

The impacts of returning rural labors on the demands of public service facilities in county towns in Central China

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Urban-rural migration has been one of the hot topics during the rapid urbanization era in China. Several decades on, millions of rural labors in China have migrated from Central China to the coastal cities. While in recent years due to higher living cost and decreasing job opportunities in coastal industries, an increasing number of urban-rural migrants went back to their hometown. They are called ‘returning rural labors’ in this paper. Majority of them settle down in the county towns rather than their original rural villages, which might generate dramatic changes on these county towns, especially in the central provinces such as Anhui. Preliminary surveys in these county towns reveal that the demands of most returning rural labors on public service facilities are different to original county residents, which could be the most vital consequences by the returning rural labors.

Although some existing research findings have focused on the returning rural labors, there is few of thorough investigation and analysis on the influences on the demands of public service facilities by the massive returning rural labors. Currently, the provision of public service facilities in these county towns follows the same way of the other county towns, usually according to the inflexible standards of national codes such as the “index of one thousand person”, which can hardly match the real social demands of the county towns with very large number of returning rural labors.

This paper aims to describe the social, economic and cultural changes of the county towns with increasing returning rural labors, and then analyzes the subsequent impacts on the demands of public service facilities. The findings of this paper intend to provide valuable ideas to optimize planning practice of public service delivery in these county towns in the new era.

According to current national codes, public service facilities in this paper include the facilities of education, medical treatment, cultural and entertainment as well as local commercial services which are closely related to common residents. Scholar Kong Ximei summarizes that the returning rural labors could make significant changes upon the age structure, education level as well as income level of the residents in county towns. Huang Shan divided all public service facilities into low, medium and high levels, from fundamental to comprehensive.

Based on the substantial analyses, the influence rules between the features of returning rural labors and the demands for public service facilities are as follows. In the terms of age structure, when the average age of returning rural labors is relatively low, the demands for public service facilities tend to be at the medium level; when the average age of returning rural labors reaches a medium level, the demand for public service facilities tends to be at the high level; when the average age of returning rural labors is relatively old, the demand for public service facilities tends to be at the low level. In the terms of education level, when the educational level of returning rural labors become from low to high, the demand for public service facilities tends to become from low to high level relatively. Similarly, in terms of income level, when the income level of returning rural labors become from low to high, the demand for public service facilities tends to become from low level to high level relatively.

In this paper, Huaiyuan and Guoyang are selected as two typical cases. Both of them are under-developed counties in the north of Anhui province, and with increasing returning rural labors in recent 5 years. Questionnaire survey and face-to-face interviews were completed in 2014 which illustrated the characteristics of the returning rural labors and their influences on the needs of all sorts of public services. More than 1800 questionnaires were sent to both returning rural labors and original residents and 80 percent of them were regained validly. The face-to-face interviews are with the

officials of various departments of local governments as well as the providers of public services.

The investigation reveals the significant differences of social structures between the returning rural labors and original residents in these two county towns. Relatively speaking, the average age of the returning rural labors is lower while the education and income levels are higher than the original residents. As the result, many medium-level demands of public services have been reached quite early in these under-developed counties, certainly because of the impacts by the massive returning rural labors. Also, the unbalanced spatial distribution of educational facilities, the low quality of medical facilities, the lack of diversity of cultural and entertainment facilities, and the limited scale of local commercial facilities are regarded as the most urgent shortcomings in these two county towns.

In conclusion, the simple “universal” standard of public service delivery should no longer be applied mechanically under the pressure of returning rural labors in county towns in central China. Instead, wide-ranged investigations on the changing social structure caused by the returning rural labors should be conducted before the planning of these facilities. The cases of Huaiyuan and Guoyang reveal that there could be extra demands of many public service facilities than usual, and current shortcomings of educational, medical, cultural and local commercial facilities are various. These could be very typical in the majority of county towns in Central China.