

The Guiding Role of New Township Sage Power on Rural Revitalization and Its Mechanisms

—A Case from Ningyang County

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How to cite this paper: Wang, W., Zhou, Y. X., Yang, J. L., & Wang, X. J. (2024). The Guiding Role of New Township Sage Power on Rural Revitalization and Its Mechanisms. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 12, 579-592.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2024.1211040>

Received: October 23, 2024

Accepted: November 23, 2024

Published: November 26, 2024

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Abstract

The Economic Work Conference emphasizes the imperative of establishing a robust agricultural nation and advocates for a thorough examination and application of the insights gained from the "Ten Million Project". To this end, it is crucial to vigorously advance the comprehensive revitalization of rural areas. By leveraging the experiences gleaned from the "Ten Million Projects", priority should be given to the development of rural human capital, alongside initiatives to actively encourage skilled villagers to return to their hometowns to facilitate rural revitalization. Through the case study method, this paper centers on the transformation of villages, developing an analytical framework grounded in social capital theory and the integration of three governance principles. It seeks to explore and elucidate the role of new township sages as an emergent governance force, examining how they can harness social capital to foster the establishment of a three-governance integration model within villages. Ultimately, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the role mechanism of new township sages leading rural revitalization, and to provide a novel theoretical paradigm for new township sages to effectively participate in rural governance and to enhance the modernization of rural governance system and governance capacity.

Keywords

Rural Revitalization, Social Capital, Transformation of Villages, Township Sage Power

1. Introduction

The figure of the village sage has historically held significant importance in the context of local governance in China. This significance is particularly highlighted within the framework of the notion that “the imperial power does not extend down to the counties, while clans beneath the counties operate autonomously; this self-governance relies on ethical standards, which in turn cultivate the village gentry.” In this milieu, village sages serve a crucial role in mediating and balancing the interests of various stakeholders.

Currently, the modernization of rural governance in the Chinese context represents a primary challenge confronting grassroots administration in the nation. The establishment of a multi-governance system at the grassroots level is of paramount importance (Gu, Li, & Li, 2024). As key participants in the modernization of Chinese-style rural governance, the effective mobilization of returning talents, particularly under the leadership of new township sages, is essential for enhancing the efficacy of grassroots governance.

Over the long term, the capacity to meaningfully integrate diverse forces—including new township sages—into grassroots governance will significantly influence the effectiveness of various elite talents in this domain. Ultimately, this integration is directly linked to the successful realization of rural revitalization strategies (Guo, 2024).

This paper focuses on the actual cases of new township sages returning home to govern villages, and uses social capital theory and the theory of the integration of the three rulers to explore the guiding role of new township sages in rural revitalization and the role of the mechanism of rural revitalization to provide a unique Luohe experience.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Literature Review

Most existing academic research on the concept of new township sages examines aspects such as their roles and the mechanisms through which they can effectively engage in rural governance.

Initially, the conceptualization of new township sages distinguishes them from traditional township sages. Traditional township sages are recognized for their prestige and talents within local villages, while new township sages represent an evolved interpretation of this role, infused with contemporary relevance. Scholar Liu Tao (2021) articulates that new township sages serve as practitioners of “rural civilization,” promoters of “good governance in the countryside,” facilitators of “prosperous living,” and maintainers of a “harmonious countryside” (Liu, 2021). Furthermore, Wen Fuqian and colleagues posit that new township sages embody high moral standards, along with scientific and cultural literacy. They maintain networks of kinship, blood relations, and geographic connections, contributing to the public welfare and developmental efforts within rural areas through their social virtues (Wen, Han, & Li, 2024). Gao Wanqin (2022) believes that as long as

one contributes to the rural society and is recognized by the people, he is a new township sage for the new era (Gao, 2022). Liu Lingfeng and Chen Xingzhu (2024) provide a new definition of the concept of new township sages: new township sages refer to “a group of people who have outstanding moral qualities, good reputation and prestige, possess a certain degree of knowledge and skills, and who are able to utilize their rich experience and broad vision to make outstanding contributions to various aspects of rural development” (Liu & Chen, 2024).

Secondly, research highlights the role of new township sages in the governance of rural communities. Chen Hanfei et al. assert that the involvement of new township sages in rural governance has yielded positive outcomes across various domains, including the legal framework, economic development, political culture, environmental enhancement, and poverty alleviation (Chen, 2020). He Zhimin and colleagues argue that new township sages function as critical intermediaries, bridging the government, village organizations, and local residents. Their unique positional advantages allow them to integrate diverse stakeholders in rural governance, thus playing an essential role in both governance and rural revitalization efforts (He & Cai, 2022).

Thirdly, investigations into the pathways for new township sages' participation in rural governance identify two primary perspectives. The first, the embedded perspective, posits that new township sages acquire social capital through interpersonal relationships, gain governance legitimacy via institutional integration, secure emotional legitimacy through cultural understanding, and derive governance authority through cognitive alignment. These processes collectively enhance the efficacy of rural governance (Shi, 2024). The second perspective, the energization perspective, emphasizes the importance of autonomy, culture, economy, and consciousness as dimensions that fortify the roles of new township sages in grassroots governance, incorporating elements of governance, resources, wisdom, and regulation (Wu, 2023).

Given the vast geographic expanse of China's rural areas, coupled with variations in economic foundations and developmental trajectories, it is evident that each locality faces unique challenges in identifying and pursuing appropriate development pathways. As such, exploring the mechanisms underlying the roles of new township sages in the process of rural revitalization is crucial for fostering effective governance tailored to local conditions.

2.2. Theoretical Foundation

2.2.1. Social Capital Theory

The concept of social capital was first introduced in 1980 by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who characterized it as “a collection of actual or potential resources” (Zhao, 1998). Robert Putnam later expanded the notion of social capital from an individual level to a collective one, arguing that “social capital refers to the characteristics of a society—such as trust, norms, and networks—that can enhance societal efficiency by promoting cooperative behavior” (Putnam, 2001).

Linnan further elaborates that “social capital is a resource invested in social relationships, anticipated to yield returns in the marketplace; it is inherently embedded within the social structure and can be cultivated through intentional action” (Zhou & Yuan, 2010).

Research within the domestic context has increasingly focused on the interplay between social capital and rural revitalization. Hu Zhongying (2018) highlighted the pivotal role of abundant social capital in facilitating rural revitalization efforts (Hu, 2018). Following a field study of 19 model villages for rural revitalization in Shanghai, Wang Wenqi and Liu Pingyan (2022) categorized community social capital into two distinct types: those characteristics that arise from internal community integration and external connections. Their analysis underscored the necessity of fostering social capital throughout the rural revitalization process to enhance community cohesion, improve governance efficiency, and strengthen the infusion of external resources (Wang & Liu, 2022).

Social capital encompasses three essential dimensions: trust, norms, and networks. These dimensions function to coordinate various stakeholders, thereby enhancing economic efficiency and minimizing transaction costs. In the rural context, social capital serves as a vital force for promoting sustainable development, acting as a key mechanism for reshaping rural development patterns and stimulating endogenous growth. Achieving successful rural revitalization necessitates collaborative efforts among multiple actors; however, differing interests and operational styles often lead to conflicts and disputes among governance participants.

The theory of social capital posits that informal norms—such as trust and reputation—can complement formal governance systems, facilitating the mediation of conflicts and disputes that may arise during rural revitalization efforts. By reducing transaction costs, social capital’s reliance on informal norms can efficiently address challenges, as these mechanisms typically require less time and fewer resources compared to formal systems. As such, the integration of social capital into governance strategies is essential for enhancing overall work efficiency and realizing the objectives of rural revitalization.

2.2.2. The Theory of Three-Governance Integration

Three-governance integration represents a grassroots governance model that synthesizes “moral governance, autonomy, and the rule of law”. This integrated approach originated in 2013 in Tongxiang City, Zhejiang Province, where it crystallized into what is commonly referred to as the “Tongxiang experience”. The model quickly disseminated throughout the country as a framework for addressing social contradictions and conflicts of interest that arise within grassroots social governance.

Jiang Yizhou (2018) posited that the integration of these three governance principles is essential for advancing the modernization of grassroots governance in China (Jiang, 2018). Jiang & Xu (2019) emphasized that clarifying the relationships between autonomy, the rule of law, and moral governance, as well as

promoting their integration, synergy, and convergence, are critical for constructing a new system of modern rural governance with Chinese characteristics (Jiang & Xu, 2019). Furthermore, Tao Dong (2021) asserted that the integration of these three governance dimensions aligns well with the evolving needs of rural society and fulfills the requirements associated with the modernization of the national social governance system, thereby enhancing rural governance outcomes (Tao, 2021).

Yang Kaifeng, Qiu Naqing, and Guo Yifan (2024) characterize “three-governance integration” as an innovative grassroots governance model that exerts a comprehensive influence on local communities. They argue that it effectively balances the diverse and intricate relationships within grassroots societies and contributes to the realization of social remodeling objectives, fostering ideals of pluralistic co-governance in vibrant, stable, and orderly communities (Yang, Qiu, & Guo, 2024).

It is essential to recognize that three-governance integration is not merely the aggregation of these three elements; rather, it entails leveraging their distinctive characteristics according to local conditions. Through effective configuration, each component’s maximum potential can be utilized to create synergistic carriers. This integration fosters an environment where self-governance supports moral rule, moral rule reinforces the rule of law, and the rule of law underpins self-governance. Consequently, the effective integration of these three dimensions can establish a scientifically grounded and effective model of good governance.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This paper focuses on Luohe Factory Village in Sidian Town, Ningyang County, Shandong Province, as the subject of the study for several compelling reasons. First, the remediation of resource-scarce villages presents a significant challenge for social governance. Luohe Factory Village is situated in a water-scarce region, characterized by a limited agricultural structure and insufficient resources, which complicates governance efforts. Second, the role of new township sages is critical in the context of rural revitalization. In the developmental trajectory of Luohe Factory Village, these new township sages have effectively addressed foundational issues by revitalizing local resources, developing appropriate industries, and enhancing the village’s aesthetic appeal, thereby playing a pivotal role in the village’s overall progress.

The information sources for this case study are principally derived from field research, in-person interviews, and online inquiries. The research methodology incorporates diverse approaches, including extensive field research and surveys conducted via digital platforms. During the offline research phase, the research team gathered a wealth of qualitative data, including textual documents, audio recordings, and photographs. Additionally, relevant reports concerning Luohe Factory Village were explored through online searches, ensuring that the collected information is both comprehensive and accurate.

3.2. Analysis Framework

Drawing upon the development data and a comprehensive review of relevant literature concerning Luohe Factory Village, this paper employs the village's developmental history as a framework for analysis through fieldwork and interviews. It applies social capital theory and the theory of three-governance integration to investigate the mechanisms by which new township sages contribute to the enhancement of rural social capital (Figure 1). This study aims to elucidate their roles in facilitating rural revitalization and achieving effective governance within the countryside.

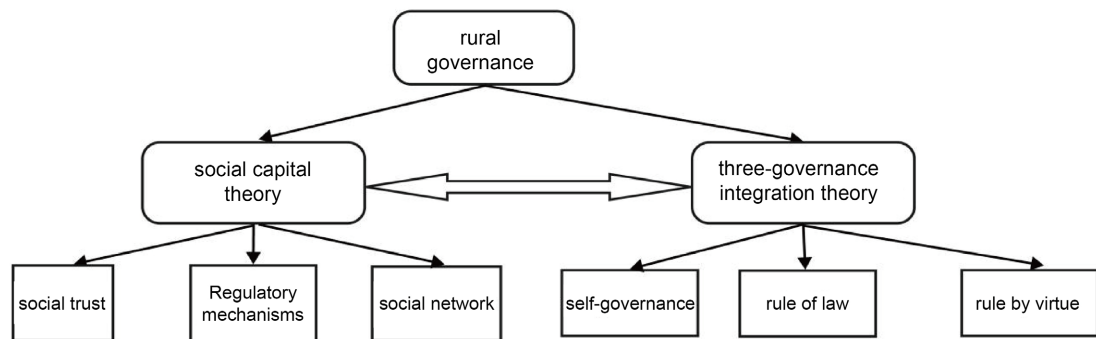


Figure 1. Analytical framework.

4. Analysis of Village Development Dilemmas

4.1. Lack of Trust

A significant number of young laborers from the village opt to migrate to urban areas in pursuit of stable income and enhanced life security. This trend has resulted in pronounced issues of “hollowing out” and population aging within Luohe Factory Village. The unidirectional flow of the labor force has severely disrupted the village's historically stable social structure, which was primarily based on geographic proximity and kinship ties. Consequently, the dynamics of interpersonal relationships are undergoing a silent transformation, leading to the gradual deterioration of the familiar, trust-based society that Fei Xiaotong described. Additionally, the lack of cooperative engagement among villagers, characterized by reciprocal relationships and a diminished sense of collective responsibility, further hampers the establishment of high-trust social networks.

4.2. Lack of Norms

The role of social norms is pivotal in employing reciprocal and constraining norms to guide individual behavior, maintain social order, and orient social activities within established parameters (Zhang, 2019). Within the framework of social capital theory, these social norms function as an informal system that is critical for fostering a harmonious atmosphere in the village, mediating conflicts of interest, and enhancing the efficiency of collective action. The primary manifestations of these norms include the establishment of village rules and regulations,

the promotion of rural civilization, and the organization of cultural and recreational activities.

In the developmental context of Luohe Factory Village, there is a notable scarcity of collective activities such as sports, recreation, and civic education, which has led to a lack of effective cooperation on shared interests. Communication and collaboration among villagers are minimal, resulting in the absence of a cohesive village community and a deficit in normative concepts that would encourage active individual participation in collective endeavors. Consequently, the sense of belonging to the village is considerably diminished.

Moreover, the regulatory power of the village rules and regulations appears to be limited. In practice, the implementation of these rules in Luohe Factory Village functions primarily as advocacy rather than as binding directives. The failure of village rules to become enforceable regulations is compounded by the limited organizational and managerial capacity of the village committees, which has hindered the effective enforcement of these rules and regulations.

4.3. Loose Network

Luohe Factory Village continues to be characterized by a traditional individual farmer economy, which is substantially restricted by natural conditions. The social connections among villagers remain insufficiently close, and there is a notable absence of effective mechanisms for cooperation and mutual assistance. This lack of collaborative engagement hampers the full utilization of available resources and inhibits the formation of synergies for common development among villagers, consequently restraining the overall progress of the village.

Additionally, transportation limitations and inadequate infrastructure development further impede villagers' access to timely information about external socio-economic trends and opportunities. This informational blockage not only challenges the dissemination of knowledge about the village itself but also constrains potential development avenues, thereby limiting the community's growth prospects.

5. Role Mechanism of New Township Sages in Rural Revitalization

Social capital exists within specific networks of social relationships, and its functional role facilitates the simultaneous achievement of both individual and collective objectives. Moreover, social capital can be enhanced through the maintenance and strengthening of these relationships (Zhang & Zhou, 2023). Presently, rural revitalization efforts encounter challenges associated with insufficient social capital stock. When new township sages engage in rural governance, they can leverage their substantial social capital to integrate their resource advantages alongside existing social resources, such as trust-building atmospheres, normative mechanisms, and established social networks. This integration promotes the effective circulation of social capital.

By enhancing the effectiveness of rural social governance through the strategic utilization of social capital, it becomes essential to explore the specific dimensions and manifestations of autonomy, the rule of law, and moral governance within the context of rural governance. Investigating how these elements can be synergistically combined with social capital will significantly contribute to the modernization of rural governance. This approach not only fully uncovers the foundational resources within rural societies but also stimulates the active participation of diverse stakeholders in rural social governance, thereby reinforcing the endogenous momentum for rural development and achieving effective governance within the countryside.

5.1. Strengthening Social Trust

In the view of social capital theorists, trust reduces transaction costs and accelerates the flow of resources and innovation. A society that relies on universalized reciprocity is more efficient than one without trust (Wang, 2021). The establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships fundamentally rely on trust, which is also essential for the foundation and operation of organizations. New township sages play a pivotal role in cultivating and sustaining social trust. Generally, new township sages are characterized by high personal trust, and their prestige, fairness, and moral stature within the community enable them to forge trusting relationships with villagers. This trust is critical for the integration of social networks facilitated by new township sages. By actively participating in village public affairs, these sages continue to consolidate and expand their trust networks, encouraging greater cooperation among villagers.

Additionally, new township sages engage in the construction and operation of the organizational system, thereby enhancing trust in governance processes and contributing to the overall effectiveness of the organizational structure.

5.1.1. Transparent and Efficient Operation

In their roles within rural governance, new township sages are obligated to adhere to principles of transparency, justice, and fairness, ensuring that all decisions and actions are conducted transparently. By publicly disseminating information and allowing for community oversight, they can bolster villagers' trust in their leadership. Upon taking office, new township sages prioritized party-building initiatives, focusing on the development of the local committees and party members. They implemented systematic management practices, which included regular meetings, weekly summaries, and the assignment of specific tasks with clear deadlines. Moreover, they employed mechanisms such as public transparency regarding "three affairs," hosting thematic party days, and establishing micro-credit groups to bolster education among party members, disseminate agricultural knowledge, and solicit community feedback.

Through organized training for party members and cadres, they facilitated the study of pertinent reports and national policies, enhancing the rectification awareness of local leaders. This approach not only counters the villagers' perceptions of

previous inefficiencies within the village committees but also fosters greater trust in these bodies as they work to establish a more convincing leadership presence.

5.1.2. Resource Sharing

Leveraging their own resources and advantages, new township sages can attract external funding and resources for village development. They actively encourage villagers to participate in rural governance and economic initiatives, fostering a culture of resource sharing and complementary advantages. This collective effort enhances the overall capacity and competitiveness of the village, while simultaneously raising villagers' confidence in and expectations for the community's future.

5.2. Establishing Sound Normative Mechanisms

The institutional norms governing a region serve as essential guarantees for its development. Given the changing environment faced by new township sages in social governance—a context where customs and ideological frameworks differ from those traditionally found in rural communities—there is an imperative to enhance normative mechanisms during their participation in rural governance to maintain social order.

5.2.1. Promoting the Rule of Law in Villages

Trust and norms are integral components of social capital and serve as foundational elements in the construction of the rule of law. In rural governance, strengthening legal awareness and education, along with establishing an effective legal framework, can enhance trust among villagers and foster norms for shared compliance. Such trust and established norms, in turn, facilitate the deeper implementation of legal principles. Currently, village governance primarily relies on rules and regulations as tools for managing economic, cultural, and social affairs; however, these regulations often lack sufficient authority, resulting in implementation challenges. Efforts to fortify the rule of law within Luohe Factory Village have aimed to transform the existing advocacy-based regulations into binding rules, effectively transitioning soft customs into strictly enforced systems that compel compliance and uphold rural harmony and stability.

5.2.2. Enhancing Moral Governance in Villages

Moral governance emphasizes the use of ethical principles to educate and guide individuals, thereby improving their moral conduct. This form of governance offers internal spiritual support and serves as a moral compass for normative mechanisms. In Luohe Factory Village, new township sages mobilized local party members and village leaders to exemplify and initiate changes in customary practices, providing role models for villagers and establishing benchmarks for virtuous behavior. The village has embraced the goal of becoming a civilized community, regularly organizing family tea parties to promote civility and contemporary values, thereby nurturing a robust cultural atmosphere. Furthermore, the establishment of a new era of civilized practice stations and the organization of dedicated volunteer teams facilitate the promotion of a spirit of “dedication, friendship,

mutual assistance, and progress”, thereby advancing the dissemination of civic values throughout the township.

5.3. Integration of Social Networks

New township sages possess extensive social networks, enabling them to connect with government entities, enterprises, social organizations, and other stakeholders. This connectivity facilitates the flow of external resources—including policies, technologies, and funding—into the village, which is crucial for development. Concurrently, new township sages coordinate the distribution of resources within the community through these networks, ensuring their rational and effective utilization. Positioned at the nexus of these social networks, new township sages are recognized by both external parties and local villagers, creating a dual acknowledgment that propels their involvement in rural development. This dynamic motivates them to manage and harmonize various resources within rural society.

5.3.1. Guiding Villagers Toward Self-Governance

The accumulation of social capital comes mainly from the participation of citizens in specific social activities, forming a broad network of civic engagement. The scope of such participation focuses on public affairs within the scope of citizens’ self-governance (Ling, 2010). Self-governance activities necessitate extensive participation and collaboration among villagers. Through their engagement in self-governance, villagers increase their communication and interactions with one another, thereby facilitating the strengthening of social networks. This process allows them to establish new connections, identify common interests and goals, and develop closer relationships within the community.

In Luohuafang Village, the implementation of the “four deliberations and two openings” system ensures that both major and minor issues are subject to discussion and resolution by party members and representatives of the villagers. This collaborative approach mandates that village affairs, financial matters, and party operations are regularly communicated through platforms such as microblogs and WeChat public accounts. By integrating both online and offline methods, this system not only enhances work efficiency but also fosters a sense of unity and cultivates a robust democratic atmosphere within the community.

5.3.2. Establishing Cooperative Networks

New township sages leverage their resources and capabilities to promote collaborative efforts and the implementation of various initiatives. These projects may encompass areas such as industrial development, infrastructure construction, and public services. Through these initiatives, they facilitate in-depth cooperation and benefit-sharing among participating entities, thereby consolidating and expanding the cooperative network.

In the realm of infrastructure construction, new township sages have successfully achieved household connectivity in the village by investing both manpower and capital, addressing key transportation challenges that hinder rural development. In

terms of industrial advancement, they have collaborated with Israeli experts to develop modern agricultural practices within the Lehuo rural area. Additionally, the local Party branch has established a partnership with Qingdao Kaizun Hat Factory Co., thereby facilitating close communication and enhanced cooperation with external stakeholders. This collaboration has enabled a substantial influx of capital, human resources, and managerial expertise, which collectively promote the transformation and upgrading of the local industrial structure.

Furthermore, new township sages can facilitate venues for exchange, consultation, and cooperation among stakeholders by establishing various cooperative platforms, such as township councils, industrial cooperatives, and voluntary service organizations. In the developmental trajectory of Luohe Factory Village, a collective effort was made to harness “Internet+” technologies to create an e-commerce platform. Simultaneously, the village registered “vegetable planting professional cooperatives” and “rural tourism professional cooperatives” to promote the marketing of local specialty products. These initiatives have significantly enhanced the flow of information, resource sharing, and the complementarity of advantages among stakeholders, thereby expanding external networks and providing a solid foundation for the development of cooperative networks.

6. Case Insights

6.1. Improving the Incentive System for Village Sages

Rural revitalization currently faces two significant challenges: how to attract village sages back to their communities and how to retain them once they return. To address these issues, it is essential to develop a comprehensive incentive system tailored to the diverse needs of different types of village sages.

First and foremost, material incentives should be considered. This includes offering policy concessions such as tax relief and reductions in social security contributions aimed at encouraging the return of village sages. Secondly, political incentives are important; providing opportunities for returning village sages to engage in political activities and take on leadership roles in rural revitalization initiatives can enhance their career satisfaction and motivation. Finally, spiritual incentives play a critical role in fostering a sense of pride and satisfaction among village sages. By publicizing their achievements through bulletin boards, village broadcasts, and online platforms such as WeChat, the aim is to enhance their sense of honor and fulfill the call for more village sages to return to their hometowns.

6.2. Promoting the Culture of Village Sages

The culture of village sages is a vital component of traditional Chinese culture, embodying the morals, values, and cultural heritage of rural society. Promoting this culture serves to recognize and applaud individuals who have made notable contributions to their communities and possess both virtuous character and conduct. This, in turn, can guide the rural society toward positive transformations through exemplary actions.

Establishment of Village Sage Organizations: Creating committees or similar organizations in rural areas can provide a platform for village sages to communicate, collaborate, and render service. By organizing activities and implementing projects, these organizations guide village sages in actively participating in governance and public welfare initiatives.

Leveraging the Modeling Role of Village Sages: It is crucial to enhance the demonstrative impact of new township sages in showcasing desirable values, lifestyles, and ideological concepts. By enabling village sages to establish local rules and regulations, and to propagate changes in the social atmosphere through the transmission of family customs and traditions, the community can be directed toward progressive norms.

Publicizing the Achievements of Village Sages: Utilizing various media platforms—including television, radio, and the Internet—can facilitate recognition of the remarkable deeds and contributions of village sages. Establishing dedicated columns or special programs to share their stories through documentaries and narratives will enhance public understanding and appreciation of the culture of village sages.

6.3. Increasing Policy Support

Rural revitalization, as an important part of the national strategy, is a key path to the modernization of agriculture and rural areas. In this process, the extent of policy support directly affects the effectiveness and speed of rural revitalization. Consequently, robust policy support is vital in the rural revitalization process to provide diverse resource backing.

Optimizing the Rural Business Environment: The establishment of investment promotion departments is essential to identify suitable projects and enterprises tailored to local conditions. By fostering cooperative relationships with businesses, the goal is to attract capital and technical resources (Gao & Chu, 2024). Additionally, formulating supportive policies and strengthening market oversight will create an equitable, transparent market atmosphere conducive to rural revitalization.

Strengthening Management Foundations for Rural Development: The government must enhance rural infrastructure, including transportation and communication systems, to provide a solid foundation for revitalization efforts. Furthermore, improving the policy framework to support rural industries—by introducing preferential policies and creating developmental platforms—will facilitate the growth and sustainability of these industries.

7. Conclusion

Through the in-depth study of the path exploration and role mechanism of new township sage power in rural revitalization in Luohe factory village of Ningyang County, we can easily find that new township sages, as an important force in rural governance in the new era, have a far-reaching impact on rural revitalization. In

the future, we should continue to explore and cultivate the resources of new township sages and give full play to their unique advantages in rural revitalization. At the same time, we also hope that more villages can learn from the successful experience of Luohe Factory Village and actively explore new paths suitable for their own development, so as to jointly promote the in-depth implementation of the strategy of rural revitalization.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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