

Structural Function Theory Analysis on the Causes of Rural Decline and Governance Structure

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Abstract: In 2018, our country released the No.1 document on Rural revitalization Strategy, which sets out the overall requirements of thriving industries, livable ecology, civilized local customs, effective governance and prosperous life. It aims to revitalize rural areas in an all-round way and achieve strong agriculture, beautiful rural areas and rich farmers. Why does the country revitalize the countryside? The issue of rural decline has become a focal point. In order to discuss how rural areas should get out of decline from the macroscopic theoretical level, this paper analyzed the causes of rural decline from the perspective of structural function theory and constructed a rural governance structure with AGIL model.

1. Introduction

In the process of modernization, rural decline is a universal problem in the world. Some scholars believe that modernization accompanied by rural decline is a universal phenomenon in the world. ^[1] For countryside of China, decline is a gradual process of evolution. The rural areas of modern China have experienced two relative declines, the bankruptcy of small-scale peasant economy led to the first decline crisis of modern Chinese countryside. In the past three decades, due to the specific historical background and reasons, China's rural areas are declining again. ^[2] The No. 1 Central Document released by the state in 2018 calls for the comprehensive revitalization of rural areas. Tracing back why the country implemented the rural revitalization strategy, the focus is still on rural decline.

2. Literature Review on “Rural Decline”

Rural decline is an objective problem. ^[3] Although great achievements have been made in the construction of the new countryside, the reality shows that the achievements of the countryside are paralleled with the relative decline. This relative decline can be divided into two dimensions: horizontal and vertical. In the horizontal dimension, the speed of modern rural development is relatively declining compared with that of urban development, while in the vertical dimension, modern rural development is relatively declining compared with the effectiveness and cohesion of traditional rural governance. ^[2]

On the studies of the first rural decline, there are successively the utopian countryside envisaged by Li Dazhao, ^[4] the Dingxian experiment promoted by Yan Yangchu ^[4] and Liang Shuming's Zou Ping model. ^[1] The current research on rural decline mainly includes the reasons, manifestations, characteristics, influences and how to effectively govern, etc. The research methods mainly include case study, correlation analysis and empirical investigation. In addition, some scholars focus on some certain aspects of rural decline to research (such as the hollowing of rural population, decline of rural collective culture, decline of rural clans, backwardness of rural education, decline of rural social publicity and abandonment of rural land). This paper will analyze the causes of rural decline and governance structure from the theoretical level which is lack of research at present. The reason for choosing the perspective of structural function theory is that the common view of the academic

circle on rural governance is to build a rural governance system with the participation of multiple subjects. Therefore, it is particularly important to define the functions of each subject and promote the benign interaction of each subject.

3. Structure-Function Theory

The development of structure-function theory has gone through three stages: the social action theory, the social system theory and the structural function analysis.^[6]

3.1 The Social System Theory: Agil Model

The social system theory in the second stage takes the social system as the analysis unit and established an AGIL model that corresponds to the four subsystems (behavior organism, personality system, social system, and cultural system) and the four conditions (adaptation, goal achievement, integration and model maintenance) that must be met to maintain the four subsystems.^[7] Among them, behavior organism performs the function of adaptation, that is, the biological characteristics of behavior organism determines the problem of system adaptation, and provides energy conditions to meet the needs of adaptive function.^[6] The personality system performs the goal achievement function, that is, to complete the individual's goal and role positioning, and then mobilize the enthusiasm of the individual personality to achieve the goal of the action system. The social system performs the integration function, that is, to integrate and coordinate each unit or each part of the system, so that it becomes a fully functioning whole. The cultural system performs model maintenance function, that is to provide the basic pattern of value standard for the whole action system.^[6]

Parsons thinks, the stability of the system depends not only on the existence and function of the four subsystems, but also on whether the four subsystems can interact well.^[6] He put forward the exchange relationship exists between the four subsystems. Ranking the four subsystems from low to high, and they are the behavior organism, the personality system, the social system and the cultural system in turn. Among them, Each lower level system provides energy conditions to the system one level above it, and each higher level system provides information control over its lower level system.^[6]

3.2 Functional Analysis Paradigm

On the basis of the criticism of the early functionalism, Merton established the functional analysis paradigm and proposed two groups of concepts of “positive function” and “negative function”, “obvious function” and “latent function” based on the complexity of the function of action system.^[5] Positive function means that the effect promotes the coordination of social order, while negative function means that the effect reduces or destroys the coordination of social order. Obvious function refers to the action consequences that the actor is aware of or expects, while latent function refers to the action consequences that the actor is unaware of or expects to achieve.^[5]

4. Analysis of the Causes of “Rural Decline”

The author mainly analyses the causes of “rural decline” from the perspectives of the external environment and the countryside itself, the former is based on Merton’s functional analysis model, the latter draws on Parsons' social system theory.

4.1 Influence of the External Environment

The external environment has two main influences on rural decline. On the one hand, the rapid development of industrialization and urbanization has caused the original development resources of rural areas to be transferred to cities, which has led to relative decline in rural areas. On the other hand, the loss of original development resources in rural areas is a negative function caused by industrialization and urbanization. The decline of rural areas caused by this negative function mainly has the following manifestations.

4.1.1 The Hollowing of Rural Population

First, the development of industrialization and urbanization has absorbed most of the rural human resources. Secondly, industrialization and urbanization have created a vast space for development, which has a huge attraction for many people in the countryside.

4.1.2 The Recession of Rural Economy

Industrialization and urbanization have promoted the rapid development of the urban economy, but indirectly hindered the development of the rural economy. Rural economic recession is a consequence of the hollowing of the rural population. Human resources are one of the production factors of rural economic development. Its loss directly leads to and accelerates the rural economic recession.

4.1.3 Rural Land is Barren

Land is another factor of production for rural economic development, but the traditional “farmers never leave the land” has gradually lost its economic significance in modern rural areas where economic development has no momentum. Many farmers would rather go out to work than stay at home to continue farming. There has been a lot of desolation of rural land.

It should be noted that the hollowing out of rural population, rural economic decline, and rural land barrenness are both specific manifestations of rural decline. From the perspective of the negative functions caused by industrialization and urbanization, the above three are also three specific causes of rural decline derived from the underlying cause of the loss of rural development resources.

On the other hand, in the process of industrialization and urbanization, the input of external resources is tilted towards cities, the dynamic balance of social resources is broken, and the problem of insufficient input of resources in rural areas has appeared. This is the key cause of rural decline, namely rural resources. Insufficient input is another negative function caused by industrialization and urbanization. The rural decline caused by this negative function mainly has the following manifestations.

4.1.3.1 Agriculture Lacks Government Protection Mechanisms

Due to the lack of risk control mechanism, farmers have only been passive recipients of agricultural products prices for a long time, and the natural risks and market risks faced by China's agriculture are mainly borne by farmers. In addition, due to the lack of interest protection mechanism, in the non-agricultural transfer of production factors such as land, farmers often can only passively accept the low price of land and can't enjoy the benefits they deserve.

4.1.3.2 Insufficient Investment in Public Services

The general shortage of government financial funds has led to insufficient investment in rural public service funds, which restricts its development. In addition, the total supply of rural public services is relatively insufficient, and compulsory education, medical and health, social security, cultural undertakings, infrastructure and other public services are far from the cities; Finally, rural public services are mainly provided by township governments, and the single mode of supply also restricts the development of rural public services.

4.2 The Reasons for the Countryside Itself

For the reasons at the rural itself, the author will use the AGIL model to analyse.

4.2.1 Behavior Organism Level: the Lack of Main Body of Rural Construction

4.2.1.1 Villagers

Villagers are the main actors of rural construction. The large number of villagers leaving their homes has led to the lack of rural construction subjects. The loss of some rural elites makes rural development lose the backbone.

4.2.1.2 Grassroots Government and Village-Level Organizations

The grass-roots government and village-level organizations are the main body of leadership for rural construction, but they did not recognize the objective facts of rural decline, let alone predict the impact of rural decline. The revitalization of the village requires the cooperation of the grassroots government, village-level organizations and villagers, but the reality is that they lack interaction.

4.2.2 Personality System Level: the Result of Villagers' Passive Choice in Pursuit of a Better Life

Compared with rural areas, cities can provide more opportunities and platforms, so villagers must choose migrant workers in order to pursue a better life. As a result, the countryside has formed a “part-work and half-farming structure” based on the division of labour between generations.^[8]

4.2.3 Social System Level: Atomization of Rural Society

“Atomization” is a discrete state of social relations in the village, which is mainly manifested in the weakening of connections between individuals and the lack of collective action capabilities.^[9]

4.2.4 Cultural System Level: Rural Acquaintance Society is Destroyed

With the development of the times, the rural acquaintance society has become increasingly profitable, the kinship community based on geographical proximity has become increasingly alienated, and the traditional rural human relationship society has been affected. The development of informatization and changes in the values of the younger generation have also led to the degradation of the role of rural culture in the countryside.

5. The Rural Governance Structure of out of the Decline

As mentioned above, at present, the reasons for the decline of rural areas lie in the loss of rural original development resources and the insufficient input of rural resources. But resources are limited. So, the key to solve the rural decline is how to maximize the resources obtained under the condition of limited resources. The realization of this goal requires a rural governance structure that can fully function. From the perspective of structural function theory, the rural governance structure is an action system constructed by the actions of all parties. Whether its subsystems can interact well or not determines whether the countryside can get out of decline. The author will start from the perspective of its subsystems to construct a rural governance structure that can match the maximization of resources.

5.1 Behavior Organism Perspective

In the rural governance structure, the behavior organism is first an economic man and needs economic support. Therefore, the grassroots government needs to seek more economic support to promote the development of the rural economy. Economic development is the material basis for rural areas to emerge from decline.

5.2 Personality System Perspective

The function of the personality system is to clarify role positioning, mobilize the enthusiasm of actors and implement supervision. The various subjects in the rural governance structure should play their own roles, and the grassroots government should fully mobilize the enthusiasm of other subjects. In addition, an effective monitoring mechanism is also essential.

5.3 Social System Perspective

At the level of the social system, rural governance should build a governance system in which multiple parties participate. This governance system should follow three principles:

5.3.1 Good Interaction and Cooperation

Among multiple subjects, the government should be the first responsible subject, and the platform for the participation of multiple subjects should be built by the government. In the governance process, the grassroots government should also coordinate the relationship between other subjects; The village-level organization is an intermediate body, a dialogue bridge between the grassroots government and the villagers, and the body responsible for specific rural public affairs; Social organizations are mainly involved in public services in rural governance. Grassroots governments and village-level organizations entrust rural public services to third parties (Social organizations) through public service outsourcing; Villagers exist as subjects of rights, and grassroots governments, village-level organizations, and social organizations all serve the villagers. While making demands, villagers should actively cooperate and assist other subjects in their work; “new able villagers” (“new Xiangxian”) has been a hot keyword in recent years. Many scholars have proposed that the governance of new able villagers can be used as a new way of rural governance. The author believes that new able villagers are the main supporter who can provide support for rural governance through economic, intellectual and status methods. The interactive structure between each subject in rural governance is shown in Figure 1.

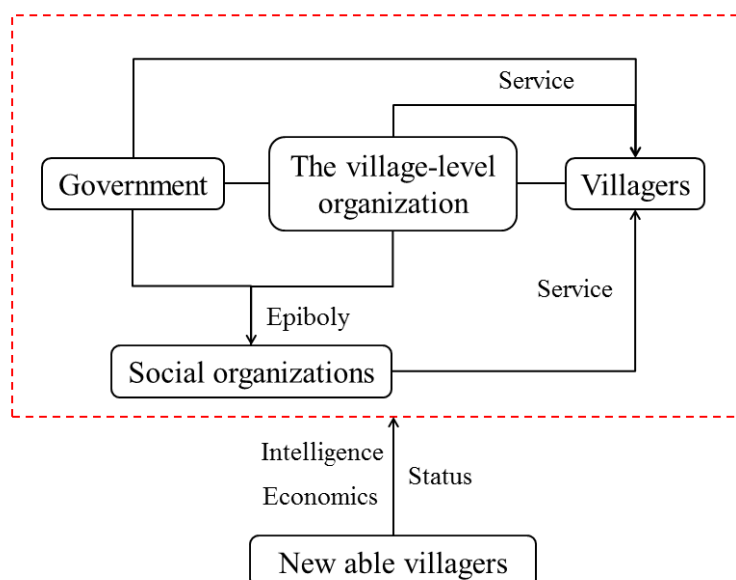


Fig.1 The Interactive Structure of Each Subject in Rural Governance

5.3.2 Interest Integration

The main body of the rural governance system is the “economic man” first, and the integration of interests is to pursue the maximization of public interests on the basis of minimizing the harm to the interests of all parties.

5.3.3 Same Goal

The goals pursued by the parties are different, but their realization depends on the rapid development of the countryside, so the goals of the parties should be consistent at a higher level.

5.4 Cultural System Perspective

The rural governance structure needs to establish a set of value norms to maintain its good operation, and the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China once proposed that the construction of the rural governance system requires a combination of autonomy, rule of law and rule of virtue^[10], So, the author believes that the establishment of this set of value norms should take into account the rule of law and the rule of virtue. The rule of law is mainly about the establishment and improvement of formal systems. The government should make system adjustments on the basis of reflection, in order to help rural areas out of decline under more

reasonable and effective system arrangements. At the level of rule of virtue, the main emphasis is on the influence of informal systems. Traditional Chinese rural society has formed a self-contained rural culture, which varies from place to place. However, with the flow of population and changes in lifestyles, these traditional rural cultures have gradually lost its influence. It is undeniable that although these traditional cultures have their drawbacks, their enlightenment to rural governance should be re-emphasized. At present, academic circles generally focus on the term “new able villagers” and propose to include “new able villagers” in the rural governance system. Therefore, the role of informal institutions should be emphasized in the rural governance structure, and the fine traditional rural culture should be actively inherited and promoted or use its variants in the new era to provide value norms for the maintenance of rural governance structures.

6. Conclusion

The research in this paper finds that the decline of rural areas is influenced by the external environment on the one hand. It is believed that the negative functions caused by the development of industrialization and urbanization is that the loss of original rural development resources and the insufficient input of rural resources, which lead to the decline of rural areas; on the other hand, the reasons for the countryside itself include the lack of the main body of rural construction, the result of villagers' passive choice in pursuit of a better life, the atomization of rural society, and the destruction of rural acquaintance society. Based on the above reasons, the author used the AGIL model to construct a rural governance structure, trying to provide some ideas on how to get out of rural decline.

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