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TOWARDS A SPATIALISED AND CIRCULATORY ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL
STRUCTURE

**RETURN MIGRATION AND EDUCATIONAL CAPITAL: REDEFINING CLASS
AND AUTHORITY IN YUNNAN'S COFFEE PLANTATIONS, CHINA**

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This paper explores the class re-stratification in Yunnan's coffee-growing villages, China. Based on 7 months of participant observation and 26 in-depth interviews, this research analyzes how university-educated return migrants are transforming agricultural production and changing who holds power in rural development.

This study explains that these migrants return due to a mix of urban involution, a situation of intense competition with diminishing returns; and state policies promoting agricultural transformation, which create new opportunities in the countryside. What distinguishes returnees from traditional farmers is reflexivity acquired through higher education, this capacity allows them to question circumstances, imagine alternatives, and navigate competing institutional logics.

This unique background allows returnees to build authority in three specific ways. First, they redefine quality standards by framing local coffee characteristics not as defects, but as expressions of terroir, making themselves the experts on "good" farming. Second, they act as institutional intermediaries, translating complex state development programs into local farming practices, which gives them control over government resources. Third, their ability to speak multiple "languages", switching fluently between global market discourse, state policy language, and local community terms, allows them to represent their villages to the outside world and explain external demands to their community.

This research found that this class differentiation happens through different frameworks of legitimacy. While traditional farmers rely on kinship and connections to access resources, returnees emphasize institutional efficiency and market competitiveness. As a result, the returnees' ontologies—their specific ways of viewing the world—are increasingly determining how actual resources are distributed, as their methods align better with state and market requirements.

This case demonstrates how educational access produces new rural class positions based on interpretive power and institutional proximity rather than land ownership alone, highlighting the spatial circulation of knowledge and authority between urban universities and rural communities in contemporary China's social morphology.

Palavras-chave: rural social morphology; return migration; educational capital; class re-stratification; specialty coffee.