Agricultural & Forestry Economics and Management (2025)
Clausius Scientific Press, Canada

DOI: 10.23977/agrfem.2025.080115
ISSN 2616-2202 Vol. 8 Num. 1

College Students Returning to Hometowns for Employment and the Diversification of Agricultural Production Relations

Wang Yuanhui

China Agricultural University, Beijing, China

Keywords: Agricultural Production Relations; Rural Revitalization; Agricultural Modernization; Talent Flow

Abstracts: This study examines the paradox of low return rates of rural-origin university graduates to their hometowns midst China's rural revitalization strategy. Statistical analysis reveals persistently low willingness among graduates to pursue rural employment, attributed to urban-rural income gaps, limited professional alignment, and negative social perceptions. Critically, traditional smallholder farming structures constrain agricultural productivity and fail to attract skilled talent. To break this cycle, the research advocates for diversifying agricultural production relations. It proposes parallel development of large-scale operations and specialized smallholdings, alongside cooperative models and integrated value chains. Such structural reforms are essential to create high-value rural employment and align talent flow with modernization goals.

1. Introduction

In recent years, college graduates in our country have faced a challenging job market, with the employment issues of rural students being particularly pronounced. Meanwhile, the 'three rural issues' persist: the slow pace of agricultural development, low levels of rural development, and the difficulty in increasing farmers' income. The number of aging and depopulated natural villages continues to grow, and the shortage of high-quality young labor is exacerbating the challenges faced by underdeveloped regions in fully implementing the rural revitalization strategy outlined in the Central Document No.1. By focusing on the mobility of the labor force, these issues are highlighted. On a macro level, rural areas continue to send young, well-educated workers to cities. On a micro level, there are already cases of college graduates returning to their hometowns to start businesses or assist in agricultural employment, which can offer insights into the interconnection between these two issues.

2. Analysis of the low rate of college students returning to their hometowns

According to statistics, from 2011 to 2021, the employment rate of college graduates from rural areas dropped from 71.3 percent to 51.54 percent, and the proportion of informal employment was even higher. The latest survey report released by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences also showed that college graduates from rural families became the most difficult group to find jobs, with

an unemployment rate as high as 30.5 percent.

This phenomenon highlights the issue of college students 'employment in rural areas, which is the focus of this article. To address this, the article analyzes cases from both the training and employment perspectives of college students. Firstly, a survey on the employment intentions of college students at a university in Henan found that only 8.91% of agricultural students expressed a desire to return to their hometowns for employment, and only 30.52% believed that rural areas had a promising future [1]. Secondly, a field survey conducted by the talent service center of a county on the employment status of local college graduates over three years revealed that among the more than 1,000 college graduates who were unemployed in 2015,84.7% to 91.2% were from rural areas, 83% to 91% were in informal employment, and only 0% to 0.4% were self-employed. In the face of an excess of urban labor, less than 7% of graduates are willing to return to townships for employment, which further exacerbates the shortage of specialized talents and technical leaders needed for the county's goal of developing green agricultural bases.

On the contrary, among the village-level cadres in more than 700,000 administrative villages in China, 87.3% have a junior high school education level. It can be imagined that the cultural level of rural labor force is generally low. In addition, the normal situation of young labor force going out to work has resulted in the increasing number of hollow villages and old-age villages. The lack of talents is extremely unfavorable to the development of rural modernization.

Theoretically, college graduates choosing to start businesses in rural areas can bring modern science and technology, innovate agricultural techniques, knowledge systems, and industrial structures, thus invigorating the modernization of agriculture. However, a common reality reflected by micro-level phenomena is that, despite years of the rural revitalization strategy, the willingness of rural students to return home for employment remains low. Moreover, young workers with higher education levels are more likely to seek employment elsewhere, which contradicts the goals of the rural revitalization strategy. As a result, the actual outcomes of recent strategic implementations have fallen short of expectations.

3. The reasons for the low rate of college students returning to their hometowns are explored

In view of the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, this paper believes that improving the scientific literacy of agricultural employees is the key to solve the "three rural" problems. Therefore, studying why rural students with natural advantages in rural employment cannot stay is an entry point to understand the difficulties of rural revitalization.

3.1 Analysis of influencing factors of employment of rural college students

Considering the employment factors of college students, multiple surveys and analyses show that in their job expectations, factors such as salary and benefits, professional fit, career aspirations, work environment, and social evaluation are positively correlated [2]. Given the significant urban-rural dual structure and the segmented labor market in China, urban areas offer better salaries and benefits compared to rural areas. In terms of industrial structure, the diversity of industries in cities provides a higher degree of professional fit and reduces the cost of career transition, whereas rural areas, primarily based on traditional agriculture, have lower professional fit and higher costs of career transition [3]. Regarding social evaluation, choosing to work in rural areas often faces more negative evaluations. Additionally, families of rural-origin students have relatively lower incomes, making them more eager for short-term salaries. Therefore, both objective factors and personal perceptions significantly influence the employment choices of college students from rural areas.

From the perspective of economics, the level of economic development is the core factor affecting employment decisions, and the level of economic development is determined by

productivity. Therefore, to understand the low willingness of college students to return to their hometowns for employment, we should start with the analysis of agricultural productivity development.

3.2 Development status of agricultural productivity

Since agricultural productivity is relative and there is no unique evaluation standard, this paper considers the yield per unit area of crops, the degree of mechanization, the scientific and technological literacy of labor force and other aspects.

In terms of yield per unit area, take soybean as an example. According to the China-Asean Statistical Yearbook, the global soybean yield per unit area increased to 188.84 kg/mu in 2021. Compared with the yield per unit area of soybean growing countries in the world, China's productivity is lower than the average level, as shown in Figure 1.

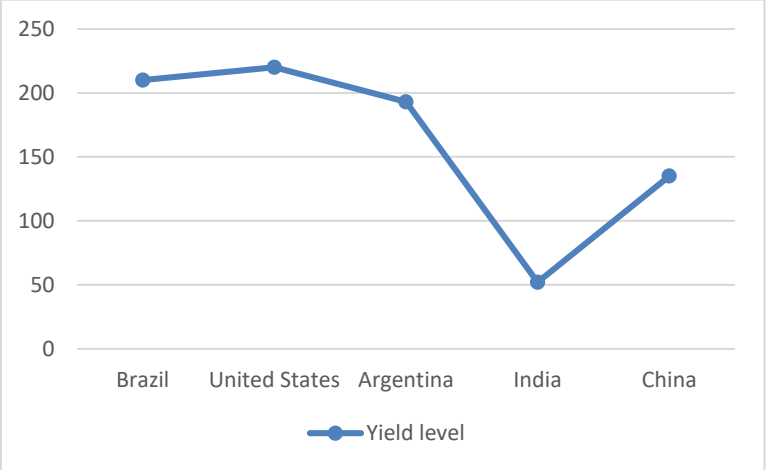

Figure 1 Yield per unit area in soybean growing countries

In terms of mechanization degree, taking the national agricultural machinery power in 2021 as an example, the total power is 1.06 billion kilowatts, and the power input per hectare is 6.31 kilowatts. The average power per mu of production is more than 5 times that of the United States [4]. China's rural land is relatively scattered, which limits large-scale production in some areas.

In terms of labor force science and technology literacy, China's rural labor force is aging, the level of science and technology education is low, and the cost of receiving and investing in agricultural technology research and innovation is limited, which is not enough to support the combination of agricultural productivity and modern science and technology [5].

On the whole, China's current agricultural production is still dominated by small-scale units such as farmers, with low productivity and low added value of agricultural products. A single industry cannot attract college graduates to return to their hometowns, so it is difficult to form a long-term employment attraction.

3.3 Development status of rural production mode

China's basic national conditions are still large country and small farmers. Although large-scale production has been carried out in northeast China and other land-concentrated areas, the majority of areas still have the individual land operation mode with the household contract responsibility system as the main body, which is self-sufficient, small scale and lacks division of labor and cooperation.

However, in order to obtain the scale of land that can be mechanized, it is necessary to

reorganize the cultivated land, which cannot be supported by the small peasant economy with contracted management rights. If the balance between efficiency and cost cannot be achieved, many automatic technical means are difficult to apply [6]. Therefore, it is difficult to achieve mechanized and large-scale agricultural production in some areas of China.

To sum up, the economic model dominated by traditional agriculture is not enough to support the upgrading and development of agricultural productivity brought about by agricultural science and technology, informatization and market operation, and it is difficult to meet the employment needs of college graduates who accept modern science and technology education and skill training with information as the core.

4. The need for diversified production relations to develop modern agricultural productive forces

Based on the above research, this paper argues that the development of agricultural productivity in our country is facing a significant challenge. Developing productivity requires high-quality talent, yet current agricultural production struggles to attract such talent, which is one of the root causes of the 'three rural issues.' So, what kind of modern productivity should we aim for? How can we break the vicious cycle between talent and productivity? How can we attract talent and high-quality resources to invest in the modernization of agriculture? We analyze these questions using Marxist theory and explore insights from foreign and rural entrepreneurship cases.

4.1 Development goal of modern agricultural productivity

The 'Rural Revitalization Strategy Plan (2018-2022)' proposed that the modern productivity of agriculture should evolve from a focus on traditional output to a pursuit of total factor productivity, the capital allocation of agricultural labor, and the conditions for agricultural production and processing [7]. Accordingly, agricultural productivity must be updated, such as by upgrading workers from manual laborers to those with higher skills, innovative thinking, and scientific literacy, transforming production tools from basic implements to advanced technologies like artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, and automated equipment, and expanding the scope of labor from land to a broader range of spaces and production factors [8].

4.2 The demand of modern agricultural productivity on production relations

How can we break the vicious cycle of talent and productivity, develop modern agricultural productivity, and attract more talents to participate in the modernization of agriculture? According to Marxist political economy, productive forces determine production relations, while production relations also influence productive forces. The contradictory movement between these two is the fundamental driving force of social development. Mao Zedong believed that the socialist path requires continuous adjustment of production relations during development, as changing production relations is essential for promoting the development of productive forces. Therefore, theoretically, adjusting production relations to facilitate the return of talents is the key to breaking the deadlock.

This article argues that, given China's vast territory, diverse terrain, a wide variety of land and crops, and an aging workforce, the production relations required for modern agricultural productivity should be adjusted to fit China's national conditions and technological development. These relations should be a diversified structure rather than a single or dual model. Only by adjusting the industrial structure, optimizing diversified production and operation models, and creating more high-value and promising job opportunities can we attract college graduates to return to their hometowns for employment.

4.3 Agricultural production relations should be diversified

4.3.1 Parallel development of large-scale and small-scale peasant production and operation mode

Drawing on the modern agricultural production models from abroad, at the end of the last century, world agriculture branched into two main streams. One stream, represented by the United States, focused on maximizing efficiency through optimal resource allocation, yield, cost, and benefit. This led to the continuous concentration of American farms, ensuring high efficiency and profitability through large-scale, specialized, and integrated operations. The other stream, represented by Japan, was characterized by 'small-scale agriculture,' which aimed to meet personalized consumer demands by promoting green, organic, distinctive, high-quality, and traceable agriculture. This approach formed an agricultural operation system primarily based on small family farms, with agricultural cooperatives serving as a bridge. It encouraged farmland leasing and job outsourcing, ensuring that agricultural products had high added value, distinctiveness, and branding [9]. Large-scale agriculture focuses on efficiency, while small-scale agriculture emphasizes value.

4.3.2 Guide the cooperative mode of small farmers

In some regions of China, while maintaining the rights of small-scale farmers, we should guide them to cooperate in operation, focusing on high value-added and characteristic agricultural products, and expand various forms of moderate-scale operation, including agricultural production entrustment, family farms, professional large households, professional cooperatives, and agricultural enterprises, so as to solve the problems of congestion in planting and breeding information channels and market lag.

4.3.3 Establish a new type of production relationship of the whole chain operation organization

At the same time, a new type of production relationship is being established to connect the entire chain from production to circulation and consumption through the internet. Successful cases of college graduates returning to their hometowns to start businesses can serve as references. For example, Hou Chuanlong in Rizhao, Shandong, created a well-known northern tea brand by forming a cooperative for unified purchasing and sales, exploring an operational model of 'base + tea farmers + cooperative + tea company.' In Hong 'an, Hubei, Chen Yang established a cooperative that reshaped the Hong' an sweet potato brand from planting, processing, sales channels, and cultural impact, forming a development model of 'special agricultural products + company + Internet + base + cooperative + farmers' [10]. Through learning and exploration, they have established an integrated new production relationship involving planting, capital, agricultural technology, internet, intelligence, and marketing, which maximizes the productivity of modern agriculture by integrating science and technology with agriculture.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the development of agricultural modernization cannot proceed without college graduates with information literacy returning to their hometowns for employment. To break the vicious cycle between talent and productivity, it is essential to follow economic development principles. This involves promoting the modernization of agricultural productivity, adjusting and establishing a diversified production relationship that suits China's national conditions, developing

both large-scale and small-scale farming models, optimizing the diversified production and operation model, thereby creating more high-value professional positions and attracting talent to return home, thus empowering rural revitalization.

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