

The Practical Forms and Challenges of Administrative Governance at the Village Level

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Abstract: *In the context of advancing the modernization of grassroots governance systems and capabilities, the administrative approach to village-level governance has emerged as a significant trend in the transformation towards modernized grassroots governance. The internal resource scarcity within rural areas, the gradual disintegration of familiar social networks, and the necessity for the transformation of governance services and the enhancement of governance capabilities have provided both impetus and a solid foundation for the administrative approach to village governance. Currently, the administrative nature of village governance is primarily reflected in the professionalization of village officials, the bureaucratization of village organizations, and the standardization of work processes. While this administrative approach can enhance administrative efficiency and improve the assessment of village organizations by grassroots governments, it also faces challenges such as the imbalance in the relationship among "strong administration, weak autonomy," and the dynamics between villagers, village officials, and township governments. Additionally, there are real issues regarding the responsiveness and public nature of village organizations. To some extent, this can interfere with village officials' governance of rural areas, particularly when individual officials prioritize personal gain over addressing villagers' needs, focusing on form rather than genuinely resolving issues. Over time, this may lead to a loss of trust among villagers towards their officials, which is detrimental to the sustainable development of rural governance.*

Keywords: Grassroots governance, Village officials, Administrative approach, Challenges.

1. Introduction

The administrative formalization of village governance refers to the emergence of a bureaucratic tendency within village organizations, characterized by clear specialization and hierarchical structures. The focus of work is centered around administrative tasks assigned by higher authorities, and the operational methods resemble those of government institutions. Village officials exhibit professional traits, with established performance metrics and salaries, adhering to the administrative directives of the upper government. Their governance approach tends to be impersonal, suppressing traditional simplified governance experiences and leading to a detachment in the relationship between officials and the community. In recent years, rapid urbanization has led to the swift decline of traditional rural areas, resulting in a general weakening of the self-governing functions of villagers, making it challenging to assume governance responsibilities for public services and initiatives in rural settings. Driven by the rural revitalization strategy, significant resources are being allocated to rural areas, creating an urgent need to enhance rural governance capabilities. Simultaneously, as government public services are decentralized, rural areas are expected to take on more responsibilities for livelihood services. In this context, it is essential to strengthen the leadership of the Party, establishing a village organizational system centered around the village Party organization to improve governance effectiveness. Conversely, due to the decentralization of state power, the daily operations and management of village organizations are increasingly resembling those of government departments, leading to an escalation in the administrative formalization of village governance.

2. The Dynamics and Foundations of Administrative Governance at the Village Level

2.1 The Scarcity of Endogenous Governance Resources in Rural Areas

The economic foundation determines the superstructure. During the process of rural development, the internal lack of necessary resource endowments and insufficient endogenous governance resources have led to a loss of governance foundations in rural areas. When governance resources are scarce within the village, it hampers the ability of villagers and community organizations to leverage their interests for connection. Additionally, without a solid economic base, the traditional authoritative power of village leaders has diminished in village-level governance, resulting in a loss of discourse power over village affairs and a diminished capacity to mobilize villagers. Consequently, in such circumstances, rural development must rely on external resource investment, necessitating the involvement and support of administrative power. The scarcity of resources has intensified the dependence of village organizations on the government. To maintain the operation of the village, higher-level governments have begun to intervene comprehensively in various affairs of village organizations, including economic, social, and livelihood matters, even directly engaging in village governance. By assessing the work of village leaders, managing salary distributions, and delineating responsibilities, the governance of rural areas has shifted from a nominal guiding relationship to a practical hierarchical relationship. Simultaneously, higher-level governments have invested various governance resources in rural areas to meet the developmental needs of villages. These actions by the higher-level government have resulted in a transfer of development rights upward, with development planning and project funding being determined by the higher-level government, leading to a loss of autonomy for village leaders and a continuous weakening of village self-governance, while administrative control at the village level has been increasingly reinforced. The strong dependence on resources has prompted village collectives to adopt a proactive approach

towards administrative governance, with members of the village committee seeking bottom-up value recognition and actively integrating into the modern grassroots governance system. This reflects the intrinsic reason for villages to require the government to enhance administrative governance from a bottom-up perspective.

2.2 Transformation of Grassroots Governance Services and Capacity Building for Governance

In the context of urban-rural integration and the modernization of grassroots governance, the government is actively promoting the transformation of village communities and the provision of public services to rural areas, ensuring that farmers benefit from the achievements of national modernization and equitable public services. The transformation of grassroots governance services has become a crucial aspect of modernizing the national governance system in this new era. This transformation, led by the government, involves the allocation of public resources and services to rural areas, necessitating effective resource distribution and administrative services in rural governance. There are heightened demands for the regulation of village officials' powers and standardized services, emphasizing the need to enhance the governance system at the village level and ensure the transparency of rural authority.

In the context of simultaneous transformation of grassroots governance services and capacity building, it is essential to establish standardized operations for rural power, regulate the actions of village officials to prevent petty corruption, and ensure effective public service delivery. Additionally, there is a need to strengthen the implementation of government administrative tasks and national policies at the village level, thereby improving administrative service efficiency. Enhancing the professionalization of village officials serves as an effective means for the government's bureaucratic system to control the execution of administrative services in rural areas. The professionalization of village officials has become a common strategy for the state to strengthen grassroots governance capabilities and policy implementation, with administrative village organizations acting as extensions of township governments and professional village officials serving as rural agents for local government policy execution.

2.3 The Disintegration of Familiar Social Networks in Rural Areas

In my country, traditional rural governance has historically been conducted within the framework of a familiar social network, where personal relationships, social status, and reputation serve as valuable resources for governance. This close-knit community has formed the basis for the exercise of power in rural areas. However, against the backdrop of rapid urbanization and innovative reforms in grassroots governance systems, the foundation of this familiar social structure in rural governance is gradually disintegrating. Rural society is increasingly evolving into a "semi-familiar society," and in some cases, even a society of strangers. This transformation is becoming an intrinsic social force driving the transition of village-level governance.

The rural communities in China are predominantly formed

through a combination of kinship and geographical ties, which have led to the establishment of specific rural rules and orders through daily interactions in production and life. This has become the social foundation and governance mechanism for villagers' autonomy. With the rapid advancement of urbanization, the young and middle-aged labor force in rural areas has opted to work in cities, with some choosing to settle there permanently. On one hand, the migration of the population has caused significant changes in the social structure of rural areas, leading to a gradual hollowing out of villages, where the primary demographic consists of the elderly, women, and children, resulting in a decrease in the frequency and depth of social interactions. On the other hand, the swift movement of rural populations between urban and rural areas has expanded the scope of social interactions, blurring the boundaries of these exchanges. As the inherent social authority and local consensus within familiar communities lose their social foundation, the ability of rural societies to autonomously maintain order diminishes, increasing the likelihood of instability. Relying solely on social governance resources such as personal relationships and social status is no longer sufficient. This necessitates the intervention of top-down administrative power to address issues within the village society that remain unresolved. Village-level organizations can leverage project implementation and other tasks to mobilize local entities to engage in public affairs and provide public services, thereby restoring the social authority of village organizations. Strengthening democratic consultation and other mechanisms of self-governance can enhance the effectiveness of villagers' autonomy, promote the integration of national will and rural consensus, and establish a new order within rural society.

3. The Practical Forms of Administrative Governance at the Village Level

3.1 The Administrative Formalization of Rural Relationships

The professionalization of village officials is characterized not only by formal aspects such as attendance, salary systems, and hierarchical management of personnel and institutions, but also by a fundamental process of rule-based and rational organizational operation. This is specifically manifested in a functional division of labor that combines both vertical and horizontal structures, a rational selection mechanism, stable career expectations, and mobility in appointments. Firstly, professionalized village officials possess clearly defined "authorities" based on established rules, which include explicit job assignments and task distributions. Generally, the village secretary oversees all work within the village, while other village officials are responsible for liaising with township functional departments and managing relevant affairs in their respective areas. Secondly, the qualifications for selecting professionalized village officials are grounded in professional expertise and loyalty to institutional regulations. Village officials can be appointed in two ways: the village secretary is directly appointed by the township government, primarily based on work capability and the ability to implement government directives, while other village officials are directly selected by the village secretary. Lastly, village officials transcend geographical and identity limitations, implementing mobility in appointments, which

includes upward and downward movement between different levels, cross-appointments between parallel organizations, and internal upward and downward mobility within the organization.

The second aspect is the hierarchical structure of village-level organizations. On one hand, there is the internal hierarchy within the village organizations. Currently, under the operation of the hierarchical system, village organizations are gradually implementing a structured hierarchy, with clear divisions of labor. Village officials have defined responsibilities and are accountable for their specific tasks. On the other hand, there is also a hierarchical relationship between village organizations and the government. Village organizations function as subordinate entities to the township government within this hierarchical framework, receiving assignments from the township government and organizing their work in accordance with its directives. Under this hierarchical system, village organizations are increasingly becoming subordinate entities of the township government.

3.2 The Administrative Formalization of Village Affairs

Currently, under the prevailing trend of administrative governance at the village level, various workflows of village officials are mandated to be documented in written or formal formats. This requirement has resulted in village officials dedicating a significant portion of their time to tasks such as preparing materials, filling out forms, and preparing for assessments from higher authorities. Consequently, these formalized tasks detract from the time and energy that village officials should allocate to actual rural governance. The work approach of village officials has shifted towards digitization and bureaucratic formalism, primarily to avoid accountability and respond to evaluations from superiors. This phenomenon has led to an increased emphasis on superficial formalities in rural governance, while the substantive work remains inadequately addressed. On one hand, the administrative nature of village affairs enhances the efficiency of management and assessment by higher-level departments, and the collection and organization of data facilitate the work of the village committees. On the other hand, the requirement for meticulous documentation and the repetitive reporting of information have increased the workload of village organizations, consuming substantial time and energy, which is detrimental to the improvement of work efficiency among village officials.

3.3 Normalization of Village Governance

The various tasks of village-level organizations follow systematic processes and standardized systems. There are strict procedures not only for the implementation of projects and the services provided to villagers but also for the assessment of the work content of village officials, which adheres to standardized criteria. These standardized operations have, to some extent, regulated the workflow of village officials and facilitated the supervision and evaluation by higher-level departments.

First, it manifests as the standardization of work implementation. The township government assigns tasks to village-level organizations primarily through an organized

hierarchical structure and departmental pathways, breaking down tasks layer by layer to the villages. Specifically, the village committee receives assignments from the higher authority (township government) through meetings and official documents, and then communicates and implements these tasks via meetings (such as village committee member meetings, village representative meetings, and village meetings) and notifications. Furthermore, given the increasing demands for standardization in rural work, the township government's focus on the administrative service work of village cadres extends beyond mere outcomes to encompass the implementation process. This governance orientation and work methodology require village cadres to not only maintain documentation and adhere to procedural norms in administrative service tasks but also to ensure comprehensive record-keeping and photographic documentation during democratic decision-making and self-governance activities.

Secondly, the implementation of quantitative assessment incentives for task completion is evident. To ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of administrative work at the village level, the township government has institutionalized the control and motivation of village officials. This is achieved through the evaluation and ranking of the performance of village committees, with rewards and penalties based on the assessment results. This approach ensures that village officials are under pressure and motivated to complete administrative tasks, while also regulating and constraining their behavior.

4. The Dilemma of Administrative Governance at the Village Level

4.1 The Trend of "Strong Administration, Weak Autonomy" is Obvious

Due to the excessive bureaucratization of rural areas, the administrative governance at the village level has intensified while the autonomy has diminished. In the long run, this trend is detrimental to rural governance and sustainable development. As village governance becomes increasingly bureaucratic, the relationship between township governments and village self-governing organizations has merged, reinforcing hierarchical dynamics. Village officials are becoming more bureaucratic, and village committees are transforming into administrative tools for township governments, which delegate various tasks to village organizations. Consequently, village officials must allocate more time to fulfill the tasks assigned by higher authorities, significantly reducing the time available for managing village affairs and severely impacting the autonomy of village self-governing organizations. Traditionally, village officials are expected to be leaders representing the interests of villagers, with all efforts focused on safeguarding these interests and striving for rural revitalization. However, with the over-bureaucratization of rural areas, village officials have become "quasi-administrative personnel" at the grassroots level. From the villagers' perspective, they no longer appear as "one of their own" but rather as administrative personnel equivalent to township government officials, which hampers their ability to fully engage in protecting the fundamental interests of the villagers. As a result, the phenomenon of

"strong administration, weak politics" severely impacts the future development trajectory of rural areas. This bureaucratization of grassroots organizations detaches them from the "local flavor" of rural society, thereby undermining their governance capacity and posing long-term challenges to the sustainable development of rural governance.

4.2 Imbalance in The Relationship between "Villagers, Village Officials, and Township Government"

First, there is an imbalance in the relationship between "villagers and village officials." Village officials may become profit-driven in their behaviors, such as project capture and power rent-seeking, which can lead to a focus on economic gain at the expense of villagers' interests. The deep integration of township governments into rural society grants village officials considerable discretion in the use of resources and project management. Opportunistic village officials may exploit their positions to gain gray benefits. Moreover, if village officials lack fairness in the distribution of benefits, they are likely to favor those they know, which can result in a hierarchical pattern of resource allocation. This, in turn, diminishes villagers' trust in village officials, undermining their authority and support for the officials' work.

Second, there is an imbalance in the relationship between "village officials and township governments." In some rural areas, the input of project resources has not produced the desired effects. This is often due to some village officials seeking to obtain personal benefits from the promotion of relevant projects and policies. These officials are drawn to the profit opportunities created by government resource allocation, seeing the extension of township power as a chance to gain personal advantage. For these village officials, cooperating with the upper-level government to complete administrative tasks is merely a means to secure project resources. Additionally, to ensure project acceptance and avert risks, township governments tend to relax their administrative control over village officials, collaborating with them to address practical difficulties encountered in project execution. Therefore, driven by self-serving administration and accountability avoidance, township governments and village officials "collude" to capture project resources, forming an "elite alliance" that excludes ordinary citizens from the benefits chain. In summary, the alienation of roles and functions between village officials and township governments contributes to an imbalance in the "township-village" relationship.

4.3 Weakening of Responsiveness and Public Nature of Village Organizations

First, there is a weakening of the responsiveness of village organizations. The administrative formalization of village organizations has led village officials to focus constantly on the assessment indicators set by township governments, resulting in a neglect of villagers' needs and a failure to address many endogenous issues within rural society. This seriously affects unity within the village. When it comes to internal issues among villagers, village officials often provide perfunctory responses without offering substantial solutions. The main reasons for this are: first, village officials are too busy with the assessment tasks from higher-level

governments to address villagers' problems; second, some issues are difficult to resolve, and mishandling them could lead to more severe conflicts. Consequently, in this context, village officials inadequately address endogenous issues in the village, leading to a disconnect between the village committees and the villagers, creating a situation of suspended governance and resulting in weakened responsiveness of village organizations.

Second, there is a weakening of the public nature of village organizations. The decline in public nature has resulted in insufficient participation from villagers. The public nature shaped by administrative processes conflicts with the public nature arising from rural production. Township governments are unable to transform the project resources they lead into "matters of the people," resulting in a phenomenon where "officials are working while the masses are watching." Additionally, due to the current competitive promotion environment, township governments, in pursuit of short-term benefits and to meet their own performance indicators, choose to mobilize village organizations through indicator assessments. This administrative logic of public nature undermines the spontaneously generated logic of local public nature within rural areas, leaving villages with inadequate space for self-adjustment and preventing the internalization of public nature into villagers' daily lives.

5. Conclusion

In the context of resource allocation to rural areas and the modernization of grassroots governance, the state's re-engagement with rural society has become an inevitable trend. The administrative formalization of grassroots governance is gradually becoming a trend. Against the backdrop of implementing rural revitalization strategies, the attention given by national and local governments to villages has been increasing, and resource allocation to rural areas has become the mainstream trend in national efforts to build rural communities. As government public services are decentralized, the administrative formalization of village governance is becoming increasingly evident. This has, to some extent, promoted the normalization and proceduralization of village governance, making village affairs clearer and more organized. However, at the same time, the administrative formalization of village organizations is a double-edged sword, and it currently faces many urgent practical issues that need to be addressed. In the future, the state and government must play a greater role in rural development, tackling the challenges of rural governance and jointly promoting the great cause of rural social construction.

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