

Exploring the Optimization Path of Rural Governance in the Perspective of “Three Governance Integrations”

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Abstract: With the implementation of the new era’s rural revitalization policy, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China has explicitly set the goal of building a modern rural governance system, emphasizing the integration of self-governance, rule of law, and moral governance in the grassroots social governance system. Rural governance plays a crucial role in grassroots governance, serving as the foundation and key to social governance, and it holds significant importance in advancing the national governance system and governance capacity building. Therefore, this paper discusses the issues in rural governance from the perspective of “Three Governance Integrations”. Currently, the pain points of grassroots governance are particularly evident in three aspects: the inadequate effectiveness of rural self-governance, the hindered operation of rural rule of law, and the limited role of rural moral governance. Based on this, the paper innovatively proposes three solutions: deepening villagers’ self-governance, strengthening rural rule of law, and enhancing rural moral governance. By consolidating the foundation of rural governance systems, enhancing safeguard mechanisms, and establishing a robust support system, further development and improvement of the rural governance system in the perspective of “Three Governance Integrations” can be achieved.

Keywords: “Three Governance Integrations”, rural governance, rural governance system, optimization path

1. Introduction

Rural governance, often referred to as the “last mile” of grassroots governance, plays a pivotal role in grassroots governance and is of paramount importance in advancing the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity. With the implementation of rural revitalization policies, there is an urgent need for the establishment of a modern rural governance system that seamlessly integrates self-governance, the rule of law, and moral governance. However, traditional grassroots governance models in rural areas face challenges such as low decision-making efficiency due to one-way government management, imperfect market mechanisms limiting resource allocation flexibility, and imbalanced development of social organizations affecting citizen participation and self-governance capabilities [1]. In recent years, the Party and the state have formulated various policies aimed at addressing prominent issues in rural development. According to the requirements of the 2022 No. 1 Central Committee Document of the Communist Party of

China, the rural governance system should be strengthened, combining Party-led self-governance, the rule of law, and moral governance. This rural governance model, rooted in self-governance, safeguarded by the rule of law, and deepened by moral governance, is referred to as “Three Governance Integrations”. This model exhibits remarkable “comprehensiveness” and demonstrates a “multiplier effect” where “ $1+1+1>3$.” Therefore, researching how to optimize rural governance elements, improve governance efficiency and service levels in the perspective of “Three Governance Integrations”, has become a current research focus and practical necessity.

This project adopts the “Three Governance Integrations” as its research perspective. It combines the current domestic and international research status with the national context, utilizing a comprehensive approach that integrates normative research and empirical research methods. The project examines the progress and governance of China’s rural governance model reform, explores the mechanisms of rural governance systems concerning farmers’ land property rights in the context of “land contractual rights, management rights, and benefit rights separation,” attempts to propose pathways for legal improvement, and promotes the modernization and professionalization of rural governance through the rule of law. This endeavor contributes to rural revitalization, fostering common prosperity in rural areas.

2. Literature Review

In the field of “rural governance,” foreign scholars have generated rich theoretical achievements and gradually developed distinctive rural governance models [2]. In practice, Germany has developed an incremental governance model as villages undergo continuous updates, while South Korea has established a cooperative model that combines government support with farmer development. On the theoretical front, scholars have studied rural governance model innovation and governance transformation. In the United States, Mc Ginnis proposed that a polycentric governance model is highly effective, emphasizing the importance of enhancing government and citizen collaboration, continuously improving institutional mechanisms, and strengthening internal team coordination as the foundation for constructing a healthy political ecosystem [3]. Brunori & Rossi, based on their analysis of rural governance cases in Italy, identified that one of the key factors for successful rural development strategies in rural areas is the establishment of appropriate governance models, with the primary outcomes being smooth communication between public and private organizations and the effective integration of objectives and policies [4]. Schluter RG’s research highlighted the Argentine government’s introduction of a national rural development strategy, implementing nationwide rural poverty alleviation plans through various measures to enhance agricultural production efficiency, improve rural environments and infrastructure, and enhance the quality of farmers’ production and lives to promote rural governance [5]. Afsharipour et al., based on rural policies, analyzed the importance of government roles and social characteristics in shaping rural regulatory and governance models through semi-structured interviews [6].

Domestic scholars have conducted extensive research on rural governance models and the selection of optimization pathways for “Three Governance Integrations.” Yu Keping believes that China’s rural governance models mainly include: government-led governance from top to bottom, governance under the participation of various organizational levels, and governance guided by certain capable elites [7]. Liang Ji-yi, starting from rural governance models, elucidated the dilemmas in rural governance subjects and governance systems in the new era [8]. He Xiaoya, Chen Yakai, and Zhang Qian analyzed the dilemmas and pathway optimization issues of new rural elites’ participation in rural governance from a perspective of diverse subjects [9]. Zuo Ting and Li Zhuo, from the perspective of diverse subjects, proposed the construction of a rural governance system based on self-governance, guided by the rule of law, and characterized by moral governance, transforming from traditional single management to multi-cooperative governance in their paper

titled “Integration of Self-Governance, Rule of Law, and Moral Governance: Constructing a New Pattern of Effective Rural Governance” [10]. Huang Bochen, from multiple aspects such as grassroots party building, rural self-governance, moral standards, rule of law awareness, and infrastructure, analyzed the dilemmas and solutions for current rural governance elements.

Foreign scholars have conducted research on rural governance earlier and have formed a comprehensive theoretical system. They have gradually developed rural governance models with distinctive local characteristics, which provide valuable references for China’s rural governance. In contrast, domestic scholars have conducted research on rural governance slightly later. However, in recent years, they have gradually explored governance theories with Chinese characteristics based on the national context. Nevertheless, there are still some shortcomings in the overall research on the “Three Governance Integrations” issue in rural governance, mainly manifested in the following aspects: firstly, many scholars’ research on the optimization pathways of rural governance focuses on individual factors or aspects of optimization. Secondly, previous domestic research on “Three Governance Integrations” has been more inclined to specific regional impact effects, with a single methodology and conclusions that possess certain limitations and specificity. Thirdly, whether the theoretical exploration of the optimization pathways of rural governance elements in the perspective of “Three Governance Integrations” is applicable in practice remains a question to be addressed. This paper employs literature analysis, systematic analysis, and comparative analysis methods, combined with the actual situation of rural China, to systematically explore the factors of self-governance, moral governance, and the rule of law in rural governance systems, forming a rural governance theory with Chinese characteristics.

3. Challenges in Rural Governance from the Perspective of “Three Governance Integrations”

3.1. Weak Foundation of “Self-Governance”

First and foremost, the rural self-governance entities lack inherent motivation, which hinders the development of villagers’ self-governance. Due to a decrease in rural population, some educated young people are more inclined to work and live in cities, leading to insufficient attention to rural development and governance. This phenomenon has resulted in “village-less” areas in some rural regions, severely impacting the normal functioning of villagers’ self-governance. This is particularly evident in the context of the “Four Difficulties” problem: 1. Difficulty in convening village meetings: Population loss makes it difficult to form effective participation groups. 2. Resolutions of villagers’ congress: The legitimacy and representative will of the delegates are questioned, leading to decreased acceptance of delegate decisions by villagers. 3. Limited public participation in village affairs: Lack of human resources support results in low levels of villager participation in decision-making. 4. Effective oversight of village committees: Supervision of village committees by villagers faces certain difficulties.

Secondly, insufficient participation by villagers has adverse effects on the effectiveness of villagers’ self-governance. On one hand, rural “hollowing out” results in a “spatial absence” of villager participation, as the willingness and capacity for self-governance are limited due to population decline. On the other hand, the prevailing notion is that “rural governance is primarily the responsibility of the government,” which leads some villagers to lack a profound understanding of the importance and initiative of self-governance. Furthermore, villager participation in self-governance tends to be formalized, lacking genuine democratic engagement. In some areas, villager participation in self-governance often boils down to superficial elections and voting, lacking effective democratic procedures, thereby limiting the depth and breadth of villager participation.

Finally, the increasing trend of administrative control in village-level self-governing organizations is a negative factor affecting the effectiveness of rural self-governance. Within the framework and practice of grassroots self-governance systems, the degree of alignment between state power and the primary needs of villagers is a crucial indicator of rural governance capacity. This is particularly evident in the question of whether administrative authority and autonomy can jointly serve the public interest of the people. Village-level self-governance should not be subordinate to state administrative power. However, in practice, excessive involvement of township governments in rural governance often results in a lack of independence and autonomy for self-governing organizations that should represent the interests of villagers and be centered on villagers. This significantly hampers villager self-governance.

3.2. Inadequate Legal Safeguards for the “Rule of Law”

The Fourth Plenary Session of the Eighteenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China explicitly stated that innovative social governance must better utilize the leading and regulatory role of the rule of law [11]. However, there are three main issues in the operation of rural rule of law: an incomplete legislative system, a low degree of legalization in law enforcement mechanisms, and a weak sense of law-abiding among villagers.

In terms of legislation, the legal framework for rural governance is still incomplete, leading to a series of challenges. On one hand, many regions do not prioritize “soft law” (informal legal norms) and fail to enact written regulations such as village rules and regulations. This results in a weak legal foundation for rural self-governance, as it cannot provide clear norms and constraints, undermining the legal basis of rural self-governance. On the other hand, even in areas where relatively comprehensive village rules and regulations have been formulated, there are implementation issues. Many village rules and regulations are not genuinely applied in the process of rural governance, remaining merely on paper without practicality or operability, failing to integrate into the actual operation of rural governance.

In terms of law enforcement, there is a problem with the low degree of legalization in law enforcement mechanisms, primarily manifesting in both governance subjects and governance objects. Concerning governance subjects, excessive intervention by township governments in rural governance restricts the space for villager self-governance, gradually turning villager self-governance into an administrative process, leading to unclear rights and responsibilities among rural governance subjects. As for governance objects, there is an incongruence between formal legal norms (hard law) and informal norms (soft law). In the execution process, there are two extreme situations: on one hand, insufficient enforcement of binding regulations results in some regulations not being fully implemented; on the other hand, soft law often remains superficial in practice, failing to exert the necessary normative and guiding influence.

In terms of law-abiding behavior, there is a weak sense of the rule of law in rural governance. Influenced by the traditional cultural atmosphere in rural areas, the legal awareness of rural governance subjects is relatively low, leading to deviations from legal norms and regulations in practical operations and a lack of a strong sense of law-abiding behavior. Furthermore, due to the long-standing influence of traditional customs and ways of thinking, rural governance subjects have a relatively low understanding of and emphasis on the rule of law.

3.3. Insufficient Support for “Moral Governance”

Firstly, the inadequacy of moral governance resources in rural governance has, to a certain extent, weakened the effectiveness of moral governance in rural areas. Moral governance, as the foundation of rural governance, requires ample resources for support and implementation. However, there is

currently a lack of sufficient moral governance resources in rural governance. On one hand, the economic transformation in rural areas has led to the erosion of collectivist values, as the economic foundation that supported these values has weakened. This shift has seen the rise of individualism and utilitarianism, diminishing the influence of moral governance principles in rural governance. Additionally, the reduction in public spaces in rural areas reflects the inadequacy of moral governance resources. With the modernization of rural development and changes in lifestyles, many traditional rural public spaces have gradually diminished, resulting in fewer public activities. This has made the dissemination and cultivation of moral governance principles more challenging, leading to a gradual loss of public rural spirit.

Secondly, there is a lack of reward and punishment mechanisms in village rules and regulations. In many rural areas, village rules and regulations often do not explicitly specify the measures and criteria for rewarding and punishing violations. This is reflected in four aspects: the lack of a sound reward mechanism, an imperfect punishment mechanism, insufficient enforcement, and a lack of publicity and education. This lack of clarity in regulating villagers' behavior makes it difficult to establish an effective self-restraint mechanism. An inadequate reward mechanism limits the enthusiasm and initiative of villagers to participate in rural governance, an imperfect punishment mechanism further weakens the binding power of village rules and regulations, insufficient enforcement leads to recurring violations, and a lack of publicity and education restricts villagers' awareness and understanding of village rules and regulations, hindering their effective implementation.

Finally, the weakening of moral governance forces in rural governance also affects the effectiveness of moral governance in rural areas. In rural governance activities, the widespread participation of local elites (known as "xiangxian") helps activate the system of villager self-governance, promotes the integration of "self-governance, rule of law, and moral governance," [12] and establishes an effective regulatory mechanism linking national power with grassroots society. This enhances mutual trust and resource sharing [13] between the two sides and promotes the modernization of rural governance through measures such as optimizing grassroots governance systems and increasing the level of villager organization. However, the phenomenon of rural "hollowing out" has resulted in the loss of many local elites, who play a crucial role in maintaining social order and preserving rural culture. The intrinsic motivation for local elites to participate in rural governance is also lacking due to the absence of a symbiotic community of interests with villagers [14]. This has made rural governance more challenging and complex.

4. Perfection Path of Rural Governance in the Perspective of "Three Governance Integration"

4.1. Deepening Villager Autonomy to Strengthen the Foundation of Rural Governance

Firstly, it is essential to effectively promote rural modernization and adopt multiple measures to address the constraints of "hollowing out" on villager autonomy. On one hand, rural areas should vigorously promote economic development by fully utilizing local agricultural and tourism resources. Efforts should be made to develop and improve distinctive modern agricultural systems and modern tourism mechanisms, raising the living standards of rural residents. Simultaneously, infrastructure construction should be enhanced to improve rural transportation, communication, water resources, and other basic conditions, enhancing the quality of life and work efficiency for villagers. On the other hand, rural education and cultural development should be emphasized to elevate the quality of education among villagers and preserve and inherit excellent rural culture, providing strong cultural support for villager autonomy.

Secondly, an organizational safeguard system should be established, centered around grassroots

party organizations, to construct a diversified governance mechanism. To optimize rural governance systems, it is crucial to improve the power structure in rural governance [15]. Specifically, grassroots party organizations should play a central role and act as leaders. Through a diversified governance mechanism, various stakeholders should be encouraged to participate in rural governance. This includes strengthening the organizational and leadership capabilities of grassroots party organizations, enhancing their authority and influence in rural governance, and establishing a diversified governance mechanism where the Party committee leads, the village committee guides, and social organizations participate. This collaboration will strengthen cooperation between village-level organizations and various stakeholders, creating a balance of power. Drawing from the experience of Tongxiang, Zhejiang, it's possible to establish a "Democratic Council" of villagers actively engaged in providing suggestions for village affairs. Furthermore, non-profit and service-oriented grassroots civil organizations, such as legal associations and volunteer service associations, can be developed and nurtured. This will create a diversified grassroots governance model to promote effective villager participation in governance.

Finally, it is necessary to mobilize villagers' enthusiasm for active participation in village governance and fully leverage their role as the main body in villager autonomy. The advantage of "Three Governance Integration" in rural governance lies in its ability to maximize the mobilization of the masses, safeguard citizens' rights to participate in public affairs management, and open new avenues for expressing legitimate demands, thereby expanding channels for rural democratic representation. While promoting the improvement of the villager autonomy system, it is essential to facilitate the realization of the goal of self-management, self-service, self-education, and self-supervision through villager autonomy. On one hand, in today's rapidly developing digital era in China, utilizing mass media's unique advantages in rural governance can help awaken villagers' democratic consciousness and encourage them to actively participate in villager autonomy. On the other hand, it is crucial to meet the diverse demands of the masses, ensuring that "everything has a response, and every matter has a solution." This will uphold villagers' sense of ownership and their enthusiasm for participating in rural governance. Additionally, strengthening publicity and education about villager autonomy is necessary to enhance villagers' awareness and capabilities in self-governance. Moreover, it's important to fully harness the role of social organizations and professionals, forming a multi-participation pattern in villager autonomy to ensure villager participation.

4.2. Strengthening Rural Rule of Law for Enhanced Rural Governance Assurance

Firstly, it is necessary to strengthen legislative efforts in the field of rural governance and establish a comprehensive legal framework for rural governance. This involves establishing and improving relevant legal systems for rural governance, with a particular focus on regulations related to rural land management, villager autonomy, rural environmental protection, and other aspects. Efforts should be made to intensify legislative work at the grassroots level, fully utilize the role of local People's Congresses in local legislation, and utilize mechanisms for legislative contact points. In accordance with the actual conditions of local rural governance, specific and tailored laws, regulations, rules, and normative documents should be formulated to ensure the legality, standardization, and operability of rural governance. Furthermore, it is essential to promote awareness and training on the rural legal system to enhance the legal consciousness and legal literacy of rural cadres and villagers, providing legal safeguards for rural governance.

Secondly, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between rural rule of law's subjects and objects and enhance the degree of legal systematization in rural governance mechanisms. This should be done while adhering to a problem-oriented approach to address the inconsistencies between the subjects and objects of rural rule of law. For the subjects of rural governance, there

should be an emphasis on strengthening the legal consciousness and legal literacy of village-level organizations and Party members, improving the scientific and legal decision-making in rural governance. For the objects of rural governance, efforts should focus on protecting the rights and interests of villagers, enhancing their legal awareness and awareness of their rights to ensure fairness and democracy in rural governance. Additionally, it is necessary to strengthen legal supervision and accountability to ensure the effective implementation of rural governance mechanisms.

Lastly, region-specific “Legal Culture in Rural Areas” campaigns should be conducted to create a favorable legal atmosphere for rural governance. To foster a conducive legal atmosphere for rural governance, it is crucial to strengthen legal propaganda and education. Under the guidance of Xi Jinping’s thought on the rule of law, a rule of law culture should be promoted in rural areas, where “everyone abides by the law.” To achieve this goal, various forms of legal education, such as lectures on the Civil Code, mock trials, legal small theaters, and more, can be organized to teach villagers about the law, increase their legal literacy, build trust in the legal system, and integrate the law into their daily lives. Continuous efforts should be made to inform villagers about the rule of law’s characteristics, advantages, and achievements in rural governance to stimulate their enthusiasm and sense of responsibility for actively participating in rural governance. Additionally, the construction of legal propaganda and education teams should be reinforced, and professional personnel should be trained to improve the targeted and effective nature of legal propaganda and education, ensuring that the concepts of the rule of law are deeply rooted and widely disseminated.

4.3. Strengthening Rural Moral Governance to Establish Solid Support for Rural Governance

Firstly, it is essential to enrich the supply of moral governance resources in rural governance, emphasizing the preservation and utilization of excellent traditional cultural resources in rural areas, thus fostering a positive atmosphere for moral governance in rural areas. On one hand, there should be continuous efforts to expand the content of moral governance in rural areas. Utilizing modern technology, traditional rural culture can be integrated with modern rural governance, allowing for innovative utilization of traditional culture and expanding the moral governance content in rural areas. For example, in Ninglang County, where multiple ethnic groups including Yi, Han, Zhuang, Bai, and Mosuo reside, each ethnic group has created a brilliant culture with characteristics unique to the Xiaoliangshan region, providing the foundation and conditions for developing a rural values system with local characteristics in Ninglang County. On the other hand, there should be a focus on moral education for rural residents, guiding them to establish correct values and behavioral norms, enhancing their sense of moral responsibility and social ethics. Moreover, support from organizations and social forces should be strengthened to provide necessary resources and platforms for moral governance in rural areas, creating a favorable moral governance atmosphere. The establishment and improvement of village libraries, rural reading rooms, village history museums, cultural lecture halls, cultural squares, cultural and sports activity rooms, and other resources should be continuously enhanced. These resources should guide villagers in conducting autonomous, positive, and culturally uplifting activities. Additionally, the development of the modern cultural industry and the cultivation of innovative cultural talents should be promoted.

Secondly, it is crucial to establish a reward and punishment mechanism in village regulations and contracts to enhance moral governance in rural areas. Moral governance requires standardized institutional regulations. This includes the periodic updating of positive incentives, such as recognizing virtuous acts, and establishing punitive mechanisms, including conducting ideological education for those intentionally causing neighbor disputes. Taking the example of Yidu City in Hubei Province’s “Family Civilization and Integrity Archives” system, it employs a point-based

evaluation system that covers five categories of bonus items, including heroic acts, and 31 types of uncivilized behaviors that disrupt public order. The aim is to establish a good social model at the grassroots level in rural communities.

Lastly, it is essential to nurture the moral governance subjects in rural governance and effectively enhance their strength. The formation of volunteer service teams, civilized propaganda teams, and other initiatives should be undertaken to engage rural Party members and cadres, moral role models, and new village elites in the new era's civilized practice and propaganda teams. By classifying services based on rural production and cultural needs, a "menu-style" service can be provided to villagers, improving the timeliness and relevance of activities, ensuring that the masses receive genuine education, benefits, and real benefits, and continuously deepening the activities of civilized practice in the new era. Efforts should be made to educate and train rural leadership cadres in moral governance, focusing on cultivating their moral consciousness and behavioral norms, making them role models and leaders in rural governance. At the same time, the awareness and autonomy of rural residents should be actively nurtured, encouraging them to actively participate in the management and decision-making of rural affairs, achieving shared governance and development in rural governance. Furthermore, efforts should be made to nurture social organizations and community forces, promoting the development and growth of the main forces participating in moral governance, and achieving collaborative moral progress through the concerted efforts of multiple parties.

5. Conclusion

This paper, through the study of the optimization path of rural governance under the perspective of "integration of the three governance," addresses issues such as the unsatisfactory effect of rural self-governance, the inefficient operation of rural legal governance, and the weak role of rural moral governance in the rural governance system. It proposes three solutions: deepening village self-governance, strengthening rural legal governance, and promoting rural moral governance. Deepening village self-governance serves to solidify the foundation of the rural governance system, enhancing residents' awareness and capacity to participate in decision-making. Strengthening rural legal governance aims to establish and improve legal mechanisms, effectively safeguarding rural order and social stability. Focusing on rural moral governance can elevate the moral quality of residents and promote the formation of a virtuous social atmosphere. Through the implementation of these solutions, the rural governance system under the perspective of "integration of the three governance" can be further improved, driving the development and progress of rural society. It provides sustainable support for rural governance, promotes rural governance towards a healthier, more orderly, and harmonious direction, and realizes the sound development of the rural social governance system and the sustainable development of rural revitalization.

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