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Research Article

# The Mechanism and Realization Path of Youth In-migration for Sustained Development of Rural Revitalization Demonstration Belts

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**Abstract**

Contiguous rural revitalisation demonstration belts are the core institutional arrangements promoting urban-rural integration in western China. Most of the previous studies have focused on how returning youth integrate into their own villages and have not explored the scaling-up mechanism of youth-led local practices to achieve regional development. Based on the qualitative case study evidence, 42 semi-structured interviews and field observations were conducted in the six villages of the three Lanzhou demonstration belts from April to May 2026 to explore youth-led rural engagement. Based on the above data, the new generation of young people brings digital operational knowledge, external market access and cross-regional social capital to the village level and achieves multi-level embedding. However, in practice, the progress has been limited by talent-industry mismatches, weak industrial carrying capacity, poor inter-village cooperation, and insufficient living facilities. Functions of village-level individual embeddedness are necessary but not sufficient conditions for sustained, widespread prosperity in the belt. Only when the scattered resources of the people in different villages are connected will sustained regional development be possible. Targeted talent governance, inter-village industrial alliance construction and amenity upgrading have been proposed as feasible policy choices in this study, and empirical lessons for peri-urban contiguous rural revitalization in western China have been obtained.

**Keywords**

Youth in-migration, Rural revitalization demonstration belt, Social embeddedness, Regional network, Peri-urban countryside

## 1. Introduction

## 2. Introduction

Peri-urban villages in western China serve as the links for the two-way flow of factors between cities and rural areas. Chronic youth out-migration, a shortage of human capital and a low-value industrial base mean that these communities cannot achieve high-quality revitalisation by relying solely on local resources (Jia, 2023). With the progress of national rural revitalisation policies, more and more educated young people with urban professional backgrounds have moved to the countryside to start businesses, manage local affairs and participate in public welfare, thus becoming important drivers of rural transformation (Zhong & Li, 2023).

Earlier studies have indicated that the human and material resources provided by returning youth promote the development of rural entrepreneurship; however, the retention of these young entrepreneurs is limited by local infrastructure, financing conditions and development opportunities (Bao et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2022). Operating in resource-scarce western rural areas, young actors frequently use the strategy of resource bricolage to avoid binding development constraints (Lin & Lu, 2024). Embeddedness theory also suggests that external newcomers need to build relational, institutional and resource-based connections first, and then become legitimate local stakeholders of the outside operator (Hu & Zhang, 2023; Wang et al., 2022).

Most of the existing studies use individual entrepreneurs or single administrative villages as the unit of analysis and have paid insufficient attention to belt-style contiguous rural revitalization. Demonstration belts are not simply spatial clusters of individual villages; rather, they are coordinated cross-village systems established along transport corridors, integrated industrial chains and shared brand assets. Thus, the main research problem of this paper is to explore how the multi-faceted youth embeddedness in these contiguous belt-type zones extends beyond the administrative boundaries of individual villages to provide long-lasting regional development support.

Lanzhou provides a suitable empirical basis for multiple rural revitalization demonstration belts operating in its peri-urban area. The Gaolanshan cultural and tourism belt, Yuzhong central valley agricultural belt and Xigu inland port industrial belt each have different industrial paths and host considerable youth activities. According to granular field material analysis, the youth embedding process, contextual barriers and conditions for regional spillover are examined herein. It addresses deficiencies in the scope of analysis and provides a reference for designing practical talent-oriented continuous rural policies in western China.

## 3. Research Design

### 3.1. Case Selection

Select three well-known demonstration belts with prominent participation by young people and cover six administrative villages. Sanying and Honggou Villages (Fulongping Sub-district) are specialisations in mountain-based tourism, study tour programs and homestay hospitality within the Gaolanshan cultural tourism demonstration belt. Gucheng and Fengwan Villages (Jinya Town) are in the Yuzhong central valley agricultural demonstration belt and focus on high-land summer vegetables, protected agriculture and agricultural e-commerce. Qingshitai and Xiachuan Villages (Xincheng Town) are in the Xigu inland port demonstration zone and have established basic agricultural processing, warehousing-logistics and community-oriented supply chain service enterprises. Tourism-led, agriculture-dominant and logistics-supporting peri-urban rural areas were selected as the samples, and they are reasonably representative.

### 3.2. Data Sources

From April 10 to May 15, 2026, a total of 26 days of on-site investigation were conducted during fieldwork. Collect data by means of semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation and village collective workshops. Forty-two informants were interviewed: 21 young entrepreneurs who had moved to the city, six village committee members, five township rural revitalization officials, and ten local farmers and small-scale operators. The interviewees were college-graduate returnees, rural site operators, new-media e-commerce practitioners, cultural tourism planners and modern agricultural technicians. Other materials included the construction documents for the demonstration belt, village collective economy accounts and local talent support policies. Multiple Sources can be triangulated to improve the credibility and reliability of qualitative data. This mechanism-focused case study does not aim for statistical generalisation.

### 3.3. Analytical Framework

Based on the theories of embeddedness and regional networks, the analysis follows this order: resource reconstruction → multidimensional embeddedness → practical constraints → scale-up. First, how young people use the skills they have learned in the city to restructure local rural resource value chains. Next, it will investigate the process of economic, social and cultural integration at the village level. Third, it finds the deficiencies in belt-wide performance. Finally, it introduces the transition mechanism from village-level embedding to cross-village network construction at the regional level.

## 4. Practices and Multi- dimensional Embeddedness of In- migrating Youth

### 4.1. Resource Reconstruction: Connecting Local Rural Assets to External Consumer Markets

Field observations show that the incoming youth rarely participate in primary crop production directly. The main role of the rural assets is to help address the deficiencies in local branding, digital promotion and market connection. Blessed with mountain landscapes and red culture, Sanying and Honggou Villages have long been deprived of resources and tourists. Three returning university graduates set up a local cultural and tourism studio, retrofitted 12 disused rural houses into homestay clusters, and promoted camping, study tour and short-break packages through short videos and social media to increase the number of local visitors significantly. Gucheng and Fengwan Villages produce high-quality highland summer vegetables but are still facing the problem of “high-quality goods, low market price”. Resident youth built e-commerce portfolios to carry out graded packaging, live-stream sales and community group buying, and established direct distribution channels connecting production sites with urban consumers. Based on their near-inland-port locations, young people in Qingshitai and Xiachuan Villages have built sorting-and-packaging short supply chains to promote the outward flow of agricultural products.

Young people do not increase the physical stock of rural resources; instead, they restructure market-oriented value-conversion paths. This is in line with the Resource-Bricolage Strategy for mitigating factor-endowment constraints (Lin & Lu, 2024). Digital tools have extended the location advantage of the peri-urban area and can efficiently connect urban demand with rural supply (He et al., 2023; Lu et al., 2024).

## 4.2. Economic Embeddedness: Industrial Projects as Material Basis for Rural Retention

Viable Commercial Operations Support Youth Economic Embeddedness. Light and asset cultural tourism businesses are widespread in Gaolanshan; Yuzhong has adopted an “agriculture + e-commerce” model; Xigu focuses on logistics support services. Younger people adapt business models according to local endowments instead of transplanting urban commercial forms mechanically. People who have lived in the countryside for a long time are generally close to the local industry. Actors who leave after a short time generally have enterprises that have been decoupled from the native resource base (Wang et al., 2022; Chen & Barcus, 2024).

Economically integrated Areas are still scattered among the pilot regions. Gaolanshan cultural tourism, Yuzhong agricultural e-commerce and Xigu warehousing-logistics operate largely in isolation. Tourist flows, sales channels and storage capacity cannot be shared; industrial gains are limited to the administrative village area and show little cross-border spillover.

## 4.3. Social Embeddedness: Public Participation for Trust Building and Subject-identity Formation

Commercial income provides basic living expenses for people in the countryside, and social embeddedness is the level of integration of young people into the local community. In Honggou and Sanying Villages of Gaolanshan, the new generation of youth participates in tourism planning, living-environment improvement, folk-culture event organisation and online rural promotion. Within Yuzhong's Gucheng Village, they help the village authorities establish e-commerce service hubs and provide free operating training for farm households. Continuous public participation builds trust among the young arrivals, villagers, collective committees and grassroots government offices, reduces transaction costs for project implementation, and completes relational as well as institutional embedding (Hu & Zhang, 2023; Zhong & Li, 2023). Economic embeddedness offers material support, and social embeddedness builds social capital; together, they promote the long-term participation of youth in rural construction.

### 4.4. Cultural Embeddedness: Revitalising Local Culture to Foster Place Attachment

Surveyed villages have rich cultural resources, such as mountain folk customs, agrarian heritage and revolutionary legacies. Young immigrants are reinterpreting traditional culture for modern readers through new-media tools. Gaolanshan develops red-themed study tour curricula, and Yuzhong opens up ancient village and agritourism experiences. Cultural Innovation creates New Tourism Products. Meanwhile, youth develop place attachment by sorting historical materials, staging community activities and interacting with local residents. Reduce the transient "sojourner" mindset and increase the desire for permanent residence. However, the short-lived festival-style cultural events are also not very popular. Sustainable cultural empowerment requires a stable system of benefit-sharing for young operators, villagers and village collectives.

## 5. Practical Constraints on Youth-led Empowerment in Demonstration Belts

Interview evidence from the six sample villages shows that there are four main obstacles to utilising the strengths of young people in the community.

First, skill-set mismatches occur between the available talent and industrial requirements. Gaolanshan requires experienced cultural tourism managers, but some arriving youth lack practical skills and increase the homogeneity of market competition. Agricultural villages in Yuzhong need agronomy and agricultural-branding specialists, but many young people are good at online communication and lack farming-sector knowledge. Logistics-related positions in Xigu require high-end supply chain knowledge that the current generation of young people cannot provide. There

are significant structural talent gaps in the Western Peri-urban Demonstration Belt (Jia, 2023), and thus, human-resource utilisation efficiency is low.

Second, the general industrial carrying capacity remains low and the revenue fluctuates significantly. Gaolanshan tourism fluctuates significantly with seasons, weather and holidays, and has a steep income drop in the off-peak season. Yuzhong agriculture cycles with planting rhythms and fluctuations in produce prices, and Xigu supporting services rise and fall according to the logistics sector. Few local business lines have stable year-round returns, leading to "seasonal rural residency" and an unclear long-term prospect for some young participants (Yuan et al., 2022).

Third, cross-village cooperative networks are not yet established. Spatial contiguity does not equate to functional industrial integration. Formalised regularised cooperation mechanisms are missing in all three demonstration belts. Tourist traffic generated in Gaolanshan is not directed to the Yuzhong agritourism offerings; high-quality Yuzhong farm products lack physical exhibition sites in the tourism area; and Xigu warehousing capacity has not been opened to the other two zones. Local operators work in isolation. Benefits from individual site-specific projects fail to spread and thus do not achieve the policy goal of "linking scattered sites into cohesive belts" (Zhou, 2021).

Fourth, inadequate residential public services reduce the incentive for long-term settlement. Interviewees repeatedly mention high commuting costs, a lack of accessible high-quality local medical and educational resources, and a scarcity of social spaces for young people. Entrepreneur support policies lower the entry threshold for rural work, but the quality of residence directly affects talent retention (Liu et al., 2023). Even young people running profitable businesses may lack a strong desire for permanent rural life.

## 6. Discussion

This study supports the main findings of previous research on returning-youth entrepreneurship and multi-dimensional embeddedness: young actors utilize human capital and resource bricolage to promote single-village development, and continuous participation is supported by both local social networks and external market connections (Bao et al., 2022; Lin & Lu, 2024; Wang et al., 2022; Zhong & Li, 2023).

Its primary marginal contribution lies in re-scaling the analytical lens. At individual-village level, combined economic-social-cultural embeddedness can drive local progress. Within cross-village demonstration belts, however, individual-level embedding constitutes a necessary but not sufficient condition. Lanzhou case evidence shows that without cross-village institutions for industrial collaboration, visitor-pool sharing and joint branding, gains generated by successful youth-run projects remain trapped within village administrative boundaries and cannot produce belt-wide effects. Accordingly, this paper advances a sequential analytical framework labelled "individual

embeddedness-regional-network formation". Individual on-site rooting provides the base, while cross-village network upgrading represents the critical prerequisite for durable contiguous-belt revitalization.

For western rural areas with a general shortage of talent, the policy effect will be better achieved by utilising the existing pool of migrating youth and expanding cross-regional spillovers, rather than simply increasing the scale of talent recruitment.

## 7. Conclusions and Policy Suggestions

### 7.1. Conclusions

Field investigations in the six villages of the three Lanzhou rural revitalization demonstration belts have yielded three main conclusions. First, the new rural youth function less as supplementary primary-sector labour and more as providers of digital capabilities, market channels and extra-local social capital to reshape value-realisation paths for native rural resources. Second, the youth have achieved village-level rooting through three mutually reinforcing embedding modes: economic embeddedness based on commercial operations; social embeddedness promoted by public-sector participation; and cultural embeddedness created through local cultural revitalisation. Thirdly, the main bottleneck preventing the sustainability of demonstration belts is not a lack of young participants but the absence of inter-village collaborative institutions. If contiguous revitalisation goals are to be achieved, the individual embeddedness must be expanded into a network.

### 7.2. Policy Suggestions

Four feasible policy paths are proposed according to the local empirical conditions.

1. Targeted talent recruitment and training to reduce the talent-industry mismatch. Recruit and cultivate specialists in cultural tourism management, agricultural branding and supply chain governance for tourism-oriented, agricultural- and logistics-supporting villages respectively, and align talent supply with the needs of the leading local industries.

2. Build cross-village coordinated industrial networks for demonstration belts. Construct closed-loop regional industrial chains with "tourism-driven visitor inflow - agricultural commodity provision - warehousing - logistics backup". Set up visitor-exchange platforms, product exhibition areas, shared marketing channels and joint-branding arrangements to reduce administrative barriers among the villages.

3. Improve residential support services to enhance youth retention. Improve rural commuting facilities, build young people's-oriented exchange platforms and entrepreneurship incubation systems. Policy intervention should combine industrial incentive instruments with residential quality safeguards to strengthen the will of long-term rural residence.

4. Adopt a two-tier governance mechanism: village-level cultivation plus demonstration-belt-level coordination. Village-level bodies nurture high-quality individual youth-led projects, while demonstration-belt-level authorities orchestrate cross-village collaboration, shifting youth-resource deployment from fragmented spot-based deployment toward intensive regional-level sharing.

## 7.3. Limitations and Future Research

This qualitative case study will not aim for statistical generalisation through mechanism decomposition. Follow-up research can conduct multi-case comparisons and long-term field tracking to test the boundary conditions of the "individual embeddedness-regional network formation" framework in different contiguous rural revitalization areas.

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## Author contributions

Conceptualization, W.W.; methodology, W.W.; validation, W.W.; formal analysis, W.W.; investigation, W.W.;resources,W.W.;data curation, W.W.; writing—original draft preparation, W.W.; writing—review and editing, W.W.; visualization, W.W.; supervision, W.W.; project administration, W.W.; funding acquisition, W.W. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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## Data availability

The data are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions.

## Declarations

### Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

### Ethics approval

Not applicable.

### Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

### Consent for publication

Not applicable. (This manuscript contains no identifiable personal data in any form.)

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