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## Revista de Cercetare și Interventie Sociala

ISSN: 1583-3410 (print), ISSN: 1584-5397 (electronic)

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### **A STUDY ON THE KEY FACTORS OF LABOR MIGRATION AND WILLINGNESS TO RETURN TO RURAL AREAS USING ANP: A CASE STUDY OF WESTERN CHINA**

*Zhihong TANG, Lun ZHAO, Xianyong ZHOU*

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Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială, 2020, vol. 69, pp. 337-348

<https://doi.org/10.33788/rcis.69.22>

Published by:  
Expert Projects Publishing House



On behalf of:  
„Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University,  
Department of Sociology and Social Work  
and  
HoltIS Association

REVISTA DE CERCETARE SI INTERVENTIE SOCIALA  
is indexed by Clarivate Analytics (Social Sciences Citation Index),  
SCOPUS and CROSSREF

# **A Study on the Key Factors of Labor Migration and Willingness to Return to Rural Areas Using ANP: A Case Study of Western China**

Zhihong TANG<sup>1</sup>, Lun ZHAO<sup>2</sup>, Xianyong ZHOU<sup>3</sup>

## **Abstract**

As a result of the limitations of the development stage and the historical process, the existence of an urban-rural dual structure in China inevitably causes rural areas to fall into a cycle of labor loss, aging and low education levels, which leads to poverty and weakness and restricts further modernization in China. To solve the imbalance of urban and rural development and the loss of rural “nutrients”, many countries, including China, have successively proposed development strategies for rural revitalization. This study selected urban returnees from Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan Provinces as the objects of a questionnaire analysis. In this study, 231 valid questionnaires were collected from 300 samples, for a recovery rate of 77%. The results of the study are as follows. 1) The most important dimension in the assessment is that of external environment, followed by individuals and families and then social network. 2) Among the 12 evaluation indexes, the top five indicators that are most valued are hometown economy, age, value identity, hometown culture, and children or parents. According to these results, the authors put forward suggestions and hopes for exploring the policy requirements necessary to make the formulation and implementation of relevant supporting policies more in line with the actual needs.

*Keywords:* rural areas; migrant workers, social development, labor migration, social structure, social capital, social network.

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<sup>1</sup> School of Public Affairs & Law, Southwest Jiaotong University, Chengdu, Sichuan, CHINA. E-mail: tzh888@vip.sina.com

<sup>2</sup> School of Public Affairs & Law, Southwest Jiaotong University, Chengdu, Sichuan, CHINA. E-mail: 15081631418@163.com

<sup>3</sup> School of Public Affairs & Law, Southwest Jiaotong University, Chengdu, Sichuan, CHINA. E-mail: xyzhou82@126.com (*Corresponding author*)

## Introduction

The decline of traditional villages is a historical phenomenon that many countries have experienced or are experiencing in the process of rapid industrialization and urbanization. For China, due to the limitations of the development stage and the historical process, the existence of an urban-rural dual structure inevitably causes rural areas to fall into a cycle of labor loss, aging, and low education levels, which results in poverty and weakness and restricts the further modernization of China. To solve the imbalance of urban and rural development and the loss of rural "nutrients", many countries, including China, have put forward a development strategy for rural revitalization. All of these rural revitalization strategies focus on the value of human capital injection. Chan (2018) believes that human capital includes both "quantity" and "quality" and emphasizes that the latter is the main factor in promoting economic growth. Due to the limitations of the social development stage and the long-term existence of the urban-rural development gap and imbalance, the majority of the rural labor force is now concentrated in cities with higher labor income and a better quality of life. The result of this shift is that the labor force left in the rural areas is scarce and has characteristics that include aging and low education levels. In terms of human resource quality, the current situation of the rural human resource stock in the western region of China is worrying. According to the results of an agricultural census, in 2016, the proportion of agricultural production and operation personnel in China's middle and high schools or technical secondary schools was 7.1%, while the proportion of agricultural production and operation personnel in the western region's middle and high schools or above was 46.6%, which was 15.6, 15.0 and 15.4 percentage points lower than that in the eastern, central and northeast regions, respectively. The proportion of high school graduates in the total labor force is an important indicator by which to measure a country's human capital level. Obviously, China's current level of 7.1% still has much room for improvement; not only is this number far below that of more than 90% in developed countries, but it is also significantly lower than that in developing countries such as Turkey, Mexico and Indonesia, which exceeds 30%.

A large number of young and middle-aged people and knowledgeable and skilled laborers seek employment outside of their villages, which makes it difficult for those who remain in the villages to meet the demands for new agricultural operators and management talent in the new economic period. However, Hwang & Jeong (2016) noted that since 2016, due to China's deep social and economic transformation, some export-oriented enterprises that rely on labor dividends have found it difficult to develop; thus, one-quarter of the 40 million migrant workers have chosen to "return to the villages" and become a new "demographic dividend". Cui *et al.* (2015), based on the analysis of the "vacancy" of the agricultural population in the promotion of the rural revitalization strategy, concluded the possibility of filling the vacancy with the returned migrant workers population.

Based on the characteristics of the returned migrant workers group, the current study was conducted under the background of the hollowing out of the urban and rural populations to research the influencing factors of the long-term willingness to stay in rural areas. This study has great significance regarding complementing the rural human capital in the western region and effectively promoting rural revitalization strategies to realize rural redevelopment.

Since the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, the Chinese government has issued relevant policy documents to support the return of migrant workers, college students and other groups to their hometown for employment and entrepreneurship; these documents explicitly propose the promotion of migrant workers who return home for entrepreneurship and focus on building a policy system to support migrant workers who return home for entrepreneurship. Should and may these returnees become human capital support for rural revitalization? However, to date, the recognition of the importance of these returning groups is not clear enough, and there are many obstacles to the implementation of such policies. Policy incentives can promote the short-term reverse flow of personnel but can they remain effective for a long period of time? What we have seen is that these policies focus on the short-term decision-making related to returning home but do not follow up on the long-term staying behavior of returning groups, resulting in serious consequences related to the idea that returning groups cannot take root in the villages. Therefore, this study hopes to explore these policy requirements through an empirical analysis of the factors that affect the willingness of returned migrant workers to stay in villages to help make the formulation and implementation of relevant support policies more in line with actual needs.

## Literature review

### *Labor migration*

The issue of labor force return has attracted much attention from academia. In recent years, scholars have conducted in-depth analyses on the historical stage, migration type, the impact on the place of immigration and the impact of migration behavior. In terms of migration history, in the 1960s, nearly 1/3 of all U.S. residents experienced a permanent migration of residence (Ma, 2016). Hirvonena & Lilleor (2015) stated that population migration in Europe is mainly related to geographical and political changes in Europe, the introduction of a foreign labor force with high welfare levels during the economic acceleration in Central and Northern Europe after the end of World War II, and the illegal flow of immigrants from Eastern Europe, African and Asian countries to engage in economic interests. Wu (2016) found that China's rural population is accompanied by continuous outflow and inflow, which is different from other countries' urban and rural population migration. Such migration is divided into two stages: the overall description stage,

which focuses on the systematic overall analysis of factors affecting population migration, and the in-depth thematic discussion based on empirical theory. Anwar & Chan (2016) noted that after the "shortage of migrant workers" phenomenon was discovered, the employment and sustainable development of the returned population once again came to the attention of researchers. According to the analysis of the census results, in the first decade of the 21st century, there was a high incidence of mobility and backflow.

Some scholars have analyzed the types of labor migration and have divided it into permanent migration and temporary migration, according to whether the individuals settle permanently. Spitzer (2016) pointed out that, according to the statistical data of German migrant workers, the planned residence period for temporary migration weakens saving behavior. Junge, Diez, & Schatzl (2015) conducted a study on the immigration statistics of the UK over the past ten years and noted that temporary migration is the main force in the migration wave and that capital accumulation for their return makes these migrants' wealth decisions tend to be savings related. The above classification of migration types is based on the assumption of a one-off flow decision; however, the research community has also paid attention to repeated migration. Collins *et al.* (2017), for example, noted that migration history has a positive impact on the secondary migration of the labor force, according to the analysis of data from Mexican communities.

Regarding the impact on the place of immigration, Chan (2018) analyzed the back movement of the labor force according to the dynamic model of human capital and found that the accumulation of human capital can significantly enhance the professional ability of the local labor force and promote the economic growth of the place of immigration. In terms of social structure, Manning, Ambrey, & Fleming (2016) found that population mobility enhances the flexibility of social structure and the ability to adjust and restore. The migration and settlement impact of the returning labor force has a significant impact not only on the development and prosperity of rural non-agricultural industries but also on agricultural production. Barrington-Leigh *et al.* (2016) found that under the assumption of limited land, the labor force's experience with working away from villages significantly strengthens their agricultural output. Hwang & Jeong (2016) found through investigation and research that the return of the labor force will also affect the political structure and economic and social system of villages.

In terms of influencing factors, Cui *et al.* (2015) noted that formal education does not significantly affect the decision-making related to population migration and return, while age has both positive and negative impacts on the migration and return of the population. Yu (2015) found that migration behavior is limited at a younger age, while the decline of psychological expectations and physical strength at an older age causes stronger risk worries and strengthens the stability of migration decisions. In terms of family endowment, Liang, Li, & Ma (2014) noted through analysis that the decision-making related to population migration and the willingness to migrate are significantly negatively affected by exogenous

family endowment such that families with superior family economic conditions tend to be more stable.

In summary, researchers have conducted in-depth analyses on the historical experience, influencing factors and relevant policies of labor force return, but most of these studies have focused on the short-term decision-making related to returning home and thus lack research results on the long-term willingness to stay in rural areas. At the same time, the research on the return of college students and migrant workers is fragmented and ignores the common characteristics of the returning groups. Therefore, this study takes the returned migrant workers group as the research object, analyzes and discusses the influencing factors that affect their willingness to stay in villages, and puts forward corresponding countermeasures and suggestions, which have strong theoretical value and practical significance.

### *Influencing factors of returning laborers to stay in their hometowns*

Individual characteristic factors include gender, age, marital status, education level, work experience and skill training. These factors have an impact on the willingness or behavior of returning groups to return to work as professional farmers. Yuniarto (2017) believes that as migrant workers grow older; their labor capacity gradually decreases due to their long-term employment in a physical industry. Under such circumstances, these migrants choose to return home. Collins *et al.* (2017) found that the main influencing factors of one's return are individual characteristics and family characteristics. Among them, age and family housing value per capita have a significant promotion effect on one's return, while individual education level and the number of working-age individuals in the family have a hindering effect on one's return. The differences between rural and urban living and employment environments have produced two different production styles and lifestyles. The differences between urban and rural industrial structures have also led to a huge difference in the types of jobs and the number of jobs. The returning groups are located within the ecology of rural social and natural areas, and their willingness to stay in rural areas is closely related to the adaptability and satisfaction of rural employment in their living environment.

Wu (2016) utilized survey data from farmers in Hebei, Anhui and six other provinces by the Ministry of Agriculture in 1999 to find through logit regression analysis that the level of non-agricultural economic development significantly affects the return of migrant labor. Wang (2015) used data from the 2004 China Rural Household Survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics to find by means of empirical analysis that the more developed the residential area in which migrant workers live is, the greater the possibility of their returning. Tomyn, Cummins, & Norrish (2015) noted that the government's policies that benefit farmers and support returnees who return to their hometown to start their own businesses have attracted the return of rural migrant workers. The external environment, which includes rural natural environment satisfaction, lifestyle

satisfaction, employment opportunities and industrial familiarity, may have a significant impact on whether these migrants stay in these rural areas. Yu (2015) examined the influence of rural family social capital (measured by the scale and quality of the financial support network, labor service support network and emotional support network) on the decision to return. Through multiple logit regression analysis, it was found that the relationship between family social capital and the return probability of farmers was U-shaped. After reaching a certain critical value (0.455), the increase in family social capital promoted the return of migrant workers to the countryside.

## Methodology

### *Delphi method*

The Delphi method has the following characteristics. (1) Anonymity: during the implementation of the Delphi method, the interviewed experts are not allowed the opportunity to exchange opinions, so they can avoid pressure interference from "authorities" and express their opinions freely. (2) Controlled feedback: the interviewed experts are informed of the statistical data (average, median, etc.) based on their own answers and those of the other interviewed experts after the last questionnaire in each round. After consulting these feedback data, the interviewed experts carefully make further judgments. (3) Iteration of opinions: in the process of several rounds of questionnaires, the experts can repeatedly think about and revise their opinions on various issues until the interviewed experts' responses to all issues reach a point of consistency. (4) Statistical group response: after the questionnaires are collected, group opinions are counted as indicators of the concentration ratio of the experts' opinions (Hosseini & Keshavarz, 2017).

According to the systematic procedure, the Delphi method adopts an anonymous method of expressing opinions, i.e., the experts are not allowed to discuss with each other, do not have horizontal contact with each other, and only have contact with the investigators. Through multiple rounds of investigation, the experts' opinions on the questions raised in the questionnaire are repeatedly consulted, summarized and revised until finally, they are determined to be the experts' basically consistent opinions and are thus taken as the prediction results. This method is widely representative and reliable. Based on the Delphi method, this study further establishes the constitutive criterion of ANP.

### *Network analysis*

AHP has been developed for more than 30 years, since Saaty's method was initially put forward, and the process has been widely applied. This section mainly discusses the application scope, applied fields and application programs for dealing

with complex problems of AHP. AHP is mainly used in decision-making problems. The analytic network process (ANP) is an extension of AHP. Ecer (2014) proposed that the ANP method is mainly based on the reality of society. Many decision-making problems are usually not expressed in a structured AHP hierarchy, mainly because in reality, there is a network-like relationship between the upper, middle and lower levels rather than a purely top-down linear relationship. Saaty's ANP rule is to add the AHP method to the feedback mechanism and elaborate it to replace the hierarchical network proposed in his book "The Analytic Hierarchy Process", which was published in 1980 by McGraw-Hill. Both methods reach decision-making in a systematic way. In addition, the main difference between the AHP method and the ANP method is that the hierarchical structure of the former is linear, while that of the latter is nonlinear. The ANP method has dependency and feedback and uses a super matrix to calculate weight. By reviewing the past literature data, it is concluded that as long as the factors or criteria related to human beings are mostly interdependent, then the ANP method is more appropriate than the AHP method for the analysis in this study, as it is more in line with practical needs.

#### *Establishment of evaluation indicators*

A research questionnaire was sent to experts in various fields by email. During the first round of questionnaires, based on feedback from these experts, statistics were created based on items that should be considered when migrant workers return to their hometown. After the initial round, those factors with similar properties were returned to the experts for their opinions. During this period, the experts had continuous communication through email and finally reached an agreement. Finally, after the large number of initial items was narrowed down, all the experts gathered together for a meeting and determined the key success factors for migrant workers returning to their hometown to be individuals and families, external environment and social network. Then, the key factors were taken as the construction plane of the AHP, and the corresponding items were classified into the criteria to establish the ANP questionnaire. The following are the revised research criteria of the study obtained through the Delphi method: (1) *Individuals and families*: age, sex, economic situation, children or parents; (2) *External environment*: hometown economy, employment opportunities, external transportation, support policies, hometown culture; (3) *Social network*: friend type, ecological satisfaction and value identification.

#### *The research objective*

This study is aimed at urban residents in Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan Provinces. This research questionnaire was distributed to 300 participants, and 231 valid questionnaires were recovered, for a recovery rate of 77%.



## Results of the data analysis

After all the hierarchy weights were established, the relative importance of the evaluation indexes at each hierarchical level was assigned, indicating the importance of the index factors at this hierarchical level in the overall evaluation system and generating the overall weight values of the evaluations of the influencing factors of migrant workers returning to rural areas, as shown in *Table 1*.

*Table 1.* Aggregation of overall weights of influencing factors of migrant workers returning to rural areas

Texture	Level 2 weights	Level 2 sorting	Indicators	Overall weight	Overall ranking
Individuals and Families	0.337	2	age	0.134	2
			gender	0.044	11
			economic situation	0.061	8
			children or parents	0.097	5
External environment	0.364	1	hometown economy	0.143	1
			employment opportunities	0.075	7
			external transportation	0.032	12
			supporting policies	0.053	9
			hometown culture	0.106	4
Social network	0.299	3	friend type	0.082	6
			ecological satisfaction	0.050	10
			value identity	0.123	3

## Conclusion

According to the analysis of the empirical results, the following conclusions can be obtained.

In the second-level evaluation framework, the most valued factor is the external environment, with a weight of 0.364, which accounts for 36.4% of the overall weight. The second most important factors are those related to individuals and families (with a weight of 0.337) and to social networks (with a weight of 0.299). From the survey results, we can see that the most important aspect related to the return of migrant workers is the external environment.

In the third-level evaluation framework, the ranking of the hierarchical weights of the evaluation indicators is as follows: (1) In terms of individual and family structure, the evaluation indexes are ranked as follows: age, children or parents, economic situation and gender; (2) In terms of the external environment, the evaluation indexes are ranked as follows: hometown economy, hometown culture, employment opportunities, support policies, and external transportation; (3) Under the framework of social networks, the evaluation indexes are ranked as follows: value identification, friend type and ecological satisfaction.

According to the overall weight values of the questionnaire data for the 12 evaluation indexes of the key success factors related to returning migrants deciding to stay in the township, the top five evaluation indexes are hometown economy, age, value identity, hometown culture, children or parents. With an increase in age, the comprehensive competitiveness of one's physical strength, even in the labor market, declines. For the sake of stability and family, the returning population is more likely to make the decision to stay in rural areas. The results of living with one's children or parents are related not only to the economic effects but also the maintenance effects of family affection and the living habits of the family, while also accomplishing the goals of raising children, supporting parents, educating and cultivating future generations. These comprehensive effects make the returning groups tend to be stable in their mobility choices, thus showing positive reinforcement in their willingness to stay in villages. However, the economic environment of the hometown, its natural public services, salary advantages and job opportunities, as well as the geographical location advantages closely tied to it, are bound to have greater advantages in terms of employment and the life satisfaction of the returning groups. On the other hand, it is more difficult for villages that are already economically backward to attract returning migrant groups. The final result of the constant accumulation of the Matthew effect in these areas is poverty and weakness. However, relatively superior entrepreneurship support policies may attract returning groups with entrepreneurial ideas to a certain extent and may have a certain stabilizing effect on their liquidity. If applied properly, such policies may offset and inhibit the Matthew effect in poor areas. The density and stability of the social networks within hometowns is a very important factor related to maintaining the willingness of the returning groups to settle down in these towns. With the expansion of the social networks of the returning groups and the accumulation of social capital, their attachment to the village is greatly improved, and their willingness to stay in the village is thus strengthened. The value identification of rural life is a comprehensive reflection of the values and feelings of the returning groups. Similarly, the return of rural vitality calls for the return of rural culture and value orientation.

### *Suggestions*

According to the conclusion, this study proposes the following suggestions, hoping to provide clear guidelines and directions for promoting the return of migrant workers to the countryside.

1. The economic development of hometowns is the soil in which the returned migrant worker groups take root. The employment opportunities and public service level associated with these towns have a subtle influence on the long-term mobility choice of the returning groups. The industrial layout should be rationally planned according to the economic development stage and the industrial potential in rural areas, the industrial chain should be opened up, and the regional economy should be developed, and more employment opportunities should be provided for the returning groups. The local government should provide financial, technical and production subsidies to returnees who have entrepreneurial ideas. In addition, entrepreneurship support policies should be publicized and popularized through various channels and in all directions.

2. Promoting the construction of rural ecological civilization is an important part of implementing the rural revitalization strategy. As the carrier of the existing society, rural ecology has special significance in maintaining the true nature of the countryside. There are many unique advantages by which rural areas can promote ecological environment measures reasonably, as well as develop ecological tourism, health care and the surrounding industries. The living environment in rural areas is directly related to the quality of life and the living experience of the returning groups. The rural location should be laid out according to local conditions, and the construction of a qualified infrastructure and public service facilities should be accelerated.

3. Villages and cities are two different systems, and their internal development logic and evolution laws are also different. It is not advisable to develop villages by using ideas related to urban construction. The greatest advantage and value of the development of rural industry is rural life itself. The government should publicize and promote the values of rural life to enhance the attraction of the countryside those within the returning groups with value orientation. Rural culture is the core of the rural life experience, so it should be fully excavated. For instance, characteristic industries should be developed with culture as the core. At the same time, the government should strengthen the construction of rural cultural talent and properly support the incubation and development of rural cultural and literary groups. In addition, the return of village culture and values will also strengthen the social network of villages and will have an inhibitory effect on the loss of the returning groups at another level.

4. It is difficult to accurately define the influence brought about by the returning groups staying in their villages. To solve the contradiction of unbalanced development between urban and rural areas through implementing the rural revitalization strategy, it is necessary to scientifically grasp the internal logic

of labor flow between urban and rural areas. To strengthen the principal part of rural construction rather than slow down the pace of urbanization, rural areas should promote the urbanization of agricultural transfer populations and become desirable places for the pursuit of a better life for urban residents. To form a new relationship based on good interaction and integrated development between cities and villages, it is necessary to break the barriers of urban-rural dualism and establish an institutional mechanism to promote mutual progress. In short, the goal of rural revitalization is not to build villages into cities; instead, villages need to promote their core values and develop naturally according to the law. It is not advisable to encourage people to return home blindly. Only by breaking away from the faulty idea of developing villages based on urban thinking and by upholding and promoting rural values can we truly leave behind the idea of returned migrant workers.

### *Acknowledgements*

This work is supported by the Innovation Method Fund, China under grant No. 2017IM010700, the Project of Soft Science Research Project of Sichuan Province under grant No. 2019JDR0368, and the Undergraduate Education Research and Reform Project of Southwest Jiaotong University under grants No. 1802026 and No. 1804089.

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