

Political Embeddedness and Meta-Governance: New Pathways for Rural Revitalization through Cooperatives

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Abstract: Revitalization of rural areas relies heavily on rural cooperatives, and despite that, rural cooperatives usually perform poorly. poor performance is due to bad governance, limited financing, and poor market connections. This paper focuses on the cooperative located in Henglangshan Village in Wuhu, Anhui Province, through the lens of embedded institution and collaborative governance to explore the key drivers behind the cooperative's success. The qualitative approach employed in this study is concerned with the phenomena of organizational restructuring, resource integration, and linkage of interests.

Henglangshan Village has successfully transcended many traditional barriers through strategic implementation. Embedding institutional guidance directly into the industrial chain has ensured the cooperative's adherence to the correct political orientation. The implementation of various modern management techniques has improved the cooperative's governance. Also, the diversification of shareholding has strengthened the community of interest. The implementation of a cross-appointment system for workers has increased internal motivation. The cooperative has opened up new pathways for economic development through the reintegration of local assets and the integration of all three levels of industry. This demonstrates the meta-governance role of organizational embedding in rural economic units, offering an institutional model that synergizes institutional forces, economic development, and social governance. In this context, the paper attempts to address the issue of how political organizations, at the grassroots level, transition from an "administrative control"

approach to a "leadership through empowerment" approach, thereby contributing to the improvement of the theory of cooperative governance with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords: Cooperatives; Meta-governance; Institutional embeddedness; Rural revitalization; Industrial chain integration

1. Introduction

The 20th National Congress Report of China establishes as a fundamental policy objective the goal of moving "comprehensively forward for rural revitalization." This report emphasizes the need to revitalize rural areas' modern industries, talent, culture, the natural environment, and social organizations. It also identifies the strengthening of the political and organizational systems as a priority for the effective governance of the grassroots level [1]. This situation has made politically guided cooperatives an important instrument for the development of the rural collective economy, integration of smallholder farmers with the larger markets, and reorganization of rural governance. There is a wide variation of local practices, such as the 'politically led' model in Yantai, Shandong, and the "Village-Cooperative Integration" model in Tangyue, Guizhou. These practices indicate that with the full participation of political organizations in cooperative economic groups and with a true participative spirit, trust and resource constraints faced by self-organized farmers' groups are overcome [2]. These practices also indicate an enduring institutional commitment to rural development. This participation in cooperative enterprises facilitates economic development while also reinforcing the rural social order. Such political engagement in the rural revitalization process is

essential to the participative spirit of the above practices.

These recent changes address problems like weak governance, lack of funding, and limited flexibility— problems that cooperative systems usually struggle with, and add to long-term rural social and economic growth. For the Chinese Cooperative System, these changes offer a framework through which political institutions employ good institutionalism in promoting rural economic and social growth, at the rural economic and social growth, employs good institutionalism. However, we must recognize that these systems focus mainly on politically guided rural cooperatives, and that most of them are just a name with a board to fulfill a quota requirement. Besides, most cooperatives struggle through an administrative problem where local bureaucrats do most of the work, leaving rural populations to be spectators [3]. Of all the problems that exist, the question that needs to be asked is in what capacity should institutional actors become involved in cooperative work? Should they fill the gaps in the market, or should they empower the participants? Should they become more hands-off, or more directive, and then allow the cooperatives to manage themselves? To date, these questions have the most attention in the literature, but they remain unanswered. What most scholars focus on is the economic success of cooperatives [4]; what they fail to see is the hidden governance matrix that exists.

The phenomena of embedding governance structures into the structures of society is covered by other studies [5]. However, these studies tend to overlook the specifics of the political process and the effects of embedding integration. In the context of embedding political institutions into the social system and the agency of the farmers, scholars maintain that the purpose of these governance frameworks should be to place themselves in the position of farmers' autonomy [6]. They also argue that in order for the political institutions to fulfill its purpose in the rural areas, it is essential that the novel constructive ideas in the field of governance be employed [7]. Given this vague theoretical basis, genuine policy development has fluctuated between two extremes. The first is ignoring the agency of farmers, which results in cooperatives as empty structures lacking content. The second is the excessive external involvement that undermines the potential for

the cooperative to provide the market an essential role in fulfilling its functions.

Considering the theory of institutional embeddedness [8] and collaborative governance theory [9], this paper analyzes the three dimensions of structural, relational, and cognitive embeddedness of political construction and the guiding role of constructive institutional guidance. Based on this theory and grounded data, we analyze the specific mechanisms used to modify local governance, integrate disparate interest groups, and consolidate multiple industries. This study deepens the understanding of rural cooperative economics in a Chinese context and provides useful frameworks for the Global South's developing countries adopting a distinctive politically guided development model

2. Key Challenges in Cooperatives Founded by Governance Bodies

Policy frameworks around cooperatives expect a lot from these organizations. The actual state of things is very different. There are institutional barriers. Governance is not keeping pace, the resources are limited, and there is little flexibility to adapt to the market. The result is a shortage of internal dynamism. Unless these problems are adequately resolved, cooperatives will be “decoupled in form and substance” becoming a lot of activity with no sustained purpose.

2.1 The Coexistence of Unprofessional Governance and Administrative Overreach

Most of the current politically affiliated cooperatives have a good foundation of political legitimacy. This legitimacy, however, has some drawbacks. For example, it can be easier to arrange people, but harder to manage the actual business operations. While the village personnel have the capacity to arrange and oversee large groups of people, they usually have insufficient comprehension of contemporary business practices, such as the principles of corporate finance, marketing, and other activities. This leads to a large number of decisions being made based on personal and subjective considerations. The situation is worse with the phenomenon known as 'administrative overreach,' where the entire operation is absorbed by the governing institution. In these instances, the cooperative's own rules become irrelevant and member assemblies are transformed into a mere formality. The village committee becomes the de

facto governing body of the cooperative and assumes all the decision-making powers. While the practice of substituting administrative control for the cooperative may bring about increased operational efficiency, it violates the fundamental principle of cooperatives, which states that the cooperative is owned and controlled by the members [10]. Additionally, it causes the cooperative's members, in this case the farmers, to begin losing control and, more importantly [11], a sense of realownership. Over time this will erode the organization's cooperative ties [11].

2.2 Narrow Financing Channels and Persistent Financial Exclusion

Every cooperative needs capital, but it is also its weakest component. Insufficient, qualified collateral, incomplete credit histories, and poor risk assessments make accessing loans from formal financial institutions almost impossible. Some regions have allowed local authorities to provide credit guarantees for these cooperatives, but a viable and sustainable long term financial assistance mechanism is yet to be devised.

The gap can be mitigated by the rapid development of digital finance. On the contrary, the inability of most rural populations to comprehend digital technologies has made the 'financial gap' even larger [12]. Owing to an inability to obtain initial capital, coupled with an inability to access loans, many cooperatives are unable to capitalize on the market and grow, and are forced to access informal lenders who charge very high interest rates.

2.3 Homogeneous Industry Structure and Weak Market Linkages

Many agricultural cooperatives are still locked into a primitive approach to sweating, simply saying, "We sell whatever we can grow." Such a fundamental approach to working produces homogeneity across their products, distinguishing nothing. Due to the generic nature of their output, they cannot gain a reputation with a strong brand, nor can they compete with others in the market based on product differentiation. There is still an existing knowledge gap between the farmers and the market buyers about the products, and their sales methods are far from varied. These challenges often frustrate farmers, as, even if they grow more crops than the average, at the end they do not gain the desired financial rewards for their

increased work.

Within the realm of agricultural online selling, there is a marked deficit of personnel with both the requisite professional skills and the ability to create promotional content for selling. In the absence of such personnel, the vast majority of live-stream selling activities are merely local government employees engaging in a short-lived, hobby-type activity. Unable to create online selling channels that are expandable and sustainable, female farmers face even more hurdles in securing information, accessing transport, or participating in even the most basic skills training [13]. This widens the unequal participation gap. At the root of this unfortunate circumstance is a system-level challenge in providing a seamless service integrating modern agricultural practices with small-scale farming [14].

2.4 Hollow Internal Governance and the Talent Gap

Numerous cooperatives have established distinct boards for supervision and management, and even though the laws that govern the structure of these boards remain somewhat ambiguous, the governance of these boards still allows for the infringement of fundamental member rights. These member rights include, but are not limited to, making democratic decisions, overseeing the cooperative, and enjoying the appropriate financial return for cooperative patronage. This weakens the interest of the farmers and contributes to the burden of the "free-rider" mentality. Farmers, who have little interest in the day-to-day activities of the cooperative, delegate their responsibility by holding shares and collecting their profits.

At the same time, village level personnel tend to be much older, and less educated, and are burdened by repetitive micromanagement tasks for the administration. Moreover, personnel sent from outside the village are unfamiliar with the local farming situation, which complicates the integration of modern farming tools and the appropriate market information. Adding to the problem, capable citizens with the requisite knowledge of technology, business, and management are often eliminated, due to their lack of political connections, or because they do not receive the appropriate incentives to join. The 'talent trap' of blocked upward mobility for younger employees, and older cadres are unable to step aside, together with an inability to retain

valuable new employees, restricts the potential for innovation and creates a 'lock-in' scenario for the cooperative.

Only placing more reliance on top-down administrative directives and political mobilization is not going to help with achieving qualitative development. There is a need to shift the focus to the 'institutional innovation' to unlock the potential political system of governance structures on the governance side of the political system and to introduce 'new' developmental growth. This is exactly the problem the initiatives in Henglangshan Village are trying to address.

3. Theoretical Framework: Integrating Institutional Embeddedness with Meta-Governance

Existing research on institutionally managed cooperatives generally only touch on policy support and personal narratives. Generally, they do not go beyond the superficial and outline the inner workings of institutionally managed cooperatives through a unified theoretical lens. Political integration is the focus of some researchers, while others analyze the economic performance of cooperatives, or address the administrative burden. These discourses assume the state and market, as well as political and economic, are opposites. This assumption creates an inability to answer a fundamental question: why, in some villages, does deep institutional involvement not stifle market operations but rather enhance the village's internal development drive?

The first step in addressing these contradictions is getting past the binary of intervention versus autonomy. We propose focusing on a new question: What are the mechanisms that facilitate institutional involvement in cooperatives while allowing Political steering to be maintained and the cooperative identity not to be disrupted? To answer this question, we integrate the concept of institutional embeddedness with collaborative and self-governance structures, and present a new theoretical framework that we call "Triple Embeddedness - Meta Governance," which applies to the context of rural China.

3.1 Extending the Applicability of Institutional Embeddedness

Granovetter (1985) was the first to present a complete and systematic approach to

institutional embeddedness theory. The key concept of this theory is relatively straightforward. Economic activities happen somewhere, but they also occur within the framework of pre-existing social ties and within the framework of the pre-existing institutional structures [8].

Initially, this theory sought to articulate the manner in which social and market behaviors are influenced by social norms, trust, and shared cultural values. From there, scholars took this perspective and applied it to the analysis of public governance. The perspective allows us to analyze the complementarity of institutions in policy implementation and inter-institutional collaboration [5].

In the analysis of China's rural areas, the institutional structures organization was, and still is, a lot more than an expression of political authority. It is the principal supplier of the local institutional order and the source of the governing rules. Where a village level institutional branch takes charge of the management of a village cooperative, it is actually constructing a new "political-economic" institutional order.

The success of an embedding process depends on multiple factors other than the tangible presence of external institutions in the system. These factors include the extent of institutional engagement, the techniques employed, and the characteristic of the limits. Administrative commands used by governance bodies create a type of 'suspended embeddedness.' This usually causes hostility from the farmers. Nevertheless, when the institutional design of political leadership's objectives—represented in the design of the framework—leads to a shared agreement as well as net benefits to the farmers, we observe 'endogenous embeddedness' and encouragement of collaboration.

3.2 Triple Embeddedness: Structural, Relational, and Cognitive

Taking into account the broader perspectives provided by the theory of institutional embeddedness, this paper divides the leading model into three successive levels. The first level is "Structural Embeddedness", which focuses on how organizational systems become integrated within the governance structures of the cooperatives through various formal channels, such as cross-body appointments, new governance arrangements, and amendments to

the cooperative's by-laws. The primary objective of this system is to ensure that the trajectory of the cooperative's evolution remains aligned with the interests of the greater collective. The guiding principle here is a reasonable distribution of authority and a diverse range of functions. The governance body is more concerned with the oversight of goal setting and direction, along with the resolution of major policy implementation activities, rather than the day-to-day operational governance of the cooperative. This model directly addresses the governance challenge of "how to prevent the leadership from dominating the operational activities of the cooperative." The second level, "Relational Embeddedness," focuses on the establishment of stable working relationships among a host of actors, such as the village collectives, individual farmer, supply and marketing cooperatives, and other external enterprises. This is achieved through the identification of unambiguous property regimes, the establishment of just and equitable mechanisms for benefit sharing, and the integration of all relevant players into one cooperative network. The central focus here is on the establishment of building a shared community of common interests and activities.

When the role of farmers change from being mere 'land lessors' to holding a three-part role, to being a shareholder of the company, an active member in the company, and a recipient of the income, the willingness to cooperate and the instinct to supervise, to some degree, the operations of the company increase significantly. The "free-rider" problem that Ostrom discussed [15] becomes much easier to solve. The first step in the implementation of the connected benefit mechanisms, which is the establishment of a well-defined property right, is shown in some recent studies to be a prerequisite [16,17].

Cognitive Embeddedness: The main focus of this is how we help farmers get fully committed to the cooperative. When leaders set good examples, get their hands dirty, and engage in local storytelling, we help farmers rebuild their recognition of the benefits of the cooperative and their sense of community. When villagers believe "this co-op is all of ours" and "if we work hard, we are building a better future for ourselves," they cooperate habitually, and not as a compulsory norm. This is how a sustainable cooperative economy is culturally founded.

The Progressive Nature of the Three Layers: The

three types of embeddedness develop in a progressive order. The first, structural embeddedness constructs a framework of the entire institution. The second, relational embeddedness fosters mutual connections based on interests. The last, cognitive embeddedness develops the cultural identity of the community. Each of these needs the others to function effectively. Combined together, they create a complete connected chain to establish effective functional leadership.

3.3 Meta-governance: Repositioning the Role of Cooperative Governance

This paper introduces the concept of "meta-governance" [9], which is useful for understanding the true nature of organizational functions at all three layers of embeddedness. The term meta-governance moves away from the micromanagement of all elements and is described as meta-level "governance of governance." It operates by formulating some basic rules, organizing critical resources, and establishing trust relations to help actors work together.

Taking this into consideration, a functioning governance structure works more as an "enabler" with regard to the overall system as opposed to a "micromanager. It does not seek to occupy the position of the market, but addresses its gaps and failures. Tsai's 2020 analysis supports this perspective, wherein she argues that the lower-level governance structures in China already incorporate elements of "adaptive authoritarianism." Within this framework, the governing body guidance that is more "soft" and "flexible" [18].

The case of Henglangshan Village illustrates this effect. When the the governing body the position of a meta-governor, it fully leverages its strengths of resource mobilization and integration, yet allows the cooperative the economic autonomy of self-management. This conceptual core — "lead, do not dominate; empower, do not substitute" — is what facilitates the overcoming of the performative governance and "void, dysfunctional cooperatives" deadlocks.

3.4 Research Questions

This paper attempts to answer three main questions after establishing this theoretical framework. For a village with fairly typical resources, how does the governance structure

utilize new institutional concepts to accomplish this triple embeddedness within the local cooperative? How does this type of embeddedness facilitate governance and local development? How do we interpret what we are seeing? Is it possible to assume the results are the combined product of various local factors, or is there a common structure that may be replicated elsewhere?

We study Henglangshan Village in detail. Our interest goes beyond simply depicting what this village has done in terms of institutional innovation. The aim is to construct an operational model, termed 'Embedded Governance within the Industrial Chain', which is meant to be more of a theoretical construct and framework for policy-making and implementation rather than a model. Finally, this study appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the understanding of rural cooperative economies with Chinese characteristics [19-20].

4. Practical Exploration of the Triple Embeddedness Mechanism: A Deep Dive into Henglangshan Village

4.1 Case Background and Methodology

Henglangshan Village is located in Wuhu, Anhui Province, in the hilly part of southern Anhui at the edge of the Yangtze River basin. This area is beautifully endowed with many forests, streams, and arable land. It was a traditional base for cotton and grain production. However, it began changing at the turn of the millennium.

Like many rural areas in China, Henglangshan Village began experiencing a host of problems that included an exodus of the youthful labor force, increased subdivision and fragmentation of cultivated land, and decreased agricultural revenue. Consequently, the village became the epitome of the rural development predicament, characterized by the abandonment of cultivated land, lack of demand for the produce, and the surrounding areas of great potential for tourism being completely undeveloped. For many years, the total annual earnings of the village collective did not exceed 100,000 RMB. The villagers were apathetic to the collective interests, and the only way to elicit a collective action, such as attending a village assembly, was to personally mobilize potential participants. Even public assemblies required the distribution of free cigarettes to encourage attendance.

The year 2020 represented a watershed moment in Anhui Province's commitment to rural

revitalization through local governance and organizational development. Led by proactive and capable villagers, several months of community discussions and participant observations placed village governance at the forefront of establishing the first of its kind, "Henglangshan Agricultural Professional Cooperative." The target was unambiguous: To construct a new track where the cooperative would consolidate and fortify, the local sector would innovate, and the local members would attain a better economic and social status.

Amazingly, the cooperative 'revival' of over 10,000 mu of land and the annual village collective income of more than 4 million RMB, was a small reward to the cooperative. All 948 families of the village received shares and, thus, the right to earn a dividend. The transformation of this village to a cooperative and a trading venture, after years of stagnation, reflects the opening of the village to economic activity.

We aim to understand the underlying mechanisms driving the rapid changes in this village through extensive fieldwork that began in 2022 and continues to this day. Using a range of complementary methods, the first of which is approximately 31 semi-structured interviews, which we conducted with people in various positions of the village hierarchy from leadership to common farmer members. We participated in a range of cooperative activities including meetings and dividend distribution and engaged in daily work on local farms over a total of 22 days. We aim to gather information on the interior perspective of cooperative innovations. We compared our semi-structured fieldwork to an organized review of the primary data which consisted of charters, monthly reports, and contracts. We aim to fill the void of cooperative innovations from an internal perspective.

4.2 Structural Embeddedness: Organizational Integration, Not Substitution

Insufficient, qualified collateral, incomplete credit histories, and poor risk assessments make accessing loans from formal financial institutions almost impossible. Some regions have allowed local authorities to provide credit guarantees for these cooperatives.

Here, the key approach is what is called "Secretary-led, Branch-on-the-Chain. The village chairperson also serves as the chairperson of the cooperative, but he operates with a directive – "Set the Goal, and Don't Sweat

the Small Stuff.” The implication is that the governing organization has three key responsibilities. First, the organization ensures that the co-operative remains faithful to its mandate of serving the collective and the farmer members. Second, the organization assists in mobilizing external supports in the form of policy and funding, as well as technical and advisory supports, from higher tier government system line ministries and departments. Third, the governing organization assists in brokering and balancing the divergent interests of co-operative members. At the same time, the cooperative embedded work groups in critical areas of their supply chain, such as grain and oil production, processing, and sales. Within these areas, core team members take on leadership and major service roles in the resolution of complex technical problems. A good example of this was the advocacy for the practice of green rice cultivation in the village. Many of the other farmers were apprehensive and had concerns that their yields would be negatively impacted. Faced with this opposition, five core team members took the initiative to trial the new green rice cultivation across 200 mu of land. They successfully lifted average per-mu income by 300 RMB, prompting other farmers to voluntarily adopt this planting method. The “organizational coverage plus exemplary demonstration” mechanism enables institutional development to be naturally integrated into value creation across all industrial segments. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge of grassroots agricultural cooperatives in a novel and useful way. Rather than succumbing to the dominant perspective of 'depolicitization is the only alternative', this study shows that, under a certain set of institutional 'rules of the game', governance structures can direct their energy into cooperative governance for mutually beneficial economic growth.

Future studies should attempt to answer some core questions: what are the criteria that determine the acceptable boundaries of political embeddedness? What conditions could be expected to shift this role from ‘empowerment’ to ‘over-regulation’? These questions are pertinent for the construction of an applicable localized rural governance theory for the context of China, with the potential of enhanced explanatory and predictive power. More concretely, this will improve the construction

and the application of rural revitalization theory.

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