

Research on the Construction of Digital Collaborative Mechanism for New Villagers' Participation in Rural Governance Under the Background of Rural Revitalization

Jinyun Yang, Xin Hu

Hankou University, Wuhan 430000, Hubei, China

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: Against the backdrop of the full implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, achieving effective governance serves as a pivotal measure to consolidate the achievements of poverty alleviation and advance the modernization of agriculture and rural areas. China boasts a profound accumulation of township sage culture, which provides valuable resources for enhancing the efficiency of rural governance, while the empowerment of digital technology acts as a driving force for rural development. However, there currently exists several issues in the digital collaboration between the participation of new township sages in rural governance and rural digitalization, such as ambiguous identity positioning, unsmooth communication channels, and inefficient resource integration, stemming from the lack of a normalized communication mechanism and the lag in technological empowerment. This study focuses on the construction of a digital collaboration mechanism, aiming to explore how to utilize digital tools to build a digital collaboration platform for new township sages' participation in rural governance. This research seeks to expand the breadth, depth and effectiveness of their participation, create a smooth and sustainable governance environment, and stimulate the driving force for rural revitalization.

Keywords: Rural revitalization; New township sages; Digital collaboration

Online publication: March 11, 2026

1. Introduction

The implementation of the rural revitalization strategy is a major historic decision and deployment made by the Party Central Committee from the perspective of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, which is crucial to the grounding of the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity at the grassroots level. The Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China pointed out that the modernization of rural governance is the "last mile" to realize the modernization of national governance

^[1]. The Opinions on Accelerating the Revitalization of Rural Talents issued by the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council stated that talent is the key to rural revitalization ^[2]. The No.1 Central Document issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council further pointed out the need to expand the rural talent team ^[3]. As an important talent resource in rural areas, new township sages provide intellectual support and social resources for rural revitalization, and are an important force for the smooth implementation of the rural revitalization strategy.

2. Analysis of the current situation of new township sages' participation in rural governance and digital application

2.1. Value and functions of new township sages' participation in rural governance

The term "township sage" first appeared in the Eastern Han Dynasty, referring to officials who made achievements and enjoyed high prestige, or virtuous people respected by the local community ^[4]. New township sages refer to virtuous individuals, both living in and outside rural areas, who were born in the countryside, have a strong local affection for their hometown, and are willing to give back to their hometown and support rural revitalization with their own advantages.

New township sages play a pivotal role in the process of rural revitalization. At the economic level, as a special group rooted in rural areas and connected with cities, they use their own capital, technological advantages and social connections to accurately fill the resource gaps in the development of rural industries. Through returning to their hometown to invest, introducing enterprises into villages, and providing technical support, they deeply participate in industrial development, which not only injects external impetus into the cultivation of characteristic industries and the upgrading of traditional industries, but also drives the creation of local employment opportunities and the income increase of villagers nearby, releasing endogenous driving forces. At the level of rural civilization, new township sages with good moral cultivation and local identity form a strong demonstration and leading effect through their words and deeds, guiding villagers to establish the value orientation of advocating morality and doing good deeds. Meanwhile, relying on their profound understanding of folk traditions, they actively promote the transformation of social traditions, eliminate unhealthy practices such as extravagance, comparison and feudal superstition, reshape the rural moral ecology, and cultivate a new atmosphere of civilization. At the grassroots governance level, relying on their geographical advantages, their understanding of social conditions and public opinions, and their prestige among villagers, new township sages enrich the main body of rural governance. By mobilizing and organizing villagers to participate in rural construction, environmental improvement, dispute mediation and other affairs, they arouse villagers' awareness of self-governance, stimulate their enthusiasm for participation, promote the transformation of villagers' self-governance from passive participation to active action, effectively optimize the rural governance pattern, and lay a solid governance foundation for rural revitalization.

2.2. Main modes of new township sages' participation in rural governance

With the continuous exploration of rural governance, the modes of new township sages' participation in rural governance have gradually developed from the early individualized and random assistance to the direction of organization, institutionalization and normalization, forming four major participation modes. The consultative and deliberative mode establishes organizations such as township sage councils, advisory committees and think tanks to provide professional opinions and folk mediation support for village development planning, major decision-making, dispute mediation and other affairs. For example, Xipu Village in Jinjiang, Fujian Province set up a

township sage council and built a deliberative democracy hall, resolving 15 issues such as land disputes and village construction through the “1133” deliberative democracy working method ^[5]. The project-driven mode sees new township sages return to their hometown to invest and start businesses by virtue of their own capital, technology, market channels and other resources, take the lead in participating in industrial projects such as modern agriculture and rural tourism, and form an effect of promoting governance through industrial development. The public welfare service mode involves giving back to the hometown through public welfare donations and voluntary services, improving rural people’s livelihood and infrastructure through donating to education, building roads and bridges, and setting up public welfare funds, so as to supplement the supply of public services. The cultural leading mode features in-depth participation in rural cultural construction, reshaping rural cultural identity through renovating ancestral halls, compiling village chronicles, inheriting intangible cultural heritage, and formulating village regulations and folk conventions. For instance, township sages in Xipu Village, Jinjiang, Fujian Province renovated the red site of the “Pudingliao Meeting” and built a Party member education base, took the lead in formulating the first village-level autonomy constitution in Jinjiang City, and played a spiritual benchmark role in cultivating a civilized rural custom.

2.3. Application of digital technology in new township sages’ participation in rural governance

In the process of promoting the digital countryside strategy, digital technologies such as big data and the Internet have gradually integrated into all scenarios of rural governance, providing tools and platforms for new township sages to participate in rural governance by breaking temporal and spatial constraints, reducing communication costs and improving participation efficiency. The integration practice of the two is mainly reflected in three aspects as follows:

- (1) The onlineization of government services: The “Internet + government services” has extended to rural grassroots levels, and various regions have built rural service ports relying on government service APPs and mini-programs to realize the online processing of government affairs and project declaration;
- (2) The digitalization of grassroots management: The application of digital platforms such as the “Xueliang Project” and smart village affairs systems has made village affairs management more transparent and standardized, and also provided online supervision channels for new township sages. For example, the smart village affairs system in Sichuan Province integrates governance data, enabling township sages to supervise village affairs remotely, and the response efficiency to village incidents has been increased by 70%;
- (3) The popularization of social tools: WeChat groups, WeChat Channels and other tools have become the basic digital carriers for new township sages to participate in governance. Various regions have built various online communities to realize the online release of information and deliberation of affairs, reducing communication costs.

3. Practical problems of new township sages’ participation in rural governance and digital bottlenecks

At present, the participation of new township sages in rural governance mainly relies on traditional interpersonal relationships and local affection, and their organized participation still centers on offline councils and deliberative halls. Digital technology is only used as a tool for auxiliary communication, information release and simple information management, and a collaborative mode has not yet been formed. This state limits the empowerment potential of digital technology for the participation of new township sages and makes it difficult to give full play to

their enthusiasm.

3.1. Practical problems of new township sages' participation in rural governance under the background of rural revitalization

3.1.1. Ambiguous identity positioning leading to dual difficulties in integration and recognition

From the legal and institutional perspective, the intermediate attribute of new township sages between official governance subjects and ordinary villagers makes their power and responsibility boundaries lack clear positioning. When participating in rural governance, they are prone to legal doubts about overstepping or neglecting their duties, which dampens their enthusiasm for participation. From the perspective of grassroots recognition, although laws such as the rural revitalization promotion law affirm the role of new township sages, there is a lack of specific regulations in practice to clarify their governance authority and responsibilities, leading to villagers' vague understanding of their identity legitimacy and behavioral boundaries, and insufficient trust and acceptance. In addition, some grassroots cadres lack a systematic understanding of their governance role, and new township sages are easily regarded as "external interferers", which further restricts their participation and voice in village-level decision-making.

3.1.2. Unsmooth participation channels resulting in the "suspension" of their roles

In terms of information acquisition channels, new township sages mostly rely on informal channels such as returning to their hometown during festivals and acquaintance networks to obtain rural information. There is a lack of special docking institutions and standardized communication mechanisms with grassroots governments, making it difficult for them to grasp the real development needs of villages, the progress of projects and the focus of contradictions in a real-time and comprehensive manner, resulting in a lack of accurate basis for their participation in decision-making. Moreover, the access for new township sages to participate in rural governance is mainly based on temporary, short-term and informal invitations, and most of their participation behaviors focus on one-time donations and short-term public welfare affairs. There is a lack of normalized and institutionalized participation platforms and procedures, making it difficult for them to play an in-depth role in key links such as village-level major decision-making and public affairs management, resulting in insufficient breadth and depth of participation.

3.1.3. Inadequate systematic incentive and guarantee mechanism weakened the motivation and sustainability of returning to the hometown

The incentive mechanism for new township sages to participate in rural governance lacks integrity, stability and long-term effectiveness, and the existing incentive measures are single in form and low in level, which are difficult to meet their diversified and high-level needs for identity recognition, social respect and self-value realization. For example, new township sages returning to their hometown face problems such as housing, medical care, cross-regional connection of social security and children's education, which significantly increase the cost of living and participating in their hometown, and reduce their initiative to return and the sustainability of their participation.

3.1.4. Lack of systematic and standardized organizational construction and management restricting the exertion of overall efficiency

Most new township sages participate in rural governance affairs in a spontaneous individual form, lacking formal organizational structure and management systems. The township sage councils and fraternal associations established in some regions generally have problems such as loose management and imperfect operation

mechanisms, and no unified access standards, division of powers and responsibilities, and performance appraisal mechanisms have been established, making it difficult to form a large-scale governance synergy ^[6].

3.2. Bottlenecks faced by digital application

At present, the application of digital technology in rural governance mostly focuses on the informatization of government services and grassroots management, and its combination with the new township sage group is still in the initial stage of shallow communication using social tools such as WeChat groups as outlined:

- (1) The existing digital tools such as government service APPs, WeChat groups and management platforms have single functions and are isolated from each other. New township sages need to switch between multiple unconnected platforms to obtain information and handle affairs, resulting in a poor user experience. In addition, the data generated by different systems cannot be shared and intercommunicated, making it difficult to form tracking and support for the whole process of new township sages' participation;
- (2) The digital divide and literacy gap: Some elderly new township sages or villagers may not be familiar with the operation of intelligent devices, becoming "digital poor". In contrast, young new township sages may lack the willingness to use rural government service platforms with simple functions and rough design;
- (3) Many digital platforms are designed top-down with a management-oriented approach, rather than a service-oriented one for users such as new township sages or villagers. The platform functions fail to accurately match the core needs of new township sages in resource docking, project cooperation, remote deliberation and other aspects, resulting in poor practicality and the phenomenon of "built but not used, used but not effective".

4. Exploration of the path to construct a digital collaboration mechanism

4.1. Build a digital collaboration platform for new township sages' participation in rural governance

A Party building-led digital collaborative governance platform for engaging new township sages should be developed to facilitate their participation in rural governance. The platform should integrate multiple functions, including information dissemination, demand-resource matching, deliberation and consultation, and project management, thereby enabling centralized and standardized platform management. Village cadres and Party members may serve as platform administrators, responsible for information verification, topic initiation, and process supervision to ensure orderly operation.

A comprehensive database of new township sages should be established alongside an information-sharing and communication platform. New township sages can be classified and managed according to their professional backgrounds, expertise, and available resources. Based on this framework, township sage councils may be formed to strengthen coordination, with regular seminars, consultation meetings, and experience-sharing activities organized to promote interaction and resource exchange among participants. Meanwhile, grassroots governments can establish dedicated liaison offices for new township sages and implement a normalized communication mechanism to facilitate their participation in village-level affairs, ensuring their systematic integration into the rural governance process.

Furthermore, a three-tier collaborative governance mechanism linking county, township, and village levels should be explored. This mechanism can be supported by an intelligent matching system that connects rural demand lists with the resource lists of new township sages. Such a system would promote coordinated

cooperation among township sages, government agencies, social organizations, and market actors, enabling the efficient allocation of policy support, financial resources, and technical expertise. In addition, the platform can facilitate demand assessment and enable full-cycle project management, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of rural governance initiatives.

4.2. Improve the institutional guarantee system for new township sages' participation in rural governance

An institutionalized identity authentication system for new township sages should be established to formally recognize their role within rural governance. This system should clarify their legal status, functional scope, and the boundaries of authority and responsibility in areas such as dispute mediation, participation in public affairs, and consultation on rural development. Corresponding legal authorization should be granted to ensure that their involvement is legitimate, procedurally sound, and aligned with existing governance frameworks.

At the same time, mechanisms for duty performance should be strengthened through the signing of responsibility agreements and the formulation of clearly defined governance task lists. A regular performance evaluation system should be implemented to assess the effectiveness and accountability of new township sages in fulfilling their responsibilities. Such institutional arrangements would enhance the standardization, continuity, and sustainability of their participation, preventing governance activities from remaining at the level of short-term or ad hoc public welfare initiatives and instead promoting long-term, structured engagement in rural development processes.

4.3. Optimize the incentive design for new township sages to return to their hometown and participate in rural governance

Local governments can expand cross-regional handling channels through an “online + offline” service model. In terms of material incentives, set up a special fund for new township sages' governance, provide material guarantees such as office space and fund subsidies to reduce economic pressure. In terms of spiritual incentives, build an electronic file and contribution point system for new township sages to strengthen their emotional belonging. In terms of public services, aiming at the current problems of new township sages returning to their hometown in household registration, social security, housing and other aspects, carry out comprehensive optimization from top-level design to grassroots implementation, simplify the household registration migration and management procedures for talents flowing between urban and rural areas, improve the connection and coordinated development of the urban and rural social security system, and guarantee the living needs of new township sages after returning to their hometown.

5. Conclusion

The digital collaboration mechanism constructed in this paper attempts to systematically address the problems of identity, channels, integration and sustainability in the participation of new township sages through an integrated platform. This mechanism is not only a technical solution, but also a reform of governance concepts and processes. It promotes a profound transformation of new township sages' participation from relying on personal relationships to institutional platforms, from sporadic and scattered behaviors to systematic collaborative projects, and from being driven by emotion and morality to being driven by both emotion and institutions. The construction and improvement of the mechanism is a dynamic process. Only by continuously promoting the in-depth integration of digital technology and rural governance can we fully stimulate the vitality of new township sages as a valuable

social capital and embark on a path of rural governance with Chinese characteristics.

Funding

1. 2025 School-level Scientific Research Project of Hankou University
Research on the Construction of Digital Collaborative Mechanism for Rural Governance Participated by New Rural Elites under the Background of Rural Revitalization (No. 2025KXYJ025)
2. 2025 School-level Scientific Research Project of Hankou University
Research on the Construction of a Party-building-led Rural Governance Community from the Perspective of Multiple Co-governance — Based on a Survey of M Village, Jingshan City, Hubei Province (No. 2025KXYJ018)
3. 2024 Philosophy and Social Science Project of Hubei Provincial Department of Education
Research on the Value Logic and Optimization Path of New Rural Elites Participating in Rural Governance from the Embeddedness Perspective (No. 24G105)

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Zhou J, Xing Y, Zhang C, 2021, A Literature Review on New Township Sages: From the Perspective of Promoting the Modernization of Rural Governance with New Township Sages. *Rural Economy and Science-Technology*, 2021(23): 217–222.
- [2] General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, General Office of the State Council, 2021, Opinions on Accelerating the Revitalization of Rural Talents. *Gazette of the State Council of the People's Republic of China*, 2021(7): 22–28.
- [3] Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, State Council, 2024, Opinions on Learning and Applying the Experience of the “Ten Thousand Villages Demonstration and Ten Thousand Villages Renovation” Project to Promote the Comprehensive Rural Revitalization Effectively. *Gazette of the State Council of the People's Republic of China*, 2024(6): 4–10.
- [4] Xin Z, Gong Y, 2023, New Township Sages Boosting Rural Revitalization: Current Situation, Dilemmas and Countermeasures: Based on a Survey in Changde City, Hunan Province. *Rural Economy and Science-Technology*, 34(21): 116–120.
- [5] General Office of Quanzhou Municipal People's Government, 2022, Xipu Village in Jinjiang: Township Sage Deliberative Hall Builds a “Heart-to-Heart Bridge” for Grassroots Consultation.
- [6] Zhai Y, Wu S, 2025, Practical Problems and Legal Paths of New Township Sages' Participation in Rural Governance under the Background of Comprehensive Rural Revitalization. *Study Forum*, 2025(2): 110–118.

Publisher's note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.v