

## "Migratory Bird" Families: Intergenerational Care

### Networks in County Urbanization

#### Abstract

This research explores the development of “migratory bird” families and their adaptive patterns in response to infrastructural limitations within the context of China’s county-level urbanisation. Through 14 months of ethnographic research conducted in three regions, we delineate four distinct patterns of mobility: seasonal agricultural circulators, education-driven circulators, healthcare-anchored circulators, and split-generation households. These intergenerational family arrangements adeptly modulate the socio-structural gap between urban and rural welfare systems concomitantly with caregiving responsibilities across generations. Our framework illustrates the interplay among urban-rural institutional divides, familial assets, and culturally defined expectations of filial duty that give rise to these structures. The data elucidate intricate bidirectional resource exchanges and gendered caregiving dynamics where women disproportionately bear caregiving burdens across spaces. “Migratory bird” families face acute disadvantage in accessing housing, healthcare, subsidised services, and living within rigidly predefined systemic thresholds. Their adaptive responses illuminate systemic shortcomings of social protection frameworks and simultaneously underscore families’ resourcefulness in care configuration. This criticism redefines urbanisation as unidirectional and proposes policy changes such as cross-system integration, flexible housing, and women-centric structural aid responsive to mobile multi-generational families within the context of Chinese urban development.

**Key words:** migratory bird families; intergenerational care; county urbanization; institutional constraints; rural-urban mobility

#### 1 Introduction

The rapid pace of urbanisation in China has altered family structures and intergenerational relations in more than one way, creating new forms of mobility that defy traditional conceptions of rural and urban households. Families structured along class lines are now gradually shifting towards more flexible compositions as members of the family are supported to work as migrant labourers under new forms of urbanisation [1]. Out of these transitions emerges the “migratory bird” family phenomenon, which describes cyclic, seasonal travelling between rural villages and urban centres. This distinct characteristic showcases adaptive responses to the incomplete integration of social welfare systems that remain predominantly divided along urban-rural lines.

Access to basic public health services emerges as a critical area of concern especially in the context of elderly migrants, whose social integration to urbanised locations is greatly dependent on institutional support systems [2]. The uneven development of

# Urban-rural Sociology Today

-Wisdom Academic Press

caregiving services among metropolitan areas and small to mid-sized urban centres causes large gaps, as illustrated by the more developed continuing care retirement communities located in first-tier cities like Shanghai in contrast to the limited options available in smaller urban centres [3]. Due to such inequalities, many families are forced to redesign their living arrangements based on novel strategies that transform formerly 'detangled' urban habitats by re-entangling them through intergenerational coexistence, care, and caregiving arrangements that span multiple generations and physical locations [4].

While technological interventions, for instance, "smart elderly care," offer promise, their adoption is contingent upon spatial sociocultural factors and demographic class [5]. Understanding the social development history of China since 1949 sheds light on how long-standing institutional rifts, which continue to exist alongside swift socio-economic changes, give rise to contemporary problems of generational care disparities [6]. Such rifts give rise to ecological disparities not only within the social realm but also the physical realm as migration alters the distribution and use of resources across rural-urban continua [7].

Understanding these new family frameworks hinges on appreciating how urban processes interrelate with sociocultural systems of care and belonging. Just as Indigenous paradigms contest other contextualised urbanism [8], an ethnographic study of ["migratory bird"]([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migratory\\_bird](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migratory_bird)) families attends to culturally meaningful approaches to family cohesion that persist alongside lopsided institutional frameworks. The mobile networks of caregiving between these families embody a critical form of "ecosystem service" that supports people and communities but is unsupported by existing policy structures [9]. To meet these challenges, there is a need to prioritise community sociocultural frameworks as core to the planning frameworks, incorporating the realities and coping mechanisms of families with complex partial urban-rural structures [10].

This paper considers the case of "migratory bird" families with regard to the urbanisation phenomenon at the county-level towns of China with a special focus on how intergenerational care systems cope with institutional pressures. Examining the mobile family form in its spatial, temporal, and relational context reveals important inadequacies and gaps in social protective systems that exist at the urban-rural divide. We analyse how families manage care across generations and geographies through multi-sited ethnography, shedding light on adaptive innovations and enduring fragilities. This analysis enriches the understanding of familial adjustment in transitional economies while underscoring the policy frameworks that would enhance intergenerational care in the context of more flexible, dynamic, and spatially dispersed familial arrangements.

## 2 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Comprehending the taxonomy of 'migratory bird' families requires an amalgamation of theories on family evolution, intergenerational solidarity, and institutional ecology spanning the rural-urban divide. This part builds a preliminary model to examine

Jasper Kalo\*

Email: [j.kalo@vanuatusoc.vu](mailto:j.kalo@vanuatusoc.vu)

Affiliation: Port Vila Rural-Urban Institute, VU-2468, Kumul Highway, Port Vila, Vanuatu

# Urban-rural Sociology Today

-Wisdom Academic Press

these emergent family dynamics situated within the specific context of pacing modernisation in China, emphasising urban growth in towns and its impact on caregiving relationships.

## **Family Transformation in Transitional Economies**

The evolution of families differs in style and structure within transitional economies when compared to the West. According to classical modernisation theory, the expansion of urban areas would be accompanied by an increase in nuclear families; however, the East Asian Southeast region has demonstrated more complex family trajectories where extended families persist alongside high levels of geographic mobility. China exemplifies this phenomenon where filial piety, or filial obligations, give rise to hybrid family forms that adapt generational responsibilities to changing spatial and economic conditions.

“Networked families” as a concept helps address some of these changes, adapting urban organisation models to the contemporary Chinese context, where families are dispersed but maintain cohesion and functional integration. However, county level urbanisation comes with distinct challenges relative to metropolitan areas: the partially developed welfare infrastructure and the declining support traditional rural frameworks due to outmigration create a precarious hybrid middle ground where no rural or urban systems adequately meet family needs.

## **Intergenerational Solidarity in Chinese Context**

The theoretical scope of intergenerational solidarity offers a rationale for exploring the persistence of familial ties in the context of spatial mobility. In the Chinese context, solidarity has multiple dimensions, including: functional (care and support services), associational (interaction rates), affectual (emotional attachment), consensual (value agreement), and structural (social mobility frameworks).

“Migratory bird” families uniquely manipulate spatial arrangements to maximise functional solidarity within tight bound institutional frameworks.

Filial obligation supporting Chinese aged parents with dependent children continues to dominate intergenerational relations; however, it operates within dramatically different structural conditions than traditional contexts. “Negotiated filial piety” as a concept illustrates how firmly families negotiate contemporary boundaries while upholding redefined practices framed around traditional expectations.

## **Institutional Ecology and the Urban-Rural Divide**

Intergenerational caregiving is profoundly shaped by the welfare institutional ecology. In China, the urban-rural divide regarding social insurance, healthcare, and services for the elderly creates gaping structures that families have to traverse through mobility strategies. The urban-rural divide is still pronounced at the county level, where urban services lag behind metropolitan centres, while rural services continue to lag far behind.

To analyse the interrelationship of institutional factors with family strategies leading to “migratory bird” family arrangements, a conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1. These family patterns arise at the confluence of institutional constraints, family resources, cultural expectations regarding care, and social norms.

# Urban-rural Sociology Today

-Wisdom Academic Press

“Migratory bird” family formations, as illustrated in Figure 1, emerge from the intersection of three predominant factors outlined as follows. Firstly, the gap between urban and rural frameworks creates systemic welfare provision deficiencies. Advanced urban centres provide healthcare, education, and elderly services, but constrict access via hukou (household registration) and pay-as-you-go models which exclude rural migrants. Rural governance systems extend more accessible, but qualitatively inferior services, especially specialised healthcare and elderly support. The prevailing institutional deficit generates structural incentives for families to sustain ties with both systems.

Secondly, familial resources such as finances, caregiving ability, and social capital dictate the specific approaches families are able to use to manoeuvre through institutional barriers. Financial resources shape a family’s housing choices and patterns of residential mobility, while care capacity (determined by family size, gender composition, and health) influences the distribution of caregiving burdens. Social networks give critical informal aid supplements that assist formal institutional services, particularly in urban county-level areas where services are not fully developed.

Lastly, cultural norms around filial piety also set strong normative expectations around the moral obligation of adult children to care for elderly parents. These norms combine with institutional constraints and family resources to determine particular mobility patterns, and frequently result in gendered care provision where disproportionate caregiving duties are borne by daughters-in-law.

## **Spatial Dimensions of Care**

The existing literature has yet to explore the intergenerational care dimension framed spatially. “Migratory bird” families optimise the provision of care within a spatial framework that responds to mobility patterns and seasonal institutional advantages. These strategies often include the maintenance of dual residences—one in the rural village and another in the county-level urban centre—where family members shift location based on care requirements and/or agricultural cycles alongside seasonal considerations.

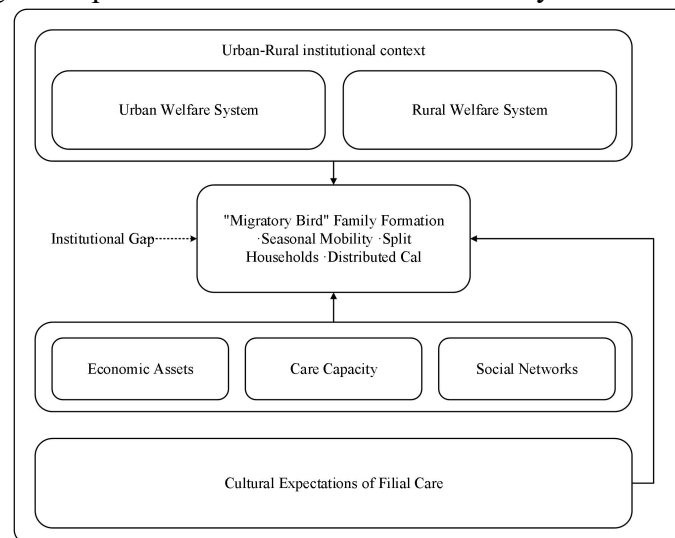
Unlike the permanent shift to primary metropolitan subcentres, county-level urbanisation still permits relatively frequent movement between urban and rural areas because distances are shorter. Such distances allow for imaginative caring approaches that would otherwise be impossible at greater distances where daily or weekly commutes occur, in contrast to the monthly or yearly visits typical of long-distance migration.

The framework developed here situates “migratory bird” family patterns as rational responses to institutional constraints, rather than deviations from a norm. These patterns embody inventive coping mechanisms designed to optimise family resources and welfare by engaging with institutional systems in urban and rural settings, preserving culturally mandated intergenerational solidarity. Understanding such family patterns necessitates reconceptualising simplistic rural-urban binaries, and instead considering the multifaceted dynamics of organised socio-cultural

# Urban-rural Sociology Today

-Wisdom Academic Press

systems—along with infrastructural assets, cultural frameworks, and normative systems shaping kinship structures in the context of county-level urbanisation.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: "Migratory Bird" Family Formation**

## 3 Methodology and Findings

This research uses a multi-sited ethnography to examine “migratory bird” family forms in the context of county-level urbanisation in China. This approach emphasises the relative caregiving positions of family members alongside broader institutional frameworks and socioeconomic structures.

I conducted fieldwork in three strategically chosen county-level cities from different geographical and developmental cohorts: Jinxiang County in the eastern region (Shandong Province), Liuyang City (Central Hunan), and Tongxin County from the western region (Ningxia Autonomous Region). These locations have differences in the levels of economic development, urbanisation progress, and culture but share the characteristic of significant rural-urban migration within the counties' spatial limits.

Data collection occurred over 14 months, from September 2022 to November 2023, through a combination of methods, such as in-depth interviews with 78 people from 32 “migratory bird” families, participatory observation in rural and urban county centres, institutional analysis through interviews with 24 local officials and service providers, and systematic documenting of housing and mobility arrangements using family mobility calendars. This approach facilitated the triangulation of findings while accounting for and capturing subjective and objective realities shaping family care structures.

The study identified four unique types of ‘migratory bird’ family forms, each showing different ways of coping with institutionally imposed limits and care demands. Seasonal Agricultural Circulators (38% of the sample) have their primary domicile in rural villages but move to county urban centres during the agricultural off-seasons, which is mostly in winter. Working-age adults take temporary urban jobs accompanied by elderly parents seeking advanced medical care not available in the

Jasper Kalo\*

Email: [j.kalo@vanuatusoc.vu](mailto:j.kalo@vanuatusoc.vu)

Affiliation: Port Vila Rural-Urban Institute, VU-2468, Kumul Highway, Port Vila, Vanuatu

# Urban-rural Sociology Today

-Wisdom Academic Press

villages. Education-Driven Circulators (27% of the sample) move to urban centres to capitalise on education opportunities for the youngest generation, often bringing grandparents along who live in urban housing with their school-age grandchildren, while parents commute to work in the rural homestead.

Healthcare-Anchored Circulators (21% of sample) have family anchored to the peripheries of chronic elderly care intertwined with more dynamic rural-urban movement, revolving around routine chronic health management involving frequent rural-urban shifts. These families maintain minimal urban housing next to county hospitals for enhanced access while retaining more substantial rural homesteads. Split-Generation Households (14% of the sample) involve more stable spatial separation between the generations, with elderly parents mostly residing in rural villages while adult children take up urban dwellings, remaining in close frequent contact through regular visits in both directions.

The "migrant bird" families exhibit intricate two-way resource flows as a migration phenomenon which goes against the notion of rural-urban migration. Material resources, such as medicine and consumer goods, flow from urban areas and payment subservies from the rural to the urban region. Nevertheless, these patterns exhibit significant trivial change during rush hours on agriculture which motivates urban members for family work during the planting and harvesting periods.

Social power relations construct social value through women's activities which profoundly shape exchange care mechanisms. Women tend to cope with circulatory roles as daughters-in-law where they would provide assistance or care duties to both the elderly and the youngsters. Elders, on the other hand, provide economic support, like paying for the services through logics instead of hands-on care. This phenomenon is true with all types of family arrangements; however, the variety of intensity for this framework differs.

From the cultural point of view, families come across several barriers of services and cross-border travelling between rural and modern ways of living. Suppose a family shifts to an urban household. In that case, it gives rise to issues relating to health care which happens to be the foremost problem where countryside cooperative insurance is only accepted at discounted prices by urban institutions. There exist some other fundamental limitations such as urban housing policies denying sponsored options to temporary residents qualifying for the subsidised limit, which results in having to rely on pricey rental agreements or living with urban relatives in overcrowded spaces.

To respond, families engage in complex adaptation strategies such as aligning the timing of healthcare needs with urban residency periods, informal care barter systems with other 'migratory bird' families to lower housing expenses, circumspect preservation of rural hukou status despite urban dwelling to safeguard land entitlement, and creation of adjustable work schedules aligned with caregiving demands and cyclical movement. These results illustrate how "migratory bird" families maintain intergenerational solidarity creatively through welfare optimisation across the rural-urban divide while navigating institutional constraints tangentially.

## 4 Policy Implications and Conclusions

Jasper Kalo\*

Email: [j.kalo@vanuatusoc.vu](mailto:j.kalo@vanuatusoc.vu)

Affiliation: Port Vila Rural-Urban Institute, VU-2468, Kumul Highway, Port Vila, Vanuatu



# Urban-rural Sociology Today

-Wisdom Academic Press

The “migratory bird” family phenomenon highlights systemic fractures concerning social protection in China within the rural-urban borderland. The considerations made in this paper inform important policy recommendations imagining China’s socio-legal framework and also contribute to the conceptualisation of family change in the context of urbanisation and de-familisation at the county level.

To begin with, the current divided welfare system fails to address the reality of fluid, mobile family structures in contemporary China. The social policies governing healthcare, social insurance, and eldercare within the rigid urban-rural divide geography not only gridlock mobility but also demand intricate strategies for basic services access. Policy change must focus on integration gaps, especially in rural-urban fringe regions which are experiencing rapid blurring of boundaries, such as county-level dynamic zones. For instance, portable healthcare insurance, transferrable benefits across jurisdictions, and recognition of split-household residency for service eligibility could enhance integration.

Moreover, zoning policies and urban planning must be adjusted to respond to families with dual-location household registrations. The existing urban housing subsidy and affordable housing schemes permanently disadvantage sojourner caregivers, thereby compounding intergenerational care burdens. Creating flexible housing arrangements, such as short-stay eldercare flats near hospitals or seasonal family housing, would ease the economic burden on caregivers, enhancing the provision of essential care across rural and urban divides.

There are gaps in policies put in place and their actual application when it comes to gender-sensitive approaches. Women already have a disproportionate caregiving burden as daughters-in-law within the family unit. Therefore, policies such as respite care services, care allowances, and pension credits for informal caregiving need to be addressed formally. Family welfare policies that intervene without addressing the care provision gender gap will always be ineffective, and at worst, strengthen the existing inequality.

The “migratory bird” family structure should, rather, be perceived as an adaptation to institutional constraints rather than transitional abnormalities from an abstract position. Thus far this arrangement has demonstrated great cultural ingenuity, optimising intergenerational solidarity at the same time as engaging strategically with urban and rural institutional systems to maximise family welfare. This perspective challenges predominant models of urbanisation that assume a singular, linear, and one-directional movement from rural areas to cities.

There is a need for future study exploring the long-term sustainability of these family structures as China's demographic ageing accelerates, as well as investigating the impacts of mobile families and the digital age. Additionally, analysing region-specific variations of the “migratory bird” phenomenon would be worthwhile. Policy frameworks aimed at multi-generational caregiving that occur alongside relentless urbanisation would greatly benefit from supporting these flexible family forms instead of rigid institutional classifications.

## References

Jasper Kalo\*

Email: [j.kalo@vanuatusoc.vu](mailto:j.kalo@vanuatusoc.vu)

Affiliation: Port Vila Rural-Urban Institute, VU-2468, Kumul Highway, Port Vila, Vanuatu

# Urban-rural Sociology Today

-Wisdom Academic Press

- [1] Du, H., Gu, D., & Liu, Y. (2023). It's the Desire that Makes a Change: On the Mechanism of Migrant Workers' Class Elevation Under the Background of New-Type Urbanization. In *SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN CHINA* (pp. 423-449).
- [2] Cui, Y., & Yang, F. (2025). Accessibility of basic public health service promotes social integration of elderly migrants in China. *Scientific Reports*, 15(1), 10685.
- [3] Wang, X., Xia, B., Skitmore, M., Volz, K., & Shu, B. (2024). Understanding the well-being of residents in Chinese Continuing Care Retirement Communities—a case of Shanghai. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 12, 1457022.
- [4] Hyland, J. L. (2023). *Re-Entangling The Urban Habitat: Exploring Housing Through An Architecture of Biodiversity*. University of Washington.
- [5] Qian, C. (2024). *Smart Elderly Care in Urban China: Policies, Practices, and Older Adults' Perception* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Liverpool).
- [6] Zhang, Y. (2024). *Social Development and Social Changes in China: From 1949 to 2019*. Springer Nature.
- [7] Janus, D. (2024). *Ecological impacts and stewardship opportunities of introduced Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) in the Fraser River Estuary* (Doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia).
- [8] Berghan, J., Hoskins, R., & Raerino, K. (2023). Reckoning with "urbanism": Why Aotearoa needs a Māori cultural landscape lexicon.
- [9] Machado, M. R., & Coleman, A. F. (2023). Incentivizing the production of ecosystem services on working lands: The opportunities and challenges of funding "nature's contributions to people" in the US Northeast. *Agricultural and Resource Economics Review*, 52(2), 273-300.
- [10] Beaty, F., John, B., Antone, M., Williams, J., Bennett, N., Wallia, N., & Harley, C. (2024). Centering community values in marine planning. *Marine Policy*, 170, 106363.