

Research Article

Understanding the Impact of Rural Returnees' Hometown Identity on Their Successful Entrepreneurship with the Operations Research Framework

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Received 25 May 2022; Revised 4 June 2022; Accepted 10 June 2022; Published 29 June 2022

Academic Editor: Xuefeng Shao

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In the past ten years, China's rapid urbanization has hollowed out the rural population considerably. Although returnee entrepreneurship has become a catalyst for retaining people and revitalizing the countryside, most disenfranchised Chinese villages struggle to retain their returnees, owing to their lack of infrastructure and low quality of life. However, many e-commerce villages and live broadcast villages have emerged in the eastern coastal plains of China. Returnees, inspired with a strong hometown identity, have become the driving force in the development of these villages. This study investigates the relationship between the hometown identity of returnees and their entrepreneurial success with the operations research framework. We explored the mediating role of the agglomeration of knowledge to illustrate the mechanism between the hometown identity and entrepreneurial success, while testing the moderating effect and conditional indirect effects of the returnees' creativity through moderated mediation analysis. Using the time lag research method, we collected field data from villages in the northern plains of Jiangsu Province. The research results showed a positive correlation between the hometown identity and entrepreneurial success, with agglomerated knowledge production as an important intermediary. Returnees with a stronger sense of a hometown identity and higher creativity are more likely to enjoy entrepreneurial success. This research has important reference significance for all levels of government concerned with rural development, and returnees who desire to start their own businesses.

1. Introduction

"Arrival City" has become the development trend of cities and villages around the world [1]. Chinese society has a long-standing dual structure, with urban and rural antagonisms and large gaps between the rich and the poor [2]. Hindered by low income and the lack of employment opportunities other than agriculture, rural residents suffer a low economic growth rate, exacerbated by the relative lack of government support, and a shortage of long-term delivery services for labor materials for urban construction [3]. In addition to the explicit economic differences, there are also implicit differences in living habits and cultural practices between urban and rural areas. The custom of patronizing sons over daughters has long been the basic pattern of opportunity distribution for children

among rural families in China [4]. The countryside is also a typical acquaintance society. Nowadays, with more alienated human relationships, the metropolis has become an acquaintance society without subjects [5], with a noticeable disparity in the ideology and ideals of the older and younger generations [6]. In addition, rural fragmentation, disorder, and passivity of rural subjects are the biggest obstacles to the realization and enhancement of the activism, rights, and identity of Chinese rural subjects [7]. The explicit and implicit challenges have become a source of discomfort for the returnee's contrasting urbanization and modernization on one hand, and the ideals of idyllic Chinese countryside on the other. How to exert the enthusiasm, motivation, and creativity of the subjects of rural development has obviously become the main challenge of rural development.

Well-built villages, however, still cannot attract young people, and this is a bottleneck for the development of countries around the world [8, 9]. In order to solve this conundrum, the Chinese government continues to implement exploratory adjustment of development strategies, and constantly strives to narrow the gap between urban and rural areas in all aspects and in multiple fields. At the end of 2005, for example, the state required local governments to develop a new socialist countryside in accordance with the requirements of “production development, ample life, civilized rural customs, clean villages, and democratic management.”

Another example was the college student village official plan from October 2008, which intended to “guide college graduates to work in the village, and implement the goal of ensuring ‘one college student per village,’” and the focus on training health professionals engaged in general medicine at the level of township hospitals and below, also complemented that effort. In 2014, the Ministry of Agriculture launched the promotion of China’s leisure villages, which drove development projects in the countryside, culminating in a rural revitalization strategy whose goal was to realize rural modernization. Another effort to narrow the gap between urban and rural areas was the 2018 stipulation by the Ministry of Education that publicly funded normal students who graduated must teach in rural compulsory education schools for at least one year. In addition, the government also supports policies in environmental assessment, land use, financial credit, etc., to achieve sustainable agriculture and rural development [10].

In recent years, rural entrepreneurship is increasing, and it mainly consists of returning to the countryside and entering the countryside [11]. In rural areas, laborers transfer to coastal areas and large and medium-sized cities to work and accumulate entrepreneurial skills, who then return to their hometowns to allocate entrepreneurial resources to benefit their neighbors [12]. Science and technology, management talents, and entrepreneurs with the ability and desire to start a business in the city generally enter the countryside because of its natural resources and labor resources endowment, and gradually increase with the in-depth implementation of the rural revitalization strategy [13]. Meanwhile, with China’s regional economic growth, improved Internet infrastructure, more convenient transportation, gentrification of the living environment, new ruralism, and new lifestyles (people in the city who choose to live in the countryside) have gradually emerged [14]. Coupled with the national policy of “mass entrepreneurship and innovation,” there has been a marked increase in returnees starting businesses in their rural hometowns, especially in the developed eastern coastal areas of China, most notably in Jiangsu Province, where the economic development is most balanced [15]. In the context of top-down national development, those returning to their rural hometowns have used their capital, experience, skills, and wisdom to transform their hometowns, and numerous entrepreneurial stars and models have emerged. To a certain extent, it has alleviated the “shortcomings” of the lack of rural talents by introducing new technologies and new information, thus becoming the backbone of rural reform,

development, and revitalization [16]. These talents in rural Chinese society have greatly increased in entrepreneurial fields, such as self-build entrepreneurial opportunities, e-commerce, and product sales on live broadcast platforms [17, 18].

The hometown identity of the Chinese is a part of inherited tradition and has become the cultural capital for the revitalization of rural areas and the sustainable development of communities in modern China [19]. China was formerly a provincial agricultural society, where people depended on the same land for generations to survive. Even when they migrated to other countries, “falling leaves returned to their roots” [20, 21]. However, since ancient times, rural society has relied on local wise men to build their hometowns, and they have become an extremely important force in rural management. They actively participate in local affairs, maintain order, and have made great contributions to grassroots governance [22]. The characteristics of the differential pattern of rural society [23] firmly consolidate the identity of the Chinese countryside and still affect the cognition, social evaluation, and behavioral decision-making of returnees to this day [24]. The hometown identity can stimulate entrepreneurs’ internal power resources and has the greatest impact on villagers’ willingness to participate in rural revitalization [25]. Therefore, due to their hometown identification, returnees tend to actively perform and gather in the acquaintance society for knowledge sharing to rejuvenate the village. In other words, the hometown identity of returnees is the soul of rural revitalization and the key to resolving the crisis of contemporary rural development. Specifically, it is an emotional mechanism of the security-trust-expression-identity that is oriented to nostalgia, sentiment, and rural culture, with perception, conflict, integration, and interaction as paths [26]. Based on the above arguments, we can attribute the successful entrepreneurship of returnees to the role of hometown identification from the perspective of operations research.

First, we focus on enhancing the contribution of the hometown identity to entrepreneurial success. Most returnee entrepreneurs are troubled by the vitality of the rural market, the system of support services, and psychological quality [27]. This inherent rural stereotype has become a key factor in the success or failure of entrepreneurship. Therefore, successful entrepreneurship requires enhancement of the hometown identity, which has been the focus of China’s current social development, addressing policies, funds, and improving rural infrastructure, leading to the establishment of the National Rural Revitalization Bureau at the end of February 2021.

Second, agglomeration strategy as an intermediate variable in this study frames the link between the hometown identity and entrepreneurial success. Since the state’s top-down consolidation of the hometown identity has received more policy support and guidance, returnees are more likely to share entrepreneurial knowledge with villagers. This comes as a result of their deeper understanding of the urban market, while independently believing that agglomeration development is meaningful and positively impacts rural development. This kind of agglomeration strategy can be

used to solve difficult entrepreneurial challenges, which will have a positive impact on the execution and completion of entrepreneurial goals. Third, we analyzed the moderating effect of the creativity of returnees. Creativity is tested as a boundary condition that influences the connection between the hometown identity and entrepreneurial success because the literature shows that returnees with professional creativity are critical to agglomeration practice and performance [28]. Our research was confined to the coastal plains of China. We determined survey points to collect data from the list of rural industrial clusters announced by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and the Ministry of Finance, as well as the villages where many returnees consolidated. Judging from the existing literature, there is a lack of research on the recognition of the successful entrepreneurship of Chinese returnees. Therefore, we have also addressed an important academic gap.

2. Theory and Hypothesis

2.1. Hometown Identity and Entrepreneurial Success. Hometown identity can be defined as “explaining the individual’s internal emotional attachment, attitude tendency, and explicit behavior, and explaining the connection between values and behavior” [29]. In the past few decades, the research of identity and the success of entrepreneurship have aroused great interest in academia. Many subfields of pedagogy, history of science and technology, applied economics, sociology, and psychology, including professional identity, leadership, team performance, task performance, motivation, decision-making, and creativity, are all included in the study of identity. It is closely related to the attitudes and behaviors of individuals, groups, and communities [30, 31].

The concept of the hometown identity is composed of four cognitions: meaning, decision-making, confidence, and sense of accomplishment. Specifically, meaning refers to the degree to which homecoming entrepreneurship itself is meaningful to the construction of the concept of returnees. Decision-making refers to the sense of motivation and autonomy that returnees have in entrepreneurial decision-making. Confidence refers to the degree to which returnees are confident in their own ventures, and able to cope with entrepreneurial challenges and have a sense of accomplishment, which involves the feeling that their personal achievements have made a significant contribution to the development and revitalization of themselves and the countryside.

Similar to the psychological identity of practitioners in various industries, returnees also face psychological challenges brought about by returning to their villages to start a business. Although returnees can freely pursue their dreams, they will always face various difficulties in the complex and evolving entrepreneurial process. They often experience more negative emotions than their employees do, such as isolation, stress, fear of failure, loneliness, mental stress, and sadness [32]. Do the returnees face it positively or negatively? Would one insist on starting a business or reenter the city to choose salaried employment? This partly depends on

whether returnees truly believe in economic activities in their hometowns and whether they regard returning as a lifelong career pursuit and ideal employment setting. The hometown identity is a core element of entrepreneurial drive, and there are significant differences among the different types of entrepreneur. Of the “true believer,” “clueless,” “practical,” and “reluctant” types of entrepreneurs, there are three characteristics that differentiate them, namely: achievement needs, risk-taking propensity, and commitment.

Among them, true believer entrepreneurs have the highest entrepreneurial commitment [33] because they firmly believe in the value of their identity, having a higher degree of conviction concerning their return to their home to start a business. For them, the construction of the hometown identity is more meaningful and influential for entrepreneurial success, leading to internal motivation.

Returnees, having specific knowledge and skills, would have high employment expectations in their hometown. Meanwhile, they have made a decision to transition from urban to rural employment after consideration of factors, such as the hometown’s policy environment [25]. The decision-making process makes returnees more confident, believing that their entrepreneurial ideas can actually help villages develop economically and rise out of poverty. The returnees’ sense of identity is transformed into power, decision-making, information, autonomy, initiative and creativity, knowledge, skills, and sense of responsibility in entrepreneurship, which becomes the internal driving force for their successful entrepreneurship. They persevere and perform well [34].

The identity self-construction model can explain the connection between the hometown identity and entrepreneurial success [35]. The individual internalizes the value of self-employment and transforms this meaning into self-definition, thus forming their hometown identity. Identity-based motivation is about “whether the individual wants to do something,” so that the value of this identity guides and drives goal-oriented behavior, often transforming possibilities into realities [36].

Moreover, the multiple identities possessed by returnees enable them to manage emotions more effectively [37]. Entrepreneurship is “a life of nine deaths.” The self-concept mainly focuses on the identity of the entrepreneur, and when setbacks and failures arise, it challenges their self-verification and self-esteem, possibly reducing their enthusiasm. However, maintaining multiple identities can not only better exert the positive effects of returnees’ self-verification [38] but they can pay more attention to identity management, which in turn bolsters their abilities [39].

Many scholars believe that hometown identification has greatly improved overall productivity, especially in entrepreneurial projects [29]. Returnees who have a stronger sense of belonging tend to believe that their entrepreneurship has far-reaching significance and influence [25]. Hence, with increased passion, they lead innovations to accomplish their entrepreneurial goals. Therefore, we assume the following:

Hypothesis 1. Hometown identity is directly proportional to the entrepreneurial success of returnees.

2.2. The Mediating Role of Agglomeration Strategies. Agglomeration strategy plays the role of knowledge production and sharing, which can be defined as “the act of providing information to others in the organization” ([40], p. 341), it aims to solve the problems encountered by the returnee group in starting a business, the exchange of market information, and the mutual consultation of opinions. In an agglomeration environment, knowledge production and sharing are a crucial team process because if knowledge resources are not shared, they cannot be fully utilized [41]. Knowledge-intensive business activities are the staple of entrepreneurship. In this knowledge-driven environment, team development and management agglomeration strategies become imperative [42].

With specific goals, the entrepreneurial ecosystem adopts open cooperation and innovation, seeking resource complementation, division of labor and collaboration, value sharing, and coexistence [43]. The concept and the relationship network that the hometown identity constructs are key factors that enhance the dissemination of knowledge among members of agglomeration [44]. The hometown identity enhances interpersonal trust, which becomes an agglomeration of knowledge production and sharing [45].

Agglomeration strategy forms an ecosystem with diverse internal roles [46]. There can be more efficient division of labor and coordination according to specific resource endowments, including “producers,” “consumers,” “disintegrators,” and “catalysts” (including lawyers, accountants, and intellectual property experts) [47]. There can be a free sharing of strategic knowledge, technical knowledge, and training and services for villagers in preparation for returnees, forming an agglomeration ecosystem for the rural industry.

- (1) Strategic entrepreneurial knowledge. Returnees who have started their own businesses are in the growth and exploration stage of their knowledge of entrepreneurial strategic planning and the business model design. The creative team that agglomeration strategy forms provides returnees with wisdom, vision, market information, and entrepreneurial experience, which greatly improves the success rate of agglomeration strategy [48].
- (2) Technical entrepreneurial knowledge. This mainly comprises knowledge and experience in core technology research and development, product development, business operations, and management. For example, returnees in the technology sector and professionals with various knowledge and skills can solve difficult problems in technology, business models, and business operations in entrepreneurial projects.
- (3) Entrepreneurship training and services for villagers. Returnees use the Internet to live broadcast goods to help villagers sell agricultural products and other

wares while opening up new markets for these products, allowing villagers to become self-sufficient [49]. Innovative guidance services through the network, video, and other media provide policy consultation, technical guidance, marketing, brand cultivation, and other services for potential entrepreneurs in rural areas.

Returnees form a cluster space, which is a key resource for realizing rural economic development and entrepreneurial ecological sustainability [50]. Through the collective knowledge sharing, knowledge can be exchanged and spread among themselves and with the villagers to form a network. This has led to an increase in the success rate of entrepreneurship. Since knowledge sharing in turn produces a very small probability of errors, it is more possible to experience relatively error-free entrepreneurial project execution [51]. Based on the above findings, we assume the following:

Hypothesis 2. Agglomeration strategies can adjust and add value the relationship between the hometown identity and entrepreneurial success.

2.3. The Moderating Role of Returnees’ Creativity. In the context of rural revitalization, returning to the hometown is a new way for youth development, as opposed to the metropolitan environment [52]. This requires returnees to have a degree of creativity and to improve the possibly outdated production methods in their villages of origin. Increasingly, returnee entrepreneurs are using the skills, personal connections, insights into market rules, and accumulated funds that they have acquired over the years to upgrade rural industries, develop rural areas, and change traditional development into innovative development [29, 53]. Thus, innovative thinking and creativity are the main characteristics of returnees [54]. In recent years, China’s rural e-commerce has developed rapidly, and some returnees have discovered various niches of novelty products that have become popular online, even though many returnees are still engaged in traditional industries, such as agriculture, vegetables, flower-plant industry, and livestock and aquaculture. However, although they have been conceived from the traditional production model, they have begun to approach a new model of standardization, intensification, and clustering [55].

The creativity of returnees is a way to generate new and useful ideas and solve problems. People are paying more attention to the research on how returnees influence and enhance each other’s creativity [56]. The challenges become more demanding for returnees who start their own businesses, and they usually have to accomplish their entrepreneurial goals creatively. Every process when running a business needs creativity, and business owners need to embrace this creative thinking to establish a conducive business environment. Creativity is an important component of individual cognitive processing. It is the ability to generate novel and innovative ideas through the recombination and matching of information and knowledge [57]. In the field of entrepreneurship, individual creativity refers to

the process by which entrepreneurs can combine existing ideas and resources to generate new and feasible ideas or resources, thereby starting a new business [58]. For entrepreneurial activities, creativity is particularly important, because creating a new business is itself a creative activity. Maintaining creativity is a quality that successful entrepreneurs must possess [47].

A high level of creativity can help returnees to better understand the connections between objects, identify business opportunities, and rationally allocate entrepreneurial resources to create value efficiently. Difficulties in the entrepreneurial process, such as shortages of resources and inability to enter the market, require creative individuals who are able to generate more ideas about products or services [59]. A successful returnee is more confident in transforming creativity into self-performance, that is, high creativity is an asset to their entrepreneurship. Some scholars have pointed out that the study of entrepreneurial goals should include creativity as an important alternative predictor [49]. With the continuous advancement of the strategy of “popular entrepreneurship, mass innovation,” entrepreneurship has gradually become a new driving force for sustainable economic development. Entrepreneurship itself is a highly creative value-creation activity, and active innovative thinking is a distinctive feature of entrepreneurs. In Schumpeter’s theory of innovation, the view of “creative destruction” essentially predicts the creativity of entrepreneurs [60]. Creativity from the entrepreneurial perspective is embodied in the process of developing novel and useful products or services [61].

Therefore, we expect the creativity of returnees to have a positive moderating effect between hometown identification and agglomeration strategies, and predict the following:

Hypothesis 3. The creativity of returnees will rely on agglomeration strategies to enhance the indirect influence of the hometown identity on entrepreneurial success. Specifically, more creative employees have a greater indirect impact.

The conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1.

3. Method

3.1. Study Context: Creative Villages of the Jiangsu Coastal Plain in China. We aimed this study at returnees from the coastal plains of Jiangsu, China, where creative villages have sprouted [53]. We chose them for two main reasons. First, these villages do not have any innate resource endowments, such as impressive natural resources for tourism. Traditional agriculture has long been the principal economic activity. With the advent of the Internet age, these villages which are close to the Yangtze River Delta economic circle in China have seen the budding development of creative villages, which has changed the traditional path of rural development and achieved substantial economic benefits. There are many returnees who have started businesses in this plain area and achieved remarkable success. Second, the careers of returnees are innovation-oriented. Hence, our selected sample comprises returnees who personify our research topic.

3.2. Sample and Procedure. Our sample comprises returnee entrepreneurs from several villages in the coastal plain of Jiangsu, China (mainly concentrated in Donghai and Guanyun counties in Lianyungang City and Shuyang and Siyang counties in Suqian; as shown in Figure 2). Before data collection, we conducted a prestudy of 12 college students who planned to return to their hometowns to start a business in order to revise and adjust items in this study while expanding the generality of the results. Prior to this data collection process, we conducted several field surveys and semi-structured interviews at the survey sites in 2018 and 2019 to obtain preliminary data and establish good relationships with some returnees. We formed a working relationship with other returnees through the introduction of key informants, which established a good foundation for the credibility of investigation. This research topic hinged on previous data and used online questionnaires to obtain research data (using the “Wenjuanxing” survey questionnaire platform).

Initially, we contacted 28 entrepreneurial teams (197 people in total), and the key informants of each entrepreneurial team led the members in completing the questionnaire voluntarily. Respondents are either self-employed or entrepreneurial partners. They are engaged in e-commerce, logistics, design, creativity industry, livestreaming, marketing, sound and vision, video editing, research and development, education and training, short videos, etc. In order to reduce potential general method bias [62], we adopted a time lag design and independent measures (self and supervisory reporting). At time 1, we distributed links for the online questionnaire to key informants from the returnee team. We asked them to provide their job status, demographics (gender, age, educational background, and entrepreneurial experience), opinions on the hometown identity, agglomeration strategies, entrepreneurial expectations, and entrepreneurial success.

In the questionnaire’s introduction, we explained to them the purpose of the research and stated that their participation in the questionnaire was voluntary, and that we guaranteed them anonymity and confidentiality because the respondents did not need to mention their names in the answer. A total of 192 returnees completed the questionnaire, and the feedback rate was 97.46%. The survey lasted for a four-week interval (time 2) from October to November 2019. We used the scores of 28 key informants in the entrepreneurial teams to evaluate the creativity of team members. In order to match the answers of returnees, the key informant identified them through the job identities we obtained at time 1. We received 116 complete matching responses (key reporters rated returnees who participated in the survey). On average, key reporters rated the creativity of four returnees, and the participation rating accounted for 58.88%.

Most of the participants (72.58%) were men, with 51.77% having a higher vocational education degree (after three years of vocational education after graduating from high school), and 41.62% with a bachelor’s degree. By age category, 52.28% of the respondents were between 27 and 34 years old, and most of them (46.7%) had been running their hometown business for 5–9 years.

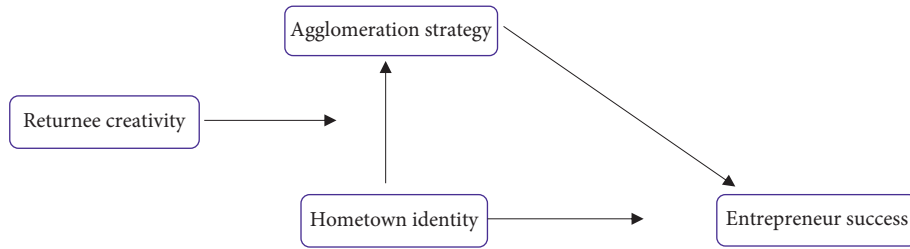


FIGURE 1: Proposed research model: The HIDENCESS model.

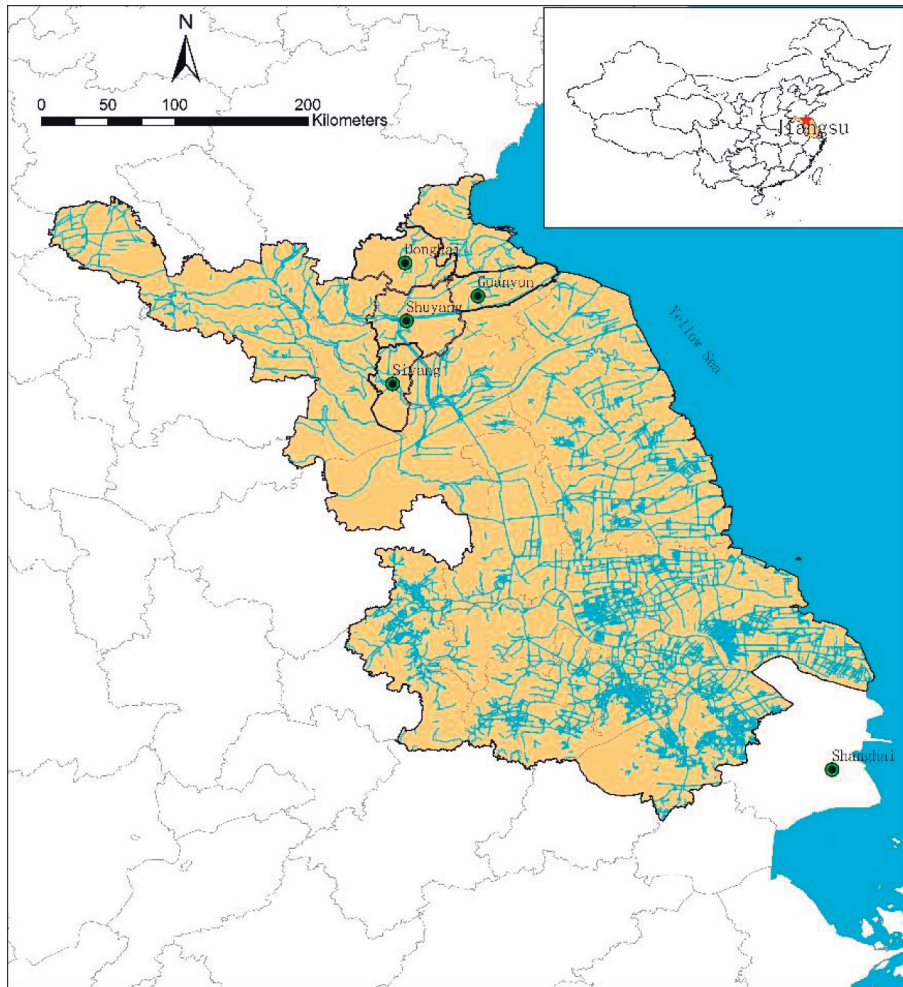


FIGURE 2: Map of sites.

3.3. Measures. The measurement tools used in this research are all scales that have been used in Anglophone research. We translated and back-translated each item of the scale to improve the accuracy of language expression. We referred to the 11-item scale developed by Spreitzer [63] to measure the hometown identity. Examples of topics included: “It makes sense for me to return to my hometown to start a business” and “Hometown is a good platform for entrepreneurship.” We referred to Cummings’ 5-item scale [64] to measure agglomeration strategy; examples include: “How often do you share your experience during the entrepreneurial period?” We also referred to Zhou and George [65] and used the 5-point

Likert scale to study the creativity of returnees. We modified the scale in the context of entrepreneurship in China to obtain the opinions of key informants from the team of returnees. Examples of these points included “the returnee often has novel ideas for entrepreneurial development projects.” For the measurement of entrepreneurial success, we referred to the research of Liñán and Chen [66] with items, such as “I have completed the entrepreneurial goals.”

In the above scale, the item’s measurement scores used a 5-level judgment matrix, from 1 to 5 representing completely disagree to completely agree, never to many, and exceptionally low to very high. Using Cronbach’s α

TABLE 1: Factor analysis.

Variable	Minimum factor loading	Cronbach's α	KMO	Total variance explained (%)
Home identity	0.79	0.85	0.89	67.11
Returnee creativity	0.63	0.77	0.82	58.73
Agglomeration strategy	0.71	0.76	0.78	59.41
Entrepreneur success	0.82	0.91	0.91	74.31

coefficient as the criterion of reliability, the obtained hometown identity, agglomeration strategy, the creativity of returnees, and the success or failure of entrepreneur were 0.85, 0.77, 0.76, and 0.91, respectively.

4. Empirical Results

4.1. Reliability and Validity Test. In this study, we used Cronbach's α coefficient as the reliability criterion, and Table 1 displays the results. The alpha value of each variable was higher than 0.7, and the KMO value was also higher than 0.7. The minimum value of the total variance contribution rate was 58.73%, and the minimum factor loading was 0.63, which is higher than the acceptable critical value.

Table 2 lists the mean (Mean), standard deviation (SD), and correlation coefficient of each variable. It is evident from Table 2 that the composite reliability of each concept is relatively high, with a minimum value of 0.86. In the test of discriminative validity, we used the AVE value for judgment. Combining with Table 3, the AVE values are visibly all higher than 0.5, and the square root of AVE is greater than the correlation coefficient between the variable itself and other variables, showing that each variable has a higher discriminative validity. Meanwhile, using AMOS17.0 to perform confirmatory factor analysis on variables, the results show that the basic model of this study has a good fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.508$, CFI = 0.936, GFI = 0.882, TLI = 0.927, IFI = 0.937, NFI = 0.901, RMSEA = 0.059); each index basically meets the standard, and the discrimination validity is good.

4.2. Common Method Variance (CMV). Since the survey data acquisition method is mainly through the self-report method of the online questionnaire, the common method deviation may be abnormal. However, several targeted measures have been taken in our survey design process to avoid this deviation. First, we used a time-lag survey design to establish time intervals between the measurement results of the main variables [62]. Second, by using the feedback of key informants from the returnees' cluster team to measure the creativity of other returnees, we limited self-reporting bias. Third, we ensured the anonymity and confidentiality of their answers and established good social relationships in the preliminary investigation. Through this, we urged them to answer questions as honestly as possible, thus reducing research bias.

Finally, we used the Harman single factor test to ascertain the common method deviation. The analysis results show that all items were automatically aggregated into four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, with the total variance contribution rate at 64.89%. Among them, the first factor explained 32.79% of the variance of all items, which

did not account for half of the total variance explained, indicating that we had successfully controlled the common method deviation of the data in this paper.

4.3. Tests of Hypotheses

4.3.1. Test of the Relationship between Hometown Identity, Agglomeration Strategy, and Entrepreneurial Success. Controlling for the gender, age, and education level of interviewees, this study performed multiple regression analysis on the relationships among the core variables studied, as shown in Table 3. M3 examined the influence of control variables on dependent variables, and the results show that gender is a factor that affects entrepreneurial success, while age and the education level did not significantly affect individual entrepreneurial success. In order to verify the main effect, we introduced independent variables on the basis of M3. It can be seen from M4 that the influence of the hometown identity on entrepreneurial success reached significance ($\beta = 0.58$, $P < 0.01$). The hometown identity could explain 36% of the total variation of entrepreneurial success, indicating that it had a significant impact on entrepreneurial success. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is verified.

M2 uses agglomeration strategy as the dependent variable and the hometown identity as the independent variable for regression. The results show that the hometown identity had a significant positive effect on agglomeration strategy ($\beta = 0.63$, $P < 0.01$), and the hometown identity explained 40% of the total variance of agglomeration strategy. M5 examines the relationship between agglomeration strategy and entrepreneurial success. The results show that agglomeration strategy has a significant positive impact on entrepreneurial success ($\beta = 0.59$, $P < 0.01$), thus supporting Hypothesis 2.

4.3.2. The Mediation Test of Agglomeration Strategy. The Baron and Kenny's mediating effect test method (1986) [67] was used to verify the mediating effect of agglomeration strategy. The first step is to test whether the independent variable has a significant influence on the dependent variable. It can be seen from M4 that the hometown identity has a significant positive effect on entrepreneurial success ($\beta = 0.58$, $P < 0.01$); the second step is to test whether the independent variable, hometown identity, has a significant effect on intermediary variable agglomeration strategy. The results of M2 show that the hometown identity has a significant positive effect on agglomeration strategy ($\beta = 0.63$, $P < 0.01$); the third step is to perform the regression of the dependent variable on the independent variable and the intermediate variable, and apply the independent variable's

TABLE 2: Descriptive statistics and correlations.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	1.47	0.51							
2. Age	1.81	0.58	-0.132**						
3. Education level	1.74	0.43	0.016	0.036					
4. Home identity (T1)	3.22	0.67	-0.202**	-0.008	-0.064	0.773			
5. Returnee creativity (T2)	3.33	0.64	-0.118*	0.025	-0.119*	0.625**	0.771		
6. Agglomeration strategy (T1)	3.14	0.72	0.081	-0.081	-0.043	-0.071	-0.011	0.756	
7. Entrepreneur success (T1)	3.21	0.78	-0.199**	0.049	-0.002	0.598**	0.594**	-0.461**	0.83
AVE						0.61	0.59	0.57	0.72
CR						0.91	0.87	0.86	0.93

Note. ** $P < 0.01$, * $P < 0.05$; The diagonal is the square root of AVE; T = TIME.

TABLE 3: Multiple regression analysis results.

	Agglomeration strategy			Entrepreneur success				
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8
Gender	0.116*	-0.014	0.198**	0.075	0.129**	0.081*	0.099**	0.092**
Age	0.016	0.038	0.024	0.044	0.014	0.030	-0.015	-0.024
Education level	0.110*	0.072	0	-0.036	-0.065	-0.062	-0.047	-0.030
Home identity		0.63**		0.58**		0.36**		
Agglomeration strategy					0.58**	0.37**	0.58**	0.53**
Returnee creativity							0.42**	0.41**
Agglomeration strategy × returnee creativity								0.18**

Note. ** $P < 0.01$, * $P < 0.05$, $M = \text{Model}$.

hometown identification and intermediate variable agglomeration strategy into regression equation simultaneously. As M6 shows, agglomeration strategy has a significant impact on entrepreneurial success ($\beta = 0.37$, $P < 0.01$). The influence of the hometown identity on entrepreneurial success is also significant ($\beta = 0.36$, $P < 0.01$), but its regression coefficient has declined ($0.36 < 0.58$). This shows that agglomeration strategy has a partial mediating effect between hometown identification and entrepreneurial success. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is verified.

4.3.3. The Moderating Effect Test of Returnees' Creativity. In testing Hypothesis 3, that is, the influence of returnees' creativity on the relationship between the hometown identity and entrepreneurial success, we first set entrepreneurial success as the dependent variable. We gradually add the control variables, agglomeration strategy, and returnees' creativity, as well as the product of agglomeration strategy and returnees' creativity, namely M3, M7, and M8 in Table 3. In order to eliminate the problem of collinearity, we processed agglomeration strategy and returnees' creativity separately, and then constructed the product term of the two. As M8 shows, the product term of agglomeration strategy and the creativity of returnees has a significant positive impact on entrepreneurial success ($\beta = 0.18$, $P < 0.01$). This shows that the positive impact of agglomeration strategies on entrepreneurial success strengthens when returnees' creativity increases. This verifies Hypothesis 3.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article focuses on the relationship between the hometown identity of rural returnees and their entrepreneurial success with the operations research framework. It discusses the relationship between the hometown identity, agglomeration strategy, entrepreneurial success, and the creativity of returnees. Through qualitative and quantitative surveys of 197 entrepreneurs returning to their rural hometowns in the coastal plains of Jiangsu Province, the study verifies the following: (1) The hometown identity of returnees has a significant positive impact on entrepreneurial success; (2) Agglomeration strategy can adjust and complement the relationship between the hometown identity and entrepreneurial success; and (3) Creativity coupled with agglomeration strategies enhances the indirect influence of the hometown identity on entrepreneurial success.

In this study, we proved that the hometown identity of returnees can be beneficial to entrepreneurial success. Our results are consistent with previous research hypotheses, indicating that since the strong hometown identity of returnees provides motivation for success, the willingness to venture into entrepreneurship will increase [68]. According to Bandura's self-efficacy theory [69], the identity of the entrepreneurial subject (individual or team) plays a fundamental role in the self-efficacy of returnees. The hometown identity can not only provide them with the resource support they need for entrepreneurship but also enhance the

entrepreneur's self-efficacy by replacing role models, verbal persuasion, and awakening. This level of performance translates into returnees' success.

In addition, agglomeration strategy significantly moderated this relationship because returnees drew great intrinsic motivation from it. Participating in the knowledge-sharing of the agglomeration space improved their performance and ultimately increased the success rate of entrepreneurship [70]. In addition, we discovered the moderating effect of returnees' creativity on the hometown identity and entrepreneurial success. Highly creative returnees achieved success by implementing ideas to achieve a competitive advantage [71]. Therefore, returnees with higher creativity were more likely to participate in entrepreneurial knowledge-sharing activities.

5.1. Theoretical Implications. This research advances the literature on the hometown identity, agglomeration strategy, and returnees' creativity from four important aspects. First, through research hypothesis testing to study the relationship between variables, it provides theoretical enlightenment for our research. We hypothesize that the hometown identity and creativity significantly affect the entrepreneurial success of returnees. We supplement the literature through our examination of the indirect effects of returnees' creativity and agglomeration strategies. Our results show that the hometown identity and creativity of returnees can solve the difficulties and challenges encountered in entrepreneurship, such as isolation, through the cooperative nature of agglomeration strategy and by inspiring them to achieve better results. In most cases, these strategies can enable returnees to make better decisions through coping strategies, such as cooperation and collusion and knowledge complementation. Second, by incorporating agglomeration strategy as an intermediary mechanism into this research, we have increased and deepened the research on the hometown identity and entrepreneurial success. Third, this article highlights the role of the creativity of returnees and uses appropriate mediation methods to determine the relationship between the hometown identity and the success of returnee entrepreneurship, thereby deepening our understanding and supplementing the literature.

Our research emphasizes that creative returnees will exert their motivation for themselves and their hometowns, and drive the rural economy and the common development of the villagers. Because of their hometown identity, the returnees nurture a strong cohesion within their group, which promotes the formation of clusters to encourage more fluid knowledge complementation. Logically, the quality of knowledge shared among agglomeration groups is a direct result of the scale of the entrepreneurs' creativity. Finally, through empirical research, we analyzed the relationship between the hometown identity, agglomeration strategy, returnees' creativity, and returnees' entrepreneurial success. This contributes to the development of rural areas in Chinese cases and literature supplements, and verifies that the

China's rural revitalization model is effective in non-developed countries.

5.2. Managerial Implications. This research has practical reference significance for the top-down management of the village. Since there is a direct connection between the hometown identity of returnees and their entrepreneurial success, this study suggests that government personnel should establish the policy mechanism, financial support, and social security mechanism for the formation, maintenance, and consolidation of the hometown identity from the perspective of operations research. Government can also play a part in consolidating and enhancing the observable factors (such as rural environmental governance and improvement of transportation facilities) and intangible factors that affect the formation of the hometown identity in all directions (developing beneficial cultural concepts and eliminating patriarchal customs), and prioritizing the empowerment of returnees. The local residents and returnees can learn from agglomeration strategy to form a creative space for rural development, and provide professional knowledge support for the development of rural industries and the improvement of villagers' livelihoods. Entrepreneurial partners face challenges often, and these measures would help them persevere and support their creativity in the face of such adversity.

Returning entrepreneurs need to consider many factors, such as the self-efficacy of their creativity, internal motivation, and satisfaction, that are closely related to personal entrepreneurial values. The factors are interrelated, and the lack of any one factor may have an adverse effect on their creativity and consequent success. In order to improve the creativity of returnees, the policy support and efficiency of the local government are crucial to the success of returnees' entrepreneurship. Local government managers should establish supportive measures to develop the assembly of returnees in order to spread knowledge and share entrepreneurial insights to support rural development. Local governments, where conditions permit, can also use incentive measures to encourage rural areas to form a good entrepreneurial atmosphere for industrial agglomeration and development.

5.3. Limitations and Directions for Future Research. Although this article has certain theoretical and practical significance for the study of rural decline and development from the perspective of the hometown identity and returnee entrepreneurship, there are still some limitations. First, this article used a self-assessment questionnaire to measure the relationship between the hometown identity and entrepreneurial success, which can be susceptible to various biases. In future research, especially when the epidemic is over, it will be necessary to conduct a return survey of questionnaire participants in the field to obtain a more objective measurement of this relationship. Second, this research focuses on the impact of the hometown identity on the success of returnees' entrepreneurship. We can explore the impact of returnees' creativity on entrepreneurial performance,

entrepreneurial growth, and rural industry development. Third, constrained by the epidemic, the samples in this study are concentrated in the rural areas of the Yangtze River Delta in China.

Also, we can further expand the scope of investigation and increase the number of samples to improve the external validity of research conclusions in future. Furthermore, the emergence of an entrepreneurship model by hometown returnees will be a good catalyst and input for future research on rural revitalization and sustainable development. The following research areas will be stimulated: (1) how to formulate policies to attract returnees; (2) how returnees can harness their creativity to build entrepreneurial advantages; and (3) how to construct the returnee identity. Along with the accumulation and exploration of these studies, the paradigm of rural development will become more and more scientific and perfect.

Data Availability

The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Disclosure

The authors Chongliang Ye, Xumei Miao and Xiaoyan Feng contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all members who were involved in the research upon which this paper is based and the two referees for their helpful improvement.

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