

How Does Administrative Decentralization Activate Endogenous Rural Development?— The Transformation of R Village and Its Underlying Logic

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Abstract: The rural revitalization strategy, guided by China's vision for national rejuvenation, emphasizes activating endogenous development in rural areas. Yet in practice, many grassroots initiatives suffer from “floating public projects,” where government dominates while local participation lags. This paper examines how administrative decentralization can effectively stimulate rural endogenous power by analyzing the transformation of R Village—a once-declining bonsai-producing village plagued by governance issues and economic stagnation. Through the downward extension of administrative authority, public resources, and governance concepts, R Village achieved organizational restructuring, industrial revitalization, and community re-engagement. The case demonstrates the potential of a “new endogenous development” model that integrates external support with internal capacity-building. R Village's shift from a “weak and dispersed” village to a national model offers valuable insights for sustainable rural development and broader rural revitalization efforts.

Keywords: Administrative Decentralization; Rural Development; Endogenous Power; Underlying Logic

1 Introduction

China's rural revitalization strategy, a critical component of the country's modernization agenda, aims to foster sustainable development by leveraging the internal resources and capabilities of rural areas (Zeng, 2007). A key aspect of this strategy is administrative decentralization, which seeks to empower local governments and communities by transferring authority and resources from central authorities to the grassroots (Zhou, 2006). While decentralization has been heralded as a potential driver for rural development, the specific mechanisms through which it activates endogenous development are not well understood (Ye & Lei, 2022). This paper addresses a significant gap in the literature by examining how administrative decentralization can stimulate endogenous development in rural areas. Using R Village as a case study, the research explores how the decentralization of administrative authority, public resources, and governance concepts facilitated the transformation of a struggling rural community into a model of rural revitalization. R Village, once facing economic decline and weak governance, successfully utilized the support of decentralization policies to restructure its governance, upgrade its industries, and engage its community in local development efforts (Zhou, 2020). Through these processes, R Village illustrates the potential of administrative decentralization to activate rural endogenous development (Zeng, 2014). The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both the theoretical and practical understanding of decentralization's role in rural development (Guo et al., 2018). By focusing on R Village, the paper highlights the practical challenges and mechanisms of decentralization and its impact on local governance, industrial transformation, and community engagement (Zhang et al., 2021; Wen & Liu, 2022; Yang et al., 2023). This research

not only fills a gap in the academic literature on decentralization but also offers insights for policymakers involved in rural revitalization strategies.

R Village's transformation from decline to revitalization illustrates the potential for a traditional industry to thrive in modern society. It highlights the importance of continuous innovation and adaptation as essential components for sustainable development (Li et al., 2018). R Village's experience demonstrates that with the right strategies and strong resolve, even the most challenging environments can be overcome, leading to a prosperous future (Li et al., 2021). The core of the rural revitalization strategy lies in cultivating and enhancing the endogenous development power of rural areas (Shu et al., 2018). However, activating this endogenous power is a complex task (Wei & Zhao, 2018). Under the "village transformation" model, large-scale external resource inputs can yield immediate results, but sustaining these improvements poses a long-term challenge (Xu, 2023). The development path followed by R Village contrasts with traditional approaches to village transformation (Wang & Zeng, 2023). It illustrates that the activation of rural development, particularly in R Village, depends on the decentralization of administrative authority, public resources, and governance concepts within the rural revitalization strategy (Zhou, 2012). In R Village's revitalization process, the integration of external resources with internal capacities facilitated the development of localized industries, strengthened public organizations, and empowered villagers as key agents in the process (Zhan, 2014; Dong et al., 2008). This case study directly addresses an important academic question: How can administrative decentralization activate the endogenous development potential of rural areas?

At the core of China's rural revitalization strategy is the cultivation of endogenous development power, which emphasizes the importance of local resources, governance, and community participation (Shu et al., 2018). However, activating this power is a complex process that requires careful coordination between external support and internal capacities (Wei & Zhao, 2018). In this context, the case of R Village is a valuable example of how administrative decentralization, by integrating external resources with local capacities, can drive the revitalization of rural areas. This paper contributes to the broader debate on rural governance and decentralization by providing a theoretical framework that links administrative decentralization to the activation of endogenous rural development. Through the case study of R Village, the paper investigates the mechanisms by which decentralization can enhance governance, stimulate industry, and empower communities, ultimately promoting sustainable rural development.

2 Problem Statement

In his report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping emphasized: "To comprehensively advance rural revitalization, we must prioritize agriculture and rural development. Building a strong agricultural country and steadily promoting the revitalization of rural industries, talent, culture, ecology, and organizations is essential" (Zhou, 2020). This highlights the strategic significance of addressing rural revitalization and the "three rural issues" as integral to achieving socialist modernization (Liu et al., 2021). Rural revitalization, as a key component of the second centenary goal, plays a crucial role in the process of building a modern socialist country (Li et al., 2021).

The intrinsic logic of rural revitalization connects the coordinated development of material and spiritual civilization with the harmonious relationship between humans and nature (Zhu, 2024). Accelerating the construction of a strong agricultural country and promoting the revitalization of rural industries, talent, culture, ecology, and organizations are essential to the high-quality development of rural areas, aligning with the new development stage and strategy for China's future (Zhang et al., 2021). After the implementation of the Household Responsibility System, farmers experienced a process of deorganization, leading to the disintegration of collective economic organizations in most rural areas and the nominal existence of the collective economy (Zeng, 2007). Following tax and fee reforms, grassroots governance shifted from a "drain-type" structure to a more loosely connected,

“floating-type” relationship between government and rural citizens (Xu et al., 2017).

The issue of rural governance’s loose structure and the consequences of “non-collectivization” and “floating” governance have become a widespread concern (Ye & Lei, 2022). To address the disintegration of grassroots governance, the Central Committee has called for decentralization, empowering local authorities with greater responsibility by delegating resources, management, and services to the grassroots level (Yang et al., 2023). Simultaneously, the concept of administrative decentralization, with leaders participating in grassroots governance, has become a consensus measure for local governments in promoting effective rural governance (Zhang et al., 2019). From the “Targeted Poverty Alleviation” phase to the “Anti-Poverty” period, this approach evolved into an all-encompassing institutional model that continues in the rural revitalization process (Wen & Liu, 2022).

While academic circles acknowledge the necessity of administrative decentralization, two concerns have been raised. One is the “formalized administrative decentralization,” where the complex social structure within village mechanisms impedes effective governance, rendering such systems ineffective in mobilizing more farmers (Zeng, 2014). The second concern is that administrative decentralization might lead to the “bureaucratization” of rural governance, which could undermine the autonomy of villages and weaken their self-governance (Zhou, 2006).

Interestingly, the case of R Village presents a scenario distinct from both of these concerns. Rather than becoming a formalized process or bureaucratic in nature, administrative decentralization has invigorated R Village, sparking new vitality and dynamic changes. This raises an important question: How does administrative decentralization activate endogenous rural development? (Zeng, 2007).

In R Village, the transformation from a “backward village” to a “model village” was driven by its own internal forces, without deep external embedding or multifaceted empowerment. The success of this transition emphasizes the potential of a model of governance that focuses on both internal and external collaboration. By deeply exploring and analyzing R Village’s case, this research aims to theoretically reveal the relationship between administrative power and local villagers’ internal motivation. It also provides a clearer understanding of the government’s role in rural development and the real-world effects of decentralizing administrative power to rural areas, which can inform future policy-making and offer valuable insights for promoting rural revitalization—a significant and historically meaningful systemic initiative.

3 Literature Review

Scholars have analyzed and summarized administrative decentralization and its effects from different perspectives, forming three competitive viewpoints in the existing literature (Zhou, 2020). The first viewpoint centers on the “formalization” of administrative decentralization and organization (Dong et al., 2008). In this view, administrative decentralization has been reduced to a mere formality due to several factors (Xu et al., 2017). The first is institutional reasons: studies have found that grassroots party organizations, under heavy task pressure and incentive systems focused on rigid evaluation mechanisms, often engage in passive “performative” strategies to conduct “cosmetic projects” to meet external supervision and evaluations (Zhou, 2006). The second factor involves organizational structure, where the heterogeneity of stationed agencies significantly impacts the support behaviors of local cadres (Zeng, 2014). Faced with limited financial resources, many first secretaries resort to formalism, shortcut strategies, or even corruption to meet demands (Li et al., 2018).

The second viewpoint focuses on “administrative decentralization” leading to “bureaucratization” of village governance. Some scholars argue that decentralizing administration and management could gradually lead to the bureaucratization of rural areas, undermining endogenous development. In practice, certain administrative decentralization measures have led to rural organizations expanding into grassroots bureaucratic structures. The

“multi-village” system has embedded diversified power structures in rural society, with “mutual aid” evolving into a “dominant-subordinate” relationship. This intermingling of powers has effectively brought village-level organizations under the influence of the broader administrative system, reinforcing bureaucratic advantages. Overly concentrated administrative power, through stationed cadres such as first secretaries, village leaders, and work teams, undermines the autonomy of grassroots organizations, potentially leading to “semi-bureaucratization” or even “complete bureaucratization.” On the other hand, some scholars have recognized that the external intervention of administrative decentralization compresses the space for the growth of endogenous power and strengthens the legal governance of rural areas, resulting in an increasing concentration of power in the hands of the first secretary, who might take over all village affairs in the long run.

The third viewpoint emphasizes the embeddedness of administrative power within rural governance, where a “floating government” becomes deeply embedded in rural society through decentralization, forming an interactive relationship. Some scholars have acknowledged the inevitability of the penetration of state-led administrative power into rural grassroots society. With changes in rural social structures and values, the decline of traditional local norms and endogenous authority has made rural society more reliant on state power. In the absence of independent production orders within villages, external management and legal forces help maintain orderly production and prevent villages from descending into anarchy. Some argue that administrative decentralization represents an embedded form of state power that can facilitate governance at the grassroots level. After the implementation of “targeted poverty alleviation,” government interaction with farmers strengthened their national identity, transforming the government from a “floating” to a “downward” form of presence. Stationed assistance not only fosters a close interaction between state and society but also facilitates the standardization of rural governance through public governance systems.

In conclusion, while existing research provides fundamental insights and theoretical foundations for understanding administrative decentralization, several gaps remain. First, while the viewpoint linking administrative decentralization with organizational formalization is supported by some empirical cases, treating the effects of decentralization solely as “formalization” may be overly simplistic and factually incorrect. In many instances, administrative decentralization has not only remained superficial but has genuinely contributed to enhancing rural governance capacity and activating endogenous development power through concrete policies and practices. The view that administrative decentralization leads to the bureaucratization of villages overemphasizes the adversarial relationship between external administrative power and endogenous rural power, overlooking the inherent need of villages with weak collective foundations for external governance support. In such villages, where internal governance is weak, external administrative power provides necessary support to help build and improve governance structures. While the embeddedness perspective acknowledges the necessity of administrative power in rural governance, it still falls short in explaining the detailed mechanisms and logic of how administrative decentralization activates endogenous rural development.

To better understand how administrative decentralization activates rural endogenous development, further empirical research and theoretical exploration are needed. Specifically, it is essential to analyze the specific operational modes and effects of administrative decentralization in different rural governance contexts, assessing their applicability and sustainability. Moreover, a more comprehensive theoretical framework is required to explain the interaction mechanisms between administrative decentralization and endogenous rural development, providing scientific guidance for policy-making and practical implementation. Through such research, we can reveal the deeper mechanisms of how administrative decentralization activates endogenous rural development and offer valuable lessons for rural revitalization in other regions, contributing to the overall improvement of rural governance capacity and sustainable rural economic and social development.

Thus, this paper attempts to construct a systematic analytical framework based on the theory of new endogenous development, exploring the mechanisms by which administrative decentralization activates rural endogenous development.

4 New Endogenous Development: Theoretical Foundation

(1) New Endogenous Development: Analytical Framework

Traditional exogenous development models view rural areas as passive recipients, where development is determined by external policies, capital, and technology. While the strong embedding of external forces can, in some cases, lead to rapid and effective integration of rural societies, it often obscures the existence of endogenous governance orders and ultimately faces the potential risk of disengagement. In fact, the over-dependence on external factors and the neglect of endogenous values in exogenous development models have led to the failure of rural areas to achieve sustainable economic growth. Unlike the exogenous development concept, the endogenous development model emphasizes tapping into the internal resources of village communities to promote rural economic development and environmental improvement. It stresses the inherent driving forces of rural development and the active participation of farmers. The self-help capacity of local actors is seen as a prerequisite for establishing and maintaining rural development. However, many scholars argue that a purely endogenous development model, which does not rely on external resources, faces the dilemma of being overly idealized. In the context of globalization, external trade, and government actions, the pursuit of pure socio-economic autonomy in rural development is practically impossible.

Building on these two development approaches, the theory of New Endogenous Development proposes a model integrating both exogenous and endogenous development. It emphasizes the interaction between internal and external factors in rural development. The new localized development model posits that the enhancement of local capabilities is the foundation of rural endogenous development, and the intrinsic power of endogenous development lies in responding to grassroots demands and activating and guiding local development potential. The core mechanism of this model is the interaction between “development” and “development capacity”. The practice of rural empowerment in China has evolved from externally driven exogenous development, to endogenous development driven by internal factors, and finally, to endogenous development within the interactive environment of internal factors. Similar to endogenous development, New Endogenous Development targets rural community-driven development. However, its internal collaboration and the symbiotic relationship between internal and external factors form a comprehensive approach to rural development. The relationship between the two is not mutually exclusive, but complementary, with long-term sustainable development as its ultimate goal. The new endogenous development theory organically combines the external and internal dual tensions of rural development. On one hand, it acknowledges and accepts the introduction of external forces; on the other, it emphasizes the leading role of farmers and villages in the development process, promoting the organic integration of both internal and external factors.

(2) New Endogenous Development and Rural Activation: An Analytical Framework

The concept of “activating the village” aligns with the theoretical framework of new endogenous development. Unlike the “transformation of villages” driven purely by external factors, which aims to reshape rural areas, “activating the village” follows a rural ontological approach. It asserts that rural areas possess inherent potential that needs to be activated, emphasizing the activation of endogenous power under the empowerment of external

factors. In this context, the government is positioned as a resource provider and potential cultivator. Specifically, “activating the village” focuses on activating endogenous development power through external empowerment, which is a bidirectional interactive process combining both internal and external elements. It is this approach of “external factors promoting internal development” and “integration of internal and external elements” that offers the possibility of achieving sustainable performance in rural governance.

The theory of New Endogenous Development provides the fundamental analytical framework for endogenous rural development driven by external forces. However, this initial theoretical model does not clearly explain the logic of how administrative decentralization activates endogenous rural development. Therefore, based on the theory of new endogenous development, it is necessary to incorporate key elements of rural development practices into the original theoretical model to construct a more explanatory new analytical framework. This paper, therefore, constructs the following analysis framework (see Figure 1), which considers three dimensions: organization, industry, and subjects. During the process of administrative decentralization, through the injection of external factors such as “administrative power decentralization,” “public resource decentralization,” and “governance concept decentralization,” the original internal organizational order, endogenous industrial base, and endogenous subject power of rural society are revitalized through the processes of “organizational restructuring,” “industrial activation,” and “subject activation.” External empowerment and endogenous activation are not isolated from each other; rather, they interact and intertwine until they achieve a seamless integration, thereby “activating the village” and ultimately creating a new endogenous rural development model characterized by public organizations, sustainable industries, and participatory subjects.

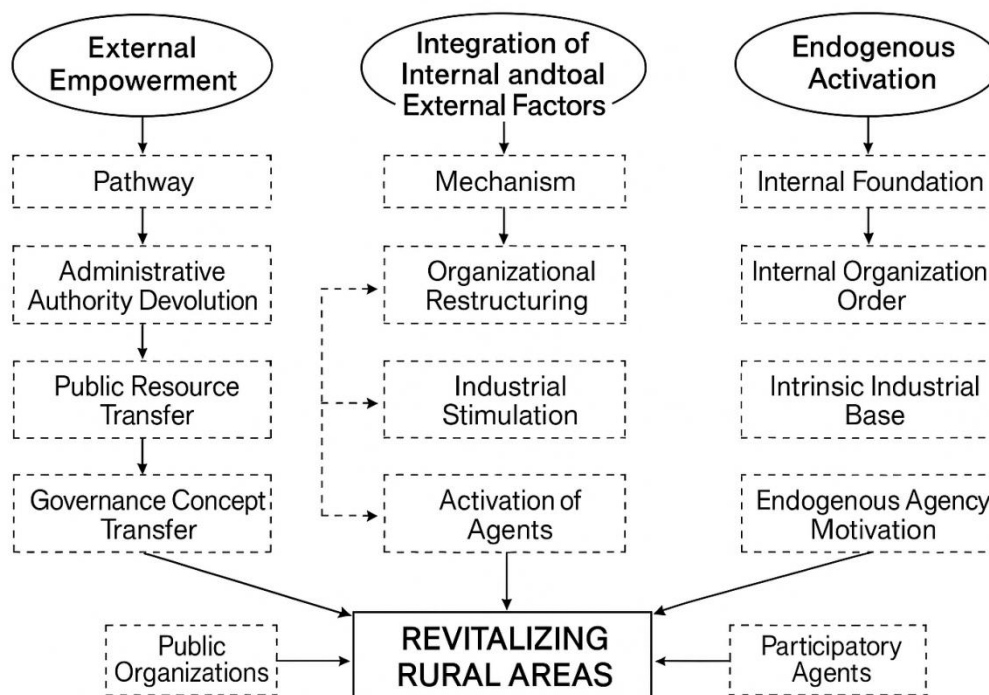


Figure 1 Mechanisms of action of administrative decentralization to promote new endogenous development in multiple villages

(3) Expanding the analysis: the interaction between New Endogenous Development and administrative decentralization

In this paper, we introduce the concept of New Endogenous Development (NED), which aims to bridge the interaction between external forces and endogenous potentials in order to promote sustainable development in rural areas. This theoretical framework emphasizes that in modern societies, the introduction of external resources and the stimulation of endogenous development capacity are complementary, not opposed, but mutually reinforcing. This paper further extends this framework and specifically analyzes the role of administrative decentralization in promoting endogenous development in the context of the case of R Village.

1. Administrative decentralization and organizational restructuring

Administrative decentralization can effectively activate the governance capacity of local governments and enhance the flexibility and autonomy of grassroots governance by decentralizing power and resources (Xu et al., 2017). In the practice of R village, administrative decentralization promotes the reconfiguration of village organizational structure by giving local governments more decision-making power and financial autonomy. For example, while receiving policy guidance from higher levels of government, the R-village government is also able to adjust and optimize rural resource allocation according to actual local needs. This decentralization of power enables local governments to mobilize villagers' resources more flexibly and effectively implement rural revitalization strategies (Zhou, 2020). This mechanism not only enables local governments to accurately identify and respond to villagers' needs, but also enhances villagers' sense of participation and responsibility through the enhancement of local self-government organizations (Dong et al., 2008). This is particularly evident in R village, where villagers' autonomy and collective decision-making ability have been greatly enhanced, becoming an important force in promoting local governance.

2. Industry Revitalization and Industrial Structure Upgrading

Administrative decentralization has not only affected the governance structure, but also had a profound impact on the industrial structure of R village. Under the traditional collective economic management model, external resources are often directly invested in industrial projects, leading to over-concentration of resources and lack of industrial diversification. Through administrative decentralization, the local government has gained more flexibility and can make more effective use of local advantageous resources and industrial characteristics to promote the optimization and upgrading of industrial structure (Zhou, 2012). Taking the transformation of R village as an example, the government has promoted the localization of industrial policies through administrative decentralization, which has enabled the agricultural industry not only to retain the traditional bonsai production, but also to successfully transform into a modernized industrial model integrating agriculture, tourism and culture (Guo et al., 2018). This industrial upgrading from traditional to modern is a direct result of the combination of administrative decentralization and local characteristic industries, which provides useful experience for rural revitalization in other places.

3. Stimulation of Community Participation and Grassroots Autonomy

Another key mechanism of administrative decentralization is the enhancement of the community's sense of participation and self-governance. In the governance model of R Village, villagers' participation is not only limited to the traditional election and decision-making process, but is also deeply integrated into day-to-day management through the mechanism of resource sharing and benefit distribution (Wen & Liu, 2022). This bottom-up form of participation not only enhances villagers' political awareness, but also stimulates their enthusiasm to participate in governance through benefit sharing. In Village R, the combination of administrative decentralization and community

participation is embodied in the “4-4-2” benefit distribution model, which ensures that villagers are closely linked to the development of the village collective economy by dividing the benefits among enterprises, the village collective, and the villagers, thus effectively mobilizing villagers' motivation to participate in public affairs (Yang et al., 2023). This practice proves that administrative decentralization is not only the decentralization of policies, but also the process of community empowerment.

4. Discussion of International Literature and Comparative Cases

Although the NED framework has been successful in the practice of R-village, it is not an isolated phenomenon and other countries have similar experiences in similar contexts. For example, India's Rural Development Program (RDP) strengthened grassroots governance through administrative decentralization and promoted local economic self-development (Bardhan, 2002). In Latin America, many countries have stimulated local self-governance and industrial development through decentralized governance models, especially in resource-rich rural areas (Faguet, 2004). These international experiences provide important theoretical support for this paper, further demonstrating the close relationship between administrative decentralization and endogenous development. By comparing the international literature and cases, we find that administrative decentralization plays a similar role in stimulating local economic and governance capacity, although the implementation contexts are different in different regions. This not only enhances the depth of the theoretical framework, but also broadens the applicability of the research in this paper.

5. Governance Concept Decentralization and Participatory Subjects: The Mechanism of Endogenous Rural Governance Order

(1) Administrative Decentralization and Governance Concept Decentralization

Driven by a series of agricultural policies, rural areas are currently shaped by two external forces: the government-led “project-based rural development” and the business-driven “commercial capital.” Both forces are external actors, working together to achieve rural development through participation. However, the development of rural areas increasingly relies on external policies, resources, and even business capital, with the flow of funds being the current mainstream. It is expected that rural development, dominated by external actors, may lead to agricultural monopolies, rural transformation, and the replacement of farmers.

Since the village is primarily the community of farmers, the leading force for rural development should be the farmers themselves. Relying solely on external solutions is not sustainable; the endogenous motivation of the village community is the true driving force for rural development. Guided by rural ontological governance, administrative decentralization focuses on activating the subjectivity of villagers to realize a village development model led by the village community. However, in practice, how to mobilize villagers' participation remains a major challenge faced by village work teams and governance organizations. Even with relatively well-established participation management methods from higher-level governments, many villagers still lack enthusiasm for participating in public affairs at the village level.

(2) Governance Concept Decentralization and Subject Activation

From the perspective of the stationed work teams, activating genuine participation from villagers requires effectively linking the individual interests of villagers with the collective interests of the village. On the one hand, the village work teams and village leaders, through multiple communications with the district party secretary, successfully secured a popular “gas station project” for R Village. This project, through the “4-4-2” dividend structure involving businesses, village collectives, and villagers, not only expanded the collective economy but also directly increased villagers' personal incomes. At the same time, relying on the development of the collective economy, villagers could earn additional income through land transfers, linking their income levels directly to the development of the collective economy. Previously, the collective' s affairs were primarily about the interests of the collective alone; now, these affairs have become directly related to every villager' s interests. Consequently, numerous opinions and suggestions for the village' s future development began to emerge.

On the other hand, previously, due to the absence of a local bonsai sales market in the village or even nearby towns, villagers were forced to transport their bonsai to other regions for sale, facing high logistics costs. The villagers were eager to have their own bonsai trading market. In response, the village work teams and village leaders quickly prioritized the construction of a bonsai trading market. After the completion of the agricultural trade market, villagers could sell bonsai and related agricultural products in a more convenient and organized setting, directly benefiting from their business activities. The bonsai market also successfully gathered villagers engaged in bonsai-related industries, forming a collective force for the village' s industrial development. Under this close-knit mechanism of interest linkages, villagers became increasingly concerned with the future development of the village and actively participated in the governance of public affairs.

(3) Endogenous Subject Power and Grassroots Participation

The essence of rural development lies in the reproduction of a healthy social order in rural areas, with the focus on reshaping the subjectivity of farmers to activate their endogenous power for self-development. During the decentralization process, the stationed work teams, following the governance concept of rural ontologism, assisted village governance organizations in activating the subjectivity of villagers based on respect for their agency and creativity. This collaborative effort ultimately stimulated active participation within the village. The complete process of governance concept decentralization is illustrated in Figure 2:

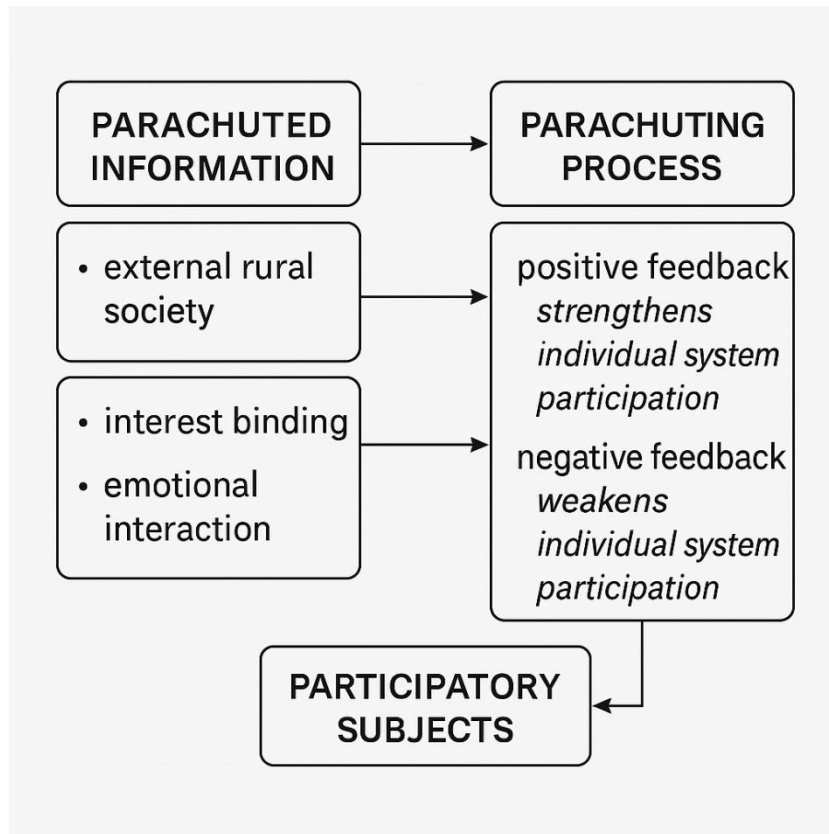


Figure 2: The Practice Logic of Governance Concept Decentralization and the Realization of Participatory Subjects

Through the case of R Village, we observe that, to improve the mechanism of rural endogenous governance, potential governance elements such as interests and emotions were reintegrated into village governance. This led to the formation of internal linkages and emotional interactions within the village. The activation of endogenous subject power, built upon this foundation, has significant sustainable implications. On one hand, the interest linkage created a community of shared interests, with the dividend system providing a formal regulation and constraint for villagers’ participation. On the other hand, emotional interaction within the village generated frequent, everyday interactions and cultivated a positive public atmosphere. This beneficial change could then transfer into the domain of public governance, reshaping villagers’ participation behavior. Within the specific context of rural society, the decentralization of the rural ontological governance concept effectively awakened farmers’ psychological identification and value affiliation, thereby addressing the weak links in the subjectivity of rural governance. This ultimately enabled the real return of grassroots participation in the practical realm.

6. Policy Recommendations: How Administrative Decentralization Can Activate Endogenous Rural Development

(1) Diversified Approaches to Construct a New Model of Village Self-Governance

To establish a modernized self-governance framework, it is crucial to consolidate the leadership role of grassroots Party organizations, ensure their comprehensive coverage across rural areas, and enhance the training and quality of Party members. Optimizing intra-party democratic mechanisms will further elevate governance and service capabilities at the village level. Effective village self-governance must be safeguarded by a robust legal foundation. This includes amending the Organic Law of the Villagers’ Committees of the People’s Republic of China to reinforce farmers’ rights and roles, intensifying legal education in rural areas, and improving villagers’ legal awareness and capacity for rights protection.

Institutional improvements should also include judicial assistance mechanisms for village committees to ensure accessible legal support. Democratic consultation platforms, such as villagers' assemblies and representative meetings, should be established to enhance participatory decision-making. Reforms must focus on democratic, legal, and evidence-based decision-making processes to ensure all decisions align with farmers' interests. Mechanisms such as public disclosure of village affairs and democratic evaluations will ensure power operates transparently. Public education campaigns should promote the concept of self-governance, encourage active engagement, and enhance villagers' capacity for self-management through community-based learning and exemplary leadership.

(2) Strengthening Grassroots Governance to Accelerate Rural Governance Modernization

Under the broader framework of rural revitalization, modernizing rural governance is a complex, systematic task requiring both effective institutional design and enhanced managerial capacity. A starting point is to strengthen grassroots Party organizations by promoting ideological education that reinforces political commitment and moral integrity. Talented individuals with strong leadership, ethical values, and service-oriented attitudes should be recruited into local leadership teams.

Government functions should transition from control-based to service-oriented models to address the real needs and expectations of villagers. Simultaneously, it is essential to strengthen the structure and functions of self-governance institutions such as villagers' committees and representative councils. These institutions should serve as the core of rural governance, with clearly defined responsibilities and authority.

Modern technologies should be leveraged to establish digital platforms for village self-governance, improving accessibility and transparency in public administration. Legislative efforts should clearly define the roles and responsibilities of grassroots institutions. Legal literacy should be raised among villagers, and enforcement capabilities should be improved through a robust supervisory system and better-trained personnel.

Local judicial resources should be rationally allocated to increase efficiency. For everyday disputes, village-level mediation systems should be established, while more complex cases should be addressed through arbitration and formal legal channels to diversify dispute resolution methods and ensure access to justice.

(3) Promoting Governance Model Transformation through Co-construction and Co-governance

A new model of rural governance should be developed, one characterized by co-construction, co-governance, and shared benefits. This model must be built upon Party leadership, villager participation, enterprise support, legal safeguards, and social assistance. While self-governance remains the foundation, enterprise investment can provide financial support, and civil society organizations can contribute their expertise and resources to strengthen community-based governance.

This integrated framework should embody the synergy of autonomy, rule of law, moral governance, and smart governance:

1. Autonomy empowers villagers to manage their affairs;
2. Rule of law institutionalizes governance processes;
3. Moral governance guides rural society through cultural and ethical norms;
4. Smart governance uses digital technology to enhance administrative efficiency.

To achieve this, a collaborative governance system should be established where villagers are involved in

agenda-setting, planning, and implementation. Farmers' agency must be fully activated, encouraging them to engage meaningfully in village affairs. Continuous evaluation and feedback should guide policy adjustments, ensuring development outcomes are aligned with farmers' interests.

(4) Expanding Governance Space to Enhance Governance Effectiveness

Effective governance in rural areas hinges on well-functioning grassroots organizations. It is imperative to institutionalize governance through timely legal reforms, creating clear and enforceable rules to guide village-level administration. Democratic governance mechanisms, such as villagers' councils and participatory budgeting, must be strengthened to guarantee villagers' rights to know, participate, and supervise.

At the same time, digital transformation should be pursued by creating integrated information platforms that enhance transparency, facilitate real-time data sharing, and encourage broader participation. Big data analytics and intelligent monitoring systems can support evidence-based governance, enhance responsiveness, and provide policymakers with timely, actionable insights.

Human resource development is also key. Training programs, higher education, and vocational development must cultivate a cohort of rural managers who are knowledgeable, skilled, and committed to rural revitalization. Through competitive salaries and benefits, policies should incentivize young talent to engage in rural governance. Ongoing training and cross-regional knowledge exchange can enhance the competencies of local governance personnel and drive continuous improvement.

(5) Increasing Investment to Promote Comprehensive Rural Revitalization

Rural governance serves as a foundational guarantee for rural revitalization and must be supported by holistic efforts in industrial, cultural, ecological, and organizational development. Investment in infrastructure, technological innovation, and human capital should be expanded through both national and local government channels. Financial institutions should offer diversified, low-cost financial services tailored to agricultural needs, reducing farmers' financing burdens. Private capital should also be encouraged to invest in rural infrastructure and operations.

Agricultural modernization should align with local resource endowments and market demand, promoting specialty agriculture, green practices, and branding strategies. Integration across farming, livestock, and fisheries sectors can drive mutual development. The rural supply chain and distribution system should be improved to support agricultural industrialization and value-added growth.

On the cultural front, a dedicated rural cultural development strategy should be adopted to preserve traditional heritage and foster distinctive cultural brands. Public cultural services—such as libraries, cultural centers, and creative industries—should be expanded to create employment and income-generating opportunities.

Ecologically, rural green development should be promoted through comprehensive environmental protection, ecological restoration, and green infrastructure. Housing conditions must be improved with increased investment in rural living environments. A full ecological civilization framework, including an eco-compensation system, should support sustainable, green production models across rural regions.

7. Conclusion and Discussion

A historical review of rural governance transformation in China reveals that administrative decentralization, as a new intermediary mechanism connecting higher-level governments and grassroots rural societies, plays a pivotal

role in the restructuring of rural governance. While previous scholarship has offered valuable insights into the concept and function of administrative decentralization, both empirical and theoretical dimensions remain underdeveloped. The case of R Village, which transformed from a “weak and disorganized” village into a “national model,” illustrates the powerful internal driving force that governmental intervention can provide for rural revitalization.

The case study of R Village demonstrates that under conditions of a “detached” grassroots government and “fragmented” village governance organizations, administrative decentralization—through the injection of authority, public resources, and governance concepts—effectively empowered the village. This empowerment activated the internal organizational order, industrial foundation, and endogenous agency through three key processes: organizational restructuring, industrial stimulation, and subject activation. With the state as a catalyst, village-level self-governing bodies, local industries, and participatory actors were all revitalized. These dynamic responses contributed to the reconstruction of the internal governance order and laid the foundation for achieving the goal of “activating the village.”

In contemporary rural China, external forces have increasingly permeated grassroots communities, influencing the internal governance logic of villages to varying degrees. However, the essence of sustainable revitalization lies in the synergistic coexistence of internal and external forces. The role of the state is not to override or reshape rural society, but to recognize and awaken the inherent value and potential within it. Through strategic interventions, the state can act as both a resource provider and capability enabler, helping villages progress toward an integrated model of modern rural development.

Under the policy framework aimed at institutionalizing the rural revitalization strategy, administrative decentralization—as an exogenous driving force—should move beyond unilateral interventions. Instead, it should adopt a reflexive and adaptive approach, respecting the originality and creativity of rural communities while actively leveraging its own advantages in authority, resources, and governance ideology. This dual approach offers a feasible and sustainable pathway for stimulating endogenous development momentum and achieving holistic rural revitalization.

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