

FINAL PROJECT

Supervisor: Jennifer McHugh

Communication Design

2024-2025

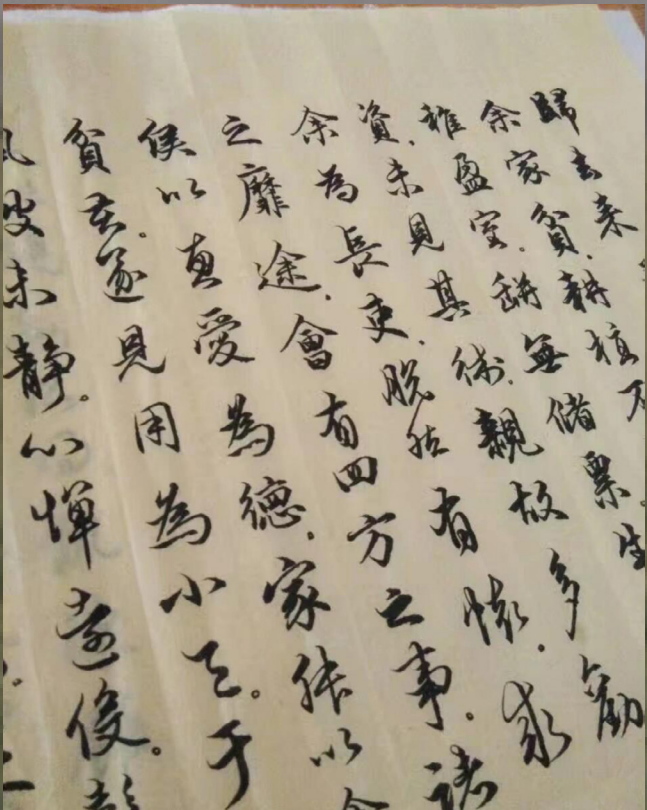
归去来兮

THE RETURN

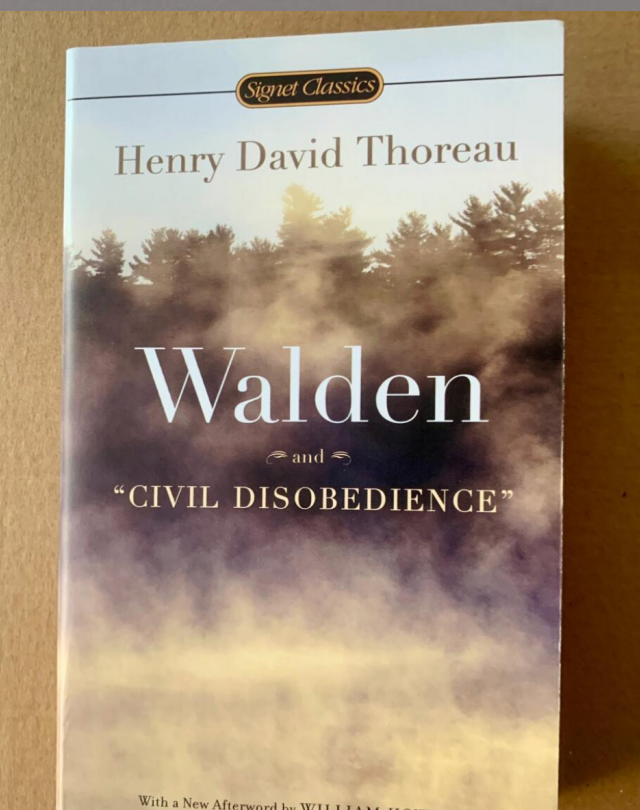
This project, *The Return*, examines the meaning of “return” in today’s society. In the process of rapid urbanization and migration, children of migrant workers often grow up torn between city and countryside, tradition and modernity. Their experiences reveal identity fractures, intergenerational gaps, and cultural disconnection. Through visual and communication design, the project reflects on both nostalgia and rupture, inviting the audience to rethink what “return” means in a world shaped by movement, belonging, and loss.

Inspiration

The project “*THE RETURN*” draws its inspiration from the emotional notion of “returning.” Influenced by Tao Yuanming’s *Return Home* and Thoreau’s *Walden*, I was struck by two distinct yet resonant perspectives on return: one rooted in the search for spiritual belonging, the other in the pursuit of independence through nature. In today’s context, however, “return” carries heavier layers of nostalgia, identity fractures, and generational disconnections. Growing up amidst the migration experiences of working-class families has further shaped my sensitivity to these tensions between movement and belonging. Through design, this project seeks to capture the ambivalence of return — at once a longing for home and identity, and a confrontation with absence, rupture, and irretrievable loss.

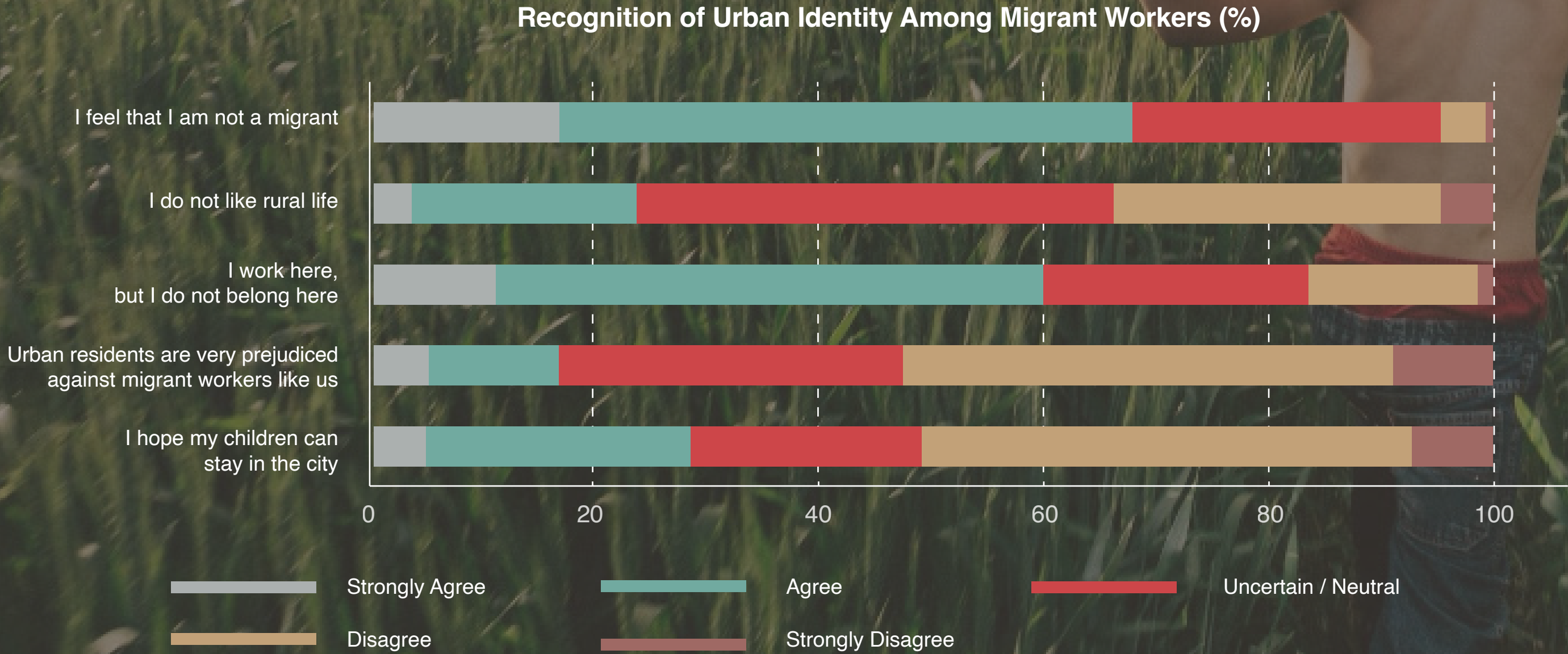


Return Home, Yuanming

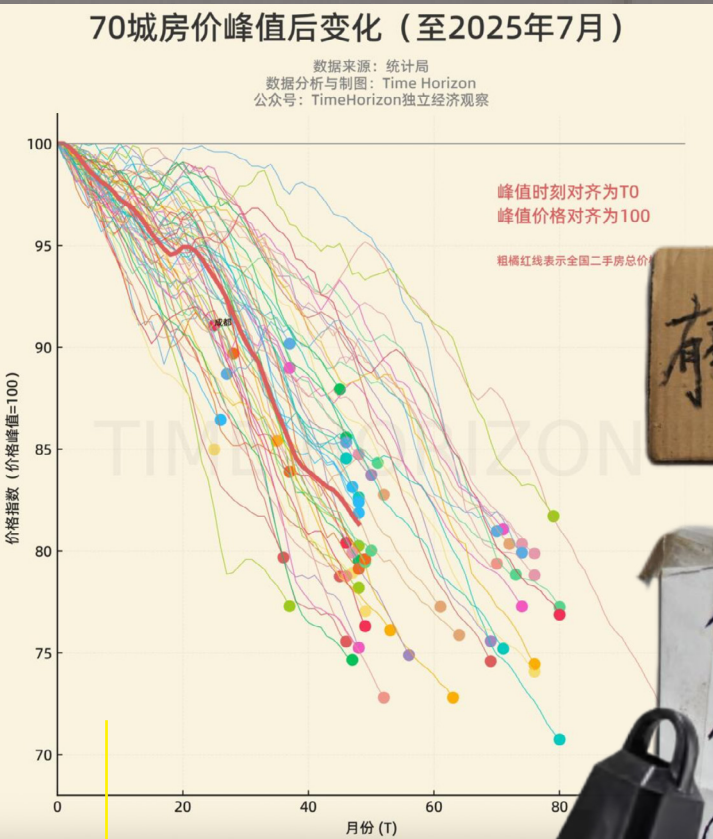


Walden, Thoreau

Background



Research

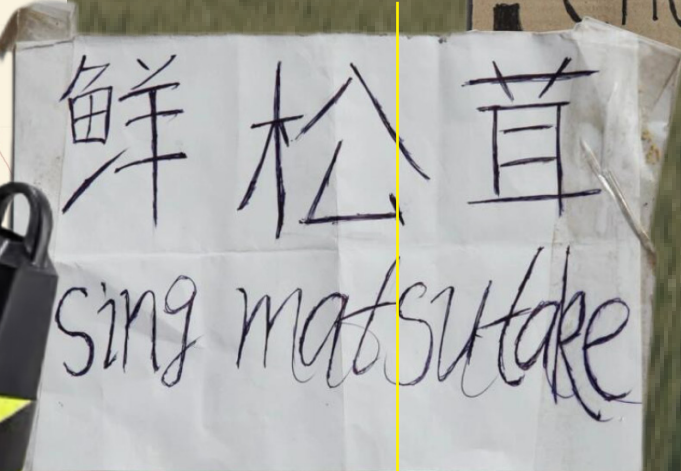


Rising housing prices

Rising housing prices
commodity prices



Obsolete household appliances



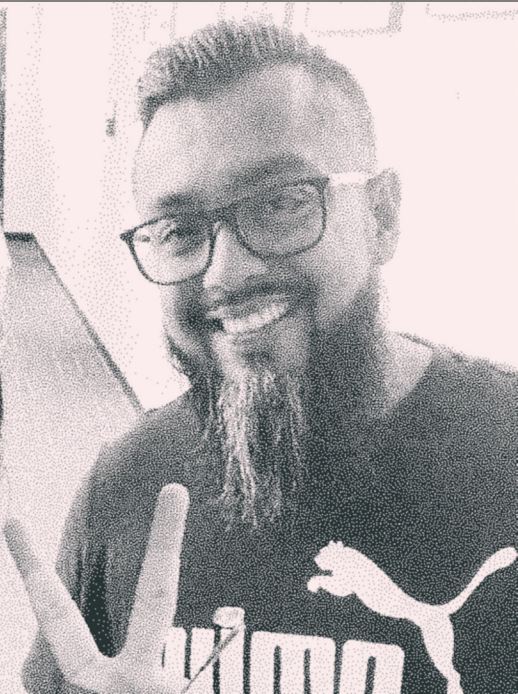
Difficulty integrating
into urban life



Based on questionnaire surveys and academic data, **59.9%** of respondents believe that **they will eventually return to their hometowns**. The main reasons include:

1. Difficulty integrating into urban life
2. Economic pressures in the city are greater than in their hometown
3. Family members still remain in their hometown; and other related factors.

Interview



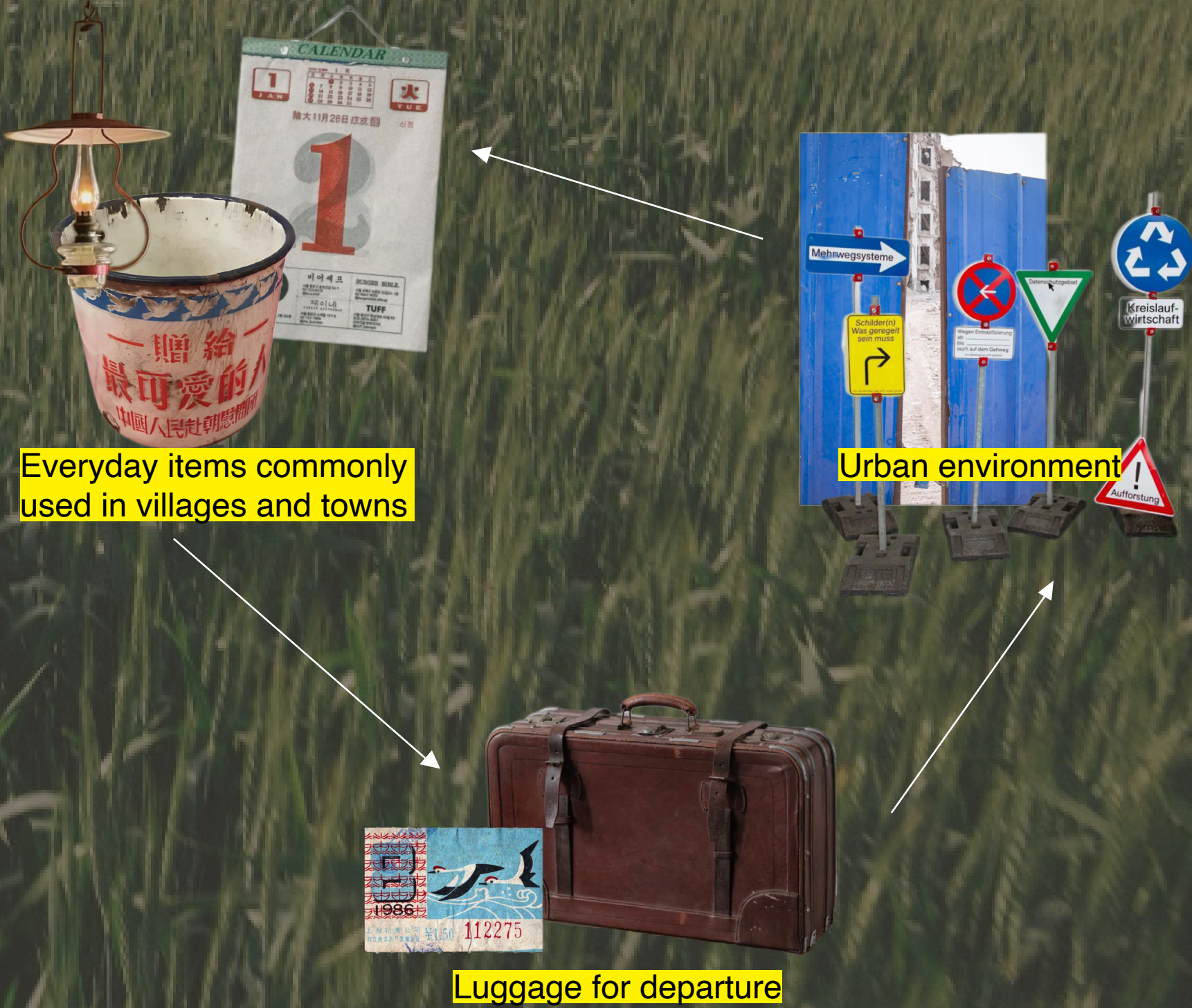
Age	23	18	25	39
Hometown	Hebei,China	Hebei,China	Hebei,China	Mauritius
Current Location	United Kingdom	Tianjin,China	Shenzhen,China	Beijing,China
Distance	8233.9 km	286.7 km	1718.9 km	9039.0 km
Occupation	Study	Study	Work	Work
Last Time Returned Home	1 year	5 month	1 year	1 year
Impression of Hometown	Steel	Fence	Bridge	Sea Breeze
How long here	1 year	3 years	1 year	4 years

Social Phenomenon Analysis

As both urban and rural areas develop, the gap in convenience between them is narrowing. Yet, cities continue to suffer from noise and light pollution, pushing many affluent people toward villages with better environments, while others move to cities for opportunities. Rising housing prices and living costs.

However, make it difficult for migrants to feel a true sense of belonging in cities. When they seek to return home, they often find that their hometowns have also become more expensive and filled with outsiders.

This creates a double dislocation: a struggle to integrate into the city, while simultaneously losing connection with the hometown.



Design Goal:

This project centers on the emotional theme of “**RETURN**”—a concept that carries both nostalgia and struggle. In the past, going home symbolized stability, family, and a sense of belonging. Yet today, “returning” has become a complex act: **Where exactly are we returning to? And what are we returning for?**

For many, the experience of leaving one’s hometown—whether for education, work, or survival— has torn a rift between their original identity and current reality. The hometown gradually shifts from a tangible place to an image in memory, and eventually, an untouchable myth. The farther the distance, the deeper the sense of emotional loss. In this context, “return” is no longer a straight line, but resembles an emotional Möbius strip—entangled with nostalgia, guilt, cultural dislocation, and intergenerational silence.

Through design, I aim to ask: **What are we truly returning to?** A physical space, a cultural memory, or an emotional refuge? As urban and rural populations undergo paradigm shifts in class and identity, where do we go from here?

This project is inspired by literary works such as Thoreau’s Walden and Tao Yuanming’s Return Home (归去来兮辞), and also draws from the real-life experiences of the working-class youth navigating between urban and rural spaces. It seeks to trace the invisible yet deeply rooted emotional entanglements, to outline the fractures behind the notion of “return,” and to search for the possibility of reconciliation.

A/B Manifesto influencers:

A	B
1. For how the world is	For how the world could be
2. change the world to suit us	change us to suit the world
3. Research for design	Research through design
4. Consumer	Citizen

Insight(s) List:

The class structure between urban and rural areas has shifted.
Wealthy urban residents are actively relocating to rural towns in search of nature, tranquility, and a sense of spiritual order. Meanwhile, economically disadvantaged rural populations are forced to migrate to cities, taking on low-wage labor jobs—yet they often struggle to truly integrate.

“Return” means different things across social classes.
For the middle class, the countryside represents rest and retreat; for working-class individuals, it can mean confronting the very hardships they once tried to escape.

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POV(s) according to insights:

Migrants are caught in a paradox: wealthy urban residents move to the countryside in search of tranquility, while migrants are forced into cities for survival yet remain marginalized.

For the middle class, “return” signifies rest and retreat; for the working class, it means confronting the hardships they once sought to escape.

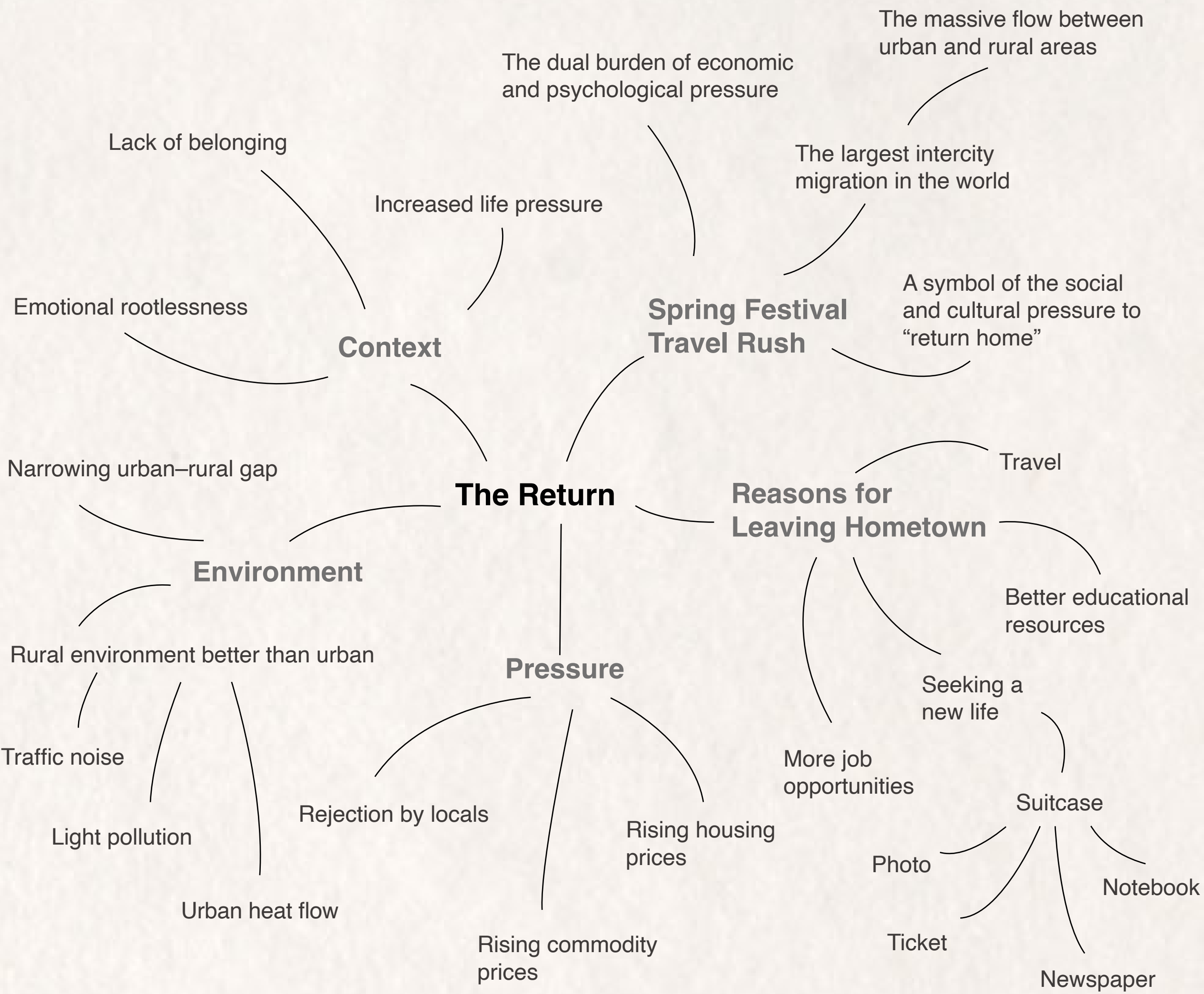
In urban contexts, pollution, transience, and economic pressures erode people’s ability to develop a true sense of belonging.

HMW(s):

How might we visualize or materialize the invisible tension embedded in the act of returning?

How might we give voice to the unspeakable nostalgia and sense of loss across generations?

Mindmap:



Visual Experiment:

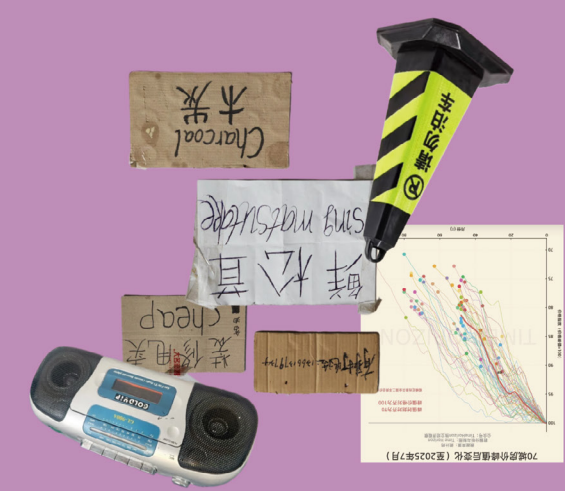


From the interviews, I extracted certain elements, but when placed together they felt too scattered and disconnected. During a journey, I saw people carrying suitcases, which made me wonder: what do those leaving their hometowns carry inside their boxes?

Ultimately, I chose a suitcase as the medium to imagine what kinds of objects might be found inside the luggage of someone leaving their hometown, and from this concept I developed a set of visual designs.

Zine

Research



Based on questionnaire surveys and academic data, 59.9% of respondents believe that they will eventually return to their hometowns. The main reasons include:

1. Difficulty integrating into urban life
2. Economic pressures in the city are greater than in their hometowns
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Style-Chinese dreamcore



Chinese dreamcore is a visual aesthetic that combines traditional Chinese cultural symbols with surreal, dreamlike atmospheres. It often conveys nostalgia, disorientation, and a sense of longing for the past. I use this aesthetic because it resonates with the theme of memory and return in my project. Its hazy, unreal quality helps express the helplessness and confusion people feel when recalling their hometowns.

归去来兮

The Return

MACD Final Project 2025

Zixin Wu

Reflection

Core Theme

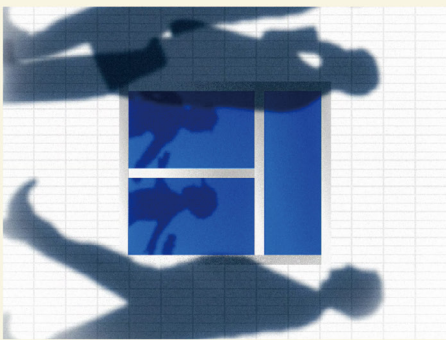
HMW:
How might we ease the loneliness of rural migrant workers struggling with emotional disconnection in urban life?
How might we support rural migrant workers in cities in overcoming emotional rootlessness and loneliness?

Visual Approach of the Work

How can the differing meanings of the city and the hometown for those who have left home be visually expressed?
How can a distinctive visual element be used to convey this theme?
What printing methods and production techniques should be chosen?



swallow



Abstract:

This project centers around the emotional theme of "return," exploring the contemporary desire and struggle for return amid urban–rural migration, fractured identities, and emotional disconnection. From a speculative design perspective, it investigates the psychological forces and cultural entanglements behind this process.

Purpose:

The project aims to question what people truly yearn for when they speak of "returning." In the aftermath of migration and separation from one's place of origin, how do we respond to generational silence, fluid identities, and the blurring image of home? And more importantly, how can the loneliness caused by the loss of belonging be reconciled?

Proposed Final Outcomes / Design Lens

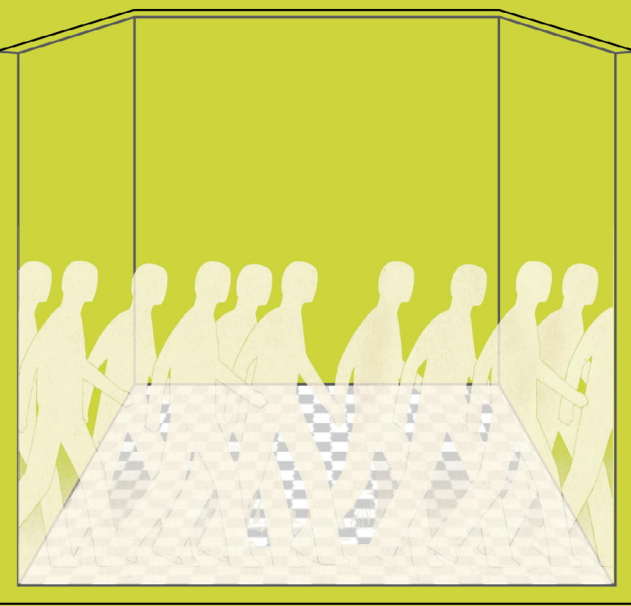
Book Design:
Accordion-fold format (one volume for the city, one for the hometown, with each page responding to its counterpart)





Inspiration & Context:

The inspiration comes from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Tao Yuanming's *Return to the Fields* (归去来兮词), and research into the real-life trajectories of children from working-class families—especially their repeated movements between the city and their rural hometowns. This project seeks to respond, through contemporary design language, to the emotional yearning for return expressed in these cultural texts, as well as the dissonance between such ideals and present-day realities.



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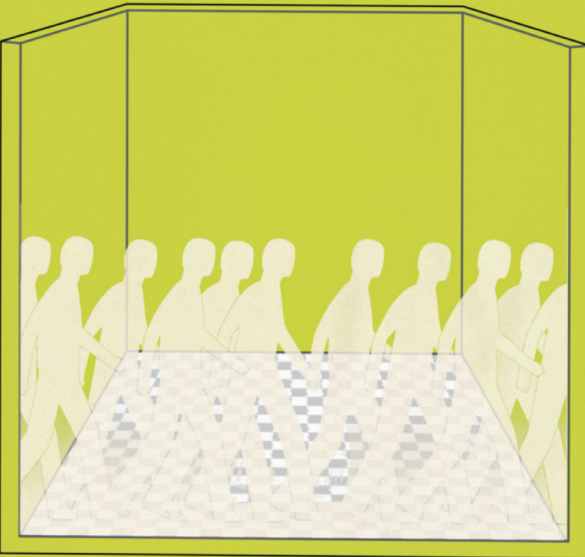
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Reflection

Core Theme

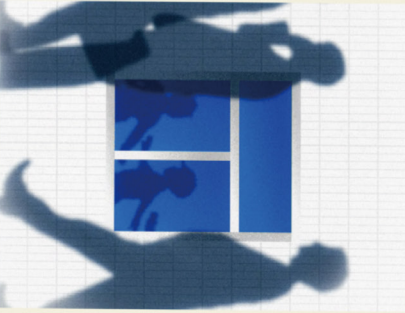
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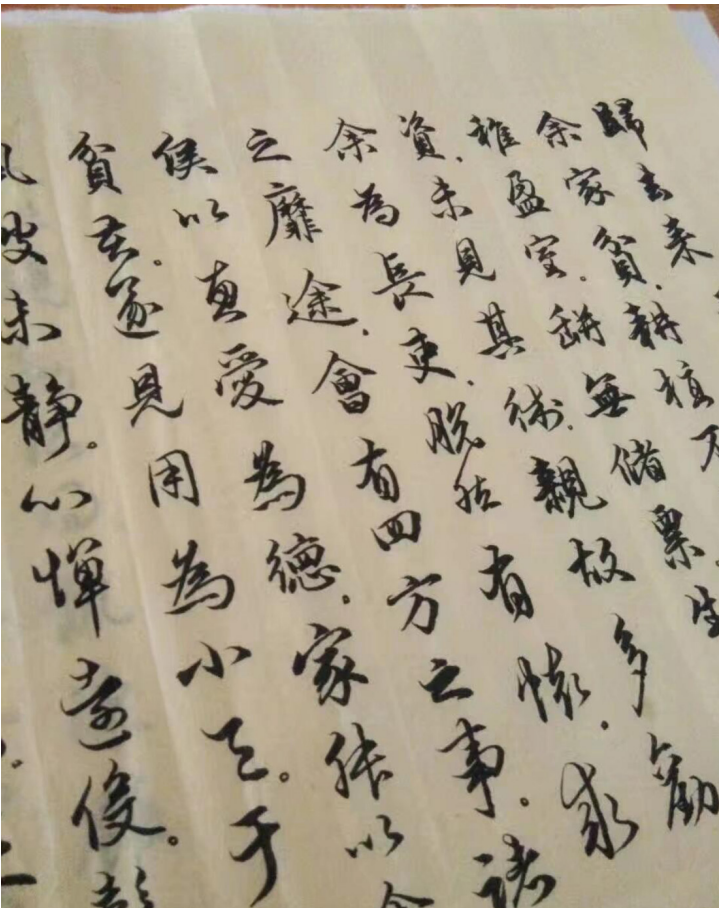
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swallow



Typography Design



Since Tao Yuanming’s Return Home Ode (归去来兮) is a work of ancient Chinese literature, I chose to present the title primarily in Chinese.

For the typography, I explored many different scripts, studying how each dynasty and each calligrapher wrote the same character in distinct ways.

In the end, I selected four styles of writing as the foundation and extended them with a modern interpretation. To highlight the pressure of the times and the absurdity of development, I made the strokes sharper and more rigid, giving the characters a stronger sense of power and oppression.

归去来兮 书法家真迹									
楷行草隶篆 作者数量 热度作者作品视频									
归去来兮 傅增湘 千文传 高启 高士奇 龚鼎孳 顾莼 顾咸正 顾易 曹世昌 归昌世 韩濂 何乔新 何绍基 何氏 何氏									
落花诗册 道因法师碑 湖州妙严寺记 灵飞经 李普墓志 元稹墓志 九歌 智永真草千字文 多宝塔碑 归 去 来 兮 归 归 归 归 归 归 归 归 归 雁塔圣教序 李璧墓志 落花诗册精选放大 多宝塔碑 草堂十志 王宠小楷书论 张猛龙碑 落花诗册 道因法师碑 归 归 归 归 归 归 归 归 归 戏鸿堂法帖 李普墓志 李璧墓志 小楷道德经卷全本 麻姑仙坛记 李玄靖碑 落花诗册 泉男生墓志铭 西园雅集图记 归 归 归 归 归 归 归 归 归									

Reference



Draft



Final Version

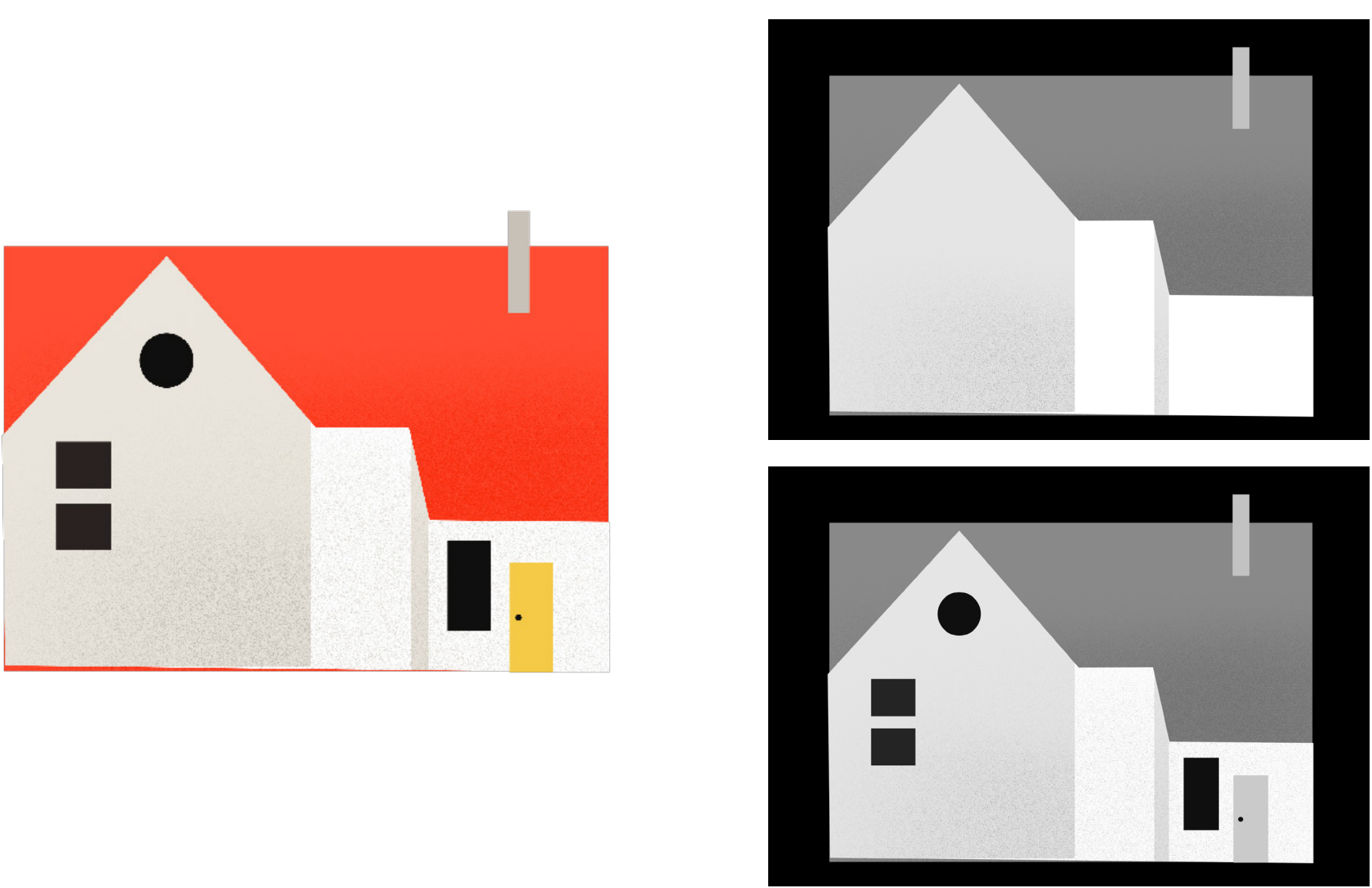
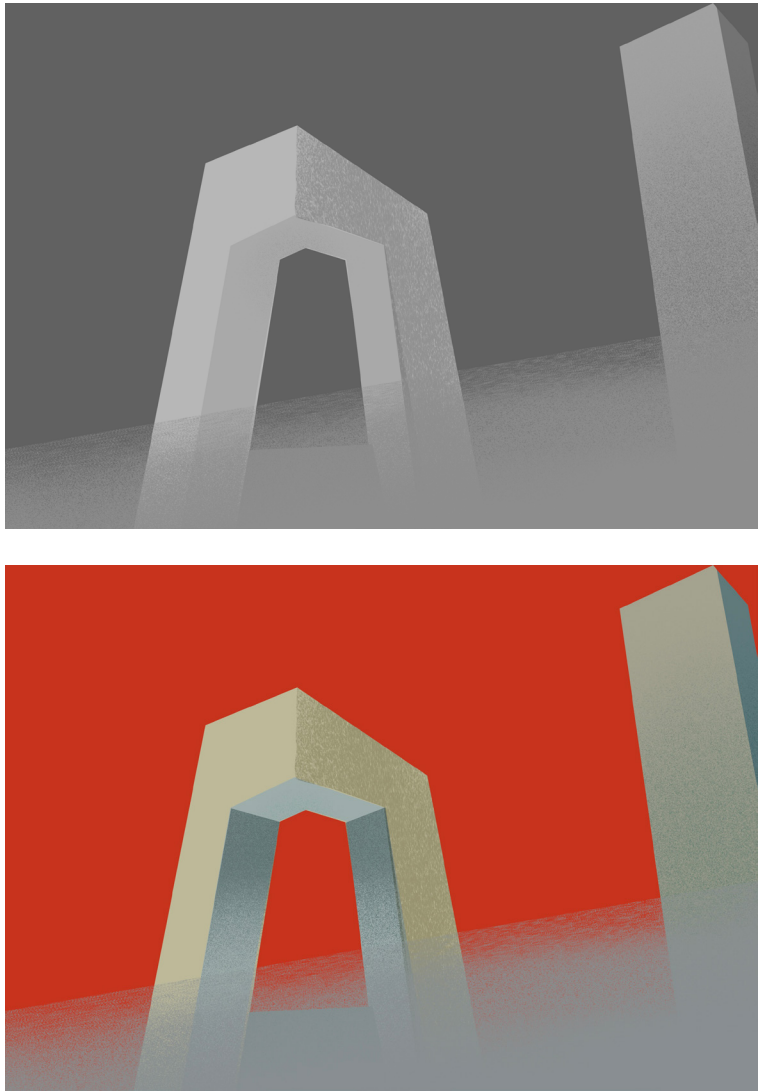


Illustration Design



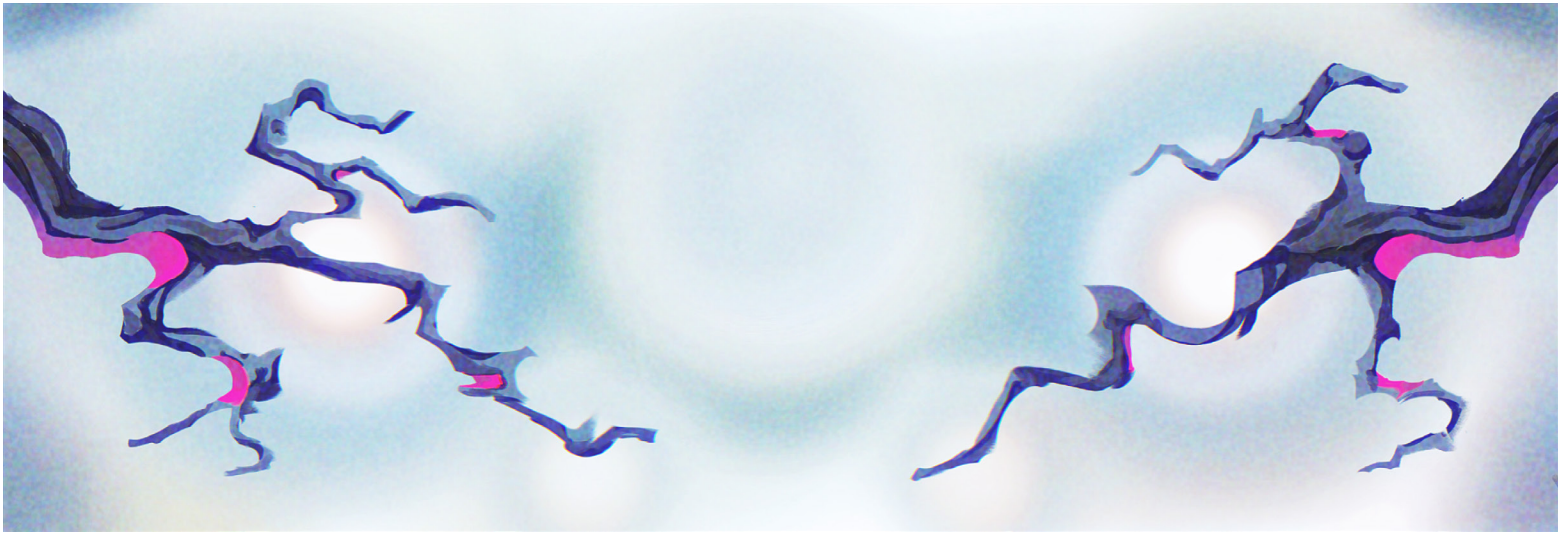
Illustration of Beijing

This illustration seeks to convey Beijing as the capital of the nation, yet during the Lunar New Year—a time that should be the most festive—the city becomes strikingly quiet. According to surveys, Beijing’s real-time population drops sharply during this period as people return to their hometowns. In this sense, the city serves as a typical example in this project for exploring issues of urban belonging and the notion of return.



New-Type Housing

Nowadays, more and more wealthy people are moving to villages and towns with better environments, seeking to escape the high-rises, noise, and light pollution of the city. This house, rendered in a modern style, depicts the emergence of a new form of housing.



Withered Willow Tree

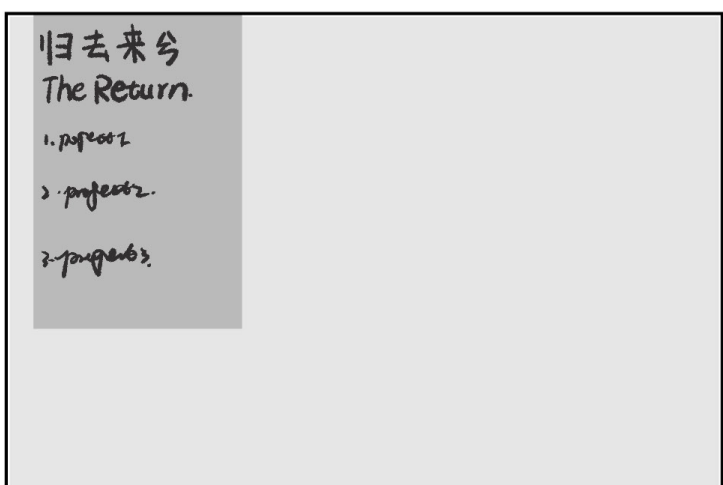


In traditional Chinese imagery, the willow symbolizes parting and reunion. When people bid farewell to family or friends, they would break off a willow branch as a token. Thus, the willow here represents the desire to return. However, the tree has withered, suggesting that for people today, returning is no longer an easy endeavor. In terms of color palette, a Chinese dreamcore visual effect was chosen, amplifying the sense of helplessness and confusion that accompanies longing for the past.

WEB Design

DRAFT

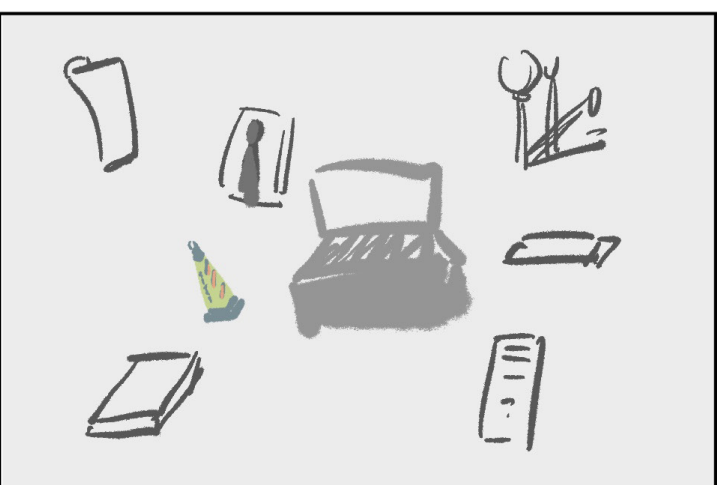
Storyboard



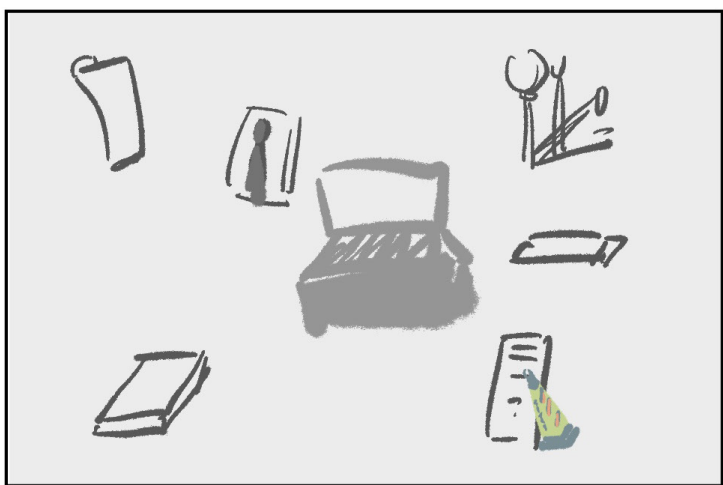
Homepage
Featuring the project title and
output information



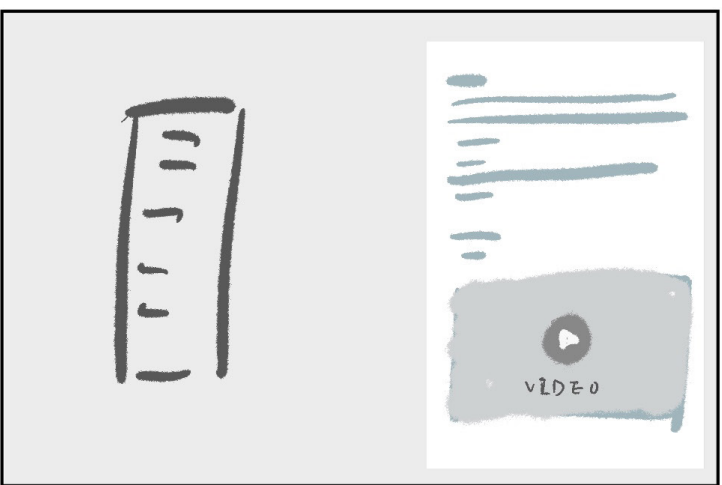
Suitcase Interaction Interface
The cursor is designed in the
shape of a city roadblock



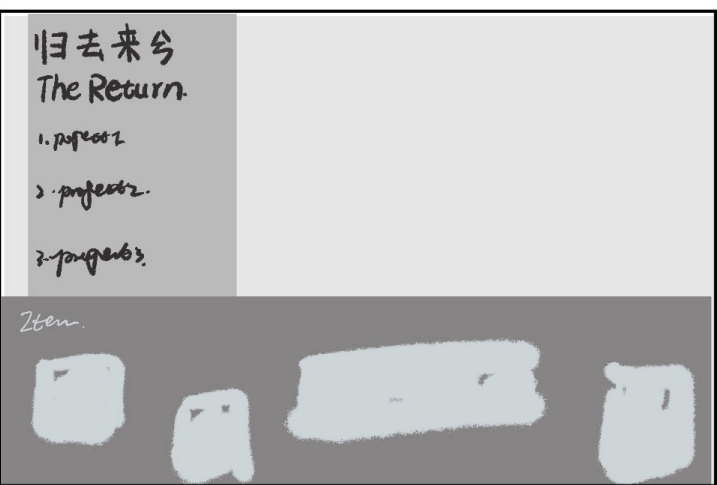
Open the Suitcas
Items appear randomly and can
be moved



View Item Story
Simply click on the item



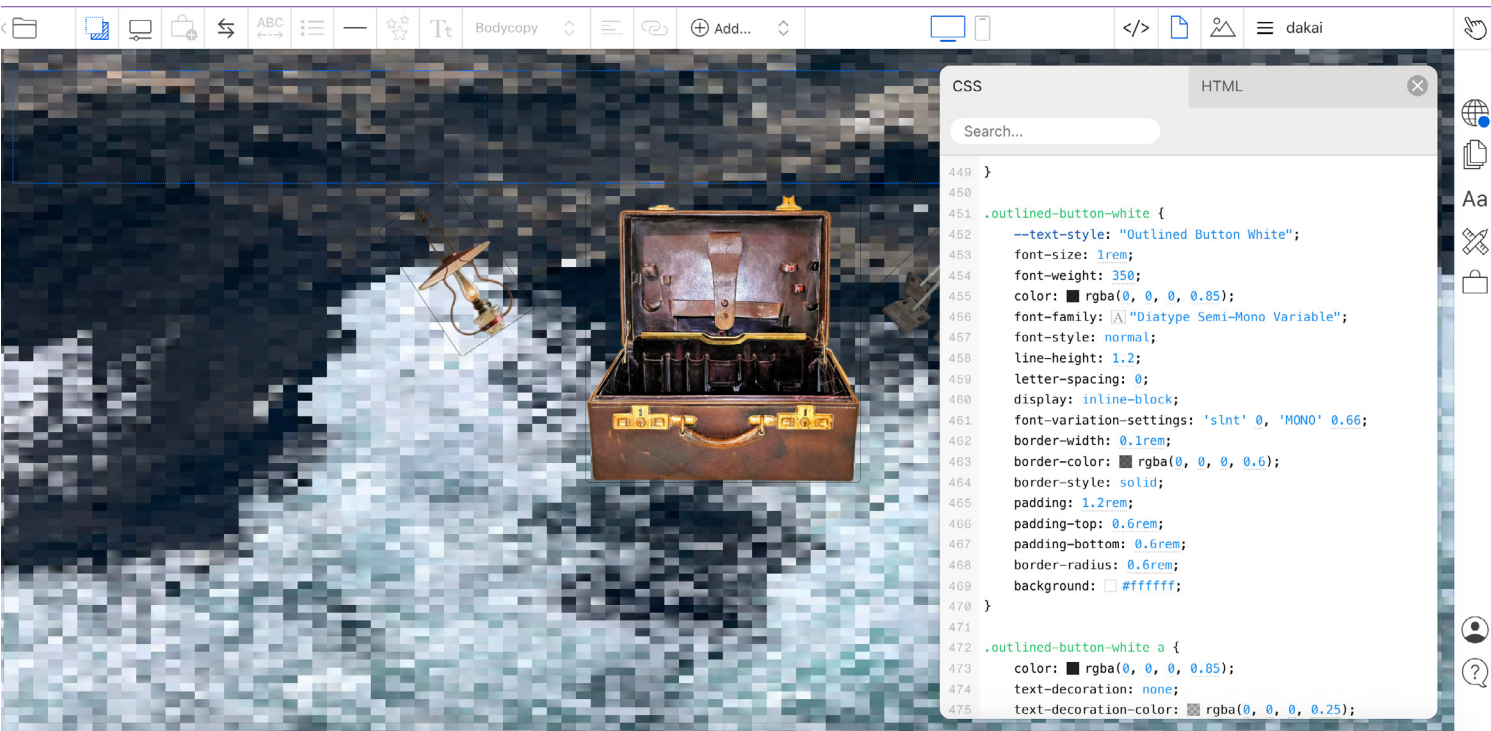
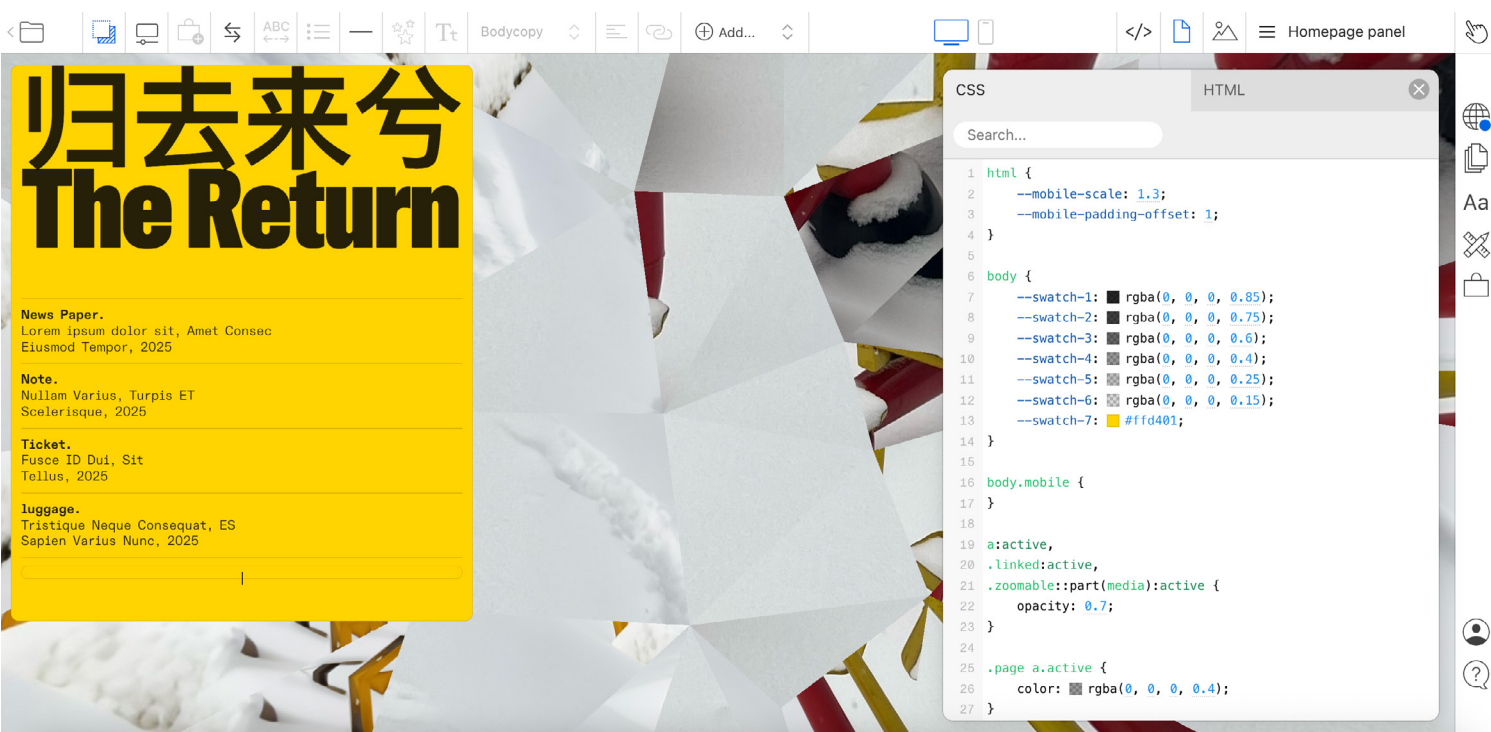
Item Story
Includes personal narratives
and video



All Project Information
By clicking on the project on
the homepage, you can view all
design details of this project

PROCESS

Interactive web page developed using the Cargo platform



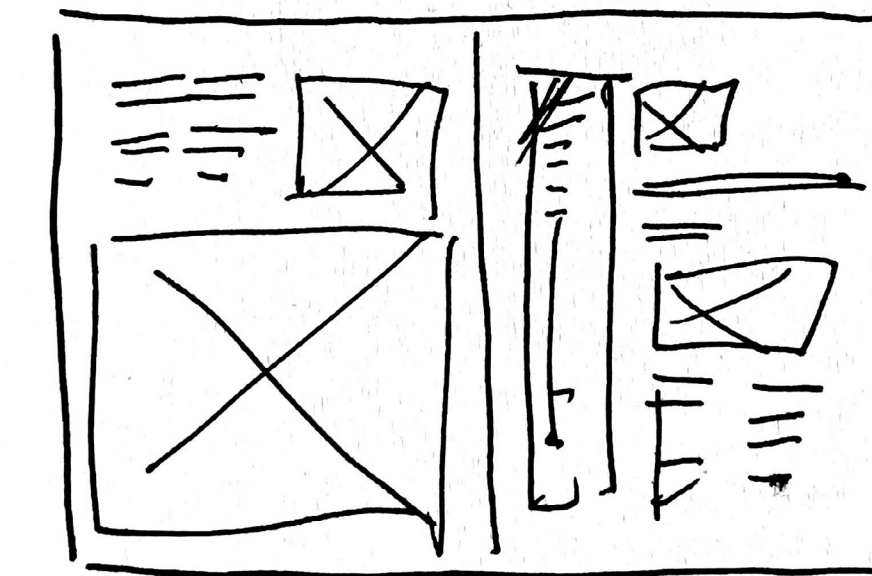
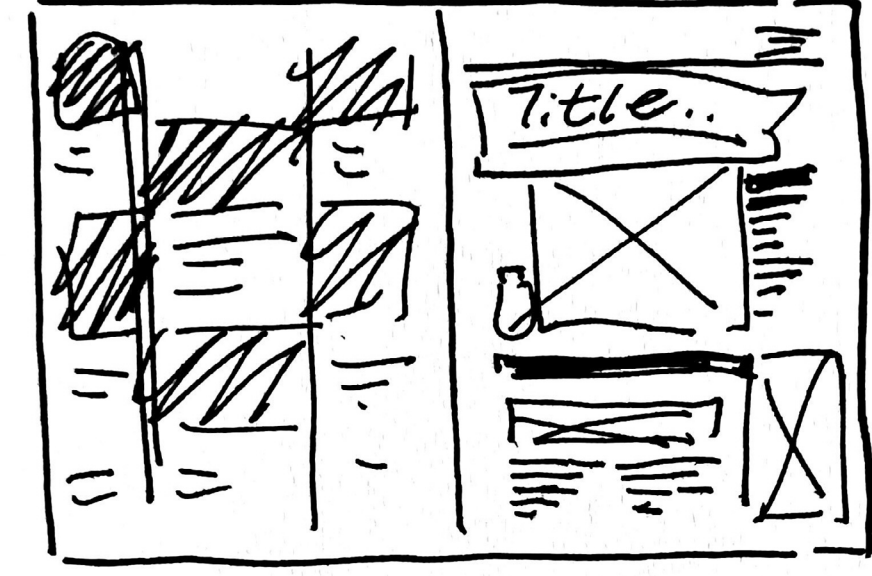
Due to time limitations, the project was ultimately not realized through a physical suitcase installation. Instead, it was translated into a digital format, using an online platform to metaphorically represent the luggage of those departing from their hometowns. The website integrates interactive functions that allow viewers to explore the stories embedded in each item, alongside comprehensive documentation of the project's outcomes. The background design employs a dreamlike Chinese aesthetic, evoking a sense of disorientation and nostalgia associated with memory and return.

<https://tthethereturn.cargo.site>

Newspaper Design



Layout Draft



- House Price.
- Ghost City
- Worker.
- Happiness ↓
- Hometown Renewal



I believe that newspapers, as a form of print media, are still an effective medium for conveying information. Although their information capacity cannot compare with that of today's mobile phones, their readership is far more clearly defined. For instance, both financial professionals and artists may read news on their phones, but financial newspapers are almost exclusively purchased by people in the finance sector. Thus, while newspapers have ceased to be a mainstream medium in contemporary society, their audience remains a very specific group.

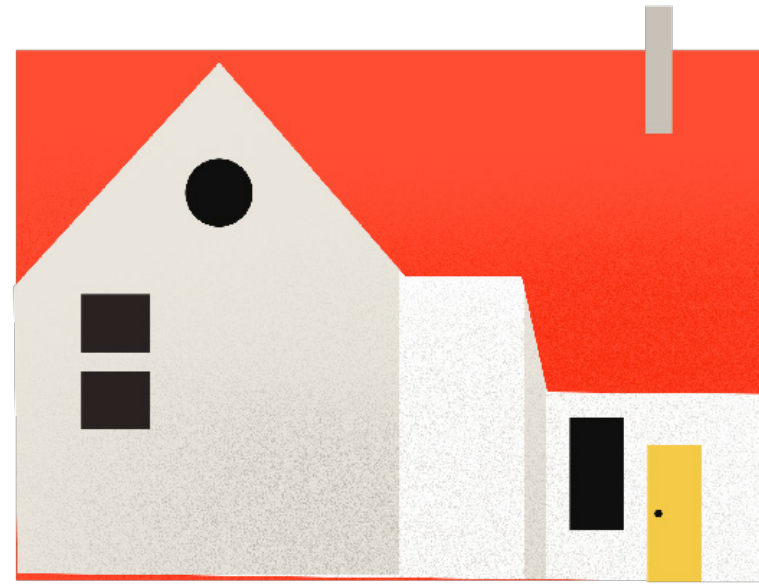
For this reason, I chose newspapers as one of the project's outputs. My research shows that for many people, memories of their hometown are still tied to the presence of newspapers. Therefore, I began to consider whether I could transform this social context into newspaper-style reports—presenting such information as if it were news coverage, thereby conveying the stories from a more indirect perspective.

Using Beijing—a city characterized by its large migrant population—as a case study, the newspaper features a headline about how it turns into an “empty city” during the Spring Festival. This indirectly echoes the project’s theme.

On the margins, there is a survey on urban happiness: while most respondents believe they feel happiness in the city, many also express a sense of belonging that is difficult to truly integrate. Presented in the form of news reporting, this content is placed on the newspaper page.

At the bottom are several short news items, such as rising housing prices and the trend of many businesspeople moving to villages or developing homestay projects. Although these may appear to be simple news reports, they also reveal reasons why people increasingly feel estranged from their hometowns.





THE RETURN