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## **Practical Paths and Innovative Developments in Rural Governance Reform in China: Based on Leading Cases from 2019 to 2022\***

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### **Abstract**

Successful examples are formed through benchmarking and establishing pioneers, and policy diffusion is carried out through the concept of exemplary leadership and progressive promotion, in accordance with the national policy deployment of rural governance. In addition to combining the two benefits of rural social promotion and national policy support, this also creates an interactive pathway between national policy promotion and rural active response. We should not only concentrate on the national administrative system but also pay attention to the peculiarities of primary-level governance in order to study the workings of exemplary leadership. The National Rural Governance Leading Cases highlight the extensive scope, wide range of manifestations, and unique characteristics of China's wave of rural governance reform efforts in the new era. The combination of feeling the stones to cross the river and strengthening top-level design better reflects the logic of exemplary leadership in contemporary rural governance. These two strategies are based on the five practical dimensions of Party-building leadership, departmental coordination, integration of self-governance, rule of law, and rule of virtue, creation of new approaches, and multi-stakeholder governance.

**Keywords:** rural governance, policy experimentation, exemplary leadership, rural governance

### **I. Rural Governance Reform in China: A Research Approach**

The modernization of national governance includes the process of encouraging the development of rural governance systems and capacities. There are currently many academic research findings on rural governance, with the topical study themes historically closely following the development objectives of the Communist Party of China (CPC)

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\* This paper presents the interim achievements of the major National Social Science Foundation project on the guiding principles from the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee, entitled the "Study on the Practice and Experience of Promoting Socialist Primary-level Democracy since the 18th CPC National Congress" (22ZDA064), and the National Social Science Foundation project, named the "Study on the Mechanism of Constructing a Rural Governance Community in the New Development Stage" (21BKS129).

and the state. The themes of village autonomy, tax and fee reform, town and township governments, villagers' committees, rural governance models, rural social governance, primary-level democracy, land transfer, rural elites, new urbanization, poverty alleviation, rural revitalization, common prosperity, digital rural areas, and Party-building leadership are generally major research hotspots.<sup>1</sup> Two representative approaches are simultaneously covered by the relevant research: Party-building leadership and the interaction between the government and social organizations.

Scholars who take a Party-building leadership approach view the guiding function of primary-level Party organizations and their efforts to strengthen the Party as a significant driving force for innovation in rural governance. Representative perspectives include the vision of the political Party organizing society from the perspective of the building of primary-level government. This holds that primary-level Party organizations can accumulate resources from all directions and trigger revitalization dynamics by enhancing their own organizational capability.<sup>2</sup> From the standpoint of primary-level societal self-governance, political Party socialization focuses on improving the operational logic of the political Party so that it is better equipped to reflect and respond to social requirements, allowing the political Party as a whole to better integrate into and serve society and coordinate social resources.<sup>3</sup> In order to break through the traditional theory of the binary structure of national-social relations, political Party embedding looks at the relationship between the state and society from the above perspective. It holds that the national logic is not the subjective will of national power but rather the historical process of dynamic evolution rooted in the construction of the national and social relationship community, and is the practice-oriented solution to the problem of national balance construction.<sup>4</sup> From the viewpoint of the interaction between the political Party and society, the integration path of political Party leadership holds that the innovative methods of primary-level Party-building and rural governance provide a state of two-way empowerment. The dual logic of Party-building leading rural governance has inherent coherence, and the sole strategy for Party-building taking the reins of rural governance should be to encourage primary-level Party-building based on effective governance.<sup>5</sup>

Scholars who adopt the perspective of the interaction between the government and social organizations have concentrated on how the populace and the government interact

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1 Jiang Junwei, Chen Sisi and Ding Enjun, "Hot Topics and Trends in China's Research on Rural Governance: A Knowledge Map Analysis Based on VOSViewer and CiteSpace."

2 Wang Huilin, "The Mechanism and Operating Space Whereby the Political Party Organizes Society from the Perspective of Rural Revitalization: An Investigation Based on the Innovative Practice of Party-Building in J Town, S Province."

3 Zheng Qi, "Socialization of Political Parties: Path Selection for the Strengthening of Contemporary Primary-level Party Organizations."

4 Chen Jinhua, "The National Logic for Modernizing the Governance System."

5 Zhang Jingen and Zhang Xuan, "Two-Way Empowerment in Party Building Leading Rural Governance: A Case Study of Innovative Conflict Resolution in A County, North China."

behaviorally during the process of rural governance innovation.<sup>6</sup> According to the government leadership approach, one reason rural social governance innovation has deviated from institutional expectations and why government-led rural governance innovation has not been able to achieve governance efficiency in real-world contexts is that in its village social innovation effort, higher-level government has failed to recognize that institutional innovation is a comprehensive process of system setup, operation and change.<sup>7</sup> The interaction between the approaches of government and society, on the other hand, examines rural governance innovation as a fluid process. From this viewpoint, the government actively seeks for and employs political, organizational, and economic resources to further shape and spread leading examples, while local villages' self-governance and exploration are seen as the primary sources of role models.<sup>8</sup> An innovative rural governance model known as the integration of self-governance, rule of law, and rule of virtue was initially developed by local governments, then formally acknowledged by the central government, and eventually completely implemented at the local level.<sup>9</sup>

The aforementioned research has illustrated and laying the groundwork for the unique areas and methods of rural governance reform from many angles. However, some research has more or less disregarded the context of the linked study of the national macro-reform pilot due to an overly strong focus on particular examples. Therefore, this paper combines rural governance reform policy experiments with National Rural Governance Leading Cases in an effort to move beyond the local single- case theme of rural governance and research on the subject relationship viewpoint. In order to address the issue of how to establish effective rural governance in the context of national direction for top-level design and flexible and diversified interaction in rural governance, this essay explores the relationship between top-level design and primary-level practice. We explore the useful traits and creative growth of rural governance reform in the new era.

## II. Examples of Typical Reforms to Rural Governance in China

In the long-term process under which the Party leads the Chinese revolution and development, governance practices based on policy experimentation have gradually developed into a mature methodology and have reached the pinnacle of governing the country with socialism with Chinese characteristics. As effective guiding concepts for China's policy formulation and

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6 Fu Jianjun, "The Mechanism and Intrinsic Tension of Social Governance Innovation in Contemporary China: On the Logic of Technological Governance in Social Governance Innovation."

7 Xu Qin, "Institutional Suspension: An Explanation for the Deviation from the Rural Social Governance Innovation Path."

8 Shen Lijuan, Zhang Hongchuan and Wu Jiang, "How and Why Does Exemplary Rural Governance Work? An Investigation Based on the Process, Dynamics, and Patterns of Governance in Z Village."

9 Li Yaolei and Li Chuncheng, "Composite Mechanism for Effective Rural Governance: A Study of the Integration of Self-Governance, Rule of Law, and Rule of Virtue in Tongxiang, Zhejiang Province."

execution, related major policy discourses including crossing the river by feeling the stones, trials in selected areas, experiments, pilots, starting with one example and then expanding upon it, approaching local reforms with an awareness of how they will affect the bigger picture, etc., have emerged. The pilot reforms' institutional setting has changed significantly in the new era. The central government places more emphasis on the principle that major reforms should have a legal basis, and local experimentation authority is given a more defined scope. Local pilot programs must first receive approval from key decision-makers; only then can the central government coordinate the systematic promotion of policy after assessing the effectiveness of the experiments.<sup>10</sup> The idea of authorized pilot projects that are subject to selective control by the CPC Central Committee has emerged as a key strategy for furthering reform in this setting. With top decision-makers taking the lead in precise problem identification, critical issue selection, and program deliberation and assessment, as well as assuming a political role in providing guidance, supervision, and evaluation, this concept emphasizes the construction of a systematic top-level institutional design. This establishes the political objective of the exemplary leadership approach. It acts as a basic tenet for modernizing national governance and development in addition to offering efficient institutional structures to address structural issues in the governance of a big country. It has additionally developed into a collection of tactical procedures for governance based on the unified system and primary-level society established by the Party.

As a result, exemplary leadership has an instrumental value that goes beyond simply providing an example for the primary level and includes ensuring that the major policies of the nation are not perverted or diverted at that level.<sup>11</sup> It has increasingly acquired the political ramifications of being a role model in terms of value logic as well as the instrumental purpose of providing examples of direction. The Central Rural Affairs Office and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs have gathered, reviewed, and published 123 National Rural Governance Leading Cases for four consecutive years from 2019 to 2022 since the 19th CPC National Congress. In order to effectively enhance and improve the capacities of rural governance, they have promoted the absorption and reference of typical experiences in many regions through batch review and promotion. This systematic project fully fulfills role models' leadership roles and demonstration, encouraging different regions to develop effective rural governance methods tailored to local circumstances. It also encourages the development of positive experiences and practices in rural governance through more thoughtful and deliberate action supported and promoted by higher-level authorities.

In this regard, exemplary leadership for rural governance serves as a key mechanism for aggregating the benefits of national policy support and rural social promotion, with both

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10 Li Ping and Yang Hongshan, "Attention Shifts and Institutional Development in China's Experimental Governance."

11 Sun Xinhua and Zhong Zhangbao, "The Governance Logic for the Development of Scale Agriculture: A Case Study on Facilitating Local Governance in He Town in Southern Anhui Province."

national administrative lineage and primary-level governance characteristics. It also gradually creates a dynamic governance process of national policy promotion and rural response. In actuality, as a policy tool for increasing coverage and expanding from one point, “Exemplary leadership is a demonstration mechanism that integrates the policy process, economic process, and social process in the study of rural concerns. It is not simply a crucial policy tool for national governance.”<sup>12</sup> Experience of practice has been reviewed and the issues, solutions, and guidelines identified in primary-level governance innovation have been condensed and improved through top-level design. As a result, more and more successful primary-level governance reform initiatives have been replicated and promoted nationally. The National Rural Governance Leading Cases can thus reflect real-world situations and China’s features, including innovation at the city and county levels as well as investigations and practices at the town and village levels, successfully resolving some of the problems, challenges, and barriers experienced in rural governance. They have also helped gain experience in strengthening primary-level Party-building, improving governance systems, perfecting governance structures, innovating governance methods, and enhancing governance capabilities. They serve as a new path and a role model and have high levels of operability, practicability, and reference value. The National Rural Governance Leading Cases are chosen as the main subjects for the case study research in this article, and the leading cases are then subjected to a text analysis.

The key strategy and technique for advancing rural governance reform in China today is exemplary leadership. By promoting the National Rural Governance Leading Cases, the central government and national ministries and commissions not only fully utilize the leading and exemplary function of leading cases, but also make them serve as helpful references, encouraging different regions to carry out in-depth analyses of the laws governing rural governance and explore the paths of rural governance. This is very important for encouraging the development of the national rural system and capacity for governance, as well as for encouraging additional research into rural governance models that are in keeping with regional circumstances. The 123 practical instances can be grouped into five main groups based on the usual differences in the substance of the National Rural Governance Leading Cases’ rural governance reform (See Table 1).

Table 1 Categorized Basic Information Table for National Rural Governance Leading Cases

Case type	Explanation of cases		Reform keywords (3-5)	Information/Sources
	Main focus	Main directions and critical areas of reform		

12 Li Yunxin and Yuan Yang, “Demonstration in the Building of a New Countryside: Practice Modes and Operational Effectiveness.”

Cases led by Party-building	The integration of Party-building and rural governance is the main focus. Making the development of rural primary-level Party organizations and the role of Party members and officials a major focus, as well as developing “Party-building plus” governance brands in accordance with local conditions, are the main directions and critical areas of reform.	Party-building	Circular of the Secretariat of the Central Rural Affairs Leading Group Office and the General Office of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs on Recommending the First National Rural Governance Leading Cases in China, May 2019.
		Comprehensive leadership	
		Party-people relationship	
Cases of systems improvement	The modification of local management systems is the main concern. The primary goal and focus of reform is to straighten out interactions between county and township governments and village-level organizations, improve the supervisory mechanism of village-level power, and strengthen the capacity of towns, township, and villages to support agriculture.	Joint county-township-village efforts	Circular of the Secretariat of the Central Rural Affairs Leading Group Office and the General Office of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs on Recommending the Second National Rural Governance Leading Cases in China, December 2020.
		Supervision of village-level power	
		List-based management of important matters	
Cases of systems creation	Promoting and enhancing modern governance is the main goal. Optimizing the rural governance system under the Party committee’s leadership and achieving high efficiency in rural governance in the course of high-quality development are the primary directions and focal points of reform.	Integration of self-governance, rule of law, and rule of virtue	Circular of the General Office of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and the General Department of the National Administration for Rural Revitalization on Recommending the Third National Rural Governance Leading Cases in China, October 2021.
Cases of creation of new approaches	Exploring creative governance solutions that are practical and effective is the main objective. Transforming working techniques into local work system arrangements, then into typical experiences through promotion by national ministries and commissions, are the major direction and key areas of reform.	List-based system	Circular of the General Office of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and the General Department of the National Administration for Rural Revitalization on Recommending the Fourth National Rural Governance Leading Cases in China, November 2022.
		Points-based system	
		Digitization	
Capacity-building cases	Addressing the problems, challenges, and barriers in local government is the main goal. Exploring the route of rural government with a focus on the practical concerns impacting the people and boosting their sense of happiness, fulfillment, and security are the main directions and critical areas of reform.	Reform of the system of rural collective land used for housing	
		Poverty alleviation relocation program	
		Improvement of the living environment	
		Extravagant spending on weddings and funerals	
		Sky-high bride prices	

### 1. Cases led by Party-building

In order to modernize China’s system and capacity for governance, it is essential to strengthen the Party’s complete leadership in rural governance activities. Party-building leadership permeates every step of the reform of rural governance in contemporary China. By utilizing the

key role and the core leadership of primary-level Party organizations, enhancing the political and organizational capabilities of rural primary-level Party organizations, emphasizing the clear direction of concentrating on primary-level work, and successfully integrating the national will and policy tools into rural governance, we can concentrate and direct resources from all levels and departments to engage with primary-level society, improve the implementation of policies, and attend to the needs of the populace. We can also give the governance system more adaptability and flexibility to handle a variety of complex governance situations in various regions and environments, thus becoming better able to respond to more complex governance scenarios and fully converting the institutional advantages brought about by Party-building leadership into effective governance. A review of the National Rural Governance Leading Cases suggests that from strengthening primary-level organizations in the first batch of cases in 2019 to promoting organizational leadership and integrating integration of self-governance, rule of law, and rule of virtue in the fourth batch of cases in 2022, they fully embody the distinctive orientation, political advantages, and organizational strengths of Party-building leadership in rural governance. With efforts to strengthen rural primary-level Party organizations and bring into full play the role of Party members and officials as the primary mission, the current reform of rural governance focuses on the complete integration of Party-building and rural governance to develop a Party-building plus governance brand that is customized for the region, to persistently advocate the expansion of Party-building to the primary level, and to improve the capacity for rural governance.

## *2. Cases of systems improvement*

The key to success in social governance is to make institutional innovations, and it is people who can make this happen. The focus of social governance must be on urban and rural communities. The Rural Revitalization Promotion Law, which went into effect on June 1, 2021, makes it abundantly clear that, “Efforts shall be made to establish a sound law- and technology-based system for modern rural social governance under which Communist Party of China committees exercise leadership, the government assumes responsibility, democratic consultation is held, nongovernmental actors provide assistance, and the public get involved.” The development of village governance institutions has evolved into a guideline for defining the purview of governance and the powers, obligations and benefits of all pertinent members of an organization in their respective domains, as well as their interrelationships. It is also the prerequisite and basis for the development of a governance system. In order to continue improving the rural governance system through rural governance reforms and to realize an improvement in the effectiveness of rural governance, it is necessary to construct a collaborative governance pattern of numerous subjects in the countryside. This is due to the objective reality of urbanization, industrialization, and massive population flows and migrations and the various challenges they bring.<sup>13</sup> Among the National Rural Governance

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13 Gao Yuan, “Evolution of the Collaborative Governance Pattern of Rural Diversified Subjects: Based on the Perspective of ‘State in Society.’”

Leading Cases, the current systems improvement cases for rural governance innovation are focused on the adjustment of the primary-level management system. The main directions and key areas of reform include: straightening out the relationship between county and township governments and village-level organizations, improving the mechanism for village-level power supervision, and upgrading the ability of towns, townships and villages to provide services for agriculture, rural areas, and farmers. In terms of typical content, mechanisms and modes include those for subdistricts, towns, and townships to refer problems that they cannot address to responsible government departments; for a list of powers, a negative list, a list of duties, and a workflow diagram for the list of powers; for the government portal website, intranet and extranet; and for the management of important lists of responsibilities and powers. Continued efforts have been made to improve policies, work systems, and institutions and to establish an institutional internal working pattern with clear responsibilities in which each takes charge of its own responsibilities and works together to promote them. Emphasis has been laid on the resilience of the rural governance system.

### *3. Cases of systems creation*

The governance system differs from the governance structure in rural areas. While the system is the end and outcome, the structure is a means. The CPC Central Committee has proposed a significant strategic mission: promoting and perfecting a rural governance system with modern governance as its fundamental orientation, with the goal of achieving the Second Centenary Goal of completing a great modern country in all respects. Under the direction of the Party committees, the rural governance system must be optimized. Proactive adaptation to the new stage features of rural governance is also necessary in order to achieve the high efficiency of rural governance in the course of high-quality development. The report to the 19th CPC National Congress noted, “We will strengthen basic services in rural communities, and improve the rural governance model which combines self-governance, rule of law, and rule of virtue.” The institutional structure known as integration of self-governance, rule of law, and rule of virtue is intended to modernize the system and capacity for primary-level governance. It has produced positive outcomes in local practice areas around the nation in recent years. For instance, by standardizing the system of villagers’ meetings, the Hongsibu District of Wuzhong City in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region has consistently strengthened the democratic foundation of rural governance. Similar methods are also present in Jinzhong City in Shanxi Province, Kunshan City and Nantong City’s Rudong County in Jiangsu Province, and Leiyang City in Hunan Province; all of these places see the integration of self-governance, rule of law, and rule of virtue as a key path for rural governance reform and innovation.

### *4. Cases of creation of new approaches*

The advancement of modern governance necessitates practical and effective ideas, methodologies, policies, and measures, which are not only essential components of China’s rural governance reform but also inescapable prerequisites for modernizing rural governance. The CPC Central Committee has put forward a number of new concepts, new ideas, and new

strategies for modernizing governance. These are mostly seen in the development of practical and efficient working practices that build and enhance rural government. To continually improve its long-term governance competence in the new era, the Party has made emphasizing the practical and efficient governance model a central subject. It focuses on the need to maintain goal orientation while simultaneously keeping an eye on the real situation and attempts to turn addressing practical requirements into a thread that may bring about agreement. It can be seen from the National Rural Governance Leading Cases that many regions have looked into various practical and innovative governing methods. For instance, emphasis is being placed on studying leading cases and utilizing a points system to promote rural governance. Efforts are being made to achieve orderly and efficient control over the grid by dividing management into smaller units and promoting grid management in rural areas. An additional illustration is the list system for micro-powers, initially implemented as a measure in Ninghai County, Ningbo City, Zhejiang Province and later developed into a typical example that may be learnt from throughout the nation through promotion by national ministries and commissions.

#### *5. Capacity-building cases*

Enhancing rural governance capacities is a crucial step in creating a people- and service-oriented government, and it must be tested via actual problem-solving. According to the National Rural Governance Leading Cases, making people's thinking conscious and standardized systems have been developed to address the problems, challenges, and barriers in primary-level governance, focusing on issues such as expensive dowries, social comparison, and extravagant funerals while ignoring elderly care. This is a crucial tool for raising the bar for rural governance. The first batch of practice batches' typical examples concentrated on unresolved issues like homestead reform, village-level power supervision, excessive wedding and funeral ceremonies, expensive dowries, and burial traditions. The second batch concentrated on important rural revitalization tasks like enhancing the quality of life and reducing poverty. The third batch concentrated on ensuring services for the people and raising rural dwellers' hopes for a better life. The fourth batch concentrated on enhancing the governance of important groups and regions and ensuring that more governing forces work at the primary level to create a combined force for governance. Each batch of leading cases had its own emphasis and focus, with the new circumstances and tasks of broadly strengthening rural governance serving as the core. Standardized, refined, and practical rules and techniques have been developed in accordance with the particular arrangements of pertinent central government ministries and commissions in order to effectively support the improvement of governance capacities and increase the sense of happiness, fulfillment, and security of the masses.

### **III. Demonstrative Practices of Exemplary Leadership in China's Rural Governance Reform**

Forging a local-style governance strategy through top-down policy deployment and maintaining

and activating endogenous forces in the countryside through a flexible intervention approach are the two major components of rural governance reform for the nation. The secret of a successful rural society is to sustain political reform effectiveness and be integrated into the national governance system. In order to enhance overall stability and efficient governance in rural areas, the statewide promotion of the National Rural Governance Leading Cases necessitates that all regions carefully learn from typical experiences and methods. In order to summarize and analyze the leading practices of different examples of rural governance, this section focuses on the five practical routes of Party-building leadership, departmental coordination, integration of self-governance, rule of law, and rule of virtue, creation of new approaches, and multi-stakeholder governance based on representative original cases.

*1. Party-building leadership: establishing the governance authority of local Party groups*

The Communist Party of China is the key to getting things done well in China. The political and organizational benefits of primary-level Party organizations can only be converted into the success of primary-level governance by properly using the key function of primary-level Party organizations. Since the 18th CPC National Congress, all areas have promoted primary-level governance with Party-building leadership, continually addressing the difficulties and complexities of primary-level governance in the new era and enhancing governance. Given the profound transformation and change that China's economy and society are currently experiencing, it is urgent to fully utilize the leadership and overall coordination functions of primary-level Party organizations, encourage the coordination of disparate interests, and address inconsistencies. In establishing a powerful and well-organized frontline force, we must make sure that Party-building leadership is incorporated into primary-level governance. By doing this, we can both strengthen the basis of governance and raise the bar for primary-level governance in both urban and rural areas. Additionally, the National Rural Governance Leading Cases demonstrate how the rural governance system has been consistently enhanced thanks to the core leadership of primary-level Party organizations. Under the direction of Party organizations, the micro-level self-governance model in villages in Daye City, Hubei Province, has strengthened the fundamental position of village-level Party organizations in the primary-level governance pattern, mobilized the populace's initiative and creativity in participating in village governance, and opened up a lively situation of dynamic villages under Party-building leadership. Through initiatives like building the framework, taking charge, electing the leading bodies, establishing standards, and giving face, Daye City has boosted the quality of rural governance and strengthened ties between officials and the populace. Shuangyang District in Daye has successfully integrated primary-level organizational development across the entire rural governance process, thus enhancing the system of rural governance. Rudong County in Nantong City, Jiangsu Province, has strengthened the leadership role of primary-level Party organizations, united primary-level Party members and the people, and gathered governance resources. It has thus promoted the development of a rural governance

system that is led by Party-building, combines regions and departments, coordinates efforts from top to bottom, and pursues shared governance.

*2. Departmental coordination: unlocking the synergy potential of the system of regions and departments*

In 2023, the CPC Central Committee made it clear that the rural management system must improve the three-tier coordination between the county, township, and village, enhance the three-tiered county, township, and village governance structure, ascertain county-level responsibilities, promote town and township empowerment, consolidate the foundation of village-level governance, and increase the effectiveness of rural governance. There is a recurring theme in the historical planning and modernization of primary-level governance by the Party and state programmatic documents: the innovative development of the rural governance system has always been carried out with the practice of encouraging empowerment, ensuring that more governing forces work at the primary-level level, and increasing efficiency. With its four reporting mechanisms of problems referred to government departments, officials, Party members, etc. by subdistricts, villagers' committees, Party branches, and grids, respectively, Pinggu District of Beijing sounded the advance for a good governance solution in National Rural Governance Leading Cases and formed a working pattern of regional coordination, regional and departmental collaboration, and top-down cooperation. In order to bridge the last mile of work implementation from the viewpoint of responsibilities and mechanisms, efforts are being undertaken in Enshi, Hubei Province, to combine village officials and resident officials into a strong frontline execution team. The crack taskforce stationed in villages is the main force behind rural governance, with an emphasis on problem- and outcome-oriented methods. As a consequence, a triple cooperation mechanism with vertical coordination has created a 1+4+N governance structure. Targeted solutions are being developed to address the challenges and bottlenecks in rural governance, and new approaches to rural governance are being explored that effectively improve the efficiency of rural governance by strengthening the collaboration between the four levels of government, i.e., the prefecture, county, township, and village.

*3. The integration of self-governance, rule of law, and rule of virtue: improving the interlocking governance structure*

At its 19th National Congress, the Party proposed to “strengthen basic services in rural communities, and improve a rural governance model that combines self-governance, rule of law, and rule of virtue.” At its Fourth Plenary Session, the 19th CPC Central Committee for the first time explicitly stated the intention to “build a primary-level governance system that combines self-governance, rule of law, and rule of virtue under the leadership of Party organizations in both urban and rural areas.” The development of primary-level governance systems was still a priority for the 19th CPC Central Committee’s Fifth Plenary Session. The integration of self-governance, rule of law, and rule of virtue is having initial synergistic impacts in the new modern rural governance system. Integration describes the way in

which a full policy implementation typically involves a number of execution networks.<sup>14</sup> The complexity of rural affairs from the perspective of the current government presents greater difficulties and demands for primary-level governance. A modern sublimation of the conventional simple and one-dimensional rural governance model is the establishment of a three-dimensional governance model guided by rule of virtue, based on self-governance, and ensured by rule of law, as well as the exploration of effective methods for integrating the three dimensions. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the integrated governance system makes use of more endogenous self-governance aims, more uniform rule of law techniques, and more humane governing means in order to comprehensively and systematically enhance the effectiveness of primary-level government. Tongxiang City in Zhejiang Province, the birthplace of a governance system characterized by the integration of self-governance, rule of law, and rule of virtue, can be thought of as a leading example. It has built a rural governance system whereby self-governance, rule of law, and rule of virtue coexist by developing the subject initiative, making rule of law more regulatory, and ensuring that rule of virtue leads in the process of investigating the way to integrate self-governance, rule of law, and rule of virtue. This has successfully promoted the participation of diverse subjects, such as government, social groups, and villagers, in primary-level governance.

#### *4. Creation of new approaches: reorganizing the capacity of rules to establish institutions*

Traditional rural governance practices are no longer appropriate for the growth of contemporary rural areas due to the ongoing modernization of their system and capacity for governance. Modern rural governance is constantly evolving, thanks to advances in economic, social, and technical growth. After extensive research and application, a number of novel governance techniques—including the points-based and list systems—have standardized the rural governance model and steadily shown the benefits of effective governance. According to the first batch of the National Rural Governance Leading Cases, Youxiqiao Village in Xinhua County, Hunan Province, explored the points-based assessment and management of village affairs; the villagers took part in the communal income distribution based on points. Points were also used to oversee and evaluate Party officials, and the entire point system was closely monitored. Caidian District of Wuhan City, Hubei Province, concentrated on significant issues such as the enormous load on village-level organizations when implementing the list system. By promoting the list system and moving faster to modernize the rural system and capacity for governance, the district successfully solved issues like heavy burdens at the primary-level level, erratic management of village affairs, low public satisfaction, and weak sense of running village affairs among villagers. In promoting digital empowerment, Julu County in Xingtai City, Hebei Province, relied on the Juhaoban digital rural governance platform to advance grid governance, closed-loop public demand management, intelligent guidance of government services, and chain-style

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14 Yang Shuwen and Xue Liqiang, “How Do County-Level Governments Implement Policies?: An Empirical Study Based on the Four-Dimensional Framework of the Government Process Theory.”

development of industries with a local competitive edge.

*5. Multi-stakeholder governance: establishing a social governance model based on collaboration, participation, and common interests*

During the process of reshaping social forms, structures, and functions, collaboration necessitates multi-stakeholder and extensive participation from all spheres of society, including the Party, government, all sectors of society, and different levels of the hierarchy. This emphasizes the crucial role that institutional arrangements and institution-building play in the social governance pattern. The secret to participation is coordination, which involves successfully integrating social entities like the Party and the government, the National People's Congress, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the market, society, and the public to create a favorable environment for multi-stakeholder governance. Common interests refer to sharing among all parties and the effective interaction of numerous actors sticking to the public nature of primary-level governance and advancing toward a genuine community. This establishes that the primary goal of the community governance pattern is to modify how individual subjectivity and what is public relate to one another. The main job is to organize everyone to work together harmoniously, which will eventually result in the formation of a community society with a stable political order. The National Rural Governance Leading Cases show that as part of its effort to pursue innovative practices of community governance, Jinshi City, Hunan Province, motivated Party members to take active actions and achieve the established goals of Party branch organization management; encouraged the general public to participate in environmental improvement and carried out volunteer services, turning rural governance into a vigorous practice of people's participation and effectively translating the advantages of governance into the actual results of governance. The idea that "one person leads one household, one household leads one clan" successfully mobilized the enthusiasm of all inhabitants to participate in rural governance, as seen in Qingmiao Community in Maoliu Town, Jinshi City. In order to prevent disputes and solve problems, Changzhi County, Shanxi Province, fully carried forward the Fengqiao model<sup>15</sup> of the new era. It established a mediation center at the county level, employed full-time mediators in towns and townships, chose grid chiefs and grid officers at the village level, and integrated administrative, judicial, and people's mediation. To address the challenging problems of "nobody cares," "lack of capability," and "unwillingness to act" in rural governance, the county gradually established a social governance model based on collaboration, participation, and common interests.

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15 In the early 1960s, the officials and citizenry of Fengqiao Town in Zhejiang Province created the Fengqiao practice, which emphasized solving problems in situ rather than passing them up to higher authorities. The practice has developed over the intervening decades, and is now a model for promoting primary-level governance and social harmony. Relying on the people, the Party committees and governments devote their efforts to preventing disputes and solving problems, so as to maintain social stability and promote development.

#### IV. Experience of the Effectiveness of China's Rural Governance Reform

It is clear from common traditions ingrained in Chinese culture that, under the Party's steadfast direction, national governance modernization and rural governance have a relationship of strategic coupling that is progressive and inheritable. This coupling logic includes both the process of rural dynamism responding to national policies and generating endogenous governance techniques as well as the process of the national will penetrating rural society and constructing national modernity. The fundamental goal of this direction is to facilitate the coupling of the fundamental pattern and the typical successful practices of rural governance modernization. Rural governance is integrated into the strategic layout of the national governance system under the guidance of leading cases and through the organic interaction and integration of top-level design and primary-level exchange exploration, continuously enhancing the national governance system's practical content, and fostering the popularization of the experience of effective practice throughout the entire nation.

##### *1. Seeking the unity of leadership and initiative*

The modernization of national governance must be closely coordinated between Party-building leadership and rural community initiative in a dynamic governance process of national policies promoted from top to bottom and rural communities actively responding from bottom to top. This can be seen by looking through the released National Rural Governance Leading Cases. The principal contradiction facing Chinese society has evolved. What China now faces in the new era is the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life. Primary-level governance is at the forefront of national governance; responding to the evolving requirements of the sizable primary level is the primary goal of primary-level governance. This calls for primary-level Party organization leaders to take the lead in promoting the growth and prosperity of the people and assembling a group with excellent organizational skills to ensure that Party-building leadership permeates primary-level governance and solidify the foundation of governance. Organization is the first and most important stage in guiding primary-level governance through Party-building and responding to the new era's demands. Various regions have implemented the new "Party-building plus" work model in accordance with local circumstances, promoting the integration of Party-building and primary-level governance through Party-building leadership, ensuring that the high-speed train of primary-level governance is equipped with a strong engine, and encouraging changes in the Party's primary-level work style and innovation in primary-level governance mechanisms.

##### *2. Seeking harmony in restriction and flexibility*

There are restrictions on how the state promotes leading examples and governance aims in rural communities. The state's power for stiff embedment is less the closer it is to rural populations, and rural governance offers more flexibility in situational execution. Micro-level governance has plenty of operational room but is constrained by the restricted capacity

of national governance. This can be seen in both the technical thinking that underpins the formulation of policy goals based on situational resources and the capacity to make reasonable adjustments in response to real circumstances during policy execution. Additionally, it compensates for structural flaws because things are made more challenging at all levels under a pressurized system and there is a lack of rural governance resources. In order to resolve internal disputes between various duties, this strategic flexibility makes use of the resources within primary-level groups and communities as well as creating new cutting-edge power strategies and unofficial ways that are different from the bureaucratic system. It is clear from looking through the publicly available National Rural Governance Leading Cases that there is a perfect inverse relationship between the state's limited embedding and the adaptable operation of rural communities. Even if modern rural governance requires the presence of the state, different regions' experience of most typical situations is based on their own local circumstances, which are continually studied and improved through practice. As the last mile of the implementation of many policies, primary-level activity is the front line of many endeavors. The rigid demands of national policies must be coupled with the challenging issues of rural governance in a flexible manner if rural governance is to achieve its full potential. Meaningless formalism and bureaucracy must be broken down, problem orientation must be maintained, and a certain amount of discretion must be granted to rural governance.

Under highly centralized organizational authority, the central leadership's decisions must ensure sufficient policy pressure, but the internal logic of the organizational strategy is to provide sufficient legitimacy space and policy support for rural areas in order to ensure effective implementation at the lower levels. Additionally, rural areas are able to evaluate their own implementation capacity based on long-term experience, benefiting from the overall adjustment between policy pressure and implementation capacity. They also exhibit a high degree of strategic flexibility and diversity, which helps them solve governance issues and raise the level of governance. Due to the size and diversity of China's primary-level regions, top-level designs targeted at primary-level governance are unable to plan all the specifics of various reforms or demand that the pace of reform be uniform throughout all regions. While top-level design identifies the direction and guiding principles, each location frequently needs to take its own path. Thus, the key to primary-level governance reform is to manage the relationship between the part and the big picture well, support local pilot units to develop new experiences for overall reform based on local circumstances, and establish institutionalized promotion mechanisms to improve the typicality and replicability of pilot reforms.

### *3. Seeking unity in stability and efficiency*

The method of focusing on examples and using typical demonstration models to play a role in guiding interests and policies is preferred by national governance for policy mobilization. It involves starting with one example to encourage overall development, as can be shown by studying the published National Rural Governance Leading Cases. However, the top-

down “starting with one example and then expanding upon it” procedure that fits precisely into the “high-level promotion layered response” paradigm does not totally describe the rural governance reform. This is because of the dual logic of national governance embedding and local governance efficacy. Primary-level exploration is a trial-and-error process from pilot exploration through expansion, and both unsuccessful lessons and successful experiences are significant assets. If an exploration is successful, other places can learn from the successful experience through widespread sharing. In the event that the exploration is unsuccessful, essential issues can be discovered, lessons can be distilled, and bottlenecks can be identified to avoid diversions. The effectiveness of overall governance can be increased by improving overall planning and systematic integration of reform programs in various fields, leveraging primary-level innovation as a source of vitality, creating a unified and fused environment for pilot experiences, and achieving horizontal linkage and coordinated promotion.

#### *4. Seeking unity in flexibility and regularity*

A look at the publicly available National Rural Governance Leading Cases makes it clear that current rural governance reforms typically make use of mobile information technology, such as 5G, big data, cloud computing, the Internet of Things, blockchain, and artificial intelligence, which promote precise governance, refined services, and intelligent management and significantly increase the governance effectiveness of rural areas with the help of technological innovations. In fact, current technical means may effectively accomplish planning and development, data resource integration, application scenario development, and real-time and omnipresent governance, which can have a multiplier effect in important sectors like poverty alleviation. However, it is also obvious that the majority of China’s developed regions in the central and eastern regions, including Zhejiang, Shanghai, and Guangdong, have rural areas with intelligent rural governance. Digital information technology has not yet become widely used in the underdeveloped rural areas in the west, and the efficacy of rural governance differs significantly between the central and western regions and the eastern region. Data empowerment should fully consider the coordinated development of the central and western regions, follow the adaptability and regularity of governance method innovation, and be better integrated into the overall development of national governance. Although the National Rural Governance Leading Cases cover governance models from various regions, involving innovations at the municipal and county levels as well as explorations and practice at the town and village levels, the coordinated development of the central and western regions should be taken into full consideration when promoting data empowerment. The flexibility and regularity of new governance approaches should be followed so as to be better integrated into the general development of national governance modernization.

#### *5. Seeking unity in fullness and coordination*

Reviewing the publicly available National Rural Governance Leading Cases reveals that current governance reforms in rural areas place a greater emphasis on collaboration, actively involving multiple stakeholders, coordinating their interests, promoting consultation and co-

governance, and ultimately realizing the beneficial interaction of governmental governance, social regulation, and resident self-governance. Building rural governance communities in the changing historical circumstances necessitates encouraging the extensive, multilevel, and institutionalized growth of consultative democracy to enable efficient governance. Giving farmers their due consideration, fostering the inherent strength of rural governance, and empowering them to gain the most from involvement in these processes are the most crucial things to accomplish. To create a social governance model based on collaboration, participation, and common interests, efforts should be made to make it possible for all villagers to take advantage of the convenience of rural public services, to feel that their legal rights, interests, and obligations are being fairly upheld, to promote the collaboration, participation, and common interests of all rural villagers, and to ensure that development offers greater benefits to all the people in a fair way.

## **V. Conclusion**

This paper analyzes and summarizes 123 National Rural Governance Leading Cases that have been successively released by the Central Rural Affairs Office and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs since 2019, based on the interaction logic between the top-level design of policy pilots and primary-level practices, in order to see what they are like, how they lead, and how effective they are. The cultivation, selection, and promotion of the National Rural Governance Leading Cases serve primarily to fully exploit their leading and demonstrative roles, study rural governance laws, investigate rural governance paths and methods, and advance the development of the national system and capacity for rural governance. This systemic mechanism, which transforms typical practice and micro-level pilot exploration into top-level design, continuously promotes the accurate and effective integration of national will and governance affairs and maximizes the enormous advantage of Party-building leadership in terms of governance effectiveness.

Rural governance reform experiments are also small-scale, hands-on investigations. Rural governance, in contrast to macro-level national governance, is the distinct practice of overseeing public affairs in localized areas. Each village has its own governance traits because rural areas in different regions have varied development situations. Therefore, initial pilot reforms are implemented on a modest scale, exploring the governing road by feeling the stones to cross the river, exploring no man's land and adjusting to local realities. The interplay between pilot and expansion is constructive once the techniques have gained maturity and consensus, at which point they are promoted for other regions to learn from. This method of spreading ideas from one place to another, from one person to everyone, and from one thing to everything gives full play not only to the innovative, pioneering, breakthrough and demonstration roles of pilot projects in overall reform, but also to the leading, planning, and guiding role of top-level design in primary-level governance practices. This not only helps

people understand the laws of governance better and cut down on the cost of trial and error, but also increases the effectiveness of governance.

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