

WORKING PAPERS

Choosing to Stay: Agency in Everyday Mobilities

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Working Paper

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Those Who Stay: How Stayers Transcend Mobility Boundaries

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Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Introduction	3
Literature review	3
Sedentary Bias and Mobility Bias	3
Digital Mobility and Scapes.....	4
Methodology.....	5
Case Studies.....	5
Rooted Mobility: Agency amongst Chinese rural stayers	5
Glocal Mobility: Active stayers in rural Mexico	7
Analysis.....	7
Transcending Spatiotemporal Boundaries	7
Transcending Understandings that Stayers ‘Lack’	9
Transcending the Self, Positionality, and Locality.....	10
Discussion.....	10
Conclusion	11
References.....	13

Abstract

The field of migration is often understood as associated with individuals crossing borders or boundaries and unconcerned with those who do not move. Shifting away from the idea that equates mobility with utopia, this paper challenges prevailing ideas in the field by foregrounding the agency, mobility, and vibrancy of individuals who choose to stay within their local communities—termed *stayers*. Drawing on migration theories and critiquing sedentary and mobility biases, this paper argues that staying is not passive, but a purposeful, resourceful, active, and dynamic act. Through a secondary data analysis of rural communities in China and Mexico, the paper demonstrates how stayers engage in mobilization, leveraging local and transnational networks to sustain livelihoods and shape communities. The findings highlight three modes of transcendence that position stayers as integral actors in meaningful global processes. By decentering physical movement as the sole indicator of mobility and centering alternative and ‘mundane’ forms of mobility, this paper contributes to a more inclusive understanding of migration, where mobility is seen as a spectrum.

Introduction

The field of migration, often being associated with the moving picture of migrants crossing borders and boundaries, appears to be avowedly not concerned with analyzing the lives of those who are immobile. Despite being seemingly geographically bounded, rooted, and left behind in a given territoriality, stayers are in fact, participating in mobile, fluid, empowered processes. Just as mobility decisions acquire specific social meanings, there is a large sense of purpose behind the decisions tied to the act of staying, as well as choices of immobility. In this paper, I will argue that on the surface, mobility may seem exclusive to large-scale movements; however, stayers are also mobile in their empowered and resourceful staying decisions. Migration scholars ought to analyze with broader mobility spectrums, rather than conflating immobility with involuntary immobility. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to centering 'alternative' type of activities within mobility and to blur the lines between immobile and mobile individuals.

With staying and stayers' mobilization as its foci, the present paper is divided into three sections. Firstly, I cover existing literature and provide an overview of the theories which will be employed in support of the argument as well as the methodology. Secondly, I illustrate two case studies of rural stayers, members of villages in China and Mexico who stay. They are seen as confirmatory of the selected theories, as they both involve the local mobilization of resources and entail vibrant daily activities. Thirdly, this idea is further expanded in the analysis section, which discusses three types of transcendence in which the stayers participate in. Finally, I provide a discussion and conclusion section.

For the purpose of this paper, the term 'mobility' will encompass the daily movements that do not have a requirement for minimum distance (Schewel 2019). I argue that the root of the individual is planted and unplanted in different contexts and locations; the individual sits, stands, and sits again in the background of a transforming locality affected by global forces and mobilizes resources while staying: this is mobility.

Literature Review

Sedentary Bias and Mobility Bias

Often seen as the ultimate 'desired outcome', movement has long been seen as an integral part of the utopian tradition (Couton and López 2009). *Vis-à-vis* movement, stillness may be an 'opposing' subject of analysis. Yet, unlike what it is often argued when discussing the movement of human populations, being still does not necessarily coincide with being inactive. If it is assumed that the rootedness of people is the norm, then movement will be investigated by virtue of it being an out-of-the-norm phenomenon. If, on the other hand, movement is seen as the norm, then rootedness will call for further analysis (Carling and Schewel 2017; Schewel 2019). Therefore, the focus of the analysis is dependent on the thinker's starting point.

Sedentary bias takes "mobility" as the norm; yet, instead of further inquiring into the complexity of being sedentary, it takes the mere absence of mobility as failure (Hjälms 2014) – i.e., failure to move away from one's place of origin. *Mobility bias*, then, is the overconcentration of attention on mobility and the neglect of immobility (Schewel 2019). Hjälms argues movers often impose the stigma that staying is tantamount to inaction, attaching a sense of dishonor to the condition of being a stayer (2014); however, the decision to stay is made with agency and is one that is "well-reflected and conscious" (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson 2006; Hanson 2005).

A *stayer* refers to someone who has both the aspiration to stay and the capability to move, or who is voluntarily immobile, at least on a transboundary level, based on the *aspiration-capability framework* developed by Carling and Schewel (2017). For the scope of the current

paper, I will not be discussing involuntary immobility, where the stayer lacks the capability to move. *Staying* should not be a binary entity opposite to *leaving*; stayers are highly mobile in their everyday activities: to the grocery store, to attend classes, to work (Schewel 2019). Instead, mobility can be understood through a continuum instead of a dichotomy.

Voluntary immobility also occurs in places that experience climate change; where mobility is an adaptation strategy for people. Place attachments, belonging, and other ties to the place are all factors that contribute to voluntary immobility amidst climate change (Kutor et al. 2025). In the face of extreme climate conditions, some still prefer immobility (Kutor et al., 2025), moving beyond the notion that mobility is the preferred option as to staying.

Migration scholars have problematized the danger of distinguishing clearly between different groups of migrants and encouraged the need to move beyond these binaries (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). Much like their leaving “counterparts”, stayers also participate in the migratory context in mobilizing resources, relations, organizational strategies, and discourses (Gaibazzi 2010). These local relocations and mobilizations speak to the non-static and non-backward nature of stayers; by seeing mobility as a “daily matter” (Gaibazzi 2010), their everyday life can be understood as mobile. Staying in a certain geographically-bound space does not deem the stayer entirely immobile (Gaibazzi 2010), nor can stayers be categorized within one group as the dynamics behind staying are often complex and diverse.

Digital Mobility and Scapes

Mobility is consistently understood in a narrow and constricting sense in the field. However, the recently prevalent concept of the post-pandemic *digital mobility* dismantles our perception of mobility strictly being physical (Kellerman 2022). Virtual tools and platforms such as Zoom expands mobilities beyond the context of merely being mobile in the physical sense (Cheng et al. 2023). Digitalization has transformed individual experiences with mobility; transnationality and the utilization of *technoscapes* and *mediascapes* will continue to complicate mobility as individuals traverse between various mobility categories (Cheng et al. 2023; Liu and Peng 2024). Digital border crossing can be considered as a sense of empowered mobility; these newer modes of digital connectivity is remaking urban localities (Qi et al. 2022). Virtual and physical mobility are both important aspects of daily lives (Konrad and Wittowsky 2018), but the field seldomly considers virtual mobility to be as important or legitimate as virtual mobility.

To see the fluidity within localities and to explore the in-betweens of mobility categories, we need to connect the local, or the location of ‘dispersal’ of the stayers, to the global; Appadurai’s theory of five dimensions of *global cultural flows* is useful for this purpose (1996). While I will not elaborate on each of the scapes in depth, the holistic argument here is that by engaging with ideoscapes (e.g., ideas), finanscapes (e.g., remittances), technoscapes (e.g., mobile phones), and mediascapes (e.g., news and social media), the ethnocapes (e.g., stayers) experience mobility within their immediate locality. These travelling scapes connect a stayer at ‘home’ to global patterns, encompassing their activities in the backdrop of global migratory and travelling contexts.

To elaborate on Appadurai’s theory, the fluidity of the *ideoscapes* is derived from the grassroots level; stayers produce them through their everyday diverse activities, which interlocks relations from local to global on every scale (Massey 1994). The flows and movements of the stayers reflect not only physical ones, but rather also the invisible political, economic, and cultural ones (Massey et al. 1993).

One of the biggest challenges in theorizing mobility is the limitation of scopes in the level of analysis, of being either too macro or micro (Castles et al. 2014). A part of the attraction of the *scapes* is that they attempt to theorize within the space between the levels. Appadurai’s theory can be used to challenge the notion that mobility is only present when certain political or territorial

borders are crossed. The scapes specifically describe the fluid relations experienced by *glocal* agents (Galván 2009) that not only those who step over borders can experience. Galván emphasizes the mundane nature of daily occurrences that are often overlooked in the worldviews of the scapes (2009). Although these occurrences do not have encompass 'international migration' in order to acquire meaning (Dzenovska 2018), they are globally situated.

Methodology

The analysis will draw upon two case studies, Chinese and Mexican rural communities, chosen for their relevance, ability to exemplify the above theoretical frameworks central to this paper. In exploring the relationship between immobility and agency as well as stayers and mobility, I take a qualitative approach, emphasizing on mobility theoretical frameworks and their connections to the two case studies. I gathered an abundance of secondary sources; however, since the topic at hand is a peripheralized area of study, there is a lack of suitable case studies of stayers.

For the purposes of this analysis, the experiences of staying are described within the dichotomous framework of mobility and immobility. This framing was adopted not to reinforce binary thinking but rather as an analytical tool to unpack the interplay between these concepts. Recognizing the limitations of such dichotomies, the study instead seeks to demonstrate how immobility and mobility exist along a spectrum.

Case Studies

Rooted Mobility: Agency amongst Chinese rural stayers

Having reached 169 million in 2015, China's migrant worker population in urban cities has been increasing on an unprecedented scale; it is estimated that there will be around 500 million migrants floating between urban and rural areas by 2040 (Ye 2018). Due to this phenomenon, China's "hollowing villages" have received much academic attention (Wu and Ye 2016; Ye 2018; Mohabir et al. 2017; May 2010; Liu 2014). Individuals staying behind in the villages not only provide support to maintain familial affairs and facilitate out-migration of their family members, but they also participate in local communal engagements. Staying is a well thought-out and calculated decision instead of a leftover consequence caused by mobility. The choice of staying is an interplay between competing personal considerations; the stayer negotiates this decision with the onset of new life stages – staying exists in a state of flux (Stockdale et al. 2017).

In Ye's study of rural stayers (2018), he employed a plethora of data from 2007-2017 including 1,800 questionnaires for left-behind and non-left-behind populations in ten villages spread across five Chinese provinces, 205 questionnaires for left-behind and non-left-behind women, an ethnographic study of 20 cases of peasants in documenting their livelihood strategies, and 54 rural interviews in Sichuan Province. Ye found that many rural stayers developed a diverse set of livelihood strategies while thriving in the countryside and that staying is not always unintended. He concluded that the rural stayers are a group of heterogenous and active individuals. He noted that the daily activities stayers engage in, such as caring, bringing up, and education for the aged, sick, and young, maintaining the village home, sustaining farming and agriculture, not only contribute to wellbeing of the village but also rural-urban development.

This is aligned with the fact that rural stayers are not outside of the realm of mobility as staying decisions are usually made by the entire household in rural China. Aligned with the theory of *New Economics of Labour Migration* (Stark 1991; Stark and Bloom 1985; Zinda and Zhang 2018), the family acts as a group to pool risks by diversifying sources of income. This is also in

accordance with the Chinese tradition of “managerialism” where livelihood is diversified (Nguyen et al. 2019; Scott 1977) and the individual is to be family-oriented thus all affairs should serve to a common good to the family and beyond (May 2010; Zhang 2010).

In the theory of *Differentiated Mode of Association*, Fei argues that although Chinese society is embedded with collectivity, the self is nonetheless at the centre in a series of concentric circles of hierarchical relationships (1952). The self is to have differentiated attitudes towards people in each of the circles (Si et al. 2019). Being a socialist society at large with collectivist moral norms (Herrmann-Pillath 2016), a stayer engages with members from each concentric circle with the family prioritized, mobilizing through local relationships to ensure the wellbeing and continuous functioning of the greater community. Micro agents’ activities and ideologies are reflecting to higher levels and scales, included in the communal landscape, which can be then aggregated up to national levels. The agents, by providing emotional and physical support and care for the aging elderly and children at home (Liu 2014; Wu and Ye 2016), mobilizes locally and enable both staying and leaving. This helps to problematize the distinct dichotomy of immobility and mobility. By doing so, the stayer maintains their household and community, ensuring the continuous existence of their locality while engaging with glocal relations. This demonstrates the mobility, empowerment, and agency of those who decide to stay.

Although the stayer does not change the place of residence or geographical city, he or she is not sedentary or inactive in the daily activities within the village: starting fires, transporting water, sweeping dirt and mopping floors, tending vegetable fields, feeding farm animals (May 2010). However, these mundane routines are often deemed “normal, unremarkable, ordinary” compared to “dramatic” movements (Bottero 2004; Hjälm 2014). Fei argues that the farmer would plant “half of his body into soil” and it is the inability to move that causes the farmers to be sedentary (1952). I argue that it is these livelihood-sustaining practices and connections to the soil, family, community, and beyond that mobilize the rural stayers to be productive in their everyday lives. The rootedness contributes to mobility of both the stayers and the movers.

When rural stayers participate in communal affairs, they are not only engaging in self-cultivation, but they are also serving the community (Zhang 2010). For instance, many Village Committees have been set up across China in self-governance; members are elected by villagers and are responsible for managing socioeconomic and political affairs (Huhe et al. 2015). This can problematize the dichotomy of West’s association with mobility and autonomy and the East’s association with socialism, lack of development, and immobility (Alamgir 2018; Schwenkel 2014). Many village cadres in Ye’s study hold multiple jobs, they receive salaries to undertake agricultural production and other business activities (2018). I argue here that the ‘intricacies’ seemingly immobile, daily, and mundane events should not be peripheralized in understanding holistic family mobility plans. Not only are the stayers engaging in global processes that exceed localities, but their social positionalities within the villages are also expanded by taking on multiple roles: as civilians with duties toward the communal good, as sons or daughters with duties to parents, as parents with duties to children. Parallel roles are imposed simultaneously on the ‘flexible’ (Ong 1999) stayer, providing the stayer with the ability to utilize different resources by pulling out appropriate tools from the “cultural toolbox” (Swidler 1986).

Although the villages are being referred to as *kongxincun*, meaning literally hollowing villages, empty inside without a heart, the activities exhibited in the villages can speak to challenge this label. Stayers improve and stabilize household welfares. The everyday intricacies that feed into the mundane mobility are often overlooked – they are nonetheless also a part of the “mobility plans” (Kley 2011) of the villagers. Village members often have a strong sense of membership and belonging and staying in the village would be the preferred choice for most rural people; some who stay get equivalent or more social rewards than those who leave (Ye 2018). Stayers can also obtain a sustainable or even high levels of income and many stayers say that the village has a good environment, with access to clean air and fresh produce (Ye 2018).

Glocal Mobility: Active stayers in rural Mexico

Similar to Chinese rural households, households and family members in Mexico also utilize local resources to manage their livings dynamically (Cohen 2002). The latest census in Mexico, another major emigration country, estimated that 21.5 million people move daily or monthly between counties for work (Meta-Codesal 2018). In a study conducted by Cohen, male household heads usually contribute to communal expenses to support local projects and festivals (2002). Most members in the communities would participate in social institutions by paying *cooperación*, cash used for community events and projects and regular service in *tequio* or communal labour (Cohen 2002).

Highly mobilized, the committees organize local affairs on a micro level and are actively engaged. Stayers strategically use a part of the remittances sent back to the community for house building and savings for crises (Cohen 2002; Duquette-Rury 2016). Through these efforts, local networks become established through the support of village-state and village-NGOs (Mutersbaugh 2002). Village leaders are responsible for negotiating with sponsorships from local development initiatives and obtaining grants and aids (Muterbaugh 2002); they are mobilizing resources in these negotiations to better their community, which has national and global effects.

The Mexican household acts as a unit, pooling together its resources to maintain itself (Cohen 2002). Women usually stayed behind to fulfill the responsibilities associated with being a mother, daughter, and wife (Nava 2013). By staying in their local communities, women are not passive: they gain additional decision-making power and autonomy through their participation in collective action (Bojorquez 2009). In a study conducted by Howell, women used their free time to participate in highly mobilizing events such as labour union activities, choral groups, and cultural seminars (1999). In this sense, women's cultural roles are transformative as they resist their associations with solely domestic and reproductive tasks (Howell 1999). Current literature continues to depict stayers as 'waiting' to emigrate, suggesting a sense of passivity (Osei et al. 2022); however, this case study shines light on the vibrant activities of villagers that have global effects.

Analysis

Transcending Spatiotemporal Boundaries

Globalization is both spatial and temporal: spatial as institutions and organizations are constantly being reconfigured and restructured, temporal as capital's turnover time is continuously fastened (Brenner 1999). The stayer, in this picture, transcends space by engaging in activities and events with and as global actors, experiencing forces constantly flowing into the village. The issue of bound spatiality is intimately connected with our understanding of individual immobility and sedentariness. Space is often seen as fixed and immune to changes (Brenner 1999) instead of fluid since boundaries and borders are heavily emphasized in our understanding of what migration entails. It is unproductive for us to understand individuals differently depending on if they have crossed an international border (Feller 2005). If we pay less attention to the divisions of space into chunks of territories and see mobility as a spectrum of activities, we are more able to understand everyday mobilities and displacements of people locally as legitimate and worthwhile, and move further from sedentary bias, which renders stayers as passive and exist in a perpetual state of waiting.

New scales for interpretation emerge in the process of globalization (Jessop 2002) between the macro and micro: movements are not only horizontal in spatiality initiated by

individual actors, but also vertical (Appadurai 1996), travelling through the units of analysis. For instance, in the Mexican cast study, remittances flow into the local economy which then circulate through the peasant households (Kearney 1996). Rural vertical mobility is exhibited as the rural stayers are engaging with global financescapes (Appadurai 1996). This echoes the effects of digital mobility – the growing use of online tools post-pandemic are strengthening and contributing the mobility of those who stay.

It is encouraged that place and home no longer serve as the “stable objects and points of anchorage”, as locality is ephemeral (Chu 2006) and continuously produced. If locality is not still, then the individual within it cannot be still. The fluidity and vitality of agrarian living in the two case studies can show that locality is not a singularly defined space. Even across the ten villages in Ye’s study (2018), village life was heterogenous. Local-to-global influences and vice versa in these contexts grant the mobility of rural stayers.

Globalization overstates the influences of macro processes as if it is devoid of and detached from any localities, unaffected by any individual action (Gálvan 2009); however, individual actions are the building blocks of globalization. In other words, aggregate flows are sums of “individual moves undertaken on the basis of individual cost-benefit calculations” (Massey et al. 1993). As exemplified, both Chinese and Mexican stayers participate in communal affairs that not only have impacts on the village, but also ‘feedback’ into national and global *ideoscapes* of rural governance. The spaces of everyday life in the village are funneled into the “nation-space” (Sparke 1998), beyond the village toward the “global space”. Dialectically, household decisions are also affected by local socioeconomic conditions, which are influenced by changing political, social, and economic structures at the national and international levels (Massey 1990).

On the other hand, the stayer transcends time by taking on additional labour as the population of the villages are often shrinking, stretching out their schedules and multiplying their workloads as capital’s turnover time fastens in globalization (Cook and Dong 2011; Brenner 1999). For instance, the amount of time Chinese rural stayers spend on farm work was increased after family members left (Chang et al. 2011). The rural stayer mobilizes from one role to another, fulfilling more responsibilities than before the emigration of family members. Through interactions with other *ethnoscapes* (Appadurai 1996), the transformation of local responsibilities occurs. The flexibility of the rural stayer is emphasized: the “inside-outside” dual-earner model of wife staying in the village while husband moves for work becomes the “outside-outside” model where both partners are engaging in labour outside of the household (Fan 2009). Both spatiality and temporality are fluid as the wife and husband are not only changing spatially-bound responsibilities (i.e. inside-outside) associated with being women and men but also temporal boundaries as the two are experiencing new time-specific work.

Having the capability to move and the desire to remain in the origin location, to stay close to home is *not* to be immobile (Meta-CodeSal 2018). To be rooted at home does not mean no movement is present. Individuals who are rooted somewhere are not isolated, nor do they exist in a vacuum. Rather, they have engagements and responsibilities that enable the capabilities of many family members who emigrate – their daily mobilities are enabling the mobilities of family and community members. In “emptying villages” where large migratory flows leave, the remaining villagers are not static. The constantly changing scapes of the stayers can only be understood fully using glocal lens (Galván 2009). It is at the local level that socioeconomic spaces are shaped and global migration patterns are traced (Wise and Covarrubias 2009).

Chinese and Mexican stayers exist beyond solely economic calculations (Kelly and Lusia 2006) as (im)mobility plans are made based on an interweaving web of reasons and values that cannot be summarized in a homogeneous manner. It should not be a prerequisite of mobility for an individual to embark on a time-consuming journey to a conventionally ‘foreign’ destination. The stayers experience mobility within their immediate locality, moving beyond conventional understandings of spatiotemporal boundaries. This helps us to surpass limitations of mobility strictly being physical. Having spatial or temporal restrictions on migration (Collins 2011) is

unproductive as it excludes certain people from being mobile when they are in fact moving. Temporal boundaries are also reconstructed as mobility is now a daily matter. Staying enables leaving and vice versa, destructing linear chronologies. The division between what constitutes a migrant vis-à-vis a stayer does not have to be as distinct as it seems; the definition of mobility needs to be more inclusive.

Transcending Understandings that Stayers ‘Lack’

While it is true that in times of conflict, those who stay are at times ones without the capability to leave; a “hierarchy of dispersal” and of destinations exists where those with greater resources can flee away from the location of conflict (Van Hear 2004). However, voluntary immobility does exist in varying scenarios within the diverse group of stayers, such as the group of Chinese rural stayers who prefer to stay in the village due to their social and environmental ties (Carling and Schewel 2017; Ye 2018). Stayers are portrayed passively, always waiting to move. We must problematize the notion that all stayers are backward and lacking in something that the migrants have.

One way to do this is to blur the ‘clear’ differentiation between those who are mobile and those who are not. As the focus of most scholars and policy makers remains on macro movements, daily micro actions are often dismissed as ‘alternative’ forms of participation in the migration field. Staying is attached with characteristics including loyalty and duty; it holds rewarding components such as security, liberty, and close connections with home and integrity (Wastl-Walter 2010); therefore, the idea that stayers are at the losing end of the globalized processes ought to be reversed.

As shown in the Chinese example, staying can be used to provide support and care for the elderly and children, an ancient moral Confucian responsibility to the innermost concentric circle of relations - family (Fei 1952). Therefore, the stayer is one who has the ‘something’ that the one who leaves lacks. Staying decisions “well-reflected and conscious” (Hanson 2005) instead of forced and last-resort choice. Similar to Gaibazzi’s ethnographic study of young men who “sit” in the Gambia River Alley where “sitting” refers to staying behind and leading a sedentary life (2010), the activities and mobilities of these young men transcend this understanding.

On the surface, “sitting” is associated with unproductivity, since a busy person is described as someone mobile, always *hustling* (Gaibazzi 2010). However, sitting is heavily embedded in culture: young men must “sit” in order to become established in the community as agents, where they learn to cultivate physical, social, and ethical habits (Gaibazzi 2015). They gain an appreciation for rural living, which entails the understanding of frugality and hardships through “rural suffering”. One striking example he used was the calloused hands as an embodiment of this kind of suffering – the process of earning these hands is a highly mobile and productive one.

In another study conducted in Tajikistan, “sitting” is associated with keeping the village full of vitality, busying with daily work and diverse forms of sociality, challenging the notion of “sitting and doing nothing” (Tirado 2019). More specifically, the villagers participate in continuous social engagements such as planning for future family projects, rituals, ceremonies (Tirado 2019). This can be seen as a form of ‘everyday mobility’ that is empowering (Hanson 2010; Zharkevich 2019). It is important to see agrarian living as unfixed, changing, and dynamically fluid (Galván 2009) to move beyond the way of thinking that stayers lack. Stayers’ staying statuses may not be static since (im)mobility is not a rigid process but is becoming more fluid in today’s world (Chen 2024).

Staying acquires meanings; by navigating through the local exchanges, the stayer stays in touch with the macro forces that organize both the local and global landscape. To stay is not to be inactive; through the busy schedules rural stayers have, they may be more mobile than emigrants. After the emigrant leaves the village, it should not be assumed that mobilities of any scale will be continuously produced. Instead of always imagining leaving as the superior option,

it can also be understood as escaping to an “easier life” and demonstration of a lack of responsibility (Wastl-Walter 2010). While it is not encouraged to indulge in this way of interpretation, this is an example showing that these dichotomies of staying and leaving are fragile and can be easily broken. As migration scholars, it is imperative to re-centre the norm of mobility and understand rootedness or staying as empowered, dynamic, and the norm, only then can we unsee sedentariness as a failure.

Categories of staying and leaving are constructed; we need to look carefully at the politics of the categories and understand that dichotomies do not only reflect the world but also limit it as well (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018). Leaving has been the desired form of participation in global exchanges; as meanings attached with movements can be reversed if we shift the focus to staying as ‘utopia’ and re-think the daily activities of stayers to give them new meanings. Stayers, then, cannot be boxed within a category of ‘immobile populations’ due to their seemingly fixed lifestyles in one place as they not only engage in meaningful activities, but support larger global forces. Immobility, therefore, needs to be understood as dynamic spectrum, “mobile populations may become immobile and immobile populations may become mobile.” (Zickgraf 2021)

Transcending the Self, Positionality, and Locality

The story of a stayer entails a set of complex and personal engagements as well as their interactions with the broader household, community, nation, and world (Sahadeo 2019). The identity of the stayer is not more simple or transparent than that of a “transboundary” migrant; it is also made up of an “array of relationships, activities, and positions shaping their multiple identities” (Gálvan 2009). Through fulfilling a plethora of roles with a variety of responsibilities, the stayer constantly transforms, shapes, and positions oneself in accordance with the changing locality. Through being a mother or father, daughter or son, and wife or husband, the stayer moves horizontally through completing tasks associated with each respective identity and vertically through influencing and being influenced by larger forces. This is an alternative way to understanding migration and migratory actions: by navigating through institutions, destinations, and roles, the individual is continuously participating in “mundane forms of mobility” (Zharkevich 2019).

Although regulatory infrastructure travels outward and downward from the capital city to the peripheries (Xiang and Lindquist 2014), structurally limiting the agents’ activities, the agents are dialectically shaping the macro system by participating in activities that may alter policies and regulations. Consequences of events within the locality may extend beyond the locality itself. On another note, Brubaker and Cooper argue that the concept of identity of a stayer does not ‘travel’ (2000); I would argue while identity as a concept may be static, identity itself is fluid and travels with movements in the local context. The rural stayer can also be uprooted through daily activities that challenge their previous assumptions; for instance, this is possible with the example of a Mexican stayer attending cultural seminars. If he or she experiences a change in *ideoscapes*, his or her relationship with soil, land, scapes can transform through repeated processes of rooting and uprooting in new localities that exist in the village. Therefore, uprooting is not exclusive to macro-scale movements.

Discussion

The present paper advances the field of migration studies by critically looking at the often-overlooked group of stayers, which has been marginalized in migration and mobility discourses. By problematizing the dichotomy of mobility and immobility, I challenge the sedentary and mobility

biases entrenched in the discipline. The paper contributes to a more inclusive understanding of mobility, highlighting the complexities, uniqueness, agency of those who stay.

Policies often prioritize displaced populations; I underscore the importance of recognizing and addressing diverse needs of stayers. This research calls for policy changes that support stayers' wellbeing, such as rural development programs that further empower stayers and continue to contribute to the betterment of their wellbeing. The new understandings of mobility could inform more equitable policies that value the contributions of stayers to their communities alongside contributions migrants make and challenge the dominant narrative that equates mobility and remittances with progress.

While this paper fills in the neglect of immobility in migration literature, it is important to acknowledge here that the absence of primary empirical data is a limitation. Though the literature and theoretical frameworks are robust, I do not provide direct engagement with the lived realities of the populations at hand. Primary data such as interviews or ethnographies would enhance the analytical depth and rigor of the two case studies. The exclusion of primary data in this case was necessitated by practical constraints. Furthermore, further discussions of digital mobility in these two case studies, a phenomenon that has proliferated exponentially after the COVID-19 pandemic would strengthen the argument, as it further dismantles the binary of what is traditionally understood as mobile and immobile. However, I did not include these discussions due to the lack of existing empirical evidence.

Conclusion

Stayers are often under-researched (Ni Laoire 2001), with the attention fixed on those cross borders. Through bringing stayers to the centre of migration studies, we are not only able to understand people's experiences of mobility but people's experience *with* it (Galván 2015). Through the three types of transcendences discussed, the definition of mobility transcends. To re-think immobility is to imagine mobility as "an active process" instead of an absence of movement (Coulter et al. 2016).

The two case studies given both entail staying as a household decision, needless to say that there are many other reasons why people stay – in order to protect their country, to act as a guarantor for the country's existence (Dzenovska 2020), to have comfort and familiarity, to stay close to loved ones. There are also legitimate reasons as to why people are involuntarily immobile, such as lack of financial resources or physical capabilities. Stayers, being a diverse group of individuals, experience both mobility and marginality (Jamieson 2000): they are also pushed and pulled by institutional forces such as the state, family, educational facilities, and work. I attempted, in this paper, to contribute to the nuanced complexities of "global movement" (Abodunrin 2018) by looking at those who stay and problematizing the definition of mobility and migration.

Mobility, as intrinsic features of the world (de Haas 2007), that extend from the individual, is everywhere and everyday. Human movements "have been part of human history from the earliest times" (Castles and Miller 2003). This argument is true for non-movement as well, staying and being rooted are a part of the human desire for a sense of belonging. Using the concepts of sedentary bias, mobility bias, scapes, digital mobility, I have shown that through "mundane forms of mobility" (Zharkevich 2019), mobility can occur with agency and choice in the lives of both Chinese and Mexican rural stayers. Mobility is seen as a continuous process, occurring all the time, only at different levels of complexity (Mabogunje 1970).

Through the four theories and three transcendences, I have argued that the stayers are able to move beyond spatiotemporal boundaries if we shift our focus away from the divisions of space and time; the understandings that stayers lack 'something' can be challenged; the stayer's sense of self travels in the positionality and locality in the village and beyond. Moving beyond the scope of the paper, analysis of forming a "sedentary identity" would be useful in understanding

influences of socioeconomic class dispositions, gender, and age on issues of staying and (im)mobility. Although migration studies continuously undermine the group that stays static, only by rethinking the processes of staying can we create a more inclusive and truly multidisciplinary field of study.

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