

An Empirical Exploration of Rural Public Opinion Expression and Collection: Empowerment, Flexible Embedding and Spatial Construction.

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Abstract. Rural governance is related to rural revitalization, and the key to rural governance lies in the subjective status of villagers and the enhancement of their participation ability [to give full play to the subjective role of villagers and enhance their participation ability]. Based on the theory of empowerment and flexible embedding, this paper takes the effective expression and collection of public opinion as the starting point and explores, through case studies, the value of the People's Talking Point for rural governance, namely, encouraging villagers' participation through empowerment, obtaining villagers' opinions through flexible embedding, and promoting interaction and communication between villagers and cadres through spatial construction. It is important to explore and summarise the value of the experience of people's talk points in order to further promote effective governance and innovative governance models in villages.

Keywords: Public opinion expression, opinion collection, empowerment, flexible embedding, spatial construction

1. Background of the study and the question raised

Rural revitalization is the top priority of rural development, and rural governance is the core of rural revitalization. The State has issued many documents on rural governance, and the report of the 19th Party Congress has put forward the twenty-word policy of rural revitalization strategy, which points out that "the countryside will be civilized and effectively governed". However, there are various problems in rural governance at present.

As far as the main body of rural governance is concerned, the main body of self-government is unclear, grassroots cadres and village gentry have overstepped their positions, and the government's rights and interests are encumbered by administrative power and status, blocking the channels for villagers to give feedback, making it difficult for villagers to give effective feedback on rural issues and their own needs. As far as the rural governance model is concerned, the current model of township abatement governance is mainly a rigid government-led governance. The relationship between the central government and the local government is one of obedience and command, and the same coercive relationship of obedience and command continues between the township government and the villagers (Hu Weiwei; She Chao, 2021). Under the rigid governance model, rural affairs are mainly handled by public power and violence, which can effectively resolve rural conflicts, but compress the space for villagers' autonomy and exacerbate tensions between the cadres and the people. As far as the village governance platform is concerned, village governance mainly relies on village committees, township governments and other administrative organs to deal with village affairs. The relationship between village cadres and villagers is one-way communication. In their daily work, village cadres are mainly responsible for the dissemination of policies from higher levels and the implementation of village rules and regulations, but it is difficult to communicate and resolve the daily needs of villagers and their internal conflicts in a timely manner. There is a lack of communication channels for information gathering and expression between grassroots cadres and villagers.

In the new era, rural governance needs to focus on a governance system that combines autonomy, rule of law and moral governance. In order to build a good rural governance environment and effectively meet the needs of villagers for self-governance, the expression and collection of public opinion is crucial. In view of the various problems in rural governance, based on the expression and

collection of public opinion, how can we effectively collect public opinion, open up channels for public opinion expression, innovate rural governance models, and promote the unification of good governance by rural cadres and villagers' autonomy from the perspective of governance subjects, governance models and governance platforms? These questions are the focus of this article.

2. Literature review and definition of concepts

Since the 1990s, the field of rural governance has gradually received the attention of the academic community, which has carried out various studies on this issue. From the perspective of rural governance subjects, Xu Zhongbo redeems [], in the interpretation of a new rural community promotion association, believes that the government is guiding rather than controlling for villagers, and that community construction should activate the sense of people's autonomous participation and promote collaborative governance. Similarly, Yan Shuhua, based on the perspective of rural revitalization, suggests the need to improve the comprehensive governance of townships, highlight the main position of the grassroots, and enhance the sense of participation, integration and contribution of villagers. And in Jin's [Jin's fork] study of the three rights of the state respecting elites and ordinary villagers in rural governance [], an interactive study was conducted. In terms of rural governance model, in recent years, due to the importance attached by the Party Central Committee to rural governance, the model of three governance in one is proposed, highlighting the effective combination of moral governance and rule of law. Domestic research has mainly focused on the governance models of resident cadres, new villagers, flexible governance, digital governance, and the combination of "three governance" and even "five governance". Among them, Yu Muqin and Yang Mengya argue that resident cadres can effectively connect resources across space and carry out rural work through identity embedding and the construction of public space[1]. From the perspective of flexible governance, Xu Zhongbo, Hu Weiwei and She Chao argue that flexible governance is in line with the reality of Chinese society and has acquired profound cultural and theoretical values[4]. There are relatively few studies from the perspective of the platform of rural governance, and the studies mainly take a certain rural governance platform as an example to explore the model of rural governance, the influencing factors and so on.

Through a review of the literature and a summary of previous experiences as well as field visits and observations, this paper takes community empowerment, flexible embedding and platform construction as the starting point to explore the innovative experience of rural governance.

2.1 Community empowerment

Empowerment first appeared in sociological and political writings and was seen as the process of empowering individuals or collectives to have the right or ability to take action to improve the status quo. It has since been gradually extended to the field of communication studies, where it is seen as the interaction of individuals within a group with each other. The process of empowerment is essentially a process of participation. Community empowerment, on the other hand, connects empowerment with social practice and refers to the promotion of collaborative community governance by giving resources and some rights within a community to stimulate a sense of participation and the ability to govern within the community[3]. Therefore, an important component of community empowerment includes community participation. Through empowerment, villagers are given the right to participate in dealing with village affairs, strengthening the sense of subjectivity, increasing motivation and participation, and resolving internal conflicts and meeting internal needs through endogenous dynamics.

2.2 Flexibility embedded

Flexibility is mainly opposed to rigid governance, emphasising that the government is in a non-subjective position and plays a supporting role in village governance by guiding, encouraging and supporting villagers to participate in collective affairs, conveying national guidelines and

policies and dealing with conflicts and disputes in a euphemistic, moderate and easily acceptable manner. It opposes authoritarian government action and rejects forceful means. Embeddedness, on the other hand, refers to the integration of one party into another party's organisation through identity, cultural consensus and organisational strength[2]. Granovetter's concept of embeddedness emphasises the inlaying of the former into the latter's organisational structure through relational action. In response to the embarrassing situation of grassroots cadres in current rural governance, the concept of flexible governance is combined with the concept of embeddedness to explore effective ways of collecting public opinion in grassroots organisations from the perspective of flexible embedding.

3. Exploring the path of collecting and expressing public opinion

3.1 Introduction to the People's Talking Point

With a registered population of 1,649 and a village area of 25.2 square kilometres, L Village is a typical village with a small population and a lot of land. The village has a large number of ancestral shrines, where the ancestors' tablets are enshrined in the main hall. The walls around the ancestral hall are decorated with records of the ancestors' songs and praises. This shows that the village has a strong sense of bloodline unity and a clear clan status.

With the development of society, the village of L, located next to a scenic area, has seen an increase in the number of tourists coming and going, the development of industries related to tourism services, and the further advancement of the market economy. The villagers' awareness of maintaining their interests has increased and conflicts of interest have gradually increased. The past reliance on the power of village cadres and the prestige of the village gentry to handle village affairs can no longer meet the needs of the current situation in the village. Based on the complexity of the village society, Village L has developed a good governance system to resolve the conflict between the feelings and laws of the villagers and the expression of their demands, i.e. the People's Talking Point system.

The People's Talking Point in Village L was established in April 2020 in an old and influential ancestral hall in the village. It is a place for the villagers of Village L to address traditional village issues and for daily recreation. The purpose of setting up the People's Talking Point is to allow villagers to express their opinions and demands in a "family talk" manner. The main person in charge is the old secretary of L Village who retired from the village office. His daily work is to listen to the villagers' opinions and demands and record them for feedback to his superiors, as well as coordinating and accounting for internal conflicts among the villagers. Most of the time the old secretary plays the role of a bystander, blending in with the collective activities of the villagers, not actively asking questions or interfering, and allowing the villagers to participate in village affairs in their leisure time.

3.2 Villagers' expression of public opinion: proactive participation for community empowerment

People's Talking Points first appeared in Shulan City, Jilin Province, and in 2021, Anhui Province vigorously promoted the construction of People's Talking Points, with Village L as an important pilot area. With the establishment of the People's Talking Points, villagers are encouraged to go to the People's Talking Points to participate in decisions on public affairs, ranging from the format of programmes held during festivals to the organisation and planning of the village as a whole. In addition, villagers can go to the People's Talking Point inside the clanhouse to express their needs regarding the construction of the village and to respond to the main conflicts that have arisen in the village recently, etc.

The community empowerment of the People's Talking Point is not only about encouraging group participation, but more importantly, the villagers' views and demands can be effectively addressed and dealt with in the process of participation and feedback, thus creating a strong level of trust in

the community and further stimulating the initiative of participation. Needs and problems are addressed while satisfying the reciprocal mechanism between villagers and village cadres on both sides of the participation, rules and regulations set by the people's speaking points, and collective deliberations guarantee that community empowerment is carried out smoothly. [Feels a little strange, should be punctuation used. Needs and problems are addressed while meeting the reciprocal mechanism between villagers and village cadres on both sides of the participation. The rules and regulations set by the people's talk points and collective deliberations also guarantee the smooth running of community empowerment].

Villager A runs a grocery shop in Village Z, which is his main source of income. As the scope and content of the development of the scenic area expanded and deepened, issues involving their own economic interests such as infrastructure construction and the division of paddy fields began to come to the fore. As the grocery shop mainly sells traditional agricultural tools and practical clothes, the consumers are the older villagers in the village, so the daily profit is small and can only maintain normal living expenses. However, the grocery shop is located in a scenic street and has a relatively good location, so the rent is constantly increasing, which to a certain extent affects the normal life of villagers A. After the establishment of the People's Talking Point, villager A discussed with other villagers through the People's Talking Point and gave feedback on his problems to the local village officials. The villagers were able to negotiate a rent reduction at the People's Talking Point, thus solving the difficulties of people like villager A. The effective resolution of problematic needs has further expanded the influence of the People's Talking Point, and villagers are gradually adapting to and enjoying the convenience of empowerment and actively expressing their demands and opinions.

3.3 Public opinion gathering by cadres: the dual flexible embedding of relationship + culture

3.3.1 Relational embedding

Fei Xiaotong pointed out in his *China in the Countryside* that rural society is still essentially a society dominated by acquaintances. Under the dual relationship of blood and local ties, "intimate groups" have been formed within the countryside. The maintenance of the "intimate group" relies on mutual indebtedness to each other [the mutual indebtedness of both sides]. In the long history of rural society, a unique system of rules and regulations has developed, but in all types of villages, 'favours' and 'face' have always been inseparable. The relationships that arise from the disparate patterns of traditional society are expressed through favours and face.

The main person in charge of the people's talk point in village L is the local secretary, who has presided over the village affairs for many years and is highly competent. As the village elder and mediator of the People's Talking Point, the old secretary is closely related to the villagers and has a kinship by blood. This relationship makes it possible for the old secretary to use his favours and face to collect public opinion and obtain the information he needs, while using his prestige to solve and deal with minor conflicts and disputes.

3.3.2 Cultural embedding

Along with the construction and development of villages, a village culture system with local characteristics is gradually formed under the influence of various factors such as villagers' consciousness, geographical environment and historical changes. The villagers living in the same space often have a unified cultural consensus that is deeply rooted in their bones, and village L is a typical traditional bloodline village, with clan shrines all over the place [] and an orderly hierarchy of elders and children. In order to meet the needs of economic development, most of the young people have gone out to work, and the village is dominated by the middle-aged and elderly. To a certain extent, this suggests that the governance of L village needs to be rooted in the cultural soil and to protect its cultural roots.

The culture of the ancestral shrine is one of the representatives of the local culture. The villagers not only see the clan shrine as a place for living and entertainment, but also hold it in high esteem

and with a sense of reassurance. By locating the people's talking point in the clanhouse, [both also], it is convenient for the villagers to express their views on the one hand, and at the same time, the villagers will deliberate on the content of their expressions and their own actions out of the preservation of the clanhouse and their common cultural values. In addition, as a native-born old secretary, he is already familiar with the village's customs and traditions. When collecting public opinion, the old secretary is able to stimulate villagers to express their views through cultural identity, thus obtaining effective information content.

3.4 Public Shrine: A Common Space for Expression and Collection

The expression and collection of public opinion is an interaction between the communicator and the recipient, but the dissemination of information cannot be achieved without the role of intermediaries. The traditional passive collection of information, such as villagers' letters and visits, or calling the police in case of conflicts within the village, has certain shortcomings. The lack of an effective feedback platform for villagers and the difficulty for village cadres to obtain public opinion information in an effective and timely manner will lead to the gradual intensification of some of the sources of conflict, which will eventually disrupt the village order and require the use of external forces to enforce solutions. The People's Talking Point has built a common space for the expression and collection of public opinion, in which village cadres can listen and observe, while villagers can freely express their ideas.

In traditional rural societies, the main way of disseminating information is through word of mouth. Villagers often gather in the public sphere under the trees, in the squares and in the pavilions after tea and dinner to obtain information through gossip. In the village of L, the interior of the ancestral hall is equipped with various recreational facilities and resting benches, making it the main place for local villagers to gossip. The talk often includes views on the village's recent policies, details of the villagers' internal conflicts, opinions on the construction of the village, and so on. The people in charge of the Talking Points can find out the needs of the people and collect hidden public opinion by exploring the details of the villagers' daily communication.

4. Summary and Reflection

The village talk point has opened up a channel for villagers to express their demands and for village cadres to collect public opinion, effectively meeting the needs of villagers' self-governance. Whether it is the main body of governance, the villager-based governance model, the flexible embedding or the building of a clan-based governance platform, all are based on the actual situation of the village, combined with local characteristics, to achieve the unity of good governance by cadres and villagers' autonomy. This community empowerment, flexible embedding and spatial construction approach to governance is also applicable to other places. In Anhui Province, the People's Talking Point is being promoted as a major initiative to expand the scope of the People's Talking Point, seeking to solve internal problems through the internal strength of the village, to inform public opinion, to speak to the people, and to continuously promote localised governance in the village.

As an important pilot area for the People's Talking Points, village L has now used the People's Talking Points to resolve more than 40 conflicts and disputes, which has greatly promoted social harmony in the village. However, the analysis of the People's Talking Point in this paper is mainly based on two three-day field surveys, and the deeper logic of its internal operation and the value of its universal experience still needs to be further explored. Therefore, this paper hopes to enrich the research methodology in the future, adopt ethnography to describe it in depth, identify its strengths and weaknesses, and strive to build a more complete and effective rural governance path and innovative rural governance model.

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