

# Review of Moral Governance in Rural China over the Past Century: Theoretical and Practical Evolution

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## Abstract:

As a core paradigm embedded in rural governance, moral governance has undergone profound evolution in its theory, practice, roles, and functions. Modern moral governance transcends mere moral indoctrination, playing a pivotal role in value guidance and order maintenance within rural governance. Furthermore, with the rapid advancement of digital technologies, contemporary rural moral governance faces both opportunities and challenges. Deeply excavating the philosophical foundations of moral governance, exploring innovative pathways for its practice, and promoting its creative transformation and development are essential to achieving the integrated evolution of modern rural governance systems.

**Key Words:** Moral Governance; Rural Governance; Tripartite Governance; Governance Modernization

## 1. Introduction

Rural governance constitutes the "last mile" of national governance. With the introduction of the state strategy to "modernize the governance system and capacity" and the strategic goal of "rural revitalization," rural governance faces both significant opportunities and challenges. Moral governance is a core tenet of traditional Chinese governance. In the context of social governance, rural moral governance refers not only to the practice of applying moral principles to govern rural communities but also to the ultimate goal of achieving "good governance" through such governance practices. Moral governance plays a foundational and supportive role in rural governance. How to maximize its efficacy has long been a central focus of academic research for over a century.

## 2. Research Progress of Moral Governance

### 2.1 Historical Evolution of Moral Governance in Rural Governance

For China, where the agricultural population has long constituted the overwhelming majority, the key academic question has always been how to extract beneficial insights from traditional wisdom on rule by virtue to provide cultural support and intellectual inspiration for rural governance practices. Scholars have delved deeply into traditional rule by virtue and concluded that it served as the foundation of governance for rulers, the principle of administration, and the essence of benevolent governance. In traditional society, the social structure was characterized by a hierarchical "differential order" with clear distinctions between seniority and status. Rulers maintained social order and stability through the norms of ritual and music systems and the moral influence of benevolence and righteousness. Every member of society—whether ruler or subject, elder or junior, parent or sibling—had corresponding social responsibilities based on their status [1]. The realization of traditional rule by virtue primarily depended on both rulers and individuals possessing "an innate virtuous heart [2]." The moral character and cultivation of the supreme ruler were the

prerequisites and foundation for achieving "governing with virtue," while the moral conduct of officials at all levels was a crucial guarantee for fostering "upright folk customs." [3] As the core actors in rural governance, the gentry class and clan organizations directly determined the quality of development and the maintenance of order in traditional villages through their moral influence and educational capabilities.

Modern rule by virtue differs entirely from its traditional counterpart in terms of governance logic, social foundations, and value objectives. Traditional rule by virtue was rooted in the Confucian ethical system of "self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and world peace," targeting a static rural society and achieving informal governance through the gentry class. In contrast, modern rule by virtue follows an institutionalized and procedural governance path, addressing a dynamic and pluralistic rural landscape to establish a new countryside guided by modern values.

Over the past century, the Communist Party of China has united and led the Chinese people through socialist revolution, construction, and reform, continuously integrating the fundamental principles of Marxism with China's specific revolutionary conditions and its excellent traditional culture. This has driven the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional Chinese moral governance thought, resulting in systematic and distinctly Chinese theoretical innovations in modern rule by virtue. This process has been both continuous and marked by distinct stages. During the socialist revolution and construction period, rural rule by virtue centered on "declaring war on feudal ethics" emerged and developed. In the new era of reform, opening-up, and socialist modernization, a new rural social-ethical system was constructed, deepening socialist rural rule by virtue with Chinese characteristics. In the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics, core socialist values have guided rural rule by virtue, enriching and refining the theoretical achievements of Marxist moral governance thought [4].

Looking back over this century-long journey, before reform and opening-up, the Communist Party of China laid the pioneering groundwork for modern rule by virtue. During the new era of reform, opening-up, and socialist modernization, the Party continued to develop and refine it. In the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics, the Party has further synthesized and elevated modern rule by virtue theory [5].

Academic research tracing the history of rural rule by virtue theory reflects both a conscious inheritance of China's excellent governance wisdom and contemporary scholars' agency in constructing theories based on local experience. Through critical inheritance, this research approach creatively transforms the rational core of traditional moral governance thought into theoretical resources for modern rural governance, providing an important intellectual reference for building a rural governance system with Chinese characteristics.

## **2.2 Synergistic Mechanisms of Moral Governance, Autonomy, and Rule of Law**

The Communist Party of China has explicitly proposed "strengthening grassroots governance in rural areas and improving the rural governance system that combines autonomy, rule of law, and rule of virtue." It emphasizes that "rural revitalization must strengthen the construction of rural grassroots Party organizations, enhance the importance of ideological and moral education for rural residents, advance the rule of law in rural areas, and highlight the significance of villagers' self-governance, continuously deepening the practical role of villagers' autonomy." This demonstrates the Party's high regard for promoting the modernization of rural governance through the "combination of three governance approaches." The traditions of rule by virtue, autonomy, and rule of law have deep roots in China's governance history, and clarifying the role and function of rule by virtue within the "three governance approaches" is essential to realizing the integrated governance system. In recent years, scholars have primarily held three perspectives on this issue.

The first is the "rule by virtue as foundation" theory, which argues that achieving modernization of national governance capabilities and systems must be based on rule by virtue, with rule of law serving as the safeguard [6]. This view emphasizes that rule by virtue and rule of law are two sides of the same coin in national governance, with rule by virtue playing a foundational role to ensure the coordinated development of the "three governance approaches."

The second is the "rule by virtue as support" theory, which posits that autonomy, rule of law, and rule by virtue are the three key components of the "three governance" synergy mechanism. Here, autonomy is the endogenous driving force, rule of law the necessary safeguard, and rule by virtue the crucial support [7]. This perspective highlights that rule by virtue, under the broadest participation of villagers, relies on widely accepted moral values to build consensus, resolve social conflicts, and maximize the effectiveness of rural governance.

The third is the "rule by virtue subordinate to rule of law" theory, which maintains that the fundamental strategy of the Communist Party of China in leading the people to govern the country is rule of law, and the basic approach to governance is law-based governance. Therefore, "rule by virtue" should be incorporated into the framework of rule of law, with the combination of rule of law and rule by virtue serving as a fundamental principle in advancing law-based governance comprehensively [8].

Academic research on the "three governance" synergy mechanism not only provides a top-level design for their integration but also clarifies their respective functions and roles, facilitating the coordinated efforts of rule by virtue and rule of law and constructing pathways for rule by virtue to empower autonomy. The "three governance" system is vast and intricate. It must enhance rural residents' moral identity and sense of social responsibility through rule by virtue, making it a vital bond for consensus-building and stimulating endogenous governance vitality. It must also ensure the coordinated application of rule by virtue and rule of law, using virtue to nurture public sentiment and law to set boundaries. Furthermore, within the legal framework, villagers should autonomously manage local public affairs and community projects through institutionalized operations. This approach alleviates tensions that may arise from rigid governance while reinforcing moral authority through legal means, achieving an organic unity of "flexible harmony" and "rigid order." Consequently, the "three governance" integration optimizes governance structures, processes, and culture holistically, realizing "good governance" in rural areas.

### **2.3 Practical Dilemmas, Implementation Mechanisms, and Governance Efficacy of Rural Moral Governance**

Promoting the development of rural rule by virtue is a systematic project. It must consistently and accurately address the principal social contradiction in the new era—the growing needs of the people for a better life versus unbalanced and insufficient development—while adapting to the new rural landscape where rural elements have shifted from being closed and stable to being fluid and free. It must also accommodate the diverse values of farmers influenced by the characteristics of the times. With the transformation and development of China's economy and society, rural rule by virtue currently faces severe challenges, including the relative weakening of its main actors, the urgent need for innovative transformation of its content, and the need to optimize and enhance its effectiveness [9].

At the same time, amid the modern transformation of rural society, urban and rural cultures collide and merge, leading to a series of practical dilemmas for the new rural rule by virtue, such as the crisis of moral values, the fragmentation of moral norms, and the decline of moral authority [10]. Exploring ways to overcome these difficulties has become an essential task in realizing the modernization of the rural governance system.

To leverage the guiding and educational role of rule by virtue in rural governance, it is crucial to emphasize the functions of rural clans, elites, and village regulations, deeply explore the moral governance potential of village conventions, harness the wisdom and strength of new rural elites, and cultivate the public spirit of farmers [11].

Innovative approaches to rule by virtue must be developed by drawing on the practical experience of "transforming customs through rituals and encouraging virtue through moral cultivation," using traditional ritual studies to advance rural moral governance. This involves constructing a modernization path for rural rule by virtue that balances moral consciousness with legal spirit and connects rural sentiment with modern thinking [12].

With the rapid advancement of digital information technology, the coupling effect between digital technology and rural rule by virtue has become increasingly prominent. Digital technology can empower the implementation mechanisms and governance efficacy of rural rule by virtue—through digital mobilization mechanisms to integrate relationships, digital credit systems to reshape rules, and digital supervision mechanisms to achieve endogenous regulation [13].

A sound organizational system for rural rule by virtue must be established to strengthen its foundational support. This involves critically absorbing historical experiences from traditional rural moral governance, deepening its roots, innovating methods, and enhancing its effectiveness [14].

In advancing rural rule by virtue in the new era, efforts must be grounded in the basic realities of socialism with Chinese characteristics, deeply understanding the intertwined features of globalization and digitization, and adopting multidimensional approaches to overcome practical challenges. The core principle lies in consistently upholding and strengthening the comprehensive leadership of grassroots Party organizations as the political guarantee for rural moral governance innovation, transforming the organizational advantages of the Party into governance efficacy, and enabling the creative transformation and innovative development of moral governance resources under the Party's leadership.

### 3. Conclusion and Outlook

Contemporary rural moral governance faces multifaceted challenges amid rapid modernization and urbanization. To advance the field, future research must transcend macro-level generalizations and prioritize three critical dimensions: (1) micro-level empirical analysis of moral governance mechanisms, (2) innovative digital-enabled implementation pathways, and (3) synergistic optimization of the "tripartite governance" framework. Such focused inquiry is essential for developing a modern rural governance system that embodies Chinese characteristics and meets contemporary demands, thereby achieving the strategic objective of rural revitalization

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