

Analysis of the Influencing Factors of Rural Revitalization Based on Grounded Theory

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ABSTRACT

Rural vitalization, a core strategy recognized by Party for the national development and positive sustainable development, is playing an ever-important role in the economic development of rural areas in China. Empirical studies are of vital importance for the implementation of rural vitalization, as they provide a foundation for more scientific and efficient policies adapted to reality. We used ground theory to study the influencing factors for rural vitalization. We believe that this study can help local governments with the elaboration of policies and the implementation of these policies.

Keywords: rural vitalization; grounded theory; rural economy

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural vitalization is one of the major strategies adopted by the Chinese government to achieve the goal of socialist modernization with Chinese characteristics. China is currently in the late stage of industrialization and the middle stage of urbanization. Combined with the rapid informatization and rural modernization, the basic conditions for rural vitalization have all been met. Positioned as a long-term task with historical implications, rural vitalization requires realistic, implementable strategies adapted to social reality. It is thus crucial to perform an objective analysis of the concrete factors that may influence its implementation to serve as the basis for the elaboration of strategies. This paper studies the factors that may influence this vitalization and in which aspects as well as the influences between the factors themselves. These questions have not been satisfactorily addressed in current literature, which has remained to a large extent theoretical. To fill this gap, we performed an in-depth study on the factors that may influence rural vitalization.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A look at the large body of existing literature reveals that the question of rural vitalization remains an area of interest for researchers, who have contributed ample discussions and analyses to this subject. Existing studies have three main focus areas: first, the principal actor of rural vitalization, second, drawbacks in the actual process of rural vitalization, third, future strategies for rural vitalization.

With respect to the first focus area, the question arises as to who should be the principal actors in rural vitalization. Two views prevail among researchers. The first one lays emphasis on the role played by rural inhabitants as participants and beneficiaries, and consider them to be the main actor. The second takes into consideration the actual governance and challenges in rural areas and coined the term “multi-subject” which includes the government and grass-root cadres, organizations, and companies. For supporters of the former position, the fact that rural inhabitants hold the principal position is explained by the very nature of rural

vitalization in China. They believe that the Chinese Communist Party's long experience working at the grass-root level has demonstrated that work done in the rural areas must rely on the rural population. Holders of the second view support the collaboration between different subjects, who together participate in the governance of villages. This is the key to meeting the diversified needs of the rural population, enhancing governance efficiency, and achieving the final goals of building "rural areas with thriving businesses, pleasant living environments, social etiquette and civility, effective governance, and prosperity"¹.

Existing studies attribute the limiting factors of rural vitalization in China to the subjects themselves, a rural culture on the decline, and governance models. Due to rural-urban differences in terms of economic conditions, job opportunities, and prospects, large rural populations are migrating to cities. This creates a subject-related conundrum,² where villages, inhabited mostly by old people and children, lack the labor force to improve or upgrade the infrastructure and, as a result, the funds and technologies necessary for economic development cannot be attracted.³ Under the impact of the market economy, customers of traditional handicrafts are on the decline, and cultural sites in villages are becoming less and less frequented. The transmission of traditional craftsmanship faces disruption. In this context, we believe that the government should bring into full play its positive role in control and guidance, improve management skills, and further bring out the cultural advantages of rural areas. The basic method of state-initiated administrative regulations can contribute to the development of cultural awareness within a country. However, relying on state-issued regulations alone would disregard the active role that farmers themselves can play. In addition, state-level regulations, designed to provide the general terms, may fail to take into consideration regional characteristics. This may lead to an over-homogenization in rural development.⁴

When it comes to development plans for rural vitalization, existing researches show that the state is favorable for rural vitalization and has provided policy support, which has resulted in the current rapid development of rural vitalization. Local conditions are conducive to the development of the rural economy, the recovery and promotion of rural culture with a long history, and the establishment of a rural body that is centered on farmers and supported by grassroots government bodies. Nevertheless, there is still a great deal of difficulty in the development of rural areas in China, including the huge gap between urban and rural development, lack of a sound organizational mechanism for grassroots governance, and lack of supervision and management. Therefore, it is important to explore the economic structures and development principles of each region, prioritize the development of economics, and

create local rural economic structures that fit local conditions.⁵

The current research findings reveal that most researchers have focused on policy documents, laws and regulations, and administrative orders. There is a lack of exploration of the deep logical relationship between different influencing factors of rural revitalization. In this paper, the grounded theory is used as the foundation support for investigating and analyzing the interactions between different influencing factors in the process of rural revitalization development. Additionally, it can provide effective and scientific references to the government for its decision-making through the proposed strategies.

3. RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

There have not been standardized and widely-accepted and theoretical hypotheses with regard to the action model of the influencing factors of rural vitalization. Empirical studies on social reality are also lacking. Grounded theory, a quantitative method that seeks to generate influencing factors, was designed specifically to fill this kind of gap.

In this study, we designed questionnaires that strive to be precise and scientific to obtain data representative of social reality. When determining the samples, we chose to opt for theoretical saturation and chose to restrict the number of participants to 20. We performed in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The in-depth interview gives the participant the room to think and express themselves, allowing them to express their feelings and views. In a

focus group discussion, the participants communicate with each other under the guidance of an interviewer. We compiled the transcript of these interviews and discussions, and the compiled document had around a hundred thousand Chinese characters in length. Three quarters of the transcript were used for coding and modeling. The remaining quarter was as validation data for verifying theoretical saturation.

In line with the grounded theory model, our research was divided into three phases: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

4. CATEGORY IDENTIFICATION AND MODELING

4.1. Open coding

With objectivity and scientific rigor as guiding principles, we analyzed the speech of the participants to identify initial concepts. A total of 55 initial concepts were identified. Due to the sheer amount of these

concepts and the convergence between some of them, we classified them into categories. Twenty-five initial concepts were excluded due to lack of repetitive mention.

Some concepts may appear too long to qualify for a concept, but this is because Chinese concepts tend to get more complex when translated into English.

Table-1 Categories from open coding

No.	Initial category	Initial concepts
1	Policy protection	Policies for supporting and benefiting agriculture Implementation of rural area policies
2	Land policies	Extension of rural land contracting
3	Targeted poverty alleviation	Industry support Idea shift
4	City re-feeding agriculture	Lack of resources in rural areas Urban assistance to rural areas
5	Supply-side reform	Supply-side structural reform
6	Government support system	Government supports for the development of agriculture and rural culture
7	Farmers' active participation	Farmers' autonomy; farmers' access to professional education; new professional farmers
8	Mutual learning among farmers	Spirit of mutual assistance and learning
9	Trust in cooperation	Quality of agricultural materials in trust cooperatives
10	Village college model	Talents from village colleges; featured courses; village-college development mode
11	Skill enhancement	Learning introduces technology, self-innovation technology, equipment technology, external teaching technology, promotion technology, and the application of technology
12	Updates of introduced species	Introduction of new species
13	Soil improvement	Soil cultivation
14	Exchange of planting experience	Cross-village exchange in planting experience
15	Plantation infrastructure renewal	Integration of water and fertilizer, and agricultural equipment
16	Innovations in ideas and practices	Idea innovation Industry innovation Technical innovation Development model innovation
17	Industry development awareness	Learning awareness Common prosperity
18	Learning spirit	Learning spirit for the organizers

		Learning spirit for the farmers
19	Cross-regional learning	Cross-regional learning
20	R&D Innovation	Scientific research and development and innovation systems
21	Agricultural cooperative mode	Cooperative welfare
22	Increase in production	Increase in production
23	Planting of special crops	Special high-quality crop planting with good selling
24	Adjustment of industrial structure	Adjustment of industrial structure
25	Southern vegetables diversify	Planting southern vegetables in the north
26	Export of agricultural products	Satisfying the export market and the external sales of potatoes
27	Cross-regional planting	Establishment of specialized planting bases in different regions
28	Cooperative base	Co-operative factory and base management
29	Adapting to local conditions	Adapting to local conditions
30	Industrial development model	Large-scale development, professional development, and extension of the industrial chain

4.2. Axial coding

From a methodological perspective, the core task of axial coding is to further dig out the relatedness and

logical relationship between categories to establish main categories and sub-categories. We studied the categories from open coding and generated six main categories, each with its sub-categories, as shown in Table-2 below.

Table-2 Categories from axial coding

No.	Main category	Sub-categories
1	Policy guidance	Policy protection Land policies Targeted poverty alleviation City re-feeding agriculture Supply-side reform
2	Policy support	Governmental support system
3	Technical improvement	Technical improvement Soil improvement Species introduction Emphasis on experience sharing
4	Measures adapted to local conditions	Measures adapted to local conditions
5	Sales platform upgrade	New retail model Market effect
6	Farmer's agency	Farmers' agency Professional education for farmers New types of professional farmers

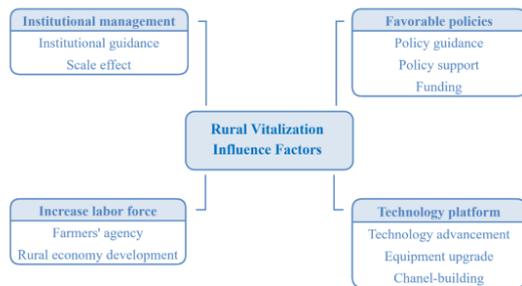
4.3. Selective coding

The main task of selective coding is to filter the core categories from the main categories. At the same time, it is necessary to further analyze the correlation between the core categories and the main categories as well as other categories, and to present them in a comprehensive

manner with the help of a certain structure chart, so as to clearly show their interrelationship. In this study, the core category “influencing factors of rural revitalization” is selected, which can be summarized into four main categories: favorable policies, the establishment of technology platforms, institutional management, and the increase in the labor force, all of which are shown in Table 3.

Table-3 Core categories from selective coding

No.	Main categories	Sub-categories
1	Favorable policies	Policy guidance Policy support Funding
2	Technology platform	Technology advancement Equipment upgrade Channel-building
3	Institutional management	Institutional guidance Scale effect Operations and management
4	Increase labor force	Famers’ agency Rural economy development



5. THEORETICAL SATURATION VALIDATION

Nearly a quarter of the interview transcripts have been set aside for the testing of theoretical saturation in order to ensure objectivity and scientific validity. After collating the findings, it can be seen that the categories developed throughout the model have been more than adequately formed into four core main categories. Beyond this, no completely new constituent factors have been identified. Through this model, we can also conclude that the encouragement of agricultural policies, the building of technological platforms, the leadership and management of organizations, and the cultivation of rural productivity all play a very important role in guiding rural revitalization. Thus, a comprehensive analysis

shows that the theory is in a clear state of saturation.

6. MODEL EXPLANATION

We obtained a total of 95 initial concepts, 30 of which were categories, 6 of which were determined as main categories. Among the 6 main categories, the following four of which were selected as key categories: favorable policies, technology platform, institutional management, and increase in the labor force. Each of the four categories has its own action model with respect to rural vitalization.

6.1. Favorable policies as directions

Policies designed to benefit the rural area provide the direction and ideological support for rural vitalization. They can also help attract investment to the rural area. According to the specific conditions of China and the way the market works in China, policies encourage actions and determine the course of actions. In this case, policies favorable to the rural area can promote the development of the rural economy, the employment of the rural population, and the sustainable development of rural industries. However, challenges and crises will still arise. Addressing these issues has been a priority for the central government. From 2005 onwards, the central government has made “the three rural issues” the concern of the first officially-released document for 17 consecutive years.

The report of China's 19th national congress detailed a scheme for building an environment that is favorable to and beneficial for the rural area, providing a design from the top.

6.2. Technology platform as a driving force

The category of technology platform construction is comprised of three subcategories: technology advancement, equipment upgrade, and channel-building. These three categories cover the whole industry chain from production to sales. Since Deng Xiaoping pointed out that "science and technology is the primary productive force", the Chinese economy has been rapidly growing. Technology and equipment upgrades can increase production efficiency while both reducing production costs and the large demand for labor in traditional rural industries. More specifically, agricultural industries can adopt mechanization, professionalization, and production on large scale to reduce their strong reliance on labor, which is scarce. For rural industries and tourism, specialized management and technical production can be used to reduce the manpower required and production cost, which can create room for more economic benefits. Finally, channel building means the use of existing sales platforms and logistics channels, this solves the difficulty of sales, which remains the largest difficulty in rural industries.

6.3. Institutional management as a guarantee

The actual implementation of rural vitalization relies on the efforts of grass-root institutions. Three sub-categories are of key importance here: active leadership, scale effect, and scientific operations and management. The grass-rooted organizations here include not only administrative organizations such as grassroots party organizations and village organizations, but also economic and technical organizations such as cooperatives,⁶ mutual aid societies, and village and township enterprises. Grassroots party organizations must actively implement relevant policies and regulations to ensure the unwavering position of rural revitalization as a national strategy. In addition to realizing rural revitalization by providing farmers with financial assistance, technical support, and experience exchange, grassroots village and town economic organizations also realize the regionalization, specialization, and large-scale development of the rural economy by integrating rural land resources and human resources. The economic benefits and production efficiency of the rural industry are guaranteed, the scale and quality of rural products are guaranteed to a certain extent, and a certain degree of profit guarantee is provided for the sales of rural products.

6.4. Increasing the labor force to provide hope

We can see that the key problem facing rural

vitalization is the exodus of the working-age population caused by the rural-urban economic gap. The labor force necessary for the vitalizing rural economy is insufficient. The exodus of talents may further result in the decrease or the total disappearance of the rural population. The following measures can mitigate this issue: call upon the agency of rural inhabitants and their affection for the countryside, provide work opportunities, and increase income. Farmers are the subjects of rural vitalization⁷, and we can only regard farmers as basic subjects⁸. Based on this view, we believe that enhancing production in rural areas and protecting the benefits of farmers provide hope for the actual realization of rural vitalization.

7. SUGGESTIONS

This study shows that the four core categories of agricultural policy encouragement, technology platform construction, organizational leadership and management, and rural productivity cultivation exert significant influence on the rural revitalization factor model. Based on this premise, the model of the four core categories of influencing factors was constructed.

7.1. Formulating a reasonable incentive mechanism to mobilize the enthusiasm for rural development

First of all, an effective assessment system should be established for grass-roots rural governors and governance institutions. The interests and achievements of relevant responsible persons should be linked to their efforts and contributions to rural revitalization. In addition, efforts should be redoubled to strengthen the supervision and restriction on the power of rural grass-roots governance institutions, so as to prevent inaction and chaotic behavior of rural institutions, and unqualified cadres who are lazy and neglectful in governance shall also be resolutely cracked down.

Secondly, the main body of rural revitalization should be rewarded. This theme cannot be limited to the farmers themselves, but also can be added to the rewards for the heads of township enterprises, cooperatives, and mutual aid societies, which is conducive to the formation of large-scale, professional, and efficient development of rural industries, and promoting the flow of capital and technology to the countryside while maintaining the interests due to local farmers.

Finally, the establishment of an incentive mechanism for foreign investors not only reflects the important role of foreign capital in rural revitalization, but also tests the importance of capital and technology under the multi-subject framework of rural revitalization.

7.2. Introducing external capital and technology to improve rural development capabilities

At present, the main problems of China's rural economy include insufficient funds, backward technology, lagging information, and labor shortages, which lead to the following main difficulties in the development of the rural economy: insufficient initial funds, low production profits, high risk of unsalable products, and insufficient production efficiency. The primary countermeasure to solve these difficulties is to actively introduce external funds and technologies. The efficient and high-quality operation of the rural economy is realized through the upgrading of rural infrastructure, the expansion of employment space for rural industries, the establishment of export channels for rural products, and the alternation of rural production capacity and technology.

7.3. Formulating rural development plans in conjunction with the actual situation

Currently, there are problems of unbalanced development and different advantages and disadvantages in rural areas in various regions of China. This requires governments at all levels to introduce crops, develop the economy, and adjust the structure according to local conditions when formulating policies for rural revitalization. It is attempted to make the best possible use of local resource advantages, location advantages, and manpower advantages, thereby avoiding challenging the objective laws of the market economy with its own shortcomings.⁹ To this end, governments at all levels should evade imposing a single solution in assigning rural revitalization planning tasks, but appropriately delegate power to grass-roots governance organizations, while village and township organizations that understand local conditions should formulate development plans that are in line with the region.

7.4. Formulating reasonable policies for rural development by summarizing current measures and policies

The report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China clearly proposed to actively promote the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy and map a grand blueprint for the high-quality development of China's rural areas.¹⁰ The total number of policies does not mean that the more the better. Only based on the actual development conditions of rural areas in different regions, we can achieve the expected results in the implementation of the policy by adjusting measures to local conditions, promoting strengths and avoiding

weaknesses, and analyzing specific problems in detail. The government should pay full attention to the high degree of integration between the policies to benefit farmers and local village conditions and public opinions. Only the development of outstanding characteristics can truly pioneer the continuous progress of the rural industry.

8. CONCLUSION

In the research activities, this paper uses grounded theory as the basic support to build an integrated model of rural influencing factors and finds out the relationship between the policy encouragement to benefit farmers, the construction of technology platforms, the management of organizational leadership, and the cultivation of rural productivity. The mechanisms of their respective roles in the process of rural revitalization are identified, which has a very obvious effect on the realization of the ultimate goal of rural revitalization. However, the reliability, validity, and generalization of the model still need to be further tested. In future research and analysis, a more in-depth, scientific, and objective design of the categories of influencing factors involved in the model architecture is needed. The accuracy of the results can only be ensured by the study of large-scale data.

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