarious nature of urban work nowadays. Zhou referring that her college roommates are all pessimistic of their future career as they are all under the risk of laid off. As a result, Zhou didn't think much when she saw the Ningchuan Institute of Rural Revitalization's job post and submitted the application. Zhou has enjoyed her work at the institute as she found it relaxing versus the sales job and the nature of the job is non-exploitative.

Meng and Artistic Programs

Unlike Professor Gao, who is closely affiliated with the government and academia, Meng—an entrepreneur and artist—is more independent and operates across multiple domains. While Gao focuses on grand narratives, promoting the value of the countryside and encouraging young people to work in rural areas, Meng emphasizes personal self-realization, urging youth to pursue their dreams and live life on their own terms.

Meng's artistic philosophy centers on free expression, with minimal theoretical framing. For example, his "Everyone is an Artist" program provides free drawing supplies to anyone interested in creating art, with no formal instruction. The only guideline is to draw from real life and pay attention to light and shadow. Similarly, his "Everyone is a Barista" program emphasizes hands-on learning, with limited theory—mostly related to types of coffee beans and their cultivation.

Meng's practice-based, expressive approach contrasts sharply with Professor Gao's theory- and grand narrative-driven discourse. Meng also personally expresses dislike for academia, believing that formal education restricts creativity, self-expression, and passion. This philosophical divide is also reflected in their followers: while most of Gao's supporters are college-educated, Meng's followers are more diverse and tend to have less formal education—mirroring Meng himself, who did not attend college and openly criticizes the current education system. Despite their differing values and approaches, Meng and Gao often participate in the same events in Ningchuan County, and Professor Gao has publicly praised Meng's creative projects.

Pei represents the typical path who enter the Hejia village through participating in Meng's program. Pei was born in 1992 in a village in Gansu Province. Pei came to Ningchuan County in 2019 to participated in Meng's painting program and. She had opened up businesses in other villages in Ningchuan County and came to Hejia in 2023, running her brewery and homestay business. Pei majored in agriculture design in college and worked in agriculture design in Qinghai for seven years. Pei recalled her architectural work in the city as tough, tiring and bored, where she has to stay up late for drafting and visited construction sites with almost no time to rest and no sense of accomplishment, especially when she started her own business. Back then, Pei's mind was all occupied by work and she had no personal life.

In 2019, Pei's sister shared an article about Meng's non-profit art classes with her and Pei was quickly drawn to the class as she found the class atmosphere to be "open", "humane" and "welcoming". Students are from all over the country and many of them have disabilities, and many people have come to the class and found healing. Pei found the in-person experience compelling and transformative as she experienced open and accepting cultural environment – "—anyone is welcome to learn, and there are no barriers to entry." She appreciated the friendly and caring of her classmates and the genuinely loving and authentic atmosphere. Surprisingly, despite working in architectural design, Pei had never really been exposed to art or received any formal training. Pei describes her architectural design job as "always involved strictly adhering to national standards, leaving little room for creativity". Getting involved in Meng's art classes was the first time Pei felt inspired by art. Feeling inspired and transformed, Pei made the decision of staying in Ningchuan on her third day in art class.

Unlike Zhou, who does not need to worry about accommodation because the Ningchuan Institute of Rural Revitalization provides free housing and covers basic living expenses such as gas and electricity, urban youth migrants like Pei—who run their own businesses—must find and secure their own living and working spaces. As a result, their period of exploration and settlement tends to be longer and more complicated. Before settled in Hejia in 2023, Pei had stayed at three different places in Ningchuan County.

> I've almost changed places every year. Within the Ningchuan area, you probably know Xijian—I've stayed there, and I also lived in Anyuan for a year. Now I'm in Hejia. At first, I was in Xijian, serving as Mr.Meng's assistant and as a volunteer for a year,

helping with driving and video recording and livestreaming. Later, when there was a cultural and creative project in Anyuan Township, I spent a year there as well—in the beginning working as a volunteer in an art studio, then opening my own shop, and later teaching in Nanshan.

Now I brew beer, which started because I joined a craft beer public teaching project originally initiated by Mr.Meng. My training was supported and sponsored by Mr.Meng, so I learned the craft and the project basically incubated people like me, equipping us with skills so we could then teach others. This was a public welfare project, and I ended up teaching beer brewing for more than a year in Nanshan. Later, I had the opportunity to claim a house here in Hejia, which I really liked, so I came here and started making my own brand of beer, which I've been doing for two years now.

Pei's path of exploration and settlement was echoed by many urban youth migrants' paths at Ningchuan County. Urban youth have come to Ningchuan through different channels, primarily through either Professor Gao's rural revitalization affiliated organization or Meng's artistic programs. Once they decided to stay, they started searching for working and living opportunity. Like Pei, many migrants' first job was volunteering at Meng's artistic program such as the painting or the coffee class. According to my observation and conversation with migrants who have worked as Meng's volunteer, the accommodation for volunteers varied depends on the role. Some volunteers get free housing, but most of the volunteers need to find their own house and almost all volunteers are non-paid or received very little payment. Pei's path of settlement was greatly tied with Meng's programs. During her one year in Anyuan Town, Pei started as volunteer for Meng's art studio and then had the opportunity to claim local house where she opened up a coffee shop and a souvenir shop. Pei's shop was also the first migrant's shop in Anyuan. Later on, as fewer and fewer people came to Anyuan, Pei closed her shops and withdraw. Pei reflected that the changes in Anyuan might be do with a change in county's decision-making regarding cultural and creative projects. "No one was really going there

anymore, so the cultural and creative community didn't really take off." Anyuan's case shows the importance of government support in rural development and the unexpectedness of rural life[7].

Pei has been in Hejia Village for almost two years, making it the village where she has stayed the longest in Ningchuan County. She feels more settled now, having found a way to make a living that she enjoys. Brewing beer is something that she is interested in and wants to pursue seriously which means staying in a place for long-term. What Hejia attracted Pei the most are its community culture and the ability to make money locally.

> As for the natural landscape, it's pretty much the same throughout this area. I think the whole Ningchuan region is quite livable, especially in terms of the natural environment— it's a good place to live, with a pleasant and healthy setting. But most importantly, what really attracts me is the cultural atmosphere that has been developed here over the years. Since the start of the cultural and creative initiatives in 2017–2018, this community culture has become very appealing to me. The feeling here is actually quite similar to my experience with the art community. People come from all over the country, and most are young, so the atmosphere is inclusive and open. Everyone is doing something different, exploring various industries.

> If you want to live here, you do need to think about how you'll make a living, but the foundation for that is already quite strong because this area has been developed as a hub for culture and tourism. That's another reason it's possible to stay here—at the very least, there are enough opportunities to earn a basic income and build a life.

As Pei noted, while the natural environment is important, what sets Hejia Village apart from other villages is its years of development as a hub for culture and tourism, which has founded an open and diverse community that attracts young people and allows migrants and locals to make money locally.

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[7] According to the official WeChat public account of Ningchuan Tourism, Anyuan initiated the creative project in 2019 by sending local residents to the artistic program of Zhou and visiting villages with more established creative project such as the Hejia Village. It was unclear about the later development of the creative project in Anyuan.

Reason for Staying: A Diverse and Open Community, A Modernized Village that Could Make Money

If key figures like Professor Gao and Meng provide the initial gateway for urban youth to enter Hejia Village, it is the open, diverse community, modernized infrastructure, and viable economic opportunities that encourage them to stay. Among those who settled in Hejia are Fang and Deng, a couple born in the 1990s, who originally arrived as tourists but quickly found a sense of belonging in village life.

From Tourists to Villagers: How Integration and Opportunity Keep Urban Youth in Hejia
Unlike other migrants who came to Hejia as they were inspired by either Gao and Meng's ideas and entered the village through their affiliated organization, Fang and Deng as a couple came to Hejia for tourism and to visit. Fang and Deng originally planned to stay in Hejia for a month but decided to stay in Hejia in long-term as they enjoy their interaction with the local community.

Fang and Deng are a married couple born in the 1990s. They settled in Hejia Village in 2024 and currently run a restaurant and a café. Deng is 30 years old and was born in a rural area of Sichuan Province. She has lived in cities since high school and holds a master's degree in administrative management. After graduating, Deng worked in Chengdu as a social worker and a civil servant exam instructor. Deng felt working in the city was meaningless as she was trapped in a cycle, and as she approached the age of 30, she realized that continuing this way was not sustainable. Fang, 32 years old, was born in an old district of Shenyang, a city in northeastern China, and majored in mechanical engineering. Fang worked at an ecological farm after graduating from college with the intention to improve himself and go back to rural reconstruction work. However, living under the pressure of reality - "married, dealing with family expectations, and how others viewed me", Fang's focus transitioned from self-improvement to "just trying to live a decent life". He left the farm and has tried multiple jobs in Shenyang and Chengdu including coffee shop manager and commercial operation but feels that it's all the same in the end.

Both Deng and Fang were actively involved in rural reconstruction initiatives under the programs founded by Professor Gao during their university years and they met at a rural

reconstruction training. For Fang and Deng, participating in rural reconstruction projects during college provided recognition, confidence, valuable hands-on experience, and exposure to broader society. Through collective action, they also discovered a sense of direction and purpose. Fang and Deng noted the difference between the rural reconstruction they are a part of during college and the rural revitalization nowadays as urban youths' position shifted from "outsider" to "insider" of the village. As Fang put it in words:

> [When I was in college participating in rural construction,] we focused on supporting rural agriculture and farmers. Later, it shifted to rural construction. What we're doing is building the countryside—not in the sense of physically constructing it, but more about facilitating the formation of local cooperatives and encouraging local development. We're working as external agents, but now we've fully immersed ourselves in the rural context and even become part of it. The subject has shifted, before we were outsiders promoting rural development, but now we are new villagers, participants. Perhaps rural revitalization is more like a concept of reconstruction. In the past, no one thought that urbanites like us could live in the countryside, let alone become part of a village. We used to be outsiders.

This transformation reflects broader policy efforts to modernize rural areas and legitimize the participation of urban youth. Rural revitalization no longer positions young people as external agents, but as active community members embedded in the everyday life of the village.

Fang and Deng both emphasized how easily they integrated into the social fabric of Hejia. They were quickly welcomed by locals and new villagers alike, forming relationships with locals who have various backgrounds and talents such as painter, opera performers, and small-scale brewers. Fang recalled how the inclusive environment—complete with public spaces like art studios and cafés—made him feel immediately at home. This ease of integration is what sets Hejia apart. Locals and migrants mingle naturally, as evidenced during events like the Dragon Boat Festival, when both groups parade through the village together. Hejia is widely recognized by both migrants and locals as the most successfully integrated village in the region.

Locals and Migrants Parade Through the Village Together During the Dragon Boat Festival (photo taken by me)

Fang and Deng didn't think about starting a business in Hejia at first as they were just there for tourism and were expecting to stay for a month. They ended up staying longer because they enjoyed the life and the community in the village, especially since Li Deng really liked the village. Besides personal preference, they chose to stay in Hejia as the village has tourism that they could make money from and renovated buildings that provide basic amenities that they need. Fang pointed out that he appreciate the country's new rural construction (新农村建设) efforts. Without the basic amenities like water, electricity, gas and delivery services, it would be hard for city people like him to live in the village. Fang also emphasizes the importance of government policy and local government's involvement.

> The policy support for cultural and creative industries old building renovations is crucial. If we had to renovate old houses ourselves, it would be impossible—we're in our 20s and 30s with no savings. Why would I renovate a house? That's crazy. Additionally, the village committee plays a role in property management such as managing land and resolving issues like water and electricity problems. The local government's involvement is essential, even if it's not perfect.

Furthermore, the village provides them with entrepreneurial opportunities that they do not have access to at this stage of life in the city. Different from Pei who claimed house in Hejia through Meng, Fang and Deng claimed house through collaboration with Wu, the local villager and the CEO of the Hejia Rural Cooperative. The cooperative provided house for coffee shop and

restaurant rent-free, with profits split 70/30 between then and the cooperative. Fang reflected that he knew many people at his age that have some entrepreneurial ideas, especially if they're not in stable jobs like state-owned enterprises or government positions as the medium and small private companies could disappear at any second. Ma Fang's favorite company that he used to work for went bankrupt years ago. As there is no job security and the instability is always there, people are always looking for ways to make money on the side.

> I don't feel a huge psychological difference between rural and urban life because I started working in the countryside right after graduation. Back then, it was much tougher, especially during winters in northeastern rural areas. I think what matters is that whether in the countryside or the city, young people need entrepreneurial opportunities. If you provide that, people will come, and they'll stay.

Fang pointed out that entrepreneurial or the opportunity to develop and try out ideas is the most important pull factors for young people despite location. And Hejia Village offer such opportunity. Fang and Deng both recognized that Hejia is a unique case as it has a grassroot nature and its ability to generate money locally. For Deng, Hejia Village is a "grassroot" community as the migrants are mostly unmarried young people and do not have much savings versus many "new villages" or "future village" such as the Tieniu Village in Chengdu which the majority of migrants are married middle-class who have savings. In Hejia, one "can arrive with empty pockets and still carve out a life". Fang thinks that rural communities are still quite utopian because making money locally in rural areas isn't easy in general as "the countryside itself isn't an environment with a high flow of money." Only places like Hejia, which have developed tourism, can generate income locally. And communities like Hejia, which have gained popularity through tourism, remain the exception rather than the norm. The particularity of Hejia raises question about the sustainability of rural life and highlights the dilemma of rural return, where such a move often inevitably led to a reduction in economic opportunities.

The Promise of Hejia Village: Family, Nature, and an Open-Door Community
Like Fang and Deng, Shen, the French bakery owner, came and stayed in Hejia Village because of the open, diverse and inclusive community. On top of the community, the lifestyle of living in

nature with family while running business also appealed to him. Shen came across the Nanshan Village and Hejia Village through new villgaers' TikTok during the pandemic in 2019.

> The first video I saw was of new villagers at Nanshan Village. I thought it looked so comfortable – living with family in beautiful mountains and rivers. Because this is a kind of life I've never had. When I was little, given my family situation—my mother often had episodes of mental illness—I never experienced this kind of scenery or family atmosphere. This kind of happiness struck a chord with me immediately; it's what I long for. Deep down, I know this is something I've always lacked.

Family is a big part in Shen's life. He is now living in Hejia with his daughter, wife and mother. In Hejia, Shen can spend more time with his family versus in the city. Shen is also the only youth migrant that has a child in Hejia. Shen was strongly appealed by new villagers' life and want to move to Hejia desperately. He followed all new villagers' social media and visited Hejia in 2021 as he resigned from work. During Shen's visit, he found that the life of the new villager is the same as what they presented in the video, and he was moved by the open and welcoming community atmosphere.

> (When I first came here, I felt) this place is very open, everyone is open, always welcoming you. It felt really good, like a real community. For example, with many of the new villagers' spaces, I can just walk in freely. In the city, there are many shops you wouldn't dare enter without spending money, but here the owners even chat with me.

After the visit, Shen quickly decided to claim a house in Hejia and signed a thirty-year lease with two hundred thousand RMB. Shen figured it's better to sign a lease in long-term as he could pass the house down to others if he chooses to and the person who take over would still have enough time to use the house.

Ultimately, it is Hejia's unique combination of modern infrastructure, policy support, vibrant community culture, and diverse economic opportunities that draws urban youth to the village and encourages them to settle down and imagine building meaningful lives there.

However, while the tangible amenities and the promise of community are compelling reasons for coming to Hejia, the realities encountered after arrival often lead to more profound

transformations. For many migrants, daily experiences in the village prompt them to reassess their identities, values, and life trajectories—sometimes culminating in compromise and adaptation, and, for some, eventual departure. The following section explores these journeys, tracing how the pursuit of rural ideals gives way to disillusionment, pragmatism, and new ways of engaging with life in the countryside.

Disillusionment and Transformation After Moving to the Village

Young urban-to-rural migrants in Hejia arrived seeking freedom, meaning, community, and the possibility of sustaining themselves through purposeful work. They anticipated modern infrastructure and supportive policies, a government responsive to their needs, and a community of like-minded peers united by shared values. These aspirations were shaped not only by personal longing, but also by national policy, media narratives and the influence of charismatic public intellectuals, all of whom are closely affiliated with the discourse of "rural revitalization" and the "rural return."

Yet, as this chapter demonstrates, such hopes soon collided with the realities of village life: fragile economic prospects, clashing values, divided communities, inefficient governance, legal uncertainty, and their persistent status as outsiders. Confronting these challenges, these young migrants experienced a sense of disillusionment—not just with rural life and community, but also with the government and even with the charismatic figures who first inspired their move.

Although this disillusionment was often painful – and led some migrants to ultimately leave Hejia – it also acted as a catalyst, pushing many young urban-to-rural migrants to adopt more sustainable and pragmatic approaches to life in the countryside. This section traces how disillusionment, which might seem like an endpoint, instead became a powerful turning point for many, prompting Hejia's young urban-to-rural migrants to compromise, adapt, and create new possibilities for themselves and their community.

"Making It" in Rural: Navigating Ambitions, Money, and Meaning

Hejia is a rare example of a village where residents can earn a living locally, offering real opportunities for young people to settle in the countryside. However, while Hejia provides far more income opportunities than most rural areas, these still do not compare to those available in cities. For Yao, Jiang, Zhou, Xu, and Pei, their incomes dropped by a third or more after relocating. Yet, the lower cost of rural living allows them to maintain a decent quality of life. On one hand, Hejia's tourism industry gives migrants the chance to earn money locally; on the other hand, many remain ambivalent about truly "making it" in rural areas since tourism income is seasonal (the travel season lasts about six months from June to November), highly dependent on external factors, and it is challenging to recruit workers in the village. Furthermore, young urban-to-rural migrants also face the problem of inadequate social security in the countryside, including limited medical and educational resources.

Migrants came to Hejia with the vision of "making it in life", but the honeymoon period doesn't last long as migrants experienced the inconvenience and the chaotic or wild rural world. Furthermore, although most migrants can "making it in life", the sustainability of such life was challenged as only a few could ultimately "making it in money" to sustain their life. And among those who "making it in money", many realize that "making it in money" almost always comes with the cost of distancing themselves from their ideal life. More specifically, "making it in money" is when migrants can generate profit from the village and the amount of profit can cover the business cost and the personal spending in the village. "Making it in life" is when migrants can be a part of the community and live a life they want to live. To conclude, "making it" in rural has two parts- money and life, and "making it" is when migrants can live the life that they envision in and having the money to make the life sustainable.

On the path to "making it" in the village, entrepreneurs face challenges that are distinct from those encountered by individuals working in government-affiliated organizations. Those working for the research institute, including Yao, Sja and Kang, receive stable salaries with no survival anxieties, plus free utilities and housing. On the other hand, entrepreneurs like Jiang, Xu, Pei, Cai, Shen, Sem, and Li face upfront investments and ongoing costs. Among them, Shen's French bakery shop and Fang and Deng's coffee shop and restaurants have recouped investments and now earn more than they did in cities. Pei's craft beer and homestay business breaks even.

Meanwhile, those in eco-agriculture and cultural ventures including Jiang, Xu, and Cai operate at a loss—with Jiang now in severe financial distress.

Jiang - From Altruistic Ideals to Entrepreneurial Pragmatism

Jiang, 28 years old, is in her third year in Hejia. In 2022, inspired by the work of Professor Gao, Jiang joined the rural development social enterprise "Homeland" and came to Hejia Village as the head of the "Homeland" chapter in Hejia, operating the bookstore and the visit and exchange program. "Homeland", co-founded by Professor Gao and supported by six colleges, now have more than eight chapters across China. The mission of "Homeland "is to protect and promote rural culture while fostering development of individuals engaged in rural revitalization. Through practice, Jiang realized that rural culture projects are vague and do not benefit the villagers directly. She shifted her focus to ecological agricultural operation and collaborated with the local farmers with the goal of connecting ecological farming to the greater community. Through their "Farmer Partner Program," community members (mostly from the city) subscribe to agricultural products in advance and the team will deliver seasonal food to the subscribed member. Jiang ensures that farmers receive fair prices for their crops while providing urban consumers with affordable, high-quality organic produce. She also allocates a portion of the revenue to purchase organic fertilizers for farmers, creating a virtuous cycle of ecological and economic sustainability.

However, Jiang's agricultural program was in great challenge as she was spending more than what she earned as the program need continuous investment and the program does not have enough subscribers. Jiang also didn't earn much working with "Homeland" as she did not receive a regular salary and was instead compensated through a share of project profits as a project partner. In addition, the organization had recently experienced funding cuts, and the bookstore generated little profits. Jiang now operates on a tight budget, often relying on credit cards to sustain her work. Experiencing economic pressure and engaging with rural entrepreneurs, Jiang realizes the importance of money to sustain herself and to develop her project and have "shifted [her] mindset to a true entrepreneur".

The rural entrepreneurs often tell us that starting a business in the countryside is very tough. We never fully understood just how tough it was back then, but now we do. Ultimately, the only difficulty is money. Initially, we didn't like focusing solely on money, but I realized that everyone is busy coining buzzwords and concepts without generating actual profit. I asked, why be so abstract? Don't you want to make money? If you want young people to return to village, you have to offer them benefits. Later, we shifted our focus to finding ways to make money – to see what opportunities can generate income, because that's how you attract people. So now, my goal is to find a profitable path. Once that's achieved, I can hire employees or bring in partners.

The "everyone" Jiang referred to includes both migrants, scholars, government and locals she encounters in the village. Jiang developed strong distrust against many people in the village as Jiang entered the village with an altruistic mindset but soon realized that many are taking advantages from her. I personally witnessed a big conflict between Jiang and the Ningchuan Institute of Rural Revitalization during an event planning meeting. Together with another migrant, Xu, and a local, Wu, Jiang formed a rural development team called "Trendy Rural Farmers", which focuses on operating and marketing local agriculture and businesses, as well as planning events to attract visitors. For an upcoming farming event organized by the research institute, the Trendy Rural Farmers team created a detailed event proposal with many revisions. However, during the meeting, the institute's staff informed Jiang that major revisions were required and indicated that the event might even be canceled due to insufficient funding. Although the institute and the Trendy Rural Farmers were supposed to be collaborators, there was no prior notification or opportunity for negotiation.

Similar incidents had occurred multiple times before: Jiang and her team would prepare event plans at the request of the research institute or government, but many of these plans were either not used or were implemented without any compensation for their work. Jiang increasingly felt that her ideas and contributions were not respected, and that her time and effort were often wasted. After a series of such conflicts, Jiang became disillusioned with both the government and the research institute. Rather than coopering unconditionally and sharing their plans openly, Jiang and her team have become more guarded, withholding details to avoid having their ideas freely used or appropriated by others.

Confronted with a tight budget and overt conflicts, Jiang began to see the self-interested nature of the research institute and government – institutions she once saw as altruistic partners. Ironically, although Jiang was initially drawn to Hejia by Professor Gao's vision of rural-centered development, the institute now represented exactly what she had hoped to escape: a culture marked by self-interest, detachment from reality, and empty rhetoric—much like the "elite culture" she had experienced in the city. This painful disillusionment ultimately prompted Jiang to abandon her purely altruistic approach and adopt a more pragmatic, profit-oriented mindset. She realized that offering free labor was unsustainable and that creating tangible value—and profit—not only supported herself, but was, in its own way, a more effective means of helping others.

> I feel that the value of my whole life lies in helping others—I have to achieve a sense of inner stability through altruism. But this isn't always a good thing; this mindset isn't necessarily right. The saying "to help others, you must first help yourself" is something I really need to believe and take to heart. Because if I can't even take care of myself, it's hard for me to truly help others. This year, I've genuinely come to understand this.

> During my first two years in the village, I thought helping others was simply volunteer work—that whatever I could contribute was an act of altruism. But in the end, I realized that what I saw as altruism meant nothing to others. That's because I hadn't actually brought them the benefits they wanted. From their perspective, altruism means bringing them tangible benefits and real rewards. Just doing hard labor, or writing a few articles or making some videos, didn't hold any value for them.

> My goal from now on is to first learn how to make money myself. If I know how to make money, then others won't have a reason to say there's no point in working with me or coming to me. As soon as you're able to benefit yourself, many people would want to work with you or follow your lead, and you naturally end up helping others as well. I've come to realize this now.

Encountering rural reality, Jiang realized that what people need the most is not an altruistic act itself, but an act that could add actual benefits to them in the immediate future. Through interaction with the locals, Jiang has broadened her understanding of "altruistic" and gained a

deeper understanding of what the locals value and what she should prioritize to help others more sustainably and effectively. Jiang is now exploring new ways to generate revenue, and her team is working on brand promotion jobs for the local business and government.

Now, Jiang has one business partner, two full-time staff, plus two interns. All her team members are between the ages of 20 and 30. Despite the ongoing financial challenges, Jiang remains optimistic about her team's ability to generate income. While Jiang has adopted a more pragmatic approach to business, she continues to act with a sense of altruism in her management and supporting young people like her who came to the village where one has no local connection. For example, because she cannot afford to pay the interns a salary, Jiang uses her business to help them apply for living subsidies and internship allowances and ensures that her staff receive any benefits for which they are eligible. The young staff can access subsidies of around 2,000 to 3,000 yuan per month, which is sufficient for those with modest financial expectations. Jiang also encourages her young employees to use this time not only to earn a living, but also to reflect on their goals, explore new ways to increase income, and find a meaningful integration of work and life.

Shen – Innovation, Luck, and the Rewards of "Making It"

Shifting to another side of the rural experience, some urban-to-rural entrepreneurs—such as bakery owner Shen, and restaurant and coffee shop owners Fang and Deng—have found notable financial success in Hejia, often exceeding what they could have earned in the city. Boosted by Hejia's thriving tourism industry, these business owners are recognized by locals for generating profits and attracting visitors, remain popular among tourists for their unique dining experiences, and are promoted by the government as exemplary cases of urban-to-rural migration.

Shen, the 33-year-old French bakery owner who moved to Hejia in 2023, credits much of his shop's success to luck. "My goal was simply to earn enough to get by," he recalls. Before coming to Hejia, Shen twice attempted to open bakeries in his hometown, but both ventures failed due to the inability to afford a prime location and a lack of digital marketing know-how.

In Hejia, however, Shen's French bakery became profitable almost from the start. With only simple home-style restaurants as competition, his bakery offered a fresh contrast and quickly caught tourists' attention. He explains:

> At first, we made 1,000–2,000 RMB a month. But even that counted as profit—my rent was just a few hundred, so earning 100 RMB a day was enough. After pandemic restrictions were lifted, business boomed. We started bringing in 7,000–8,000 RMB a month, sometimes over 10,000. That's more than I ever made in the city.

> In the city, I'd work myself to death for a month to earn that much. Here, making 10,000 RMB a month means 28 days of leisure and just two days of real work. If three customers stop by for coffee and pastries, that's 300 RMB in 15 minutes, and I'm done for the day.

Shen's story highlights the importance of luck, experience, and especially "newness" in rural entrepreneurship. Introducing an unexpected French bakery in a village both satisfied tourist curiosity and created a unique selling point. By leveraging his skills (over fifteen years of baking experience), the village's distinctiveness, and tourist demand, Shen has not only established the most famous store in Hejia—now a local landmark and photo spot—but also supplies pastries to coffee shops in neighboring villages across Ningchuan County.

<u>Fang and Deng - Thriving in Business, Longing for Community</u>
Similarly, the success of restaurant and coffee shop owners Fang and Deng is closely tied to their professional expertise and the distinct place their businesses hold within the village. Fang's experience as a city coffee shop manager enabled them to launch Hejia's largest and most professional coffee establishment. Together, Fang and Deng developed original food and drink offerings, created local souvenirs, and collaborated with other local businesses—including selling organic farm products and handmade traditional clothing—broadening their appeal and impact. Deng and Fang's coffee shop and restaurants are also a popular social spot for young people as they organize events such as game nights, movie nights, yoga session, barbeque, hiking and much more.

Importantly, after deducting living expenses and costs, the money that Deng and Fang make in the village is comparable to, if not greater than, what they would earn in the city. Not only are

their net earnings similar, but they also find themselves able to save more and enjoy greater freedom, both in terms of their time and consumption choices. The high cost of living in the city often erases any salary advantage, whereas Hejia's lower expenses and fewer opportunities for spending allow them to accumulate savings and enjoy a less pressured lifestyle.

Looking ahead, Deng and Fang are optimistic about their prospects in Hejia. The steady flow of visitors currently sustains their business and is expected to do so for at least the next two years. Confident in their entrepreneurial path, they have even taken out bank loans to further invest in and expand their ventures—demonstrating both a belief in the viability of rural entrepreneurship and a willingness to reinvest in the local economy.

In this sense, Fang, Deng, and Shen's stories not only illustrate pathways to rural prosperity but also redefine what "making it" means within the rural context: combining innovation with tradition, building community through creative social events, generating profit from and for the local, and fostering optimism and autonomy far from the pressures of city life.

While Fang and Deng temporarily "made" it in the village, they find themselves nostalgic for earlier days when the community was more active and vibrant. Back then, both migrants and locals had more free time and frequently gathered to chat, play, and enjoy each other's company. Today, the pursuit of profit has made everyone busier and comes at the expense of leisure and community-building. Shen refers to that earlier period—when there were fewer tourists and more time for play and casual conversation—as "utopia." Yet, despite these changes, Shen remains more optimistic than Fang and Deng about the current state of the village community. Shen believes that the essence of what makes Hejia special has persisted: "Everyone still has their own way of life."

Even so, as Shen, Fang, and Deng increasingly earn recognition and profit from local tourism, the diverse and lively community that first drew them to Hejia has gradually faded. Like many others, they have begun to prioritize income over communal life—a compromise driven by the necessity to survive before one can dream of building a community. This shift toward pragmatism is rational, given the precarious reality of rural living. As the next section will show, however, this turn toward money-making is only one aspect of the story. The once-cohesive

group of migrants has become increasingly divided—not only by economic priorities, but also by deeper frictions and everyday tensions within and beyond the migrant community.

Friction, Fragmentation, and Everyday Tensions: Divisions Within and Beyond the Migrant Community

A Diverse but Divided Migrant Community

Urban-to-rural migrants in Hejia Village come from a wide range of backgrounds and hold very different visions for life and community development. This diversity is a double-edged sword: it brings vitality, diverse human capital and resources to Hejia but also creates friction, as differences in values and ideals produce both creativity and mutual avoidance.

With just over 100 residents and about 30 migrants, Hejia is a small community where collaboration is crucial—especially for migrants who lack strong local roots or resources. Yet solidarity remains elusive. As Fang puts it: "Our differences were actually quite significant. Through collaborations, we may have grown even further apart. Everyone has different ideas: ecological agriculture, youth culture, family-friendly activities, rural revitalization. It's hard to agree on a single direction."

Within this small community, four loosely defined groups have emerged among young migrants, each shaped by distinct core values. The first is the *Rural Construction Group*, inspired by Professor Gao; its members believe in the potential and importance of the countryside and focus primarily on rural revitalization, making them the most prominent group in Hejia. The second group, the *Lifestyle Exploration Group*, is influenced by Meng and centers around self-realization and the pursuit of innovative personal ways of living. The third is the *Pragmatic Business-Oriented Group*, consisting of entrepreneurs who prioritize profitability and business success. Finally, the *Creative Expression Group* is made up of independent artists and creators who emphasize individuality and artistic pursuits - this group also constituted the first wave of urban-to-rural migrants to Hejia.

Although many migrants interact across multiple groups, most maintain their closest relationships within their primary affiliation. These divides manifest as mutual avoidance in daily life. For example, business owners like Fang and Deng, who were once active in rural

development circles, now mostly bond with fellow entrepreneurs, such as Shen and his wife, and focus on pragmatic business concerns over earlier idealistic aspirations.

These internal divisions persist and have become more pronounced over time. Members of the pragmatic and lifestyle-oriented groups often view the rural construction group as overly idealistic, dogmatic or academic, while pragmatists regard lifestyle experimenters as "bourgeois" or "unserious." As Deng notes, local recognition and legitimacy often hinge on running a profitable business rather than living an artistic life or building communal ideals.

Such value differences have led to competing priorities and occasional open conflict, particularly since the surge in tourism beginning in 2023 shifted the focus of many migrants from community-building to individual profit. Fang observes, "since Hejia's tourism boom, people spend more time making money and less time interacting. When we first arrived, we talked about community-building and public events; now those conversations have faded. Most newcomers are motivated by earnings, not community." Deng echoes this sentiment, underscoring a practical shift: "Now that business opportunities have saturated, everyone wants to capitalize on tourism, and there's little patience for non-commercial activities."

The outcome is a "community" divided along interest and business lines. As Jiang notes, "people stick with their own circles. There's an unspoken rule—don't interfere with others' business. When collective action is really needed, it's almost impossible to get everyone to agree on a common goal." Pei adds: "Things move slowly because there's no unified vision. Infrastructure problems, litter during peak tourist season, and lack of management persist because no one takes responsibility. Improving the village is left unresolved."

As tourism has become Hejia's main economic driver, the focus on profit has only intensified, further weakening community ties. Formerly collective activities—such as creative markets—have dwindled, replaced by individual businesses and rising competition for tourist spending. Even local villagers now spend more time selling food to tourists on the sidewalk and less on shared, communal life, reshaping the village's social fabric. Not everyone benefits equally from tourism, and economic competition fosters new conflicts over shared space, resource allocation, and whose vision and profit should prevail.

Increasingly, the initial promise of a dynamic, creative community has faded as business realities have taken center stage. Yet, even as the need for harmony and collaboration is heightened in a village like Hejia—where people live in proximity and must share resources and profits—this pursuit is continually challenged by fragmentation and everyday friction. The next section delves deeper into these challenges by examining how interactions with local governance add further complexity to village life.

Everyday Encounters with the Local Governance: Inefficiency and Disorganization

As economic competition deepens social divides in Hejia, daily interactions with local governance introduce yet another layer of complexity to village life. Hejia have an official communication platform on WeChat group called the "Xiling County Hejia Village Small Power Supervision Group" (西陵县四坪村小微权力监督群), managed by the village head. There are currently 231 participants, including officials from the village and county governments, local and non-local villagers, and migrants. Within this group, Hejia's residents report issues encountered in daily life—such as odors from pig farm, unregulated street vending, water and power outages, and tourist debris. The government responds to these issues in the group and shares policy updates and matters requiring resident cooperation.

Since I joined the group in February 2024 at the invitation of research institute staff, I have observed that infrastructure and environmental complaints—especially those affecting both lifestyle and income—were the most frequent. New migrants commonly expressed frustration about the government's slow responses. To manage rural land collectively, the village government serve the role of property management. Migrants' requests for basic services—such as water and electricity repairs—often face long delays. Unlike cities with abundant labor and specialized roles, Hejia only has a handful of craftsmen and utility workers, leading to long waits. Migrants, lacking local connections or familiarity with village procedures, typically must rely on the village government or established locals (such as Wu, the CEO of Hejia Cooperative) to find workers. As Jiang, a migrant, described, the inefficiency and disorganization of village management felt "unprofessional":

At the very least, a community should ensure everyone is always informed about any updates. That doesn't happen here—so I hesitate to even call this a 'community.' An actual community should have a professional manager who organizes things, and the communication platform should not just act as a complaint channel. If it's only a platform for complaints, everyone just dumps their negativity there. People stop communicating openly, sharing resources, or getting to know one another.

This breakdown in communication demonstrates that, although local policies and infrastructure made it possible for urban-to-rural migrants to move to Hejia, their lived realities are largely overlooked. One problem both migrants and locals agree is most urgent is the odor from nearby pig farms. While residents have repeatedly reported this to both village and town officials through the WeChat group and in-person—and mitigation efforts like barriers, sprinklers, and ventilators have been attempted by the government—the problem has never been fully resolved.

The odor is so pervasive it disrupts daily life and directly impacts business: tourists often leave Hejia or abandon plans to dine, resulting in immediate profit loss for local entrepreneurs. Beyond the tangible service and infrastructure frustrations, urban-to-rural migrants also grapple with the intangible frustration as they negotiate between urban and rural values and identities.

Negotiating Value and Identity: Internal and External Pressures

While urban youth migrants often find a sense of freedom, belonging, and self-expression in rural settings, they nonetheless grapple with enduring pressure of mainstream urban values – a framework that defines success by marriage, homeownership, car ownership, and a high-paying stable job. Hejia offers a spatial and cultural buffer against these societal norms, giving young migrants relief from the fast pace and competitiveness of city life. Yet their long experiences in urban environments mean they cannot fully escape internalized urban measures of self-worth.

This tension is especially pronounced among those working at the Ningchuan Research Institute of Rural Revitalization. While the institute provides stable government-funded work and accommodation, employees see less opportunity for rapid career advancement, higher salaries, or accumulating urban assets—markers of "success" by city standards. Their futures remain more uncertain and often less prestigious in the eyes of urban peers and family.

Holding on to Hope: Rural Ideals Amid Everyday Contradictions

Kang, 26, exemplifies these contradictions. A native of an urban area in Hubei, he joined the Ningchuan Institute as an intern in 2023, seeking a change from a stressful city job in Beijing where he could barely save money. Drawn by the slow-paced and relaxed rural life, the great view, the diverse and open community and the rural potential promoted by Professor Gao, Kang took a leap and moved to Hejia. In Hejia, Kang was deeply moved by the welcoming, supportive local community where his ideas and creativity were valued—such as launching community events or photography projects. He felt himself growing more open and expressive, thriving in an environment where encouragement was abundant, and the cost of failure was minimal. The recognition he received from scholars and local officials further boosted his confidence and affirmed his sense of self-worth.

However, although Kang enjoys higher earnings than in his former city job and benefits like free housing, a lingering anxiety remains. He recognizes the danger of "falling behind" urban society—in his words, of slipping into a "semi-retirement mode" or becoming disconnected from mainstream society's developmental trajectories.

> Living in the countryside is inherently semi-isolated, so to some extent you become disconnected from the rhythms of the wider world. If you don't actively work to keep up, to develop your diverse potential, or push yourself forward, it's easy to slip into a kind of semi-'lying flat' mode, almost like retirement. For young people, entering this 'retirement mode' in the village is quite risky, because it essentially amounts to wasting your time. While rural life can be nourishing for the soul, there inevitably comes a point where you'll feel a deep emptiness.

> In the city, even if you're 'lying flat' at work, your environment is constantly changing around you, and there are still rigid performance evaluations pushing you forward. The high cost of living in cities forces you to engage with many challenges. On one hand, these experiences earn you income; on the other, they help you grow.

Rural life, while nurturing, can feel isolating, and Kang worries that the recognition and growth he enjoys in Hejia may not translate back to urban contexts. The risk, as he sees it, is that rural

support and achievements may not be valued outside this setting—leaving him vulnerable to feelings of social irrelevance.

Kang's reflection captures the fragile foundation of rural "good life" for urban youth: Despite genuine community support and personal growth, the internalized standards of urban success put urban youth in lasting value tension and concern about their future. Even as they embrace rural living, many youth migrants remain caught between new-found meaning in the countryside and persistent social and economic insecurities imposed by the value systems of the urban mainstream. As Kang's cohort Zhou, age 28, put in words "the question is whether in the long-term I should stay here or not. Let's be realistic—I'm unmarried, my career isn't fully settled, and I'm still uncertain about my future direction."

The Limits of Escape: Disillusionment and Growth in Yuan's Journey
While Kang and Zhou continue to grapple with these contradictions, others, like Yuan, ultimately decide that the tension is unsustainable. Yuan moved to Hejia in 2022, seeking a new way of life and hoping for meaningful change, but returned to the city in 2024. Her story – one of initial hope, gradual disillusionment, and eventual departure- demonstrates that, even when the village holds out an alternative value system, the pull of urban value and practical realities often remains powerful.

Yuan was born in a village in Hunan province and, as a "left-behind child," was raised by her grandparents while her parents worked in the city. After moving to the city for middle school, she felt keenly aware of urban prejudices against her rural background, a sense of exclusion and inferiority that persisted into adulthood. It was only through exposure to Professor Gao's ideas about rural China that Yuan began to question her own biases, gradually coming to see rural identity in a new light.

Still, Yuan's urban trajectory left its mark. She worked in sales and marketing but found herself exhausted by the expectations around stable jobs, home ownership, marriage, and material accumulation. Seeking a more meaningful existence, she deliberately chose to leave the city for Hejia—first joining the "Homeland" bookstore, then moving to the research institute for a better salary—despite still carrying a home loan. She described her migration as an act of "rural

escape," a bid to break free from what felt like a meaningless value system. Yuan's time in the village offered her an alternative framework. She cast aside worries about home ownership, marriage, and material expectations, convinced that a richer, freer life was possible in rural China. Yet, despite the village's promise of an alternative, she could not escape the pressures of practical survival and family expectation. As she reflected:

> Even now, I remain torn between two conflicting value systems—still trapped within the traditional urban framework. During my two years in the village, I had crossed far beyond the midpoint, fully embracing an alternative lifestyle and values. I became convinced that life held infinite possibilities—that you could do anything without worrying about owning a house or car, without marrying or having children, or even raising kids in the countryside. What's wrong with rural life, after all? Eventually, I realized I couldn't sustain it. I lacked the practical skills needed for long-term rural living. And then there was the relentless pressure from my parents, always pushing me to return [to the city].

In the end, Yuan's decision to leave was shaped both by conflicts with the research institute and by practical concerns. Hejia, she realized, could not meet her basic needs for a future life—especially financially. For her, the rural dream was undermined by the harsh reality of lacking economic security and access to education, healthcare, and long-term stability: "If I didn't have urgent financial pressures, I wouldn't have left so quickly. But thinking about marriage, children, education, healthcare—all of those things are just too hard to obtain in the countryside."

Yuan's disillusionment deepened through her work at the research institute. Unlike Zhou and Kang, who maintained strong faith in the organization, Yuan soon understood why both locals and migrants were critical. Initially, she saw Professor Gao and the institute as agents of positive change. However, once inside, she recognized the institute's top-down, unequal approach and its prioritization of grand narratives over actual village needs. Like Jiang, Yuan became frustrated with the self-interested and authoritative nature of the institute. She felt that the institute did not truly put villagers at the center of its work, but instead prioritized grand narratives and its own projects. She found herself powerless to enact change, with little voice or agency: "You realize that as an individual, you can't play any real role. It's extremely frustrating, and you can't question the team or its authority."

This experience drained Yuan's initial enthusiasm of rural development. Her sense of public service clashed with the government-oriented, research-driven priorities of the institute, which seldom involved itself in practical village affairs. Many former interns and workers, like Yuan, have experienced similar disillusionment, feeling the institute prioritizes grand narratives and control over grassroots engagement and real development.

Yet, despite the disillusionment and eventual departure, Yuan's rural experience left a lasting mark on her values. She became less materialistic, more appreciative of living close to nature, and more open to diverse lifestyles. The creativity and resourcefulness she encountered in rural communities challenged her previous assumptions. She came to realize: "People in the countryside are just as intelligent and capable as anyone in the city. Whether living in a city or a village, everyone has their way of navigating the world and can find joy and fulfillment in their way."

The intertwined stories of Kang, Zhou, and Yuan reveal that the pursuit of the "good life" in rural China is not simply a matter of material comfort. It is a social and psychological battleground, where young people must negotiate deep-rooted expectations about belonging, success, and the future. These value tensions, though a source of conflict and anxiety, are also transformative, continuing to shape the self-understanding, choices, and aspirations of those who move between urban and rural worlds. For many, the friction itself becomes a driver of ongoing adaptation and personal change, even as their paths diverge.

Having explored the inner struggles and value dilemmas of urban-to-rural migrantas, the next section turns outward to examine how migrants and local villagers interact—and how questions of integration, village management and local power relations shape what it means to build a life in Hejia.

Migrants and Locals: Underlying Conflicts and the "Rural Return" Dilemma

Overt conflicts between migrants and locals are rare in Hejia, largely because they do not directly compete in business. Each group offers different products, sets different prices, and caters to distinct audiences. During peak tourist season, Hejia attracts a high volume of visitors

with diverse needs, reducing potential competition. Migrants tend to focus on products and services with an external or cosmopolitan flair—such as French bakeries, coffee shops, and fusion restaurants—often at higher price points. In contrast, locals primarily offer locally rooted products and services, including traditional food, regional agricultural goods, and homestays converted from their own homes, typically at more affordable prices.

Additionally, most urban-to-rural migrants' frustrations are not directed at the locals, but at the government's approach to village management and aesthetics. Migrants acknowledge that Hejia is the locals' home and respect their rights, such as building houses or running stalls. While open conflict between these groups is uncommon, underlying tensions persist. These often reflect deeper divisions over values and competing visions for the village's future.

"Old Villagers" and "New Villagers": Social Structure, Identity, and Community Boundaries
In the context of rural revitalization and the influx of urban migrants, locals have also acquired new identities. In public discourse, locals are often referred to as "old villagers" (老村民), a term that stands in contrast to the "new villagers" (新村民), or urban migrants. While both groups are described as villagers, the distinction between "old" and "new" clearly highlights the differences between locals and newcomers. Importantly, these labels do not refer to age, but rather to one's status within the village. However, as noted by urban-to-rural migrant Deng, such terms are rarely used in daily interactions:

> In fact, for those of us living here, we rarely talk about things like 'new villagers' or 'old villagers.' It's mostly people outside of the village who use these terms. Once everyone gets to know each other, daily interactions are just regular greetings and casual conversations. So, I think we need to consider who is actually using these labels in the first place.

Deng highlighted the context and functions underlying the use of the terms "new villager" and "old villager." These labels are commonly employed by government officials, the media, and scholars to suggest the integration of rural and urban populations, as well as the modernization of rural areas—echoing the aims of the rural revitalization campaign. While these terms are not

frequently used in daily conversations, both migrants and locals recognize and accept the distinction, often drawing on it when introducing themselves to tourists, scholars, or government officials.

When asked about the difference between new and old villagers, Deng responded: "Old villagers are those whose families have lived in Hejia for generations. Even if they don't reside in Hejia all year round, they still feel a strong sense of belonging here, because Hejia is their home."

In contrast to the old villagers, Deng feels less rooted in the village, as it is difficult for migrants like her to establish local connections. Kinship ties, clan affiliations, and shared rituals tightly bind the old villagers and reinforce a strong sense of community, making it challenging for newcomers to fully integrate. The Xie clan has dominated Hejia Village for over 700 years, with locals united by their shared ancestor. Yet, these deep clan ties also create barriers for migrants seeking acceptance. As Xu, an urban-to-rural migrant who happens to share the same clan, reflects:

> Hejia is a large clan-based village, and Fujian clans are known to be somewhat exclusive by nature. Fortunately, I happen to share the same clan, so building connections in the village was relatively easier for me compared to those who have no clan ties here.

Xu, 34, moved to the village in 2023 and now collaborates with migrant Jiang and local Wu to run educational tours and a guesthouse. On his first visit, Xu immediately sensed the warmth shown to him by locals—an experience that stood in contrast to that of other migrants. Despite sharing a close physical environment, it remains difficult for most migrants to establish trusted connections with locals, who often view them as "outsiders" in relation to the dominant clan structure. As a result, relations between migrants and locals remain harmonious but not close. Migrants and locals greet and help one another, but meaningful conversations are rare.

Many new villagers come to the countryside hoping to escape the complexities of urban relationships and the pressures of elite lifestyles. However, they soon discover that rural life has its own forms of complexity. In fact, the relatively closed environment of the countryside can sometimes amplify the less desirable aspects of human nature. Despite Hejia's small size, it is home to numerous factions and intricate social dynamics. As Xu observed, "If you don't network here, it's hard to get things done or make progress. Some people might deliberately create

trouble for you, and without support from influential locals, you could easily find yourself at a disadvantage." As a result, many migrants feel the need to build alliances with powerful insiders to navigate local life and resolve conflicts. This explains why migrants like Xu, Jiang, Deng, and Fang often choose to partner with Wu, the CEO of the Hejia Cooperative.

Confronted with the complexities of these rural social networks, Jiang quickly became disillusioned with her initial utopian vision of village life. She realized that social rules are unavoidable, whether in the city or the countryside—the difference lies only in their outward expression. Jiang observed that, while urbanites often hide their intentions behind layers of sophistication, rural interactions are generally more direct—even subtle schemes are easily recognized. Rather than seeking to escape or idealize the countryside, Jiang's experience led her to recognize the universality of social complexity and human nature. This disillusionment ultimately became a moment of acceptance: instead of running away from the unpleasant, and even daunting, realities of relationships, this time Jiang chose to face them head-on.

Nevertheless, migrants' lack of deep social networks and their outsider status often limits their influence in village planning and management, increasing their reliance on government intervention. These dynamics lay the groundwork for deeper tensions, as explored in the following section on governance, aesthetics, and village management—where differing expectations and approaches between migrants and locals frequently come to the fore.

Governance, Aesthetics, and Village Management

Disagreement often surfaces over the standards of village order, aesthetics, and management, revealing a key source of migrants' disillusionment with rural life. Many urban-to-rural migrants had initially hoped for a peaceful and idyllic countryside, only to find that expectations around organization and public space are a persistent site of friction. Migrants tend to expect formal regulation and planning—regarding issues such as street vending, building facades, and the overall village environment—reflecting their faith in institutional oversight. In contrast, locals favor informal autonomy and self-management, viewing the village as a flexible, self-regulating community. The limited capacity—and at times indifference—of the local government only compounds these unresolved issues and deepens migrants' sense of frustration.

Street vending, in particular, illustrates these tensions. Migrants are not opposed to vending itself, but to the unregulated practices that, in their view, disrupt the village's appearance, block pathways, and undermine orderly commerce. Locals, on the other hand, embrace street vending because it requires no registration fees and offers economic opportunity for those who lack property in the village center—ironically, often the very locations where migrants are concentrated. For locals, the presence of vendors is rarely problematic, especially as many benefit from it directly. With the village head taking little interest in regulating these spaces, migrants find their complaints repeatedly dismissed or ignored by both village and township authorities. This forced them to pursue "bottom-up" strategies, such as negotiating directly with locals or forming their own informal associations and chambers of commerce—a far cry from the structured governance many had envisioned.

For migrants, the disorderly street vending and other visible signs of village informality, like the clutter of advertisements on house walls and pervasive street food smoke, became daily reminders of the gap between their ideal and reality. They worried not just about their own businesses and environment, but also about the impression left on tourists—a key source of income for all. A subtle but growing disillusionment set in, as few began to perceive the local approach as less "modern" or "artistic," even as they themselves felt uncomfortable with the urban elite culture they'd left behind. Ironically, their education and exposure now set them apart as perceived "elites" in the village, echoing the very hierarchies they thought rural life would transcend.

The result is a subtle but persistent distancing—a sense that, despite their ideal of modernized rural living, migrants must continually negotiate, adapt, and ultimately confront how ideals of modernity and civility are locally contested and redefined. It is in these everyday frictions over governance, aesthetics, and community order that the migrants' disillusionment with rural utopia becomes most visible.

Shattered Certainties: Navigating Risk, Information, and Vulnerability

Boundaries between locals and migrants remain strong in Hejia due to differing levels of access to information and land, combined with low contractual security and high risks for outsiders.

While locals benefit from long-established social networks and communal resources, migrants often feel exposed and vulnerable—especially when considering major investments or trying to secure stable business or property rights.

Among the many risks, the lack of information transparency and the prevalence of informal, insecure agreements loom largest for urban-to-rural migrants. A revealing incident in late 2023 involved Deng and Fang, restaurant and coffee shop owners who leased their space in partnership with the Hejia Cooperative. Their business was put at risk when former local landowners, whose property had been consolidated by the cooperative, decided to return and reclaim part of their land to build a new home.

For Deng and Fang, negotiations proved particularly challenging. Local villagers discussed matters in unfamiliar dialects, and much of the decision-making process remained opaque. Reflecting on the experience, Deng shared:

> We don't know what's really going on behind the scenes—no one tells you anything. When we first signed the contract for our current space, we weren't even sure which parts of the land hadn't been officially leased by the cooperative; we just had to rely on what various people told us.

Ultimately, Deng and Fang had to surrender a portion of their courtyard to the returning family. The resulting construction disrupted their business, causing restaurant revenue to drop by a third that year and leaving them disillusioned about their future in Hejia. To persuade them to stay, Wu—the Cooperative's CEO—helped them secure a new space and supported the opening of their coffee shop. Trust in Wu, newfound profitability, and the friendships they formed kept Deng and Fang from leaving, despite the disillusionment.

Deng and Fang's story is far from unique. For many migrants, vague land rights and the underlying informality of rural governance make them especially susceptible to economic losses. Pan shared that he would never dare invest heavily in Hejia as the cost of breaking an agreement in the countryside is very low, especially for outsiders: "If someone sees you making money and decides they want to take over instead, they can easily break the deal with few consequences." Legal uncertainty both discourages significant investment and emphasizes migrants' precarious status.

Jiang, another migrant, highlighted an additional facet of risk: even though all her village experiences are direct and immediate, she finds that information sources are often unclear. In Hejia, communication is slow and sometimes absent altogether, in stark contrast to the immediacy and transparency she had grown used to in the city.

Together, these challenges reinforce a sense of disillusionment among migrants, who find that in rural life, power, information, and rights are negotiated within boundaries that are far harder to cross than they had ever anticipated.

Left: Restaurant's Courtyard Before Locals' House Was Built (photo taken by Cai)
Right: Fang and Deng's Restaurant (photo taken by Deng)

Conflicting Social Logics in Hejia

The tensions between urban migrants and rural locals in Hejia Village reflect a deeper clash between two fundamentally different social orders: what Fei Xiaotong (1947) called the society of ritual and custom (礼俗社会) and the society of law and formal rules (法理社会). Urban migrants bring with them an expectation of order, transparency, and protection based on formal rules and regulations—a worldview rooted in the structured, contract-based logic of city life. In contrast, the village relies on a culture of familiarity, personal relationships, and flexible boundaries, where a respected local's word can carry more weight than a signed contract.

As a result, migrants and locals continue to follow different informal "rules," shaped by their experiences in atomized urban society versus kinship- and clan-based rural networks. Integration

remains superficial as both groups are just beginning to learn and navigate each other's expectations. Conflict emerges as each side is frustrated by the other's system, and as yet, no mutually recognized set of shared norms has been established. This ongoing negotiation—and the disappointments it engenders—reveals the real difficulty of rural and urban integration in contemporary China.

Faced with these enduring divides and ongoing negotiations, many migrants in Hejia have gradually come to realize that earning a livelihood must take priority—a reality that often necessitates compromising on lifestyle or community ideals. Yet, these continual compromises contribute to a persistent "rural return" dilemma, leading many migrants to regard the village more as a temporary passing point than a destination.

Future Orientation: The Ongoing Search, Open Possibility

Urban youth drawn to the rural for possibilities may also leave in search of new ones. Among the twelve urban youth, only Pei plans to stay in Hejia permanently; the other urban youth envision possibilities beyond the village. For most urban-to-rural migrants, rural life is not the destination but one step in an ongoing search for meaning, value, and possibility.

Successfully running his French bakery, Shen is thinking about the possibility of opening a bakery shop abroad in the future as he wants to explore more possibilities and give his daughter a better education and more possibilities. Deng and Jiang envision a mobile life across the city and the village. Zhou views her experience in the institute as "a steppingstone for future work in rural revitalization" and hopes she can contribute to her home village one day.

On the other hand, while all migrants hope the village could attract more diverse and interesting people, such hope face growing challenges as Hejia's space is already becoming saturated. The recent boom in rural tourism has drawn many profit-seekers: numerous former residents have returned to build new homes and open guesthouses. As a result, there is little available space left for newcomers, especially for young people seeking to settle. Hejia also lacks clear mechanisms for people to enter or exit the community, and those who are already established are reluctant to relinquish valuable resources or lucrative opportunities. This further limits the village's potential for attracting new talent and fostering genuine diversity.

Discussion

From Idealism to Disillusionment: The Evolving Realities of Rural Return

Using Deng and Yao's words, this study follows the stories of twelve "grassroots" and "ordinary" urban youth born after the 1990s who left cities marked by "inward spirals", consumerism, and elite culture to seek an alternative way of living in Hejia Village. Centering on their migration journeys, this study asks: *What happens after young urbanites move to the countryside? What forms of disillusionment do they encounter, and how do they respond?*

The findings align with existing research on the push factors behind urban-to-rural migration—such as the pressures of urban workplaces, high living costs, consumerist culture, lack of belonging, and environmental degradation (Ban 2023, Sun 2024, Wang 2021, Jiang 2020). However, beyond the appeal of natural landscapes and slower-paced lifestyles, Hejia Village offered additional pull factors: it hosted diverse organizations including the Ningchuan Research Institute of Rural Revitalization founded by Professor Gao, and various artistic and cultural programs initiated by Meng (Ban 2023, Mao 2021, Sun 2024, Wang 2021). Professor Gao's discourse emphasized rural value, while Meng's promoted self-realization—both of which inspired many young people to relocate.

Once in Hejia, migrants were drawn to the village's open, diverse, and vibrant community, as well as the economic opportunities tied to tourism. Yet, as previous studies have shown, settlement in the countryside is rarely without difficulty—issues such as land access, limited business prospects, shallow integration, and insufficient policy support frequently arise (Huang 2023, Wang 2021, Yuan 2023). While much of the literature has focused on tensions between migrants and locals or between migrants and the government, this study complicates the picture by highlighting tensions among the migrants themselves.

In Hejia, urban migrants can be grouped into four loosely defined categories: the Rural Construction Group, the Lifestyle Exploration Group, the Pragmatic Business-Oriented Group, and the Creative Expression Group. Although these categories are not rigid, they reflect underlying value differences that manifest in subtle forms of mutual avoidance. Over time, many

migrants have come to see the village not as a unified community, but as one fragmented along lines of interest and enterprise.

This study also moves beyond existing "integration versus challenge" narratives by examining the sense of disillusionment that unfolds after settlement—often in contrast to romanticized depictions of rural return. While national policy and popular media promote idealized visions of rural life, the reality for migrants is far more complex. In fact, the very elements that initially drew them to Hejia Village often became sources of frustration.

For example, Jiang and Yuan were inspired by Professor Gao's vision and joined the "Homeland" bookstore and research institute with the goal of serving rural communities. However, their idealism clashed with the institute's hierarchical structure and self-interested agenda, leaving them disillusioned by the very authority figures they once admired. Similarly, dining entrepreneurs Deng, Feng, and Shen were attracted to Hejia's inclusive community. Yet, as the village gained popularity as a rural tourist destination, leisure gave way to commercialization, and the once-vibrant community atmosphere began to fade. Despite being among the most financially successful migrants, they now express nostalgia for a community that no longer feels the same. Their experiences point to a larger dilemma: Hejia is an exceptional case where money can be made in the village locally, raising questions about whether rural revitalization is truly replicable or sustainable elsewhere.

These moments of disillusionment—whether with community, authority, or the idea of rural life itself—mark a shift among migrants from idealism to pragmatism. Some prioritize income over communal ideals, others form bottom-up coalitions to address unmet needs, and many distance themselves from self-serving individuals and organizations. For these urban youth, disillusionment is both a turning point and a generative force: it opens the door to more grounded, sustainable approaches to rural life—but also fuels mobility and uncertainty. Indeed, only one of the twelve informants expressed a desire to remain in Hejia long-term.

Hejia as a Site of Experimentation and Transformation

Urban-to-rural migrants rarely refer to Hejia as "home." Instead, they use terms like "life" or simply "where I live." Their most pressing concerns related to their life in Hejia revolve around making a living and attracting more young people to the village. In this context, Hejia functions less as a site of belonging and more as a space for accumulation, transformation, and social experimentation. Living in Hejia is shaped by action and pragmatism, rather than by sentiment or imagination.

The social experimentation undertaken by young urban migrants in Hejia is an ongoing process—exploring alternative lifestyles, creating models for sustainable rural living, and re-evaluating both personal and rural values. For these young migrants, the journey from urban to rural is not a settled destination but a continual quest. Through living in Hejia, they have gained self-worth, community recognition, new opportunities, courage, experiences, networks, and resources. Yet, they also face ongoing tensions: the clash between urban and rural values, the gap between their ideals and reality, and persistent questions about long-term sustainability.

Like what Yuan (2023) have observed, the arrival of urban youth and their involvement in rural development and local affairs have also impacted local villagers. Their enthusiasm and creativity have developed the village and have prompted a sense of pride and renewed identity among Hejia's original residents, reframing what it means to be from Hejia. Thus, migration is a two-way process: as the village transforms the urban youth, the urban youth also transform the village, the local community, and even the broader relationship between the urban and rural. The case of Hejia suggests that for most urban youth, migration to the countryside is not a definitive solution but an ongoing experiment—marked by transformation, moments of doubt, and ambivalence about "making it", either in life or economically. This experimental mindset not only shapes individual trajectories but also provides new possibilities—and points to the limits—of rural revitalization policy and youth mobility in China. Furthermore, Hejia's open and diverse community prompts us to reconsider what truly constitutes a community and a public space. It raises the vital question: why do urban public spaces remain inaccessible to many, and what can rural spaces teach us about inclusion and participation?

By focusing on ordinary youth in their twenties and thirties, this study aims to shed light on the everyday realities and dilemmas of rural life. It hopes to resonate with others who face similar obstacles and aspirations, and to serve as a reference for those who have moved - or are considering moving – from urban to rural areas.

Future Directions

Future research might take the form of a longitudinal study in Hejia Village, especially given that most migrants have only lived there for one to three years, and the village's development is still at an early stage. Alternatively, other villages that are drawing young urban-to-rural migrants could be explored for comparison. Key areas for future investigation include: the evolving tension between urban and rural values; the ways contemporary urban youth adapt to, or challenge established rural norms; and the question of resource and recognition transfer—how and to what extent can the accomplishments and experiences achieved in the rural context be brought back or translated into urban life?

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Appendix

Number of Urban-to-Rural Migrants in Hejia Village (2018-2024) [8]

Year	# of Migrants in Total	# of Newly Arrived Migrants	Type of Newly Arrived Migrants					# of Departures
			Entrepreneur	Artist	Worker	Rural Revitalization Related	Family Member	
2018	5	5	0	5	0	0	0	0
2019	14	9	3	2	0	0	4	0
2020	11	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
2021	11	5	1	0	0	4	0	5
2022	14	9	4	1	0	4	0	6
2023	26	15	9	1	0	3	2	3
2024	30	8	3	1	1	3	0	4

Businesses in Hejia Village (2024-2025)[9]

Category	# of Businesses	Business Format
Arts and Culture	7	Ceramic studio, comic book studio, art & coffee studio, art studio & pottery selling, documentary studio, bookstore (2)
Stay	11	
Food & Drink	10	Restaurant (4), coffee shop, tea shop (2), bakery, beer shop, local wine
Entertainment	2	Karaoke, music bar, camping site
Research	1	Ningchuan Research Institute of Rural Revitalization

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[8] As there is no official data, the number of migrants was estimated based on ethnography, interviews, news reports, and migrants' social media.

[9] As there is no official data, the number of businesses is estimated based on ethnography, interviews, news reports, and migrants' social media. The chart only covers active businesses and does not include any closed businesses.

Category	# of Businesses	Business Format
Farming	3	Hejia Cooperate, plum and peach grove, traditional farming
Independent Craftsmen	Independent	10+ craftsman [10]
Street Vendors	Independent	food and crafts

[10] Most craftsman are elderly villagers over 60 years old. Some can work up to 20 days a month, earning 170 yuan per day. For more labor-intensive tasks, such as carrying stones, they can earn 200 yuan per day. Stonemasons from the neighboring county earn 400 yuan per day, while local carpenters make around 350 yuan per day.