

Original Paper

A Review of Researches on Return Migration

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Abstract

Driven by factors related to economic development, return migration has become a topic of increasing academic interest. There are several mainstream theoretical interpretations of the phenomenon of return migration, and the existing literature focuses on the causes of return, employment choice and return effects. Through literature review, it is found that both economic factors and non-economic factors will have an impact on the decision to return. Compared with non-migrant group, returned migrants are more likely to engage in self-employed. Returned migrants may bring back advanced ideas and technologies, which will have a positive impact on local economic and social development, but the driving effect on employment is limited. In developing countries, “entrepreneurship” means vulnerability. Entrepreneurship is a choice made when all other labor market opportunities are not satisfactory or individuals have no employment opportunities, which belongs to necessity-based entrepreneurship. This paper discusses the findings based on a summary of the review and provides the prospects for future research.

Keywords

Return migration, employment, urbanization

1. Introduction

Frequent international and intra-country migration has provided a large number of labor resources for urbanization and industrialization. With the advancement of urbanization in most countries in the world, a single analytical framework of “rural-urban” (such as “push-pull” theory and dualistic economic theory) has been formed. The phenomenon of outworking is accompanied by return. In fact, return migration is common (Xiang, 2014; Wahba, 2014), but the phenomenon of return migration has not received much attention from scholars and society for a long time in the past. Since the 1970s, the

industries of developed countries have undergone secondary transfer in the world, which has promoted the large-scale flow of production factors such as labor. Recent evidence shows that the returned migrants may account for 25 percent of the international migrants (Azose & Raftery, 2019). Driven by factors related to economic development, some countries have begun to discuss the return and its influence more frequently. Correspondingly, more and more literatures began to focus on the phenomenon of return migration.

Migration is not simply a demographic phenomenon, but also an economic one. With the dynamics of demographic and economic structures, the allocation of labor resources among regions is crucial for aggregate efficiency and welfare. The spatial mobility of migrants, especially the return, has a profound impact on economic decisions such as individual consumption, savings and human capital investment (Zhang et al., 2020).

Several theories have explained the phenomenon of return migration. Neoclassical theory suggests that there is a significant wage gap between the place of immigration and the place of emigration, which encourages the migrants to migrate to the area where they can earn higher wages, and the migrants expects to get higher income in the place of immigration. Return migration is since the migrants did not earn higher income in the place of immigration. In other words, their human capital did not receive the expected return, failed to maximize the expected income and successfully integrate into the place of immigration, and therefore return migration belongs to a failure type. While the new economics of labor migration argues that return migration is foreseen and planned, and the return decision is a strategy calculated at the family level. The migrants make the return decision when the stated objectives (e.g., capital accumulation) have been achieved, and therefore return migration belongs to a success type.

However, a fact that should not be overlooked is that return migration is not only a subjective individual decision, but also affected by social environment, which also leads to the inadequate explanation of return migration in neoclassical theory and the new economics of labor migration, which have been criticized in the social science literature.

Structuralist theory suggests return migration should not simply be defined as a failure type or a success type. The analysis of the return phenomenon should not only consider the personal experience of returned migrants, but also pay attention to the social and institutional factors of the place of emigration. Any migration decision and behavior will be affected by the socio-economic structural framework. According to the expectation and demand of returned migrants, the types of return migration are classified into four types: failure-based return, conservative return, root return and innovative return. Compared with neoclassical theory and the new economics of labor migration, structuralist theory focuses more on the impact of returned migrants on the place of emigration rather than the return phenomenon itself. Another theory, theory of migrant transnationalism, emphasizes that repeated migration is becoming more and more common. For example, the return migration from the United States to Mexico was circular for most of the 20th century (Masferrer & Roberts, 2012). Return

migration does not mean the end of migration, but it is an important part of the reintegration of migrants into the original society.

Although there have been many studies on return migration, there is a lack of review and summary of these studies. This paper reviews the existing literature from the aspects of the influencing factors of return migration, employment choice after returning and the return effects. In the last section, this paper summarizes the research findings and discusses the research prospects. Specifically, it has been found that both economic and non-economic factors have an impact on the return decision. Compared with non-migrant group, returned migrants are more likely to engage in self-employed. The returned migrants may bring back advanced ideas and technologies, which will have a positive impact on local economic and social development. However, the entrepreneurial behavior after returning is more of an employment choice of their own, and most of them are self-employed. In developing countries, entrepreneurship is fragile, and one cannot expect the returned migrants to have a significant driving effect on the employment of local labor force. This paper enriches the literature on return migration, and future research should focus on collecting data at the national level and addressing endogeneity problem.

2. Reasons for Return Migration

Although there are various academic explanations for the phenomenon of return migration, until the beginning of this century, the scale and structure of returned migrants could not be reliably measured due to the available quantitative data, and the overall understanding of the phenomenon is still ambiguous. Thanks to the availability of data, more and more literatures have begun to pay attention to the phenomenon of return migration and returned migrants in recent years. International experience shows that there are multiple and complex motivations for return migration, which vary greatly. It is impossible to simply attribute return migration to “success type” or “failure type” (Kļave & Šūpule, 2019). In summary, there are two main reasons for return migration, i.e., economic factors and non-economic factors (Piotrowski & Tong, 2013).

2.1 Economic Factors

Both the “pull” of the emigration place and the “push” of the immigration place have an impact on the return decision of migrants. The “pull” factor is more influential for temporary return (Bilgili & Siegel, 2017). Income has a positive impact on labor’s decision to move out, and the possibility of migration depends on costs and the ability to pay those costs (Entwisle et al., 2020), the income gap between the emigration place and the immigration place will affect the migration decision (Görlach, 2023). If the migrants encounter obstacles in the place of immigration, such as unemployment (Bijwaard et al., 2014), and earnings are lower as a result, the possibility of return will be higher (Mohabir et al., 2017; Bijwaard & Wahba, 2023). The residence policy of the place of immigration will not only affect the occupation of the migrants and their contribution to the place of immigration, but also affect the decision of return migration (Adda et al., 2022).

Similar to the return of international migrants, the return migration within countries is also due to a combination of push and pull forces. In addition, there are peculiarities of migration in some countries. Some studies focus on migration in China, which is strongly constrained by the *Hukou* system.

The rural labor force has made great contributions to urbanization and urban construction in the past 40 years. However, the *Hukou* system have prevented rural labor force from integrating deeply into cities and receiving the same social welfare as local urban residents, including housing, medical care, and education. These administrative barriers reduce the willingness of the migrants to settle in the workplace, and tend to keep the group closely tied to the place of emigration. Rural migrants can perceive the attitudes of residents in the place of immigration, which will significantly affect their return decision (Zhou & Tang, 2022).

Zhang et al. (2020) studied the impact of urban settlement threshold on return migration by using data from 2017 China Household Finance Survey. The results show that cities with higher economic development level have higher threshold for settlement, and the possibility of return increases by 10% for each standard deviation of urban settlement threshold. Based on data from the 2012, 2014, 2016 China Labor-force Dynamics Survey, Hao (2022) examined the effect of relaxing *Hukou* restriction on the willingness to return using differences-in-differences method and found that *Hukou* restriction mainly affect the willingness to return by limiting employment opportunities, public services and social welfare. The relaxation of *Hukou* restriction significantly reduces the willingness to return of migrants living in cities with a population of less than 5 million, especially for low-skilled, low-educated and rural *Hukou* migrants. However, Hao (2022) did not test the parallel trend assumption due to the lack of data prior to 2012. In addition, willingness to return is different from return behavior (Carling & Pettersen, 2014), and the impact on willingness to return may not be equal to the impact on actual return behavior.

2.2 Non-Economic Factors

Migration decision depends to some extent on maximizing life satisfaction, and the main purpose of outworking is to increase income (Weber & Saarela, 2023). Correspondingly, return is a utility maximization strategy for returned migrants (Schiele, 2021). The old migration theory mainly focuses on the economic motivation of migration. However, migration is not always purely motivated by economic motivation. In fact, although the conditions in the place of immigration are consistently favorable, the migrants will still return, and thus, economic factors are not sufficient to explain the complexity of return migration (Girma, 2017).

In addition to macro-level factors, micro-level factors such as age, gender, marital status and education level will also affect the willingness of migrants to return (Paparusso & Ambrosetti, 2017), and family and friends have a significant impact on the decision to return migration throughout the life cycle (Gillespie et al., 2021). There are many literatures have studied the impact of micro-level factors on return migration. Zhang et al. (2020) argued that men are more likely to return compared with women. The possible reason is that the economic and family burden of men settling in cities is higher than that

of women in China's cultural context, and the high cost of living forces men to return. At the same time, Zhang et al. (2020) found that education level has a significant negative impact on the decision of return, as people with higher education are more likely to find stable jobs in cities and therefore are more likely to stay in cities. Tang & Hao (2019) hold the same view, i.e., migrants with low education level are more likely to return to their hometown.

3. Employment Choice after Returning

Return migration does not mean direct withdrawal from the labor market. Reintegration into the labor market is an important link faced by the migration after returning (Fernández-Sánchez et al., 2023). The employment choice of migrants after returning and its influencing factors have become the focus of attention in academic circles.

When analyzing the employment choice after returning, most studies choose the non-migrant group in the place emigration as the control group. Abramitzky et al. (2019) studied the return phenomenon during the period of large-scale migration from the historical census data of Norway and the United States. The study found that the returned migrants are engaged in higher-paying occupations after returning than the non-migrant group. It has shown that the returned migrants are more likely to be self-employed than the non-migrant group, which can be regarded as entrepreneurship in a broad sense. Mexico has one of the highest self-employed rates in the world, and the study by Orozco-Aleman & Gonzalez-Lozano (2021) showed that the logarithmic income of returned migrants is 1.72 percentage points higher than that of non-migrant group.

The employment of returned migrants exhibits significant differences from non-migrant group, and numerous scholars have discussed the influencing factors of employment choice of returned migrants. Although individual characteristics, family characteristics and employment experience largely affect the entrepreneurial decision of returned migrants (Lin et al., 2021), which is highly correlated with the entrepreneurial probability after returning (Croitoru, 2020), regional factors such as government fiscal expenditure, infrastructure and tax burden should not be neglected as well (Yin et al., 2021).

Existing studies has generally focused on the impact of outworking experience on the employment choice of returned migrants. The process of migration is a process of experiential learning. Returned migrants have participated in more occupations and increased vocational skills during their previous work experience (Mahé 2022). The outworking experience allowed returned migrants to overcome constraints such as mobility constraints, insufficient initial endowments and imperfect credit markets to engage in self-employed or start their own businesses through savings and human capital accumulation, thus reducing poverty and increasing income (Orozco-Aleman & Gonzalez-Lozano, 2021). Similar to the international migration, the movement of migrants within a country between different regions may acquire new human capital, financial capital and social network to support their entrepreneurial activities. However, some literatures have believed that the outworking experience may have a negative impact on entrepreneurial activities due to the migrants may lose their original social network after

moving out, and it is more difficult to become an entrepreneur than the non-migrant group (Wang & Yang, 2013).

It is challenging to determine the casual relationship in the study of the outworking experience on entrepreneurship, which is due to migration is a self-selected process (Hagan & Wassink, 2020; Batista et al., 2017). Since migration is non-random, reliance on unrepresentative return samples is problematic (Wahba, 2014). The existing empirical papers rarely consider the various biases due to the selectivity of returned migrants, which depend on whether the select of returned migrants in the migrants is positive or negative. Evidence from Egypt showed that migration is a positive select compared with non-migrant group, while return is a negative select (Wahba, 2015). Many returned migrants are naturally adventurous, and are likely to start a business or earn higher income whether they move or not.

To address this problem, several studies have used historical migration rates as an instrumental variable (Lara et al., 2021; Orozco-Aleman & Gonzalez-Lozano, 2021). On the one hand, historical migration rates exhibit a high degree of persistence, and on the other hand, it does not directly affect current entrepreneurial behavior. In the study by Lara et al. (2021), the results of probit model showed that there is a positive correlation between outworking experience and entrepreneurship. However, this effect was negative in the communities surveyed before 2001, probably due to the lower risk of immigrating to the United States before 2001, which inhibited the entrepreneurial spirit of Mexican immigrants. Batista et al. (2017) used the occurrence of war and plague as exogenous shocks to eliminate self-selection bias. In the simplest comparison, the probability of returned migrants to start a business is 13 percentage points higher than that of non-migrant group. After eliminating the self-selection bias, the probability of returned migrants to start a business is higher, which is 22-27 percentage points higher than that of non-migrant group.

4. The Return Effect of Migrants

Changes in experiences, values and lifestyles brought about by migration have affected individuals who have migrated (Masferrer & Roberts, 2012). It is very important to ensure the reintegration of the migrants into the local society after returning (Ianioglo et al., 2021). Individual characteristics such as gender and age are significantly associated with the possibility of resettlement after returning (Croitoru & Vlase, 2022), and it is more difficult for the elderly, women and returning groups with lower education level to reintegrate into local society (Coniglio, 2018).

Most places of emigration have high hopes for the transformative effect of the returned migrants, which is regarded as the promoter of change and the source of new ideas, investment and socio-economic revival. Schumpeter's legacy still exists in many studies in the field of entrepreneurship. High-skilled returned migrants are highly related to entrepreneurship studies. Entrepreneurs are regarded as adventurers, and their entrepreneurial spirit will affect economic and social development. From this perspective, high-skilled returned migrants can be a potential compensation mechanism for the loss of

“brain drain” in the place of emigration, and the returned migrants can bring compensation for human capital. The returned migrants are human resource with entrepreneurial spirit as they have increased their work skills and knowledge reserves during the period of outworking, and changed their values in the process of migration. Their positive impact on the place of emigration is reflected in improving education, medical care and overall welfare. In addition, returned migrants may bring back more capital, newer technology and more advanced enterprise management methods, which will play an important role in knowledge diffusion and new enterprise creation (Zhang et al., 2020). Chen et al. (2022) studied the return phenomenon in 60 countries based on IPUMS2019 data, and found that the returned migrants in more than 50 countries played a positive role in improving the overall education level in the origin countries.

The outworking experience provides the migrants with opportunities with access to physical capital (savings) and human capital (new knowledge and skills), which increases their chances of becoming entrepreneurs (Wahba & Zenou, 2012), and makes the survival probability of this group as entrepreneurs higher than that of non-migrant group (Marchetta, 2012). Evidence from Egypt shows that the experience gained by returned migrants during outworking is more valuable than that gained by local labor force in the same sector, and that returned migrants have more start-up capital for entrepreneurship than local labor force (Bensassi & Jabbour, 2022), and the corresponding return is a potential source of economic growth in the place of emigration.

Does return migration compensate the loss of human capital in the place of emigration through occupational mobility? El-Mallakh & Wahba (2021) showed that for men in the same birth cohort, returned migrants have a significant impact on upward occupational mobility, and men with higher education level are more likely to move upward. Therefore, return migration is beneficial due to the ability of the returned migrants to improve skills and have better occupations after returning.

From an international perspective, returned migrants bring back knowledge and skills from abroad and mobilize these knowledge and skills in their own countries through entrepreneurial activities, which not only creates employment opportunities for themselves, but also creates employment opportunities for non-migrant group. Especially in the labor market of the informal sector, the returned migrants have a positive impact on the wages of low-skilled non-migrant group, and improve the market participation and employment opportunities of non-migrant group. Therefore, the returned migrants and non-migrant group are complementary rather than substitute (Hausmann & Nedelkoska, 2018). The Mexico-U.S. migration is one of the largest migration flows in human history, with nearly 90 percent of people voluntarily returning to Mexico after migrating to the United States. Three quarters of the returned migrants are part of the economically active population, and almost all of them can find jobs within one year after returning, with 70 percent of them working in the formal sector, which reflects the potential benefits of return migration. Returned migrants have a significant positive impact on the well-being of their home communities.

5. Discussion

As the returned migrants are more likely to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Should the government support the returned migrants to expand the scope and scale of entrepreneurship? The answer is not obvious. The benefits brought by the return migrants are not always immediate (Gillespie et al., 2021). Return migration may exacerbate the surplus of labor force in the place of emigration (Acuna, 2023; Diodato et al., 2023), and the outworking experience provides an advantage to the returned migrants over local competitors (Wassink & Hagan, 2022). In fact, not all self-employed should be regarded as an entrepreneurial activity (Wahba, 2014). If the migrants cannot accumulate enough capital during the period of outworking, they will only use self-employed as a last resort (Mezger & Flahaux, 2013), and one of the possible reasons for choosing self-employed is that the returned migrants lack the characteristics that are valued in the labor market of the place of emigration, such as social relations (Martin & Radu, 2012).

Return migrants' entrepreneurship depends on a series of factors. The first step should be to identify which returned migrants have accumulated sufficient skills and capital (Bensassi & Jabbour, 2022), and returned entrepreneurs are more likely to take a positive attitude towards policies to help returned migrants start their own businesses (Croitoru, 2021).

Lara et al. (2021) defined self-employed and employers as entrepreneurship, it was found that 23.2 percent of returned migrants' families were engaged in entrepreneurial activities by using the data of returned migrants in Mexico, of which only 3.9 percent employed 4 or more employees, and in general, the entrepreneurial activities of returned migrants do not have no potential to create employment opportunities, therefore policies should be introduced to support the development of large-scale enterprises. Bucheli et al. (2019) also believed that policy makers should facilitate the resettlement of returned migrants and help them to make positive contributions to promoting social and economic development by using capital, skills, knowledge and social relations. Returned migrants may bring back entrepreneurial spirit, accumulated human, financial, social and technological capital to promote the socio-economic transformation of hometown, and thus act as the catalyst of urbanization nearby. Zhu et al. (2021) argued that the outworking experience not only help returned migrants to start their own businesses in their hometown, but also help to cultivate more qualified and professional labor force, and transform them from agricultural labor force to one more suitable for urban development in a market economy. Currently, although the returned migrants have played a positive role in the development of their hometown, their role in driving employment is rather limited.

Within some developing countries, the spatial shift of industries has a strong attraction for the returned migrants (Hao, 2022). However, the returned migrants may not return to the countryside, and towns near the countryside are also one of the popular choices (Tang & Hao, 2019). International experience showed that not all regions were equally attractive to returned migrants (Lundholm, 2015), and the location choice after returning depended on the local system quality (Tran et al., 2018). In China, returned migrants were 44.6 percent more likely than non-migrant group to settle in cities or towns

within five years, especially those returned from coastal provinces were more willing to settle in cities or towns (Yin et al., 2021).

Although empirical studies show that the returned migrants' probability of self-employed after returning is higher, and there is no shortage of typical cases of returning hometown to start a business, not all places of emigration have the conditions to large-scale develop industry and commerce, and not all of them are suitable for returned migrants to start their own businesses. Any society in the process of economic growth will inevitably experience a decline in agricultural share and transfer labor from agriculture to non-agricultural industries. From the historical perspective of urbanization, the significance of rural labor moving out for employment is much greater than returning. The most important and direct source of the continuous improvement of urbanization level in many developing countries is the urban-rural population mobility. For a considerable period in the future, migration is still an important way to solve the problem of farmers' employment and income growth. Only when the number of farmers decreases absolutely can there be an essential increase in labor productivity of agriculture.

No matter from the perspective of economic development or national development, continuing to promote rural labor migration is an important part of realizing modernization and urbanization. How to further tap the resources of rural labor transfer and reduce the number of surplus labors is still the key direction of policy making in developing countries in the future, and it is not desirable to encourage rural migrants to return to rural areas blindly (Tang et al., 2020). Agricultural production rarely becomes the key driving force for rural migrants, mainly due to the low income of agricultural production (which is in fact one of the reasons why rural labor move out to work).

6. Research Prospects

This paper summarizes the frontier research findings on return migration in recent years. Firstly, reviewing the theories related to the phenomenon of return migration. Further literature review shows that both economic factors and non-economic factors will have an impact on the return decision. Compared with non-migrant group, returned migrants are more likely to engage in self-employed. The returned migrants may bring back advanced ideas and technologies, which will have a positive impact on local economic and social development. For the returned migrants who have the willingness to start their own businesses, the government should provide them with corresponding entrepreneurial assistance and support, such as providing targeted skills training and increasing tax incentives. However, it should be emphasized that, according to international experience, the entrepreneurial behavior after returning is more of an employment choice of their own, and most of them are self-employed. In developing countries, entrepreneurship is fragile, and one cannot expect the returned migrants to have a significant driving effect on the employment of local labor force. The starting point of the policy should focus on helping the returned migrants to achieve re-employment.

In general, there are abundant studies on the phenomenon of return migration (reasons for return

migration, employment choice and return effect), but there are several important issues worthy of further analysis and discussion.

First, there is a lack of national-level and panel data. Currently, the data used in many studies on return migration are based on individual regions within a country, and the economic development level and social environment of different regions within a country may differ greatly. It is inevitable that the research scope will be limited to a certain region, which cannot reflect the real situation of the whole country. At the same time, the existing study mainly focuses on cross-sectional data analysis, lacking longitudinal observation of employment choice, wage income and other data after returning. A misunderstanding of the existing study is that it is concluded that the returned migrants can effectively promote local employment only because returned migrants are more likely to start businesses after returning. There are differences between employer role and self-employed role. Self-employed has limited employment driving effect. The existing literature mostly regards both employer and self-employed role as entrepreneurship when studying the return effect, which is obviously biased. In the future, scholars can pay attention to collecting panel data at the national level, and conduct more comprehensive and complete studies on the phenomenon of return migration from the national level.

Second, the endogeneity problem is yet to be addressed. According to the above analysis, the migration decision and employment choice of migrants are both self-selection processes. Previous studies have used probit model to analyze whether the migrants return and whether starting business after returning, with less consideration of the possible endogeneity problem. The credibility of research conclusions needs to be improved. Future research should focus on overcoming the interference of the endogeneity problem on research results and conducting more reliable causal identification.

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