



## BITTER SWEETNESS: Compelling Greenhouse Farming and the *Inter-Mobility* among Middle-Aged Farmers in North China

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The first time I met Xu Guoxiang was in June 2019,<sup>1</sup> when he was showing a delegation of provincial officials around his greenhouse farms. The village party secretary gestured toward Xu and proudly introduced him: “This is the greenhouse owner. He and his wife run two cucumber greenhouses, each earning a net profit of 100,000 yuan [around \$14,286 USD] per year—a remarkable yet common achievement in our village, isn’t it?” Amid the officials’ amazed reactions and applause, Xu nodded without uttering a word.

The following day, I approached Xu with a request to share his experiences in greenhouse farming for my research. With a mix of humility and confusion, he questioned my interest in the stories of “nobodies” like him, suggesting that I instead interview younger, more successful entrepreneurs who had made fortunes trading vegetables in Shanghai, Suzhou, and other cities in the Yangtze River Delta (YRD) region. I countered by pointing out that he was also quite successful, as his profits far exceeded the typical earnings of rural Chinese farmers.<sup>2</sup>

“Do you really believe that nonsense?” Xu retorted with disdain. “While I acknowledge that our county excels in the vegetable industry, which might make greenhouse farming somewhat profitable, the claim of 100,000 yuan per greenhouse is absurd. In reality, even a well-managed farm earns only 40,000 to 50,000 yuan—at best—if the market holds.”

His wife Xiuying chimed in, accusing the village leader of exaggerating: “If greenhouse farming were that profitable, why wouldn’t younger generations be taking it up? Nearly all the greenhouse farmers in our village, and indeed across the county, are around our age, in their fifties.”

“We are bounded by these greenhouses,” Xu sighed, “If we had better options, or if we were younger, we’d much prefer venturing to the southern cities to embark on business endeavors rather than remain here, tied down to farming like our parents’ generation.”

This essay is based on fieldwork with middle-aged “staying” farmers who, like Xu and Xiuying, engage in greenhouse agriculture in Lanling, a county in northern China’s Shandong province known for its vital role in the vegetable supply chain of the YRD region. Central to this study is to explore why greenhouse farming proves particularly compelling for this specific demographic of rural residents. Their frequent references to fellow villagers who have migrated to the YRD region and to those who remain in Lanling suggest that their perspectives on greenhouse farming are deeply entangled with the “social-spatial hierarchies” (X. Liu 1997) of post-socialist China,<sup>3</sup> within which their identities and imaginings of social difference are closely linked with physical mobility, particularly the rural-to-urban labor migration that has become a key marker of success.

Hence, instead of viewing these farmers as isolated figures in a rural setting, this essay situates them within the larger network of connections between the Lanling countryside and the urban centers of the YRD region, where their attitudes toward greenhouse farming are closely linked to their position within a hierarchical structure of physical and social mobility. Drawing on twelve months of ethnographic research conducted among Lanlingnese vegetable producers and traders in Lanling and the YRD region from 2018 to 2022, I argue that the reason why greenhouse farming is at once appealing and disappointing for middle-aged Lanlingnese farmers is that it embodies a form of *inter-mobility* that allows them to distinguish themselves from the old-generation “immobile,” “risk-averse,” and “ignorant” peasants,<sup>4</sup> while still feeling “inferior” to the young-generation entrepreneurs running vegetable businesses in the urban south.

### **MOBILITY, IMMOBILITY, AND *INTER-MOBILITY*: Peasant Subjectivity in Post-Socialist China**

The concept of *inter-mobility* builds from Doreen Massey’s (1994) foundational idea of “differentiated mobility,” which highlighted how different social groups and individuals experience mobility in unequal ways. For Massey, mobility is stratified by power dynamics that determine who can move, under what conditions, and with what consequences. In other words, mobility is not merely

about the physical ability to move but about the varying degrees of agency and control individuals or groups have over their movement. As she notes,

Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it. (Massey 1994, 149)

Drawing on these insights, and in line with the “new mobilities paradigm” (Sheller and Urry 2006) that reconceptualized mobility and immobility as co-constitutive, scholars such as Jørgen Carling (2002) and Kerilyn Schewel (2020) extend the analysis to immobility, emphasizing that some people are more “in charge” of their staying, while others experience immobility as a constraint. This recognition of (im)mobility as differentiated and relational underscores the complexities of how individuals and groups navigate their spatial realities, often within the constraints imposed by broader social, economic, and political structures.

However, while Massey’s framework powerfully maps the hierarchical outcomes of mobility, this article coins the term *inter-mobility* to offer a more specific analytic for a strategy of dwelling within the interstices of this structure. It moves beyond describing unequal access to movement to ask: How do individuals agentively position themselves within a “mobility regime” they cannot escape but can creatively navigate?<sup>5</sup> The prefix “inter-” in inter-mobility proves crucial, signifying a deliberate positioning that is simultaneously threefold: (1) Interstitial: Spatially and socially located between the perceived immobility of the traditional peasantry and the hyper-mobility of urban elites. It is a mode of staying that is not static but dynamically engaged with external markets, technologies, and ideas; (2) Intergenerational: Mediating between the obligation to care for aging parents (pulling them back to the village) and the aspiration for a non-agrarian, upwardly mobile future for one’s children (pushing them outward); (3) Intertwined: Blurring the lines between entrepreneurial ambition and kinship responsibility, where economic risk-taking is reframed as an act of familial care and intergenerational investment.

Thus, inter-mobility refers to a constrained yet agentive strategy that is less about physical relocation and more about leveraging emergent possibilities—technological, social, and entrepreneurial—to recalibrate one’s position within a stratified system. The concept helps me capture how these middle-aged farmers hybridize a rooted return to their rural origins with an expansive engagement in the dynamism of external markets, transforming their condition of relative immobility into a project of hope and care.

Crucially, this form of mobility is defined in relation to other, more dominant forms. It allows farmers to distinguish themselves from the old-generation, “immobile” peasants while remaining subordinate to the young-generation entrepreneurs in southern cities. Inter-mobility is therefore not a rejection of hegemonic mobility ideals but a strategic, partial, and often precarious alignment with them from a position of relative immobility.

This concept should be distinguished from both “involuntary immobility” and “secondary mobility.” Involuntary immobility refers to situations in which individuals aspire to move but are blocked by external barriers (Carling 2002; Debray, Ruysen, and Schewel 2025). Inter-mobility, however, captures the agentive navigation of these constraints. It reveals how seemingly immobilized individuals are not passive, but actively employ alternative strategies to cultivate a sense of movement and progress without physical relocation.

Inter-mobility also differs from “secondary mobility”—a term often used in refugee studies to describe the movement of refugees from their initial country of settlement to another (Glorius and Nienaber 2022).<sup>6</sup> While both concepts involve complex movements after an initial (im)mobility phase, inter-mobility is not primarily about sequential relocations. Instead, it is about creating a sustainable, albeit tense, in-betweenness that strategically bridges rural and urban worlds, past and future, and farm and family.

Mobility, and by extension immobility, is highly politically charged, particularly for those labeled as *nongmin* in China. Now conventionally translated as “peasant,” *nongmin* historically referred to people engaged in agricultural activities, akin to the European term *farmer*. However, since the early twentieth century, the term gradually evolved, shedding its original meaning and acquiring derogatory connotations associated with peasants, in contrast to urban citizens (Cohen 1993; L. H. Liu 1995; Hayford 1998; Schneider 2015). The *hukou* (household registration) system established in the People’s Republic of China further institutionalized this view by immobilizing *nongmin* within a rigid binary classification system, profoundly influencing the identities and life chances of those labeled as such, including their social rank, wage, welfare, food rations, and housing (Kipnis 1995; Solinger 1999; Wu 2010). This system reinforced a “spatial hierarchy” of unequal and bounded rural and urban entities, in which being classified as *nongmin* meant being relegated to agricultural work and rural immobility (Chu 2010).

Since the 1978 market reforms, the loosening of the *hukou* system has allowed rural residents to imagine and pursue alternative forms of “peasant” life that diverge from state-imposed trajectories. As a result, the category of *nongmin* has become more fluid, evolving into a marker of differentiated citizenship (Q.

F. Zhang 2015). Following this shift, I use the seemingly anachronistic term *peasant* to refer to one set of Lanlingnese agricultural subjects, most of whom still hold rural *hukou*. This should be understood as a different sense from the traditional usage, which conjures images of immobile, risk-averse, and ignorant subjects. As scholars have noted, the increasing capitalization of agriculture in post-socialist China has blurred the lines between subsistence peasants and entrepreneurial farmers (Q. F. Zhang and Donaldson 2010; Ye 2015; Yan and Chen 2015). Rather than positioning peasants and farmers as opposites, I follow perspectives that view these categories as existing on a continuum (Ploeg 2009; Edelman 2013). Within this framework, I use the term *farmers* to refer to the middle-aged greenhouse agriculturalists at the heart of this study, exemplified by Xu Guoxiang and his wife Xiuying. This term distinguishes them from the older generations engaged in staple crop farming, whom I describe as “peasants,” thereby highlighting their differing degrees of mobility and entrepreneurial capability. Moreover, while *nongmin* has conventionally referred to men, my analysis includes women as active subjects of mobility. Challenging the trope of the domestically confined rural woman, I recognize women’s own aspirations for mobility (Ngai 1999; Rofel 1999) and foreground the vital role they play in the migration decisions of rural farming households.

In post-socialist China, the ability to leave rural areas has become a key marker of success and modernity (Nyíri 2006; Xiang 2007). This has given rise to a new peasant subjectivity “hinged to mobility as the principle and modus operandi for value production” (Chu 2010, 10). Existing studies of Chinese peasant mobility have predominantly focused on rural-to-urban or home-to-overseas migrants (Ma and Xiang 1998; L. Zhang 2001), often overlooking those who remain in rural areas. These rural stayers are frequently perceived as stagnant “others” and excluded from studies of mobile subjects. This is a mistake. As I show here, these seemingly stagnant others do not necessarily lack desire for mobility, nor are they simply “trapped” by immobility. Instead, they engage in alternative forms of mobility—ones not expressed through geographic movement but through economic, social, and technological strategies that reshape their roles as modern subjects.

This alternative approach to mobility is particularly evident in the ways middle-aged Lanlingnese farmers navigate migration and return. Unlike the dominant pattern of rural-to-urban migration in China, which has been shaped by the *hukou* system and typically sees migrants leaving in their youth and returning as they age (Démurger and Xu 2011; Qian, Wang, and Zheng 2016), Lanlingnese farmers follow a different trajectory. They tend to return home while still relatively young, long before they reach an uncompetitive age for

urban employment. Their decision to return seems driven less by age or job competitiveness and more by kinship obligations, including childcare and eldercare responsibilities. Their return thus does not signify a retreat into rural immobility but, as [Frances Pine \(2014\)](#) suggests, strategic reconfigurations of household economies, balancing familial duties with broader aspirations for economic stability and social mobility.

Their trajectory also diverges from other emerging forms of not-quite realized aspirational mobility in contemporary China. For instance, a growing number of Chinese youth in first-tier cities relocate to second-tier cities to “lie flat” (*tangping*), rejecting high-intensity work cultures for a minimalist lifestyle ([Su 2023](#)). In contrast, these middle-aged farmers recalibrate dominant mobility ideals rather than rejecting them. They actively align with market-driven opportunities, using greenhouse technologies to transform their rural environment into a space of economic possibility, even as they recognize its limitations. Additionally, unlike middle-class urban Chinese families who voluntarily leave cities for better educational and familial conditions ([Friedman 2023](#)), Lanlingnese farmers are not driven by growing pessimism about urban life, nor do they frame their return as a fully autonomous decision. Instead, their mobility aspirations arise from the tension between entrepreneurial ambitions and kinship obligations, leading them to pursue a unique form of strategic movement that balances rural roots with broader market forces.

In *Cosmologies of Credit*, [Julie Chu \(2010\)](#) describes how Fuzhounese peasants, in their efforts to regain control over their (im)mobility, engaged in transnational exchanges, circulating money, gossip, ritual blessings, and immigration papers between their village and its overseas outposts. For them, mobility was not solely defined by physical relocation, but could be imagined and enacted through economic and social networks. Similarly, middle-aged farmers in Lanling participate in greenhouse farming as a way to assert agency over their mobility constraints. However, unlike the Fuzhounese peasants, who viewed staying as a complete form of displacement, Lanlingnese farmers proactively invest entrepreneurial capital into their hometowns, reshaping their biographical fate while contributing to local development.

I thus argue that the mobility cultivated by Lanlingnese farmers—who navigate the tension between entrepreneurial ambitions and kinship obligations within the context of involuntary immobility—can be understood as *inter-mobility*. This form of mobility emerges in a historical milieu in which market opportunities coexist with institutional constraints. While their engagement in high-risk, high-reward greenhouse agriculture is driven by economic necessity—particularly familial obligations and caregiving pressures—they strategically organize their ventures in ways that align with hegemonic ideals of mobility and progress within contemporary China’s differentiated mobility system.

The following section will delve into the specifics of greenhouse farming in Lanling and explain why and how it has become a strategy for middle-aged Lanlingese farmers to position themselves as modern entrepreneurial subjects within the constraints of limited mobility in both physical and social senses.

### GREENHOUSE FARMS AND FARMING IN LANLING COUNTY

The rise of commercial greenhouse farming in North China can be traced back to the 1978 agrarian reforms, which dismantled the collective farming system and introduced the Household Responsibility System (HRS). These reforms granted individual households the autonomy over production decisions, paving the way for market-oriented agriculture. To meet the growing demand for year-round fresh produce in rapidly urbanizing areas, peasants in colder northern regions began experimenting with protected agriculture in the late 1970s. By the early 1980s, innovators in Lanling and other parts of Shandong developed a distinctive, earth-sheltered, solar-heated greenhouse model, known internationally as the “Chinese greenhouse,” which enabled year-round cultivation without additional heating (Chiras 2020). This technological breakthrough, coupled with Lanling’s proximity to the economically vibrant YRD region and advancements in infrastructure such as highways and refrigerated transport, allowed Lanling to emerge as a key vegetable supplier by the 1990s.

Over the past three decades, state-led agro-industrialization has transformed China’s agricultural landscape, encouraging specialization and the expansion of agribusiness enterprises (Yan and Chen 2015; Ye 2015). However, as René Trappel (2016) suggests, this “capitalist transformation” is uneven and varies locally. In Lanling, despite growing corporate farming and land concentration, 90 percent of vegetable farms remain small-scale, managed by individual households and occupying less than 20 *mu*.<sup>7</sup>

My ethnographic observation is based on a greenhouse co-op in Huanglu village, located in southwest Lanling County. As of 2021, Huanglu reported a population of 1,520 across 380 registered households, with 121.3 hectares dedicated to arable farming. Reflecting a common trend across Lanling, Huanglu exemplifies the “hollowed-out village” phenomenon (Ye 2018), where about a third of its populace—largely the young and able-bodied—pursue vegetable-related ventures in the YRD region. The remaining population consists of mainly women, children, and the elderly. The village co-op was established in 2011, with twenty Chinese greenhouses run by twenty households. By 2021, when I conducted fieldwork, it had expanded to seventy-two Chinese greenhouses operated by forty-two households (see Table 1).

Items	Median	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
Household size	4.1	4.3	2	8
Age of permanent farmworkers in household	50	48.7	34	62
Number of permanent farmworkers in household	2	2.3	2	4
Number of Chinese greenhouses	1.5	1.6	1	4
Current planting acreage	6	5.9	3.2	22.4

Table 1. Characteristics of 42 Chinese greenhouse farm households in Huanglu, 2021–2022. Source: Yue Liao.

Compared to conventional staple crop farming, greenhouse farming can prove exceptionally rewarding, offering profits more than ten times higher. However, its demands for significant capital and labor also make it a highly risky venture. Constructing a modern Gen-3 Chinese greenhouse—typically a hundred meters long, fifteen meters wide, and four meters high—costs between 80,000 and 100,000 yuan (approximately \$11,500 to \$14,000 USD), with annual off-farm input costs averaging 20,000 to 25,000 yuan (approximately \$3,000 to \$3,500 USD). The initial investment required to start a Chinese greenhouse operation thus exceeds 100,000 yuan, a formidable sum for many Lanlingnese farmers. Moreover, compared to open-field agriculture, greenhouse operations demand more than four times the labor (P. C. C. Huang 2011, 483), perpetuating the traditional Chinese agricultural hallmark of “intensive and meticulous farming” (*jingeng xizuo*).

The “double intensive” nature of greenhouse farming poses significant challenges for rural peasants lacking either capital or labor. Most greenhouse growers in Lanling and other parts of Shandong are middle-aged, between forty and sixty, as the younger generation often seeks opportunities elsewhere and the older generation lacks the capital and physical capacity for the demanding work. To be profitable, greenhouse farming requires the full dedication and involvement of both spouses. This explains why, despite the presence of many young female “stayers” in the village, only forty-two households are engaged in this labor-intensive agribusiness.

These middle-aged farmers, primarily born in the 1960s and 1970s, represent a distinctive demographic in rural China. Having experienced life in rural communes and early exposure to agriculture, they maintain a relatively strong affinity for farming, reflected in their attitudes toward local soil. Fei Xiaotong (1992) observed that traditional Chinese peasants practice an agricultural life deeply “rooted in the soil.” In the post-socialist era, the soil still plays a

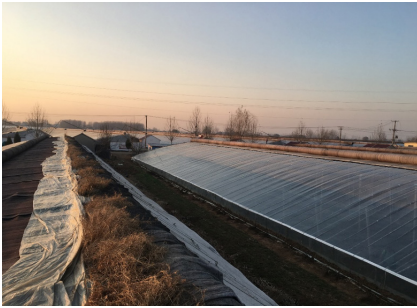


Figure 1. A typical Gen-3 Chinese greenhouse in Lanling County. Photo by Yue Liao.

Figure 2. A view from inside a Chinese greenhouse, showing rows of cucumber plants under cultivation. Photo by Yue Liao.

significant role in constituting one's sense of self and belonging among the aging peasants (X. Liu 2000, 11). During fieldwork, greenhouse farmers often boasted about the fertility and historical significance of the local soil: "Huanglu means 'the road traveled by an emperor.' Several hundred years ago, Emperor Qianlong [1711–1799] passed through here on his way south because our soil produces the best crops." Moreover, while acknowledging the physical demands of farming and the urban disdain for agricultural labor, they emphasize its autonomy compared to factory work. As one farmer noted, "Factory jobs may pay more, but there are too many rules. Here, you're your own boss and have more freedom [*ziyou*]." Despite their aspirations for urban life, they acknowledge that it may not fully suit them.

Compared to previous generations, these middle-aged stayers are better educated and more adventurous. While many born before the 1960s are illiterate, those born later have mostly attended middle school. A significant number of middle-aged farmers, including women, also have long-term experiences of "leaving home" (*chumen*) in search of work when they were younger. *Chumen*, meaning departure for work or business in a different world, describes a significant event that marked the birth of modern Chinese subjects defined by spirits of entrepreneurialism (L. Zhang 2001, 33). Such experiences have not only helped them accumulate their "first pot of gold" but have also shaped their self-perception as open-minded and resourceful. During fieldwork, I observed several embodied differences between middle-aged farmers and their predecessors. For example, while both groups typically speak the Shandong dialect, the middle-aged generation also speaks Mandarin. Additionally, only the middle-aged generation uses smartphones, whereas the elderly still rely on feature phones. These remarkable differences often lead local officials to dismiss the elderly for their perceived stubbornness, labeling them as having a "dead mind" (*si naojin*).

For these middle-aged farmers, greenhouse farming serves as a middle ground between rural subsistence and urban entrepreneurship. As they often say, “Those who grow grains were not equal to those who grow [greenhouse] vegetables, and those who grow [greenhouse] vegetables were not equal to those who sell vegetables.” This hierarchy reflects their position within the broader mobility landscape. While they have moved beyond subsistence farming, they remain economically and socially subordinate to those engaged in the urban vegetable trade.

Despite their aspirations for upward mobility, they often joke that they “have no other abilities [*mei benshi*] except farming,” contrasting themselves with young, mobile entrepreneurs who have “made it” in the South. Yet they do not see themselves as part of the aging, stagnant population. Instead, they view themselves as entrepreneurial and adaptable, fully engaged in mobility as a principle, even if their movement remains constrained. Their engagement in greenhouse farming is thus a strategic choice—or, as they describe it, “an inevitable option”—one that allows them to maintain their connection to their rural homes, fulfill kinship obligations, and gain a sense of control over their condition of involuntary immobility.

#### **TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE: “An Inevitable Option”**

A few days after I arrived at Huanglu, I heard about Lao Zhang, known within the village co-op as the most well-traveled member. His journey had begun decades earlier when, after completing junior high school, he had aspired to join the army. However, after failing to enlist, his parents urged him to remain in the village and farm. Dissatisfied with the prospect of a stagnant peasant life, Lao Zhang left for the YRD region in search of work. In 1983, at the age of eighteen, he and several fellow villagers found jobs as porters for vegetable wholesalers in Shanghai’s agricultural markets. Despite Shanghai’s booming economy, life in the marketplace was harsh. Frequent gang fights made the environment both dangerous and exhausting. In 1988, after narrowly avoiding serious injury in one such incident, he decided it was safer to return home.

Back in his village, Lao Zhang got married and had two children, juggling farmwork with small business ventures to support his family. In the early 1990s, he began experimenting with pig farming and small-scale greenhouse vegetable production in plastic tunnels. Although these strategies allowed his family to scrape by on less than three *mu* of farmland, Lao Zhang still felt dissatisfied with the prospect of being an immobile peasant in the countryside for the rest of his life, following in his parents’ footsteps.

His restlessness was reinforced by his wife Jinlan, who frequently reminded him, “A man must always be self-motivated [*nanren yaoyou shangjinxin*].” This phrase, commonly used by Chinese wives to encourage their husbands, reflects the cultural expectation that men must actively pursue upward mobility and economic advancement for their families. To her, remaining in the village as a traditional peasant symbolized a lack of ambition. In 1998, driven by the desire to secure a better future for their family, the couple sold most of their assets and relocated to Urumqi with their children, joining a group of fellow villagers. Drawing on his experience in Shanghai, Lao Zhang started selling vegetables in street markets, sourcing produce from local farmers and wholesalers. Years of diligent work eventually allowed him to contemplate renting land for greenhouse cultivation.

For seventeen years, Lao Zhang’s family successfully managed two Chinese greenhouses and four plastic tunnels in Xinjiang, earning significant annual profits. However, when asked about his proudest accomplishment, he didn’t highlight his farming success but, rather, his travels:

Many people think I saved a lot of money, but that’s not the case. I did earn quite a bit, but much of it went into traveling. After arriving in Xinjiang, I realized just how vast China was. Every year in slack seasons, I’d take my wife to travel around the country. We’ve traveled a lot of provinces of China, including Tibet, Mongolia, and Yunnan, and even two countries in Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan. As an undereducated peasant, I can proudly say that we have really “seen the elephant” [*jian shimian*].

This aspiration to travel and “see the elephant” set Mr. and Mrs. Lao Zhang apart from their parents’ generation, who seldom left their home county and rarely spent money on such experiences. For them, mobility—especially outward migration—was highly desired, sought after, and valued. Yet their long-term migration strategy was also shaped by pragmatic household calculations. Lao Zhang and Jinlan initially planned to settle permanently in Xinjiang. The region’s lower *gaokao* (college entrance exam) threshold made university admission more accessible, prompting them to secure local *hukou* status for their children. However, in 2015, concerns over Lao Zhang’s elderly parents’ declining health forced them to return to Lanling. Their return was not a simple retreat into rural life but rather a strategic recalibration, balancing the needs of different generations in that by the time they moved back, their children had secured university placements, fulfilling a key family aspiration.

Aside from caring for elderly parents, ensuring their children's education was an even more common reason for returning. In China, access to public schools and eligibility for *gaokao* are directly tied to one's *hukou* status. Families without urban *hukou* often face institutional pressures to return to their hometowns, ensuring their children can attend local schools. In many cases, household strategies for managing migration and care follow a gendered pattern: the mother returns home to care for children and elderly parents, while the father continues working outside. However, the anxiety about their children's future can be so intense that it leads to a shared responsibility between both parents, with caregiving often taking precedence over financial gain (Fong 2004; Kipnis 2011; Friedman 2023).

This was often the case for greenhouse farmers in Lanling. Mr. and Mrs. Wang spent more than a decade engaged in vegetable trading in Shanghai and greenhouse farming in Wuhan. In 2010, as their two children approached high school age, they returned to Huanglu, despite both being under forty and running a profitable farm. Reflecting on this decision, Wang joked: "If I hadn't come back and continued to work outside, I might have become a millionaire. But there was no other way. It's all for the children!" When asked why he didn't continue his business outside while leaving childcare to his wife, Wang explained that his wife insisted they return together, as she believed that the single parenting model, where one parent stays with the children while the other works elsewhere, was not ideal for children's development. "You see a lot of kids riding motorcycles and showing no interest in studying around here," Ms. Wang remarked; "I don't want our kids to turn into those aimless youth [*xiao hunhun*]."

For both the Wangs and the Lao Zhangs, the decision to return was driven by their dual role as "mainstays" (*dingliangzhu*) within their families, bearing the responsibilities of supporting their children's education and caring for aging parents. In the Chinese moral framework, middle-aged individuals, particularly men, are expected to uphold these obligations, balancing the demands of multiple generations. Their mobility, much like the strategies of the migrants in Polish highlands (Pine 2014), did not merely concern movement in economic terms but was deeply embedded in kinship obligations. Migration, in this sense, was always a means to an end—a future-oriented endeavor structured by hope and family-care strategies rather than a straightforward trajectory of upward mobility.

Yet returning home did not mean returning to traditional modes of farming. As Wang calculated: "Our household has less than three *mu* of land. By planting wheat and corn in rotation in a year, we can earn at most 3,000 yuan in the most ideal case, which could not even afford the tuition fees of my children. Sure, planting wheat and corn is easy, as production is now highly mechanized.

But the return is so low that only older peasants over sixty would do it. Someone like me, at forty, could never make a living this way.” Faced with this reality, greenhouse farming emerged as a necessary strategy—a high-risk but high-reward option that brings home earnings far greater than any local income. With its focus on off-season vegetable production for urban consumers, greenhouse farming integrated these families into trans-local and national economic networks, allowing them to remain in the village while maintaining connections to urban markets. The high-profit potential of greenhouse farming also enabled them to aspire to social mobility, not just for themselves but for their children. Unlike their parents, who saw farming as an inherited occupation, they viewed greenhouse cultivation as a means to secure a different future for their children.

This was evident in their reluctance to involve their children in farmwork, even during peak seasons. Instead, they encouraged their children to focus on education, seeing academic achievement as the key to escaping rural life. This mind-set reflects what [Andrew Kipnis \(2011\)](#) conceptualizes as “educational desire,” a deep-seated belief in the transformative power of education as a means to escape rural stagnation and to secure a better future. For these farmers, education was not just a route to social mobility but the key to breaking the generational cycle of rural hardship. By prioritizing their children’s schooling over immediate economic contributions to the farm, they were not only rejecting traditional peasant values but also actively reshaping rural identities and aspirations. Thus greenhouse farming was more than an economic necessity; it was a deliberate, future-oriented strategy—a way to invest in intergenerational mobility. By staying physically rooted in the countryside while embedding themselves in broader economic networks, these farmers challenged traditional notions of rural stagnation. In this vein, their return to rural life was not a passive fallback but an active recalibration of household strategies, reflecting the complex interplay between care, mobility, and hope for the future.

Indeed, not all greenhouse farmers had extensive migration experience before returning home. Xu Guoxiang and his wife Xiuying, among the first twenty households to join the village co-op, had taken a different path. Unlike Lao Zhang’s family, they had little prior experience with migration. While Xiuying attributed this to her husband’s lack of *shangjinxin*, Xu offered a different explanation: he had been eager to seek employment outside the village in his youth but “had no one to take him along” [*meiren dai*]. The concept of *dai*, or being taken along and looked after by someone with migration experience (normally family or friends), was a crucial mechanism for Chinese peasants’ migration practices ([L. Zhang 2001](#), 34). Without such social capital, migration became highly risky

and uncertain, leading villagers like Xu to stay behind rather than venture into the unknown alone.

However, by 2011, with Xiuying's support, Xu took a different kind of risk: joining in the village co-op and investing more than 150,000 yuan to build two Chinese greenhouses. This formidable sum was pooled from years of modest personal savings, loans from his brothers and cousins, and a small credit line from the village cooperative. This entanglement of kin-based debt and mutual aid meant the venture was never his alone; its success or failure was tied to a web of familial obligations from its inception. Neither he nor his wife had prior experience in greenhouse farming, but they saw it as an opportunity for economic mobility within the village. When asked why he took the gamble, Xu explained:

Many villagers my age made a great fortune in the South by running a vegetable business. Some of them have even settled down in Shanghai. Once, many of them were inferior to me either in studying or farming. But they had seized opportunities. So, when I heard the co-op was promoting greenhouse farming, I thought this might be my last chance to catch up. I couldn't afford to miss it.

The anxiety of being left behind constitutes a powerful affective force that pushes middle-aged stayers to take risks and engage in greenhouse farming. For them, catching up with rural entrepreneurs in southern cities is not just about financial success but also about achieving mobility in a society where movement is a marker of modernity. Over the past decade, the rapid expansion of greenhouse agriculture in China has created a demand for specialists in the field. As a key hub for greenhouse farming, Lanling has attracted people from across the country seeking technical expertise. During the off-season months of July and August, experienced greenhouse farmers are highly sought after, making it easier for them to secure temporary work outside their hometowns.

This rising demand for expertise has also created unexpected mobility opportunities for stayers like Xu. Though he once regretted being “uncultured” (*mei wenhua*) and having never left home to see the world, his expertise in greenhouse farming has reshaped his trajectory. In recent years, he has received multiple invitations from distant regions to assist in greenhouse construction and operations. Last year, he even got an invitation from Xinjiang. Though he could not go because his father got paralyzed by a stroke, Xu remains confident that he will have more opportunities to travel and work in the future:

A skilled person is always popular. As long as I have my own expertise, even when I get too old to farm these greenhouses, I think I can still count on it to make a living and conveniently see more of the world.

For Xu, acquiring technological expertise in greenhouse farming has become a means of securing a future beyond the limits of conventional rural life. Unlike earlier generations of peasants whose livelihoods were tied exclusively to the land, Xu sees his skills as portable, allowing him to participate in wider agricultural networks without the need for permanent migration. His greenhouse skills have already provided opportunities to work beyond his home village, whether through short-term contracts in distant regions or through knowledge-sharing with farmers from other provinces. In this way, his mobility is no longer constrained by physical relocation alone but is shaped by his ability to leverage technical skills in a market-driven economy.

This shift reflects a broader transformation in how mobility is imagined and enacted among Lanling's greenhouse farmers. Rather than being defined solely by outward migration, their movement takes on new forms—through economic engagement, knowledge circulation, and technical specialization. In this sense, greenhouse farming is not just a livelihood but a technology of mobility—one that enables farmers to transcend the traditional limitations of rural life by embedding themselves in trans-local and even national agricultural networks. Through their expertise, they carve out new spaces of agency, positioning themselves as entrepreneurial subjects rather than passive rural stayers. This, in essence, is the practice of inter-mobility: a strategic creation of movement and value not through departure, but by deepening one's roots in transformative ways.

### THE GREENHOUSE AS A TECHNOLOGY OF INTER-MOBILE AGRICULTURE: “More Like Gambling”

While most co-op members are “self-taught experts” (*tu zhuanjia*),<sup>8</sup> with decades of experience in protected agriculture, running greenhouse farms remains a constant challenge. Due to the low level of mechanization in China's vegetable production, the yields of family-run greenhouse farms are highly dependent on each household's *guanli shuiping* (literally, level of management), a term frequently used by local farmers to describe a combination of factors that influence farming performance, including agricultural inputs, intrafamilial collaboration, and farming experience.

To illustrate this, consider the cultivation of cucumbers, one of the most widely grown and economically valuable greenhouse crops. The process begins

in late September to early October with seedling preparation. Because cucumbers are sensitive to cold, each seedling must be grafted onto pumpkin rootstock, a labor-intensive task that once relied on mutual aid among neighboring households. However, as farmers age, most now purchase grafted seedlings from commercial suppliers. While this shift reduces physical strain, it also increases costs and introduces new risks, as seedling quality varies across suppliers, and delivery delays are common during peak planting seasons. This shift reflects the broader capitalization of China's agrarian sector, driven by the dual forces of an aging rural population and the growing penetration of agrarian capital (Yan and Chen 2015; Huang 2015; Q. F. Zhang 2015).

By late October or early November, seedlings are transplanted into greenhouses, initiating a fifty-day intensive management phase before the first harvest. Farmers must carefully regulate temperature, humidity, irrigation, and pest control. Among the most strenuous tasks is mulching, performed ten to fifteen days after transplanting. This manual process—spreading large plastic sheets to suppress weeds and retain moisture—requires prolonged crouching, aggravating chronic back issues common among aging farmers. Before they can rest, farmers must suspend and drop cucumber vines to maximize production within the confined greenhouse space. As vines reach the top of the wire trellis, they must be carefully lowered, retied, pruned, and sprayed every seven to ten days. Nearly all farmers agree that dropping vines makes for the toughest task in greenhouse farming. Even Xu Guoxiang and Xiuying, the most industrious couple in the co-op, struggle with this workload. Last year, they managed two greenhouses while minimizing labor costs to just 1,400–1,500 yuan, about one-third of the co-op average. Yet even they had to hire workers for vine-dropping, a testament to its difficulty.

The labor intensity continues through the harvest season. To secure the best prices, farmers must deliver cucumbers to the marketplace before 7 a.m., often requiring midnight harvesting. While picking cucumbers might seem straightforward, manually collecting over 1,000 kilos from a greenhouse proves grueling. It typically takes a skilled couple five to six hours to harvest, and since cucumbers grow rapidly, harvesting must occur daily during peak seasons to prevent overripening. After sorting and packing, the produce is transported to a marketplace about eight kilometers away by tricycle, which is uncovered and unheated, making winter deliveries particularly punishing.

The relentless workload often frustrates farmers, yet to turn a profit, they must minimize employee hours and complete as much farmwork as possible themselves. This is not just because labor costs are increasing but also because a noticeable difference exists in the quality of work between themselves and seasonal workers. As Xu Guoxiang put it:



Figure 3 (left). Hired seasonal workers engaged in the task of suspending cucumber vines within a Chinese greenhouse. Photo by Yue Liao.

Figure 4 (upper right). A typical farmer's tricycle in Lanling County, used for transporting vegetables. The advertisement on its tailgate for "treating shoulder, lower back, and leg pain" highlights a common occupational hazard for those who work in greenhouse farming. Photo by Yue Liao.

Figure 5 (lower right). The simple dwelling to the left of the greenhouse serves as the farmers' living quarters. For convenience, most farmers choose to live on-site rather than in their homes in the main village. Photo by Yue Liao.

We try to do as much as possible ourselves. After all, these are our own farms, and our livelihoods depend on them. It is certain that we do every kind of farm work "with care and heart" [*yongxin*]. No matter who you hire, they won't put more heart/care than we do ourselves.

The concept of *yongxin* (working with care and heart) is frequently emphasized by greenhouse farmers when discussing farm management. It signifies more than just diligence; it implies a deep emotional and ethical investment that transforms labor into care. Here, *yongxin* emerges not merely as a work ethic but as the moral engine of inter-mobility. It is the affective practice that justifies the immense risk and physical hardship of greenhouse farming, framing it as an act of profound responsibility toward one's family. It is what distinguishes their rooted, care-based enterprise from the perceived alienation of wage labor or the cynicism of urban youth who "lie flat." This unique fusion of economic activity and moral duty is precisely what Xu Guoxiang captures in his work. His analogy between farming and parenting powerfully illustrates this entanglement:

Raising children is not just about money, but more about care and heart [*yongxin*]. Of course, you can hire babysitters if you have money, but even the best babysitter won't care as much as the parents. The same thing applies to planting vegetables. If you want to have a good harvest, you can't expect the hired workers to take much care. They basically just do what you ask them to do and care little about the crops.

Xu's analogy reveals that greenhouse farming, for them, is not just a livelihood but a form of care labor that mirrors the dedication involved in raising a family. They see their role as both providers and caregivers, ensuring financial stability while personally overseeing their children's education and well-being. This intertwining of farming and caregiving is crucial to understanding their mobility choices and lies at the heart of what I call *inter-mobility*, particularly its intertwined dimension, where entrepreneurial ambition and kinship responsibility become inseparable.

Since the success of greenhouse farming heavily relies on household labor and meticulous care, achieving economies of scale proves extremely difficult. In Lanling, a household can typically manage a maximum of two to three Chinese greenhouses, provided both spouses are healthy, diligent, and work in coordination. Despite this, there are always some farmers, particularly younger ones, who seek greater profits by expanding their operations.

Liu Wenbin, the youngest member of the village co-op, provides an example. In 2013, Liu built four Chinese greenhouses for cucumbers and initially saw strong profits. Encouraged by early success, he expanded in 2016, constructing two additional greenhouses, each twice the size of a standard Gen-3 greenhouse. Confident that hired labor would sustain the expansion, Liu soon realized otherwise. Supervising workers proved difficult, and as rural labor shortages intensified, finding enough seasonal workers became increasingly challenging, especially during peak seasons. Consequently, Liu's yield per unit area was consistently the lowest among the co-op members, and despite having nearly four times the planting acreage of Xu Guoxiang, his net profits were sometimes lower.

Liu's failure was not solely due to poor management skills. While meticulous care is necessary for a good yield, the opposite does not always hold true. Moreover, even a good yield does not necessarily lead to high profits. The success of small greenhouse farms depends not only on careful management but also on favorable natural and market conditions. These uncontrollable factors are referred to as "fortune" or "luck" (*yunqi*) by local farmers, highlighting the sense of unpredictability embedded in their livelihoods. In recent years, with significant changes in the macro environment, which have increased natural and market risks, many farmers have voiced growing concerns about their luck.

One major concern is the increasing frequency of climate anomalies. Just a few years ago, the term *climate change* was unfamiliar to Lanlingnese farmers, but now they are experiencing its impact firsthand. While greenhouses provide a controlled environment for agriculture, they are still susceptible to nature's forces. Chinese greenhouses are designed a few inches below ground for insulation, making them vulnerable to waterlogging during heavy summer rainfall. According to greenhouse farmers in Huanglu, flood and waterlogging disasters used to be rare before 2018. While there was a flood during the summer of 2012, it did not result in any crop losses. In the past four or five years, however, there has been an increase in intense rainfall and associated flooding. In August of 2019, typhoon Lekima hit Lanling and caused significant damage, with four greenhouses of three households being destroyed by the flood in Huanglu. With commercial insurance in China covering only crops, such losses can lead farmers to bankruptcy. When I visited the village in 2021, only the richest household had reconstructed two greenhouses, while the other two greenhouse farms had been converted into open fields.

These environmental risks are compounded by structural shifts in China's agricultural supply chain. After 2000, local governments across China aggressively promoted greenhouse agriculture to alleviate poverty, leading to a "greenhouse boom." Over the past two decades, China has tripled its cultivation area for greenhouse vegetables to more than 4 million hectares, accounting for over 70 percent of the global total. Although Shandong still dominates the industry, its share has since declined to less than 25 percent. Meanwhile, as China's coastal and inland areas become increasingly interconnected, cities like Shanghai have diversified their sources of vegetable supply to meet the demands of their urban consumers, intensifying competition for Lanlingnese farmers. Huanglu villagers recall that in the early 2000s, greenhouse cucumbers were rare and could easily fetch up to ten yuan per kilo, which would remain at elevated levels for more than three months. Today, however, the maximum price has remained almost the same, but it can hardly be maintained for more than a month, as cucumbers grown elsewhere flood the market. The proliferation of commercial vegetable production has heightened price volatility, making it increasingly difficult for farmers to plan and secure stable profits.

Unlike many rural areas in China, greenhouse farmers in Lanling benefit from the county's robust agricultural wholesale market network. This access provides them with a wide range of buyers, enabling them to proactively sell their produce, rather than depending on external purchasers. However, this advantage has been shaken by the uncertainties introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the spring of 2022, as the virus resurged in Shanghai and spread to Lanling, all local wholesale markets were shuttered by government mandate. For



**Figure 6.** Waterlogging inside a Chinese greenhouse following days of severe rainstorm, highlighting the vulnerability of this agricultural infrastructure to extreme weather events. Photo by Yue Liao.

months, farmers resorted to secretly seeking buyers along the roadsides, facing irregular sales at best. Despite the soaring prices of agri-food in Shanghai, Lanling's greenhouse farmers grappled with the challenge of selling their crops amid lockdown restrictions.

The growing risks and uncertainties in vegetable markets have discouraged younger generations from pursuing greenhouse farming. In conversation with young Lanlingnese villagers in Shanghai, many expressed that growing greenhouse vegetables is no less risky than running a vegetable business in the city. They questioned why they should take up such physically demanding work when they have other options available. Over the past few years, even Liu Wenbin and a few relatively younger greenhouse farmers in Huanglu have tried to sell their greenhouses and switch to other businesses, but none have succeeded. Secretary Xu, the head of Huanglu village and founder of the local co-op, candidly shared:

Although I set up the co-op, I would never engage in greenhouse farming myself, especially at this moment. There are too many uncertainties. Nowadays investing in greenhouse agriculture becomes more like gambling. You may earn a lot in some years, but you can easily lose everything if you don't take good care of the crops or have bad luck.

Though disappointing, greenhouse farming remains a compelling option for those who are already involved, particularly among the middle-aged demographic. This persistence is not only due to the significant initial investments and

sunk costs but also because, as many farmers emphasized, it represents “the only hope” for creating a better life. As Xu Guoxiang explicitly explained:

If we don't take this risk, what else is there? Planting wheat and corn won't even cover our basic living expenses, let alone support our children's tuition and marriage. So, for us, this is the only hope. At least with the greenhouse, we have a chance to save for their future, even if it's hard.

Xu's words highlight that greenhouse agriculture is more than just an economic activity; it embodies the hopes, obligations, and risks that farmers navigate in their pursuit of familial aspirations. Pine (2014) suggests that migration is often pursued as a strategy of hope, where families gamble on the promise of a better future despite significant risks. In Lanling, greenhouse farming functions in a similar way. For many middle-aged farmers who either cannot or choose not to migrate, investing in greenhouse agriculture becomes an alternative pathway to sustain hope for economic improvement and social mobility.

This sentiment echoes the findings of Edward Fischer and Peter Benson (2006) in their study of Maya farmers in highland Guatemala, who ventured into export agriculture driven by dissatisfaction with mere subsistence and the pursuit of *algo más* (“something more” or “something better”). Such aspirations for improvement fuel the entrepreneurial spirit of these farmers. Similarly, the involvement of Lanlingnese middle-aged farmers in greenhouse agriculture underscores their entrepreneurial identity. For them, engaging in greenhouse farming is a journey fraught with “bitter sweetness,” balancing the hardships encountered with their aspirations for economic advancement, social mobility, and the fulfillment of caregiving responsibilities.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have examined how middle-aged greenhouse farmers in Lanling navigate the intersecting political, economic, and social conditions that shape their livelihoods. These stayers redefine themselves beyond the traditional image of the immobile, subsistence-focused peasant by adopting a set of practices I term *inter-mobility*—a strategic dwelling in the interstices of China's stratified mobility regimes. This form of mobility allows them to balance their attachment to traditional agricultural life with their aspirations for modernity and social progress. High-tech greenhouse farming, for these farmers, represents a departure from conventional subsistence agriculture, enabling them to engage with broader markets and trans-local networks, and balancing their practices with both kin-based obligations and emerging values of mobility and progress.

At the core of this analysis lies the tension between structure and agency. The greenhouse itself functions as a key technology of inter-mobility, a socio-technical assemblage that connects local soil to national markets, and family labor to capitalist logics. Yet this technology does not guarantee success. The precarity of the market, the climate, and their aging bodies means that inter-mobility is a constant struggle, a gamble animated by the ethical imperative of *yongxin*. This commitment to “working with care and heart” allows them to reframe their constrained position not as a failure, but as a meaningful, if arduous, project of intergenerational care.

This study contributes to the broader theoretical debate on rural transformation in post-socialist China by offering a nuanced understanding of the differentiation of *nongmin*. It highlights how these farmers, through their engagement with new agricultural technologies and market practices, are redefining their roles and identities in a rapidly changing agrarian landscape. The transition from traditional, subsistence-based farming to capital-intensive, technology-driven methods represents a central feature of agrarian change in China, where broader political and economic forces increasingly shape farmers’ strategies for mobility.

Beyond China studies, this article also informs discussions on mobility and modernity. The concept of *inter-mobility*, introduced in this study, offers a tool for understanding how people navigate inequality not by escaping it, but by creatively carving out livable spaces within it. Their experience, in all its bitter sweetness, reveals that modernity is not a single destination, but a contested field of positions, and that mobility can be as much about the art of staying put with purpose as about the freedom to leave.

### ABSTRACT

*This article examines how middle-aged Chinese farmers navigate their position between a highly mobile new urban elite and the traditionally immobile elderly peasantry through a set of practices I term inter-mobility. Based on ethnographic research in Huanglu village, I explore how their adoption of new greenhouse technologies is shaped by both the shifting political-economic landscape of post-socialist China and their desire to align kin-based solidarities with emerging values of progress. I argue that these farmers use greenhouse farming to cultivate a strategic, in-between position, distinguishing themselves from the perceived stasis of the older generation while upholding familial commitments, unlike the perceived rootlessness of younger urban entrepreneurs. This inter-mobility is animated by an ethos of yongxin, which frames their entrepreneurial risk-taking as a form of intergenerational care. The study highlights how China’s broader societal transformations generate not just new agricultural technologies but also new subjectivities within its stratified mobility regimes. [greenhouse farming; mobility; inter-mobility; subjectivity; care; technology; peasantry; China]*

## 摘要

本文以“居间流动”这一概念为核心，考察中年中国农民如何在高度流动的城市新精英与传统上留守故土的老年农民之间，占据一个既区别于二者、又联结二者的居间位置。基于在皇路村的民族志研究，本文发现，这一群体对新型温室技术的采纳，既受到后社会主义中国政治经济格局变迁的深刻影响，也源于他们试图将基于亲缘的团结与新兴的进步价值观相融合的愿望。笔者认为，这些农民通过温室种植构建起一种策略性的“居间”身份：既区别于被视为“安土重迁”的上一代，又以履行家庭责任的方式，区别于被视为“离土无根”的年轻城市创业者。这种“居间流动”的内在动力，是一种“用心”的精神气质，它将创业的风险承担诠释为一种代际关怀的实践。本研究揭示，中国宏观的社会转型不仅催生了新型农业技术，也形塑了其分层流动体制下的新型主体性。[温室农业；流动性；居间流动；主体性；关怀；技术；农民；中国]

## NOTES

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1. To protect the privacy and safety of my interlocutors, all personal names in this article are pseudonyms. Similarly, names of specific locations below the county level, such as townships and villages (e.g., Huanglu), have been anonymized. The county name, Lanling, has been retained due to its public recognition as a center for greenhouse agriculture, which is crucial for the context of this study.
2. The per capita income for rural residents in China was 16,021 yuan (about \$2,290 USD) in 2019. See Xinhua, “China’s Resident Disposable Income Rises 5.8% in 2019,” January 17, 2020, English.gov.cn.
3. I use the term *post-socialist China* to describe the period following the economic reforms initiated in 1978, which shifted the country from a centrally planned economy to more market-oriented policies. This term does not imply a complete departure from socialism; instead, it reflects a combination of socialist governance and capitalist economic practices. The Communist Party retains control over political processes and key economic sectors, while also promoting private investment and consumer capitalism.
4. As we will see, the labels “immobile,” “risk-averse,” and “ignorant” do not accurately describe the older generation of Chinese peasants. These terms merely reflect the perceptions held by middle-aged greenhouse farmers like Xu Guoxiang.
5. By using *mobility regime*, I adopt anthropologist Xiang Biao’s (2007, 3) conceptualization of “a constellation of policies, cultural norms and networks that condition, constrain or facilitate migration.”
6. I thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me crystallize the idea of *inter-mobility* by contrasting it with the concept of *secondary mobility*.
7. One Chinese *mu* equals 0.165 acres.
8. The Chinese term *tu* has multiple meanings, “including ‘soil; earth’, ‘land; ground’, ‘local; native’ and ‘homemade; indigenous’” (Cody 2019, 75). *Tu zhuanjia*, therefore, refers to self-taught local experts who have gained professional knowledge and skills through practical experience, despite having little or no formal education.

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