

Mobilities and Identities of Educated Young Adults: A Life-History and Biographical Study

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Abstract

Drawing on original data from a life-history survey and biographical interviews, this research investigates the patterns and meanings of migration among educated young adults from peripheral China. A fourfold typology of spatial mobility is developed from the divergent migration pathways from home to university and onward to the current places of residence: move-out, move-down, move-up, and reentry. The finding that the migration process of educated young people is complex and dynamic calls for a reconceptualization of migration as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event. Using four case study examples, the article illustrates how identities, throughout the life course, are shaped by place and are articulated in the dialectic between mobility and immobility. In doing so, the article corroborates the idea that identity cannot be fully understood without reference to mobility and place.

Since the 1990s, scholars have addressed the challenges facing population geography in general and migration research in particular. Dominated by the deterministic conceptual approach, population geography and migration research have typically overlooked the theoretical debates in human geography and in the social sciences in general.¹ Among other suggestions, scholars advocate the adoption of a humanistic approach, which “stresses the essential and irreducible subjectivity of both the observer

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