Activating elite motivation in community governance

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Abstract. Retrofitting elevators in old residential buildings is a typical project in urban community renewal, yet it often falls into a collective-action dilemma due to conflicting interests. Using the elevator-addition project in Caihong Subdistrict, Guangzhou, as a case, this study explores how to activate community elites' motivation to break this impasse. Through qualitative analysis, it proposes a threefold activation mechanism: (1) at the actor–structure level, build a polycentric governance network that integrates administrative, market, social, and elite forces to form a stratified action architecture; (2) at the institution–action level, design incentive-compatible rule instruments to lower coordination costs; and (3) at the value–interest level, combine quantified benefit assessments with moral incentives to generate a dual drive of instrumental (material) and value rationalities. The findings indicate that, under Party-building leadership, community elites' "sense of mission as Party members" and "neighborly sentiment" are the core drivers. By flexibly deploying both formal and informal strategies, these elites effectively foster consensus. The study offers theoretical insights and practical approaches for grassroots governance and recommends promoting the "Chinese path" to address collective-action challenges in urban renewal worldwide.

Keywords: community elites, community governance, elevator retrofitting

1. Introduction

As the basic unit of residents' daily life and the grassroots arena of social governance, urban communities play a crucial role in improving residents' well-being and the community environment through renewal and renovation. According to data released by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development in 2022, there are 170,000 old residential communities awaiting renovation nationwide, involving more than 42 million households. Among these, installing elevators in old residential buildings (hereinafter referred to as "elevator retrofitting") is a typical community micro-renewal project. It has the notable attributes of a quasi-public good: on the one hand, it features non-excludability in consumption (the entire building benefits), while on the other, it faces congestion in supply (lower-floor residents may be negatively affected). These attributes give rise to a dual dilemma in the supply process. First, there is the government-led dilemma: relying solely on public finance creates enormous fiscal pressure. Taking Guangzhou as an example, with a subsidy of 100,000 yuan per elevator, completing the retrofitting of 52,000 old residential buildings would require 5.2 billion yuan of fiscal expenditure—equivalent to 7.8% of the city's 2023 livelihood spending. Second, there is the market-failure dilemma: the profit-seeking nature of enterprises often clashes with the heterogeneous demands of residents. A survey conducted by an elevator company revealed that, without coordination, disagreements over cost-sharing schemes between high- and low-floor owners within the same building reached as high as 63%, resulting in a contract signing rate of less than 30%.

   This structural contradiction is particularly evident in Caihong Subdistrict. Located in Guangzhou's old urban area, 28.7% of its population is aged 60 or above—11 percentage points higher than the city average. Eighty percent of the residential buildings in its jurisdiction are 8–9-story walk-ups without elevators, and the difficulty faced by elderly residents in climbing stairs has become a pressing livelihood issue. Yet, in the past four years, Caihong Subdistrict has successfully retrofitted more than 100 elevators, with a success rate close to 90%. Its achievement did not rely on a larger fiscal package or more forceful administrative intervention, but rather on transforming a scattered group of retired Party members, enthusiastic residents, and skilled individuals into a continuously operating "elite engine." This transformation was made possible by a systematic mechanism that weaves together structure, institutions, and values. First, the subdistrict reshaped the topology of its governance network, enabling administrative, market, social, and elite actors to operate compatibly within the same polycentric network. Next, it designed a set of precise rules that lowered transaction costs, dispersed risks, and strengthened trust, thereby providing predictable incentives and guarantees for sustained elite participation. Finally, by anchoring both tangible benefits—such as property appreciation and improved mobility for the elderly—and intangible incentives—such as the Party members' sense of

mission and neighborly sentiment—within the same discourse, the subdistrict ensured that elites were willing to remain engaged even after resolving one economic issue, ready to tackle the next challenge. These three strands—structure, institutions, and values—interact and reinforce each other, constituting a complete solution to the collective-action dilemma.

In this process, community elites often serve as an informal leadership force, playing a vital role in fostering cooperation and triggering collective action [1]. Regardless of age, community elites who participate in decision-making, governance, and leadership are social or economic elites in their own right [2]. While existing research has identified the composition and functions of community elites, [3] as well as their potential negative effects, there remains a significant gap in understanding how to systematically activate their motivation for participation, design feasible practical pathways, and distill transferable successful experiences.

This study centers on the core question of how to effectively activate community elites' motivation for participating in community governance. Research suggests that elites tend to form exclusive identities and sustain access to resources and privileges through mechanisms such as rituals, symbolic cultural adaptation, preferential treatment, social networks, and insider knowledge [4]. Based on an in-depth case study of the elevator retrofitting project in Caihong Subdistrict, Guangzhou, and drawing on qualitative data including in-depth interviews, this paper proposes and elaborates a threefold framework for activating the motivation of community elites. The goal is to provide both theoretical insights and practical solutions for addressing collective-action dilemmas in the supply of quasi-public goods.

2. The mechanism for activating community Elites' motivation in governance: a threefold framework

Based on an in-depth analysis of the elevator retrofitting practices in Caihong Subdistrict, Guangzhou, this study finds that the effectiveness of community elites in overcoming collective-action dilemmas relies on a synergistic interplay of three mechanisms: actor–structure innovation, institution–action empowerment, and value–interest integration. The concept of "elites" first emerged in seventeenth-century France. Pareto was the first to define elites as "the whole of people who have special talents and display outstanding abilities in certain aspects or activities." [5] In the context of community governance, community elites play a crucial role through the coordinated effects of the three mechanisms mentioned above.

2.1. Actor–structure: reweaving neighborhood relations into a governance network

Rather than following the traditional bureaucratic command–obedience pathway, Caihong Subdistrict rewove originally loose neighborhood relations into a polycentric, high-density, and self-repairing governance network. At the core of this network is the Glasshouse Party–Mass Service Station, which radiates outward to fifteen community Party branches and 137 building-level Party groups. Although the service station covers only 120 square meters, it received 18,000 resident visits in the past year, becoming a "public living room" where information converges and community sentiment resonates. Within this service station, the subdistrict no longer issues directives in an administrative tone. Instead, it invites diverse actors—including elevator companies, legal advisors, retired engineers, and community doctors—into the same room. Using a roundtable approach, these actors collectively dissect technical details, funding schemes, and legal risks. This spatial design transforms the antagonistic triangle of "government–enterprise–residents" into a shared issue of "our building," thereby creating a natural stage for elites to step in.

More critically, the subdistrict has embedded elites into a structured governance process through a three-tiered penetrating architecture of "building leaders—community coordination groups—subdistrict task forces." Building leaders are often retired Party members or skilled individuals, who are the first to sense neighborhood sentiment and the most likely to have face-to-face persuasion opportunities. The community coordination group, led by the Party branch, brings together building leaders to facilitate cross-building experience exchange and mutual resource support. The subdistrict task force then steps back, focusing on policy interpretation, fiscal subsidies, and legal arbitration. Importantly, these three tiers are not strictly hierarchical but form a flexible and elastic relationship: when negotiations in a given building reach an impasse, the community coordination group immediately provides support; if legal disputes arise, the task force swiftly activates an arbitration mechanism. This "layered yet interconnected" network structure not only avoids the heavy fiscal burden of government monopoly but also overcomes the contracting deadlocks of full marketization. As a result, elites can consistently exert influence at the points closest to the problems—where their expertise is most effective.

2.2. Institution–action: safeguarding continuous elite participation with precise rules

No matter how tightly woven a governance network is, without a set of supporting rules that lower transaction costs, distribute risks, and strengthen trust, elites' enthusiasm will quickly be exhausted amid endless quarrels and repeated disputes. Caihong Subdistrict's second key experience was to refine seemingly trivial institutional details into a finely tuned toolbox that could sustain long-term negotiation. The first innovation lay in redesigning voting thresholds. The subdistrict adapted Article 278 of the

Civil Code—which requires an "absolute majority" (two-thirds of all owners)—into a "double two-thirds" variant: approval is granted as long as two-thirds of both property area and number of households participating in the vote agree. Compared to the previous absolute-majority rule of "two-thirds of all owners," this lowered negotiation costs by nearly 40%. For the highly sensitive issue of light obstruction compensation for lower-floor residents, the subdistrict introduced the "Caihong Cost-Sharing Model," which incorporates three variables—floor coefficient, floor area weight, and age adjustment—into a unified formula. Under this model, upper-floor residents bear 80% of the costs while lower-floor residents receive reasonable compensation. The calculated results are directly output through the "Caihong Elevator" mobile app, where any resident can enter their unit number and instantly see the amount payable. In this way, technical details and moral disputes are compressed into verifiable Arabic numerals.

To prevent building leaders from struggling alone with fund supervision, the subdistrict established transparent co-managed accounts, with every expenditure made public in real time via WeChat groups. To shield them from exhaustion when facing lawsuits, a legal arbitration task force was set up, which properly handled nine lawsuits within two years, including that of No. 27 Zhoumen Street. To ensure they still had recourse when mediation failed, the subdistrict institutionalized monthly "Elevator Night Schools" to provide training in negotiation techniques, psychological intervention, and technical Q&A. Fiscal subsidies acted as a safety rope—while the maximum subsidy of 100,000 yuan per elevator did not cover all costs, it was sufficient to reassure hesitant residents that "the government has not withdrawn." This systematic support chain—linking policy support, conflict mediation, and capacity-building—transformed elites from solitary "lone warriors" into institutionally backed "project managers," significantly reducing the coordination costs and potential risks required for collective action.

2.3. Value–interest: calculating economic and emotional accounts on the same ledger

No matter how sophisticated the structures and institutions, if they fail to address elites' deeper value-oriented needs, they cannot generate sustainable motivation. Caihong Subdistrict's third key experience was to stitch together quantifiable economic benefits, such as property appreciation and improved mobility for the elderly, with intangible spiritual gains, such as Party members' sense of mission and neighborly sentiment, within the same network of meaning. Building leaders first organized retired engineers to compile an Elevator Benefit Assessment Report, which stated that "elderly residents' travel efficiency increased by 67% and property values rose by 8–12%." These data conveyed to opponents that "this is not merely the private gain of upper-floor residents but shared public benefits for the entire building." They then translated these figures into warm stories at Double Ninth Festival tea gatherings: "The elderly lady upstairs can finally go downstairs by herself to buy groceries, and the gentleman downstairs has seen the value of his school-district apartment rise." In this way, cold technical language was transformed into a tangible narrative of neighborly mutual aid. For retired Party members, elevator retrofitting symbolized not only the physical vertical movement within stairwells but also a renewed elevation of personal Party cultivation and life meaning. For technically skilled elites, the cost-calculation expertise once applied to corporate bidding became a new stage for serving neighbors and realizing self-worth. Economic accounts and emotional accounts were repeatedly overlaid on the same sheet of paper, ultimately motivating elites to stay engaged after settling the "small accounts" in order to continue addressing the "big accounts."

3. Discussion

Advancing the three main threads—subject–structure, institution–action, and value–interest—one step further, it becomes clear that Caihong Subdistrict's success in installing over one hundred elevators within four years, with a success rate approaching 90 percent, was not simply a matter of "strength in numbers." Rather, it was the outcome of a precise and sustained process of systemic evolution. At the outset, the subdistrict confronted a neighborhood network torn apart by three layers of historical legacies: the danwei system of the planned economy era, the fragmentation of property rights after housing reform, and the rapid population mobility of the commercial housing era. Within a single building, there might be retired colleagues from the same workshop, young tenants commuting to jobs in Zhujiang New Town, and "migratory landlords" who had entrusted their properties to agencies and rarely appeared in person. To reweave such a fractured web into a governance structure capable of sustaining collective action required more than emotional appeals; it demanded a form of "topological reconstruction" operating simultaneously across four dimensions—space, identity, information, and resources.

First was the reconstruction of space. The Glasshouse Party–Mass Service Station was originally just a small structure of less than 120 square meters, built by the subdistrict on an idle corner lot. Yet its spatial design carried subtle intent: the entrance opened onto the central garden of the residential compound, while floor-to-ceiling windows dissolved the aura of authority typical of government offices. Inside, there was no counter—only an oval wooden table seating twenty, with a pot of freshly brewed jasmine tea always set out. When retired Party member Dong Yide first brought a lower-floor resident from No. 13 Zhoumen Street into the station, suspicion was still running high. But as an elevator company technician projected a shading-simulation program onto the tabletop, and retired engineer Old Chen calculated the sun angle on the spot, the previously tense atmosphere quickly eased. The visualization of space transformed abstract conflicts of interest into technical details that could be

verified on the spot. Equally important, this small room also functioned as an "information exchange." The subdistrict pinned on a cork wall the duty rosters of fifteen community Party branches, the contact information of thirty-seven building leaders, and QR codes linking to the latest subsidy policies. Anyone stepping inside could find the missing "puzzle piece" they needed within five minutes. A year later, a row of plastic stools appeared spontaneously outside the station. In the evenings, elderly residents often sat fanning themselves while waiting for building leaders to "finish work." The sociality of space was thus further amplified.

The reconstruction of identity followed. The subdistrict Party committee realized that for community elites to truly be "embedded" in the governance network, they needed a third type of identity—somewhere between "official representative" and "ordinary neighbor." This identity had to carry the authority of institutional endorsement while retaining the trust rooted in neighborhood ties. Thus, the role of "building leader" was formally written into the Caihong Subdistrict Elevator Installation Work Guidelines, with three supporting mechanisms. First, "identity disclosure": each building leader was issued a gilded work card with a QR code that, when scanned, displayed their Party membership or technical qualifications. Second, "provision of tools": the subdistrict printed standardized One Household, One File templates requiring the recording of 23 indicators, including floor area, household composition, reasons for opposition, and acceptable forms of compensation. This transformed word-of-mouth gossip into comparable data. Third, "right of exit": if a building leader could no longer serve due to health or family reasons, they could file with the coordination group and hand over seamlessly to an alternate, avoiding situations where "one person steps down and the whole building stalls." Institutionalizing identity did not turn elites into "quasi-officials." Instead, by clarifying boundaries of responsibility and authority, it allowed them to interact more confidently with neighbors. For example, during litigation at No. 27 Zhoumen Street, lower-floor owners were still willing to accept mediation from retired judge Old Zhou, precisely because the words "Caihong Subdistrict Legal Volunteer Group" printed on his work card seamlessly wove together personal prestige and institutional credibility.

The reconstruction of information relied on digital tools to replace and amplify the traditional "word-of-mouth" chain. The subdistrict's "Caihong Elevator" mini-app was initially designed merely as a cost calculator, but through iterative upgrades it gradually evolved into an integrated platform encompassing a policy database, case repository, negotiation records, and fund flows. Its most ingenious feature was the progress visualization function: the installation process for each elevator was broken down into six nodes—will collection, design, cost-sharing, contract signing, construction permit, and final inspection. As each step was completed, its corresponding icon turned from gray to green. When building leader Dong Yide shared a screenshot of this interface in the No. 13 building's WeChat group, three households that had previously remained undecided suddenly realized they were the only "red dots" left in the entire building. The psychological pressure proved decisive: all three signed within three days. More significantly, the app preserved over three thousand online negotiation records, becoming a form of "live data" for policy refinement. Analysis revealed that disputes over sunlight obstruction accounted for as much as 41 percent of conflicts. In response, the subdistrict introduced third-party daylight simulation agencies the following year to issue reports in advance, which subsequently reduced such disputes by 27 percent.

The reconstruction of resources went beyond the traditional "government subsidy + enterprise pre-financing" dual structure. Fiscal subsidies were divided into three installments—30% upon contract signing, 30% at construction commencement, and 40% upon completion and inspection. This arrangement both eased corporate cash flow pressures and reassured residents that "the government is truly putting money on the table." At the same time, a "community micro-fund" was introduced, allowing homeowners to contribute part of their compensation into a common pool for subsequent public projects such as corridor beautification or handrail replacement. What had once been a one-off transaction was thus transformed into a sustainable form of public accumulation. Most striking was the introduction of a "time bank" mechanism. Each time a building leader successfully mediated a dispute, they accrued "service hours" that could later be redeemed for community services such as household help or medical accompaniment. After persuading the last holdout household in Lihua Building, retired Party member Old Liang had accumulated 27 hours in his account. Smiling, he told subdistrict staff: "When I can no longer manage the stairs myself, these hours will get me a young volunteer to carry me downstairs for some sunshine." In this way, resources expanded beyond monetary form to constitute a multidimensional structure of credit, services, and emotional reciprocity.

Once the fourfold reconstructions of space, identity, information, and resources were in place, the institutional–action design gained a practical "operating interface." The subdistrict consolidated previously fragmented functions—approval, mediation, subsidy distribution, and training—into a systemic support chain of policy assistance, conflict mediation, and capacity-building. Yet every institutional element retained flexible "interfaces," enabling elites to combine them according to the specific circumstances of each building. The "double two-thirds" voting rule exemplifies this. Ostensibly, it translates Article 278 of the Civil Code, which requires an "absolute majority," into a threshold of "two-thirds of participating voters." In practice, it embedded a layered unlocking mechanism: when both area and headcount reached the two-thirds mark, fiscal subsidies were automatically pre-approved; if headcount was sufficient but floor area fell short, a "multi-unit owner" mediation procedure was triggered; if floor area sufficed but headcount lagged, a "migratory landlord" remote-voting function was activated. Rules thus ceased to be rigid legal clauses and instead became adaptive, learnable, and evolvable "living institutions."

The deepening of the value–interest dimension lay in the ability of elites to reconcile financial and emotional accounts on a single ledger, turning potential trade-offs into mutual reinforcement. Building leaders discovered that emphasizing property

appreciation alone heightened the "sense of deprivation" among lower-floor residents. Instead, they reframed the issue: "elevator access improves mobility efficiency for seniors by 67%" became "Auntie Zhang downstairs can now go out twice a day and help the whole building collect parcels." Abstract public benefits were translated into tangible neighborhood reciprocity. Similarly, Party membership was transformed into the performative act of "I'll sign first," while technical elites converted their corporate cost-accounting expertise into the moral capital of "helping neighbors save money." More subtly, the subdistrict embedded personal achievement into collective memory through ceremonial activities such as the "community governance star" awards, Mid-Autumn communal banquets, and elevator ribbon-cutting ceremonies. In this way, elites received social recognition while reinforcing their emotional bond with the community. On the day the elevator in Lihua Building was completed, retired engineer Old Chen was surrounded by more than twenty elderly neighbors as he cut the ribbon. Later, he wrote in his diary: "Back in the work unit, I designed big machines. Today, I designed a small elevator. But this feeling of being needed is more fulfilling than winning a science and technology award."

In sum, the topological reconstruction of subject–structure provided the arenas in which elites could deploy their skills; the precision design of institution–action lowered the costs and risks of sustained participation; and the meaning integration of value–interest elevated economic incentives into dual drivers of emotion and mission. These three threads interwove and reinforced one another, ultimately generating within Caihong Subdistrict a form of self-replicating community capacity. From the initial 31 retired Party members who served as building leaders to today's 17 "Elevator Assistance Teams" and more than 270 cross-building volunteers, elite motivation has ceased to be a project-based mobilization and has instead become a durable engine embedded in everyday governance.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that activating the motivation of community elites to overcome collective action dilemmas in the installation of elevators in old residential communities essentially lies in the organic linkage and synergistic interaction among the structural field (actor–structure level), rule-based instruments (institution–action level), and meaning system (value–interest level). Within the unique context of grassroots governance in China, community elites exhibit a distinctive dual-drive characteristic combining "party mission consciousness" and "neighborhood sentiment." The practice of Caihong Subdistrict demonstrates that Party-led governance can effectively transform abundant social capital into substantive governance capacity. In their actions, elites display a high degree of flexibility, adeptly applying formal rules to resolve conflicts while skillfully employing informal strategies, thereby achieving an organic integration of "law, reason, and emotion."

The "triple-motivation activation mechanism" framework constructed in this study deepens the understanding of how community elites function within grassroots governance. Specifically, it integrates structural, institutional, and value dimensions into a comprehensive analytical model, thereby enriching the application of collective action theory and social capital theory in the context of urban community governance during China's transition period. Based on these findings, several policy implications are highlighted. At the municipal level, establishing a community elite talent database to systematically identify and incorporate retired experts, committed Party members, and other key governance actors is recommended. At the subdistrict level, the development of digital negotiation toolkits—such as online cost-sharing calculation systems—can improve the efficiency of multi-party coordination, as illustrated by the case of No. 30, Zhaomen West Street. At the community level, institutionalized systems of spiritual incentives are advised to transform spontaneous expressions of social recognition into sustainable honor-based resources.

It should be noted that this study does not differentiate in depth among economic, political, and social elites regarding their potential variations in activation pathways. Future research could integrate elite typology theory with methods such as social network analysis and big data techniques to explore the topological structures of interactions among different elite types and their impact on the motivation activation mechanism, thus yielding more fine-grained insights. The "Party-led embedded community elite self-governance" model explored in Caihong Subdistrict, with its core triple-linkage mechanism, holds significant value for wider promotion. It is suggested that this innovative paradigm—which effectively integrates formal institutions with informal governance forces—be incorporated into higher-level urban–rural community service system planning, thereby contributing a replicable "Chinese Approach" to addressing the collective action dilemmas commonly encountered in urban renewal processes worldwide.

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