



Research on the Practical Benefits of Chinese-Style Democracy in Rural China: Based on the Cases of 20 Villages in Zhejiang Province, China

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Abstract

Whole-process people's democracy, core to Chinese-style democracy, sees China emphasizing rural effectiveness. Zhejiang, a reform forerunner, serves as a case: field research in 20 national demonstration villages highlights its "Five-Governance Integration" model, a holistic framework combining political leadership, rule of law, virtue-based social norms, grassroots self-governance, and digital intelligent governance. Dilemmas in Zhejiang's rural democratic governance include: exogenous-endogenous conflicts; hollowing-out from absent subjects; disconnection between grassroots democracy and practice; model homogenization/rigidity; and regional disparities in effectiveness. Measures proposed include: deepening "embedded collaborative governance" to integrate administration and autonomy; boosting villagers' self-governance for co-construction/sharing; optimizing resources to embed democracy in practice; innovating methods to upgrade the model; and building inter-village platforms to leverage demo villages.

Subject Areas

Culture

Keywords

Rural Governance, Chinese-Style Democracy, Cases in Zhejiang Province

1. Introduction

In China's blueprint for a modern socialist country, rural governance is key to national governance modernization. As the birthplace of the Party's "Red Boat" revolution, Zhejiang province has followed the "Eight-Eight Strategy" for 20 years, advancing whole-process people's democracy in rural governance with remarkable results. Its 273 "National Demonstration Villages for Democracy and the Rule of Law" embody grassroots practices. The central focus of this research is the "Five-Governance Integration" model, a holistic framework combining political leadership, rule of law, virtue-based social norms, grassroots self-governance, and digital intelligent governance to modernize rural administration [1]. This model has become a benchmark for grassroots governance modernization (See **Table 1**).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of survey participants.

National Model Village for Democracy and the Rule of Law in Zhejiang Province (Excerpt)
Chashan Village, Chun'an County, Zhejiang
Houxi Village, Tonglu County, Zhejiang
Zaotianban Village, Jiangshan City, Hangzhou City
Meizhu Village, Xinchang County, Shaoxing City
Fengqiao Town, Zhuji City, Shaoxing City
Xinchuan Village, Meishan Town, Changxing County, Huzhou City
Wusi Village, Moganshan Town, Deqing County, Huzhou City
Lijiakeng Village, Zhangshui Town, Haishu District, Ningbo City
Waicao Village, Yongjiang Subdistrict, Jiangbei District, Ningbo City
Xugong'ao Village, Tuci Town, Xiangshan County, Ningbo City
Yuta Village, Pengxi Town, Taishun County, Wenzhou City
Linggen Village, Aojiang Town, Pingyang County, Wenzhou City
Shuitong'ao Village, Shamen Town, Yuhuan City, Taizhou City
Yangfengshan Village, Zhuxi Town, Xianju County, Taizhou City
Sanxing Village, Fengqiao Town, Nanhu District, Jiaxing City
Xuyouche Village, Qinshan Subdistrict, Haiyan County, Jiaxing City
Huangyangjian Village, Zhanmao Subdistrict, Putuo District, Zhoushan City
Meiyuan Village, Chongtou Town, Yunhe County, Lishui City
Houchen Village, Wuyi County, Jinhua City
Hongqi Village, Dachen Town, Yiwu City, Jinhua City

This study draws from a broad survey of 65 of Zhejiang's 273 national demonstration villages (23.81% of the total), selected through purposive sampling to ensure representativeness across the province's 11 prefecture-level cities, economic

levels, geographical locations, and cultural contexts. This paper presents an in-depth analysis based on intensive fieldwork conducted in 20 of those 65 villages. To assess the reliability of our findings, our methodology included administering a 50-item questionnaire to over 500 households and conducting semi-structured interviews with more than 100 individuals, including village cadres, Party members, ordinary villagers, and local officials. A qualitative thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns from interview transcripts, field notes, and official documentation.

2. Findings

2.1. Development Trajectory and Experience of Whole-Process People's Democracy

The development of Zhejiang's grassroots democracy can be traced through three phases. The embryonic pilot phase began with the "Fengqiao Experience" in 1963. This was followed by a comprehensive construction phase in the early 2000s, guiding villages with the principles of "self-governance, virtue-based governance, and rule of law." Since the 18th CPC National Congress, Zhejiang has entered a quality enhancement and innovation phase, advancing development via "intelligent governance" and digital platforms. As a "testing ground" for grassroots governance, Zhejiang upgraded its system from the "Three-Governance Integration" to the "Five-Governance Integration" by incorporating "political governance" and "intelligent governance."

2.2. Political Governance: Innovating Synergetic Governance Mechanisms under Party-Building Leadership

Under the principle of "upholding Party leadership," villages explore multi-subject governance. Quzhou's Diwei Village pioneered the "cadre-Party member-farm household" linkage mechanism, an adaptive transformation of the traditional hierarchical system that forms a governance structure of "vertical integration and horizontal coordination" [1]. This strengthens the Party's core role while activating participation from cadres, elites, and villagers. Furthermore, villages practice a "Party-building coalition" model, breaking self-governance boundaries to form "governance alliances" with neighboring villages. This "strong leading weak" approach pursues common prosperity; data shows the per capita disposable income gap among one coalition's villages narrowed from 1:2.1 in 2019 to 1:1.4 in 2023.

2.3. Rule of Law Construction: Dual Construction of Normative Order and Resilient Society

Zhejiang's demonstration villages explore diverse legal education practices, shifting from one-way indoctrination to cultural immersion. This "legal socialization" process [2] has boosted villagers' law-abiding behavior, cutting local law-related petitions by 52%. A key innovation is the "Maritime Fengqiao Experience" paradigm. The "Marine-Land Joint Mediation Network" in Zhoushan leverages "acquaintance authority" within the fisherman community to resolve most maritime disputes

swiftly. This informal institutional innovation, based on local knowledge, provides a vivid example for the localized implementation of national mediation law.

2.4. Virtue-Based Governance: Cultivating Morality through Culture and Evaluation

Using moral review councils, villages utilize “folk public opinion” to amplify moral discourse. Activities like “Moral Model Lists” represent a gentle practice of Foucauldian “panopticism” [3]. By visualizing and quantifying moral performance, they construct an incentive-discipline mechanism based on “honor–shame,” shaping good conduct through soft discipline. Concurrently, rural cultural halls serve as comprehensive platforms integrating moral education and cultural activities, transforming public spaces into “governance theaters” that strengthen collective memory and construct moral consensus.

2.5. Self-Governance Construction: Mutual Construction of Democratic Practices and Institutional Empowerment

In deepening democratic self-governance, Huangyan District innovatively established the “Three Modernizations and Twelve Systems,” integrating Party leadership, modern governance, and supervision with twelve specific institutional measures [4]. This clarifies the power relationship between townships and village committees, legally protecting villagers’ democratic rights. Many villages have also adopted a “grid management” model, where mediators address disputes at their inception. Through fine-grained division of labor, grid management promotes the efficient operation of village-level self-governance and enhances villagers’ initiative in community decision-making.

2.6. Intelligent Governance Construction: The Paradigm Revolution of Digital Governance

Zhejiang’s villages actively adopt information technologies to achieve intelligent and transparent management. Digital practices such as “financial QR code disclosure” break information monopolies; data shows that online supervision has reduced violations in village-level projects by 79%. This marks a shift in governance logic from “department-oriented” to “problem-oriented.” By integrating data from various sectors, villages break down “information silos.” Data sharing maximizes digital value, improves the precision of governance decisions, and provides strong support for rural revitalization.

3. Discussion and Implications

Despite its success, the “Five-governance Integration” model faces several dilemmas.

3.1. Democratic Level: Contradictions between Exogenous Governance and Endogenous Order

A primary challenge lies in the tension between exogenous state forces and the

endogenous order of rural life. State administrative power requires unity and fairness—a “matter-oriented” governance—which clashes with the traditional “person-oriented” governance of rural China, a society based on human relationships and a “differential-order pattern” [5]. This makes it difficult for administrative power to penetrate the roots of rural areas effectively.

3.2. Democratic Subject: The Hollowing-Out of Rural Governance

Villagers are the main body of grassroots democracy, but their absence leads to the “hollowing-out” of rural governance—an efficiency dilemma caused by the loss of governance subjects [6]. This problem is compounded by the influx of “new villagers” or migrants, who often have a lower participation rate and less say in decision-making, creating issues of democratic fairness.

3.3. Democratic Form: Disconnection between Democratic Construction and Governance Practice

While villages have innovated new forms of democratic practice, these often remain disconnected from the realities of governance, a failure of “embedded governance” [7]. The utilization rate of democratic resources, especially digital platforms, is often low due to high maintenance costs and low digital literacy. Moreover, the effectiveness of these resources is hampered by the dynamics of an “acquaintance society,” where villagers are often reluctant to exercise supervision rights due to face-saving concerns [8].

3.4. Democratic Content: Homogenization and Rigidification of the Governance Model

The “Five-Governance Integration” model is prone to homogenization. Many villages simply copy successful models without adapting them to their local context, leading to a “one-size-fits-all” approach that is often ineffective. Furthermore, there is a tendency to emphasize the five governance elements separately while neglecting their integration, thereby failing to achieve a synergistic effect.

3.5. Democratic Distribution: Regional Disparities in Effectiveness

The distribution of “National Demonstration Villages” in Zhejiang is uneven, with a higher concentration in more economically developed areas. This indicates that economic construction is a foundational prerequisite for robust democratic institutions, creating a challenge for promoting balanced development across all regions.

3.6. Study Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, by focusing exclusively on “national demonstration villages,” the research is subject to selection bias. These villages represent high-performing examples and their successes may not be generalizable to all rural localities in Zhejiang, many of which face more significant challenges. Second, the findings’ external validity may be con-

strained. Zhejiang's unique economic and political context limits the direct applicability of its governance model to other Chinese provinces or different national settings without substantial adaptation.

4. Conclusions

4.1. Deepening Embedded Collaborative Governance

To bridge the gap between administrative power and autonomous governance, it is crucial to cultivate “intermediate-layer” forces like councils of village sages. This requires reconstructing a composite authority system that enhances credibility by drawing on traditional governance resources [9].

4.2. Enhancing Villagers' Self-Governance

To counter the “hollowing-out” of governance, a rights protection system for the floating population is necessary. Based on Bourdieu's field theory, the key is to strengthen villagers' power by smoothing channels for communication and ensuring fair representation in democratic institutions [10].

4.3. Optimizing Resource Allocation and Embedding Democracy into Practice

To improve the utilization of democratic resources, digital platforms must be designed according to actual needs. It is also vital to break the dilemma of supervision in the “acquaintance society” by establishing anonymous supervision channels and introducing third-party institutions to enhance transparency.

4.4. Innovating Governance Methods to Upgrade the “Five-Governance Model”

Villages must move beyond simple replication and formulate governance plans based on their unique characteristics. This requires deepening the synergistic effect of “Five-Governance Integration” by establishing joint meeting systems to integrate resources from all five pillars, allowing the model to adapt to the complex challenges of modern rural governance.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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