

Research on the Role and Practical Path of New Local Elites in Digital Village Construction

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Abstract: Digital village construction is not only a strategic direction for rural revitalization but also a significant component in building a digital China. As a group of elite figures in rural society, new local elites play an increasingly prominent role in promoting rural governance. This paper examines the role of new local elites in digital village construction and addresses existing challenges such as misconceptions about new local elites, cultural integration difficulties, low social recognition, ambiguous responsibilities, and a lack of incentive mechanisms. The study proposes practical pathways, including fostering a culture that values new local elites, clarifying roles and responsibilities, nurturing talent, and improving incentive measures.

Keywords: New Local Elites; Digital Village; Challenges; Practical Pathways

1. Introduction

Digital village construction is an inherent aspect of agricultural and rural modernization driven by the application of networking, informatization, and digitization in rural economic and social development, as well as by farmers' growing proficiency in modern information skills. New local elites, as influential figures in rural society, possess a deep-rooted connection to their communities, a wealth of social resources, and extensive social influence. In digital village construction, they can serve as vital bridges, linking government, businesses, farmers, and other stakeholders to promote the widespread adoption and application of digital technologies in rural areas. Moreover, new local elites can leverage their professional knowledge and experience to provide intellectual support and advisory services for digital village initiatives, thereby advancing modern governance systems and capabilities in rural areas.

As digital village construction progresses, the role of new local elites becomes increasingly significant. However, to fully harness their potential and ensure practical outcomes in digital village construction, further exploration and practice are necessary. Investigating the practical paths for new local elites in digital village construction can help identify current issues and gaps, enabling targeted solutions and recommendations that strongly support the advancement of digital villages. Additionally, such research can promote the healthy development of new local elites, thereby contributing to the prosperity and stability of rural society.

2. Literature Review

The term "local elite" first appeared in the Eastern Han dynasty, describing individuals respected and admired by their community for their moral integrity and talent. It referred to either influential officials or local gentry who held a high reputation in rural society ^[1]. With social changes over time, the concept of "local elite" has evolved, giving rise to the "new local elite" — individuals in contemporary rural settings who demonstrate a public spirit and a deep love for their hometowns, often possessing extensive knowledge, skills, and a broadened cultural perspective. Unlike traditional local elites, the new local elite not only embody traditional values like attachment to their homeland and moral character but also bring modern knowledge, skills, and a new cultural outlook. With strong moral character and appeal, they contribute significantly to rural revitalization by offering valuable advice and playing a key role in village governance ^[2]. As a unique emerging group, the new local elite are characterized by strong individual competencies, deep familiarity with local conditions, and sustained involvement in governance ^[3].

An overview of the existing literature reveals that researchers have primarily focused on the role of the new local elite in rural governance and the issues encountered in the process. New local elites

contribute to rural economic development, foster thriving industries, rebuild the rural moral framework, promote a positive local culture, and assist in improving rural governance systems [4]. However, challenges such as insufficient platform development, unclear role positioning, and unfulfilled potential in moral leadership and influence persist in the involvement of new local elites in governance [5]. In light of this, this paper explores the roles and challenges of the new local elite in digital village construction and proposes practical paths for their participation.

3. Role of the New Local Elite in Digital Village Construction

As an essential force in talent support for rural revitalization in the new era, the new local elite play multiple roles in digital village construction.

3.1 Strategic Planners

The new local elite lead the planning and policy formulation in digital village construction. Equipped with modern knowledge, skills, and a forward-looking cultural perspective, they can devise digital development plans that align with rural characteristics. These elites, with their extensive experience and visionary insights, can foresee trends in digital village construction and provide scientifically based policy recommendations. In the initial stages of digital village projects, the new local elite play an active role in planning to ensure the feasibility and sustainability of initiatives.

3.2 Technology Promoters

The new local elite play a crucial role in promoting and applying digital technologies. They introduce advanced digital technologies that drive innovation in agriculture, education, healthcare, and other sectors. In agriculture, for example, they can advocate for smart agricultural techniques that increase productivity and product quality, injecting vitality into rural revitalization. In education, they facilitate online education platforms, offering quality resources to rural schools and helping to narrow the urban-rural education gap. In healthcare, they support the establishment of telemedicine and health management platforms, improving rural healthcare services.

3.3 Cultural Custodians

The new local elite play a significant role in preserving, passing on, and innovating rural culture. Through the inheritance of agrarian traditions, they ensure the lasting presence of local culture and nostalgia in rural areas. By leveraging digital technologies, they can document and showcase rural cultural heritage, such as establishing local history museums and digital libraries, allowing rural culture to be preserved and celebrated online. Moreover, they promote innovation in rural culture by using digital platforms to spread local culture, thus enhancing its attractiveness and influence.

3.4 Social Mobilizers

The new local elite possess strong social mobilization capabilities, which are crucial in digital village construction. They mobilize social resources through various channels, strengthening community cohesion. Firstly, with their influence and credibility, they attract wider social attention and support, securing funding, technology, and talent for digital village construction. Secondly, they organize community activities that increase residents' sense of involvement and belonging, fostering a social governance structure characterized by shared participation and shared benefits. Lastly, they leverage digital technologies to create community communication platforms, facilitating information exchange and emotional bonding among residents, thereby enhancing overall community cohesion.

4. Challenges Facing New Local Elites in Digital Village Construction

Although new local elites play an important role in digital village construction, they face several challenges.

4.1 Villagers' Misunderstandings of New Local Elites

With the development of rural governance, the structure and values within rural communities are

undergoing profound changes. Against this background, the traditional "acquaintance society" is gradually transforming into a more individualistic and profit-oriented "semi-acquaintance society" [6]. As a result, villagers tend to focus more on material and economic interests, often viewing new local elites as leaders in economic development while overlooking their role in moral governance, leading to a lack of an atmosphere that values and respects virtue. Furthermore, the identity of new local elites lacks institutional guarantees. Unlike village officials, they do not have legally endowed authority, which causes villagers to question their voice and decision-making power, thereby affecting their enthusiasm and effectiveness in digital village governance and construction.

4.2 Difficulty in Cultural Integration and Low Social Recognition

Most new local elites are well-educated urban professionals whose lifestyle and mindset differ significantly from rural residents. This gap can lead to cultural integration challenges in digital village construction. New local elites often need to invest substantial time and energy in adapting to rural culture and establishing good communication and cooperation with local residents. In certain rural areas, the arrival of new local elites has not always been warmly welcomed. Some local officials or villagers may see them as outsiders or even a threat or challenge, resulting in a reserved or skeptical attitude toward their efforts and contributions. Such misunderstandings and biases inevitably dampen the motivation and enthusiasm of new local elites, hindering their effectiveness in digital village construction.

4.3 Ambiguities in New Local Elites' Roles and Responsibilities

New local elites serve as the "lighthouses of wisdom" in digital village governance, acting as both a think tank for rural modernization and a bridge linking tradition with modernity, and connecting the government with the public. They bring fresh insights into rural governance with their deep-rooted affection for their hometowns, extensive social experience, and visionary perspectives, becoming an indispensable force. However, their role is not entirely clear. They are neither direct leaders of rural governance—those bearing daily governance responsibilities—nor are they entirely detached third-party observers. Instead, they occupy a subtle and complex "gray zone" between the two. This ambiguous positioning between formal and informal roles grants them flexibility and innovation space but also carries risks of overstepping or misalignment. This ambiguity in roles and responsibilities often hinders the enthusiasm and active involvement of new local elites. Without a clear understanding of their role, they may lose direction within the intricate overlap of roles and responsibilities. Consequently, the bridge and think tank functions that they are supposed to fulfill may become compromised, potentially undermining the momentum and effectiveness of digital village governance.

4.4 Disorganized Management and Lack of Effective Supervision and Incentives

The diverse backgrounds of new local elites add complexity to their organizational management. Currently, the organizational management system for new local elites is inadequate, lacking clear internal division of labor and rigorous assessment and evaluation measures. When faced with public benefits and personal desires, some may be tempted by money and power, prioritizing personal interests over collective ones. In digital village governance, they might use their economic and political resources to infringe on villagers' rights or engage in unfair competition. Therefore, it is essential to establish effective guidance and supervision mechanisms to regulate the behavior of new local elites and ensure the smooth progression of digital village construction. Additionally, many new local elites participate in digital village construction driven by their deep attachment to their hometowns, with little external motivation. Thus, explicit external incentives for their involvement in rural governance are notably scarce [7].

5. Practical Pathways for New Local Elites in Digital Village Construction

Digital village construction is an essential pathway for promoting rural modernization and revitalization. As an emerging group, new local elites can play a significant role in digital village construction, making it crucial to establish effective pathways for their involvement.

5.1 Cultivate New Local Elite Culture to Enhance Cultural Identity

Cultivating the culture of new local elites and enhancing cultural identity is vital for rural revitalization. This approach not only stimulates the inherent vitality of rural culture but also unites the

community to collectively drive prosperity. First, it is essential to establish platforms for interaction between new local elites and rural residents to promote cultural integration. Creating a consultative platform for these elites can enhance standardized procedures and expand their involvement in rural public affairs, including decision-making in public services, conflict resolution, and nurturing rural civility. Second, various media platforms, such as radio, television, the internet, and mobile apps, should be leveraged to promote awareness of local elite culture. By conducting campaigns like “In Search of New Local Elites,” organized by the Propaganda Department and cultural authorities, society can foster a supportive atmosphere that respects and encourages the contributions of these elites. Finally, digital tools can be utilized to disseminate rural culture effectively in the digital age. Through platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, and short video apps, accounts can be created to regularly share content related to new local elite culture. Advanced technologies like virtual reality and augmented reality can also bring rural culture to life in more vivid and accessible ways, attracting more interest in rural life and development.

5.2 Define the Responsibilities of New Local Elites and Cultivate Talent

As charismatic authorities with high credibility, extensive connections, and abundant resources, new local elites serve as a critical supplement to rural governance, expanding the scope of governance [8]. They should be clearly positioned as facilitators of rural development, preservers of rural culture, mediators of conflicts, and participants in rural governance. On one hand, their relationship with the village committees and residents must be well-defined. New local elites should assist village committees in executing their duties, convey national policies downwards, and relay villagers’ needs upwards, avoiding the usurpation of the committees’ functions. They should act as representatives of the villagers’ interests, fostering a sense of unity and collective rural advancement. On the other hand, it is crucial to focus on cultivating local digital talent. First, digital literacy and skills training should be provided to local entities like family farms and farmer cooperatives, boosting the digital competencies of local talent. Second, an innovative model for digital talent cultivation should be developed, encouraging close partnerships between universities, research institutions, and businesses. By establishing shared laboratories and talent pools, more highly skilled individuals with a focus on innovation can be attracted to and retained in digital village construction.

5.3 Improve Incentive Mechanisms to Encourage New Local Elites to Leverage Their Resources

Given the unique capacity of new local elites to address issues historically faced by rural areas, it is essential to create effective incentives to encourage them to fully utilize their resources. First, project-based involvement should be fostered. To maximize their impact on rural revitalization, it is crucial to ensure there are projects, platforms, and avenues available for their participation — in other words, providing “something to do” [9]. Based on the expertise and resources of new local elites, a series of specialized projects can be established in areas like rural revitalization, cultural preservation, educational support, and technological innovation, offering them opportunities to showcase their talents. Second, a comprehensive honors and recognition system should be developed. Awards such as the “New Local Elite Contribution Award” and the “Innovation in Technology Award” could be introduced to recognize outstanding contributions in rural revitalization, cultural preservation, and economic growth. By inscribing the names of contributing local elites on “honor boards” or “merit monuments,” a culture of recognition and motivation can be cultivated, inspiring more elites and residents to contribute to local development [10-15].

Conclusion

With the continuous development and popularization of digital technology, the role of new local elites in digital village construction cannot be overlooked, despite multiple challenges. By following effective practical pathways, their enthusiasm can be maximized. In the future, new local elites will likely focus more on the application and innovation of digital technology, further advancing digital village construction and development.

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