

Model Selection and Cultivation: Honorary Incentive Mechanisms with Countermeasures for Grassroots Civil Servants — A Sociological Analysis of Symbols

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Abstract: Taking Model Selection and Cultivation as examples, this study re-conceptualizes honorary incentives for grassroots civil servants as a process of symbolic production through field research. The findings show that occupational organizations encode abstract ethical commitments into advanced models via naming, narrative, and ritual empowerment. Through sequential mechanisms, including meaning circulation, psychological transformation, and dynamic reproduction, honorary symbols are transformed into symbolic capital that shapes civil servants' incentives. The efficiency of honorary incentives depends on the model narrative anchored in real job scenarios, ritual generation, shared emotional focus, and meanings remaining connected to actual performance, after repeated negotiation within peer networks. When model selection slides toward perfectionist narratives, rapidly developed, and neglects subsequent supporting, the effectiveness of honorary incentives tends to diminish incrementally. De-template standards, regular procedures, diversified types, and verifiable linkages between awards and career development channels are required for grassroots civil servants' honorary incentives.

Keywords: Honorary incentives; Symbolic production; Grassroots civil servants; Ritualized emotions

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1. Introduction

In contemporary China's street governance, the selection and cultivation of models among civil servants is not merely a project to some extent. It is a set of honorary incentive mechanisms embedded in a chain of civil servants' promotion, assessment, and accountability. By the name of linkage of title conferral, model publicity, political recognition, and subsequent career development channels, it translates job responsibilities into symbolic capital that can be identified, disseminated, and reproduced by organizations^[1]. This is true

at the township or street levels, where financial constraints, long administrative chains, and complicated working tasks make honorary recognition deeply intertwined with multiple affect factors, for instance, identity dignity, career expectations, and organizational trust. Thus, it becomes one of the key incentive tools leading civil servants' job engagement, willingness to stay in the grassroots area, and interaction behavioral norms.

Model leadership has been institutionally placed at an importance of cadre team building, as well as public value shaping. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 136 "Role Models of the Times" titles, 299 National Moral Model honors, 300 "Most Beautiful Women Strivers" awards, and 11,585 "Good Samaritans of China" awards have been granted ^[2]. This scale demonstrates the huge influence of model projects in governance narratives. Meanwhile, it means that such projects inevitably consume substantial organizational attention. Once deviations occur in this selection process, the job incentive benefits for civil servants may be offset by institutional wear.

Presently, the inflation of honorary supply at the street level accelerates the depreciation of symbolic capital. This trend creates challenges to the effectiveness of honorary incentives for grassroots civil servants. Survey indicates that around 42.6% of public sector employees believe that honorary titles are too abundant to serve their intended purpose, and are essentially empty ^[3]. At the same time, there is a risk that the recognition conferred by awards could be weakened if the selection of models is perceived as insufficiently grounded in genuine achievement. In some towns or streets, when selecting models, occupational organizations create showcase points, relying on briefing materials and media campaigns to replace substantive performance accumulation, thereby reducing the legitimacy of honorary incentives ^[4]. Furthermore, there is a disconnect between the honor chain and civil servants' job development channels, leaving incentive effects suspended. Awards are often disconnected from personal promotions, resource allocation of daily work, and income rewards, resulting in a structural fracture between evaluation and personnel decisions ^[5].

This study argues that honorary incentives are symbols with various social significance. It views challenges that people face as a dilemma in honorary incentives. From a sociological perspective, this research analyzes how honorary symbols are produced, as well as how they are utilized by occupational systems to generate organizational incentive effects for the group of grassroots civil servants. Based on this, it further examines the dilemma of grassroots civil servants' honorary incentives and proposes targeted countermeasures.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. The occupational incentive function of honors

Articles on public sector incentives have long placed honorary recognition within the framework of non-monetary incentives from the perspective of intrinsic motivation. Classic explanations of Public Service Motivation have incorporated non-material drivers into the encouragement landscape. For instance, emotional commitment to public values, normative obligations, and career calling. These studies point out that the motivational basis of public service employees is not only simply rational-economic calculation, but also full of collective recognition, sense of mission, and organizational prestige ^[6].

Subsequent empirical study further indicates differences in sensitivity to intrinsic versus extrinsic incentives among governmental employees. When rewards appear as symbolic recognition rather than direct monetary compensation, they produce stronger marginal incentive effects for those with high public

service motivation^[7]. This sort of incentive also depends more heavily on individuals' judgments of reward legitimacy^[8]. A meta-analysis reminds us of a principle boundary condition. Once external interventions are perceived by recipients as controlling rather than informative, they may crowd out inner motivation^[9]. It means whether honorary recognition strengthens mission identification or turns people into trophy collectors depends on fairly verifiable distribution procedures modeling.

In the studies of Chinese street bureaucrats, this issue is further embedded in the structure of cadre assessment^[10]. Observations indicate that the target responsibility system ties economic indicators, stability maintenance, and administrative performance together, causing spiritual incentives to intertwine with economic-political incentives among the group of county-level cadres. When honors are detached from verifiable performance with predictable returns, they tend to be downgraded in civil servants' cognition to periodic pacifiers^[11].

2.2. Symbols, interaction, and job incentives

Viewing honors as symbols rather than certificates means that their influence lies not literally in the title itself, but in collective meanings mobilized during the conferral process. Social objects influence human behavior not as the objects have fixed properties, but because they acquire and continuously update meaning through bidirectional interaction. The same medal could be interpreted as either a collective endorsement or a product of personal connections, depending on its audience reactions, fitted in a specific ritual context^[12]. The award ceremony could be understood as a front-stage performance order. Organizations use ritual scripts, positioning, applause, and public narratives to designate "who is worth emulating", while peers and the public confirm, or ridicule, this hierarchy through murmured commentary^[13].

The interaction ritual chain framework provides a more direct explanation of why some symbols ignite emotional energy, while others leave only fatigue. When co-presence, mutual focus of attention, and shared affect tone exist simultaneously, rituals produce collective effervescence. Otherwise, only procedural emptiness remains^[14]. In organization studies, the emotional-symbolic dimension of workplaces is not merely cultural decoration, but an institutionalized means of producing identity full of administrative power. For example, job titles, award ceremonies, and heroic narratives^[15].

At the age of modern governance, promoting exemplary models can be understood as a process through which public organizations communicate desired behavioral norms and shared professional values through narrative selection and symbolic representation^[16]. When functioning well, models translate abstract organizational values into imitable personality templates. However, when this kind of production traces are too heavy, accompanied by the fact that grassroots units could only pack models with display boards, symbols lose genuine emotional energy, even triggering ironic decoding^[17].

2.3. Research gap

Combining these two strands above, current studies show several possible shortcomings. Firstly, the production side of honors has been treated as a black box. Public Service Motivation literature focuses more on how honors improve performance, yet it models how honors themselves are defined, screened, packaged, and circulated as independent variables. Secondly, causal identification is insufficient. Even though numerous surveys claim that honors enhance motivation, honors are highly endogenous to organizational evaluation. There is a particular shortage of longitudinal tracking of behavioral trajectories after award events. Thirdly, explanations of negative spillovers remain at the level of moralizing narratives, lacking mechanism-based

accounts as an institutional logic. The question of why model selection slides toward insufficient substantive differentiation still needs a clear exploration. Under what conditions do organizations treat honorary symbols as controls rather than recognition instruments? Moreover, which links in the symbolic production process create incentive dilemmas? These questions remain vaguely addressed.

2.4. Analytical framework

From the perspective of symbolic production, our study reconstructs the generation of civil servants' honorary incentives as a dynamic process to analyze causes of symbolization dilemmas (**Figure 1**).

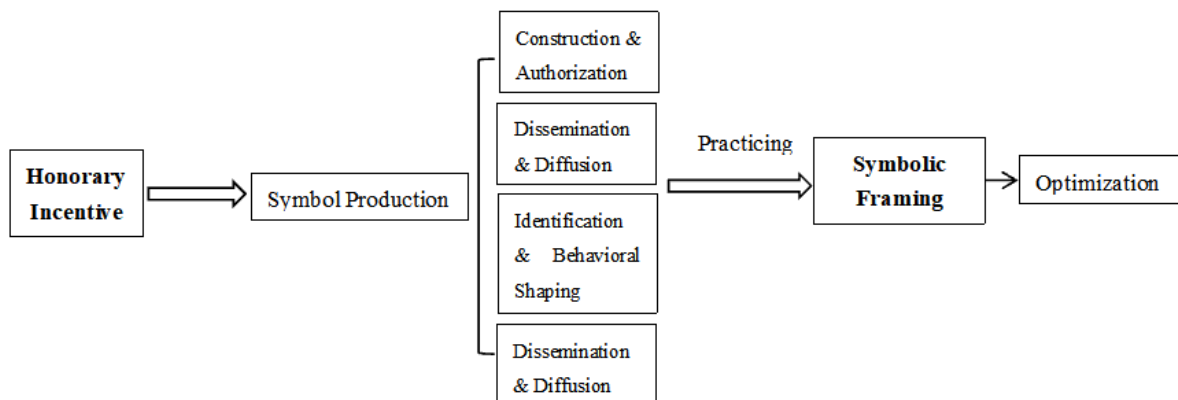


Figure 1. Symbolic production mechanism of honorary incentives and its dilemmas with countermeasures

The first stage is the construction of symbolic authority via demonstration. Occupational organizations use naming strategies, case screening, and narrative arrangement to define distinction. From this sort of practice, specific cadres are evolving from ordinary individuals to symbolic carriers. This stage determines initial legitimacy, as well as potential vulnerability of honors ^[18]. Then, authorized honorary symbols enter meaning flow within occupational networks. Under the joint mediation of diverse actors, original meanings of symbols undergo constant translation, transcription, and even distortion. The actors include higher-level assessment departments, peer competitors, media platforms, the public, and material artifacts ^[19]. The actual incentive effect depends on major negotiation results among network actors rather than the organization's encoding intentions.

When symbols reach an individual dimension, the mechanism of psychological transformation in practice becomes operative. Drawing on interaction ritual chain theory, only in ritual situations characterized by co-presence, mutual focus, and shared emotion could civil servants internalize honorary symbols ^[20]. Finally, the mechanism of dynamic symbolic evolution reveals that honors are not ossified. They experience a life-cycle of birth, diffusion, institutionalization, and decline. The vitality of symbols depends on re-coding frequency, feedback loop closure, and the presence of exit with correction mechanisms.

This analytical framework opens up the entire process of honorary symbols from definition, circulation, internalization, to reproduction. It is effectively compensating for current theoretical inadequacies regarding the production side of symbols, causal mediating mechanisms, and negative consequences of honorary incentives. It is vital to note that this four-stage framework was not derived from reasoning alone. Rather, it emerged iteratively from our fieldwork data, as interview narratives consistently pointed to different

phases in how honorary symbols were produced. The following sections present empirical evidence for each mechanism, demonstrating how theoretical constructs such as symbolic forces, actor-network translation, and interaction ritual chains are concretely manifested in grassroots civil servants' lived experiences.

This research approach, which establishes a dialogue between existing theoretical frameworks and grounded theory from the field, could better elucidate the uniqueness of how honorary symbols are produced. First of all, it prevents the mechanical imposition of Western theories onto the Chinese grassroots context. Secondly, this iterative interplay enables the identification of theoretical gaps. When field data contradict or extend existing propositions, the researchers are compelled to refine the theoretical apparatus itself, thereby generating new conceptual insights.

3. Research methods

This study took six units, including towns and streets, in City A, Eastern China, as field sites. The team conducted fieldwork from July to August in 2023. Furthermore, the researchers carried out two follow-up visits in February 2024. Data collection employed semi-structured interviews, accompanied by participant observation. Based on the roster of on-duty civil servants in these six field research sites of City A, interviewees were randomly selected from regular employees. Each interview lasted 30 to 60 minutes, totaling 22 participants. Among them, 10 were street-level civil servants in downtown. And, 11 of them were township civil servants in rural areas. In terms of work content, the interviewees covered major public service departments at the grassroots level. It includes economic development, Party building, personnel management, comprehensive governance, and social security services (Table 1).

Table 1. Interview participants

Code	Gender	Educational Background	Workplace	Working Department
01	Female	Bachelor	A	Social security services
02	Female	Bachelor	A	Party building, personnel management
03	Male	Master	A	Economic development
04	Female	Bachelor	A	Economic development
05	Male	Bachelor	A	Economic development
06	Female	Master	B	Economic development
07	Male	Associate Bachelor	B	Social security services
08	Female	Associate Bachelor	C	Social security services
09	Male	Bachelor	C	Environmental protection
10	Male	Master	C	Social security services
11	Female	Bachelor	C	Party building, personnel management
12	Female	Bachelor	C	Party building, personnel management
13	Male	Bachelor	C	Social security services
14	Female	Bachelor	D	Economic development
15	Male	Associate Bachelor	D	Economic development
16	Male	Bachelor	D	Economic development
17	Male	Bachelor	E	Personnel management
18	Female	Bachelor	E	Environmental protection
19	Male	Bachelor	F	Environmental protection

20	Male	Master	F	Safety supervision
21	Female	Master	F	Economic development
22	Female	Bachelor	F	Social security services

4. Results

Honorary incentives for civil servants refer to a system of institutional practices in which organizations affirm and commend cadres who demonstrate outstanding performance and significant contributions. Through symbolic and ritualistic methods, this sort of incentive exerts its influence through modeling. For instance, conferring distinct titles, issuing medals, granting certificates, and conducting public recognition. Its core is not material return, but collective recognition and professional acknowledgment, which focus on symbolic capital. By transforming personal excellence into glorious symbols within collective memory, it constructs a shared value orientation about glorious recognition among the civil servants' group.

One of the primary practical vehicles for honorary incentives is exemplary models selection and cultivation publicly. This process represents a sophisticated governance technique integrating value advocacy, narrative construction, emotional mobilization, and behavioral guidance in civil servants' daily work. It transforms abstract occupational requirements, as well as professional ethics, into concrete, vivid, and perceptible model figures and stories. By evoking broad emotional resonance through narratives of a civil servant, it is achieving deep spiritual leadership through demonstration. Ultimately, it shapes collective identity on purpose, guiding grassroots cadres to emulate the worthy and consolidating spiritual momentum for taking initiative. This chapter delves into the mechanisms via which honorary incentives function by means of model selection, as well as the practical challenges they face, revealing their critical role in the emotional incentive system for grassroots cadres.

4.1. Symbolic production of advanced models and value embodiment

The principle condition for honorary incentives to take effect is the transformation of abstract job ethical requirements into perceptible and transmittable symbols. The core mechanism is systematic symbolic production of advanced models with subsequent embodiment of values. Organizations identify and select individuals whose behavioral trajectories and spiritual traits closely match specific criteria via institutionalized, ritualized selection procedures. Then, their complex work or life experiences are refined, shaped, and disseminated according to mainstream narrative frameworks, elevating them into vivid symbols carrying clear value orientations.

Essentially, this sort of externalizes implicit ethical requirements, such as loyalty, responsibility, and dedication, into tangible images with flesh and blood. For example, a figure who persists in arduous areas for years, or a practitioner who creatively solves governance problems. When an honorary title is firmly linked to a specific name, a clear face, and a rich story, emotional incentives transcend static textual statements. And, it acquires a material form and personal embodiment that could be touched with. This marks a solid grounding of emotional incentives from abstract organizational ideas into concrete perceptions directly graspable by individual minds. Moreover, it provides an indispensable carrier for evoking broad affect resonance and shaping collective cognition.

Symbolic production originates from a common dilemma that organizations face in value transmission and spiritual mobilization. The core values guiding grassroots civil servants' job behavior typically exist as

highly condensed organizational discourse. While ensuring directional unity, their abstraction also creates distance in understanding difficulties in internalization. For grassroots cadres situated in specific working situations, establishing meaningful connections between these macro-level discourses and their own trivial yet real daily practices could be challenging. Institutional constraints and material rewards could regulate baseline behavior, but they struggle to address deeper existential questions about work meanings and transcendent values.

Therefore, organizations need a sophisticated, cohesive technique to condense diffuse intangible demands into focused, easily transmissible symbolic entities. The symbolic production of advanced models is precisely such an organizational arrangement. By selection in an open approach, via recognition and publicity processes, organizations actively shape exemplars that perfectly embody mainstreamed values. It is allowing abstract concepts to attach themselves to concrete life histories. The constructed model thus transcends individual identity and evolves them into a living value symbol, continuously articulating the ideal action patterns cherished by the organization. This completes a symbolic encoding of organizational ethics, providing a vital intermediary for deep emotional mobilization.

Once advanced models transform from individuals into value symbols, they shift from passive targets to active meaning carriers and spiritual mediums. This carrier, laden with idea information and spiritual energy that the organization intends to transmit, is deployed into the fields of meaning interaction both inside and outside this organization. Through procedural performances, like report meetings, media coverage, literary and artistic creations, study seminars, and other channels, honorary incentives initiate a dynamic, ongoing socio-psychological interactive process.

“You know, it’s like throwing a stone into water. The ripples just spread out. When we see a model like that, it hits you at once. You totally get what they did and how they did it. Then it stirs something sentimentally. You start reflecting on yourself, wondering if you could do the same. And, almost without anyone saying it out loud, there’s this unspoken peer pressure there. People start sizing each other up, thinking. Finally, some folks actually start trying out the model’s methods in their own job. That’s how the whole thing trickles down and slowly changes the way we do things around here.” (06-2307).

Current efforts to select, cultivate, and publicize advanced models among grassroots civil servants are supposed to be categorized into several distinct types based on the spiritual traits and value orientations highlighted by their core deeds. Each category not only recognizes specific behavioral patterns, but also transmits and reinforces more demanded values at a deeper level. Together, these effects weave the honor pedigree advocated by organizations, and the collection of outstanding individuals bearing these feelings substantively constitutes a vivid, diverse personified carrier of organizational honor.

It reveals two theoretical dynamics. The organization exercised a symbolic practice proposed by Bourdieu, defining which characteristics qualified as “advanced” and then actively constructing a narrative around them. And, the selection was a mixture of pre-existing merit and organizational priorities. This finding aligns with Latour’s notion of translation within actor-networks, where raw material is transformed into a stabilized narrative.

Firstly, advanced models emphasize the value of “loyalty and perseverance.” These models typically represent distinct public servants who have worked silently for extended periods in remote areas, front-line positions, or harsh environments. Their narratives focus on extraordinary steadfastness when facing material scarcity, family separation, and social loneliness. The main emotion conveyed is a persistent commitment

to the beliefs of service for people, an adherence to duty, and a sense of absolute reliability entrusted by their organization. This strong belief is not passionate and intense but calm, deep, and enduring. It sends a profound summon to all grassroots cadres regarding professional integrity.

“I remember Xiao. He was the vice president of People’s Court, spent 29 years at the grassroots, and then died on the spot of his job. They gave him the award posthumously. Same with Chen, the discipline inspection guy from a remote county. He worked himself to death, literally. And then there is Yong, a postal worker in Mountain County. He delivered mail on rural routes for 33 years before getting the ‘Most Beautiful Grassroots Cadre’ title. Those stories really stick with you, you know? Makes you think about what it actually means to serve.” (15-2402)

Secondly, advanced models emphasize striving emotions of duty accomplishment. Such models typically emerge from such main fields, like reform and development, urgent and dangerous tasks, or risky conflict resolution. The official narratives highlight civil servants’ drive to break through bottlenecks, their sharpness in responding to sudden crises, and their resilience in pushing forward implementation. What they promote is a strong sense of mission and enterprising, one that confronts challenges and contradictions, rises to challenges, and takes responsibility for that cause. This emotion is full of energy and tension, inspiring restlessness and action-oriented passion within the cadre team, shaping collective behavioral expectations of fearlessness for responsibility taking. Models embodying this striving for initiative and achievement are recognized through award systems emphasizing front-line performance.

“We’ve got a bunch of these selection projects. Like, ‘Good Cadres Who Take Initiative and Make Achievements’, that’s pretty common in a lot of cities and counties. Take Q City, for example. They pick cadres who really push things forward in project construction or rural revitalization, and they straight-up say those people get priority for promotion. Then there’s this thing called ‘Identifying Good Cadres on Major Project Front-lines’. It’s not really a fixed award name, more like a mechanism they came up with in Eastern China during their high-quality development push. Basically, they use it to spot and promote cadres who tackle tough problems in big industrial projects or tech innovation platforms. And timely awards matter too, like, the J Provincial Department of Commerce gave third-class merit to cadres who did a great job on the consumer goods trade-in program. X City went even further, they gave second-class merit and promotions to cadres who performed well in cultivating innovative industry clusters.” (20-2402)

Thirdly, advanced models focus on shaping and transmitting the noble effect of dedication. These are often found in stories of civil servants who put collective and public interests ahead of personal interests, making tremendous sacrifices. The narratives highlight their resolute choices between public and private, gain and loss, creating a sacrificial spirit that transcends utilitarian calculation. This emotion carries a strong moral appeal for the group of public employees. It touches upon human yearning for purity and nobility, aiming to elevate a spiritual realm of cadre group, strengthen service purposes, and resist the erosion of utilitarianism.

Models promoting the noble emotion of dedication receive awards with a strong moral appeal. The “Role Model of the Times in J Province” title was awarded to Anqi, Secretary of the W Community Party Committee in Y City, who served the community wholeheartedly for over twenty years. National-level honors such as “National Model Judge” were posthumously awarded to Xiaobin, whose deeds profoundly embodied the spirit of justice for the people and devotion to duty. The “J Province Model of Promoting Agriculture through Science and Technology” title was awarded to experts like Ya, who spent decades rooted

in Mao old revolutionary base areas, helping millions of farmers escape poverty and achieve prosperity while adhering to the principle of financial support free and dedicating himself selflessly. Additionally, honors like “Good Samaritan of China” and “Provincial Poverty Alleviation Award” are often given to grassroots civil servants who quietly contribute and willingly sacrifice in their respective positions.

Finally, the selection of models advocating the emotion of innovation is increasingly becoming a principle engine driving governance change and enhancing development efficiency. The core of recognizing such models lies in identifying, affirming, and incentivizing public employees who proactively break path dependencies. It demands that civil servants creatively use new thinking, technologies, and methods to solve governance problems, optimize service processes, and empower regional development. Compared with models emphasizing loyalty, initiative, and dedication, innovation models place greater emphasis on wisdom, efficiency, and forward-looking vision. The corresponding award settings also exhibit distinctive contemporary features and problem orientation.

For example, the “Advanced Individual in Science and Technology Innovation Development Award of J Province” is a provincial-level honor recognizing individuals who have achieved notable results in promoting scientific and technological innovation and supporting industrial upgrading. Recipients include Li, President of City Academy, and Li Ping, a cadre at Big Data Management Center. “Innovative Cadres” titles appear in some local practices to encourage civil servants to break conventions and work creatively. Titles like “Efficiency Star” recognize collectives or individuals who use new methods and technologies to improve work efficiency. Local innovative case selections, such as “Best Innovative Cases of Good Governance”, also motivate grassroots cadres to explore new approaches in governance.

The symbolic production of advanced models with the embodiment of values constitutes a logical cornerstone and initial engine for generating strong effects of the honorary incentive system. By transforming invisible concepts into visible symbols and vague values into clear images, it lays a cognitive foundation. This practice may depend on injecting emotional momentum for subsequent affect mobilization, social learning, and behavioral guidance. This process reveals that effective organizational governance involves not only the operation of institutions, but equally importantly, the active shaping of meaning, the careful production of symbols, and the continuous construction of consensus. Without this element, honors easily become tokenistic, failing to perform their deep governance functions of integrating emotions, shaping values, and guiding behavior.

4.2. The production mechanism of the grassroots model and the honorary incentive

The generation and effectiveness of grassroots model demonstrations are not spontaneous linear processes. Instead, they depend on a complex, dynamically adjusting organizational production mechanism. This mechanism transforms isolated individual advanced deeds into collective behavioral reference patterns with popular influence. Its key function is to accomplish a systematic conversion from individual excellence to widespread emulation. This production mechanism includes several interlocking, cyclically advancing key stages. That is, from the careful construction and authorization of symbols, through multi-channel, multi-dimensional dissemination and diffusion, to deep internalization, identification, and behavioral shaping, finally supplemented by continuous feedback and systemic adjustment.

4.2.1. Construction and authorization of demonstration: From deeds to authoritative symbols

The production of demonstration begins with the identification and symbolic construction of potential

advanced individuals, but more deeply, with the conferral of authority. This is, at the beginning, a rigorous screening and confirmation process. Organizations do not passively wait for models to emerge in a common way. Rather, they proactively identify civil servants who stand out in relevant domains, based on current priority tasks, pressing governance challenges to be resolved, and values to be promoted. Furthermore, the personal traits and experiences of civil servants could perfectly fit, even dramatically illustrate, this framework.

After identification, systematic narrative processing and meaning attribution follow next. Raw, rough records of personal work are transformed into structurally complete, thematically clear, emotionally sample stories. This processing may intensify the hardship of initial conditions to highlight the value of struggle and amplify contradictions. The struggles in this process to demonstrate firm conviction, foreground innovative methods and tools reflect the spirit of the times. Ultimately, it connects achievements to broader national strategies or public welfare, completing meaning elevation.

Next to this processing, the model is no longer merely an individual who performs brilliantly at work, but becomes a highly purified personified symbol carrying several specific values. More importantly, through formal, public, and high-standard conferral ceremonies, organizations systematically authorize this symbol. For instance, grand recognition conferences, meetings with senior leaders, authoritative media releases, etc. Honor symbols, like medals, certificates, titles, and accompanying public attention, jointly elevate the chosen model to a position with special moral authority. This authoritative status is the socio-psychological foundation for its subsequent leading role.

“So when we got that task, the higher-ups had already made it crystal clear: we needed to set up a benchmark for daring to break the rules. Well, not break rules, but break conventions, when it comes to improving the business environment. We looked at maybe ten or more candidates, and in the end, we settled on this bureau director from the development zone. Not just because of the number of projects he brought in—though that was impressive—but more importantly, the cross-department process overhaul he pushed through really hit the pain point of the old approval system. Plus, his personality—he just had this stubborn, never-give-up edge to him. That fit perfectly with the ‘reform trailblazer’ image we wanted to put out there. So during the writing process afterward, we went back and interviewed him, his colleagues, his clients—over and over—until we nailed down a solid core story.” (04-2307)

4.2.2. Dissemination and diffusion: Meaning flow in a multi-dimensional network

Only when a constructed model symbol enters a broad network of meaning circulation could its demonstration value be realized. The complexity of the modern communication environment requires that the demonstration effect rely on a multi-dimensional, integrated dissemination system. Official channels play a vital role in setting the tone and amplification. These include top-down document notifications and conference briefings within the organizational system, as well as feature reports in various media. These include official newspapers, journals, radio, television, and government communication platforms.

These channels carry directionality, aiming to quickly establish the chosen model’s orthodox status, defining the essence of learning. However, what truly penetrates civil servants’ daily work, sparking spontaneous discussion with deep resonance, often depends on informally interpersonal organizational diffusion channels. Within units, via Party branch study sessions, departmental discussions, and work group sharing, the model’s story is repeatedly mentioned, interpreted, and locally elaborated. Private conversations among colleagues, although potentially generating unofficial interpretations, are important processes

for information sedimentation and affect fermentation. Cross-unit, or cross-regional, exchanges within governmental systems allow civil servants in similar positions to experience stronger professional resonance. Take an example, the story of a business service model from an economically developed region might be highlighted during a provincial system training session, thereby stimulating urgency and innovative ideas among public servants in less developed regions in similar positions.

Moreover, the integrated dissemination of new media greatly expands the spatial and temporal boundaries of the demonstration effect. Various media, like crafted short videos, documentary micro-films, interactive posters, and character interviews, are simultaneously pushed through government new media platforms and mainstream commercial platforms, reaching a wider audience. Especially, younger cadres are lighter and more emotionally engaged in this kind of format. This dissemination not only tells stories but also creates a pervasive social atmosphere that respects advanced emulation.

Finally, by incorporating the model's spirit into public employee training plans, local cultural products, and even unit environmental arrangements, the demonstration effect shifts from concentrated publicity campaigns to continuous integration into the cadres' cognitive environment, achieving a kind of organizational culture and work climate immersion.

"I saw a short video on the provincial WeChat channel about that hero town mayor who fought floods. The visuals were striking. Soon after, the county organized a special report meeting. The town mayor came and spoke plainly, without big principles. He just talked about which part of the dike was most dangerous, what he feared most, and how he made the decision to jump in and plug the leak. This incident was discussed repeatedly in our internal WeChat work group and offline departmental study sessions. Later, when I attended a municipal training class for young and middle-aged cadres, the instructor actually used this case as a teaching example for emergency response." (16-2402)

4.2.3. Internalization, identification, and behavioral shaping: Psychological transformation from perception to practice

The goal of dissemination is to inspire emulation, which depends on the audience completing a complex psychological transformation from external perception to internal identification, eventually to behavioral adjustment. The starting point of this transformation is successfully triggering affect resonance. When grassroots civil servants encounter model stories via channels described above, they encounter scenes that overlap with their own professional experiences. It shared emotional responses quickly evoke professional substitution and work empathy. This empathy instantly breaks bystander mentality, opening a psychological channel for deep acceptance. The individual civil servants consciously or unconsciously compare, integrate, and reflect on the model's behavioral patterns, valuing choices against their own cognitive schemas.

Eventually, some of the cadres begin attempting to translate and then apply this model's spirit or methods to their own specific work. This may manifest as imitating certain working methods, borrowing problem-solving approaches, or using the model's choices as a reference to strengthen their own courage. Although not all civil servants immediately become new models, this diffused behavioral fine-tuning is precisely the most common governance output expected from model leadership, continuously improving the ecology of street-level governance practice.

"When I first heard the report, I thought that model could manage mobile vendors so harmoniously—it seemed almost mythical. But when our Party branch held an organizational life meeting specifically

comparing ourselves with his deeds of ‘warm law enforcement, meticulous service,’ several colleagues mentioned their own impatience and simplistic tendencies when dealing with similar management subjects. At that moment, I suddenly realized that the gap wasn’t ability but original intention and patience. Later, when our department took the lead in handling a long-standing illegal construction dispute in a residential community, we all instinctively thought: can we try that kind of drive? We changed our previous approach of mainly sending notices and forced demolition. Instead, we spent considerable time visiting homeowners, property managers, and surrounding residents to hear their opinions. After no fewer than ten rounds of coordination, we finally found a solution acceptable to multiple parties.” (02-2308)

4.2.4. Feedback, adjustment, and reproduction: Dynamic evolution of the mechanism

The model demonstration and spiritual leadership mechanism is a cyclical system containing feedback loops. Organizations evaluate the actual effectiveness of the demonstration through various approaches. These include reviewing ideological reports, as well as actual work changes after learning activities. Analyzing relevant work indicators has improved positively, monitoring new forces with similar traits that emerge during cadre assessments, and observing genuine public opinion and civil servants’ evaluations of selected models. This feedback information serves as vital input for mechanism optimization. If a certain type of model triggers widespread, spontaneous learning enthusiasm, improving work performance, the organization may strengthen the intensity of selecting and publicizing such models.

Conversely, if a particular model receives warm responses, it is considered too perfect or out of touch, or even triggers burnout. The organization needs to reflect on its selection criteria, narrative methods, or dissemination strategies and adjust accordingly in future work, for instance, by emphasizing model diversity, layering, and learnability. At the same time, as priority tasks shift, social contradictions evolve, and cadre generations change, the spiritual traits and competency models urgently needed by organizations also evolve.

Therefore, advanced models selected should keep pace with the times. From early emphasis on hard work and selfless dedication, to later emphasis on pioneering innovation. Also, it ranges from responsible action to professional empowerment and rule-of-law governance. Proficiency in using new technologies, connotation, and image of demonstration is constantly enriched and updated.

“A few years back, we really pushed a bunch of ‘old ox’ type models—you know, the hardworking, silent types. Their stories were touching, no doubt. But later, in young cadre forums and anonymous surveys, we started hearing something else: people respected them, sure, but felt they were a bit out of touch with today’s realities. So in recent years, we’ve adjusted our direction. For example, in our latest batch of key promotional models, we included a grassroots team leader who used big data to pinpoint environmental hazards, and a village Party secretary who figured out a ‘Party branch + cooperative + e-commerce’ model for rural revitalization. That sends a clear message about what the organization now needs and values most. And honestly, that process of adjusting—that itself is a form of dynamic leadership.” (11-2402)

When model selection is perceived as ritual-driven rather than merit-based, the symbolic capital of the award is eroded. The respondent’s language is full of empirical grounds for the theoretical claim that perceived procedural injustice could turn honorary incentives into demotivators. This finding underscores the importance of transparent feedback, as well as adjustment mechanisms in maintaining the credibility of the symbolic production system.

4.3. The symbolic framing of honorary incentives and optimization countermeasures

Honorary incentives play an irreplaceable role in shaping grassroots public employees' value identification, which guides their work actions. However, they may also face tensions or risks of alienation in grassroots practice. When recognition disproportionately emphasizes the form of symbols and the conferral ceremony itself, while relatively neglecting substantive contributions, real contexts, and ongoing developmental needs of incentivized individuals. It should ground these symbols; the original intent and actual effect of honorary incentives may diverge. This symbolic framing of civil servants' honorary incentives could trigger an incentive toward an emphasis on form over substance. The optimization countermeasures are crucial for ensuring that our cadre honorary incentive system maintains vitality, credibility, and long-term effectiveness.

4.3.1. Manifestations of symbolic framing in honorary incentives

The perfect shaping without the sincerity of advanced model narratives may reduce learnability. In the process of shaping models, to make the spirit more pure, narratives may intentionally or unintentionally filter out ordinary human aspects, like exploratory trial-and-error processes, and even moments of inner hesitation. It is always supposed to create a flawless saint image. Meanwhile, stories of model civil servants from different fields may possibly follow highly similar narrative templates, from structure to phrasing. While this perfection strengthens the sublimity of symbols, they may erect an invisible dividing line between common cadres in different departments. Grassroots civil servants, while admiring, easily develop a sense of distance with alienation. Some cadres may argue that models are made of special circumstances, making their experience difficult to replicate under their own ordinary and constrained working conditions.

“Did he never hesitate? Never feel tired or guilty toward his family? None of that gets written. We’re also at the grassroots, with the elderly and children at home, and work is just as complicated. This image of a ‘perfect person’ without any selfish thoughts or inner conflict makes us feel, oh, this is something saints can do. Ordinary people like us, with endless mundane worries and limited resources at work, don’t even know where to start following that standard.” (03-2307)

Then, the rushed conferral process may erode the fairness of incentives. In some cases, due to short-term publicity or policy demonstration needs, honors may be manufactured. Specifically, substantial resources are tilted toward a few cultivated targets, who are intensively packaged and launched to create a concentrated publicity effect. Additionally, honors may be overly concentrated on a small number of civil servants, creating a Matthew effect in honorary incentives. The risk is that this may probably distort grassroots cadres' effort direction, inducing people to invest more energy in catering to selection criteria and impression management rather than solving practical problems. This orientation may dampen the enthusiasm of the majority of public servants who work silently over a long-term period. Once honors are perceived as something that could be planned, rather than the natural result of hard work and contribution, their fairness and authority come under serious question.

“Something happened in our unit a couple of years ago that really stirred things up. There was this colleague—yeah, he was capable, no question. But it felt like the higher-ups wanted to rush and set up a model in some area, so they just poured resources, opportunities, and even credit from other brother units onto him. Over time, everyone picks up on that kind of thing. If you’re working hard and it feels like the organization just doesn’t see it—man, that really kills morale. You just feel like, where’s the fairness?” (20-2307)

The result-oriented direction of honorary incentives may lead to a superficial affect connection. If honorary incentives remain at the level of conferring titles, it may degenerate into a purely ceremonial event.

For instance, holding conferences, publishing news, without sustained attention, development for awardees afterward, and without institutional support for the practical difficulties encountered by a broader cadre group in learning from models.

For cadres who did not receive awards, they may feel more pressure from publicity than genuine guidance, while also not experiencing substantive empowerment. This situation would lead to carelessness from the organization during the process. This unidirectional conferral of honorary symbols struggles to build deep, lasting emotional connections and organizational identification. Its incentive effects are often temporary and unsustainable.

“I won a city-level ‘Service Star’ award the year before last. I was happy at the time—big ceremony, leaders presented the award, my photo went on the bulletin board. But after the excitement of those few days, there seemed to be no follow-up. The medal went into the cabinet, and things went back to normal. The same old problems at work remained the same old problems. Both those who won awards and those who didn’t actually need real, ongoing support afterward.” (19-2308)

This account empirically demonstrates the disconnect between symbolic conferral and sustained support. The respondent’s phrase “medal went into the cabinet” is a powerful metaphor for symbolic decay. Without post-award engagements, the honorary symbol loses its affective charge and fails to produce lasting behavioral change.

4.3.2. Optimization countermeasures for symbolic framing of honorary incentives

To overcome the current predicament of symbolic framing in honorary incentives for grassroots civil servants, the following suggestions could be proposed from a perspective of symbolic production. First of all, promoting the return of advanced model narratives to grassroots scenarios. In shaping models, consciously retain and present these challenges in model cadres’ professional growth, their hesitations in career choices via trial-and-error in exploring working methods. Honorary incentives anchored in grassroots scenarios portray a resilient, growing, and approachable public servant. Such grassroots contextualization does not diminish the model’s brilliance. Rather, it enhances resonance via an authentic model figure.

In parallel, expanding the typology of models significantly. Beyond traditional narratives of loyalty, perseverance, and selfless dedication, equal attention should be given to models emerging in many grassroots working settings, like reform and innovation, digital transformation, risk resolution, professional services, and cross-sector collaboration. Let cadres skilled in fine-grained grassroots governance, rule guardians proficient in governance law, and platform builders adept at integrating governance resources, all find corresponding positions with elevated value in the honorary incentive system. This motivates grassroots public employees from various fields to contribute to the modernization of governance by each excelling in their own domain.

Secondly, improving the scientific nature of selection and follow-up support for the honor conferral. It is worth strengthening the practice orientation and performance foundation of honor conferral. Establishing more scientific, democratic, and transparent selection procedures is anticipated for upgrading the honorary incentive. Increasing the weight of public evaluation, client feedback, and peer assessment in award selection, so that honors derive more from popular reputation and practical testing. Simultaneously, minimizing undue human influence in model conferral to ensure every model withstands the test of grassroots practice and time. More importantly, establishing a tracking, cultivation, and support mechanism after honor conferral is also beneficial for symbol understanding. Include cadres receiving significant honors in talent pools, provide them with more challenging practical positions, higher-level learning and training opportunities, and broader

exchange platforms, helping them transform honors into new responsibilities and capabilities.

Thirdly, strengthening deep emotional connection and systematic empowerment throughout the entire incentive process. Honorary incentives should not be suspended at the moment of recognition, but should run through the entire cycle of civil servants' entrepreneurship. Before selection, create an ecosystem of fair competition and performance-first, where everyone believes their efforts can be seen. During selection, focus on identifying and affirming cadres who accumulate over long periods in ordinary positions and step forward at critical moments. Even if they do not ultimately win the highest award, their performance should receive organizational recognition and encouragement in time. After recognition, organizations should conduct regular heart-to-heart talks to understand the true thoughts or practical difficulties of the cadre group. Combine spiritual incentives with addressing work bottlenecks, improving working conditions, and providing psychological support, transforming honorary incentives from outcomes-directed into process empowerment.

5. Conclusion and discussion

Honorary certificates themselves do not generate motivation. What generates motivation is a whole set of credible meaning symbol production surrounding the certificate. When defining distinct, maintaining a visible connection with grassroots civil servants, verifiable performance, typical narratives, even when retaining ordinary aspects or traces of trial and error, are more easily legitimized.

However, when the production side treats models as some short-term publicity materials and pushes narratives toward perfectionist templates that are divorced from daily constraints, the audience does not simply accept them. Instead, they initiate decoding. The production of honorary symbols involves multiple stages. These are naming and material selection in the construction-authorization phase, the multiple readings generated by the intersection of formal documents, WeChat work groups, training classrooms, and short-video platforms in the meaning-flow phase, the subtle leaps of empathy, reflection, and partial imitation in the psychological-transformation phase, and finally the critical role of feedback with re-coding in the dynamic-evolution phase.

Placing these findings within broader theoretical traditions, this study provides a new meso-level empirical support for classic tension. Organizations use symbols to motivate professional groups, but the effectiveness of symbols does not submit to the unilateral will of occupational organizations^[21]. In discussing language, conferring titles, labeling, and holding ceremonies are seemingly ritualistic operations. Defining qualifications for advanced models, determining narrative forms, and inclusion in collective memory are themselves exercises. The accumulation of symbolic capital requires that the giver's own symbolic capital be sufficiently substantial. The dilemma of symbolic framing observed in this study illustrates that when grassroots civil servants perceive models as excessively formalized, model selection is no longer read as a recognition mechanism.

Moreover, the interaction ritual chain theory helps us to explain the differentiated operation of honorary symbol production. Co-presence, mutual focus of attention, shared emotional tone, and boundary demarcation must all exist simultaneously for rituals to produce high-level emotional energy as well as symbol sacralization^[22]. The absence of any one element reduces the ritual to procedural emptiness. These two directions of dialogue point toward a broader interdisciplinary issue that requires sustained effort from sociology, political science, public administration, and other disciplines. Simply increasing the density of external rewards does not linearly enhance public sector motivation. On the contrary, excessively strong

controlling signals may crowd out intrinsic drive. Our study proposes that the cause of honorary incentive failure often lies not in excessive production at the supply end, but in a lack of institutionalized honesty within the symbolic production mechanism itself. An honorary incentive system grounded in structural identification, if stripped of the truthfulness required for recognition, could only compensate through thicker rhetoric and larger ceremonies. This is precisely the generative logic of symbolic framing.

This research uses in-depth interviews to form an exploratory framework for validation. It is important to acknowledge the scope and limitations of this study. As the analysis rests on interviews, the conclusions should be framed as exploratory findings rather than as definitive or broadly applicable propositions. In particular, the study captures civil servants' psychological perceptions of honorary incentives primarily via respondents' post-recollections, rather than real-time tracking of ritual scenes or behavioral changes. This reliance on memory introduces potential recall bias and social desirability effects, as interviewees may unconsciously reconstruct their emotional responses after the facts.

Besides, the analysis is based on interviews with only 22 informants across a small number of field sites in a single city. This narrow empirical base constrains the generalizability of our findings. The patterns observed may reflect local contextual factors, such as regional job culture, economic conditions, or organizational practices, rather than universally applicable mechanisms of honorary incentive production. Future studies need larger-sample cross-regional comparisons and longer longitudinal tracking to strengthen causal inference. To address the reliance on retrospective accounts, future research should adopt a longitudinal mixed-methods design combining real-time sentimental measurement with behavioral tracking.

Researchers could administer brief ecological momentary assessments immediately before and after award ceremonies for capturing civil servants' affective states and cognitive appraisals in situ, followed by weekly diary entries to trace gradual shifts in work engagement, peer interactions, and emulation behaviors. This approach would allow researchers to pinpoint critical thresholds where symbolic recognition translates into sustained behavioral change, while also identifying conditions under which the ritual fails to generate lasting impact, thereby offering stronger causal evidence for the symbolic production framework.

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