

Elite Participation's Path on Rural Governance: A Case Study in China

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Abstract. As an essential part of national governance, rural governance is directly related to the modernization of the country. Under the background of the new era, as an important backbone of rural governance, the "rural elite" play a particularly significant role. Given that, this paper analyzes the self-assessment of comprehensive quality of rural elites by introducing the Entropy-TOPSIS method. Then from the four dimensions of institutional foundation, role perception, public expectation and external thrust, we construct a Structural Equation Model (SEM) for path analysis to explore how elites participate in rural governance and major influencing factors. The results show that with continuous improvement of the institutional foundation, the public would hold higher expectation for rural elites. Besides, the improvement of external thrust and the creation of a good external environment can be potential triggers for elites to play a positive role in rural governance. We believe that our results are of great theoretical and practical significance for accelerating the modernization of rural governance system and national governance capacity and realizing favorable governance in rural areas.

Keywords: Rural Elites, Rural Governance Effect, Entropy-TOPSIS Method, Structural Equation Model (SEM).

1. Introduction

Urbanization process has accelerated the decline of traditional villages and the local culture, which has made traditional country hard to adapt and further lead to rural hollowing out, spiritual emptiness and countless problems. In such realistic context of rural governance, the rural elites has been attracted great attentions for its participation in soft governance mode to achieve the diversification of rural governance, which provides a new and creative road for policy makers (Nie, 2021). Meanwhile, with the acceleration of the process of rural revitalization, rural elites and their organizations are playing an increasingly significant role in rural governance (Zhang and Wu, 2021). Especially, during nowadays when there are great confrontations between the overall goal of building a well-off society and the new problems arousing in contemporary rural economic and social development, the participation of rural elites in rural governance is extremely benefit for rural revitalization, not only in rural industry development, but also in the improvement of governance level, alleviating the "three rural" problems to a certain extent, (Chen and Gao, 2020). It has already proved that the role in rural elites is of great essential to promote and achieve the rural revitalization strategy.

However, at present, the concept of "rural elites" is relatively new and the current perspective on the participation of rural elites in rural governance is not comprehensive enough, which indicates that there is still space for further research on the influencing factors and effects of the participation of rural elites in rural governance. Therefore, several questions worth our thinking are, what factors affect the effect of rural elites' participation in rural governance? Does the self-assessment of the comprehensive quality of rural elites have any influence on the actual effect of their rural governance? What are the certain channels for rural elites participating in rural governance? Given that, from the perspective of rural elites, this paper obtained first-hand data through questionnaire survey and introduced an evaluation system by using Entropy-TOPSIS method to assess the quality level of rural elites. Moreover, we constructed a SEM to conduct an empirical study on the influencing factors and

channels of rural elites' participation in rural governance. The marginal contributions of this paper are in the followings:

(1) Based on role perception dimension, this paper creatively adopted the Entropy-TOPSIS method to build comprehensive quality evaluation index system for different social identity of rural elites. From the four dimensions of the moral assessment, competency assessment, reputation evaluation, we aim at more clearly understanding the comprehensive level of rural elites at present, and in conformity with the practical conclusions and suggestions are presented.

(2) From the perspective of rural elites, this paper introduced a mathematical model, SEM, to construct the influencing factor path model of rural elites' participation in rural governance for the first time. From the four factors of institutional foundation, role perception, public expectation and external thrust, the relationship between each influencing factor was studied and the degree of its influence on the effect of rural governance was analyzed, which would contribute to the improvement the initiative of rural elites to participate in rural governance.

2. Research Design

2.1 Variables

According to Halpern (2003), Dong (2011), Li and Sakamoto (2013), Kuang et al. (2017), Liu (2017), Liu et al. (2018), Zhang (2020) and Dong (2021), this paper ultimately selected Institutional foundation, Role Perception, Public Expectation, External Thrust as major variables to explore the factors influencing rural elites' governance effect.

Institutional foundation: From the development history of rural elites, their status and role are directly related to institutional change (Zeng, 2020). In ancient times, by relying on local elites to assist in rural governance, successive rulers could maintain social order in rural areas even when the imperial power was not in counties (Lv, 2010). However, due to the development of the institution and system, the model of traditional elite governance, which is not compatible with the new system, faded out of the historical stage. Nowadays, the character of rural elites has been given a whole new meaning of the times with the modernization of national governance. With the vigorous implementation of the villager autonomy system and the rural revitalization strategy, the rural governance has been improved to a certain extent, which has also brought the dawn of hope to the regovernance of the mode of rural elites participating in rural governance. (Liu, 2017).

Role Perception: It is a research theory that illustrate the role behavior of individuals according to their social identity and status. The participation of rural elites in rural revitalization is the internal and external behavior of individuals. Whether rural elites can recognize their own cognition accurately in rural revitalization is the basis and key for a robust governance (Liu et al., 2018). The rural elites not only keep on the characteristic of the traditional village management such as regionalism, popularity and morality, but also adhere to the leadership of the country and socialist core values. Additionally, rural elites are those who take the initiative to participate in the rural revitalization, with outstanding talents or knowledge and lofty reputation. To sum up, there are four comprehensive qualities of rural elites as follows. The first is the identity factor. Due to their deep feelings for homeland, rural elites always pay attention to and support the development of their hometown even though they are far away from home. Then come to the moral elements, which considers that rural elites should virtuously praise words and deeds to lead the villagers to set up the correct values. The third one refers to ability factors, which identifies that most of rural elites are those who have achieved certain achievements in all walks of life and have outstanding knowledge and interpersonal resources. Next is the reputation factors, which reveals that rural elites must be recognized and respected by the public or organizations and enjoy a high reputation (Zhang, 2020).

Public Expectation: According to social identity theory, individual behavior will be influenced by the group. The higher the degree of identification with rural or group activities, the higher the group will give the individual high affirmation and evaluation, which will trigger the individual to actively participate in group activities (Guo, 2013). According to Dong (2011), public expectations of rural

elites is defined as: the public selection of rural elites working in themselves and have certain characteristics expected, mainly including their moral character, personality, knowledge, skills.

External Thrust: Based on the relationship between the state and society, this dimension discusses the influence of external forces on the participation of rural elites in rural governance. There are various forces fighting with each other behind the governance of rural elites, mainly including the following four problems: autonomy of villagers, villagers' lack of trust in rural elites, insufficient policy tilt, and the restraint of the grassroots authorities (Sun, 2016). These problems will hinder rural elites from participating in rural governance and even affect the effect of rural governance (Huang, 2019). On the contrary, the improvement of external surroundings works as external thrust that would push the enhancement of elite rural governance quality.

Based on the above analysis, this paper designs a theoretical model, shown in Figure 1.

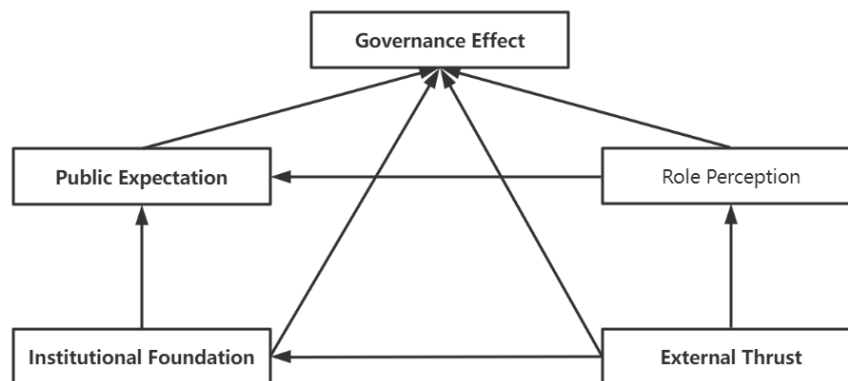


Figure 1. The Theoretical Model of Factors on Rural Elite Governance

2.2 Questionnaire Design and Variables Measurement

In order to fully explore the influencing factors and channels of rural elites' participation in rural governance, this paper takes institutional foundation, role perception, public expectation, external thrust and governance effect as first level indicators. The third level indicators are built to help respondents comprehensively understand the cognition of elites in rural governance. Details are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Variable Measurement Indicators

First Level Indicator	Second Level Indicator	Reference
Institutional foundation (IB)	Historical Origin	Liu (2017)
	Future Plan	
	Realistic Foundation	
Role Perception (RP)	Identity Perception	Zhang (2020), Liu et al. (2018)
	Moral Perception	
	Prestige Perception	
	Ability Perceive	
Public Expectation (PE)	Work Quality	Halpern (2003), Dong (2011)
	Personality Charm	
	Knowledge & Skills	
	Moral Quality	
External Thrust (EG)	Autonomy Dilemma	Dong (2021), Kuang et al. (2017)
	Trust Crisis	
	Political Inclination	
	Government Restriction	
Governance Effect (GE)	Political Construction	Li & Sakamoto (2013)
	Economic Construction	
	Cultural Construction	
	Social Construction	

Our research can be divided into two parts: field survey and network survey. There are 13 identities of all the respondents, referring to those who work as a village leader to get rich, grass-roots cadre, city entrepreneur, expert and scholar, retired cadre, social worker with rich experience, cultural celebrity, outstanding retiree, home entrepreneur, rural teacher, retired entrepreneur, health worker, rural recreation developer. In total, 567 valid questionnaires were obtained from villages (including Chashan and Nijin Village) in Guangdong, China.

3. Empirical Analysis

3.1 Reliability and Validity Analysis

In this part, we aim at testing the consistency and stability of the survey results. As shown in Table 2, Cronbach's Alpha values are all greater than 0.8, and KMO values are all greater than 0.7, indicating that the questionnaire had good structural validity and all variables are suitable for further mathematic analysis.

Table 2. Reliability and Validity Test

Variable	Item	Cronbach's α	KMO	Bartlett
Institutional foundation	3	0.915	0.794	1078.780
Role Perception	4	0.908	0.845	1410.475
Public Expectation	4	0.877	0.897	1875.426
External Thrust	4	0.880	0.856	1420.153
Governance Effect	4	0.890	0.801	1143.785
Total	19	0.925	0.915	7961.358

3.2 Elites' Governance Effect Evaluation Model

Entropy weight method is an objective weight assignment method, which determines the weight according to the amount of information reflected by the variation of the value of each index. In such evaluation system, the greater the variation degree of the index, the smaller the information entropy, which indicates the index provides more information and gains larger weight. TOPSIS method, a multi-objective decision making method, holds principle to rank the evaluation objects by the relative closeness between each evaluation object and the optimal scheme.

In order to make a more comprehensive evaluation, this paper combined the Entropy method and TOPSIS method to construct the effect evaluation model of rural elites in rural governance. Notably, identity perception, moral perception, prestige perception and ability evaluation are taken into the factor layer. We get the ranking of the effect of rural elites in rural governance through the relative closeness calculated by Entropy-TOPSIS method. The scores and rankings of governance effect of rural elites with different social status were calculated, shown in Figure 2.

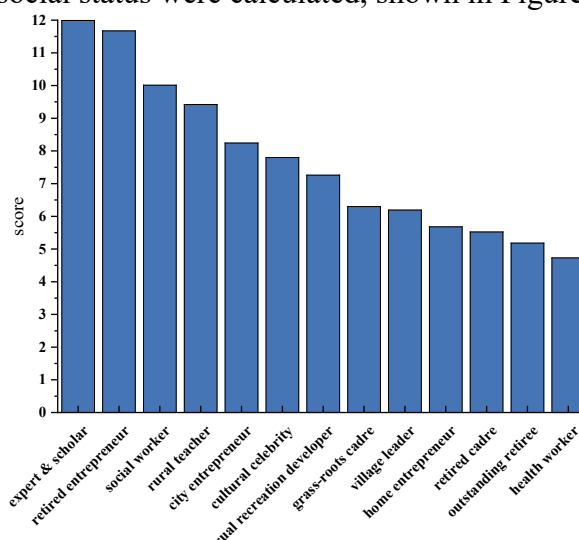


Figure 2. Rankings of Governance Effect of Elites with different identity

According to Figure 2, there exists no extreme case among rural elites of 13 kinds, appearing a relative balanced overall performance of elites in rural governance. It further indicates that most rural elites have deep feelings for home and hold a strong sense of responsibility. Besides, those who are in high virtue, with outstanding knowledge and skills, enjoy high reputation and can win the recognition and respect of the public, are more willing to be committed to serving the rural revitalization.

3.3 Factors for Rural Elite Governance

In this part, we construct a Structural Equation Model to further dig out the factors and working path of elites' participation in rural governance. First of all, the maximum likelihood method is used to make a fitting test, which comes out that AGFI value is 0.818, RFI value is 0.891, NFI value is 0.909, GFI value is 0.863, IFI value is 0.928, CFI value.0.927(all nearly close to 1), indicating that the model has a good overall fitting degree. The final path factor result is shown in Figure 3 and all relationships between the various influencing factors are summarized in Table 3.

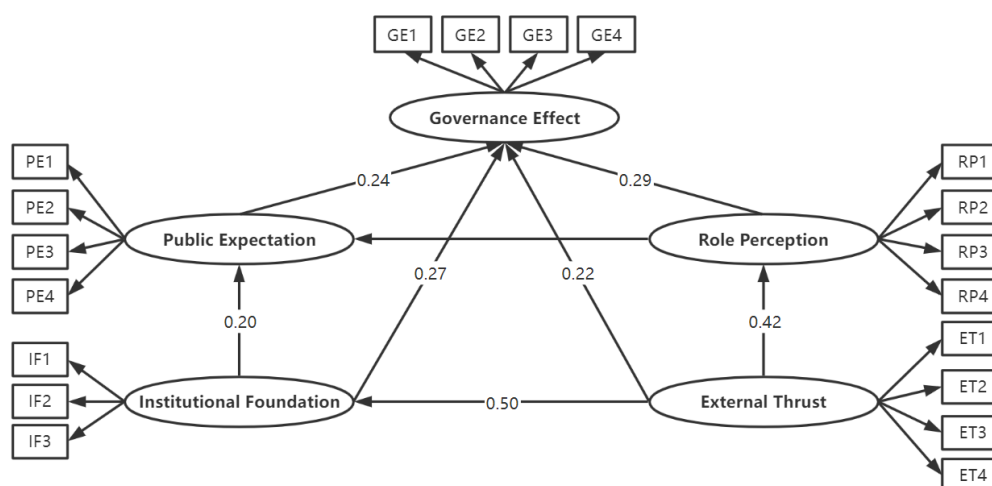


Figure 3. The Result of Structural Equation Model on Rural Elite Governance

Table 3. Paths on Rural Elite Governance

	Path	Standardized Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	p
External Thrust	→ Institutional foundation	0.504	0.504	8.332	***
Institutional foundation	→ Role Perception	0.379	0.422	8.133	**
External Thrust	→ Role Perception	0.422	0.379	6.837	***
Institutional foundation	→ Public Expectation	0.200	0.200	4.137	***
Role Perception	→ Public Expectation	0.649	0.649	13.352	***
Institutional foundation	→ Governance Effect	0.267	0.218	4.949	***
External Thrust	→ Governance Effect	0.218	0.290	4.764	***
Role Perception	→ Governance Effect	0.290	0.236	4.360	**
Public Expectation	→ Governance Effect	0.236	0.267	5.611	***

Note: ***, **, and * represent significance levels of 1%, 5%, and 10%, respectively.

According to Table 3, institutional foundation is proved to be a positive promoter for rural elites' governance effect, whose path coefficient is 0.267. We hold that the theory Rule of Rural Gentry and the culture of traditional elites have laid a historical foundation for the emergence of nowadays rural elites. Meanwhile, under the vigorous implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, China has laid a realistic foundation for the return of rural elites. For public expectation, as expected, it plays a relatively strong role in promoting rural elites' governance effect with path coefficient of 0.236, which is significant at 1% level, indicating that public expectation affects elites participate in the role of rural governance. If rural elites are endowed with high expectation by the public, it would trigger

them more actively participate in group activities and further improve their motivation to participate in rural governance. The external thrust is found to have positive relationship with rural elites' governance effect, with path coefficient of 0.218, suggesting that the return of rural elites continuously compensate for the inadequacy of rural grassroots governance. Additionally, institutional foundation has positive influence on both the role perception and public expectation, with path coefficient of 0.379 and 0.200 respectively. It denotes that the improvement of the policy can provide rural elites' role perception with stability and legitimacy foundation, which can make them have better positioning and understanding and clear the scope of themselves. Besides, it proved that the role perception can improve the governance effect, with path coefficient of 0.218, indicating that the higher the degree of self-perception of rural elites, the better the effect of their participation in rural governance will be. The path coefficient of role perception on public expectation is 0.649, which shows that there is a great influence between rural elites' perception degree on their own identity, morality, ability and reputation, and the public expectation, account for a fact that external recognition would stimulate their own evaluation. The external thrust plays a positive role in boosting institutional foundation and role perception, with path coefficient of 0.504 and 0.422 respectively, which indicates that the better the external environment is constructed for elites to participate in rural governance, the better the effect will be on rural elites' governance. At the same time, it can also promote the public's positive evaluation of rural elites themselves and their work result.

4. Conclusion and Suggestion

From the perspective of rural elites, this paper conducted an empirical study to explore the influencing factors on elites' participation in rural governance under the background of rural revitalization strategy. Our main conclusions are as follows. (1) The higher ranking of rural elites' self-assessment of comprehensive quality of morality, ability and reputation on the rural elites are mostly belong to those who make decision to return back to hometown, which reflects their strong sense of personal feedback. (2) The continuous improvement of the institutional foundation and enhancement of external thrust can promote elites to play an active role in rural governance. Besides, the higher expectation of the public on the rural elites themselves and their work can stimulate the elites to play a more active role in rural governance.

Based on the above conclusions, the paper puts forward the following suggestions. (1) rural elites should improve their own comprehensive quality and increase their actual effect on rural governance. During the process of realizing their own mission and responsibility in rural ideological and moral governance, they should also clarify their position in the role of rural governance. (2) Social media should cultivate and publicize the culture of rural elites so as to create a favorable atmosphere and kindle a group of people back to make contribution for hometown. Meanwhile, they should also find way to spread the local culture, enhance the local people's understanding and sense of identity of rural elites, in order to improve the cohesion and appeal of rural elites and further promote the effective combination of elite participation and rural governance. (3) Government should improve the relevant policies and systems to provide a legitimate foundation for the governance of rural elites. Besides, they should strengthen the driving force of elites returning to their hometowns, and breed more economic elites return to drive rural economic growth.

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