

Research on Popular Participation in Chinese Rural Governance——the Case of Shunde, Guangdong

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Abstract: *This study is based on the context of rural governance. Moreover, popular participation is an important factor influencing the effectiveness of rural governance. However, the current situation in rural China shows that the so-called innovations or models that are constantly introduced at the local level are based on the old institutional logic, which is a continuation, consolidation and strengthening of the traditional community management system of the state. The aim of this study is to examine the impact of popular participation on rural governance. Three villages (communities), Madong, Xingle and Huanglian, in Shunde, Guangzhou, were selected for the case study. The research questions were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively through four research methods: literature review, on-site observation, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires. The results of the research showed that the transition from authoritarian to participatory governance in China is the direction of development for the transformation of village governance, but the issue of transformation of village governance is first and foremost a question about the construction of a subjective society, or the transformation of participatory community governance only after the removal of society's dependence on state power.*

Keywords: *Rural Governance; Popular Participation*

1. Introduction

In this essay, three research questions are discussed based on the literature review, survey data and analysis. The first is about the characteristics of the three governance models in Shunde, a brief description of each of the three governance models is given and their characteristics are explored. Secondly, the role of takeholders in rural governance is discussed. The role of takeholders in the three models in Shunde is compared through international cases and experiences, highlighting the importance of villagers' participation in rural governance and the lack of residents' role in rural governance in China. Finally, the reasons for residents' participation in rural governance are explored, and the positive significance of residents' participation in promoting local governance is highlighted through participatory governance.

2. Chinese Rural Governance Models in Shunde, Guangdong

Shunde currently has three representative rural communities, Madong, Xingle and Huanglian, as areas of practice for rural governance. According to their backgrounds, it is easy to see that Madong is a model of rural community building arising from the expansion of urbanisation, Xingle is a model of rural community building arising from rural urbanisation, and Huanglian is a model of rural community building arising spontaneously under villagers' autonomy. These three models represent attempts at rural governance undertaken at different stages of development in rural China.

2.1 The Madong Model

As the first pilot of a new model of rural governance in Shunde, Madong Village mainly embodies the development of a pluralistic and synergistic rural grassroots governance structure. In the historical context of the construction of a new socialist countryside, the primary task of transforming rural grassroots governance is to enhance the level of democratic autonomy of society, constrained by the inertia of the people's commune system, which was dominated by a single authority at the grassroots level ^[1]. Therefore, Madong Village adjusted the focus and emphasis of its grassroots governance structure by improving the construction of institutional mechanisms for villagers' self-governance and purchasing administrative services, so as to clarify the inherent relationship between the township

government, residents and the village committee, and then realise democratic elections, democratic decision-making, democratic management and democratic supervision with the villagers' committee as the core.

Through the Madong Village Discussion Group, we learnt that due to policy changes and funding shortages, Madong Village ended its administrative purchase of services in 2014 and reverted to the 'general model' of Chinese rural governance, where the village is managed and serviced by the authority, the village committee (Interviewing Mr. Zhao on Jan 8, 2020). As it turns out, Chinese villages have had very limited success with a single government decentralization approach.

2.2 Xingle Model

Drawing on the experience of the Madon model and based on the purchase of administrative services in Madon, the "Xingle model" lies in the redistribution of powers and responsibilities and the promotion of the integration of community and social workers. The Xingle community uses the social work service station as a platform to further innovate its management system.

Firstly, it standardised community work through a number of regulations. The community neighbourhood committee decentralised the administrative matters previously undertaken by the community to the grid, which was shared by community and social workers, all working in unison in accordance with the Community Services Manual (Interviewing Mr. Luo on Jan 8, 2020). In particular, the community grids are mainly responsible for taking over the administrative functions transferred from the neighbourhood committees, while at the same time bringing into play their own rich experience and geographical advantages to assist the social workers in providing community services. The social workers, on the other hand, assist the community grid officers in carrying out their administrative functions and take over some of the administrative tasks while carrying out their service work.

Secondly, the grid governance is vertically co-ordinated, with the community neighbourhood committee unified in its management and operation, and the staff of the two communities co-ordinated to carry out community management and service work (Interviewing Mr. Luo on Jan 8, 2020).

The community grid is a feature of the Xingle community and has improved the efficiency of community and social workers, but it is still fundamentally a community purchase of administrative services and has not made much progress in the practice of rural governance.

2.3 Huanglian Model

The Huanglian community, like most villages in China, also purchases administrative services, but in addition it has the following three more distinctive and innovative features.

2.3.1 Stimulating the Autonomy of Community Residents

Rural (community) grassroots governance is not only about improving the physical environment, but more importantly, the reconstruction process builds a sense of community members' participation in community affairs, which is actually a side effect of community creation^[2]. The impact of the market economy and modernisation on rural communities has led to a gradual fading of the old 'acquaintance society' and a slow break in rural social relations, with community residents becoming more independent individuals with few ties and a weak sense of community^[2]. One of the highlights of the reconstruction of the Huanglian community governance mechanism is not only the reconstruction of the physical space, but also the repair of rural social relations and the cultivation of a sense of autonomy among community residents. The establishment of the Community Building Association and the Village Revitalisation Promotion Association, as well as other local social organisations, has imparted to the residents the history and culture of Huanglian, raised their moral awareness and cultural cultivation, and enabled them to develop a sense of ownership. These initiatives have enabled residents to discover the beauty of the Huanglian community and to realise that the community atmosphere they create through their actions has a direct impact on their own development and that of future generations; they have then begun to plan their own activities and participate in community deliberations, interpreting in practical terms the meaning of resident participation in rural governance.

2.3.2 The Excavation and Transmission of Vernacularism

The countryside is the natural, pure and most vernacular of settlements, and its formation and development is the creative outcome of the wisdom of the working people^[3]. Each rural community

has its own unique vernacular, and in some villages where development is driven by industry, the blind construction of communities, the pursuit of monetary gain by residents and the lack of attention to vernacular culture has led to the continuous erosion of the inner soul of the villages^[3]. The community has organised a variety of activities that allow the local culture of the Huanglian community to be reflected and passed on in various forms, allowing residents to gain a better understanding of the history of Huanglian and a greater sense of identity with the local culture (Interviewing Mr. Zhang on Jan 8, 2020). At the same time, the purchase of services by the community also provides residents with better livelihood security and enhances their quality of life, making more residents willing to stay or return to their hometowns and injecting new vitality into the community (Interviewing Mr. Zhang on Jan 8, 2020).

2.3.3 Village and Enterprise Twinning to Bring Social Forces into Play

The Shunde District Three-Year Plan for Villages (2018-2020) states that the autonomy of villages (communities) and enterprises should be respected and brought into play, and the form and content of co-buildings should be determined on an equal and voluntary basis according to their own characteristics and development needs^[15]. Just on 1 February 2018, Huanglian took the lead in establishing the Community Rural Revitalisation Promotion Association, kicking off the twinning of villages and enterprises to build together (Interviewing Mr. Zhang on Jan 8, 2020). It is reported that the Huanglian Community Rural Revitalisation Promotion Association is composed of 11 people, including community cadres, entrepreneurs, social sages, overseas villagers and retired cadres, with entrepreneurs accounting for four of them, and these enterprises have been providing support for activities such as dragon lice competitions and village basketball tournaments organised by the community (Interviewing Mr. Zhang on Jan 8, 2020). Guan Qingzheng, a retired cadre from the Huanglian community who is a member of the promotion committee, is now in his seventies and has been rehired by the community committee as the deputy director of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office because he has been in contact with many overseas Chinese who have gone out from Huanglian, and he said in an interview that "I feel happy to do something positive for the development of the community." (Interviewing Mr. Guan on Jan 8, 2020)

2.4 Conclusion

Both the Madon model and the Xingle model use the purchase of administrative services for village governance practices; more often than not, the Xingle community has made the purchase of administrative services more refined and specialised. Compared to the first two villages (communities), the Huanglian community has experimented more with the purchase of administrative services, placing more emphasis on the role of local participants in village governance. Although many of the approaches adopted by the Huanglian community have long been practised in developed countries, they can perhaps indeed be considered advanced and typical for Chinese villages. Therefore, the reform of the administrative system, the transformation of social governance and the 'reinventing government' is a major challenge in the current reform of the Chinese administrative system, and it is important to draw on the theoretical and practical experience of participatory governance.

3. Different Roles of The Stakeholders in Chinese Rural Governance

Although as we know that the government's main role in Chinese rural governance is that of a guide and decision-maker, the village committee is the implementer, the residents are the advisers and monitors, and the third-party organisations are the facilitators, the residents and third-party organisations have very little influence on rural governance.

3.1 Current Situation in Shunde

Throughout the governance participation of the three village (community) stakeholders, apart from the suggestions and supervision made by the spontaneous participation of the residents in the restoration and transformation of buildings and spatial forms such as clan shrines and temples due to the clan concept, the rest of the decision-making power for the restoration and transformation of public services and public spaces mainly falls in the hands of the neighbourhood committee and the government (Interviewing Mr. Zhao on Jan 8, 2020). For example, although residents are consulted before a community building project is undertaken, they are largely unaware of the specific proposal and only learn the "true nature" of the project after it is completed (Interviewing Mr. Zhao on Jan 8,

2020). This approach can easily lead to the transformation and renovation of public spaces that do not correspond to the actual needs of the residents or social organisations, as was found to be the case with the construction of the activity square in Madong Village (Interviewing Mr. Zhao on Jan 8, 2020). This approach also neglects the strong supervisory role of the residents, as in the case of the Shi Gui Ancestral Park in Huanglian, where the quality of construction was unsatisfactory (Interviewing Mr. Gao on Jan 8, 2020). If the residents had been informed of the construction plans in advance, and had taken ownership of the construction, and had monitored the construction and reported problems to the village committee in a timely manner, the quality of construction might have been greatly improved. In addition to this, only the Huanglian community, of the three villages (communities), has introduced third-party organisations to promote village governance, not only community organisations but also local businesses to participate in community decision-making and financial support, such as its Village Revitalisation Promotion Association (Interviewing Mr. Gao on Jan 8, 2020). The residents of the Huanglian community are also very active in participating in community activities organised by various community organisations, so only the Huanglian community's governance practices have been successful (Interviewing on Jan 9, 2020).

3.2 International Cases and Experiences

Over the past decade, devolution to the regions has had a significant impact on the development and implementation of rural policy in the UK, making it an important aspect of the UK's rural transformation, strongly characterised by the integration of private sector features into the functions of rural governance bodies through 'partnerships' ^[4]. This implies a new role for government as coordinator, manager or facilitator, rather than provider and director, forming flexible alliances and networks to manage. This is where power is reconceptualised as a matter of social production rather than social control, where the core of the system is not about control and obedience, but about the ability to act and achieve goals, i.e. capacity building ^[5]. Individuals and institutions can try to come together to exert greater action through new situations ^[4]. In British rural governance, the 'partnership' formed by government, farmers and businesses has worked well to improve the delivery of management and services. The case of the Seto River in Furukawa Town, Japan, is also a good example. Recognising the consequences of environmental degradation and wanting to leave a better living environment for future generations, the residents of Furukawa initiated a campaign to clean up the river. To keep the water clean, the local residents also took on the task of cleaning up the rubbish in the morning and evening without paying for it, and the main body of governance was mainly the residents, supplemented by the government and autonomous organisations, which achieved good governance results ^[6].

3.3 Conclusion

Effective social governance cannot be achieved without the active participation of citizens and the synergy and interaction of multiple actors, including individuals, profit-making organizations, non-profit organizations, and the public sector ^[7]. However, China's social autonomy is both weak and fragmented, and the development of social organisations is slow, both of which are not conducive to the formation of a new pattern of participatory social governance. Therefore, rural governance should be based on the practical needs of villagers, mobilise their participation to the maximum extent possible, and expand public participation. On the one hand, this can be done through education and awareness-raising, and by increasing villagers' sense of belonging to and identification with their community ^[8]. On the other hand, villagers can be encouraged to participate in the management of local public affairs by taking their practical needs into account. The government should gradually withdraw from specific community management and governance activities and return power to the village committees, withdrawing administrative tasks from them and actively providing them with support and assistance, so that they can clarify their autonomous role. In the process of public space, village committees should reflect public opinion and seek appropriate assistance from the government in conjunction with the immediate needs of the villagers. Although third-party organisations (social organisations, social work agencies, public interest organisations, non-profit organisations, etc.) play the role of "double-sided glue" in the reconstruction of public space, balancing the interests of the village (residents) and the government, more often than not they should act as intermediaries for the cultivation of the core subjects of the village (residents) by offering courses, organising various thematic activities, and guiding residents to participate in public space on their own initiative. It should, however, more often act as an intermediary for the cultivation of village (resident) core subjects, through the provision of courses and the organisation of various thematic activities to guide residents to

participate consciously in the reconstruction of public space and to shape the sense of ownership of the village (resident)^[9]. Therefore, it is so important to ensure that, while the government leads the way, there is also social support and participation from businesses and farmers^[1]. As direct users and experiencers of public space, villagers are expected to participate in the whole process of spatial reconstruction and subsequent development, becoming a conscious, autonomous rather than passive central subject^[10].

4. The Reason Why Residents Were Not Participating in Community Affairs

The lack of centrality of residents is the greatest obstacle to participatory governance in new rural communities, and the opposite is the strongest motivator^[10]. According to Keith R. Emrich, the belief and principle of participatory development is that development must start at the bottom or the bottom of the pile^[9].

4.1 The Limits of Decentralization in China

The results of a survey of community residents show that 34.8% of them have not actively participated in community management and decision-making. The main reasons for this are that they believe that their participation is meaningless, that they believe that governance is a matter for the government and that they have nothing to do with it (Interviewing Mr. Zhao on Jan 8, 2020). In the seminar in Madong village, it was also mentioned that although the councils had been set up in each village and the residents' participation was initially high, the participation was declining because the demands raised by the residents were not addressed in a timely or effective manner (Interviewing Ms. Lin on Jan 8, 2020).

The reasons for this are, firstly, the lack of an effective system to regulate it. On the issue of residents' participation in decision making, the system is more flexible, there is no relevant participation system and procedures, and the government's response to residents' opinions is more spontaneous, without fixed standards and systems. Secondly, there is the drawback of the pressure operation mechanism. In the current government operation mechanism, it is usually accountable only to the higher level, with little regard for the response of the lower level, and "the management style of quantitative task decomposition and materialistic evaluation system are adopted by the political organisation at the first level in order to achieve economic catch-up and fulfil the targets set by the higher level."^[2] Under the constraints of the pressure system, village councils only consider the tasks handed down by their superiors, and to their subordinates they generally delegate tasks from their superiors or arrange tasks at their own level, with little regard for the response and affordability of the subordinates, which makes the transformation of the relationship between government and citizens inappropriate and untimely.

4.2 A Sense of Local Identity

There is the issue of local residents and migrant workers not forming a complete social network. While it is true that the innovation and increase in the number of ways for residents to participate in governance has played an important role in the repair of social relations, these are currently limited to local residents. For example, in a community such as Huanglian, where industry is the main source of economy, there are twice as many migrant workers as local residents, and the integration between the two is a matter of concern. Local residents can often be seen in Huanglian community governance participation, listening to classes and planning activities together; after all, they have been here since birth and have a stronger sense of community identification (Interviewing Ms. Xu on Jan 9, 2020). At the same time, migrant workers often feel excluded by the locals, and the use of public space is only for residents (Interviewing Ms. Lin and Mr. Huang on Jan 9, 2020). However, several migrant workers in the Huanglian community interviewed said that they did not participate in community activities (Interviewing Ms. Lin and Mr. Huang on Jan 9, 2020). If the needs of migrant workers could be given more attention and the strengths of this group could be brought into play, and integrated with local residents to form a complete social network, this could contribute more to the integrity of the reconfiguration of public space and contribute to the development of the community.

4.3 The Role of Participatory Governance in Promoting Popular Participation

Self-governance is generally defined as the exercise of power by citizens themselves to govern

public affairs and to collectively decide on the allocation of public resources to jointly safeguard and promote the public interest^[11]. Self-governance is another manifestation of participatory governance, highlighting the values of citizen participation and citizen ownership embedded in participatory governance^[11]. The government was expected to transform from a 'night watchman' role to an 'all-powerful' manager, taking responsibility for the management of all social affairs and providing public goods for all members of society from the 'cradle to the grave'^[12]. Managerialism extends the power of the state to every corner of society, submerging society under the control of the state, suppressing the growth of civil society, limiting the free development of citizens, distorting their independent personality, and causing a lack of civic public spirit^[12]. To ease the tensions between the state and society and give civil society the institutional space to grow, 'social reconstruction' has become an important task for governments in the new era of change in governance^[11]. The goal of "social reconstruction" is to make citizens the subjects of social governance by enhancing their capacity for social action, and thus to enhance their capacity for autonomous governance^[11]. In a state of autonomous governance, citizens follow a value-based logic of action, accumulating social costs in interpersonal interactions, increasing social cohesion in the construction of social organisations, and cultivating public spirit in participation in public affairs^[9].

The places of civic autonomy in the Huanglian community range from small buildings to large streets and neighbourhoods, and even extend to the whole community (Interviewing Mr. Zhao on Jan 8, 2020). In a common place of life, citizens share local knowledge, experiences, and values, and gradually form a community of trust, mutual help, and communication in face-to-face daily interactions^[9]. The common good is the incentive for citizens to interact and cooperate with each other, as well as the connection between local public participation in public affairs^[2]. It is precisely because of shared values and a sense of belonging to a region that citizens are more interested in the ecological environment, urban and rural construction, social assistance, medical services, retirement protection and other public goods around them. This is why citizens are able to volunteer to participate in social welfare organisations, such as associations for the elderly, environmental protection associations, security committees and supervisory committees, according to their interests, hobbies and abilities, in order to realise the collective interests of their communities in a network of autonomous social organisations with horizontal participation. Social self-governance organisations are the axis of citizen-led governance, bringing together the scattered forces of civil society, fully integrating social resources and greatly improving the performance of citizen-led governance^[13]. It can be argued that the degree of development of social self-governance organisations is an important indicator of the level of citizen-owned governance, and that well-developed social self-governance organisations are an important guarantee for the realisation of citizen-owned governance^[13]. Citizen-led governance in the context of participatory governance is a process of positive interaction between the state and society. On the one hand, by empowering individual citizens, the state returns to society the functions that originally belong to it and withdraws from socially relevant areas in a reasonable and orderly manner; on the other hand, by participating in solving public problems, citizens enhance the governance capacity of their networks and continuously expand the space of public spirit coverage.

5. Conclusion

This chapter explores the research questions based on the data analysis and interview results, as well as testing the research hypotheses. Firstly all three villages (communities) in Shunde used the method of purchasing administrative services to try out village governance, but the results were not satisfactory and the level of participation by residents was not high. The Huanglian community, however, has incorporated local enterprises and community organisations into community governance and mobilised residents to participate in community affairs through cultural activities. Secondly, in the second question, it was found that China has its own unique political and cultural traditions, and that the long-standing homogeneous political operating mechanism and power structure of the state has made the state or government play a particularly important role in social development and civic life. The Chinese government is the main centre of power, and the government mainly takes care of everything from policy formulation to implementation, from social governance to supervision of power. Inadequate effective oversight and checks and balances, and unsound performance evaluation of services remain widespread. The purchase of administrative services may be a first step towards decentralisation of governance in China, but in fact its effect on rural governance is minimal and does not provide a long-term boost to rural development. Finally, empowerment, consultation and autonomy are the deeper connotations of participatory governance^[14]. Without citizens' rights to expression and autonomy, democratic consultation will not function properly and there will be no room for

autonomous governance to grow ^[6]. Democratic consultation is at the heart of participatory governance and is an effective mechanism for civil society to resist the violence of executive power, helping to limit the manipulative nature of public policy making and the coercive nature of its implementation ^[10]. Self-governance is the foundation of participatory governance and is an important arena for the development of modern civic character, public spirit, and public responsibility, contributing to a thriving and active civil society and breaking the monopoly of public service provision ^[11]. It is important to note that participatory governance does not seek to free society from government management, but rather to uphold government authority and consolidate the legitimacy of government governance by giving full play to the function of citizen participation ^[9]. The ideal goal of participatory governance is the cooperative governance of public affairs by government and citizens, sharing public power, public responsibility and public resources, and establishing a mutually trusting and reciprocal partnership between them, i.e. a state of good governance in which the best of both worlds is achieved.

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