

Factor Analysis of Rural Middle-Aged Migrant Labor Behavior from the Perspective of Social Change: a Case Study of Village C in Weifang City

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Abstract: With the continuous acceleration of urbanization in China, middle-aged rural people going out to work is no longer an isolated choice for a few, but has gradually developed into a common and normalized social phenomenon, which fundamentally affects the long-term development of rural areas and the stability of grassroots society. This study adopts qualitative research as the main approach, focusing on exploring the motives behind middle-aged rural people going out for work from the perspective of social change. The research results indicate that there are four main reasons that encourage middle-aged rural people to choose to work outside, namely economic income demand, overall family livelihood planning, social network driven by acquaintances, and the practical needs of personal long-term development. At the same time, the large-scale outflow of middle-aged labor force has also brought many negative impacts on rural economic development, grassroots social governance, and the inheritance of local culture, further exacerbating the problem of rural hollowing out. Based on the above research findings, this article proposes several targeted optimization measures, hoping to provide practical reference for alleviating the dilemma of rural hollowing out and promoting the healthy development of rural areas.

Keywords: Social Change; Rural Middle-Aged; Migrant Workers

1. Introduction

In the process of continuous urbanization, urban economic development is much faster than rural areas, and the development gap between urban and rural areas continues to widen. Middle aged people in rural areas are gradually realizing this development gap. As their ideological concepts become more open, they are more willing to

work in cities to increase family income and improve living conditions. According to the 2023 Monitoring and Survey Report on Migrant Workers by the National Bureau of Statistics, the total number of migrant workers in China is close to 300 million, of which over 170 million are migrant workers, and the proportion of people over 40 years old has reached 55.4%, becoming the main force of the migrant worker workforce. Middle aged rural laborers play a crucial role in the development of rural areas. Their migration for work not only changes the living standards of individuals and families, but also profoundly affects the economic development, social structure, and family relationships of rural areas. From a family perspective, middle-aged people are the main pillars of rural families, having to support both the elderly and children. They face significant financial and living pressures, and going out to work is an important choice for them to improve their family life, support their elderly care and children's education. From the perspective of rural society, this group is the core of rural interpersonal networks, not only responsible for inheriting local culture, but also the main organizers of various public activities in the village. The outflow of a large number of middle-aged laborers will directly weaken the social resources of villages and have a negative impact on rural governance and construction. From the perspective of population structure, the continuous outflow of labor has disrupted the existing rural population balance, further exacerbating the problem of rural hollowing out. Social issues such as empty nest elderly and left behind children have become increasingly prominent, constraining the stability and long-term development of rural areas. Based on the above background, this article starts from the perspective of social change, systematically analyzes the multiple driving factors of middle-aged rural people going out to work, as well as the specific impact of labor outflow on rural

hollowing out, hoping to provide certain research references for understanding the current rural social transformation and solving the problem of rural hollowing out.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Literature Review

At present, there have been many studies both at home and abroad exploring the influencing factors of labor mobility. These studies can be categorized from both macro and micro perspectives. At the macro level, factors such as location conditions, regional development disparities, industrial structure, and policy environment all affect the choice of labor mobility. Zhu Qiankun et al. (2024) through quantitative research found that the location characteristics of villages have a very obvious effect on rural labor outflow^[1]. Song Jian (2020) with the research scope of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, proposed that regional economic level, industrial layout, the degree of social security improvement, and related institutional mechanisms are all key factors affecting local labor mobility^[2]. Zhang Ziyi et al. (2020) further added that regional development level, salary gap, geographical distance, and local settlement policies all influence the direction of labor mobility. Overall, cities with better development, higher wages, and closer to home have a stronger appeal to migrant workers. Foreign research has also reached similar conclusions^[3]. Bonasia (2012) conducted research in the European region and confirmed that regional salary differences and the number of employment opportunities are the core reasons driving labor cross-regional mobility^[4]. Albouy et al. (2020) broke away from the traditional analysis of production efficiency and through a balanced model study found that the livability of urban life often has a greater impact on the settlement and employment choices of workers than industrial productivity^[5].

At the micro level, the academic community more often analyzes from the perspectives of workers' personal traits, family conditions, and social resources. Zhang Xukang (2024) believes that the education level, income level, demand for educational and medical resources, and whether they have purchased houses in towns, participated in insurance, or have local social networks, all significantly affect their outbound

transfer behavior^[6]. He Jian et al. (2016) research showed that rural laborers with good physical fitness, work experience, specialized skills, and strong language communication skills have a stronger willingness to work outside. Gao Ya et al^[7]. (2018) using national monitoring data of migrant population found that age and the probability of cross-regional mobility have a U-shaped relationship. At the same time, male laborers with higher or lower educational attainment are more willing to work cross-regionally^[8]. Yin Hongpan et al. (2016) also pointed out that the level of personal human capital is crucial, and rural laborers with higher comprehensive qualities have a more obvious tendency to migrate. In addition, the institutional environment also affects the decision to work^[9]. Ahituv et al. (2002)'s research mentioned that the satisfaction of workers with policies such as household registration and social security will directly affect their employment and migration choices^[10].

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Social change is an important analytical perspective for sociology to study various social phenomena and issues. For a long time, the academic community has been exploring the manifestations, internal driving forces, and causes of social change. Among numerous definitions, Professor Zheng Hangsheng's definition of social change is more comprehensive and reasonable. He summarizes it as the dynamic process and ultimate result of various social phenomena, especially changes in social structure. This definition makes up for the shortcomings of previous research definitions that were too broad or too narrow, integrates the reasonable viewpoints of previous studies, and clearly includes the process of change and the ultimate results in the category of social change, making it more academically applicable. Using social change theory as the research perspective of this article can help us interpret the phenomenon of middle-aged rural people going out to work in a more three-dimensional way. This theory can explain both macro level changes in social structure and micro level individual behavioral choices, making it highly compatible with this study. Urbanization, industrialization, economic transformation, updating of ideological concepts, and related policy adjustments are all typical social changes and important incentives for promoting rural

labor mobility. Therefore, relying on the theoretical framework of social change for analysis can provide a deeper understanding of the diverse motivations behind middle-aged migrant workers and a more comprehensive interpretation of the various social impacts brought about by population mobility.

3. Research Methods

From January to February 2025, the author conducted on-site research in C Village, Weifang City. The phenomenon of middle-aged laborers going out to work is common in the village, and it coincides with the Spring Festival when a large number of migrant workers return home. The author took this opportunity to conduct participatory observation and selected 20 middle-aged migrant workers for semi-structured interviews through snowball sampling. These interviewees are in line with the research topic and can truly and comprehensively reflect the overall characteristics of the middle-aged rural migrant worker group, providing solid first-hand information for the study. Firstly, the age distribution of these middle-aged people is between 36 and 55 years old and they are currently in the working stage. The types of work cover the main types of migrant workers, such as construction workers, service industry practitioners, logistics transporters, etc., which can represent the typical characteristics of rural middle-aged labor force. Their rich work experience and strong communication skills contribute to providing in-depth and comprehensive information. Meanwhile, middle-aged people have relatively stable social networks and are more easily accessible through the "snowball" sampling method. They also have a higher willingness to cooperate and can provide reliable data support for research.

On the basis of voluntary participation by the respondents, this study conducted in-depth interviews to explore the driving factors behind their migration for work and gain a deeper understanding of their chosen behaviors. The interview mainly includes topics such as personal information of the interviewees, personal reasons for choosing to work outside, and the impact of working outside on their daily lives. On the basis of ensuring a clear interview thread, the author fully encourages respondents to freely express their personal feelings in order to obtain richer and more authentic research data. By studying the experiences and behaviors of

these 20 middle-aged people, we can more comprehensively reveal the reasons for middle-aged rural migrant workers and their impact on rural hollowing out, providing solid theoretical basis and practical guidance for research.

4. Analysis of the Reasons for Middle-Aged Rural Migrant Workers Going out for Work

4.1 Research on the Behavior of Middle-Aged Rural Migrant Workers Driven by the Economy

The theory of social change emphasizes the impact of economic structural transformation on social behavior. With the advancement of industrialization and urbanization, the proportion of agriculture in the economy is gradually decreasing, the income gap between urban and rural areas is widening, and the middle-aged rural population is facing significant economic pressure. Going out to work has become an important strategy for them to cope with low agricultural income and increased household expenses such as child education and elderly care. This economically driven migration behavior reflects the uneven allocation of resources and the spatial transfer of economic opportunities in social change.

On the one hand, low agricultural income is one of the important economic factors that encourage middle-aged people to go out for work. In rural areas of our country, many regions still rely on traditional agricultural production methods. Many farmers in rural areas still use manual farming and harvesting methods, which have high labor intensity and low efficiency, seriously restricting the improvement of agricultural income. The yield situation of corn is also roughly the same, and in some years, due to market price fluctuations and other reasons, the yield is even lower. In the interview, villagers generally reported that after deducting the cost of farming at home, their annual income is only enough to maintain basic living expenses, and it is difficult to afford large expenses such as children's education and medical care. This economic pressure forces middle-aged people in rural areas to choose to work outside in search of higher income. We don't have much land at home, and now the price of food is so low. We can't earn much money from farming or doing some agricultural work all year round. Besides, there are few opportunities to earn money in the village now, and the factory is not stable with a

large number of employees. In addition, our children are going to school, and the elderly are getting sick again. The pressure is too great. Although it's far away from home to go out and work, we can earn more money, which can at least improve our family's life and not be too worried

On the other hand, the large income gap between urban and rural areas is a key economic factor leading to middle-aged people going out to work, which has had a profound impact on the hollowing out of rural areas. With the rapid development of China's economy, there are significant differences between urban and rural areas in terms of economic development level, industrial structure, employment opportunities, etc., which are directly reflected in the income levels of urban and rural residents. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, the per capita disposable income of urban residents in China will be 49283 yuan in 2023, while the per capita disposable income of rural residents will only be 19261 yuan, with an urban-rural income ratio of 2.56. In order to narrow the income gap between urban and rural areas, the government has taken a series of policy measures, such as increasing financial investment in rural areas, promoting the adjustment of rural industrial structure, developing emerging industries such as rural e-commerce and rural tourism, and improving the income level of rural residents. The implementation of these policy measures requires a certain amount of time and process, and it is difficult to completely change the current situation of large urban-rural income gap in the short term. Therefore, in the foreseeable future, the income gap between urban and rural areas will continue to be an important factor driving middle-aged rural people to work outside, and will have a sustained impact on the phenomenon of rural hollowing out. Economic driven migration behavior reflects the uneven allocation of resources and spatial transfer of economic opportunities in social change.

4.2 Analysis of the Phenomenon of Middle-Aged Rural Migrant Workers from the Perspective of Family Strategy

As the basic unit of society, the family will make a series of strategic choices in the face of economic imbalances and life pressures, in order to pursue better quality of life and family development. In rural areas, middle-aged people

going out to work has become a common family strategy, which involves consideration of various aspects such as economy, education, and elderly care. The choice of this family strategy reflects the adaptive adjustment of family functions in social changes, as well as the tension between traditional family concepts and modern economic needs.

From an economic perspective, increasing the overall household income is the core reason why middle-aged people in rural areas choose to work outside. The interviewee M47_T in this survey is a typical case. He has two children at home, his parents are already old, and the family's income is only maintained by a few acres of farmland. However, traditional agriculture has limited income and it is difficult to cover various expenses such as children's education, elderly medical treatment, and daily household expenses, resulting in significant economic pressure on families. In order to improve living conditions, he chose to work at an aluminum plate factory in another city. He works as an external affairs worker for about ten months every year, with an average monthly income of about 5000 yuan. After deducting personal daily expenses, he can save more than 30000 yuan annually to subsidize his family. This stable income from working effectively alleviates the economic difficulties of the family, not only supporting the education expenses of children, but also ensuring the medical and elderly care needs of the elderly in the family, greatly improving the quality of life of the whole family.

In terms of education, families hope that middle-aged people can go to work outside their hometowns, thereby creating better educational conditions for their children. With the development of society, the importance of education in personal development has become increasingly prominent. Rural families generally recognize that only by allowing their children to receive a good education can they change the fate of their families. I have a child who goes to a private high school at home, and the tuition fee is only over 20000 yuan per year. If I were at home, I wouldn't even be able to earn the child's tuition fee, let alone the living expenses of the family, social skills, and so on. I don't have much money left in a year. Although I work outside for a long time and am far away from home, I can earn money to eat and also earn the child's tuition fee. As an elderly person, it's just

to let the child live a good life in the future. Learning is the only way out. "The interviewee expressed the hope that by working outside to earn money, the child can receive better education and change the fate of the family. This sense of responsibility towards the family and expectations for the development of the next generation have become important driving forces for middle-aged rural migrant workers.

Elderly care is a crucial consideration in family strategies, especially in rural areas. The traditional elderly care model mainly relies on family care, where children bear the responsibility of supporting the elderly, providing them with economic support, life care, and emotional companionship. The large-scale outflow of young and middle-aged labor force from rural areas has led to a significant increase in the proportion of left behind elderly people, resulting in a severe shortage of labor resources within families, and the traditional family based elderly care model is difficult to sustain. Many families choose to send their middle-aged members out to work and accumulate pension funds by increasing non-agricultural income to cope with this challenge, in order to provide better economic security and living conditions for the elderly. Behind this strategy, it reflects the flexible coping ability of rural families in the face of social changes. As the backbone of the family, middle-aged people not only bear the responsibility of supporting the elderly, but also need to provide support for their children's education and future development. Going out to work is not only to alleviate current economic pressure, but also to prepare for future elderly care needs. By earning income from work, families can provide better medical conditions, improve living environments, and even prepare for future institutional or community elderly care services.

4.3 Research on the Interactive Mechanism between Social Networks and Rural Middle Aged Migrant Workers

The theory of social change places great emphasis on the influence of social networks on people's social behaviors. Rural middle-aged people who go to work in other places usually rely on their personal connections such as relatives and fellow villagers to obtain assistance and recommendations. This rural social network not only provides them with employment information and job opportunities, but also

effectively reduces the economic costs of going to work elsewhere, alleviates the psychological pressure brought by working in a different place, and reduces various risks during the migration process.

In Chinese society, interpersonal relationships are extensive and profound, especially in rural areas. Social networks based on blood ties and geographical connections have become an important channel for middle-aged people to obtain information and opportunities for working outside their hometowns. In many rural areas, introductions of jobs by acquaintances is a common phenomenon. When a villager in the city finds a stable job, they often pass on the relevant information to their relatives and friends back home. This information transmission is not only based on trust but also because there are common interests and emotional connections among acquaintances. Also, thanks to his frequent introduction of clients, I didn't have no orders when I first started. In addition, social networks can also form a demonstration effect, inspiring more middle-aged people to go out for work. When villagers see that people around them have improved their living conditions and increased their economic income through working outside, they will have the idea of working outside. Looking at the people in the village who are about the same age as me going out to work, when they come back for the Chinese New Year, their speech, clothing, and other aspects have changed. It shows that the environment outside is still much better, stronger than in the village. When we chat together, we are also influenced by them, and feel that we are not much worse than them. We think we can earn a lot of money like them. Of course, the main reason is that we see others earning money outside, and also tempted to go out and try.

However, there are also some problems with the migration of migrant workers driven by social networks. On the one hand, this approach may lead to relatively narrow career choices for migrant workers, often concentrated in specific industries and positions. Due to the fact that information mainly comes from acquaintances, their knowledge of job opportunities is relatively limited, making it difficult for them to access a wider range of professional fields. On the other hand, excessive dependence on social networks may limit the development space of migrant workers. They rely too much on the help of acquaintances and lack the ability to

independently search for jobs and expand their career development. When facing career changes or unemployment, they often appear powerless. Some migrant workers have to return to rural areas and face employment difficulties again due to the lack of other employment channels after the closure of their acquaintances' businesses.

4.4 Analysis of Personal Development Needs and Deep Motivation for Middle Aged Rural Migrant Workers

The rural middle-aged group's going out to work is not only an economic choice but also reflects their pursuit of personal development. Through working, they hope to enhance their skills, broaden their horizons, and realize their self-worth. This personal development need is closely related to the modernization process in the social transformation, reflecting the aspiration of rural residents for a better quality of life in the context of urbanization. The age distribution of this group is mainly 36 to 40 years old. Although this group accounts for a relatively small proportion, it reflects the pursuit of personal growth and development by rural middle-aged people. They hope to broaden their horizons, learn skills, enhance their own abilities, and accumulate capital for future development by going out to work. "I first received two months of training at a snack establishment, learning various methods of making noodles. Later, I borrowed money from relatives and friends, along with my own savings, and rented a storefront in the city to start making noodles and becoming my own boss. Having a skill is always better than working for others." This pursuit of personal development reflects the awakening of the middle-aged rural group's self-awareness and the improvement of their development needs.

5. The Impact of Rural Middle-Aged Out-migration on Rural Hollowing-out

From the perspective of rural economic development, middle-aged labor force is the core and main force of agricultural production. The large-scale outflow of this group of people directly causes a shortage of rural labor force, seriously restricting the development of agricultural production. It not only makes it difficult for labor-intensive traditional planting industries such as grain and vegetables to operate normally, but also gradually abandons many remote and complex farmland due to lack of cultivation, resulting in the problem of

extensive cultivation and lowering the overall agricultural production efficiency; Most of the people in the left behind villages are elderly, who are limited by their cultural level and learning ability, making it difficult to proficiently use modern technologies such as intelligent agricultural machinery and precision agriculture, resulting in difficulties in promoting advanced agricultural technologies and hindering the modernization transformation of agricultural production. In addition, among middle-aged people who go out to work, there are many high-quality rural talents with culture and technical knowledge. The continuous loss of this group of talents has caused the upgrading of rural industries and the cultivation of new business models to lose core intellectual support. Whether it is traditional agricultural innovation or the development of emerging industries such as rural e-commerce, the lack of talent, technology, and channels makes it difficult to break through. This not only restricts the high-quality development of rural economy, but also makes it difficult for rural areas to cultivate new economic growth points, and the gap between urban and rural economic development is further widened.

From the perspective of rural social order construction, middle-aged people are the backbone of rural governance, cultural inheritance, and community operation. Their large outflow has caused a series of rural governance problems. On the one hand, there is a lack of high-quality governance talent reserves in the village, and grassroots elections often face difficulties in selecting personnel. Most newly appointed village cadres lack the ability and experience to properly handle various village affairs such as industrial development, infrastructure construction, and neighborhood disputes, greatly reducing the quality and efficiency of rural governance. On the other hand, villagers who have been working outside for a long time have become detached from rural public life, indifferent to village affairs, and their enthusiasm for participating in village affairs consultation and democratic decision-making has greatly decreased. The participation rate and deliberation efficiency are low, which has caused rural democratic governance to lose a solid mass foundation.

At the same time, the inheritance of traditional rural culture has also encountered difficulties. Middle aged people are the main inheritors and

organizers of traditional customs, folk skills, and rural culture. Their loss makes it difficult for various rural cultural activities to be carried out normally, and traditional rituals are gradually lost. In addition, migrant workers have been influenced by urban culture for a long time, and their sense of identity with local culture is gradually fading. In addition, left behind children lack family education and atmosphere of local culture, and the new generation of rural cultural inheritance forces are fragmented, and the foundation of rural cultural development is constantly weakening.

In addition, the previous close and harmonious neighborly relationships of mutual assistance and support in rural areas have gradually faded, and daily communication and mutual assistance among villagers have decreased. The tradition of mutual assistance during busy farming seasons no longer exists, and farmers can only spend money to hire workers and machinery to complete agricultural work, increasing production costs and continuously weakening the ability of rural communities to cope with various risks and challenges.

Overall, the influence brought about by the rural middle-aged migrant workers is comprehensive and far-reaching. It has completely reshaped the economic and social structure of the countryside and also presents numerous severe challenges for the sustainable development of rural areas.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

This study has compiled a large amount of relevant literature and conducted field interviews to analyze the situation of middle-aged rural migrant workers from the perspective of social development and changes. It has clarified the formation logic, various influencing factors, and various impacts of this migrant behavior on rural hollowing out. Research has found that middle-aged people choose to work outside the home mainly driven by factors such as economic income, family livelihood planning, social networking resources, and personal development needs. At the same time, this large-scale migration for work has had a significant impact on rural economic development, rural governance order, and the inheritance of local culture, further exacerbating the problem of rural hollowing out.

To improve the current situation of rural hollowing out, multiple measures and efforts are needed, including developing the rural economy,

optimizing rural education and healthcare, improving the rural social assistance system, and guiding migrant workers to return home and start businesses through comprehensive measures. This work requires collaboration and cooperation among the government, various sectors of society, and rural communities to jointly create a sustainable rural environment.

Firstly, vigorously develop the rural economy. The government can increase investment in rural infrastructure construction and optimize the production and living environment of villagers. Simultaneously supporting local industries such as characteristic agriculture and rural tourism, creating more nearby employment opportunities, and revitalizing the rural economy. In addition, promoting agricultural technology upgrading and improving agricultural production efficiency can also effectively increase the income of villagers.

Secondly, optimize rural education and medical facilities. The government needs to increase investment in rural education and medical resources, improve the quality of rural teaching and medical services. Improved public services can reduce the situation of rural families going out in pursuit of high-quality education and medical resources, and alleviate the problem of rural hollowing out from the source.

Thirdly, improve the rural social support system. The government and various social organizations can establish a sound rural social service mechanism to provide practical assistance and protection for left behind elderly and left behind children. At the same time, support the development of rural community organizations, bring villagers closer together, enhance rural cohesion, and build a comprehensive rural social assistance network.

Fourthly, encourage migrant workers to return home and start businesses. The government can introduce various favorable policies, such as entrepreneurship training, financial support, and policy subsidies, to attract middle-aged rural migrant workers to return to their hometowns for entrepreneurship and development. These returnees can bring back advanced technologies and development concepts from the city, injecting new impetus into rural development and driving overall economic and social progress in rural areas.

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