

Balancing Formal and Informal Institutions in the Rural Governance of the Dong Ethnic Group in Guangxi: An Institutional Integration Perspective

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Received: 16 June 2024; Accepted: 29 June 2024; Published: 16 July 2024

Abstract:

Since the initiation of the reform and opening-up policies, rural society in China has been undergoing a significant transformation from traditional to modern, driven by the forces of industrialization, urbanization, and the expanding reach of state power. This shift has led to the development of a multifaceted and collaborative governance structure at the grassroots level. However, this transition also presents new challenges, particularly in managing the changing dynamics between formal and informal institutions. Effective coordination between these institutions is essential to maintain political order and promote positive interactions within rural communities. Using Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County in Guangxi as a case study, this paper investigates the county's innovative governance practices. It delves into the complex interactions between formal and informal institutions in the context of China's multifaceted rural governance and explores strategies for achieving institutional integration and balance to enhance governance effectiveness.

Keywords:

Institutional Integration, Rural Governance, Formal Institutions, Informal Institutions

1. Introduction

Characteristics of Rural Governance Rural governance in China has a long history. In traditional society, there was a clear separation between rural governance and national governance in terms of power structures. Under the county system, a distinct political landscape emerged, with county cities being the main centers of state power, while rural areas had minimal interaction with state authority and were often marginalized. As society evolved, rural autonomy based on local distribution developed unique organizational structures, governance models, and rural cultures, but remained largely detached from national governance.

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the leadership of the Communist Party of China spearheaded socialist reforms and construction,

providing the essential political and institutional foundations for building a modern state. State power and institutional frameworks gradually became integrated into rural governance. In 1983, the central government established township governments to replace the former people's communes. These township governments, governed by local rural populations, implemented a system of villagers' self-governance. This system, through democratic elections, decision-making, management, and supervision, ensured the democratic rights of rural residents and realized the goals of self-management, self-education, self-service, and self-supervision for villagers.

Over the past forty years of reform and opening-up, the changing social structure in rural areas has brought new challenges to the rural governance system. The traditional governance model based on close-knit communities has seen partial improvements, and villagers' perspectives have shifted significantly. Traditional rural consciousness is gradually being replaced by notions of equality, autonomy, and contractual relationships. Currently, China's rural democratic governance exhibits a dual trend in institutional supply: the formal institutional framework centered on the villagers' self-governance system is deepening, while other endogenous informal institutions are becoming increasingly active.

In the traditional governance system, township governments struggled to effectively manage the complex interest relationships in modern rural areas. With the market and society playing larger roles, the forces involved in rural governance have diversified, shifting from a single governance subject to multiple ones. This transition also blurs the boundaries between formal and informal institutions. Addressing the relationship between these institutions, fostering their positive interaction, and ensuring stable political order in rural communities have become pressing issues. Therefore, the future of rural governance must neither simply continue traditional models nor indiscriminately apply modern ones. Advancing the modernization of rural governance has emerged as a core challenge.

2. Overview of the Study Area

2.1. Definitions and Characteristics of Formal and Informal Institutions

Formal institutions are systems deliberately established and officially recognized to achieve specific objectives. These institutions are typically upheld by authorities and include written norms such as laws, regulations, policies, rules, and contracts. In the context of rural governance, formal institutions encompass the legal and regulatory frameworks provided by the state, such as the Organic Law of Village Committees and family planning policies. These formal institutions are external to rural societies and are constructed by the state power system. Consequently, any breach of these institutions by rural communities would result in state-imposed sanctions.

Informal institutions, on the other hand, are behavioral norms that arise from prolonged communal living and social interactions. These norms, widely acknowledged and adhered to by the community, include ideology, values, cultural traditions, customs, and ethics. In rural governance, informal institutions are reflected in the customs, religious beliefs, village rules, and moral standards that guide rural society. These norms are deeply ingrained in agricultural practices, daily life, and social relationships, forming the internalized rules of conduct for villagers. Violations of these norms lead to communal condemnation and punishment.

Formal and informal institutions play distinct roles in rural governance. Key social relationships and significant political events necessitate intervention and adjustment by formal state institutions, as informal institutions lack the capacity to address such issues. For instance, criminal activities and political incidents require resolution through formal state regulations, whereas social issues pertaining to rural life can be mediated by informal institutions. The functioning of rural governance is primarily influenced by informal institutions and local organizations, making them suitable for managing social relationships tied to rural life. These relationships often involve personal emotions, and excessive formal intervention could potentially intensify conflicts.

Certain social relationships can be regulated by both formal and informal institutions. These relationships are unique and can be managed through the interaction of both types of institutions to resolve disputes. For example, civil disputes among villagers can be settled using either state laws and regulations or village rules and conventions.

Huang Zongzhi's concept of the "third domain" helps explain this phenomenon. It refers to the institutional space created by the interaction between formal state institutions and informal social institutions, characterized by negotiation. When addressing such conflicts, either formal or informal institutions can be used as a basis for resolution through their interplay. For instance, village leaders might employ local customs and village rules to mediate disputes. This approach is also evident in the judicial and people's mediation processes within rural governance.

2.2. Case Analysis: The Synergistic Effects of Formal and Informal Institutions

The Dong ethnic group, with its long history, traditionally resides based on clan lineage. To avoid ethnic discrimination and class oppression, they frequently migrated to seclude themselves in the mountains, minimizing disturbances and often being overlooked by rulers. To ensure internal stability and social harmony while preventing external interference, the Dong developed a unique system of social organization and customary regulations. These practices have been vital for the survival, development, and growth of the Dong people and continue to this day. In Guangxi, the "Huikuan" and "Kuanyue" systems in Sanjiang are particularly notable. "Kuan" refers to an alliance organization that evolved from the clan commune system based on blood ties to one based on geographic ties among villages, also known as "Hekuan," "Menkuan," or the "Kuanbang System" [5]. This system dates back to the late primitive society's military democracy era and is documented in the "Sanjiang County Gazetteer" from the Republic of China era, indicating its ongoing significance.

"Kuan" can be classified into small, medium, and large categories. A "small Kuan" comprises several or dozens of villages; neighboring small Kuans can form a "medium Kuan," and multiple medium Kuans can combine to form a "large Kuan." The jurisdiction of a Kuan can range from a few miles to cross-county or cross-province areas. Each Kuan has a "Kuanshou," typically an elder respected for their moral standing, authority, and knowledge of Kuan regulations and family history. Internally, the Kuanshou oversees family meetings, manages public family property, establishes or reaffirms village rules, and frequently mediates disputes over family matters, marriage, forests, and water resources. They also handle certain criminal cases such as theft, robbery, and rape. Externally, the Kuanshou leads the Kuan militarily during invasions by other ethnic groups. The Kuanshou participates in labor

without special compensation, usually receiving meals or some money or goods from the parties involved.

The Kuan organization holds discussions in the village's drum tower or the stone-paved area beside it, where everyone has the right to speak and vote. The "Kuanyue" (Kuan regulations) is negotiated during this process. The Kuanshou drafts the Kuanyue based on the Kuan's internal situation, and after collective discussion at the gathering, the finalized Kuanyue takes immediate effect, and no one within the Kuan may violate it. Since the Dong people historically had no written language, the Kuanyue was memorized and recited by singers and elders. Each Kuan also held regular "Jiangkuan" meetings annually to ensure the Kuanyue was well-known. The Kuanyue covers a wide range of aspects, including social production and daily life, and is quite specific. Whether small or large, the Kuanyue has clear penalty provisions. This is evident in the Dong ethnic group's "Six Dark and Six Light" laws, where "six" refers to "day, night, east, south, west, north," meaning Kuan members must abide by the Kuanyue at all times and places. "Dark" refers to severe punishments, including the death penalty for crimes such as murder, arson, robbery, cattle theft, pig theft, burglary, harboring criminals, colluding with outsiders, adultery, rebellion, or grave desecration [5]. "Light" refers to lighter punishments, such as fines or public shaming for minor thefts and trespassing. The Kuanyue also imposes certain restrictions on allied villages, ensuring mutual supervision and assistance in enforcing the Kuanyue.

Following the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China's directive on promoting spiritual civilization, several regions in Guangxi's Dong communities have successfully merged national laws with local village regulations. By integrating elements of spiritual civilization into their rural governance practices, they have established updated village rules. These new regulations were disseminated through various channels, including large and small meetings, blackboard announcements, wall posters, and traditional Pipa songs. As a result of this widespread promotion, many "civilized villages" have emerged.

For example, in Linxi Township of Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, the revised "Village Regulations and Agreements," based on existing village rules, have fostered a more harmonious social order. In Guandong Village within Linxi Township, the implementation of these new agreements resulted in a notable absence of theft, illegal logging, fights, and inter-village disputes. Additionally, under the dual promotion of material and spiritual development by the party organization, the village's per capita income rose from 90 yuan in 1981 to 316 yuan in 1986. The number of impoverished households dropped from 283 to just 15, with 95% of households lifting themselves out of poverty. Consequently, Guandong Village has become a renowned model of a civilized village.

In rural governance, both ethnic and grassroots autonomy play a crucial role in building local legal systems, with national law serving as the fundamental basis. In ethnically distinct villages and towns, relying solely on national law to regulate villagers' behavior is often ineffective. Instead, many unique local disputes are better addressed through customary law, as its local relevance and contractual nature foster greater trust and adherence among villagers. Consequently, integrating the formal system based on national law with the informal system of village regulations provides a more effective solution for resolving civil disputes and advancing social progress.

3. Institutional Integration and Balancing Mechanisms

3.1. Concept and Significance of Institutional Integration

Institutions, as Douglas C. North pointed out, can be divided into formal and informal, differing in their degrees. The system of rural self-governance is implemented through top-down design, promoting autonomy and the development of democratic politics in rural areas. In contrast, informal institutions are diverse systems that emerge from the local ecology, often providing complementary support from unofficial social forces. Therefore, the difference between the system of rural self-governance and rural informal institutions is only a matter of degree, and there is no conflict between the two. To deepen the practice of rural self-governance, it is necessary to reexamine and verify the relationship between formal and informal institutions, in order to achieve their integration. During the process of institutional integration, it is crucial to focus on the conditions for implementation. This includes exploring the possibility of cooperation between formal and informal institutions and forming a consensus on the extent of integration.

In rural governance, there is a certain relationship between formal and informal institutions. This includes aspects such as village construction and peasant consciousness, rural development and local consensus, as well as the connection between national policies and farmers' consciousness. However, there are some conflicts and issues, such as the inconsistency between policy concepts and farmers' consciousness, and the integration of national policies with farmers' consciousness. Both formal and informal institutions are behavioral norms in rural governance, with functions of normative guidance, value orientation, and interest regulation. These commonalities create opportunities for the integration of formal and informal institutions. On the other hand, there are also conflicts and differences between formal and informal institutions in rural society, so it is necessary to integrate them. For example, the formal system is the country's legal system, emphasizing legal order and mediating social relations and resolving social conflicts through the establishment of a legal authority system. Informal institutions emphasize human emotions and ethical order, originating from people's behavioral habits to naturally follow social order. In rural society, especially in areas with many elderly people, a small population, remote areas, and low living standards, the legal order and modern rule of law concepts have not yet been internalized as behavioral habits of the people. The concept of rites and laws and ethical order are still the key factors in people's behavior and serve as the main force to coordinate social relations. The objective conflict between these formal and informal institutions makes us realize the complexity and challenges of integrating them.

3.2. The Current Situation and Issues of Institutional Integration in Rural Governance

In rural governance, there exists a certain relationship between formal and informal institutions. This includes aspects such as village construction and peasant consciousness, rural development and local consensus, as well as the alignment of national policies with farmers' consciousness. However, there are conflicts and issues, such as the inconsistency between policy concepts and farmers' consciousness, as well as the integration of national policies with farmers' consciousness.

Both formal and informal institutions are behavioral norms in rural governance, with functions of normative guidance, values orientation, and interest regulation. These commonalities create opportunities for the integration of formal and informal institutions. On the other hand, there are also conflicts and differences between formal and informal institutions in rural society, hence the need to integrate them. For example, formal institutions are the legal system of the state, emphasizing legal order, and mediating social relations and resolving social conflicts through the establishment of a legal authority system. Informal institutions, on the other hand, emphasize human emotions and ethical order, stemming from the behavioral habits of the people naturally following social order. In rural society, especially in areas with a high proportion of elderly people, low population density, remote locations, and low living standards, the concept of legal order and modern rule of law has not been internalized as behavioral habits of the people. Instead, the concept of etiquette and ethical order remains a key factor in people's behavior, serving as the main force to coordinate social relations. The objective conflict between these formal and informal institutions makes us realize the complexity and challenges of integrating them.

3.3. Exploration of Institutional Balance and Optimization Strategies

When dealing with informal institutions, the principle of "take the essence and remove the dross" should be adopted, retaining informal institutions that have positive significance. The provision of national formal institutions should be consistent with local informal institutions, especially those valuable ones. In rural society, in the process of implementing formal institutions, such as the implementation of family planning policies, funeral reforms, and aspects involving customs and culture, local customs and culture should be respected, rather than attempting to completely replace or change them. We must recognize the coexistence and interaction between formal and informal institutions. In some places, differences and conflicts between formal and informal institutions may be unavoidable. For example, some places still adhere to traditional customs, such as "child betrothal," and ignore the provisions of the Marriage Law. Furthermore, even when the national formal institutions are introduced into rural society, villagers still retain a strong local culture and tradition, integrating these elements into the actual implementation of formal institutions. This integration not only makes formal institutions more closely aligned with the needs of rural governance but also makes them more psychologically acceptable. Therefore, in rural governance, efforts should not be made to weaken or restrict the existence of informal institutions, so as not to undermine their function in social regulation or disrupt the natural order of rural society. Formal institutions should gradually recede in rural society, providing education and guidance within a certain scope, so that they gradually transform from external control to people's conscious behavior.

In the process of the expansion of state power into rural society, existing and effectively operating informal institutions must be considered, fully understand the willingness of local villagers, and adopt a win-win approach to work, avoiding the forcible implementation of formal institutions. Blindly strengthening formal institutions may lead to anti-establishment sentiments and may trigger a crisis in rural social governance. Therefore, the relationship between formal and informal institutions must be carefully balanced to ensure social stability and effective governance. As one scholar said, "If farmers acquiesce to and accept the existing social system, they provide a stable foundation for it. If they actively oppose this system, it becomes a carrier of revolution."

4. Conclusions

Currently, grassroots consultative governance is being given new expectations to address the external pressures and internal tensions in the practice of grassroots governance. This model is an institutional innovation based on the interaction of formal and informal rules, forming a complex interaction between grassroots government and plural governance. The establishment of a community-based multi-party collaborative governance structure requires the simultaneous use of rigid integration mechanisms and flexible integration mechanisms, while fully utilizing formal and informal institutions. It not only depends on the leadership of grassroots governments but also requires active participation from social organizations and the general public. In the context of government management and social conflicts, collaborative governance, as a new way of thinking and a new approach, advocates for “public governance of public affairs,” where various subjects such as government, social organizations, enterprises, and citizens help each other, enabling policies to be implemented and jointly assuming the responsibility of regional public governance. This promotes a positive interaction between the state and society, forming a new governance pattern led by the government and coordinated by society.

Through the analysis of the multi-party governance mechanism in Sanjiang County, Guangxi, we can see at least three aspects of the future development direction of rural governance models that are worth paying attention to:

(1) Fully Utilize the Advantages of the Informal System and Actively Innovate the System. Due to the significant responsibilities but limited authority of township governments, especially in situations where the market economy is relatively weak, although surface social conflicts may be small, there are numerous underlying issues. The dominance of the formal administrative system is relatively rigid. To adapt to the rapidly changing social needs, township governments should pay full attention to the advantages of the market and social forces, draw on the strengths of the informal system, innovate the system, and ensure positive interaction between formal and informal systems.

(2) Strengthen the Concept of Rule of Law and Institutionalize the System of Interest Expression. On the one hand, rural residents should enhance their civic awareness. On the other hand, township governments should provide villagers with compliant and legal channels for expressing interests, ensuring that all governance entities have clear channels for expression and power scope, preventing the informal system from entering the formal system's domain and harming the rights and interests of ordinary villagers.

(3) Establish Connections between Village Committees and Other Autonomous Organizations at the Formal System Level. Considering the administrative characteristics of the Village Committees and their lack of autonomous functions, due attention should be paid to organizations outside of village self-governance. While establishing clear institutional rules between the two, ensure the flexibility of the organizations. By improving the efficiency of soliciting opinions from the Village Committees and enhancing their autonomous functions, township governments can timely obtain feedback.

In conclusion, through the study of Dong villages in Sanjiang County, Guangxi, we can see that in plural governance, there exists a positive interaction between formal and informal institutions, jointly promoting the construction and development of rural

areas. The future development of rural governance models should focus on fully absorbing the advantages of informal institutions, enhancing the rule of law awareness, establishing institutionalized mechanisms for expressing interests, and establishing connections between different autonomous organizations at the formal system level. These development directions will help achieve more effective and coordinated rural governance.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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