

# The Functional Evolution and Contemporary Value of Rural Rules and Agreements in the Transformation of Rural Society

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**Abstract:** The structural transformation of rural society is an important component of China's modernization process. As an endogenous governance resource in rural areas, the functional evolution of rural rules and regulations is deeply coupled with the changes in rural society. This article takes the changes in rural society as the main line, and uses literature research, historical analysis, and case analysis methods to systematically sort out the functional transformation trajectory of rural rules and regulations from traditional customs and etiquette society to modern legal society. It analyzes the functional transformation logic from ethical constraints and order maintenance under clan leadership to grassroots governance, cultural inheritance, livelihood services, and conflict resolution under diversified co-governance. Combining the practice of rural revitalization and modernization of grassroots governance, this article elaborates on the contemporary value of rural regulations and agreements in connecting national governance with rural reality, safeguarding the roots of local culture, and promoting comprehensive rural development. It identifies the practical difficulties faced in their formulation and implementation, legitimacy connection, and adaptability to the times, and proposes an optimization path that standardizes the formulation process, strengthens the connection of the rule of law, empowers digitalization, improves the execution mechanism, and emphasizes both inheritance and innovation. Research has shown that the functional transformation of rural rules and regulations is the result of the synergistic effect of social structure transformation, governance demand upgrading, and policy guidance. Its creative transformation and innovative development can provide important support for the modernization of grassroots governance and the construction of beautiful rural areas.

**Keywords:** changes in rural society; township regulations and agreements; functional evolution; grassroots governance; rural revitalization connection of the rule of law

## 1. Introduction

As the core carrier of traditional Chinese society, the structural transformation of rural society is an important manifestation of the modernization process. With the acceleration of urbanization, increased population mobility, and weakened clan ties, the traditional "acquaintance society" of ritual governance is gradually loosening, and rural governance is facing the practical challenges of diversified interest patterns and diverse governance needs[1]. As an endogenous governance resource in rural areas, rural rules and regulations are important carriers of self-regulation, self-management, and self-service in local society. They carry the dual functions of traditional ethical education and grassroots governance, and their functional evolution is deeply coupled with the changes in local society.

At present, the deepening implementation of the rural revitalization strategy and the steady progress of modernization of grassroots governance construction have activated traditional governance wisdom, achieved creative transformation and innovative development of rural rules and regulations, and become important paths to solve rural governance problems. Existing research has explored the historical evolution and governance functions of rural regulations and agreements, but there are still shortcomings in the study of the internal logic and adaptability of their functional changes from the perspective of rural social changes, and a lack of systematic construction of functional optimization paths.

Based on this, this article takes the changes in rural society as the logical mainline, sorts out the

functional evolution trajectory of rural rules and regulations from traditional to modern, analyzes the core causes and characteristics of their evolution, explains their contemporary value in rural governance, and proposes optimization paths in combination with practical difficulties, in order to enrich the theoretical system of rural social governance and folk law research, and provide theoretical support and practical reference for the modernization of grassroots governance and the construction of beautiful countryside.

## **2. Core concepts, theoretical foundations, and characteristics of rural social changes**

### **2.1 Definition of core concepts**

The rural society referred to in this article is a familiar social form formed based on agricultural civilization, with clan and neighborhood relationships as the bond and ritual norms as the governance core. Its core characteristics are reflected in the "hierarchical pattern" proposed by Fei Xiaotong, which means that social relationships radiate outward from the center of the individual, forming an ethical order with different degrees of closeness, stability, and ethical standards [2]. The transformation of rural society refers to the systematic and holistic transformation of traditional rural society in terms of social structure, production methods, values, and governance models under the impact of modernization. Its core essence is the transformation from a "ritual society" to a "legal society", from a closed rural area to an open rural area, and from a clan centered approach to an individual and collective symbiotic approach. Essentially, it is the reconstruction of rural governance logic and social operation mechanisms.

Township rules and regulations are a general term for the behavioral norms and moral standards formulated by members of rural society through spontaneous agreements or democratic negotiation procedures in long-term production and life practices, used to regulate the behavior of villagers, adjust rural social relations, maintain rural public order, and inherit local ethics [3]. They have the triple attributes of autonomy, morality, and quasi rule of law. Traditional rural regulations and agreements are centered around clan ethics, emphasizing moral constraints and order maintenance; Modern rural rules and regulations are based on village autonomy, connecting national rule of law with rural reality, and serving multiple functions such as governance, service, and cultural inheritance. There are significant differences in their connotations, carriers, and operational logic, but both are important manifestations of endogenous governance resources in rural areas.

### **2.2 Theoretical basis**

This article mainly relies on three theoretical systems to provide support for the construction of the research framework. Firstly, the theory of ritual order and legal order, as proposed by Fei Xiaotong in "Rural China," deeply explains the ethical basis of rural rules and agreements in traditional rural society, that is, relying on ritual and customs norms to achieve rural self-governance without the need for state coercive intervention; Weber's theory of "legal authority" provides a theoretical basis for the transformation of modern rural regulations and civil agreements, revealing its logic of transition from ethical constraints to the rule of law, and clarifying the core requirements of modern rural regulations and civil agreements that need to be in line with the national legal system.

Secondly, social change theory, Durkheim's theory of social division of labor, and Parsons' theory of structural functionalism provide a perspective for analyzing the impact of rural social change on the function of rural regulations and civil contracts. They point out that the transformation of social structure will inevitably lead to changes in governance needs, thereby promoting the adaptive transformation of rural regulations and civil contract functions, and the two exhibit a deeply coupled relationship. Thirdly, the modernization theory of grassroots governance emphasizes diverse governance, legal empowerment, and precise services, providing core guidance for interpreting the contemporary value of rural rules and regulations and constructing functional optimization paths. It clarifies the important role of rural rules and regulations as the "soft law" carrier of grassroots governance in connecting national governance with rural reality.

### **2.3 Stage division and core characteristics of rural social changes**

Based on the actual development of Chinese rural society, its transformation process can be divided into three core stages, each stage presenting distinct differentiated characteristics. The first stage was the traditional rural society (ancient early modern period), which relied on agricultural production as the core livelihood. Clan forces dominated rural governance, and the social structure showed a high degree of

closure and stability. Population mobility was extremely low, and rural operations relied on ritual and customs order. Township rules and regulations were important tools for clan governance, with the core role being to maintain clan ethics and daily order in the countryside.

The second stage is the modern transformation period (late modern period - before the reform and opening up). Influenced by the impact of war and modernization process, the traditional rural social structure began to loosen, clan power gradually weakened, and state power began to intervene in rural governance. The concept of modern rule of law was initially spread, and rural rules and regulations showed the characteristics of "traditional and modern interweaving". Functionally, they began to extend from simple ethical constraints to public affairs management, but they still did not break free from the constraints of traditional customs and rituals. The third stage is the modern rural society (since the reform and opening up), with accelerated urbanization, frequent cross regional population mobility, diversified transformation of rural industrial structure, gradual dissolution of the traditional acquaintance society pattern, diversified characteristics of interest pattern, significant improvement of villagers' legal awareness, and the transformation of rural governance needs from "order maintenance" to "diversified services", providing a realistic context for the modern functional transformation of rural rules and regulations.

### **3. The functional evolution, contemporary value, and practical difficulties of rural rules and agreements in the transformation of rural society**

#### ***3.1 Functional evolution trajectory and intrinsic logic***

The functional evolution of rural regulations and agreements is coupled with the synchronous evolution of rural social changes. Combined with the characteristics of the three stages of social change, its functional evolution can be divided into three progressive stages. In traditional rural society, village rules and regulations are guided by clan ethics, with core functions focusing on ethical education, order maintenance, and mutual assistance and cohesion. By regulating the behavior of clan members, mediating neighborhood disputes, advocating mutual assistance among neighbors, and maintaining the stable operation of a closed acquaintance society, their functions have strong ethical dependence and clan dominance, which is an important concrete manifestation of the traditional ritual governance order.

In the period of modern transformation, with the weakening of clan power and the intervention of state power, the functions of rural rules and agreements have undergone initial transformation. The governance subject has shifted from "clan led" to "government civilian coordination", and the focus of functions has been added to public affairs management, covering rural security maintenance, public facility repair, and other contents. Gradually breaking through the limitations of traditional ethical constraints, but still not deviating from the core framework of traditional customs and traditions, presenting a transitional feature of "interweaving traditional and modern functions". In modern rural society, the upgrading of rural rules and regulations has achieved comprehensive functional upgrading, forming a diversified functional system of grassroots governance, cultural inheritance, livelihood services, and conflict resolution. It has transformed from a "moral constraint tool" to a "three governance integration carrier", and its internal transformation logic is reflected in the core driving force of social structure transformation, the direct driving force of governance demand upgrading, and the important guarantee of policy guidance and support. The three work together to promote the adaptation of rural rules and regulations to the needs of rural governance.

#### ***3.2 The contemporary value of township regulations and civil agreements***

In the context of rural revitalization and modernization of grassroots governance, rural rules and regulations, as endogenous governance resources in rural areas, demonstrate distinct contemporary value. Firstly, it is an important support for the modernization of grassroots governance. Rural regulations and agreements can connect national laws with rural realities, compensate for the mismatch of national rule of law in rural governance, reduce the cost of grassroots governance, promote the deep integration of moral governance, autonomy, and rule of law, and build a diversified governance pattern in rural areas. Secondly, it is the core carrier of rural cultural inheritance and revitalization, carrying the traditional virtues and cultural genes of the countryside. By regulating the behavior of villagers, advocating civilized rural customs, safeguarding the roots of rural culture, alleviating the dilemma of rural cultural hollowing out, and enhancing the cultural identity and sense of belonging of villagers. Thirdly, as a practical tool for the rural revitalization strategy, rural regulations and agreements can optimize the rural business

environment and ensure high-quality development of rural industries by regulating land transfer, industrial cooperation, and other behaviors; At the same time, clarify the ecological protection responsibilities of villagers, promote the cultivation of green production and lifestyle, and assist in the construction of ecologically livable rural areas. Fourthly, the spiritual bond that unites rural communities. Against the backdrop of frequent population mobility and the dissolution of familiar societies, rural regulations and agreements clarify the rights and obligations of villagers, consolidate governance consensus, rebuild rural community awareness, and solve the fragmented problem of rural governance.

### ***3.3 Current challenges faced***

Although rural regulations and agreements play an important role in contemporary rural governance, they still face many practical difficulties in practice due to the rapid changes in local society. At the level of formulation and implementation, some township rules and regulations are led by village cadres, and the democratic participation of villagers is insufficient, resulting in a lack of representativeness and pertinence of the provisions, and there are problems of formalized content and blindly copying policy documents, with weak operability; At the same time, there is a lack of sound supervision and reward and punishment mechanisms, and some rural regulations and agreements have become "empty words" with low implementation efficiency.

At the level of legality and normativity, some provisions of rural regulations and civil agreements conflict with national laws and administrative regulations, resulting in issues such as "exceeding authority constraints" and "setting penalties for private activities", and the boundary of legality is blurred; And the connection with the national legal system is not smooth, the governance logic is chaotic, and it is difficult to achieve the complementary coexistence of "soft law" and "hard law". At the level of adaptability to the times, the updating of rural regulations and agreements lags behind, making it difficult to cope with new scenarios and problems such as rural new formats, population mobility, and network governance; At the same time, digital transformation lags behind, lacking efficient digital management and execution methods, making it difficult to adapt to the efficiency needs of modern rural governance, and restricting the full realization of its contemporary value.

## **4. Suggestions for optimizing the functions of rural regulations and agreements**

### ***4.1 Standardize the establishment of procedures and strengthen the foundation of democracy***

Democracy is the core attribute of rural regulations and agreements, and it is also a prerequisite for gaining the recognition of villagers and ensuring their effectiveness in implementation. It is necessary to establish standardized procedures, strengthen participation guarantees, fully safeguard the participation, expression, and supervision rights of villagers, and solve problems such as formalism and insufficient representativeness in the formulation process. To clarify the full process norms of democratic participation, a closed-loop development mechanism of "research and collection draft drafting discussion and modification voting approval public announcement and effectiveness" should be established. During the research and collection stage, various forms such as village representative symposiums, home visits, online questionnaires, etc. should be widely collected to collect the demands of villagers in production and life, neighborhood interaction, public affairs, etc. During the draft drafting stage, the village "two committees" should take the lead, and a drafting group composed of village representatives, legal advisors, and township elites should be formed to draft the draft based on the research results, avoiding unilateral leadership by village cadres. During the discussion and modification stage, all villagers or village representatives should organize multiple rounds of discussions to refine and improve the terms, absorb reasonable opinions, and strictly follow the relevant provisions of village autonomy during the voting approval stage. The draft can only be drafted with the consent of more than two-thirds of the members of the village meeting or village representative. Through, the final version will be publicly announced on platforms such as the village committee bulletin board and rural WeChat groups during the effective stage of public announcement. After the expiration of the period without objection, it will officially take effect and be subject to supervision; At the same time, we will strengthen the mechanism for ensuring the participation of villagers, and adopt methods such as on-site explanations, online voting, and delegated representation to protect the participation rights of special groups such as elderly villagers and migrant workers. We will establish a regular revision mechanism every 2-3 years, and update the terms based on changes in rural society, policy adjustments, and changes in villagers' needs, in order to solve the problem of content formalization and detachment from reality from the source.

#### ***4.2 Strengthen the connection between the rule of law and clarify the boundaries of legitimacy***

Legitimacy is a prerequisite for the effective operation of rural regulations and civil agreements. It is necessary to strengthen the connection with the national legal system, clarify the boundaries of its legitimacy, resolve conflicts between provisions, and overcome issues such as exceeding authority constraints, in order to achieve the complementary coexistence of "soft law" and "hard law". Firstly, establish a regular legal review mechanism, incorporating the legality review of rural regulations and agreements into the key work of grassroots rule of law construction, clarifying the review subject, review content, and review process. Led by the township judicial office, a review team consisting of legal advisors and legal experts will conduct a comprehensive review of the procedures and content of the formulation of township rules and regulations. The team will focus on investigating whether there are any provisions that conflict with the national constitution, laws, and administrative regulations, as well as whether there are any unauthorized content such as "private penalties" and "restrictions on personal freedom". The team will promptly provide modification suggestions for any problems found during the review, urge the village committee to rectify within a specified period of time, and ensure that the township rules and regulations are legal and compliant.

Secondly, promote the coordinated connection between rural regulations and agreements, national laws, village regulations and agreements, and village autonomy regulations, clarify that the positioning of rural regulations and agreements is to supplement national laws, focus on areas that are not covered by national laws and urgently needed for rural governance, such as neighborhood dispute mediation, rural civilization construction, public affairs management, etc., and avoid duplication or conflict with national laws; At the same time, we need to clarify the relationship between rural regulations and village agreements, as well as village autonomy regulations, and clarify their respective adjustment scope and rights and responsibilities, forming a governance system that is guided by national laws, supplemented by rural regulations and village agreements, and guaranteed by village autonomy. Thirdly, we will strengthen the promotion and guidance of the rule of law. Through various forms such as rural rule of law lectures, legal education bulletin boards, and new media push notifications, we will popularize the legality requirements and relevant legal knowledge of rural rules and regulations to villagers, guide them to establish the concept of "formulating, abiding by, and executing according to law", and enhance the legal literacy of village cadres and village representatives to ensure that the formulation and implementation of rural rules and regulations are always carried out within the framework of the rule of law.

#### ***4.3 Digital empowerment to enhance governance efficiency***

In the face of the trend of digital transformation in modern rural areas, it is necessary to empower the management and implementation of rural rules and regulations with digitalization, solve problems such as digital lag and low governance efficiency, and enhance their adaptability to the times and governance effectiveness. We need to build a digital management platform for rural regulations and agreements, integrate existing digital governance resources in rural areas, and establish an online platform that integrates public disclosure, publicity, supervision, implementation, and feedback. This will enable online public disclosure, clause inquiry, and feedback of rural regulations and agreements. At the same time, we will establish an online ledger for the implementation status, record and dynamically manage the compliance and violation of rural regulations and agreements by villagers in real time, and facilitate village cadres to timely grasp the situation and rectify problems. At the same time, adapting to the digital governance scenario, supplementing the relevant provisions of rural digital governance in the township rules and regulations, clarifying the rights and obligations of villagers in network use, digital information security, and digital facility maintenance, using big data and artificial intelligence technology to analyze and execute data, accurately identifying weak governance links and core demands of villagers, and providing data support for the revision and optimization of township rules and regulations. In addition, supervision and reporting entrances will be set up in rural WeChat groups and digital platforms, and digital supervision and feedback channels will be established to facilitate villagers' supervision and reporting, and to provide opinions, forming a closed-loop mechanism of "online supervision and offline rectification", effectively improving governance efficiency.

#### ***4.4 Improve the execution mechanism and strengthen the effectiveness of constraints***

The insufficient effectiveness of implementation is a prominent dilemma faced by current rural regulations and civil agreements. It is necessary to improve the implementation mechanism and

strengthen the effectiveness of constraints to promote the transformation of rural regulations and civil agreements from "empty paper" to "effective and efficient" governance tools. Firstly, establish a diverse and collaborative execution mechanism, clarify the execution responsibilities of village committees, village representatives, township elites, volunteers and other groups, and form an execution pattern of "village committees leading, village representatives supervising, township elites leading, and all staff participating"; The village "two committees" are responsible for organizing, coordinating, and supervising the implementation of township rules and regulations, while village representatives are responsible for daily supervision and dispute mediation. Township elites play a leading role in demonstrating and encouraging villagers to consciously abide by township rules and regulations, forming a multi-party collaborative and joint management work force.

Secondly, a sound incentive and restraint system with clear rewards and punishments should be established, linking the implementation of rural regulations and agreements with the vital interests of villagers, clarifying the specific standards and implementation processes for rewards and punishments, and ensuring that rewards and punishments are based on evidence and fair and just. In terms of rewards, villagers who consciously abide by township rules and regulations, actively participate in rural governance, and practice civilized rural customs will be given spiritual and material rewards, such as selecting "civilized villagers" and "honest farmers", giving point rewards, material subsidies, etc., to play a demonstrative and leading role; In terms of punishment, for behaviors that violate township rules and agreements, criticism and education, notification of criticism, deduction of points, cancellation of evaluation qualifications, and other methods will be adopted according to the severity of the circumstances. If the circumstances are serious, they will be promptly transferred to relevant departments for handling to avoid the phenomenon of "law not punishing the public" and strengthen the binding effect of township rules and agreements. Thirdly, improve the dispute mediation mechanism by combining rural regulations and civil agreements with people's mediation and judicial mediation, and establish a "rural regulations and civil agreements+mediation" conflict resolution model. For neighborhood disputes, property disputes, etc. caused by violations of rural regulations and civil agreements, priority should be given to mediation through rural regulations and civil agreements to reduce the cost of conflict resolution, improve the efficiency of conflict resolution, and enhance villagers' sense of identity and credibility with rural regulations and civil agreements.

#### ***4.5 Emphasizing both inheritance and innovation, activating cultural values***

As an important carrier of local culture, the optimization process of village rules and regulations should adhere to the equal emphasis on inheritance and innovation. It is necessary not only to tap the cultural essence of traditional village rules, but also to integrate modern governance concepts, activate its cultural value, and achieve the deep integration of traditional governance wisdom and modern governance practice. It is necessary to dig deeply into the cultural essence of traditional village rules and regulations, organize professionals to systematically sort out and study the text of traditional village rules and regulations, refine the core values such as honesty and friendliness, mutual aid among neighbors, and integrate them into the provisions of modern village rules and regulations. At the same time, it is necessary to integrate local traditional customs and intangible cultural heritage into them in combination with regional cultural characteristics, create a village rules and regulations with regional characteristics, and enhance its cultural appeal and villagers' cultural identity. At the same time, we will promote innovation in the form and content of rural regulations and agreements, and combine them with the needs of modern rural governance. We will add new provisions for industrial development, ecological protection, digital governance, etc., to enhance their adaptability to the times; Formally breaking the limitations of traditional text, using forms such as graphics, short videos, etc. that villagers enjoy to promote, enhancing readability and dissemination. In addition, cultural dissemination is strengthened through various forms such as rural cultural halls and folk activities, guiding villagers to internalize the requirements of rural rules and regulations into conscious behavior. This not only plays a governance role, but also realizes the value of cultural inheritance, and helps to revitalize rural culture.

## **5. Conclusion**

This article takes the changes in rural society as the logical mainline, systematically explores the functional evolution trajectory, contemporary values, and practical difficulties of rural regulations and civil agreements, and proposes targeted optimization paths. The core conclusions are as follows: rural society has undergone structural transformation from a traditional ritual and customs society to a modern legal society, from a closed society to an open society, promoting the transformation of rural regulations

and civil agreements from ethical constraints under clan leadership to governance services under diversified co governance. Its functional evolution is deeply coupled with social changes, experiencing a single function of ethical education, order maintenance, and mutual assistance and cohesion in the traditional period, to a transitional function of government civilian cooperation in the modern transformation period, and then to a complete transformation of the diversified functional system of grassroots governance, cultural inheritance, livelihood services, and conflict resolution in modern society.

In the context of rural revitalization and modernization of grassroots governance, rural rules and regulations, as endogenous governance resources in rural areas, have concentrated their contemporary value as important supports for the modernization of grassroots governance, core carriers of rural cultural inheritance, practical tools for rural revitalization, and spiritual bonds for the cohesion of rural communities. They provide important support for solving modern rural governance problems and activating rural development vitality. At the same time, the current rural regulations and agreements still face many challenges in terms of formulation and implementation, legal connection, and adaptability to the times, which restrict their full function.

The optimization path proposed in this article, which includes the establishment of standardized procedures, strengthening the connection between the rule of law, digital empowerment, improving execution mechanisms, and emphasizing both inheritance and innovation, can effectively solve the above difficulties and promote the creative transformation and innovative development of rural rules and regulations. Due to limitations in research conditions, the scope of empirical research in this article is limited, and the study of the differential evolution of rural rules and regulations in different regions is not in-depth enough. Future research can expand the scope of empirical research, focus on new trends such as rural digitization and urban-rural integration, deeply explore the adaptation path of rural rules and regulations, further improve the research system of local social governance and folk law, and provide more targeted theoretical support and practical reference for the modernization of grassroots governance and the construction of beautiful rural areas.

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