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# From "Exam Hopping" to "Taking Root": Identity Construction and Institutional Anchoring of a Primary School Teacher in a Chinese County

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**Abstract:** This narrative life history study examines how China's bianzhi (The term *bianzhi* refers to the system of established posts in Chinese public institutions. For public school teachers, obtaining *bianzhi* means being formally employed by the government with a permanent position, enjoying stable salaries, social welfare benefits, and public housing subsidies, and cannot be easily dismissed unless serious misconduct occurs. It is a structural variable unique to the Chinese sociocultural and education system.) (permanent post) system1 shapes the professional identity of teachers in county-level schools. Through three in-depth interviews—including a timeline interview—and one week of field observation, the study traces the case of Ming, a teacher who relocated from Shandong to N city, a county-level city in northern Guangdong Province after three years of nationwide "exam hopping" (xunkao) ("*Exam hopping*" *(xunkao)* is a spatial mobility strategy adopted by teacher candidates in China. Faced with hyper-competitive local recruitment (often with passing rates below 5%), candidates travel nationwide to sit for various regional exams, treating the competitive examination system as a nationwide "fishing expedition" for stable employment.). Findings reveal a three-stage process: (1) spatial mobility, driven by familial pressure and regional exam culture; (2) institutional anchoring, whereby salary adjustment and free dormitory accommodation anchored Ming's physical presence while identity remained suspended between "being here" and "wanting to leave"; and (3) identity suspension, characterised by a "saying–doing" gap—verbal contentment coexisting with the strategic accumulation of transferable capital. The study proposes the concept of institutional anchoring to explain this paradox, complicating prevailing "affective–value" and "rational–interest" frameworks in teacher retention literature. It argues that retention policies must layer structural reforms upon material provision to address deeper structures of spatial injustice. The findings offer insights for teacher governance in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in contexts marked by permanent staffing systems and urban–rural resource disparities.

**Keywords:** Teacher Identity; Institutional Anchoring; Exam Hopping; Migrant Teachers; China; Narrative Life History.

## 1. Introduction

China's educational governance reforms in recent years, including the "Double Reduction" policy and the tightening of permanent post quotas, have intensified the uneven distribution of qualified teachers between urban and rural areas [1]. Within this context, a distinctive and growing pattern of teacher mobility has emerged in county-level schools: "exam hopping" (xunkao), whereby prospective teachers travel across provinces to compete for permanent public-school posts (bianzhi). Unlike voluntary rural teacher programmes in other Asia-Pacific contexts (e.g., Teach for India or Japan's JET Programme), China's bianzhi system combines strong job security with rigid spatial anchoring, making it a powerful institutional force in shaping teachers' career trajectories and professional identities.

Existing research on teacher mobility in China has predominantly focused on two axes: the urban-oriented outflow of rural teachers [2] and the retention of local teachers through affective attachment or financial incentives. These studies, however, share a common limitation: they treat teacher retention as either an emotional commitment to place or a rational calculation of costs and benefits. Consequently, they overlook an emerging group—teachers who secure permanent posts through competitive exams but remain institutionally anchored rather than emotionally rooted. This blind spot is particularly evident in studies of non-core subject teachers, such as physical education (PE) teachers, whose experiences of mobility and settlement differ markedly from those of Chinese Language and Mathematics teachers. [3]

To address this gap, this study draws on narrative life history methodology to examine the case of Ming, a teacher from Shandong province who spent three years "exam hopping" before securing a permanent post in a county-level city in northern Guangdong Province. By tracing Ming's trajectory from "exam hopping" to "taking root," the study asks: How does the permanent post system shape the spatial trajectory of a teacher who moved across provinces? What institutional arrangements anchor the teacher in a county school? And how does this anchoring relate to the teacher's professional identity?

This study makes two contributions. First, it introduces the concept of institutional anchoring to explain how salary adjustments, free dormitory accommodation, and spatial arrangements collectively anchor teachers' physical presence without necessarily generating a sense of belonging. Second, it challenges the prevailing "affective–rational" binary in teacher retention literature by showing that identity suspension—a state of "embodied presence, identity floating"—is a structural rather than individual phenomenon. These findings resonate beyond China, offering insights for other Asia-Pacific societies grappling with teacher maldistribution and the institutional governance of rural education.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts narrative life history as its methodological framework, underpinned by the epistemological premise that individual lives are not merely lived but told—and that these tellings are always shaped by the institutional contexts in which they unfold. [4] Rather than treating Ming's experience as idiosyncratic, the study treats his narrative as a "window" onto the broader structural forces governing teacher mobility in contemporary China. [5] The life history approach is particularly suited to this inquiry because it allows for the examination of how macro-level policies—such as the permanent post system—are mediated through micro-level, embodied experiences of space, work, and identity. [6]

### 2.1. Participant and Research Site

The participant, Ming(a pseudonym used to protect the participant's identity), is a male physical education teacher born in 1995 in Shandong Province, eastern China. After graduating from a provincial normal university with a major in sports training, Ming spent three years (2018–2021) travelling across multiple provinces to sit for competitive examinations for permanent teaching posts (bianzhi). In 2021, he secured a position at S Primary School, located in a county-level city in southeastern China . At the time of data collection, Ming had been teaching at S Primary School for three years and also served as a homeroom teacher—an atypical role allocation for a PE teacher within the Chinese educational context, and one that intensified his daily engagement with students, parents, and school space.

S Primary School is a public fully fledged primary school situated on a hillside, characterised by steep slopes, tiered playgrounds, and a campus layout that reflects the mountainous topography of the surrounding county. The school provides free dormitory accommodation for non-local teachers—a critical material condition that shaped Ming's settlement experience.

### 2.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through three primary methods, following the principle of triangulation [7]:

Timeline interviews. The core method was a modified timeline interview (Sheridan et al., 2011), conducted twice with Ming (March and May 2024). Ming was asked to draw a horizontal line representing his life from 2010 to the present, marking key events: the start of university, exam attempts, job changes, salary adjustments, and shifts in professional aspirations. This visual artefact served as both a mnemonic device and an analytic tool, enabling Ming to narrate his life as a sequence of spatially anchored decisions rather than isolated incidents.

Semi-structured interviews. Three in-depth interviews (each 60–90 minutes) were conducted, covering: (a) family background and motivations for entering the teaching profession; (b) experiences of "exam hopping" and reasons for choosing N City; (c) daily work routines, including teaching PE classes, managing a homeroom, and navigating school space; (d) perceptions of salary, housing, and career prospects; and (e) future plans and spatial imaginaries (e.g., moving to an urban centre). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Field observation and material artifacts.The researcher spent one week (five working days) conducting non-participant observation at S Primary School, focusing on Ming's movement through school space (e.g., climbing slopes between classes, supervising morning exercises on the tiered playground), interactions with colleagues, and use of the dormitory room. Additionally, Ming provided selected material artifacts—including screenshots of salary payments (with identifying information removed), photographs of the dormitory, and his handwritten exam preparation notes—which were used to corroborate interview accounts.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Analysis followed a three-stage narrative analytic process:

Global reading. Transcripts and timeline drawings were read holistically to identify the overarching plot structure of Ming's narrative: a movement from mobility (exam hopping) to anchoring (settlement in N City) to suspension (identity tension).

Thematic coding.Guided by the research questions, transcripts were coded inductively for instances of mobility, anchoring, identity, and spatial practice. Constant comparison was used to refine categories.

Narrative reconstruction.The findings were organised around three narrative threads—"exam hopping," "institutional anchoring," and "embodied presence, identity suspension"—each weaving together Ming's voice (direct quotations) and the researcher's interpretive commentary.

### 2.4. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines for narrative research involving human participants . Informed consent was obtained in writing from Ming, covering interview recording, observation, and the use of material artifacts. To protect anonymity, all identifying details—including the participant's name, school name, and city name—have been replaced with pseudonyms. Geographic specificity was deliberately reduced to prevent deductive disclosure. A draft of the findings was returned to Ming for member checking , and he confirmed the accuracy of the representations.

### 2.5. Researcher Positionality

As a teacher educator based in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA), the author teaches pre-service teacher education courses and maintains close familiarity with the employment trajectories of teacher graduates. Several of my former students have taken up positions in primary and secondary schools across northern Guangdong, which first drew my attention to the "exam hopping" phenomenon. Furthermore, as part of my institution's rural revitalization support programme, I have visited numerous schools in northern Guangdong on multiple occasions, gaining direct observational exposure to the material and spatial conditions of teaching in these contexts. This background shaped both the initial research design and my interpretive sensitivity to the spatial inequalities embedded in China's teacher deployment system. However, I sought to maintain a reflexive stance throughout, acknowledging that my position as an "insider-outsider" [8]—simultaneously connected to the region through institutional ties and yet external to the daily lived experience of teachers like Ming—may have influenced both data collection (e.g., Ming's willingness to discuss salary dissatisfaction) and interpretation. Regular debriefing with colleagues and memo-writing were used to mitigate bias.

# 3. Findings and Analysis

Guided by the research questions, this section presents Ming's narrative through three interconnected themes: (1) "exam hopping" as a spatial practice under the permanent post system; (2) institutional anchoring through salary, dormitory, and terrain; and (3) the resulting state of "embodied presence, identity suspension." Ming's voice is foregrounded through direct quotations, followed by interpretive commentary that situates his experience within broader structural conditions.

## 3.1. "Exam Hopping": A Spatial Practice under the Permanent Post System

### 3.1.1. The Pressure Cooker of Shandong's Exam Culture

Ming's trajectory began not with a personal calling to teach, but with familial and regional expectations rooted in Shandong Province's intense exam culture. His parents, both factory workers, viewed the permanent post (bianzhi) as the only route to stability: "They kept saying, 'You must get a bianzhi. It's permanent security.' Otherwise, you'll end up like us.'" This familial pressure intersected with Shandong's hyper-competitive teacher recruitment environment, where passing rates for permanent posts often fall below 5%. For Ming, the decision to pursue teaching was less a vocational choice than a spatially mediated survival strategy—a way to escape the precariousness of working-class life through geographic mobility.

### 3.1.2. Three Years of Nationwide Mobility

Between 2018 and 2021, Ming engaged in what he termed "exam hopping" (xunkao): travelling across provinces to sit for teacher recruitment examinations. His timeline interview revealed a dense map of movements: Shandong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Guangdong. Each attempt required significant financial investment (travel, accommodation, exam fees) and emotional labour. Ming described the period as "mentally exhausting—you're always travelling, always preparing, but never arriving." The COVID-19 pandemic intensified this instability, with exam cancellations and lockdowns disrupting his plans. Crucially, "exam hopping" was not merely about finding a job; it was about finding a permanent post in a location that balanced competitiveness with livability. As Ming noted, "I didn't care where, as long as the competition wasn't insane and the salary could cover my basics."

### 3.1.3. "Just Happened to be There": N City as a Compromise

In 2021, Ming secured a position at S Primary School. When asked why he chose N City, his response was revealing: "It wasn't really a choice. N City was just where I happened to pass." This statement underscores the contingency and compromise inherent in the permanent post system. N City, a county-level city in northern Guangdong Province, was not Ming's preferred destination (he had initially targeted urban centres in the GBA). Rather, it represented a low-competition niche—a place where his chances of securing a post were higher due to lower applicant numbers. The end of "exam hopping" thus marked not the fulfilment of a place-based aspiration, but a shift from active searching to passive placement. As Ming reflected, "Once I got in, I stopped thinking about where else I could go. I just… stayed."

## 3.2. Institutional Anchoring: Salary, Dormitory, and the Mountain Terrain

### 3.2.1. Salary Adjustment as a Turning Point

Ming's initial settlement in N City was fragile. Upon arrival in 2021, his monthly salary was "barely enough to cover food and transport." He confessed to considering another round of exams for posts in the Pearl River Delta: "I thought, maybe 2022 I'll try Guangzhou or Shenzhen. The pay there is higher." This plan was abandoned following a salary adjustment in mid-2022, when N City implemented a district-wide pay raise for public school teachers. Ming recalled: "Suddenly, my salary jumped. It wasn't rich, but it was enough to save a little each month. I thought, 'Okay, I can do this.'" This moment functioned as an institutional anchor: the salary increase did not make Ming "happy," but it recalibrated his cost–benefit calculus, making the prospect of leaving financially less attractive. Notably, Ming's satisfaction was relative, not absolute: "I'm not complaining, but I know if I go to Guangzhou, I'd earn double. Still, the competition there is crazy. Here, at least I have a life."

### 3.2.2. The Dormitory as a "Landing Anchor"

For migrant teachers, housing is often a more immediate concern than salary. Ming initially worried about securing accommodation: "I'm from Shandong. Finding a flat here, paying rent—it's stressful." His anxiety was alleviated when the school assigned him a free dormitory room. The room, though "small, with basic facilities," provided two critical functions: economic relief (eliminating rent) and psychological security (a private space to rest and prepare lessons). Ming described it as "a place to land"—a buffer between the dislocation of migration and the demands of daily work. The dormitory, in essence, became a material anchor that reduced Ming's spatial vulnerability. As he stated, "Not having to worry about rent lets me focus on teaching. That's a big deal when you're far from home."

### 3.2.3. The Vertical Terrain and Embodied Adaptation

N City's physical geography—characterised by karst hills, clustered peaks, and gently sloping terrain on the city's outskirts—profoundly shaped Ming's daily experience. Notably, Ming grew up in a mountainous county in Shandong Province; this prior familiarity with upland terrain made his adaptation to N City's hilly landscape relatively smooth. As a PE teacher, his work involved frequent movement across the slightly elevated campus—navigating short flights of stairs between buildings and walking the sloping paths that connected the playground, dormitory, and teaching blocks: "There are a few slopes and staircases around campus. My legs were sore for the first couple of weeks, but now it's just part of the day." This embodied interaction with terrain gradually transformed the school from an alien space into a familiar one. Over time, Ming's body adapted to the mild verticality of N City's terrain, a process that paralleled his institutional anchoring. The school's Confucius statue—nearly identical to the one that stood at the centre of his university campus in Shandong—was initially perceived as "just a decoration," and eventually became integrated into his spatial routine. As he noted, "I've seen this kind of statue since college. I don't think about it anymore. It's just… part of the school." This habitual familiarity further anchored Ming's body in place, even as his emotional identification remained ambivalent.

### 3.3. "Embodied Presence, Identity Suspension"

#### 3.3.1. "Being Realistic": Conditional Acceptance Rather Than Belonging

Ming frequently described his attitude as "being realistic": "I'm being realistic. I focus on doing my job well, improving my skills. That's what matters." This pragmatism, however, masked a deeper lack of belonging. While Ming appreciated the dormitory and salary, he remained acutely aware of his status as an "outsider." During breaks, local colleagues discussed "children's schooling" and "local gossip"—topics in which Ming could not participate. He described feeling "a bit left out, not in a bad way, just… different." This social exclusion, though subtle, prevented the development of a strong place-based identity. Ming's realism was thus a coping mechanism—a way to maintain professional dignity in the absence of communal belonging.

#### 3.3.2. The Urban Aspiration: "Considering Moving to The City Centre"

Despite his physical anchoring, Ming's professional identity remained future-oriented and urban-aspirational. He openly discussed plans to transfer to a school in N City's urban centre: "If a new school opens downtown, I'll definitely apply. The opportunities there are better—more competitions, more visibility." This desire was not merely about prestige; it reflected a structural reality. Ming perceived county-level schools as "resource-poor": "Promotion is slow here. Competitions? They're all about connections. If you want to grow, you have to fight for attention." His identity, therefore, was split between his current location and a desired urban future. As he put it, "My body is here, but my mind is thinking about where I could go next."

#### 3.3.3. The Saying–doing Gap

The most striking evidence of Ming's "identity suspension" was the disjunction between his stated contentment and his future-oriented actions. In interviews, he repeatedly affirmed his satisfaction: "I'm content. The job is stable, the kids are nice." Yet his actions told a different story: he actively sought opportunities to publish papers, join research projects, and win teaching awards—activities aimed at accumulating transferable capital. When asked about this discrepancy, Ming did not perceive it as contradictory: "Being content doesn't mean stopping. I'm building my resume so I have options." This saying–doing gap is the hallmark of institutional anchoring: the system secures the teacher's body while leaving identity unfinished. Ming's narrative reveals that stability and aspiration are not opposites but coexisting conditions under the permanent post system.

## 4. Discussion

This study set out to examine how the permanent post system shapes the mobility trajectory, institutional anchoring, and professional identity of a non-local teacher in a Chinese county school. By tracing Ming's journey from "exam hopping" to "taking root," the findings challenge dominant explanations of teacher retention and offer a new conceptual lens—institutional anchoring—for understanding the paradoxical state of "embodied presence, identity suspension."

### 4.1. From "Willingness to Stay" to "Institutional Anchoring"

Existing literature on teacher retention in rural and regional contexts predominantly operates within two frameworks: the affective–value perspective, which emphasises emotional attachment to place and students, and the rational–interest perspective, which focuses on salary, working conditions, and career advancement. Both frameworks share a common assumption: that retention is the outcome of an individual's active choice, whether driven by sentiment or calculation.

Ming's case disrupts this assumption. His decision to remain in N City was not rooted in a deep affection for the locale, nor was it a purely rational assessment of long-term career prospects. Rather, it was the result of a series of institutional arrangements—salary adjustment, free dormitory accommodation, and the embodied adaptation to N City's hilly landscape—that collectively "locked" his body in place. This process, which we term institutional anchoring, differs fundamentally from voluntary retention. It does not require the teacher to identify with the place; it only requires that the costs of leaving (economic, psychological, and spatial) outweigh the perceived benefits. In this sense, institutional anchoring represents a shift from "willingness to stay" to "being anchored to stay"—a subtle but critical distinction that reframes retention as a structural condition rather than an individual disposition.

### 4.2. The Paradox of "Anchoring without Belonging"

A further contribution of this study lies in its illumination of identity suspension as a structural rather than individual phenomenon. Throughout the findings, Ming's narrative revealed a persistent gap between his stated contentment ("I'm practical," "I'm content") and his future-oriented actions (accumulating transferable capital, aspiring to move to an urban centre). This "saying–doing gap" is not evidence of hypocrisy or indecision; it is the logical outcome of institutional anchoring.

When a teacher's body is anchored by material and spatial arrangements, but his professional identity is not nourished by affective belonging or developmental opportunity, a state of "identity suspension" emerges. Ming's identity is neither fully rooted in N City nor entirely detached from it; it exists in a liminal zone between "being here" and "aspiring to leave." This finding resonates with recent scholarship on teacher mobility in the Asia-Pacific region, which highlights the "stuck" or "stalled" trajectories of teachers in disadvantaged areas. However, whereas these studies often attribute such stasis to individual deficits or lack of resilience, our concept of identity suspension locates the problem in the institutional production of spatial inequality. Ming is not "failing" to identify with his workplace; he is responding rationally to a system that offers material security but withholds developmental justice.

### 4.3. Implications for the Asia-Pacific Context

The concept of institutional anchoring carries significant implications for teacher education and policy across the Asia-Pacific region. In many societies—including Vietnam, India, and the Philippines—teacher distribution is governed by similar combinations of civil service systems, rural posting requirements, and urban–rural resource disparities. In such contexts, policies aimed at "attracting and retaining" teachers

often focus on financial incentives or professional development opportunities, assuming that teachers will respond as rational actors. Our findings suggest that such policies may succeed in anchoring bodies without securing identities, leading to a workforce that is physically present but emotionally and professionally disengaged.

For policymakers in China and beyond, the challenge is not merely to "keep teachers in place," but to foster conditions under which anchoring can gradually evolve into belonging. This requires moving beyond salary adjustments and housing provisions—necessary as they are—to address the deeper structures of spatial injustice that underpin teacher identity. Specifically, it calls for:

Developmental justice: Ensuring equitable access to promotion, competitive opportunities, and professional recognition in county-level schools.

Social inclusion: Creating opportunities for non-local teachers to participate in local communities and collegial networks.

Spatial reimagining: Designing school environments that are not merely functional, but conducive to place-based identity formation.

# 5. Conclusion

This study has traced the journey of Ming, a non-local PE teacher, from nationwide "exam hopping" to institutional anchoring in a Chinese county school. By employing a narrative life history approach, it has shown how the permanent post system—through salary adjustment, free dormitory accommodation, and adaptation to N City's hilly landscape—secures teachers' physical presence while leaving their professional identities suspended. The concept of institutional anchoring captures this paradox: the teacher's body is fixed in place by material and spatial arrangements, yet their sense of belonging remains oriented toward future urban possibilities.

Three key insights emerge. First, teacher retention in county schools is less a matter of affective commitment or rational choice than of structural accommodation. Ming's decision to stay was a pragmatic acceptance of constraints shaped by the permanent post system, not a positive embrace of N City. Second, the "saying–doing gap" in Ming's narrative—verbal contentment versus action-oriented accumulation of transferable capital—is not an individual failing but a rational response to a system that offers stability without developmental justice. Third, institutional anchoring produces a spatial identity characterised by embodied presence and identity suspension, reflecting the lived reality of many non-local teachers in China's county-level schools and comparable Asia-Pacific contexts.

For policymakers, these findings caution against equating physical presence with professional commitment. Retention policies that rely solely on salary or housing may anchor bodies but risk cultivating a workforce that is "present yet absent." To foster genuine commitment, policies must address deeper structures of spatial injustice—ensuring equitable promotion and professional recognition in county schools, creating inclusive environments for non-local teachers, and reimagining school spaces as sites of belonging rather than mere workplaces.

This study is limited by its focus on a single male PE teacher in one county-level city. Future research should examine how gender, subject discipline, and regional variations shape institutional anchoring, and employ longitudinal designs to clarify whether identity suspension is transitional or persistent.

In closing, Ming's story is a window onto broader dynamics of teacher mobility in contemporary China. His narrative reminds us that to "take root" is not simply to occupy a place, but to imagine a future there. Until the permanent post system offers not only stability but also dignity and development, the teachers who sustain China's county schools will remain, in a profound sense, anchored but not yet home.

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