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Escaping the Broken Social Elevator: Youth Migration, Privilege, and Global Inequality

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Abstract. In recent decades, growing numbers of educated youths across the Global South have embraced geographical relocation to escape blocked social mobility at home. Using literature review, comparative case analysis, and critical examination of secondary datasets, this paper examines youth migration as a response to the collapse of the traditional "social elevator" linking educational credentials to stable employment and middle-class status. It focuses on China's "Running" (runxue) and Nigeria's "Japa" movements, analyzing push factors, upward-mobility mechanisms such as overseas education and diaspora networks, and their limitations. The paper argues that although geographical mobility can create new opportunities and enable upward mobility for some individuals, it operates through a deeply unequal sorting mechanism. Moreover, the departure of educated, capital-rich youths can constrain development in sending countries through human capital drain, social capital depletion, economic distortions, and cultural stigmatization of those who remain. It concludes that spatial mobility is not a miracle cure for social immobility; rather, despite its promise, it risks deepening the global inequalities it appears to resolve.

Keywords: youth migration, social mobility, Japa movement, global inequality

1. Introduction

Nowadays, a large portion of youths have finished their education and started to flow into society and the workplace with inadequate opportunities and social resources to consider every individual youth. Youths are promised that hard work equals success but find themselves trapped in places where the social elevator is broken. Effort can no longer promise upward social mobility [1]. Mechanism for coping with this immobility are typically known as the "run" movement. Youths attempt to relocate geographically to leap through blocked social hierarchies [2]. However, this is not a suitable solution for everyone and under all conditions.

Using the research methods of literature review, comparative case study analysis, and statistical analysis of secondary datasets, this paper explores the phenomenon of youth geographical mobility as a strategy for achieving upward social mobility, particularly focusing on the case studies of Chinese "Running" and Nigerian "Japa" movements.

It will analyze contemporary conditions that trigger educated youths to flee from their home countries, the mechanisms of migration that facilitate upward social mobility (overseas education and diaspora networks), followed by a critical examination of the limitations of these approaches.

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The study done in this paper is significant due to its evaluation of geographical mobility as a solution to blocked social mobility. It reveals that spatial relocations can both generate new opportunities and upward mobility and reproduce existing privileges or even deepen global inequalities, serving as a significant reminder for individual youths and national policymakers to reconsider the concept of migration and social mobility.

2. The broken social elevator

Social elevator can be explained as a chain that links educational credentials with stable employment and middle-class status. Specifically, young people receive education and earn a degree, and then, corresponding careers and social standing are provided by the society. In traditional cases, when this chain functions properly, education can be a primary pathway for youths to achieve upward mobility [3]. However, when economic structure fails to fulfill this promise, education is no longer an effective social elevator. When the traditional order of education and economy collapses, staying in the system can mean permanent stagnation. This is the reason why many youths choose to "run." Jingjing Liu's study explains the concept "Japa" [4], the flee-or-run phenomenon in Nigeria among youths. It is stated that Nigerian youths see the domestic economy as a ceiling that confines them within their original class, not a ladder that helps them reach a social class breakthrough. To be specific, a degree that once guaranteed a middle-class life can now lead to underemployment (doing a job that falls far short of what your level of education warrants) or unemployment (not having a job at all). The domestic economy is no longer a ladder helping young people break through class barriers. Instead, it has become a ceiling that conceals them within the original social class. Being devalued in their original country means the only way to reach upward mobility is to flee to another geographic site that values the degrees and skills of Nigerian youths, the primary choices for them are the United Kingdom and Canada.

The theory of how push and pull factors affect migration choices can explain such phenomena as the "Japa" movement in Nigeria. From the "push" side, Nigeria, as the original location, pushes local youths away by devaluing highly educated and intellectual youths with degrees and skills in the job market, shutting down opportunities once opened to them. Unemployment and underemployment caused by exclusion from the job market certainly serve as strong push factors that trigger youths' outward migration [5]. However, to explain why they made the choice of migrating to specific countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada, rather than elsewhere, an analysis of the pull factors of the destination countries is also necessary. First is the economic pull: the UK and Canada, as relatively more developed countries, have a sustained demand for skills in fields like healthcare, nursing, engineering, and information technology. Not only do they provide youths job opportunities, but the income returns for these skills are far higher than in Nigeria, and academic degrees and professional qualifications are more readily recognized, thereby restoring the "degree–occupation–status" exchange chain. The second pull factor is appealing local institutions: these countries offer a relatively stable environment in terms of the rule of law, security, public services, infrastructure, and currency, thereby reducing the uncertainty associated with long-term residency. The third pull factor is the attraction of the destination country's immigration policies: Many European and American nations face the issue of aging populations and labor shortages. To resolve such shortages of young employers, have established entry pathways. Canada's Express Entry system is one of the examples. In this program, applicants are ranked on points for age, education, work experience, and language ability [6]. A Nigerian with a bachelor's degree, several years of skilled work experience, and strong English test scores can enter the Express Entry pool and

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potentially receive permanent residency without already having a job offer from Canada. Such immigration policies are concrete, actionable invitations to young and highly educated individuals.

From an intergenerational perspective, what drives this generation of youths to flee is not an absolute deficiency of opportunities, but the collapse of a social contract that they grew up with. For earlier generations, such as their parents, a university degree pays people back with stable employment and middle-class respectability. Today, such credentials no longer guarantee them. This creates a sharp disparity between what young people were promised while they got educated and what the domestic economy actually provided them as they entered the society. This sense of betrayal could also be intensified by the digital connectivity enabled by recent technological development. Through social media, youths now compare their stalled life conditions in real time with the career success of peers exaggerated by the internet, transforming abstract inequality into daily, visible disappointment. At the same time, in recent years, as birthrates have hit rock bottom in some European and American countries' economies, aging populations have opened temporary policy windows—such as Canada's Express Entry system—that specifically invite young, educated migrants, offering this generation a structured exit that their parents never had. Thus, youths' outward migration, such as the "Japa" movement, is best understood as a generational response. In this era, the local social elevator no longer functions, while destination countries actively hold the door open, leaving becomes not only rational but also almost expected.

3. Mechanisms of ascent

After considering the complex reasons behind their choices of migration, it's also important to understand how migrated youths pursue upward mobility after they arrived in the destination country. To understand how migrated youths pursue upward mobility after departure, it is useful to look beyond the Nigerian "Japa" movement alone and place it alongside a parallel phenomenon: the Chinese "run xue" or "running" movement [7]. Referring to both cases, this investigation would treat overseas education and social networks as two deeply interconnected mechanisms that operate in a feedback loop.

In whole, education usually functions as the formal entry point, a place-specific degree converts local ambition into a globally legible qualification, while social networks determine how effectively this degree credential can be converted into jobs, housing, and long-term settlement. Therefore, these two mechanisms function simultaneously while reinforcing one another, gaining the degree opens institutional doors, and mutual aid networks among migrants supply the knowledge, trust, and referrals needed to achieve sustainable success and settlement.

A foreign degree acts as a converter of identity in a precise institutional sense. A Nigerian student arriving in the UK or Canada, like a Chinese student entering the United States, or perhaps Australia, does not simply gain subject knowledge; their previous educational history accumulated in their home country can be re-coded into a qualification that appeals to local employers and immigration systems. For instance, in the UK, the Graduate Route allows international students to remain in the nation for two years after study; similarly, in Canada, the Post-Graduation Work Permit offers flexible time for youths to transform from study to employment. After finding a job, the work experience can then feed into the Express Entry points system [8]. In the United States, Optional Practical Training (OPT) gives Chinese and other international graduates up to three years of work authorization in STEM fields, creating a possible route to H-1B sponsorship [9] and eventually permanent residence. Employers likewise treat the possession of a local degree as evidence of language ability, familiarity with professional norms, and reduced hiring risk. Nigerian and Chinese youths, by following the institutional sequence of study-work-permit-visa sponsorship-

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residency, transform credentials devalued in their home country into a structured route toward career advancement and long-term residency. Marzi's insight that physical mobility unlocks new "circuits of opportunity" [10] materializes here: the university becomes an escalator that converts local personal ambition into a qualification recognized in graduate job markets and post-study visa regimes.

Yet gaining a degree only constructs the basis of this social escalator. Social networks convert formal credentials into actual mobility. It is helpful to distinguish between explicit and implicit networks. Explicit networks include university alumni associations and Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA). These networks offer official resources: job boards, credential recognition guidance, mentorship schemes, and formal referrals [11]. For Chinese "run xue" migrants, CSSA chapters and alumni associations for universities such as Tsinghua, Peking, or Fudan support them by hosting career fairs, immigration seminars, and cultural and social networking events in North American and European cities. Implicit networks, by contrast, are informal and often invisible from the outside: WeChat groups for specific cities and career goals, Telegram and Discord servers, and collective public platforms to ask questions and share information, such as the social media platforms Red Notes and Zhihu. These networks are as crucial as the explicit ones, as they circulate the tacit knowledge that formal institutions cannot provide, for example, which house renter would provide housing without a local credit history, which employer is willing to sponsor a visa, or where to find affordable housing near a transit line. Explicit networks give migrants access to formal opportunity structures. Meanwhile, implicit networks give them the unofficial information and social backing that guide new starters to use those structures effectively.

Through these networks of institutional credentialization and collective support, individual ambition is converted into group-level mobility. The success of one migrant strengthens the networks and reputational capital available to those who follow, turning migration from a desperate escape into a collectively organized strategy of upward social movement. Nigerian "Japa" communities and Chinese "run xue" communities both circulate landing guides, visa timelines, referral codes, and settlement checklists, making the path from departure to middle-class stability more predictable for the next cohort of migrants. In this sense, the two movements are not simply reactions to collapsed social elevators at home. They are also self-conscious, transnational collaborations that exploit education and networks. They function together to rebuild and even reinforce the route of international migration as a ladder for social leap.

4. A critical evaluation: mobility as privilege, not a panacea

However, migration as a mechanism of the social ladder should yet be critically evaluated.

First, the experiences of those who do manage to leave but fail to ascend further refute the narrative that geographical mobility simply serves as automatic renewal. Not every overseas degree converts into a stable career, and not every migrant who steps onto the escalator reaches the top and achieves success. For example, many Chinese international students graduate from American or Canadian universities with master's degrees in business, finance, or data science, only to find themselves trapped in the Optional Practical Training or Post-Graduation Work Permit cycle: working in jobs below their qualification level, unable to secure H-1B or permanent residence sponsorship, and eventually forced to return home with debt and diminished career momentum. The myth of the effortless "sea turtle" (Overseas Returners) conceals the reality of those who spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on an overseas degree, then found that it did not revalue their social persona in the way they had hoped. Some returnees discover that their foreign credentials are discounted in China's hypercompetitive domestic job market, where local networks and resources

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often matter more than an unfamiliar international degree. These cases reveal that the mobility escalator is not a one-way conveyor belt that guarantees success. It can stall, reverse, or deposit migrants in a position worse than the one they left.

The capability of "running" or "Japa" movements to fix or improve one's life is not a pure act of agency. Instead, it often reproduces existing privileges rather than transcending them through class borders. Does geographical mobility help migrants generate new social capital, or is it merely transferring existing advantages to a more favorable setting? The ability to take the first step onto the mobility escalator is secured by the migrant's old capital. Financial resources are needed for visas, tuition, and flights, people need social connections to navigate complicated visa and institution application processes; in addition, cultural capital in the form of fluency in English or another major language spoken in the destination country. All these capitals are prerequisites that filter who can flee. In the "Japa" narrative, youths in Nigeria borrow the exaggerated phrase of escape for survival and urgency. However, a large portion of migrants remain middle-class members that are educated and resourceful. Marzi's framework suggests that spatial mobility indeed creates new, place-specific capital for unemployed or underemployed youths in their original site, but her own logic implies access to a generative context is guaranteed by capital one already possesses. The escalator region rises, but only for those who can reach its bottom step.

Furthermore, youths who remained in those "left behind" areas are doubly trapped. They are spatially immobile because they were first socially immobile, lack social capital, and the departure of capital-rich members actively worsens local conditions through several specific mechanisms.

First, human capital drain removes not just skilled workers but also potential employers, mentors, and civic leaders, weakening local healthcare, education, and entrepreneurship. Nigerian communities lose doctors and nurses to the UK, while Chinese cities lose engineers and academics to North America, leaving critical sectors facing employee shortages. Second, social capital depletion follows: the networks, professional associations, and informal mutual-aid structures that once supported local advancement thin out as their most connected members, the educated youths, leave. Third, economic distortions arise from remittance dependence and uneven price inflation, especially in housing, making life harder for non-migrant residents who cannot draw on foreign income. Fourth, a cultural stigma attaches to staying: as departure becomes the normalized marker of success, those who remain are framed as failures, even when inevitable structural barriers prevent them from leaving. Migration thus deepens the very inequalities it appears to resolve.

5. Conclusion

This study examines youth geographical mobility, specifically China's "Running" and Nigeria's "Japa" movements, as strategic responses to blocked social mobility. Findings show spatial relocation can enable upward mobility through foreign credentials and collective networks, but it is neither universally accessible nor guaranteed. Success depends on pre-existing financial, social, and cultural capital, dividing youth into those who can "run" and those who cannot. Thus, migration often acts as a new sorting mechanism that reproduces global inequalities rather than dismantling class barriers.

The research contributes a comparative analysis of two major contemporary Global South youth migration movements. It extends migration and social mobility theories by showing that overseas education and social networks operate in a reinforcing feedback loop, though their effectiveness is mediated by individual capital and destination-country structural limits. It moves beyond individual agency to highlight migration's role in a complex transnational system.

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Limitations include reliance on secondary datasets and literature, which may miss nuanced lived experiences and long-term outcomes. The two-case scope may not generalize. Future research should collect primary longitudinal data and in-depth interviews, and examine digital networks such as WeChat and Telegram groups.

Overall, the study offers new insights into geographical and social mobility, stressing that migration is not a panacea for social immobility. By exposing its limitations and its role in deepening global inequalities, it advances a more nuanced understanding of youth agency in a world where mobility remains largely blocked.

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