

Governing (Im)Mobility: Internal Re-Bordering and Conditional Inclusion in China's Rural Return

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Abstract

Post-COVID rural revitalisation policies and digital platform economies have renewed attention to returning to the Chinese countryside, yet return rarely becomes durable residence, livelihood, or recognised membership. This concept paper addresses that problem through a scoping-oriented critical literature review and interpretive synthesis of scholarship on rural return in China. It develops internal rural re-bordering as an analytic for explaining how rural return is governed as a form of conditional inclusion within national territory. The synthesis identifies three interacting mechanisms: institutional bordering, which shapes eligibility and service portability; platform governance, which shapes visibility and monetisation; and aesthetic governance, which shapes admissible rural identities, livelihoods, and spaces. Across the literature, durable return depends on whether mobility can be converted into regularised entitlements, relatively stable income, and locally recognised legitimacy, often through local intermediaries and relational labour. Rural return is therefore better understood as a conditional pathway of incorporation than as a simple demographic reversal.

Keywords: internal rural re-bordering; hukou; algorithmic governance; aesthetic governance; livestreaming/e-commerce; short-video economy; social infrastructures; rural return; platformisation

1. Introduction

In the context of COVID-19 and its policy aftermath, Chinese rural revitalisation agendas have increasingly framed “return” to the countryside through the policy language of “return/enter-the-countryside entrepreneurship” (fanxiang ruxiang chuangye [返乡入乡创业]). The 2021 and 2022 Central No. 1 Documents (中央一号文件) explicitly encourage the development of “return/enter-the-countryside entrepreneurship parks” (fanxiang ruxiang chuangye yuan [返乡入乡创业园]), indicating that “return” is treated as an explicit target of governance rather than a spontaneous demographic reversal [1,2]. In this study, “rural return” refers to a heterogeneous field of practices through which migrants, graduates, entrepreneurs, platform workers, small traders, and households seek to re-establish rural residence, livelihood, administrative eligibility, or social recognition. It includes permanent relocation, seasonal or pendular movement, hybrid rural–urban household arrangements, and platform-mediated forms of self-employment. The analytic significance of “return” lies in the gap between physical relocation and institutional, economic, and symbolic incorporation. Relocation can be enacted while remaining

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institutionally provisional: access to schooling, healthcare, social insurance, and record transfer is mediated by administrative categories and locally implemented thresholds. Return may also remain socio-economically provisional when income opportunities depend on platform-mediated visibility and on whether local programmes recognise particular people, practices, and built forms as legitimate and investable. Recent scholarship on post-return trajectories in China underscores that reintegration is frequently uneven and unstable rather than guaranteed [3]. Its durability depends on whether physical presence can be converted into regularised residence, service access, income stability, and locally recognised membership.

During and after COVID-19, disruptions and recovery were uneven across social groups, sectors, and localities, interacting with pre-existing inequalities in employment security, household care responsibilities (e.g., childcare and eldercare), and access to services [4]. Evidence from a 2022 survey-based study of rural migrant workers finds that public health emergencies shape willingness to return primarily through mediating channels—notably reduced employment stability and income—while also affecting migrants' perceived attachment to their hometowns, rather than operating as a simple, direct trigger of return [5]. This uneven and mediated pattern provides context for why rural return can be provisional and conditional, and why mechanisms of eligibility, platform governance, and recognition become decisive in determining who can be included, under what conditions, and through which forms of institutional, economic, and symbolic conversion [6,7].

This article conceptualises these conditions as internal rural re-bordering. The term refers to domestic boundary-making processes that sort access to residence, services, livelihood opportunity, and recognition within national territory. Its analytical objective lies in specifying the concrete sorting devices through which rural return becomes conditional: hukou-linked eligibility thresholds, portability rules, local implementation criteria, platform access controls, moderation and monetisation systems, branding templates, programme selection criteria, and local gatekeeping. Internal rural re-bordering adds to existing accounts of inequality and governance by identifying the cross-domain sorting operations through which broad structural asymmetries are enacted. It links administrative rules, platform controls, and representational criteria to specific conversion outcomes: regularised residence, stabilised livelihood, and recognised membership. The framework therefore makes it possible to trace how unequal conditions accumulate across domains and become spatially differentiated within national territory. The framework distinguishes three interacting mechanisms. Institutional bordering establishes the baseline conditions of eligibility and service portability, especially through hukou-linked access to schooling, healthcare, social insurance, and administrative record transfer. Platform governance mediates whether visibility can be converted into income by organising access to audiences, features, monetisation tools, payment infrastructures, and fulfilment systems. Aesthetic governance shapes whether rural identities, livelihoods, and built forms become recognisable, fundable, and politically acceptable within revitalisation and branding agendas. These mechanisms operate as a recurrent conversion sequence: institutional eligibility conditions settlement, platform governance conditions income, and aesthetic governance conditions recognition and investability.

Platform governance matters because the promise of 'voice' and livelihood is not distributed evenly. Research on short-video and livestreaming economies in China shows how attention and monetisation are structured through recommendation systems, feature access controls, moderation, and payment infrastructures, making visibility a contingent resource rather than a direct route to inclusion [8]. This platform layer refers to the role of digital platforms—such as e-commerce, livestreaming, and social media systems—in shaping how returnees access economic opportunities and social recognition. It interacts with administrative bordering by introducing an additional digital and commercial filter

through which incorporation is mediated. While platforms can create new income opportunities and market access, participation remains conditional on platform rules, algorithmic visibility, monetisation requirements, and locally recognised forms of rural representation.

Aesthetic governance requires explicit treatment because rurality is made through meanings, images, design cues, heritage scripts, and evaluative norms that organise expectations and can be materialised through policy, markets, platforms, and built-environment interventions [9,10]. Longstanding rural scholarship emphasises that “the rural” is continuously produced through representation and social relations rather than merely discovered as a fixed spatial category [11,12]. Work on aesthetic governmentality and cultural governance in China helps define this mechanism more precisely. Pow’s analysis of ecological civilisation and eco-city planning shows that aesthetic principles can enter planning and governmental practices, producing normative visions of harmonious and sustainable development rather than remaining at the level of visual representation [13]. Oakes’s work on heritage and cultural governance further shows how cultural scripts can be materialised in the built environment as governable space, while also indicating that residents may appropriate, ignore, or contest these spatial inscriptions [14,15]. In this article, these insights are extended to rural return: aesthetic governance is treated as a mechanism through which symbolic value can become materially consequential by shaping programme selection, tourism promotion, platform visibility, renovation priorities, and local recognition.

In contemporary revitalisation settings, branding scripts (such as heritage-themed tourism narratives, model village templates, e-commerce branding strategies, and rural lifestyle imaginaries) and evaluation metrics can operate as symbolic borders. They sort which rural identities, livelihoods, and built forms appear proper, which activities become investable, and which practices remain difficult to legitimise even when they are physically present. Accordingly, the article addresses two questions: (1) Through which institutional, platform, and aesthetic mechanisms is rural return rendered conditional? (2) How do these mechanisms combine and recursively shape one another in converting mobility into residence, livelihood, and recognised membership?

Methodologically, this study conducts a desk-based scoping review and realist-informed interpretive synthesis of scholarship on rural return, rural revitalisation, and platformised livelihoods in China. The aim is not to claim a single “return” trend, but to specify plausible mechanisms and contextual conditions through which return becomes durable for some households and provisional for others. By linking post-COVID rural return, platform-mediated livelihoods, and rural revitalisation governance, the article contributes to this Special Issue by developing a conceptual framework for understanding how crisis-related mobility is spatially redistributed and institutionally and symbolically mediated. The case of rural China foregrounds conditional inclusion as a key mechanism through which post-crisis transformations are governed inside national territory.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews scholarship on institutional bordering, platform governance, and aesthetic governance in relation to rural return. Section 3 details the conceptual review design and analytic approach. Section 4 presents the mechanism claims and recurring interaction patterns derived from the synthesis. Section 5 interprets these claims, specifies boundary conditions, and outlines what empirical follow-up would be needed to test them. Section 6 concludes.

2. Technologies of Conditional Inclusion in Rural Return

2.1. Institutional Bordering: Hukou, Service Eligibility, and Domestic Mobility

This section treats institutional bordering as the baseline mechanism through which domestic mobility and “return” are administered. In this study, hukou is approached primarily as a membership and welfare-allocation system, not as a direct prohibition of movement: it rarely prevents rural residents from living and working elsewhere, but it makes settlement and incorporation conditional by tying full access to public services and administrative portability to local registration status. Hukou classifications (e.g., agricultural/non-agricultural; local/non-local) therefore continue to condition access to schooling, healthcare, and social insurance through place-bound registration, shaping whether movement can be converted into settled membership and service entitlements [16].

Contemporary “return” unfolds within an eligibility framework that governs whether households can regularise residence, where children may enrol, and how pensions and medical records can be transferred across jurisdictions. Patterns of rural population change reflect both internal and return migration; these flows are shaped not only by wages but also by hukou-linked rules and infrastructural investments. Policy adjustments can encourage or restrict mobility independently of market signals, thereby reshaping whether return can be sustained over time [17].

Institutional bordering is also digitally extended. This does not imply that code replaces law; rather, state data infrastructures can amplify administrative reach by increasing interoperability, standardising documentation, and enabling cross-bureau coordination. China’s data and AI strategy links innovation to security and social governance, treating data platforms as instruments of coordination and stability rather than neutral utilities [18]. In rural settings, this orientation informs the design of digital public services and inter-bureau data sharing, which can make eligibility checks faster while also making inclusion more dependent on how categories are encoded, which data are accessible to which offices, and how exceptions are flagged and reviewed.

Within this broader governance environment, policy programmes associated with New-Type Urbanisation (xinxing chengzhenhua [新型城镇化]), Rural Revitalization (xiangcun zhenxing [乡村振兴]), and the Digital Village Development Strategy (shuzi xiangcun fazhan zhanlüe [数字乡村发展战略])—often reiterated through annual Central No. 1 policy priorities—shape the infrastructural and administrative conditions under which return is enacted [19]. Rather than dismantling rural–urban differentiation, these initiatives are often framed as altering how it is governed: village land and governance can be consolidated, administrative target-setting and project-based implementation can intensify, and “integration” is pursued through administratively managed schemes rather than left to market adjustment [20]. Operationally, policy blueprints describe multi-layer architectures (connectivity, data aggregation capacity, application support, and services) intended to reduce fragmentation and integrate economy, ecology, culture, services, and governance [21].

Evidence also suggests that expanded connectivity and e-services can reproduce offline hierarchies in reworked digital forms—for example, through unequal access to devices and digital skills, uneven bureaucratic capacity, or differential ability to navigate documentation and platform interfaces [22]. Taken together, hukou-linked eligibility, local thresholds, and the digital and policy infrastructures that operationalise them define the institutional conditions under which “return” can be regularised as membership rather than remaining a provisional relocation.

Institutional bordering is constituted not only through formal eligibility rules but also through local organisational intermediaries that translate policy into concrete access, benefits, and development outcomes. Research on urban–village governance shows how

collective shareholding companies can consolidate land-use rights, distribute dividends, and negotiate redevelopment, thereby shaping who can access the material gains associated with “integration” and place-based investment [23]. Such intermediaries operate as practical gatekeepers insofar as they can prioritise some households, projects, and claims over others within formally unified policy frameworks. For returnees, this means that durable incorporation may depend not only on hukou-linked portability and service eligibility, but also on how local brokerage channels entitlements, opportunities, and recognition. This intermediary or gatekeeping layer helps explain why similar formal rules can yield uneven outcomes across places and social groups, even before platform dynamics are considered.

2.2. Platform Governance: Visibility, Monetisation, and Participation Conditions

This section treats platform governance as a cross-cutting mechanism that mediates how opportunity and recognition are distributed in rural “return” contexts. Platforms are often presented as widening voice and entrepreneurship. In China, however, visibility and monetisation are shaped within state–platform arrangements. Regulators, including the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), the State Administration for Market Regulation (SAMR), the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), interact with firms in specifying conditions of circulation. Regulatory priorities are translated into interface design, recommendation logic, and feature-access rules that classify content and distribute reach. These conditions are periodically recalibrated through rectification campaigns, classificatory labels (including “positive energy” — zheng nengliang [正能量], a governance norm favouring upbeat, socially affirmative, and politically acceptable content), and feature-gating that controls access to high-leverage affordances such as livestreaming, external links, and in-app product shelves [24]. Prior scholarship on rural e-commerce during the COVID-19 period illustrates how platforms can sustain opportunity while also governing who can participate and under what infrastructural conditions [25].

At the level of creator work, industry analyses of the wanghong (网红; internet celebrity/influencer) field show how labour, content classification, and commercial tooling form a regulated assemblage rather than an open marketplace for speech and commerce [26]. Creators move through staged checkpoints, including trial exposure, automated scoring, occasional human review, and stepwise access to monetisation features [27]. Because revenue is concentrated in channels such as gifting, affiliate links, and shop integrations, earnings remain sensitive to shifts in discovery, compliance, and commerce access. Amplification is therefore selective: accounts that maintain cadence, legible vernacular formats, and backstage fulfilment capacity are advantaged, while others may remain marginal despite sustained effort.

Digital gating is not purely technical; it intersects with urban–rural status distinctions, classed and gendered expectations, and online vocabularies of “quality,” “civility,” “taste,” and “positivity.” Research on rural e-commerce shows how suzhi (素质) discourses and status contests are reworked in digital settings, remaking distinctions rather than erasing them [28]. Comparative information and communication technologies (ICT) research also cautions against assuming uniform platform effects: similar infrastructures can widen access or concentrate value depending on how intermediary functions are organised [29]. Studies of rural youth platform cultures further show how aspirations (e.g., upward mobility and recognition), peer norms (e.g., what counts as respectable or credible rural presentation), and moderation practices produce selective inclusion, stabilising some identities while constraining others [30].

Platform governance also has a spatial and infrastructural dimension that conditions whether online visibility can be converted into income. Evidence suggests that social

media can shape location decisions, as creators and merchants adopt pendular, trial, or seasonal moves between urban locations that enhance visibility and peripheral locations that lower living and operating costs. Work location is co-determined by platform discovery features and by fulfilment capacity—local logistics, storage, and payment systems—that support timely delivery [31]. Related studies on platform-enabled rural connectivity show that where local logistics/delivery capacity and payment infrastructures are in place, platforms can connect peripheral producers into wider circuits of demand and services; yet participation is routed through standardised interfaces and metrics, deepening dependence on discovery and transaction systems [25]. In parallel, agritech platformisation reorganises agricultural value chains into centralised, data-mediated networks linking online marketplaces to offline producers, reinforcing advantages for actors and regions able to meet informational and logistical thresholds [32].

Maintaining visibility also requires sustained relational labour and creator identity work: audience interaction, posting cadence, livestream engagement, and a consistent on-screen persona. Studies of Chinese micro-celebrity show that attention is maintained through genre discipline, tone, humour, and moral positioning (signalling diligence, respectability, and alignment with socially acceptable norms) rather than through a single viral moment [33]. In rural and small-town creator scenes, visibility therefore often depends on rural scripts that remain audience-facing and governance-compatible, such as ordinary expertise, family teamwork, craft, and an upbeat “constructive” tone.

Gendered constraints recur across this scholarship. In livestreaming and e-commerce, where reach and monetisation are closely tied to posting cadence and performance metrics, interruptions in labour routines can translate into losses of traffic and visibility in systems where algorithmic ranking and metric-based allocation shape exposure [34]. For rural women, livestreaming entrepreneurship may also remain embedded in household arrangements that condition autonomy and control [35]. Beyond gendered constraints, post-COVID-19 scholarship cautions against interpreting short-run shifts in work and consumption geographies as evidence of durable residential change, given persistent inequalities in amenity access, credit, and secure employment [36]. For the present argument, this implies that short-lived spikes in rural-themed attention (e.g., temporary surges in views, sales, or weekend visits) are weak indicators of stable resettlement or livelihood security: they often reflect transient shifts in leisure and consumption patterns rather than long-term relocation [37,38]. Accordingly, short-term performance metrics (views, sales, follower counts) are weak proxies for livelihood security because converting attention into income depends on organisational and intermediary arrangements (e.g., influencer communities, incubation, supply-chain linkages) that stabilise production and fulfilment, while micro-celebrity economies simultaneously curate “the rural” as an aesthetic and political-economic resource [39].

2.3. Aesthetic Governance: Representation, Branding, and Admissible Rurality

This section defines aesthetic governance as the public, policy, and market-facing practices through which rural places, livelihoods, and identities are rendered recognisable, desirable, and governable through images, narratives, design cues, heritage scripts, and evaluative norms. Branding campaigns, tourism itineraries, model-village templates, and heritage vernaculars stabilise standards that administrators, visitors, platforms, and investors can interpret and reward [40,41]. For returnees, these standards favour show-caseable formats such as homestays, craft workshops, café conversions, and family-run cultural enterprises, while ordinary livelihood infrastructures remain harder to recognise within authorised rural images. The mechanism has three related dimensions. Governmentally, aesthetic norms shape conduct, subjectivity, and everyday organisation [42]. Performatively, designed and curated environments actively produce environmental

relations [43]. Eco-ethically, aesthetic appreciation becomes connected to ecological value and desirable human–environment relations [44,45]. Comparative work on rural tourism and place-making supports this interpretation beyond China. Kneafsey’s study of rural Ireland shows how tourism can commodify place identity while remaining mediated by local social relations [46]. Rogers’s work on French rural tourism shows how heritage-making selects particular versions of nature, culture, and identity as publicly legible rural value [47]. Csurgó and Smith’s study of rural Hungary further shows how cultural ecosystem services and landscape values acquire social, symbolic, and economic significance in rural development and place-making [48]. Aesthetic governance therefore concerns the material consequences of selecting and valuing rural attributes through funding, promotion, legitimacy, and recognition.

Approaching rurality as representation clarifies how inclusion and exclusion are negotiated through the circulation of images, genres, and evaluative criteria: what is shown, how it is formatted, who is authorised to speak, and which forms of rural life are judged credible, attractive, or out of place. A growing literature on low-resource or grassroots media practices—often produced by villagers, small workshops, or returnees with limited institutional backing—shows how vernacular short videos, workshop tours, and serial “day-in-the-life” formats can sometimes generate alternative accounts of competence and value [30]. Such outputs can form counter-public registers in a limited sense, because they offer narratives and audiences that are not fully reducible to official revitalisation scripts or commercial place-branding formats. Yet wider circulation of this content—i.e., distribution beyond a small follower base—often depends on remaining legible within dominant aesthetic conventions and governance norms. Material may be down-ranked or demonetised when it is evaluated as “low quality” (e.g., poor lighting/editing, unstable audio, unclear storytelling), “excessively negative,” or commercially weak (e.g., low conversion to sales, limited advertiser compatibility), an evaluative filtering often articulated through suzhi-related vocabularies of “quality,” civility, and propriety [49]. Related work shows that visibility originating from peripheral locales—less-connected villages and small towns positioned as marginal relative to urban cores and flagship tourist nodes—can be rapidly folded into official and commercial branding grammars. Viral vernaculars may be selectively extracted, standardised, and repackaged so that “periphery” becomes a curated image category, while underlying infrastructures and livelihoods remain only partially transformed [50].

To analyse “return” without turning liminality into a purely metaphorical register, the term is used here in a narrow, operational sense: an “in-betweenness” organised through thresholds, tests, and sanctioned forms of passage [51]. In this usage, “return” can appear open-ended (neither fully urban nor conventionally rural) while being structured by practical checkpoints—eligibility conditions, evaluations, and aesthetic screening—that make some transitions easier than others [52]. In contemporary China, curated pastoralism and heritage vernaculars can operate as such thresholds by making some social roles, occupations, and dwelling forms more readily recognisable (e.g., craftspeople, family-run micro-enterprises performing wholesome domesticity, carefully rustic homestays), while rendering other labour and dwelling forms less compatible with authorised images (e.g., dormitory-like housing, muddy shoulders, repair yards, logistics backlots) [11,53,54]. A brief analogy to urban branding is useful here because it clarifies the mechanism: in cities, branding scripts often appropriate local symbols and simplify lived complexity for external audiences; rural revitalisation campaigns can reproduce similar selection effects when they translate everyday landscapes into marketable, governance-compatible formats [55].

Scholarship suggests that recognisable aesthetic templates can circulate quickly across bureaus, markets, and platforms, shaping procurement briefs and creator-training

materials [56]. The Yangtze River Delta provides a focused example because its rural landscapes are embedded within wider processes of mega-urbanisation and rural–urban synthesis [57]. Within this regional condition, heritage-based rural tourism is organised through spatial clusters, local hotspots, and cross-regional cultural corridors, while administrative boundaries can also fragment heritage resources into unevenly activated cultural enclaves [58]. The resulting templates may include Jiangnan water-town iconographies, canal-front refurbishments, festival circuits, and “rustic-chic” homestay and café typologies. As such templates enter procurement and training, they can streamline coordination and attract visitors or investment, while also privileging image-ready rural scripts that help some returnees gain legitimacy yet leave working landscapes (e.g., workshops, warehouses, aquaculture edges) and ordinary architectures (e.g., sheds, informal extensions, basic rentals) comparatively under-recognised in funding and attention [59]. Analytically, images can be treated as selectors insofar as they condition what becomes publicly legible as “rural,” for whom, and with what distributive consequences—i.e., who gains visibility, resources, and investability, and who is rendered out of frame [11]. Grass-roots media practices may diversify the representational palette, but sustained visibility and monetisation often remain contingent on meeting prevailing thresholds of taste and “positivity” within platform and governance environments [54,60].

3. Methods/Materials

3.1. Conceptual Review Design and Analytic Approach

This study undertakes a desk-based, scoping-oriented critical literature review and realist-informed interpretive synthesis of scholarship on how institutional bordering, platform governance, and aesthetic governance shape rural return in China. The review is purposive and iterative. It identifies recurrent mechanisms, conversion conditions, and boundary conditions for conceptual framework-building, without estimating prevalence or causal effect sizes.

The synthesis tracks whether mobility becomes stabilised as regularised residence, livelihood, and recognised membership. Sources are compared through three mechanism families: institutional eligibility and service portability; platform visibility and monetisation; and aesthetic admissibility and recognition. It also examines two conversion conditions—local intermediaries/gatekeeping and relational labour—where these mediate the passage between eligibility, opportunity, and recognition. Because the reviewed studies define return and inclusion differently, the synthesis records their operational definitions and treats this variation as part of the evidence base.

Mechanisms are extracted and compared using the classification frame presented in Section 3.3 and Figure 1. The frame supports cross-study comparison and the formulation of mechanism propositions under specified contextual conditions.

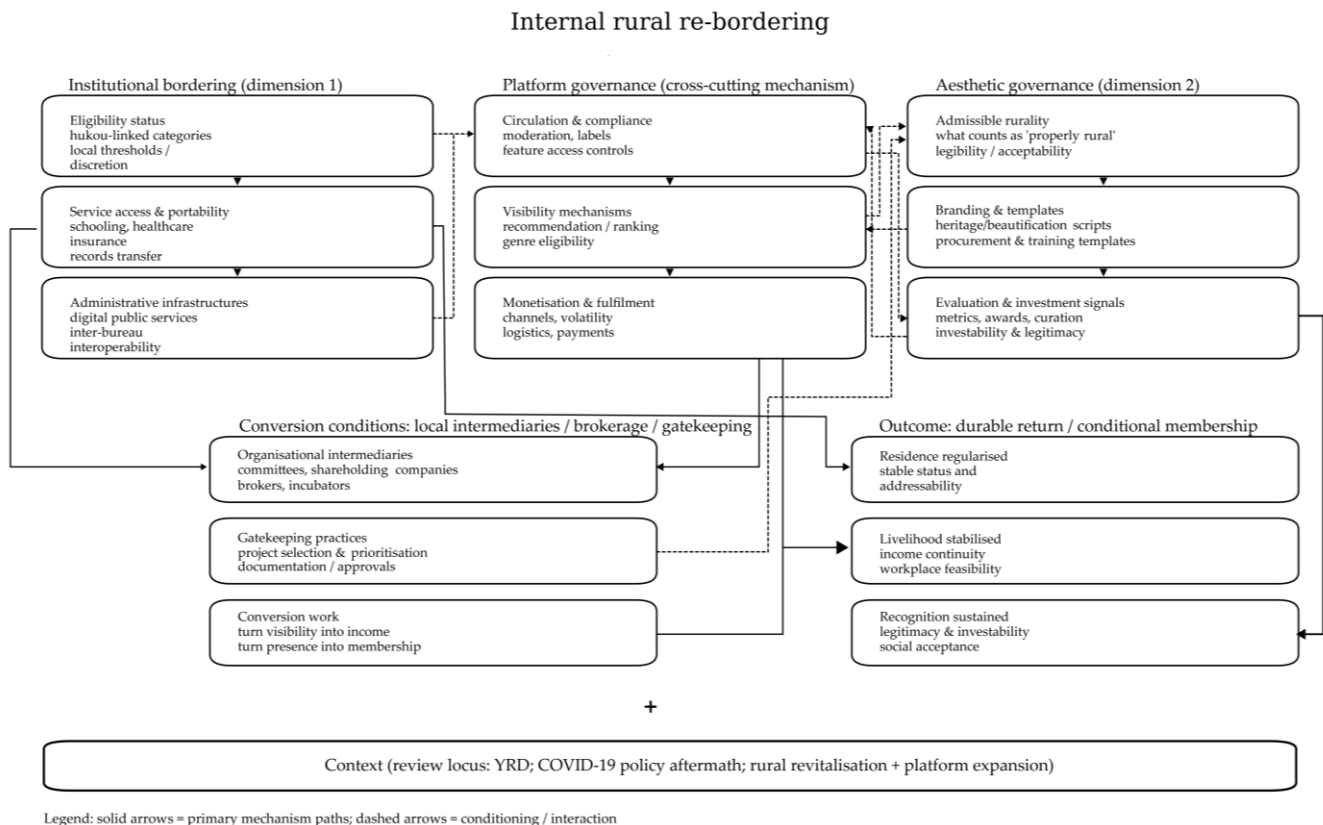


Figure 1. Internal rural re-bordering: mechanisms and conversion conditions. The figure shows how institutional bordering, platform governance, and aesthetic governance mediate the conversion of rural “return” into regularised residence, stabilised livelihood, and recognised membership. Solid arrows indicate primary mechanism pathways; dashed arrows indicate conditioning or interaction effects between mechanisms.

3.2. Scope, Sources, Search, and Selection

The review targets scholarship relevant to rural China that engages substantively with at least one mechanism family (institutional bordering; platform governance; aesthetic governance) and/or the conversion conditions that mediate them (local intermediaries/gatekeeping; relational labour). The corpus is seeded by a pre-compiled literature register and then extended through targeted searching and citation chaining.

Searches were conducted across Scopus and Web of Science, complemented by targeted Google Scholar searches and CNKI, to capture international and domestic scholarship. The search spans approximately the past two decades, with emphasis on works published since 2018; earlier sources are included where needed for hukou path-dependence and longer-running governance context.

Searches paired geographic and administrative terms, such as “county”, “township”, and “rural revitalization”, with mechanism-specific terms. For institutional bordering, these included “hukou”, “household registration”, “service access”, “schooling”, “healthcare”, “social insurance”, “record transfer”, and “eligibility”. For platform governance, they included “short video”, “livestreaming”, “live commerce”, “e-commerce”, “algorithm”, “recommendation”, “feature gating”, “moderation”, “platform governance”, and “monetisation”. For aesthetic governance, they included “rural representation”, “branding”, “heritage”, “beautification”, “beautiful countryside”, “vernacular”, and “authenticity”. Because the review also tracks conversion conditions, additional terms were used where relevant (e.g., “intermediary”, “broker”, “committee”, “shareholding company”, “incubation”, “training”, “care work”, “cadence”, “micro-celebrity”).

Selection was conducted in two stages. Titles and abstracts were assessed for topical fit, relevance to rural China, and engagement with at least one mechanism family. Full texts were then assessed for analytic usefulness, defined as providing (i) empirical material, (ii) institutional/programme specificity, or (iii) conceptual clarification that materially informs one or more mechanisms used in the synthesis. Sources were excluded when they (i) focus on urban settings without rural return relevance, (ii) are purely technical studies of platforms/AI without implications for participation conditions or governance, or (iii) mention “return” only tangentially without mechanism-relevant material.

The synthesis draws on a purposively assembled corpus comprising peer-reviewed research and a limited number of policy and online documents, included only when they directly specify institutional programmes, platform arrangements, or governance signals relevant to the mechanism propositions. Because the corpus was built from a pre-existing seed set and then expanded through targeted searches and citation chaining, database “hit counts” are not reported as a measure of coverage. Instead, transparency is provided through the specification of search fields, mechanism-oriented search terms, inclusion and exclusion criteria, extraction categories, and the classification frame used for synthesis.

3.3. Classification, Synthesis, and Transparency

Data extraction follows a standardised template capturing bibliographic details, study design, site and period, population group or platform context, main findings, mechanism family, conversion condition, boundary condition, and relevance to the conceptual framework. For synthesis, sources were classified and compared using a three-part frame:

1. Institutional bordering: hukou-linked status and place-based eligibility; service access and administrative portability (including schooling, healthcare, social insurance, and record transfer); locally administered thresholds and discretionary implementation; and the role of digital public services and inter-bureau data infrastructures in making eligibility checks interoperable and administratively enforceable.
2. Platform governance (cross-cutting mechanism): conditions of circulation and compliance (including moderation and feature access controls); recommendation/visibility dynamics; monetisation channels and income volatility; and infrastructural conditions shaping whether visibility can be converted into earnings (e.g., logistics, storage, payment systems).
3. Aesthetic governance: branding, beautification, and heritage scripts; admissible rurality and the circulation of recognisable templates; and evaluative criteria shaping which forms of rural life, labour, and landscape are recognised as legitimate and investable.

Across these components, the review also classifies references to conversion conditions—local intermediaries/gatekeeping and relational labour—where they mediate whether institutional and platform opportunities become durable settlement and recognised membership.

Themes were refined through author comparison of extracted materials. Findings were compared across different study types, including ethnographies, policy analyses, platform studies, and practice-oriented reports. Greater interpretive weight was given to mechanisms that recurred across sources, sites, and scales, and to sources that provided institutional specificity, empirical detail, or explicit conceptual clarification. Claims based on narrower or more context-specific evidence were treated as mechanism propositions requiring further empirical testing rather than as generalisable findings. The synthesis does not aggregate effect sizes; it consolidates convergent patterns and specifies boundary conditions under which particular mechanisms appear to operate [61].

The study relies exclusively on published materials and publicly accessible artefacts. All figures included in the revised manuscript were prepared by the authors, and no third-party image is reproduced. The three pathways presented in Section 4.4 were defined through interpretive synthesis. They were derived by comparing how the mechanism families recur and combine across the reviewed sources. Pathway A captures sequences in which eligibility and service portability condition settlement. Pathway B captures sequences in which platform visibility requires intermediary support, fulfilment capacity, and stable monetisation to become income. Pathway C captures sequences in which aesthetic admissibility shapes recognition, legitimacy, and investability. The pathways are therefore mechanism propositions generated through cross-source comparison, not quantified causal models.

4. Findings/Analysis

Building on the critical conceptual synthesis described above, this section synthesises the corpus to specify mechanism propositions explaining why rural “return” is frequently provisional and conditional. Across the reviewed literature, return appears more likely to become durable when three conditions align. First, eligibility and service portability must allow residence and entitlements to be regularised. Second, platform participation conditions must allow visibility to be converted into earnings through relatively stable feature access, compliance, and fulfilment capacity. Third, aesthetic admissibility criteria must allow people, practices, and built forms to be recognised as legitimate and investable. Conversion is repeatedly mediated by local intermediaries/gatekeeping and by the relational labour required to sustain visibility.

Sections 4.1–4.3 elaborate each claim and its boundary conditions. Section 4.4 then identifies recurring interaction patterns showing how the mechanisms combine in sequence.

4.1. Institutional Bordering: Eligibility, Portability, and Administrative Operationalisation

The first mechanism concerns China’s household registration system (*hukou*), which continues to shape differentiated access to schooling, healthcare, and social security across places. For households attempting return, mobility is intertwined with the transfer and recognition of entitlements, and decisions often hinge on school admission, access to clinical care for older family members, the portability and recognition of pension contributions, and the ability to regularise an address. Accounts of reform-era change suggest that *hukou* has been reconfigured rather than removed, enabling circulation while sustaining unequal membership rights and service eligibility across jurisdictions [16]. Across the reviewed literature, return is commonly described as partial settlement and hybrid livelihood strategies in which households sustain links to both county and city while navigating *hukou*-mediated inequalities in welfare and basic service access, including through alternating residence, staggered documentation procedures, and phased re-registration [62]. Even where administrative reforms streamline procedures, unequal membership rights can persist because eligibility remains differentiated in law and is increasingly operationalised through data infrastructures—interoperable records, digital verification, and administrative information systems that mediate enrolment, insurance, and related services. Under these conditions, the feasibility and terms of regularising return vary systematically across households depending on how status is recorded, validated, and recognised across jurisdictions [63].

Scholarship on mega-urban regions such as the Yangtze River Delta (YRD) frequently describes a configuration of dense logistics networks, reliable payment systems, comparatively capable county administrations, and mature place-branding repertoires. In the corpus, these conditions are treated as boundary conditions that can reallocate constraints

toward eligibility thresholds, platform feature access, and aesthetic screening, making small adjustments in these mechanisms consequential for whether return can be stabilised as residence, livelihood, and recognised membership.

4.2. Platform Governance and Conversion Conditions

The reviewed studies indicate that platform participation conditions operate as rule-based participation constraints that shape how visibility and monetisation are allocated. In short-video and live-commerce environments, content is commonly released in stages, beginning with limited exposure to small test audiences and automated checks that assess policy compliance and basic quality signals, followed, in some cases, by human review before wider circulation is enabled. Access to higher-leverage affordances—such as livestreaming, external links, or in-app shop functions—is frequently gated, and rectification campaigns can recalibrate category tolerances and eligibility thresholds over short time horizons [26,27,53]. Monetisation pathways, including gifts, affiliate links, and shop integrations, are relatively concentrated and governed by platform-defined rules and revenue splits, contributing to uneven trajectories of exposure and income across creators. Where fulfilment and payment infrastructures reduce downstream frictions, the reviewed literature suggests that constraints can shift toward upstream processes of discovery, moderation, and feature access, such that order conversion is more likely when gatekeeping and visibility remain sufficiently stable over time, whereas otherwise comparable actors may experience stalled growth despite similar offline capacity [64].

Patterns of platform visibility and engagement do not necessarily translate into sustained settlement or recognition. Across the reviewed studies, the conversion of episodic attention into a liveable return is mediated by local intermediaries and gatekeeping arrangements, including kinship networks, village committees, brokers, and peer-based creator groups (often described as “families” within creator communities). These intermediaries can provide hospitality, endorsement, and forms of guarantee that help unlock accommodation, informal credit, permissions, and initial clients. When streetscapes or workshops gain mediated relevance, intermediaries may coordinate practical arrangements—for instance by integrating novices into small teams, facilitating temporary-use approvals, or aligning delivery routines with emerging demand—thereby helping stabilise episodic attention into more regular orders [65]. At the same time, this conversion can remain uneven, particularly when returnees lack prior local ties or when online self-presentations clash with local norms and expectations—even when platform metrics appear comparatively strong [65]. Case-oriented reportage on short-video-fuelled renovations similarly suggests that trajectories are more likely to consolidate where brokerage capacity is dense, whereas in other settings mobility can remain pendular or seasonal [66].

A further conversion condition concerns relational labour, understood as the ongoing communicative and affective work through which creators sustain audience ties that support visibility and sales. In this framing, income is often contingent on maintaining cadence, responsiveness, and on-screen identity management over time, including routine practices such as replying to comments, acknowledging repeat viewers, and cultivating a sense of conviviality within live rooms [67]. In micro-celebrity economies in China, Li shows that creator identity requires continuous calibration, as creators adjust tone, genre conventions, and self-presentation in response to feedback loops linking recommender-system testing, audience responses, and governance constraints that delimit what is promoted and what is sanctioned [33]. This ongoing calibration can entail substantial time and affective commitments that are unevenly distributed; studies of women’s livestreaming and e-commerce, for example, indicate that care-related interruptions may lower posting cadence and disrupt the recent-performance traces that platforms use when allocating visibility and access to monetisation features [68]. One implication is that

creators may experience increases in metrics and income opportunities without corresponding gains in autonomy within households or local decision-making settings, a dynamic discussed as a form of constrained or “mobile” immobility [69]. These pressures can be further shaped by post-COVID-19 shifts in demand and consumption rhythms, where short-lived surges in attention and spending may be captured more readily by teams with back-office capacity and sufficient logistics reach, while other households may undertake comparable relational labour with more limited returns [38,70].

4.3. Aesthetic Governance: Admissible Rurality and Recognition

Aesthetic governance adds a further mechanism by defining admissible venues, occupations, and authorised bearers of “authentic rurality,” shaping which livelihoods and built forms can secure recognition and work [71]. Across the reviewed corpus, rurality is repeatedly treated as a social representation that circulates through images, narratives, and evaluative frames, rather than as a purely territorial attribute [72]. From this perspective, recognition and investability depend not only on physical presence or economic activity, but on whether practices can be rendered legible within dominant scripts of what counts as “properly rural.”

The reviewed studies indicate that vernacular media practices can broaden the representational repertoire, but their wider circulation and longevity often depend on remaining legible within prevailing aesthetic conventions and governance norms. When vernacular styles travel across wider publics and platform ecologies, they may be curated and normalised through platform–state campaigns and training repertoires that instruct creators, stabilise preferred performances of “digital rurality,” and standardise expression into governance-compatible and commercially convertible formats [73]. In mechanism terms, this functions as a symbolic border: it does not simply communicate rural value but filters which performances and settings are recognisable, promotable, and fundable.

Branding templates described in the corpus can accelerate investment and visitor flows while narrowing admissible futures by favouring rural formats that are easy to package visually (e.g., scenic streetscapes, curated homestays, heritage-style renovations) over working landscapes and ordinary architectures (e.g., workshops, storage yards, aquaculture edges, informal extensions) that sustain everyday economies but travel less easily as attractive images [54,55]. The effect is not only representational. When aesthetic criteria are coupled to evaluation metrics (e.g., awards, training rubrics, platform signals) and to administrative or market responses, they can shape what kinds of renovation, enterprise, and public-facing rural life are most likely to consolidate, and what is pushed to the margins as “out of place” even when physically present. In this way, aesthetic governance intersects with platform governance: visibility and monetisation are more easily stabilised when the content, settings, and public-facing identities align with admissible rural scripts, whereas misalignment can limit reach, legitimacy, and the durability of return trajectories.

4.4. Interaction Patterns

The reviewed literature suggests that these mechanisms become most consequential when they combine. The three pathways below describe recurrent conversion sequences, while remaining open to feedback and recursive effects. Institutional incorporation can increase the capacity to sustain platform work; platform visibility can alter local recognition and programme access; and aesthetic recognition can affect both administrative support and commercial reach. Across multiple study types, these interaction patterns recur as linked constraints on eligibility, conversion, and recognition. Pathway A (eligibility, settlement, and conversion): institutional eligibility and service portability condition whether physical relocation can be regularised as residence. Where eligibility remains

uncertain or portability is constrained, platform income opportunities are more likely to remain decoupled from durable membership; where eligibility can be regularised, episodic income is more readily translated into longer-run settlement.

Pathway B (visibility, income, and intermediation): platform visibility can generate short-run earnings, but stabilisation depends on feature access controls, compliance dynamics, and fulfilment capacity, and is frequently mediated by local intermediaries (e.g., committees, brokers, peer groups) who enable permissions, space access, initial clients, and logistical routines. In this pathway, gatekeeping and brokerage shape whether attention becomes repeat orders and whether return becomes economically viable beyond brief spikes.

Pathway C (admissibility, recognition, and investability): aesthetic governance shapes which rural practices, spaces, and public-facing identities are recognised as legitimate and investable. Alignment with admissible rural scripts tends to reduce friction across both platform and administrative arenas (e.g., content eligibility, training repertoires, and public-facing programme criteria), whereas misalignment can limit reach, legitimacy, and the durability of return trajectories even when mobility and effort are comparable.

Taken together, these pathways support a model of internal rural re-bordering in which eligibility, opportunity, and recognition are repeatedly re-sorted inside national territory through interacting administrative, platform, and representational mechanisms. Section 5 interprets these mechanisms and interaction propositions, specifies their boundary conditions more explicitly, and discusses what kinds of empirical follow-up would be needed to test them.

5. Conditional Inclusion: Conversion, Frictions, and Boundary Conditions

The mechanism synthesis developed in Section 4 reframes rural return as a problem of conditional inclusion. Return becomes durable only when physical relocation is converted into three relatively stable outcomes: institutional incorporation, economic stabilisation, and symbolic recognition.

The first implication is conceptual. The synthesis separates physical presence from institutional incorporation (entitlements and record transfer), from economic stabilisation (income that persists beyond episodic spikes), and from symbolic recognition (legitimacy and investability). These dimensions are governed through different rule-sets and evaluative criteria, which helps explain why similar return efforts can produce divergent outcomes. “Bordering” in this framework is not a metaphor for rural–urban difference. It denotes concrete sorting operations—eligibility thresholds, service portability requirements, feature access controls and moderation, programme selection rubrics, and branding templates—that allocate opportunity unevenly.

The second implication concerns interdependence and the location of frictions. The synthesis indicates that eligibility/portability constraints shape whether households can remain in place long enough to stabilise routines, while platform participation conditions shape whether visibility can be converted into earnings with any stability. Aesthetic admissibility further conditions which practices, livelihoods, and built forms become recognisable and fundable. These mechanisms interact through local intermediaries and gatekeeping channels (formal and informal) that broker permissions, resources, and legitimacy. This is where procedural dynamics become analytically important: selection rubrics, procurement briefs, training access, and “quality” vocabularies (including *suzhi* criteria) can operate as classificatory norms that naturalise hierarchy and legitimise exclusion without formal disqualification [74]. Under this interpretation, internal rural re-bordering does not simply “filter returnees”; it shapes the institutional conditions under which

mobility and mediated visibility can (or cannot) be converted into durable livelihoods and recognised membership.

A useful interpretive lens is Wallis's account of 'mobile phones without guarantees', which emphasises that digital infrastructures can enable new opportunities without ensuring inclusion or empowerment [75]. Digital channels can open routes to income and recognition, including through mobile-platform participation in rural contexts [64]. At the same time, platformisation can reproduce social hierarchies and extend monitoring/managerial control into everyday time-spaces, especially where data infrastructures and governance priorities are tightly coupled [18,63,75]. The reviewed literature therefore supports a mechanism-focused interpretation: platform effects depend on how participation conditions intersect with administrative eligibility and local authorisation.

Gendered constraints are best understood within this conversion logic rather than as an adjacent theme. The reviewed scholarship indicates that women can leverage livestreaming, e-commerce, and short-video work to generate income and symbolic capital, but participation is often channelled through "appropriate" genres and interactional expectations. Because ranking and feature eligibility tend to penalise pauses, interruptions linked to childcare, eldercare, or household crises can carry measurable costs—reduced traffic, lost permissions, and the labour of rebuilding audience ties [69,76]. This aligns with accounts of constrained or online presence, in which apparent opportunity coexists with limits on autonomy [69]. In mechanism terms, the point is not that visibility is unavailable, but that conversion requires sustained temporal and affective commitments that are unevenly distributed. The corpus suggests that cooperative back-office arrangements and programme designs that explicitly account for care responsibilities may affect whether platform gains translate into more durable and self-directed livelihoods [77]. The framework can be operationalised by tracing where return stabilises or remains provisional. Institutional bordering can be examined through hukou transfer procedures, school-enrolment rules, healthcare and social-insurance portability, service-centre records, and local eligibility thresholds. Platform governance can be assessed through feature access, account restrictions, recommendation volatility, livestream permissions, monetisation channels, fulfilment capacity, and income stability. Aesthetic governance can be investigated through renovation guidelines, procurement briefs, tourism and branding plans, training materials, model-village criteria, platform content categories, and decisions concerning which livelihoods or built forms receive support. Interviews with returnees, village cadres, platform workers, managers of multi-channel networks (MCNs), local officials, and service-centre staff would connect these procedural materials to lived trajectories of incorporation, exclusion, and partial recognition.

Finally, the mechanism propositions should be read with explicit boundary conditions. Opportunity structures differ across rural localities (manufacturing-linked townships, logistics nodes, amenity/heritage corridors), so the same adjustment may operate differently depending on local economic composition and administrative capacity [78]. Temporal sensitivity also matters: in the post-2019 period, changing health governance, accelerated platform uptake, and shifting consumption rhythms altered participation conditions; as these conditions move, digital niches can expand, contract, or re-stratify. Ideational filters further condition conversion: moralising narratives (e.g., attributing poverty to "laziness") can normalise everyday gatekeeping unless institutions provide accessible channels for contestation and procedural transparency [79].

6. Conclusions

Contemporary "return" to the countryside can be interpreted as internal rural re-bordering (domestic bordering), in which administrative eligibility rules, platform participation conditions, and representational/admissibility criteria jointly shape whether

mobility becomes durable membership. Rather than treating return as a demographic reversal or an individualised choice, the mechanism synthesis developed in this study shows how institutional incorporation, economic stabilisation, and symbolic recognition can come apart, and how their re-alignment is mediated through local intermediaries and the conversion work required to sustain platform-based livelihoods.

This concept paper advances an internal rural re-bordering framework for analysing rural return as a problem of conditional membership. It specifies the concrete sorting operations through which opportunity and legitimacy are allocated inside national territory—eligibility thresholds and portability requirements, platform feature access controls and moderation, programme selection rubrics, and branding templates. On this basis, the synthesis identifies three recurring conversion conditions associated with more durable return: (i) eligibility and record portability that can be regularised; (ii) platform participation conditions stable enough for visibility to be converted into earnings; (iii) livelihoods and built forms that align with admissible rural scripts and become recognisable and investable. Several limitations follow from this literature-based conceptual review design. The synthesis does not estimate prevalence or causal effect sizes and may reflect publication, language, and visibility biases in the underlying literature. It is also concentrated on the post-2019 period, when health governance and accelerated platform uptake reshaped mobility, work routines, and consumption rhythms. Accordingly, the propositions advanced here should be treated as mechanism propositions to be examined and refined through further empirical research, rather than as definitive causal claims. The article therefore speaks to the broader concerns of this Special Issue by demonstrating that post-crisis rural transformation cannot be understood only through movement, recovery, or demographic rebalancing. It must also be examined through the governance mechanisms that decide which mobilities become institutionally supported, economically viable, and publicly recognisable.

Future empirical work should test the mechanism claims by observing conversion processes with procedural precision—for example, through (i) embedded ethnographies of return attempts and intermediary decision-making; (ii) time-use/diary studies of relational labour and its interaction with household care constraints; (iii) surveys routed through local service centres to identify where portability frictions are decisive and which workarounds become durable; (iv) analyses of training/branding materials to assess how admissibility criteria shape what becomes visible and fundable. Because much of the reviewed scholarship concentrates on mega-urban regions, these settings offer a pragmatic locus for initial testing, while comparative work can assess which claims travel to other rural contexts. A later empirical extension could translate the framework into administrative-unit maps of conditional inclusion by combining indicators of service portability, platform access, logistics capacity, programme eligibility, tourism branding, and recognised rural-renovation projects.

Overall, internal rural re-bordering extends existing accounts of inequality and governance by tracing the cross-domain sorting operations through which mobility is converted into residence, livelihood, and recognition. It identifies where frictions accumulate, how they travel across administrative, platform, and representational domains, and why return can remain provisional even when mobility and visibility are actively encouraged. Return is therefore understood as a conditional pathway whose durability depends on the interaction of eligibility, opportunity, and recognition inside national space.

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Abbreviations

YRD	Yangtze River Delta
HRS	Household Registration System
IB	Institutional Bordering
DG	Digital Gating
PLCW	Platformised Livelihoods and Creator Work
SIR	Social Infrastructures of Return
AG	Aesthetic Governance
CAC	Cyberspace Administration of China
SAMR	State Administration for Market Regulation
NRTA	National Radio and Television Administration
MCN	Multi-Channel Network
MIIT	Ministry of Industry and Information Technology
CNKI	China National Knowledge Infrastructure
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies

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