

Exploring the Population Exodus of Northeast China from the Perspective of Cultural Sociology——Cultural Blockage and the Outflow of College Students

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Abstract. The spatial migration of the population is a social phenomenon since ancient times. With the relatively stable natural growth rate, migration and flow have become significant factors affecting the size and structure of the regional population. According to the seventh national census in 2021, more serious population loss can be seen in Northeast China, where the outflow of a large number of high-quality population will lead to insufficient driving force for regional economic development. It has also become one of the vital reasons for the economic plight in Northeast China. Based on the employment emigration rate of college graduates in Shenyang, this paper explores the root of population outflow in Northeast China from the perspective of cultural sociology and puts forward relevant countermeasures and suggestions.

Keywords: Population exodus; Northeast China; Cultural sociology; Cultural blockage; College students.

1. Introduction

The process of modernization is characterized by cumulation, diffusion, acceleration and irreversibility^[1]. In other words, the country's modernized economic and social development feature irreversibility. In addition, the further development of the country's economy is closely related to population movement^[2]. Shenyang City, as an important city of the country, once ranked in the forefront of the country in terms of economic aggregate, and it is also a city with a long history and rich culture. At present, the outflow of college students from Shenyang is becoming more and more conspicuous, and there are too many students choosing to go to colleges in other cities. As the economic declines in this region, Northeast China has also seen a slide in the quality of its college education and a serious brain drain. The cause of this problem is the cultural crisis.

Previous studies have shown that social conditions, including cultural traditions, social networks, historical experiences, institutional concepts, etc., are crucial prerequisites for the transformation of society in a region. The key driving force of regional social transformation is constituted by the humanistic spirit based on immigrant culture, the social mechanism based on the inertia of history, and the social capital based on traditional experience. Combining the history and reality of Northeast China, it is not difficult to find that the causes of the population exodus of Northeast China are manifold: the limitations of the institutional mechanism, the lack of capital and technology, too much government regulation, insufficient civic participation, and so on. It is worth noting that, in the country of a unitary system and under a united regime, the political system, the nature and structure of the regime, the policies promoted are consistent in every region. However, there are differentiation in the operation and implementation of the formal institutions and policies. The reason for this is that different regions have different regional cultures, and "the existence of different cultural regions has significant social and political consequences"^[3]. There are indications that culture plays a more significant role than ever before. Thus, for Northeast China's development, it is not enough to establish a set of institutional rules and regulations, and cultural issues deserve more attention. A cultural perspective can enable people to "better understand what in their culture opposes their wishes to live a more just, prosperous and dignified life and what they can do to facilitate changes"^[4]. Therefore, the spatio-temporal, historical, and cultural dimensions should be incorporated into the study framework of transformation of society in Northeast China, and step out of the unidirectional

logic that economic development is centered. It is needed to re-conceptualize the historical and cultural process of social revitalization in Northeast China.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview of Cultural Sociology Perspective

Cultural sociology is a branch of sociology, which is founded in the 1970s. Cultural sociology explains and analyzes social change through socio-cultural factors from specific events and phenomena in social life. Alexander argues that “to believe in the possibility of a ‘cultural sociology’ is to subscribe to the idea that every action, no matter how instrumental, reflexive or coerced vis-a-vis its external environments, is embedded to some extent in a horizon of affect and meaning^[5]. Cultural sociology views culture as an integral part of the explanation of social phenomena^[6]. In China, “culture” refers to the various values, ways of thinking, knowledge systems and behaviors that have been formed or created in a society, history or nation. In addition to economic development, “culture” is also an important factor for China since it is a country with a unique demographic environment, a unique institution, and a long history^[7].

2.2. Overview of the current research on population exodus of Northeast China

At present, there are mainly two focuses in the research on population exodus of Northeast China: one is the in-depth analysis of the causes, processes and consequences of the population exodus; the other is the exploration of the causes and characteristics of the exodus. The existing research findings mainly focus on the emergence, process and development of the population exodus or the economic development, social and cultural conditions in Northeast China.

2.3. How to investigate the population exodus of Northeast China from the perspective of cultural sociology

The population exodus of Northeast China is a social phenomenon, and its causes are manifold. A sociological perspective is indispensable for analyzing the causes. The cultural crisis, alongside the social crisis and economic problems, has a non-negligible impact on the quantity and the quality of college students in Northeast China.

With the reform and opening up as well as the continuous promotion of industrialization, China has gradually transformed from a traditional agricultural economy to a modern industrial economy (Sun et al., 2020)^[8]. However, in the development of modern industrial economy, the modernization process of China has been affected to a certain extent because the scale, structure, product quality and management level of industrial production are constrained by some factors^[9]. In China’s history, the agricultural economy, which is dominated by the small-scale peasant economy, is the economic foundation of ancient Chinese society. In the agricultural production, man and nature is a unified whole. However, with the development of industrialization and modernization since modern times, the production relations in society have also changed^[10]. The “human relations” in agricultural production was replaced by the “social relations” in industrial production^[11].

In a certain period of time, a serious population outflow can be attributed to various reasons. In the author's opinion, the current population exodus in Northeast China and the causes can be analyzed from the perspective of cultural sociology. Subjectively, the social identity for young people is getting lower and lower. Theoretically speaking, for young people, the floating population, their long-term residence willingness is highly guided by the social identity they obtained in the inflow places^[12]. Objectively, the society as a whole has insufficient awareness of the cultural crisis and lacks attention to cultural differences. Under different cultural backgrounds, people’s behavioral styles and values are different. Cultural differences exist between the Northeast China and the Mainland represented by the Southeast Coastal Region in terms of space-time culture^[13] and conceptual culture^[14] and so on, but they have not received much attention. Surveying the college students, it was found that

students of Northeast China are now more inclined to choose big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, etc., or provincial capitals and new first-tier cities as the places where they go to college.

In summary, the research on reasons for the population exodus of Northeast China and the impact on college students does not go far enough, which is mainly due to lack of specific analysis and a comprehensive view of the problem.

3. The outflow of college students of Northeast China

3.1. The context of the outflow

In recent years, with China's economic and social development, population migration is no longer simply transferring the population from one production factor to another, but gradually transformed into a comprehensive activity where human being's production, labor and creation for others, social services and other factors are combined. In China, the reason for population relocation is no longer the original simple pursuit of economic and technical factors, but the pursuit of comprehensive literacy^[15]. However, the different development status of each region has caused different degrees of human capital loss and labor shortage in the process of development, and this phenomenon is common in all parts of the country^[16]. Recently, a more serious population exodus occurred in Northeast China. Historically and realistically, population exodus is an inevitable result of China's social, economic and cultural development.

3.2. The main manifestations of college students' outflow in Northeast China

According to the sixth national census in 2010 and the seventh national census in 2021, the population loss in Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang Provinces in Northeast China has already appeared. The national population proportion of Liaoning Province has dropped from 3.27% to 3.02%, that of Jilin Province has declined from 2.05% to 1.71%, and that of Heilongjiang Province has decreased from 2.86% to 2.26%. College graduates in these three northeastern provinces rarely return to their places of origin for employment, which also causes the outflow of highly educated talents.

Table 1. Share of the population of the Northeast in the national population at the time of successive censuses and sample surveys (%)

	2000	2005	2010	2020
Liaoning	3.37	3.29	3.27	3.02
Jilin	2.16	2.12	2.05	1.71
Heilongjiang	2.92	2.98	2.86	2.26

Table 2. Characteristics of population outflows and inflows in the Northeast China^[17]

	Outflows	Inflows
Never attended school/Primary school	10.6	14.1
Middle school	41.8	57.7
High school/Technical secondary school	22.6	18.9
Junior college or above	24.9	9.2

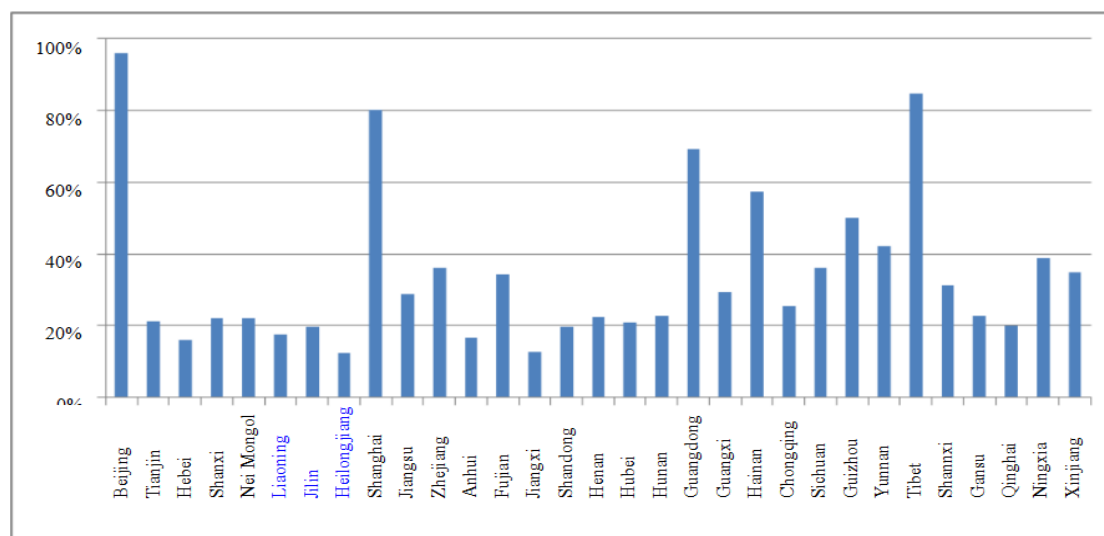


Figure 1. The proportion of college students from Northeast China return to their home provinces for employment

As shown in figure 1, the proportion of students from the three provinces of Northeast China who return to their home provinces for employment is relatively low, less than 20%, and only 12.5% in Heilongjiang. The overwhelming majority of students from the Northeast China will stay in other places after graduation. In this regard, if we cannot attract local students to return to their hometowns, it will be even more difficult to attract students from other universities and colleges to obtain employment in the Northeast China. Moreover, after graduation, college students' choice is more based on their development, and the inability to utilize the skills they have learned or the broader space for development in other regions are the critical factors for the loss of college students of the Northeast China. However, compared to other regions, if other external conditions are the same, there are fewer obstacles to return to their hometowns and construct their hometowns. Additionally, it is favorable for family reunion and cultural adaptation.

4. The leading cause of the outflow of college students in Northeast China: the cultural blockage

Cultural blockage is reflected in the behavior, interaction, and mechanism of life operation in Northeast China's society. The development and prosperity of any society is not only a matter of system, but also a matter of culture. It is relatively not difficult to promulgate a large number of rules and regulations, but it is another matter to form an effective institutional and cultural environment. A system be altered overnight, but culture is difficult to be changed, and this process is often accompanied with strong path dependence and historical continuity, i.e., "lawyers and politicians have the fastest clocks, and they can propose new constitutions, laws and regulations almost overnight. The clock of economists is much slower, since they need more time to plan and order the economy to shift to the market's orbit. The slowest of all is the 'civil society clock', which adjusts the pace of change in the deeper realms of cultural traditions" [18]. It is obvious that there is a cultural bottleneck in the social construction of Northeast China. With the strategy of law-based governance of the country and the process of establishing a socialist market economic system, the contradictions and resistance encountered in the transformation of Northeast China will no longer come from the traditional economic and political institutional fields, but from the blockage of traditional culture.

4.1. Cultural Background of Different Historical Periods in Northeast China

Table 3. Cultural Characteristics of Different Historical Periods in Northeast China

Historical Periods	Cultural Characteristics	Cultural Background
Qing Dynasty	Prohibition Culture	<p>Since the reign of the Kangxi Emperor, a prohibition policy has been decreed in Northeast China, the origin place of the Qing Dynasty, which banned its cultural exchange with Central Plains. Strictly prohibiting Han Chinese settlement in Northeast China, the Qing government took rigid measures such as an economic attack, administrative eviction, legal sanction, and military suppression for Han Chinese streaming into Northeast China. Therefore, Northeast China limited in total population had culture with distinct regional and ethnic characteristics, which was the confluence of agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing, and hunting. The earliest regional culture in Northeast China originated from these indigenous nationalities that interacted with each other.</p>
Late Qing Dynasty and Early Republic of China	Immigrant Culture	<p>With the expanding ambition of Japan and Russia to invade Northeast China during this time, the Qing government began to encourage Han Chinese to settle down and cultivate in Northeast China. After they immigrated to Northeast China, they not only worked hard and reclaimed wasteland, but also brought advanced agricultural production technology to Central Plains, which promoted agricultural productivity in Northeast China. In the early Republic of China, the growth rate of grain output (84.6%) even exceeded the expansion rate of cultivated land area (67%), and the per capita grain output increased from 490 kg in 1915 to 684 kg in 1930^[19]. With a more extensive migration into Northeast China, which was also called the crashing into Guandong (Chuang Guandong), Han culture interacted with Qilu culture, Central Plains culture, and Northeast regional culture. People penetrated each other in ideology, mindset, production and lifestyle, values, cultural customs, etc., forming a unique Northeast regional culture in the vast but sparsely populated land with a fertile natural environment and extensive agricultural economy, which featured the roughness and inclusiveness, that is, extensive agricultural culture.</p>
Planned Economy Period of People's Republic of China	Organizational Culture	<p>Up against the good Sino-Soviet international relations in the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, Northeast China became the key hub between China and the Soviet Union, which was prioritized as the national strategic development area. Nearly 15 million workers and scientific and technological talents were assigned to settle and guard the border. In this period, "Daqing Spirit", "Spirit of Fighting Against Famine in Northern China", and so on were typical cultures.</p>

		<p>Different from the crashing into Guandong, population inflow into Northeast China during the planned economy period was weak in individual autonomy and mainly resulted from the authoritative political mobilization. A comprehensive study of the Soviet Union included the transformation and reconstruction of the social structure, which was symbolized by establishing organizations and forming institutional systems. Some regarded this change as “the largest spatial reorganization in China’s history”^[20]. Uniformly deployed through national plans, production activities of state-owned organizations obeyed leadership and superior arrangements. Having experienced socialized mass production earlier, workers in Northeast China shaped a collectivist spirit regardless of hardships and an organizational culture faithful to authority.</p>
Reform and Opening Up	Self-Development Culture	<p>With the changing China’s social structure after the reform and opening up, the non-state-owned economy and non-organizational system expanded and developed by leaps and bounds, and the original organizational systems began to reform, which enabled the coexistence of “organizational system” and “non-organizational system” in current Chinese society. Due to the slowdown of economic development in Northeast China, its gap with other regions characterized by the rapid economic development such as the southeast coastal cities has widened. In recent years, a large number of people in Northeast China have mainly streamed to the economically-developed regions including Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei, Yangtze River Delta Economic Zone, and Pearl River Delta Economic Zone, which was called the “escape” from Northeast China. The development of Northeast China was not driven by administrative external forces, but by the market-oriented self-development culture with autonomy and increasing independence.</p>

4.2. Manifestations of cultural blockage

4.2.1 Ethical relationships is superior to rules

During the period of “Chuang Guandong”, the rush into Manchuria of the Han Chinese population, the government was disorganized and the legal system was virtually non-existent, so the immigrants could not rely on the government to obtain a shelter for their lives. At the same time, the immigrants could not obtain due support from the clan-family relationship since they have left their hometowns. In the unfamiliar environment, the immigrants who lacked resources and support had to take the initiative to create a social network in order to avoid risks and maintain the stability of their lives. Thus, they attached great importance to the ethical factors including human touch, loyalty, fellowship in hometown and friendship. They were good at “migrating” and “socializing”, and for them ethical relationships is superior to rules.

In Northeast China, the social interaction rules based on the “relationship” prevail, and the free growth of talent and fair competition are suppressed. People in Northeast China value personal loyalty, and for them the legitimate rules are often inferior to feelings. The lack of contractual spirit is not conducive to the healthy development of the market economy in Northeast China, which is based on

the rules and laws. Under the influence of the “relationship culture”, many private enterprises in Northeast China have turned to the logic of power and “state-owned enterprises” in the process of development, and a large part of the existing private economy is also relying on the relationship with the government to maintain business. That is, family organizations and civil organizations are not developed, which triggers businessmen to maintain good relations with the government, and devote their main energy to finding resources, accumulating social relations, and developing social networks, rather than relying on their own ability to solve problems.

4.2.2 The strong officialdom is detrimental to the development of market economy

Under the influence of officialdom, the culture of Northeast China lacks respect and esteem for equality, the rule of law, human dignity and individual freedom. In addition, dispute resolution still relies mainly on officials’ coordination, and the objectivity and impartiality that judicial and administrative law enforcement organs demonstrate when handling cases are disturbed by the powers, especially by powers from the executive branch. Moreover, the government does not follow the rules, and there are numerous incidents of enterprises and the public pulling strings, which undermines the opportunities for fair competition and the justice and norms of society. The above phenomenon is attributable to both the dominant social concepts and the geographical resources and environment. First of all, the north was under feudalism for a longer time than the south. The rulers emphasized agriculture and suppressed commerce, and officialdom has long controlled people’s thought and become the dominant concept among the people. They regard “seeking official positions” as the right way. The south is the opposite, as early as in the Ming Dynasty, around Jiangsu and Zhejiang the workshop-type small commodity trading had been very popular, in the eastern coastal areas business dealings with foreigners were even developed. The development of commercial activities has led to deeply ingrained commercial awareness in the southerners’ ideology. In their character and consciousness, business is a pursuit of their own values, reflecting the dignity of the personality. Thus, a strong commercial culture has been formed. This difference in the dominant concepts results in different mentality in the face of market economy between the southerners and northerners.

In the executive-led economic operating system, the market mechanism that should play a role in the resource’s allocation is replaced by the administrative, and this have had a profound impact on social life, values and ways of thinking of northeasterners. Thus, authoritarian and heteronomy in personality as well as psychological stereotypes have been formed. Under the value orientation of “officialism”, those who are good at following orders and those who are not creative are easily encouraged and rewarded, and the spirit of innovation and risk-taking is suppressed, resulting in the distorted notion of power-worshipping in the culture of the Northeast China.

4.2.3 Loss of identity due to cultural trauma

Cultural trauma stems from the reform of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and the resultant structural layoffs of workers. During the 1990s’s wave of layoffs in Shenyang City’s Tiexi District, 4/5 of the total 3,500 industrial enterprises were in a state of shutdown or semi-suspension, and the labor relations between 130,000 of the 300,000-odd industrial workers and their enterprises were released through the buyout of seniority and other means. By 2001, Tiexi District was described by the media and workers as a “city of layoffs”, and neighborhoods such as Workers’ Village became the city’s new space of poverty. Cultural trauma has become an irreversible trauma for workers in state-owned enterprise in Northeast China in the 1990s. ^[21]

As the relationship between the Steel Mill of Hualin City and Hualin City described in the 2023 hit drama *The Long Season*: “The Steel Mill is the heart and soul of Hualin City. If something goes wrong with this mill, what about Hualin City?” ^[22] Between the words, strong collective pride of the workers living here is presented. The “wave of layoffs” unveiled the “fault” of pillar industries and the overall industrial decline in Northeast China. Northeast China’s cities where state-owned industrial enterprises were dotted has fallen into decline, and it is difficult for them to revive. The workers are the witnesses to the historic industrial decline and bankruptcy, and their traditional identity as working class disintegrated into the hobos in society. This passive withdrawal brought

about drastic changes to the lives of the workers and their families. The workers' families that had accustomed to the "iron-bowls" in public institutions and the highly organized life for a long time could not adapt to the drastic social change and the plummeting quality of life. Moreover, the negative emotions caused by cultural trauma led to a lack of identity and sense of belonging.

5. Reflection and Countermeasures on the Outflow of College Students in Shenyang

5.1. Rebuild the Culture Adapted to College Students' Intellectual Concept

College students as high-quality workers occupy more cultural and social capital with stronger abilities in social mobility. Establishing a reasonable return mechanism and improving the cultural environment for talent development is beneficial to attract more well-educated talents to return to Northeast China, which is of positive significance to promoting the optimization of regional labor structure and the development of high-tech industries.

To tackle the outflow of college students in Shenyang, we must prioritize advanced cultural concepts with innovation as its essence. Cultural innovation is related to economic development and social progress, so the innovation and reconstruction of regional culture fundamentally affect its economic development trend in the future. Thus, attaching great importance to the regional culture of Northeast China, we should not only examine and reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of the past culture, but also outline and recreate the present culture and that in the future, so as to realize culture supportive to the economy. As the trend of modern social development, cultural innovation requires an open, inclusive, communicative, mobile, and scientific culture. Only by unshackling the passive thinking in the past, abandoning the cognitive inertia featuring the "inactivity, supplication, and dependence" under the planned economy system, being brave in practice regardless of failure, and accepting market competition, can the modernization of regional culture be realized.

5.2. Rebuild the Law-Based Culture Adapted to Market Economy

The inflow and number of talents is the most convincing demonstration of a city's charm and competitiveness. Besides, the excellent culture as the soft environment of a city is vital to attract, protect, and stabilize talents. A socialist market economy is essentially an economy ruled by law. From the common characteristics and general laws of the development of developed areas in China, all that realize rapid economic advances have solved the problem related to the rule of law faced by the development of the market economy and shaped the contractual spirit conducive to talent development. Therefore, to solve the brain drain, people need to identify with the law-based culture, whose cultivation needs ideological enlightenment and practical nourishment. Especially in the current transition of the economic and social system in Northeast China, transforming the traditional relationship culture based on an organizational system and replacing it with the normative interpersonal relationship based on contractual relationship is the rooted support for the cultural transformation and the construction of law-based culture in Northeast China. It needs to overcome inherent cultural obstacles. When people's law-based awareness is not fully awakened and the society ruled by law is not mature, it is necessary to promote their awareness through publicity and education of the rule of law culture, so as to ensure the development environment of talents by the law-based environment.

5.3. Rebuild the Culture of Innovation and Entrepreneurship

With entrepreneurial culture as a necessity in a market economy, northeast economy stagnation after the reform and opening up has been intertwined with the incompleteness, immaturity, and underdevelopment of entrepreneurial culture. Many developed areas in China have unique entrepreneurial characteristics. The development of the Wenzhou model depends on the Wenzhou spirit that emphasizes "natural environment, joint wisdom, sufficient communication, and

challenging hardships”. These nationalities and regions promote production with an advanced entrepreneurial culture, which creates remarkable social wealth and spiritual wealth. Therefore, to build a new entrepreneurial culture in Northeast China, we should explore the positive elements in the historical tradition of Northeast China and activate the pioneering nature buried in the time-honored history, returning to the essence of Northeast society to seek solutions. Only with the internal support of local culture and historical tradition can animate the new entrepreneurial culture we pursue.

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