

# The influence of social relationship network of new village-sages on rural governance: A case study of H village in Pengzhou City, Sichuan Province

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**Abstract:** *The participation of new township sages in rural community governance is an important exploration for national and local governments to enhance the effectiveness of grassroots governance. In order to analyse the relationship network and governance logic of new township sages, this paper investigates the governance practice of H village in Pengzhou City, Sichuan Province, based on the perspective of social relationship network. It is found that new township sages often have "strong relationship", "weak relationship" and "structural hole" relationship with village cadres and villagers. Different relationship statuses play different roles in village governance, with strong relationships being conducive to the handling of public affairs, weak relationships being conducive to the development of village economy, and "structural holes" being conducive to the dissemination of information and culture.*

**Keywords:** *new township sages; social relationship network; rural governance*

## 1. Introduction

Village governance by village sages is a crystallisation of the wisdom of ancient Chinese governance, a local governance concept and practice rooted in Chinese rural society.<sup>[1]</sup> Since the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the "Opinions on Strengthening Reform and Innovation and Accelerating the Construction of Agricultural Modernisation" in 2015, which puts forward the policy proposition of "innovating the culture of rural sages", the No. 1 document of the Central Government from 2016 to 2018 has further emphasised the need to bring into full play the positive role of the culture of the new rural sages. The October 2018 release of the The Strategic Plan for Rural Revitalisation (2018-2022), released in October 2018, also explicitly proposes to "actively play the role of new township sages" in the process of upgrading the level of moral governance in the countryside, while the Guidelines for Farmers' Participation in Rural Construction (for Trial Implementation), released in January 2023, explicitly proposes that the opinions of new township sages should be taken into account in the construction of the countryside. It is clear that the Central Government attaches great importance to the participation of new township sages in rural construction and supports their participation in village governance.

China's vast territory has seen a significant influx of peasant groups migrating to urban areas. According to the National Bureau of Statistics in the 2022 National Economic and Social Development Statistics Bulletin, the total number of rural migrant workers in the country at the end of 2022 was approximately 170 million.<sup>[2]</sup> The frequent movement of a large number of peasant groups from the countryside to the cities has imported sustained and stable human resources for the economic and social development of the cities. However, at the same time, it has left behind a lot of grassroots governance problems in the rural areas.<sup>[3]</sup> The background of the new township sages ruling the village, on the other hand, is the current dilemma of rural governance. In view of this, this paper starts from the empirical case of H village in Pengzhou city, focuses on the discussion of new township sages as one of the subjects of grassroots governance, analyses the social relationship network of new township sages, and explores their influence and role in the practice of rural governance.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Basis

### 2.1. Concept of "new township sages"

In ancient China, the traditional township squire was the honorific title for those local officials or social sages who had high prestige in the rural society or made significant contributions to the rural society, who were the leading force in the construction of the rural society, in the edification of customs and habits, and in the public affairs of the townships.<sup>[4]</sup> In modern times, the concept of Xiangxian has also changed in different periods. Nowadays, the concept of "New Township Sages" was proposed in the 13th China Rural Development Forum, which not only has the dual geographical attributes of urban and rural areas, but also has the dual cultural attributes of tradition and modernity, and plays the role of cultural inheritance and innovation. Some scholars have compared the differences between the traditional township sages and the new township sages, and believe that the new township sages should have a broader connotation, and its connotation and extension should include not only the local township sages who are rooted in the countryside, but also the off-road township sages who have left the countryside but are in constant contact with their hometowns and are willing to return to their hometowns to feed their hometowns and have the spirit of dedication.<sup>[5]</sup> Most scholars define the new township sages in terms of the background of the era they live in, their local contribution and their own ability. Hu Penghui and other scholars proposed that the new township sages are those who have wealth, knowledge, morality and sentiment in the new era, who can influence the rural politics and economic and social ecology, and are willing to make contributions to them.<sup>[6]</sup> Liu Yutang et al. pointed out that "new township sages" are a new group of people with high prestige among villagers and neighbours, high moral awareness, and the ability to use new knowledge and skills to achieve new rural development under the new situation.<sup>[7]</sup>

Based on the above literature sorting, we believe that new township sages are elites who have certain knowledge, talents and resources, etc., and are willing to contribute to the construction of villages in the context of the new era.

### 2.2. Study on New Village-sages Ruling Villages

As an important returning subject of rural social governance in China, new township sages play an important role in promoting the modernisation of grassroots social governance. On the one hand, most scholars have focused on the role that new township sages can play when they return to rural governance from political, economic and social perspectives. For example, in the rural field, the active participation of new township sages is needed in the allocation of public power, the supply of public products, industrial development, and cultural construction. Zhang Dengguo et al. believe that the role of rural elites as "village sages" can not only promote the economic development of rural communities and rural community integration, but also promote the development of rural public welfare.<sup>[8]</sup> Liu Wei and others believe that rural elites play an irreplaceable role in stabilising the social order in villages, absorbing and integrating social resources, and promoting the development of villages.<sup>[9]</sup> On the other hand, a few scholars have also explored some governance problems exposed by the new township sages. Chen Hanfei and other scholars believe that new township sages also have negative effects, such as undermining democracy, overly broad or narrow functions, ambiguous relationship with village "two committees", exclusion of villagers from participation in village governance, and lack of livelihood security.<sup>[10]</sup> Zhang Dengguo and others believe that there are still some limitations in the governance process, such as the over-concentration of power of village elites, the lack of governance system and benefit-seeking, etc.<sup>[8]</sup>

After understanding the role and dilemma of the new township sages' governance of villages, we need to further pursue the internal logic of the new township sages' governance. Some scholars understand the new township sages' governance from the perspective of government, new township sages and village relationship network.<sup>[11]</sup> According to Zhang Xingyu and Ji Zhongyang, the social network platform constructed by new township sages in the rural community, the path of this social network includes the connection between the state power, the public welfare of the villages, the grassroots people and the new township sages.<sup>[12]</sup> Fei Xiaotong pointed out in "Native China" that the acquaintance society in the countryside has a strong local nature, and there is a complex network of social relations between people, which is manifested as a "difference order pattern", and the constraints on people's behaviours do not rely on "contracts", but rather on default norms of behaviours and trust.<sup>[13]</sup> According to Liu Wei et al, from the perspective of structural hole theory, rural elites are the nodes of structural holes that effectively connect the internal and external relationship networks of rural

society, and they have the information and resource advantages to build or expand the network relationship with other actors inside and outside the village.<sup>[9]</sup>

### **2.3. Social network theory**

It is well known that the concept of social networks is commonly used in multidisciplinary fields such as economics, political science and sociology.<sup>[14]</sup> Social network refers to all the social relations or social connections that an individual has, and the social structure that this constitutes.<sup>[15]</sup> According to the German sociologist Zimmer, social network analysis does not see people as driven by individual norms or the common activities of separate groups, but instead it focuses on how people's connections affect the possibilities and constraints in their actions. Heterogeneity theory, as a native network theory, discusses how individuals who assume the role of outsiders can leverage their relative distance from the original group and their proximity to the current group to serve as mediators between the two groups. Thus, Outsiders are usually more mobile than other members of the group to which they currently belong, and tend to have fewer kinship and other strong ties with other individuals in the same group.<sup>[16]</sup> Recently in social network research, heterogeneity theory has been expanded with some new perspectives - the weak ties and structural holes perspectives.

Generally speaking, existing studies have answered the positive and negative roles of new township sages in village governance, as well as explained the internal logic of new township sages' governance from the dimension of social network, which, to a certain extent, provide some theoretical guidance for the research of this paper. However, there are still some shortcomings in the existing studies, for example, most of them focus on the impact of individual village sages or village sage organisations on village governance, and there is a lack of specific case studies on the impact of the social network of new village sages on village governance, which fails to further explore the links between the social network of the new village sages, and the impact of the key actors in depth. Moreover, the rural social relationship network is not static, and its changes will have different impacts on rural governance. Based on this, this paper will build a social relationship network centred on new township sages on the basis of existing literature, starting from the weak relationship power assumption and the structural hole viewpoint, and taking H village in Pengzhou City, Sichuan Province as a research case to study its impact on rural governance.

### **3. Research Objects, Methods and Data**

H Village in Pengzhou City, Sichuan Province is located in the north of Pengzhou City. The village consists of 11 village groups, with a total population of 967 and 333 households. At present, the village is implementing the integrated development of "one or three industries", with the development idea of "developing agriculture by science and technology, strengthening the village by industry, and enriching the farmers with excellent fruits", and taking the fruit industry, forestry and rural tourism as the dominant economy. The party organisation and the villagers' committee of the village of H have a total of 5 members, and 16 village sages are selected, including local, external and foreign villagers. As a demonstration park for developing rural agricultural characteristics in the city's rural centralised residential community, it has a certain degree of promotion to choose it as a case study.

Through data collection and analysis, field research and interviews, we mainly collected information on the basic situation of the village, the current situation of governance, governance problems, etc. We conducted field research in March-April 2023, and conducted semi-structured interviews with three village cadres familiar with the local situation, two retired cadres, one teacher, one owner of a farmhouse (who is also a deputy to the Municipal People's Congress), the chairman of a collective economic cooperative, and eight ordinary A total of 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted, and a wealth of primary data was collected.

### **4. Construction of social relationship network of new township sages**

In fact, there is considerable variation in the willingness of new township sages to participate in rural community governance. If divided according to the spatial scope of the new township sages, most of the new township sages with endogenous presence belong to the active "political, economic and emotional" return, and they make use of their own advantages to participate in rural community governance and contribute to rural economic development, environmental sanitation, dispute mediation, road traffic, etc.; the new township sages embedded in the outside are mostly passive "invited" to return,

and They usually introduce resources to rural development through the help of local governments or rural communities. Most of the externally-embedded new township sages are passive "invited" to return, and they usually bring in resources for rural development under the matchmaking of local governments or rural communities. Most of the foreign new township sages who are enthusiastic about rural construction are spontaneous "active" participants who use their skills and resources to contribute to the governance of rural communities. Song Zheren and Chen Qiuqiang argue that the potential for the social network of village sages to serve as a new foundation for rural governance hinges on the normalization of cooperation and interaction among sages. This includes interactions between external sages and local sages, as well as between townships and villages. Furthermore, it is essential for this network to evolve into a structured institutional arrangement.<sup>[17]</sup>

In this paper, village cadres, ordinary villagers and new township sages are regarded as the three actors in constructing the village social relationship network, which is manifested in the following three aspects:

#### ***4.1. New Township-sages and Village Cadres***

How well village cadres fulfil their role as executors and implementers of grass-roots work in rural areas has a direct bearing on the foundations of the Party's rule and the immediate interests of the masses. Although village cadres can use their authority to promote rural governance. However, some problems have arisen, such as the village cadres' own ability and quality, and the villagers' trust in the village cadres, which have a great impact on rural governance. In ancient times, the rise of the village gentry and the widespread implementation of the township contract system gradually formed a rural community governance system combining moral rule and self-governance led by the village gentry.<sup>[18]</sup> In modern times, the new township sages have re-emerged, mainly based on the relationship of co-governance with the state power. The participation of new village sages in rural governance includes advising and mediating disputes and providing counselling services, etc. They not only play the role of talents in the rural community, but also serve as an important information bridge from the state to the grassroots. The deputy secretary of H village said that he came from a foreign village and would take the initiative to ask for help from the village sages when he encountered difficulties in implementing his work:

"The issue of sewerage pipe renovation in H village hinders the future development of our village, affects the aesthetics of the river, involves 57 villagers, and is difficult to work. We contacted the former old cadres, farmhouse owners and other new townspeople. This time they personally went to communicate with the villagers to solve the problem, and the villagers also reflected their own problems and the real situation, and finally things were solved."

On the other hand, in order to stimulate the mobilisation of new village sages to participate in village governance, the local government has provided relevant policy support to the new village sage groups. The owner of the local farmhouse mentioned:

"The town clerk's office will give these township-sages a star rating and give tax and loan incentives to townspeople who open farmhouses."

For the rest of the new township-sages, the first secretary said:

"We have a technical advisor for rural revitalisation here, who also grows fruit trees, and he actively communicates with those of us who grow fruit trees, so we have hired him as our technical advisor, and we have also given him a certificate. "

Of course, in the process of constructing the social relationship network of new township sages, it is also necessary to guard against the boundary problem of this social relationship network. New township sages must position their roles well, so as not to overstep their roles and not to be absent from their roles.<sup>[19]</sup> Besides, village committees should also pay attention to the opinions of the new township sages.

#### ***4.2. Between New Township-sages***

New township sages are an important talent resource in the countryside, and are recognised as social elites by local governments and villagers. The number and identity of new township sages vary in different areas, and the influence and discourse of new township sages may vary, and their impact on village governance may be different as well. Through interviews, we learnt that there are 16 village

sages in the village sage station displayed in H village, including former veteran cadres, economic leaders, talents in culture and technology, etc., as well as villagers who are highly respected, have made contributions to the village, and have influence on the village.

New township-sages also have certain connections through their participation in village community organisations and village activities. Through interviews, it was found that Village H has set up organisations such as village representative assemblies, councils, old people's sports associations' chapters, and collective economic cooperatives, as mentioned by the former local secretary:

"Most of the leaders of these organisations are new township-sages."

In addition, the village two committees organise new township-sages to study in the outer city, and they communicate with each other, which is conducive to the cohesion of the power of new villagers, said the deputy secretary of H village:

"We basically go out three times a year to learn. For example, learning has to be organised for the opening of the farmhouse, and learning has to be organised for the pruning of our fruit."

Of course, in the process of cohesion of the new township sages, we must prevent the new township sages from being alienated into the new village hegemony. Therefore, it is necessary to strictly select the procedures and standards for new township sages, and effectively strengthen the education and supervision of new township sages.

#### ***4.3. New Township sages and Villagers***

Most of the new township sages are local villagers who stand out through their own resources or abilities. Born and raised in the area, the new township sages have established social relationships with ordinary villagers, such as kinship exchanges, festivals and ritual interactions, etc., a network that is conducive to the cultivation of a new type of grass-roots governance circle. Firstly, the establishment of organisations between villagers and new township sages is an important foundation for new township sages to participate in rural community governance. Local villagers have mentioned:

"For the villagers to sell their fruits well, the co-operative orders the baskets that hold the fruits."

Furthermore, "trust is like a lubricant, it can make the operation of any group or organisation more effective".<sup>[20]</sup> The trust relationship between villagers and new township sages is an important social capital, which not only increases their interaction and collaboration, but also facilitates the construction and cohesion of village communities. Retired veteran cadres proudly mentioned:

"To do practical things, so that the people get benefits, the people will support you from the heart."

The local farmhouse owner said proudly:

"When they find us to help to do things in the village, people think I'm doing a good job."

Of course, it is necessary to deal with the relationship between the new township sages and the villagers to avoid the gradual marginalisation of the villagers in the power structure of the rural community and their excessive dependence on the new township sages. Therefore, the new township sages should pay attention to listening to the voices of the villagers and act as the think-tank of the villagers' decision-making, so as to work for the benefit of the villagers.

### **5. The Practice and Impact of New Township Sage Social Relationship Networks on Rural Governance**

#### ***5.1. Strong Relationships: Advancing Public Affairs***

Granovetter found that there are strong and weak relationships between people, and this relationship power plays different roles in the interpersonal relationship network. "Strong relations" generally exist between members of groups or organisations and play a role in maintaining internal relations. In the context of rural villagers' self-governance, blood ties and karmic ties predominate. Public affairs are usually dealt with in the form of one-issue resolutions, but the current cultural level of villagers is low and their awareness of political participation is weak. In order for villagers to participate in the resolution of public affairs, they have to use their own social networks to pass the resolution through a series of "strong ties", said the deputy secretary of village H in the interview:

"H village has a river which affects the aesthetics of the river. I firstly lined up 4 groups by contacting the captain and former old cadres. Under their leadership, through constant communication with the villagers, and finally the sewage pipe relocation problem was solved."

This case implies a series of "strong relationships". First of all, the deputy secretary, the old captain and the leaders of each group in the village belong to the same faction of new township sages, and the relationship between the deputy secretary and the leaders of each group is superior and subordinate, so in the process of official dealings, a "strong relationship" was gradually formed, and the deputy secretary took advantage of this "strong relationship" to increase the possibility of solving the problem. The deputy secretary used this "strong relationship" to increase the likelihood of a solution.

On the other hand, public affairs such as sewerage upgrading, ordinary villagers do not have strong connections in this area, nor do they have the social resources in this area, so they are powerless even if they have the will to do so.

### **5.2. *Weak ties: fuelling the rural economy***

In Granovetter's view, weak relationships, on the other hand, develop between individuals with different socio-economic characteristics. He asserts that information bridges do must be weak relationships. In recent years the new township sages in H village have made great contributions to the development of the village economy, and playing an important role in attracting investment. Local villagers claim:

"For the sake of the river's aesthetic, the townspeople raised money to hire outsiders to fix the sewer, and we only offered the land, and people are still willing to have this sewer rebuilt."

The new township sages who have accumulated rich experience in the city, which are effectively used in the economic development of the village. At the same time, the village will organise annual economic leaders to go to other places to learn the operation of agricultural music and fruit planting technology, not only to improve the technical level of the new township sages, but also to expand their network circle, although they only have one chance relationship or a short contact, but this "weak relationship" in the need to play an important role. As the chairman of the village collective economic co-operative said:

"Our co-operative has the responsibility to find sales channels, in order to effectively solve the problem of plum marketing problems, last year and Pengzhou City Comprehensive Administrative Law Enforcement Bureau General Secretary contact, got 15 free stalls, each villager can go to sell."

During the previous outbreak, SDIC's assistance working group visited villages, said the villagers:

"Every day, I'm at home preventing epidemics, watching the blossoms bloom, counting the days to fruit, and worrying about bad sales of cherries."

This sentence caught the attention of the working group. Subsequently, after the State Investment Company, H village village committee got and Chengdu Runsheng Agricultural Co., Ltd. signed the first batch of 5 tonnes of fruit ordering agreement, at the same time, innovative sales methods, hand in hand to teach the villagers to use "Douyin" and "Kuaishou", and demonstrated in person that they were the spokespersons for the live broadcast of fruit farmers. Local villagers said excitedly:

"This is a place while playing business, convenient and free." It not only promotes the development of the village's fruit industry, but also gives the villagers hope.

In this network of relationships, "weak ties" play a major role. Because of the matchmaking between the chairman of the cooperative and the assistance team of the State Investment Corporation, not only has the sale of the village's fruit industry been promoted, but the village has also established a link with the agricultural company.

### **5.3. *"Structural holes": disseminator of information and culture***

According to Burt's "structural hole" viewpoint, we believe that most of the new township sages are in this position, they have rich information and social resources, as well as a good understanding of the situation of the rural society. The Deputy Secretary has mentioned:

"College students who are out there can bring outside resources and ideas into the village."

On top of that, the deputy secretary said excitedly:

"We also have a village sage who is not actually from our village, and every time we have a fruit management meeting, he comes proactively to share his new knowledge and share his fruit skills."

Of course, the new townspeople with endogenous presence contribute to village activities by utilising their own strengths, said Mr S in the interview:

" I gather the children and carry out a lot of activities, such as parent-child sports, children's birthday parties once or twice a month, and learning visits."

According to the interviews, every time the activities were carried out, both children and adults gained something, such as respect for the elderly, love for the young, the responsibility to protect the environment, and the development of patriotic awareness, etc.

In the countryside as a "semi-familiar society", new township sages usually have advantages in political, economic, social and other relationship resources, which creates the conditions for them to occupy the rural community structure, and the relationship between new township sages and other villagers is easily affected by multiple factors such as kinship, geographic location, event and business, and accordingly, new township sages are inextricably linked with other governance subjects (Figure 1).

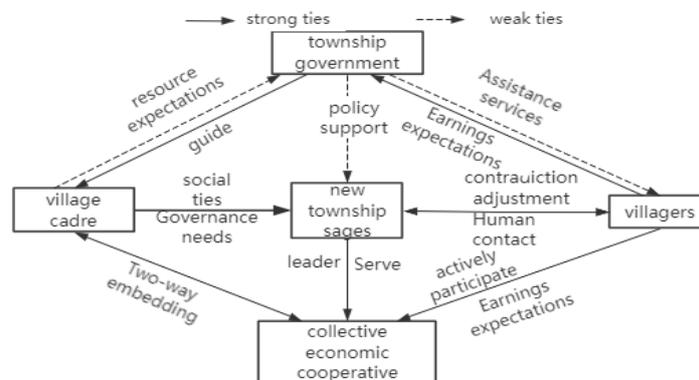


Figure 1: Structure of social relationship network of new township sages

## 6. Conclusion and discussion

In this paper, we interviewed the social relationship network of new township sages in H village, Pengzhou City, Sichuan Province, and found that, driven by "township love + interests", new township sages can assist village cadres to promote rural governance, improve the quality of life of villagers, and then gain the trust of the rural community, which is an important foundation for building the social relationship network of new township sages. The study found that:

(1) As the linker and lubricant between the two, village cadres and villagers need new township sages to "tell each other their feelings". At the same time, the relationship between the three should be dealt with appropriately, so that neither offside, nor lack of position.

(2) By interpreting the hypothesis of the strength of weak relationships and the structural hole viewpoint and applying them to the examination of the participation of new township sages in rural governance practices, it is found that different relationships play different roles in the social relationship network. Strong relationships are conducive to the handling of public affairs, weak relationships are conducive to the development of rural economy, and "structural holes" can act as disseminators of information and culture, which is conducive to the development of rural cultural activities.

The shortcomings of this paper are: this paper only explores the new township sage social relationship network on rural governance, but as for the size of the promotion effect, obstacles still need further investigation and study; with the acceleration of the speed of social change, the scale of the rural social network structure will continue to expand, how to deal with the complexity of the new township sage social network of the problems that may exist between the pluralistic action, which still need to be further explored.

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