

# Carry Forward the Culture of Rural Sages to Strengthen Rural Endogenous Governance

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## Abstract

With the declining rural society and the worse rural governance, carrying forward the culture of rural sages and enhancing the endogenous governance in rural areas are keys to realizing the “rural revitalization strategy” and building “beautiful countryside”. This paper is to clarify the connotation of “rural sage” and discuss why and how to carry forward its culture and strengthen rural endogenous governance under the dilemma of rural governance. Finally, taking the development of Rural Sages Council and the improvement of rural governance in Yunfu City, Guangdong Province as an example, the author enhances the advanced experience.

## Keywords

Culture of Rural Sages, Rural Areas, Endogenous Governance

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## 1. Introduction

The Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee put forward that “the overall goal of deepening the reform in an all-round way is to perfect and develop the socialist system with Chinese characteristics and to enhance the modernization of the national governance system and governance capability” (Xi, 2013), which raises new requirements for the governance capability and achievements of the government. With the fast change of social science and technology and social outlook, the social structure has become more complex, resulting in difficulties in social governance. Among them, the most severe is the governance of the declining countryside.

Over the past 30 years since the reform and opening up, the contradiction between the drive of market-oriented mechanism and the urgent urbanization development mode has marginalized and hollowed out many villages. First of all, villages with little rural elites and children and women left are dispirited, and

have weak foundation of endogenous governance. Secondly, the spiritual civilization in the countryside cannot match the speed of economic development. With chaotic belief system, distorted values, ethical and moral corruption, most villagers spend their free time playing cards, gambling, chatting and watching TV. The living habits of neighbors who used to help each other were weakened by family consciousness and alienated by human indifference. The crisis of honesty and filial piety has intensified. Even, local ruffians, hooligans, village bullies and other evil forces invaded the villages and disrupted its order. Moreover, the villagers' lack of trust in the grass-roots government and the village committee is increasingly hindering rural governance, causing conflicts between "officials" and "villagers" and undermining rural governance.

As for the contradiction between the rapid development of urbanization and the declining of villages, the Report of the 19th National Congress put forward the "strategy of revitalizing villages", which is to "perfect the rural governance system combining autonomy, rule of law and rule of virtue" (Xi, 2017). Among them, for "autonomy", the state has put forward "carrying forward the culture of rural sages" to strengthen rural endogenous governance and rural governance.

It is gratifying that in recent years, more and more rural sages have united to make contributions to the hometown. Under their enthusiastic construction, earth-shaking changes have taken place in the face of many villages, which amazed the author. The author has witnessed the construction achievements of rural sages in several villages. Thanks to their efforts, the village council and the village foundation were established, and the villagers resumed their attention to the village customs, festivals and rituals. Outgoing rural sages returned to the village one after another to participate in ancestor worship and hold meetings to discuss the blueprint for the development, offering suggestions and contributions to the village. As a result, mud roads have gradually been replaced by hard-bottomed roads.

Examples are as follows:

1) The increase of farmers' income. Rural sages have helped the needy by introducing projects and funds to villages, especially for the revitalization of villages and precise poverty alleviation in recent years. They set up a production and operation mode of "enterprise + council + peasant household", and addressed disputes between enterprises and peasant households in land lease, contract, replacement and production environment improvement.

2) Upgrade of village appearance. The increased collective assets in village from introduced projects and donations have advanced the hardening of roads, the construction and maintenance of public facilities, garbage disposal, and the tidiness of villages, embellishing the appearance of villages everywhere.

3) Improvement of rural governance. Before rural sages returned to participate in village governance, many local villages were trapped in the loss of population, cultural decline and deteriorating public security. After their return, rural sages guided villagers to learn and abide by national laws and carry forward traditional morality and excellent traditional culture. For example, they encouraged

villagers to participate in public welfare projects awarded by financial capital, pushed acts of “feedback projects”, respecting teachers and valuing education, awarding teachers and giving financial aid to students, and helping the poor. In addition, it took the lead in organizing the compilation of village songs, village history, villagers’ honor lists, compilation of good people and good deeds, etc. to publicize moral standards, as well as folk customs, festivals and cultural activities such as the “Six Patriarchs of Zen Fair”, “Seizing the Cannon” and “Divine Wandering”. Finally, according to the established rules and regulations in natural villages, they mediated many disputes.

The author believes that rural sages are the main force to save the declining villages and realize the blueprint of “building beautiful countryside” called for by General Secretary Xi. This paper is to clarify the connotation of “rural sage” and discuss why and how to carry forward its culture and strengthen rural endogenous governance under the dilemma of rural governance. Finally, taking the development of Rural Sages Council and the improvement of rural governance in Yunfu City, Guangdong Province as an example, the author enhances advanced experience.

## 2. What Is Culture of Rural Sages

The premise of carrying forward the culture of rural sages is to understand what are the “culture of rural sages” and which villagers can be called “rural sages”.

Firstly, which villagers can be called “rural sages”?

**Liu Shulan (2016)** believed that rural sages are the products of China’s traditional farming society. It began in the Eastern Han Dynasty and refers to people who are erudite and virtuous. In ancient times, it was called “squire” and “gentry”.

**Zhang Yi (2015)** believed that traditional rural sages usually are talented, virtuous and prestigious people with a certain social status, or social resources. In the unified national structure of traditional China, the rural sage group is the guardian of the traditional Chinese social order to inherit the history and culture.

Culture of rural sages is closely related to that of squire. Squire is a special class in Chinese culture, including clan leaders, the scholars failing in an imperial examination, loyal and righteous people, old-style private school teachers and unemployed officials in rural villages. They are political, economic, cultural elites and moral model in villages. With their social status and advantages of social resources, they have established a basic governance structure in rural society to maintain clan etiquette, handle public affairs and coordinate the relationship between “officials” and the villagers.

Rural sages are similar to squire, but there are some differences between them. The former is more enlightened and wiser than the latter. Squire is a natural social stratum in social changes, while rural sages are often elected and officially recognized. Most squires govern the grassroots, maintain stability, serve the vil-

lages and inherit culture. However, there are also some evil gentry who run amuck in the countryside and bully villagers. By virtue of their family background, they entered and left the government, forcibly occupy others' property, making the people complain. Therefore, rural sages culture is not equivalent to squire culture. The former includes the latter's virtues and abandons bad customs. In fact, people with certain social prestige have traditionally been regarded as social sages highlighting the achievements of serving the village, morality and knowledge, being a model of virtue for others, contributing to the society. These should also be the gist of promoting the culture of rural sages.

Li Ning (2017) pointed out that rural sages should have the following characteristics. First of all, they have certain popularity and social influence. For example, they have outstanding talents, noble conduct or enjoy high social prestige, including those in notable family and great clan. Secondly, rural sages often make contributions to the dissemination of cultural knowledge, economic assistance and the settlement of social conflicts and disputes in their villages, thus maintaining rural order and moral education. In these ways, they are respected by the villagers.

Ji Zhongyang and Hu Yan (2016) pointed out that rural sages mainly refer to those who are virtuous, educated and responsible in rural public affairs in the traditional squire class, which are also often used to refer to elites in modern rural society.

Qi Xin (2016) proposed that new rural sages are virtuous and talented locals who devote themselves to the village and enjoy high prestige among villagers. Looking back on history, almost all the rural sages of past dynasties have replaced or cooperated with the government in handling a large number of social "public management" affairs-building bridges and roads, digging canals and dams, emergency rescue and disaster relief, respecting teachers and valuing education, purifying customs, settling disputes and disputes, stabilizing order, etc.

To sum up, we can give a definition to rural sages (including contemporary new rural sages). First, rural sages enjoy influence because of his natural endowment or rich resources-wealth, power, status, talents and conduct. Second, those who are respected by the villagers for their contribution to the village affairs.

Ji Zhongyang and Hu Yan (2016) said that the culture of rural sages includes not only the cultural relics, documents and legends left behind by ancient rural sages, as well as the fine tradition and cultural spirit of loving the country, caring for the people of the rural world and maintaining the rural social order, serving people with morality, but also the inheritance, practice and innovation of the traditional spirit of rural sages by modern rural elites.

In Wang Quangen's (2011) view, culture of rural sages is the cultural concept and enlightenment strategy that county-level researchers at the grass-roots level study the moral contributions of local celebrities and sages of past dynasties to encourage education and build a harmonious society. Liu Shulan (2016) also

agrees with it. They hold that the culture of rural sages as an important part of regional culture is the material achievement and spiritual wealth with humanistic value created by rural sages.

From the “explanatory materials” in the “13th Five-Year Plan” (draft), “culture of rural sages”, as a form of traditional Chinese culture in the countryside, is characterized by emulating those better, respecting virtues and being kind and honest and friendly. The traditional form of “culture of rural sages” has been endowed with a new connotation of the times. Based on local conditions, outstanding grassroots cadres, moral models, and the nice deeds, it enhances new culture of rural sages, continues agricultural civilization, cultivates new farmers, nurtures civilized rural customs, enhances common prosperity, and creatively develops Chinese traditional culture (Xinhua News, 2016). It can be seen from these that culture of rural sages and socialist core values derived from the same origin. It can even be said that culture of rural sages is the concrete expression of the socialist core values landing in the countryside.

### 3. Reasons for Carrying Forward the Culture of Rural Sages

#### 1) New Difficulties in Rural Governance

At a time when farmers need to pay agricultural taxes, China’s rural governance has changed from an indirect mode to a direct mode (Fu, 2016). The financial foundation, governance mode, power structure and governance logic of rural grassroots organizations have undergone structural changes. The imbalance between the state power and the rural society has frustrated the governance of the grass-roots government (Zhou, 2006). Even, township cadres almost attempt nothing and accomplish nothing. Some scholars have pointed out, “township grass-roots governments are doing nothing for citizens in a haven” (Tian & Yang, 2009). In this way, the country and farmers are increasingly estranged, and traditional local authority is gradually fading away in rural governance (Zhou, 2006).

On the premise of less administrative power and unified salary distribution, in order to maintain the daily operation of township government, public service and public expenditure in villages, township finance officials often “Rob peter to pay Paul”. Therefore, the dilemmas of wage arrears, water and electricity bills arrears, no money for meetings, dilapidated roads, buildings collapsing and so on frequently occur. Under the further obstruction of tax and fee reform, the township government has difficulties in financial operation, resulting in the loss of governance functions. Since the rural autonomous organizations have not been established for a long time, the governance dilemma faced by the rural areas still exists after the abolition of agricultural tax. The standard of living of farmers has not been improved significantly, and even the governance of rural society has been deteriorated due to the shortage of public goods and services, the decline of public welfare undertakings, and the infiltration of evil forces.

Yan Deru (2016) said that the most basic problem in contemporary China’s

rural governance is the change of governance field. The feeling of hometown nostalgia, warm affection, and the culture of etiquette and custom have disappeared in many villages. According to relevant researches, China's villages are undergoing various degrees of disintegration. Some of them are rich in traditional governance resources, some are partially disintegrated, and some have basically disintegrated or even seriously shrunk (Liu, 2014).

According to Li Jianxing (2015), there are three difficulties in rural governance. First, villages with little rural elites and children and women left are dispirited, have weak foundation of endogenous governance. Secondly, village officials are incapable of fair governance. Under China's current social governance system, it is difficult for village officials with multiple roles in the core of rural governance to carry out fair governance. Some studies have shown that the current village cadres have "three roles" in land expropriation compensation, namely government agents-villagers' leaders and rational economic agents (Fu, 2014). Thirdly, the lack of trust erodes rural governance. At present, the "officials" and "villagers" in the countryside in China do not trust each other. They are dissatisfied with and accuse each other (Zhang, 2010). Due to the lack of trust, some accidental events such as the "June 28" Incident in Weng'an County, Guizhou Province, may inadvertently become the trigger for the anger of the rural people and eventually become serious mass incidents, undermining social stability. Moreover, many rural work, such as the construction of public facilities-water, electricity and roads, and charity fund-raising, is difficult to push forward. Even simple conflicts and disputes have to be resolved at a high price under the guidance of distrust. In recent years, problems in rural governance, such as the frequent occurrence of rural conflicts, stem from the distrust between "officials" and "people" in rural areas.

In addition, the differentiation of rural social interests, the diversity of demands, the lack of available social resources and the inadequacy of public services caused by social transformation have widened the difficulties of rural governance and eroded the effectiveness of rural governance.

## **2) Natural Advantages of Culture of Rural Sages**

Rural sages, as endogenous authorities in the village, make up for the inability of the grass-roots government and the village committee. Governance and culture of rural sages have the following advantages and functions.

Yang Jun (2016) said that there are four advantages for rural sages in participating in rural cooperative governance. First, break through the restriction of imperfect system. Second, improve the resources and allocation mechanism. Third, strengthen the execution of rural civil society and its organizations. Fourth, increase rural governance talents.

Liu Shulan (2016) advocated that there are four advantages for rural sages in participating in rural cooperative governance. First, advocate civilized rural customs. Second, as an advanced model, they led the villagers to become rich. Third, inherit regional culture. Fourth, safeguard social harmony.

According to Huang Hai (2015), as a “soft restraint” and “soft governance”, there are five advantages for new culture of rural sages. First, improve the interest expression mechanism of rural residents, stimulate new sages to participate in the construction of their hometown, stimulate the enthusiasm of villagers to participate in rural affairs, build a rural community, and improve their cohesion and autonomy. Second, its cultural and moral strength can continue the traditional rural context, thus optimizing the rural governance culture. Thirdly, taking new sages as an example, they can educate the villagers, make contribution to the villages, and cultivate civilized rural customs and value orientation. Fourth, as a symbol of rural regional spirit and culture, it can also optimize and integrate rural culture and value system and enhance good governance in rural society. Fifth, from the perspective of promotion means, in some “vacant” villages, the integration of new rural sages and rural social structure can enhance the popularization of public services and the formation of public order and good customs, and build a modern rural governance model with both local and modern characteristics.

Li Jianxing (2015) insisted that the rural governance can be improved by re-shaping modern rural sages and promoting the return of rural sage governance. First, it can strengthen the endogenous foundation of rural governance which is to form a harmonious rural order, which cannot be sustained by external intervention. To enhance the return of rural governance is actually to accelerate the restoration of rural governance ecology and heighten the endogenous foundation of rural governance.

Second, the return of rural sages to participate in rural governance can make up for the deficiencies of the current governance system and improve the relationship between “officials” and “villagers”. On the one hand, they can rely on their authority in the rural “acquaintance society” to assist the government in solving “powerless” matters. On the other hand, they act as a bridge of communication between village officials and villagers, bridging the differences, enhancing mutual trust between the two sides and easing the opposition between each other. More importantly, these have changed the dual governance pattern of rural governance jointly led by the township government and the “Party Branch Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in the Village and the Villagers’ Self-Government Committee” and formed a multi-dimensional governance pattern in rural governance.

Third, the ability of rural public services can be improved. The current cost of cooperation is getting higher and higher due to the tension in rural villagers’ relations caused by rural autonomy, increased mobility and differentiation of villagers’ interests. However, rural sages are able to mobilize all kinds of social relations, with contacts, technology, capital and information. In a word, they feed back their hometown through project return, capital return, information feedback, intellectual return to their hometown, technical assistance, poverty alleviation and assistance, etc., which is conducive to enhancing the economic strength of the village, reducing the villagers’ cooperation cost and boosting the village’s

public service capability (Li, 2015).

Wang Quangen (2011) stressed that since rural sages are local elites, perhaps their ancestors, relatives and fellow villagers, grandpa's brothers, father's classmates and uncle's comrades-in-arms, they are cultural figures and spiritual idols with human touch, affinity and kinship, who are most likely to be loved by villagers, and at the same time, they can best inspire the younger generation to emulate those better and become inspirational talents. For example, it was in childhood that Wen Tianxiang was inspired by the local elites from rural areas and was determined to follow their example and work hard to finally become a national hero.

### 3) Feasibility of Promoting the Culture of Rural Sages

The traditional rural sages' participation in the education and assisting the government in governing the villages has been proved by history to be in line with China's local social culture. But today, is this outdated, and is the governance of rural sages no longer suitable for today's society? In other words, is today's dynamic and open countryside still the "rural society" of the past? Has the local nature changed?

The author thinks it has not changed, so does Li Jianxing (2015). According to Fei Xiaotong's three main dimensions of local nature—the illiquidity of social subjects, the locality of social space and the familiarity of social relations (Lu, 2015) it has not changed.

First of all, judging from the illiquidity of the social subject, Fei Xiaotong thinks that the main body of the local society is illiquid because the farmers are mainly controlled by the land in order to make a living, from the relationship between people and space. In terms of the spatial arrangement between people, this is isolation (Fei, 2013). It should be admitted that under the promotion of market economy, the main body of the village has indeed moved in the relationship between people and space, but only in the physical space of the body. As migrant workers, they have not really been accepted by the locals. All of them are still isolated psychologically. In the relationship between "countrymen" and "townspeople", as Fei Xiaotong said, "isolation is related to the relationship between villages". They moved out of the countryside to make money, but they never separated themselves from their homeland. This is also an important reason why most workers come home at a certain age.

Secondly, from the perspective of the locality of social space, Fei Xiaotong believes that "the life in the local society is local", which means that their activities are regional, which is characterized by little contact between regions, isolated life and social circles. Obviously, as far as the scope of spatial activities is concerned, the present villagers have already broken away from the regional restrictions of narrow village communities. However, they could not escape from the area of their hometown village in the scope of their psychological activities. As the saying goes, "the villagers can't bear to cry when they meet each other". A local accent and a local feeling will make two people who do not know each other feel more friendly. "As an outer, on festive occasions more than ever one thinks of



one's dear ones far away". Even, during the Spring Festival, countless migrant workers in the city travel thousands of miles to the dilapidated village, regardless of hardship, regardless of high cost. The saying "it is necessary to go home for the Spring Festival, no matter how much money you have", has become a common voice. In such scenes, who can say that their psychological activities are not limited by region? Who can deny the isolation of their social circle?

Third, judging from the familiarity of social relations, Fei Xiaotong believes that "the local society is a 'familiar' one with no strangers". This is not in line with the present village, because many people in the present village do not live together in the same village for a long time as the older generation. However, in the village social network relationship, A may not know B, but may know B's father C or grandfather D, and then B becomes D's son or grandson. In this way, with the help of the network of C or D, A and B are no longer strangers because they have common topics and ties. This is totally different from strangers in the city. Therefore, in the village society, for the villagers who were born in the same place or had lived in the village for a period, the common blood ties and geographical ties will draw closer to each other, which is what we often say that blood is thicker than water.

To sum up, our country today still has the characteristics of China's rural society, although it has ostensibly changed compared with what Fei Xiaotong described. The local "spirit" is still maintained in diverse "forms". Industrialization and modernization have not fundamentally disintegrated the cultural genes of local China, nor have they completely collapsed the structure of traditional society. The homesickness diluted by time is always hidden in the deepest memory of the rural migrant workers, which will recover immediately once there is a suitable scene. Therefore, township governance is still suitable for today's villages and can make up for the dilemma of "township governance and village governance" in today's village governance.

#### 4. How to Guide the Culture of Rural Sages

Fu Cuilian (2016) believed that in order to reshape the "New Rural Sages Governance" model of rural elites, the following work should be done. First, carry forward the culture of rural sages and enhance the co-construction of rural society. "Culture of rural sages is an example and advanced culture with distinctive regional characteristics. New rural sages are leaders in doing good deeds and public welfare, as well as practitioners of local culture, civilization and socialist core values. In the process of rural governance, they should be encouraged to return, carry forward the culture of rural sages, pool the strength of "rural sages" with their financial resources, intelligence and influence to enhance the construction of beautiful countryside.

Second, new social organizations such as the Village Council for Rural Sages should be cultivated and developed into new social organizations between the government and the people to participate in rural governance affairs extensively.

Through the organization and cultivation of prestigious and capable economic talents, retired cadres, retired soldiers and representatives of migrant workers in the villages, etc. This can not only make full use of the influence of their informal authority to play the role of assisting the “Party Branch Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in the Village and the Villagers’ Self-Government Committee” in the rural governance, but also become an unofficial new type of social organization to make up for the lack of government governance capacity in the post-agricultural tax era and strengthen the relationship between the government and the public.

Liu Shulan (2016) proposed that it is necessary to carry forward the time value of culture of rural sages in rural governance, reshape the soul of humanistic and friendly rural governance, construct a multi-dimensional and cooperative rural governance subject, enrich the rural governance mode combining etiquette and law, and enhance the service-oriented rural governance guarantee.

Huang Hai (2015) said that the cultivation of culture of new sages requires diverse measures. First, taking retired cadres, intellectuals, outstanding migrant workers, entrepreneurs, etc. as examples, carry out cultivation and growth projects for new sages. Second, praise the “ancient sages” and organize and publicize the spirit of the traditional sages and their advanced deeds. Third, introduce new sages to return home to invest and participate in public projects and infrastructure construction. Fourth, cultivate new sages who are knowledgeable, responsible, prestigious and willing to take root in local areas. Fifth, improve the mechanism and build a platform for new sages to participate in rural construction. Through the formation of county, township and village-level associations or chambers of commerce and other social organizations, they are encouraged and supported to actively participate in rural public construction and public welfare undertakings. Sixth, help new sages to participate in the rural construction, inherit and carry forward the rural civilization through such forms as the New Rural Sages Council, mediators and preachers. Seventh, implement the system of holding a temporary leading post as “village official” or assistant for new sages to participate in the construction of rural grassroots organizations, thus enhance the modernization of rural governance with Chinese characteristics.

Yan Deru (2016) advocates to appoint new rural sages as consultants to the village management organization, and then divide them into various advisory groups to enhance the professionalism of the deliberation according to their characteristics and strengths. As suggested by some scholars, let them hold a temporary leading post as “village official” or township governors’ assistant, and they can also be directly elected to relevant posts in rural management organizations to specifically participate in decision-making and governance, improve the cadre structure of rural governance, the democratization and science of decision-making and governance.

Secondly, set up a deliberative and supervisory organization. As an integral part of the citizen group, new rural sages can independently set up three kinds of

organizations as followings according to the provisions of the constitutional law and corresponding laws and regulations. Set up research organizations, such as Research Institutes which focus on the excavation and inheritance of ancient rural sages, and then put forward various suggestions to improve rural governance. Built negotiating deliberative organizations, such as the rural counselor's Committee, directly discuss the contradictions in rural governance and so on, form certain decision-making opinions, and then directly report them to the relevant agencies. Establish relatives organizations, such as Clan Relatives Associations, directly coordinate and resolve the internal affairs of the family and their harmonious relationship with external affairs, effectively resolving various contradictions and "bridging social differences" (Zhang Yiwu, 2015).

In addition, foster and develop collaborative governance institutions. In order to strengthen the cooperative governance of rural society, new rural sages can also set up various organizations in a planned way with their own fame. First, various associations established according to age differences and interests, such as the elderly association and dance association. These will revive the community's public spirit and sense of belonging and enhance the community's awareness. Second, according to the type of rural affairs, water conservancy, roads, schools, communications and other security and repair work teams have been established to safeguard the public property of rural society and stimulate and pool the awareness of common interests. Third, according to the characteristics and special projects, set up cooperatives for agricultural seed research and development, breeding of fine varieties of poultry, planting of organic vegetables, development of special fruits, etc. to build a beautiful village and strengthen and institutionalize the awareness and ability of win-win cooperation.

## **5. A Case: Development of Rural Sages Council in Yunfu City, Guangdong Province**

### **1) Establishment of Rural Sages Council**

In the comprehensive rural reform in Yunfu City, rural sages have been given a modern meaning. Taking the natural village as a unit, New Rural Sages Council is fostered. Old Party members, old teachers, old models, old cadres, retired soldiers, economic and cultural talents and other people who are enthusiastic about local economic and social construction services and have long lived in rural areas or settled in rural areas after retirement have been brought into the category of modern rural sages to form councils. The council is a public welfare, service and mutual aid rural grassroots social organization with the purpose of participating in rural public services and developing mutual aid and mutual aid services, which is to develop rural public welfare undertakings, participate in rural social governance, and make up for the shortage of public goods and public services provided by grassroots governments and autonomous organizations.

The New Rural Sages Council is set up in a natural village with 21 to 81 members. It is composed of local party representatives at all levels, deputies to

the National People's Congress, members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and other rural sages. The members are recommended and nominated by the natural village (villagers' group), reviewed by the village (community) party branch, and confirmed as members after being published by the natural village (villagers' group). Then, the members' meeting elected 1 director, 6 to 17 vice-directors and 1 secretary-general handling the daily affairs by secret ballot. Its decision-making on affairs follows the principle of "one discussion for one event" on major items. General items are proposed, visited and deliberated by the board of directors and decided by the household representatives at the meeting. Besides, the resolutions of the bills and proposals, the implementation process is made public, and the results of the work are announced. Members make a public commitment to the villagers to perform their duties every year around their work duties stipulated in the articles of association, and voluntarily accept supervision by the masses.

## **2) Social Role of the New Rural Sages Council**

New Rural Sages Council as a social organization performs its duties according to the principle of "civilian affairs run and governed by the people", which is responsible for livelihood issues involving the vital interests of the masses, such as mediation of neighborhood disputes, establishment of rural public welfare, correction of bad habits of the masses, putting forward work suggestions, and performing autonomous functions. Its social role is mainly reflected as follows (Zhang Yi, 2015):

First, increase farmers' income. The Council actively assists leading agricultural enterprises to enhance the innovation of modern agricultural management system and mechanism and create a management mode of "company + Council + farmers". In the original "company + peasant household" industrialization development mode, it guided participation in the construction of the experimental zone, coordinated the company and peasant household, assisted in solving the problems of land lease, contract, replacement and production environment improvement, etc. in cooperation between leading agricultural enterprises and peasants, and enhanced the development of rural agriculture. Since its establishment, local councils have assisted leading agricultural enterprises to solve 299 problems.

Second, participate in public welfare undertakings. Guide the village council, especially the village council members, to practice excellent traditional culture. Not only will villagers be mobilized to participate in public welfare projects supplemented by financial awards, but also the principles of "self-discipline, self-improvement, mutual trust and mutual assistance, and joint construction and management" will be implemented to enhance project construction and public welfare undertakings. In addition, it also enhances the "feedback project", acting as a "think tank", "planner", "security team" and "philanthropist", respecting teachers and valuing teaching, rewarding teaching and assisting students, and helping the poor and needy. For example, rural sages in the villages of

Sanshan Town, Fuqing City, Fujian Province made donations to build ecological parks, reservoir landscape walkways, walkways around reservoirs and leisure villa for villagers' fitness and leisure, while those in Chengdong Town, Wenling City, Zhejiang Province set up a foundation for assistance for incidents, poor families, schooling for children in difficulty, medical service for seriously-ill villagers who are hospitalized, and Yuan's Charity. In addition, those in Mengdian Township, Yanshan County, Hebei Province have set up a foundation to help the elderly, the disabled, the medical service and students in need. In 2016, in total, charitable donations amounted to 489,000 yuan and rural sages also assisted 405 villagers, including 274 old people, 95 disables, 28 students, and 8 with serious diseases.

Third, carry forward excellent traditional culture. The New Rural Sages Council organized the compilation of village songs, village history, villagers' honor lists, compilation of good people and good deeds, etc. to publicize moral standards, guide people to distinguish right from wrong, honor from disgrace, and enhance the organization of folk customs and festivals and cultural activities such as "Six Patriarchs of Zen Fair", "Seizing the Cannon", "Dancing the Fire" and "Divine Wandering". These allow the masses to enhance their feelings and establish harmonious neighborhood relations in their participation.

Fourth, implement village rules and regulations to enhance village governance. The Council cooperates with the natural villages to establish and perfect the rules and regulations of the natural villages, to mediate conflicts and disputes in the countryside and to enhance social harmony. Based on incomplete statistics, by the end of 2019, first of all, the Rural Sages Council of the city's natural villages had assisted in formulating or revising more than 6000 village rules and regulations for villagers' groups and 4000 related systems for order management. Secondly, more than 2000 monitoring groups and nearly 10,000 management and protection groups have been set up. Then, the funds for management and protection of public facilities from donation reached more than 20 million yuan. Finally, they mediated over 5000 disputes resorting to village rules and regulations. These have played the main role of the masses and enhanced self-management, self-education, self-service and self-supervision.

### **3) Establishment of an Incentive Mechanism for Culture of Rural Sages**

As culture of rural sages is a very important social resource in social management innovation, it must be perfected from the system. Therefore, Yunfu City has established an incentive mechanism for rural sages to recognize their enthusiasm in serving the countryside and their hometown, and has also recognized the social status of modern rural sages.

In various places, "history of merits" has been set up, and merit halls have been set up where conditions permit to record deeds of rural sages, such as their zeal for public welfare, kindness and charity in the form of chronicle of events, and the history of villages has been written to reflect the deeds of wise and charitable people. Moreover, these actions advocate a civilized new style of "putting

morality first and treasuring peace” in the countryside, and guide the masses to hold self-discipline, self-improvement, mutual trust and assistance, and joint construction and sharing. The honorary incentive mechanism established by Luoding City for rural sages has made continuous and vigorous reports on the deeds of rural sages through television, radio and other media for many days during major festivals. The “naming system” in the donation and construction of public welfare undertakings has been implemented. For example, the named “Berlin Street” and “Guosheng Bridge” etc. have attracted more attention and participation of rural elites in the work of the Council.

## 6. Conclusion

### 1) Conclusion

Since the reform and opening up, there have been more and more dilemmas in rural governance. The outflow of rural labor and capital brought about by industrialization has resulted in a “vacuum” of governance in rural areas. Moreover, due to the excessive “administration” of villagers’ committees, the public affairs of villagers are hindered. In short, the gradual disappearance of the governance capacity of the grassroots government in the post-agricultural tax era and the lack of trust between the villagers and the grassroots government have proposed unprecedented difficulties in rural governance.

In addition, the traditional concepts of rural midwifery, loyalty, filial piety, benevolence and righteousness, which are represented by the culture of new sages, still affect the lives of the masses in the countryside. A large number of rural elites, especially those who have a strong desire to return to their hometown become a powerful force in building and managing the countryside. Positive rural sage groups have high management ability, and most of them have received the baptism of modernization and are knowledgeable about rural construction and development. Moreover, they are positive forces in building their hometown with a broad social foundation and a strong sense of making contributions for hometown.

Therefore, it is suggested that we should vigorously carry forward the culture of rural sages, give full play to the positive role of rural sage groups in the rural grassroots social management, rebuild the endogenous governance foundation of the countryside, so as to lay a solid foundation for perfecting the “rural governance system combining autonomy, rule of law and rule of virtue” and building “beautiful countryside”.

### 2) Deficiencies

In this paper, the author demonstrates the feasibility of improving the traditional governance of culture of rural sages through theoretical examples based on the connotation of “rural sages”. However, the specific operation of the culture of rural sages in rural governance has not been mentioned, which is the most important in the research of rural sages’ governance. Therefore, future related research should give priority to discussing its specific operation.

### 3) Practical Significance

The decline and serious brain drain in rural areas have worsened the foundation of endogenous governance. Moreover, in view of the decline in the service capacity of the grass-roots government, it can be seen that only rural sages returning home to participate in the construction can revitalize the countryside. However, many people still know little about rural sages, culture of rural sages and its function.

Given enough understand of the connotation of rural sages, the author explains the reasons for carrying forward culture of rural sage amid governance dilemma and the corresponding measures with successful cases. This can enhance people's understanding of and confidence in the governance of rural sages, and the model with participation of rural sages in the development of the rural governance, thus upgrading the endogenous governance, and accelerating targeted poverty alleviation and rural revitalization strategies.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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