

From "Returning Young People" to "Urban-to-Rural Returnee Group": Reconstruction of Talent Paths for Rural Revitalization

Wanyi Liu^{1*}, Hao Li², Chen Yang³, Xiaotian Shen⁴

¹Annie Wright Schools, Washington State, USA

²Hangzhou No.13 Middle School Education Group (General School), Hangzhou, China

³Emerson College, California State, USA

⁴Rosseau Lake College, Ontario Province, Canada

**Corresponding Author. Email: banzhuren@yishan.org*

Abstract. Traditionally, returning young people refer to rural youth who, after graduating from universities in cities or working for one or two years, return to their hometowns to start businesses out of nostalgia, driving rural economic development and increasing villagers' income. Studies have found that due to insufficient social experience, limited personal capabilities, and lack of social resources, the success rate of entrepreneurship among this group is relatively low. However, there is a group of middle-aged urban residents who, out of the pursuit of a lifestyle and personal career development, move from cities to rural areas to settle down and engage in production and life, often with a higher success rate. Although they cannot generally directly drive villagers to prosperity, they have made significant contributions to the rural environment, cultural atmosphere, community governance, and local consumption, which is more in line with the comprehensive and diversified development values of rural revitalization. Therefore, we can redefine returning young people in a broader sense and propose corresponding measures to attract this group to better realize rural revitalization.

Keywords: Rural Revitalization, Returning Young People, Urban Group, Entrepreneurship, Career Development

1. Introduction

In the context of comprehensively promoting rural revitalization in the new era, the shortage of talents has become a key bottleneck restricting the sustainable economic and social development of rural areas. Currently, the problem of "talent hollowing-out" caused by the large-scale outflow of young and middle-aged rural population is particularly prominent, which is further exacerbated by factors such as the intensification of population aging and the imbalance between urban and rural development. The group of returning young people has become a potential new force of talents for rural revitalization. Through this online research and practical investigation in Dayi County, Chengdu, another group has been discovered. They have many years of work and life experience in

cities and a certain economic foundation. Their arrival in rural areas for production and life has brought various benefits to the countryside. Therefore, this group is taken as the core research object to discuss their characteristics, motivations, concerns, etc., so as to explore methods to accelerate this phenomenon and provide reference for constructing a sustainable rural talent revitalization model.

2. Research on the current situation of rural population

As the overall grasp of the work related to agriculture, rural areas, and farmers in the new era, the core of the rural revitalization strategy lies in talent revitalization. However, China's rural areas are currently facing a severe shortage of talents, especially the lack of young talents, which has become an important factor restricting rural revitalization. The 2024 Central Rural Work Conference clearly pointed out that it is necessary to "adapt to the trend of population change and promote the organic combination of comprehensive rural revitalization and new-type urbanization".

2.1. Current situation of the outflow of young and middle-aged rural population

According to relevant report data, China's rural areas are showing "hollowing-out", that is, the outflow of young and middle-aged labor force. Among the young and middle-aged labor force with rural household registration, about 70% have settled in cities and engaged in long-term physical work such as construction, security, and cleaning. Only 30% are employed in rural areas, engaged in farming, or taking care of the elderly and children. Therefore, the common resident family structure in rural areas is the elderly, or the elderly plus young children.

Comparing the distribution of employed persons in 2023, the national total employed population is 740 million, of which 470 million are in urban areas, accounting for 63.5%. In terms of employment types, the number of employees in urban enterprises, institutions and individual businesses is 450 million, accounting for 96%. The number of employees in rural private enterprises and individual businesses is 146 million, accounting for 54%, and the rest are mainly engaged in small-scale farming. Therefore, the comparison of the number of employed population in urban and rural enterprises, institutions and individual businesses is 450 million to 146 million, about 3:1.

In terms of newly added employed population, that is, fresh graduates. With the increasing number of graduates year by year, the gradual reduction of urban employment opportunities under the economic downturn, and the dual pressure brought by the rising urban living costs, returning to counties and grass-roots units has become a trend in the employment changes of graduates. However, very few of them return to work or start businesses in rural units.

2.2. Analysis of the causes of the outflow of young and middle-aged rural population

Firstly, there is a large income gap between urban and rural areas. Economic data for the first half of 2025 shows that the per capita disposable income of national residents is 21,840 yuan, of which 28,844 yuan is for urban residents and only 11,936 yuan is for rural residents, with an urban-rural income ratio of 2.42:1. This significant income gap has become the primary economic motivation for talents to flow to cities, as higher salaries are more likely to attract workers.

Secondly, the allocation of public service resources between urban and rural areas is uneven. Taking medical resources in Chongqing as an example, the main urban area of Chongqing has many Grade A Class 3 hospitals, while Hechuan District, as a representative of rural areas, has only one Grade A Class 3 hospital and two Grade A Class 2 hospitals by 2025. There is also a significant gap

between urban and rural areas in public facilities and services such as entertainment and transportation, which reduces the attractiveness of rural areas to talents.

Thirdly, the space for career development is limited. On the one hand, the comprehensive strength of rural industries is still not strong enough, showing the characteristics of incomplete categories, small scale, short chains, and scattered layout. The degree of industrial integration is not high, and there is room for improvement in terms of variety, quality, and brand. The quality and efficiency of the industrial chain and the added value income obtained by farmers are relatively low, and the endogenous motivation and self-development capacity of the industry need to be enhanced. On the other hand, the level and capacity of agricultural product processing need to be improved, mainly reflected in the extensive mode of agricultural development, weak agricultural product processing technology and equipment, and slow progress in agricultural standardization, which all restrict the development of the agricultural product processing industry. At the same time, the support of resource elements and supporting facilities for rural industrial development is still insufficient, obstacles restricting the two-way flow and equal exchange of urban and rural elements still exist, the support for technological research and development is not enough, and the talent incentive and guarantee mechanism is not sound. It can be seen that rural industries are small in scale, low in level, have insufficient interaction with the outside world, and are not advanced in technology, making it difficult to provide competitive career development platforms for young people.

Finally, there is the influence of social concepts. In traditional concepts, cities are often associated with positive evaluations such as "success" and "dignity", while rural areas are labeled with negative labels such as "backward" and "unpromising". This concept difference leads many families to encourage their children to stay in cities, further strengthening the trend of talent outflow.

2.3. Policy practices and effects in promoting talent return

In recent years, the state has issued a series of policies and measures to encourage talents to return to their hometowns to start businesses. In terms of financial support, tax reductions, subsidies and other preferential treatments are given to eligible returning entrepreneurs. For example, college graduates who engage in individual businesses within the graduation year can deduct relevant taxes and fees at a limit of 24,000 yuan per household per year for 3 years.

Similarly, local governments have also carried out many innovative practices in attracting talents to return. Dong'an County, Hunan Province has innovatively built a "full-chain support model of fund support + venue guarantee + skill training + follow-up services", and successfully cultivated some typical cases of returning entrepreneurship [1]. For example, Tang Yunyun, a graduate of Hunan Agricultural University, is now an entrepreneurial leader with an annual sales volume of 6 million yuan, driving more than 40 villagers to find employment at their doorsteps. Her success is a vivid example of the county's full-chain support model accurately helping college graduates return to their hometowns to start businesses and serve rural revitalization. A few years ago, Tang Yunyun saw that the high-quality agricultural products in her hometown had no way to be promoted and developed, so she had the idea of returning to her hometown to start a business. However, problems such as start-up funds, venues, and technology made it difficult for her to move forward. The Human Resources and Social Security Bureau of Dong'an County took the initiative to provide assistance and tailor-made a support plan for her.

First, solve the problem of funds and venues. In the early stage of entrepreneurship, she suffered losses due to natural disasters, and the human resources and social security department quickly coordinated with financial institutions to resolve the capital turnover crisis. In response to the

demand for processing venues, the human resources and social security department also coordinated to revitalize the idle factory buildings in the town, renovated them, and implemented a total of 54,000 yuan in venue subsidies and post stabilization subsidies, which greatly reduced the start-up costs. Then, skill training was carried out to strengthen operational capabilities. Tang Yunyun participated in the entrepreneurship training course organized by the Human Resources and Social Security Bureau, systematically learning knowledge such as enterprise management and marketing. Inspired by the training, she began to try live streaming e-commerce and e-commerce to help farmers. To solve the problems of product quality and scale, she rented land to build her own planting base. The Human Resources and Social Security Bureau also continued to provide help, conducting regular on-site guidance to promote the better development of the industry.

In supporting college students' entrepreneurship, Hunan Province has also established an initial 500-million-yuan college student entrepreneurship investment fund, focusing on supporting early-stage, small-scale and long-term entrepreneurship projects, with a maximum investment of 1 million yuan per project. This market-oriented support method has effectively alleviated the capital pressure of college students returning to their hometowns to start businesses [2].

3. Observation and research on the phenomenon of returning young people

Tang Yunyun's success is the result of the full investment of the local government in venues, funds, skills and other aspects. However, most of the more "Tang Yunyuns" ended in failure. The reasons can be roughly divided into the following categories:

Blind entrepreneurship type: Some rural college students return to their hometowns and invest in planting "high-end strawberries" without investigation and research. As a result, because the local soil is alkaline, it is extremely unfavorable for the growth of strawberries; in addition, it is 150 kilometers away from the city, and the transportation cost per kilogram of strawberries is more than 8 yuan, so the strawberries grown cannot be sold at all, and the strawberries that rot in the fields just rot. The total investment loss is about 100,000 yuan. "Emphasizing enthusiasm over research" and acting out of touch with local reality is a typical example. In addition, insufficient consideration is given to the rural areas' own "resource endowments", such as local soil conditions, geographical location, and market demand, and sometimes the constraints of the regional conditions in which they are located are completely ignored.

Skill-deficient type: Some urban young people, due to blind admiration for the idyllic pastoral life, "yearn" for the countryside and go to the countryside to set up "rural e-commerce", but they have not mastered the relevant skills and knowledge points related to rural e-commerce, such as the necessary knowledge and skills of fresh-keeping of fresh produce and rural logistics. The "local eggs" they sell often suffer from damage and deterioration during transportation due to too long transportation time, resulting in a large number of customer complaints and even the closure of the store. It is precisely because of the existence of these factors that people have a "misunderstanding of urban youth's perception of rural industries", and some people think that "rural e-commerce is just opening an online store".

Type of insufficient policy utilization: Some young people return to their hometowns to engage in "leisure agriculture" and want to run "farmhouses", but they did not apply for the local "college student entrepreneurship subsidy", which can provide 50,000 yuan of start-up capital. Because there is no start-up capital, they did not carry out relevant infrastructure construction, such as toilets and parking lots, resulting in the suspension of the project. The crux is that young people do not understand the content of the policy provisions and cannot connect with policy support. For

example, rural young people engaged in leisure agriculture can apply for rural tourism support projects, but some young people still do not know much about this, so few can use it [3].

It can be seen that young people returning to their hometowns in their early twenties have a high risk of entrepreneurial failure due to mismatches in three aspects.

First, the mismatch between cognition and reality: ignoring the "industrial logic" of the countryside, that is, the periodicity of agricultural production and the dispersion of the rural market, and using "urban thinking" to carry out rural projects.

Second, the mismatch between skills and needs: without mastering compound skills such as "agricultural technology, e-commerce operation, and rural social communication", it is impossible to solve various "complex problems" faced in rural entrepreneurship, such as communicating with local people, negotiating land transfer, and connecting with customers in big cities.

Third, the mismatch between policies and actions: the awareness rate of "rural revitalization policies" is low, and they are not used to avoid entrepreneurial risks. For example, "entrepreneurship subsidies" can cover 30% of the early entrepreneurial costs [4].

4. Research on the production and living phenomena of urban-to-rural returnee groups

Research has found that there is a special group in rural areas. They are older, have many years of work experience in cities, and have given up urban life to come to rural areas to engage in their favorite careers for various reasons. Some have rural household registration and return to their hometowns, while others have urban household registration and choose to settle down and start businesses in rural areas with beautiful environments. The success rate of entrepreneurship among this group is relatively high, and they play a certain role in promoting rural revitalization directly or indirectly.

4.1. Research on the motivations and success factors of urban-to-rural returnee groups

Through on-the-spot case investigations in Dayi County, Chengdu and online research, this group can be divided into three categories:

First, those who return to their hometowns out of a strong sense of social responsibility and mission for rural revitalization. This group often has a high educational background and urban work experience, and converts their own resources and skills into practical actions to promote the development of the village during the return process. For example, Xie Bingmei, a "post-90s" Party General Branch Secretary of Daxian Village, Jintian Town, Guiping City, Guangxi, resigned from her urban job and chose to serve as a village cadre. By improving the living environment and improving the garbage collection and cleaning system, she has significantly improved the quality of life of the villagers; she also helped the local soy sauce factory carry out brand transformation, expand sales channels, and increase employment opportunities and tax revenue; at the same time, she introduced Chinese herbal medicine planting and processing projects, promoted the rapid growth of the village-level collective economy, and provided employment opportunities for more than 100 left-behind women. Xie Bingmei's case clearly shows the remarkable results of urban entrepreneurs going to the countryside in promoting economic development, improving infrastructure and enhancing social welfare.

Second, those who continue their personal career development and realize their ideals. They value the low living costs and broad development space in rural areas and choose to carry out creative and cultural entrepreneurship here. For example, Uncle Wang, a well-known advertiser in Chengdu, moved from Chengdu to Dayi County, attracted not only by the low rent and beautiful

natural environment, but also by combining his love for traditional Chinese culture and professional background to promote the protection and innovation of traditional handicrafts. He participated in the construction of the "Tianfu Miaohui" community-benefiting digital new community, which coincides with the "community-benefiting new community" concept initiated by the "Yiyou Shanshui" platform, an extended business of Fuping Microfinance, making contributions to the diversified development of local cultural and social activities. On Tianfu Street in Anren Ancient Town, Dayi County, managers from all over the country have jointly opened various formats such as dyeing workshops, restaurants, cafes, woodworking workshops, jewelry workshops, wineries, leather workshops, stores, oil tofu shops and flower shops, enriching the local cultural life and tourism experience. Although such entrepreneurship may not directly increase agricultural output value, it has significantly enhanced the cultural attractiveness and social vitality of the countryside.

Third, those who pursue a healthy lifestyle. Many urban residents hope to get rid of the fast-paced and high-pressure life in cities and turn to pursue the high-quality natural environment and slow lifestyle in rural areas. On Tianfu Street in Anren Ancient Town, an operator from Taiwan chose to open a pineapple cake shop precisely because Dayi County has one of the highest oxygen content in the country and a natural ecological environment with organic fruits and vegetables, which provides ideal living conditions for her retirement.

Through the research of cases, three key success factors are summarized.

First, strong personal capabilities. Urban work experience has brought a broad vision, rich market experience and management capabilities. For example, sociological research points out that rural youth who have received systematic training and accumulated experience in cities are more capable of integrating resources to carry out entrepreneurship.

Second, abundant social resources. The network resources they have accumulated in cities over the years help to open up project cooperation, brand communication or channel expansion.

Third, sufficient funds. They often have considerable wealth. On the one hand, they can start projects quickly, and even if they fail, they can quickly replace them with new projects. On the other hand, they are not so eager for wealth and are willing to give up more profits to ensure the quality of the project. Thus, the success rate is improved.

In contrast, fresh graduates in their early twenties have neither capabilities nor connections, and are more likely to be attracted by the prosperity and high salaries of cities, making it difficult for them to adapt to the conditions and rhythm of production and life in rural areas.

Based on the above analysis, compared with the narrow sense of returning young people, those entrepreneurs who have accumulated resources, experience and a certain economic foundation in cities are more qualified to become the backbone of rural revitalization. We advocate a broad concept of returning groups that breaks age restrictions, covering young, middle-aged and elderly groups. Among them, the middle-aged and elderly groups are often more likely to achieve successful "return" due to their more mature resource integration capabilities and risk resistance capabilities.

4.2. Research on the concerns and needs of urban-to-rural returnee groups

Although urban-to-rural returnee groups have brought vitality to the countryside, the backward infrastructure, policy support and information promotion in rural areas still hinder this return phenomenon and become concerns of urban groups.

First, rural infrastructure is relatively backward, especially the insufficient medical and educational resources, which are difficult to meet the living habits and needs of urban-to-rural returnee groups. Many urban-to-rural returnee groups are used to convenient medical services and

high-quality educational environments, which have become important concerns for their life in the countryside. For example, some rural areas in Dayi County lack large-scale medical equipment and high-quality schools, which restricts the long-term settlement willingness of urban-to-rural returnee groups.

Second, the sustainability and implementation of policy support still need to be strengthened. Urban-to-rural returnee groups also expect stable support from the government in terms of funds, technology and market development during the process of starting businesses in the countryside.

At the same time, the insufficient capacity of information dissemination and market promotion also restricts the development of rural industries. Taking the public welfare store on Tianfu Street in Anren Ancient Town as an example, a Taiwanese grandmother who has lived in the mainland for more than 20 years has innovated a public welfare model, using the income from the sale of donated items for public welfare undertakings, emphasizing the promotion of sustainable environmental protection, reflecting the power of social collaboration and love, and adding more content to the local area. However, the current promotion of the store is still limited, and its influence has not been fully exerted.

5. Advocacy and suggestions

Promoting rural revitalization is crucial to the introduction and retention of talents. Faced with the current rural talent gap and the significant resource advantages of urban-to-rural returnee groups, how to effectively attract more people with urban backgrounds to go to the countryside is an important issue for realizing the sustainable development of the countryside. Combined with the previous analysis of the motivations and success factors of urban-to-rural returnee groups, this section puts forward targeted suggestions from three aspects: improving hardware facilities, precise information dissemination, and policy and economic support [5].

First, improve rural hardware facilities and enhance the livable environment. Urban-to-rural returnee groups generally have high requirements for the quality of life, and the improvement of rural infrastructure is a prerequisite for attracting them to settle down and start businesses for a long time. First of all, we should focus on promoting the upgrading of infrastructure, ensuring stable water supply, power supply and high-speed broadband network coverage, especially accelerating the upgrading of medical equipment in township health centers to the standard of Grade B Class 3 hospitals, so as to improve the quality of rural medical services. Secondly, for middle-aged and elderly urban-to-rural returnee groups, we can promote the "smart health huts" project to realize digital medical services such as teleconsultation and blood pressure monitoring.

Ecological environment governance should not be ignored. By improving garbage and sewage discharge, increasing the green coverage rate, and building livable villages with "low density and high ecology", we can create a natural, beautiful and healthy living atmosphere for urban-to-rural returnee groups. For the emerging digital economy group, we can focus on building "remote work-friendly villages", combining natural health resources with online work models to attract digital nomads and freelancers, and promote the diversified development of the countryside [6].

The comprehensive improvement of these hardware and ecological environments can approach or even surpass cities in terms of quality of life, greatly enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of rural areas.

Second, precise information dissemination to expand the scope of potential groups. Information asymmetry is one of the important factors restricting urban-to-rural returnee groups from going to the countryside. Governments and relevant institutions should establish a "rural life experience platform", make full use of emerging media forms such as short videos, live broadcasts, and online

communities such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin, to widely display successful rural entrepreneurship cases and high-quality natural ecology, and reduce information barriers.

Through carefully planned content dissemination, combined with real character stories and rural scenery displays, it can arouse the resonance and yearning of urban groups, and stimulate their interest in starting businesses and living in the countryside. This not only expands the coverage of information dissemination, but also enhances the modern sense and affinity of the rural image.

Third, policy and economic support to reduce entrepreneurial costs and risks. Economic incentives and policy guarantees are the core levers to attract urban-to-rural returnee groups.

First of all, local governments should introduce effective tax relief policies, such as exempting business tax for rural entrepreneurs for 3-5 years, or implementing value-added tax relief measures for small-scale taxpayers, such as Chenzhou City, Hunan Province, which exempts value-added tax for monthly sales of less than 100,000 yuan, so as to reduce the tax burden in the early stage of entrepreneurship.

Secondly, establish an entrepreneurship incentive mechanism, select rural entrepreneurship talents, and give a maximum reward of 300,000 yuan to encourage more high-quality talents to engage in rural revitalization. In terms of finance, provide low-interest entrepreneurship loans of up to 5 million yuan and special subsidies to support light-asset projects such as agriculture, homestays, and handicrafts, and alleviate the financing problem.

In addition, optimize the land transfer and use right policies, simplify the process of renting and renovating rural houses and farmland, especially to facilitate the middle-aged and elderly urban-to-rural returnee groups to carry out entrepreneurial transformation, thereby saving time costs and improving efficiency. Strengthen the protection of the rights and interests of "urban-to-rural returnee groups", and explore mechanisms for non-household registration population to participate in rural governance, such as the "Honorary Villager" system, to enhance their sense of belonging and social identity.

Through the above policy combination, reducing the threshold and cost of entrepreneurship and optimizing administrative efficiency can greatly enhance the enthusiasm and success rate of urban-to-rural returnee groups going to the countryside, and promote the diversified development of the rural economy.

6. Conclusion

The core of rural revitalization is talent revitalization, and the breakthrough of talent revitalization lies in introducing and retaining high-quality groups that can promote the sustainable development of the countryside. Research shows that relying on the economic foundation, social resources and management experience accumulated in cities, "urban-to-rural returnee groups" are more qualified to achieve entrepreneurial success and community integration in rural areas. They can not only drive industrial upgrading and employment growth, but also promote cultural inheritance and ecological civilization construction, injecting diversified development momentum into the countryside. However, to form a scale effect of this trend, it is necessary to construct a stable talent attraction and guarantee mechanism by improving infrastructure, optimizing the living environment, improving policy support and broadening information dissemination channels. Only in this way can the countryside truly realize the optimization of population structure and the coordinated development of economy, culture and ecology, and thus radiate lasting and vigorous vitality in the process of urban-rural integration in the new era.

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