# Home in Mobility: The Emotional Landscape of Migrant Children in Urban China

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ABSTRACT

Migrant is a process that exposes individuals, especially children at risks of experiencing mental health issues. This study examines how migrant children in the context of rapid urbanization in China understand and construct the concept of "home," and how this identification affects their personal development and social perceptions. Through this study, we offer a more comprehensive understanding of migrant children's psychological well-being. To achieve this, we purposefully designed an empirical study, in which we not only surveyed migrant children in Beijing, originating from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds but also analyzed their activities on social media. This study aims to comprehensively understand their living conditions and psychological adaptation patterns in the new environment. The findings reveal the complex and significant role of social media in these children's lives, serving not only as a connection to their hometowns but also as a platform for personal expression and emotional sharing. This research provides valuable insights into how migrant children construct and maintain family identity amidst change, highlighting potential directions for future research including expanding sample sizes, exploring the social networks and cultural adaptation of migrant children, and the long-term impact of social media on child development.

## Introduction

Internal migration in China has become an indispensable factor shaping the fast-paced domestic economic development since 1980 (Zhang and Song, 2003; Lu and Zhou, 2013). Over the past decade, the migrant population in China experienced dramatic growth, increasing from 221 million in 2010 to 376 million in 2020. Among this vast number, migrant children have become an increasingly prominent and vulnerable social group, with 71.09 million recorded in 2020 (Peng, 2023). Unlike most other developing countries, China's institutional arrangements limit the internal migrant population from attaining urban citizenship, making internal migration more akin to international migration (Lu and Zhou, 2013). This significant difference fosters substantial changes, reshaping the migrant population's social identity and profoundly impacting their psychological development and social adaptation. These changes often lead to mental health issues within both individuals and families. Migrant children usually move from rural areas to cities with their families, transitioning from their original family environments to new urban settings. Throughout this process, they face unique challenges due to their vulnerability. Legal and socioeconomic disadvantages, limited access to healthcare, cultural and language barriers, and potential separation from parents and caregivers all contribute to the complexity of the migration process. Understanding the impact of migration on children's mental health is essential and warrants further investigation (Chan et al., 2009).

When I was four, I migrated from my hometown, Guangzhou, to Beijing. This personal experience allows me to understand the potential challenges and life experiences of migrating to a new city as a child. This study will focus on how migrant children construct and understand the concept of "home" in new environments and how this identity affects their personal development and social perception. Migrant children often face

continuous changes in their family environment, which affect their daily lives and reshape their sense of family identity.

The subjects of this study are migrant children in major cities like Beijing. Originating from various parts of China, such as Loudi in Hunan and Qitaihe in Heilongjiang, their diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds provide rich material for understanding how they adapt to different cultural and social contexts. Our research shows that these children's use of social media reflects their adaptation patterns and psychological states in new environments. Through surveys and analysis of the social media behavior of 29 migrant children, we aim to fully understand their living conditions in Beijing and explore their psychological adaptation and social behavior patterns. Notably, social media plays a significant role in these children's lives, serving as a tool for communication with the outside world and as an important platform for maintaining contact with their hometowns and expressing personal emotions.

## Literature Review

### Family Identity and Child Development

Family ties have long been identified as fundamental social institutions, playing a crucial role in children's development. Social norms expect families to bear and socialize children, preparing them with the skills, values, and attitudes necessary for societal integration (Stroup, 1977). Beyond fostering social skills, families are pivotal in ensuring children's psychological safety. Recent studies underscore the significance of family identity in shaping children's psychological well-being, especially for migrant children who navigate rapidly changing social and cultural environments.

The interaction style and childcare approaches within a family significantly influence children's competencies. In her research, Diana Baumrind investigated the effects of different child-rearing patterns and found that parental behaviors involving consistent pressure on children to test their limits intellectually and socially, paired with support, praise, and encouragement, contribute to the development of high levels of instrumental competence (Baumrind, 1967).

For migrant children, the challenge extends beyond changes in the physical environment to include transformations in family structure and function. Studies indicate that migrant children might face difficulties in establishing lasting family identity and social relationships. Frequent migration and environmental changes can negatively impact their psychological health and social adaptation.

The effect of a mobile lifestyle on children's social skills and academic performance is also a focus of psychological and educational research. A study on the relationship between family relocation and children's development in the US found a positive correlation between the number of family relocations and the rate of child dysfunction. Children in frequently relocating families show higher rates of repeating grades compared to those in relatively stable families and are more likely to demonstrate behavioral problems (Wood et al., 1993). However, the impact of frequent relocations on children in China may differ, necessitating further investigation into the specific cultural and social contexts.

### The Multi-Dimensionality of "Home"

"Home" is often considered as the place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household. However, recent research has revealed that "home" is a multidimensional concept that must be understood from more than a singular perspective. The geographical location and environmental context are piv-

otal in shaping the concept of home. Leyshon (2008) articulates how environmental familiarity and geographical settings influence migrant children's feelings of security and belonging, which are essential for conceptualizing home.

In addition to the geographical aspect, home is also a complex concept that encompasses location, environment, emotions, actions, and engagement with the world (Ichwan and Ekosiwi, 2023). Moore (2000) highlights how personal connections and memories intertwine with physical spaces to deepen the emotional dimensions of what individuals consider home. Attention has also been paid to how emotional well-being and social relationships contribute to the feeling of home, especially for children who experience migration. Research by Boschmann and Cubbon (2014) discusses how migrant children's spatial and social experiences in new environments significantly affect their sense of belonging and identity. Their findings underscore that home for these children includes not just a physical place but also social interactions and emotional connections.

This broader interpretation is crucial when analyzing the experiences of migrant children, for whom home is not only a physical locale but also a nexus of emotional, cultural, and familial identities. As they frequently relocate into new "houses," for them, "home" includes not only their original family background but also their current residence, emotional belonging, and cultural identity. Studies specifically focusing on migrant children often explore how their identities evolve in response to new cultural contexts. Ní Laoire et al. (2011) examine the narratives of migrant children in Ireland, showing how their experiences of home are shaped by their ongoing negotiations of belonging and identity in a new country. These narratives reveal that cultural integration plays a crucial role in how migrant children perceive and construct their new homes.

The above-mentioned studies emphasize that family identity is closely related to geographical location, interactions among family members, and connections to culture and community. Especially in the collectivist cultural context of China, the boundary between family and social connections is blurred, highlighting the central role of family identity in individual development.

## Public Perception and Support for Migrant Children

Despite the growing number of migrant children, public understanding of this group often lags behind. Studies highlight the common misconception that migrant children lack stable family environments and parental care. There is very little literature that focuses on the migrant children population compared to other vulnerable groups. This cognitive bias may lead to inadequacies in educational and social services in meeting the special needs of these children. Social media is a vital tool supporting migrant children when adapting to new environments. Previous research has found that the use of social media can benefit children by enhancing their communication and social interaction skills.

Research shows that adaptive education policies and effective family support are crucial for enhancing migrant children's adaptability and overall development. For instance, Chen and Feng (2013) detail how the majority of migrant children in China are unable to access local public schools due to policy restrictions, forcing them to enroll in private schools specifically established for migrants. These schools often lack the resources of their public counterparts, leading to poorer academic outcomes (Chen and Feng, 2013).

Additionally, a study by Lu and Zhou (2013) demonstrates that effective family interaction and support systems play a critical role in mitigating the uncertainties and pressures associated with a mobile lifestyle, positively impacting children's emotional stability and social adaptability. The majority of migrant children in China are unable to access local public schools and are forced to enroll in private schools established for migrant children, leading to significantly worse academic performance compared to their counterparts (Chen and Feng). Effective family interaction and support systems have been proven to mitigate the uncertainties and pressures of the mobile lifestyle, positively impacting children's emotional stability and social adaptability.

## Data and Methodology

To fully understand the family identity, social media habits, and psychological and social adaptation of migrant children in Beijing. his study adopts a mixed-method research design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The study subjects were 29 migrant children living in Beijing who entered private migrant schools, primarily around the age of 11. The gender ratio is close but slightly more female, reflecting the common situation of this specific age group of migrant children. These children come from diverse geographical backgrounds, such as Loudi in Hunan and Qitaihe in Heilongjiang, offering a rich perspective for understanding how they adapt to different cultural and social environments.

Research data were collected through online questionnaires. The questionnaires covered aspects such as hometown, duration of schooling in Beijing, and social media use. The questionnaire design aimed to comprehensively collect information on children's daily lives, school experiences, and social activities to fully understand their life experiences in the urban environment. Additionally, the study used semi-structured interviews and social media behavior analysis to deeply explore children's emotional attitudes and social habits.

Participating children were generally active social media users, using platforms like Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), Douyin (TikTok), and Kuaishou. Their levels of engagement varied, showing personalized social media usage patterns. Some children were very active on social media, eagerly posting personal works and sharing experiences, while others tended to browse more passively. By analyzing these behavior patterns, the study revealed the different ways migrant children adapt to new environments and their interactions with family and social relationships.

## Results

### The Role of Social Media

The data collected in this study highlight the complex and critical role of social media in the lives of migrant children. Out of 37 survey respondents, 24 are users of social media platforms like Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and Kuaishou, indicating the high prevalence of social media among this group. While the majority of respondents use social media for entertainment, a significant portion also use it for educational purposes, socializing, and maintaining contact with their hometowns. This usage suggests that social media provides not only skill enhancement but also emotional sustenance for children settling in new cities. Nearly half of the respondents use social media to maintain contact with their hometowns by browsing information about them. This implies that, for migrant children, social media serves as an essential tool for connecting with their roots and managing the emotional challenges of settling in new environments. Through social media, they can bridge physical distances and sustain connections with their hometowns. Moreover, the survey results show that many respondents do more than just browse content on these platforms. They actively engage by leaving comments, responding to others, and posting their own content. This interaction makes social media a vital tool for not only entertainment and socialization but also for personal expression and emotional sharing. Many children post personal works on these platforms, reflecting their use of social media for creative expression and self-presentation.

### Family Care

The study found that despite constant changes in their living environment, migrant children still receive care and love from their families. Survey results indicate that 25 respondents believe the parental accompaniment they receive is sufficient, with 11 considering it very sufficient, and only one respondent finding it insufficient. None of the participants described their relationship with their parents as distant. Parents' involvement in their

children's daily activities and routines, such as studying, traveling, and participating in everyday events, helps deepen the emotional bonds within the family. This sufficient parental involvement is crucial for enhancing migrant children's mental health and positively impacts their ability to adapt to new environments. These findings challenge the common societal assumption that migrant children lack family care. This misconception likely arises from the confusion between the concepts of "migrant children" and "left-behind children." "Left-behind children" are those who remain in rural areas while their parents migrate to other cities, usually for job opportunities. These children indeed face challenges due to the lack of interaction with their parents. However, the situation is different for migrant children who move with their parents. The next section will discuss this misconception further, using data from social media and word cloud analysis to illustrate the differences between migrant and left-behind children.

Analysis of Social Media Data and Word Clouds

The word cloud visualizes the comments gathered from popular Douyin videos about migrant children. It is evident that words like "left behind" and "alone" are prominent, indicating the public's assumption that migrant children lack parental care. However, the survey results challenge this perception, as the majority of participants reported receiving sufficient support from their parents.



**Figure 1.** Word cloud formulated from the comments under videos about left-behind children

**Figure 2.** Word cloud formulated from the comments under videos about migrant children

Discussions and word cloud analysis on social media revealed significant public misconceptions about the difference between migrant and left-behind children. Although the videos focus on migrant children, the most dominant word in the comments is "left behind." Many comments discuss experiences as left-behind children, feelings of guilt about leaving their own children behind, and challenges faced by left-behind children. Very few comments are relevant to migrant children, highlighting the societal misconception and low awareness of this vulnerable population.

These findings show that although migrant children move with their parents, they still face challenges related to continuity disruption and self-identity in new environments. It is difficult for them to fully transition their identity and achieve self-realization from their homelands to host cities. Despite the time span that migrant populations have been in host cities, they are often marginalized and referred to as "outsiders" (wailairenkou) (Fan, 2008; Du et al., 2018; Lin et al.). For children, this identity transition is even more challenging.

Maintaining a bond with their homelands contributes to enhancing their psychological status in the host city where they are often marginalized. Social media plays an important role in helping children maintain virtual connections with their hometowns, which is crucial for their emotional health. The survey results show that while all participants have access to mobile devices, the majority use social media to browse content relevant to their hometowns. This virtual connection helps them feel less isolated and more connected to their roots.

These findings demonstrate the profound impact of social media on the lives of migrant children. It serves as a bridge to maintain contact with their hometowns and as a tool for personal expression and social adaptation. Social media not only provides a platform for entertainment and socialization but also becomes a space where migrant children can express their emotions, share their experiences, and receive support from their peers. Many children post personal works on these platforms, reflecting their use of social media for creative expression and self-presentation.

At the same time, family support plays a key role in helping these children adapt to new environments and maintain psychological health. Parents' involvement in their children's daily activities, such as studying, traveling, and participating in everyday events, helps deepen the emotional bonds within the family. This involvement is crucial for enhancing migrant children's mental health and positively impacts their ability to adapt to new environments.

Understanding these dynamics is significant for comprehending the life experiences of migrant children and providing effective support. These insights can guide the development of strategies and policies aimed at supporting migrant children, ensuring they receive the care, attention, and resources they need to thrive in their new environments.

## Discussion

This study highlights the pivotal role of social media and family care in the adaptation of migrant children. First of all, the study shows the crucial role of social media in the process of migrant children interacting with their hometowns in base cities. For migrant children, social media exceeds its conventional function of providing entertainment and diversifying socialization. It also serves as a bridge connecting them with their distant hometowns, offering solace for homesickness.

Additionally, social media acts as a substantial channel for shaping and expressing their self-identity. While maintaining emotional connections with their hometowns through social media in a new environment, these children also strengthen their identification with their multifaceted identities and backgrounds by sharing daily life, school experiences, and personal creations. Through their posts, they have opportunities to interact with others by commenting and replying, which enhances their interaction with society in an environment where they may feel marginalized. Social media becomes a vital tool in maintaining family and cultural identity, especially as they move away from their birthplaces and adapt to new environments.

The experiences of continuous and frequent migration shape a multidimensional understanding and identity of "home" for migrant children. For these children, "home" is no longer a fixed concept but encompasses multiple dimensions, including the physical environment, family relationships, and cultural identity. As previously discussed, while migrant children continuously move to new host cities, they struggle to adapt to new environments while striving to maintain connections with their original family and culture, which is facilitated by social media.

Considering all three dimensions of "home" for migrant children is requisite when interpreting their psychological statuses to obtain a more comprehensive insight. Neglecting any of these dimensions can hinder a complete understanding of their emotional state. In the process of interacting with their homelands, social media plays an indispensable role, helping children maintain close emotional and cultural ties despite physical distances.

Although social media is vital for migrant children in maintaining family and cultural connections, it is also necessary to find a balance between real-life and virtual social interactions. Encouraging migrant children to actively participate in real-world social activities while maintaining virtual connections with distant families is essential for building a sense of belonging and social identity in new environments.

Furthermore, the data gathered and surveys reveal the public's misperception and lack of attention towards migrant children as a vulnerable subgroup in the migration process. Compared to left-behind children, migrant children are less understood and accepted by the public, facing multiple challenges and barriers that require collective efforts to address. This suggests that the government and media should pay more attention to caring for migrant children.

## Conclusion

This study, through analyzing the living experiences of migrant children in Beijing, particularly how they use social media to maintain connections with their hometowns and express their personal identities, reveals the complexity of building family identity in an ever-changing environment. The findings show that social media not only provides a way for migrant children to maintain contact with their hometowns but also becomes an

important platform for them to showcase themselves and share creative content. This phenomenon underscores the need to consider how they maintain connections with family, culture, and society when understanding and supporting migrant children. Additionally, the study points out that although family care and parental companionship may change due to migration, many migrant children still receive support and love from their families, contradicting the common societal notion that migrant children lack family care. This finding emphasizes the need to fully consider the diverse family backgrounds and personal experiences of migrant children when offering support.

Although this study provides important insights into the formation of family identity among migrant children, it also has limitations. First, the sample size is limited and may not fully represent the experiences of all migrant children. Secondly, the study is mainly focused on Beijing, a specific urban environment, and may not fully cover the experiences of migrant children in other regions. Future research can expand the sample range to include more areas and different backgrounds of migrant children for a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, future research can explore issues such as social network building, cultural adaptation, and mental health of migrant children in real life. In particular, how migrant children establish stable social relationships and community belonging in new environments deserves further in-depth study. Lastly, considering the importance of social media in modern society, researching the role of social media in the lives of migrant children and its long-term impact on child development will be another important direction for future research. Overall, this study provides valuable insights into how migrant children establish and maintain family identity in changing environments, offering significant guidance for designing more effective educational strategies and social support systems to help this special group.

## Acknowledgments

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