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Sustainable Endogenous Development Path Based on Rural Local Elite Governance Model: A Case Study of Xiamen

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Abstract: Under the background of the decline of rural society, the brain drain and the lack of endogenous development power are one of the main reasons restricting the development of rural China. Although village committees and village Party committees, as grassroots governance institutions, have played a great role in the process of rural revitalization, it is still difficult to achieve effective governance in rural areas with only top-down bureaucratic power. Therefore, activating the vitality of local elites and promoting the bottom-up development of rural areas is the internal driving force of rural revitalization. However, local elites have neither the institutional power of grassroots cadres nor the same prestige as clan elders. Therefore, for local elites to gain effective governance power, they must go through a process of empowerment, that is, gaining recognition from various forces within the village. Taking the Yuanqian Community of Xiamen city in Fujian Province as an example, this paper analyzes the formation process of local elite power. In this process, local elites gained the trinity of administrative, social and economic empowerment, and became the subject of governance power and the leader of rural revitalization. A new rural governance network with local elites as the core was constructed in the Yuanqian Community. Under the role of the new governance network, the material space and industrial space of the village have been transformed, thus promoting the revitalization of the countryside. At the same time, the village gradually expanded its influence and eventually became a model village in the field of rural revitalization. Due to its growing influence, the Yuanqian Community has achieved sustainable development. The case of Xiamen shows that local elites could gain effective governance power through an empowerment process. Then, by reconstructing the rural governance network, local elites could be the important social foundation of rural sustainable endogenous development.

Keywords: local elite; rural governance network; endogenous development; empowerment process; space transformation



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1. Introduction

Rural revitalization is an important research topic in the world, and rural governance is an important part of rural revitalization. The development of rural revitalization in China is relatively late. Since the 1970s, with the acceleration of China's industrialization and urbanization, the excessive loss of rural population, the disintegration of rural culture, and the lack of effective management within villages have led to a series of problems such as rural hollowing out [1–3]. Therefore, in the report of the 19th CPC National Congress, the Communist Party of China proposed the implementation of the strategy of rural revitalization, and formulated a policy of “industrial prosperity, ecological livability, rural civilization, effective governance, and affluent life”; among these concepts, “effective governance” is the basis of rural revitalization [4].

China is a highly centralized country with the influence of a long-term feudal system, making the status of a clan traditionally powerful in the countryside. At the same time, because most of the traditional villages are composed of enlarged families, the rural authority mainly comes from the family authority within the society [5]. Therefore, rural

governance rarely requires tangible institutions of power [6], while the maintenance of rural governance mainly depends on the code of conduct based on the clan ethics system. In other words, the countryside depends more on autonomy, and the governance of public affairs needs to establish its own rules [7]. For a long time, governance in the Chinese countryside mainly depended on rural elites, such as clan elders and retired officials back in their hometowns. This situation is summarized as “Imperial power does not fall to the county [8,9].” In the vast practice of rural revitalization, it can be found that the smooth exercise of power by a subject of rural governance is often less affected by institutional factors and more affected by moral, knowledge, financial, and other factors. Therefore, in rural revitalization, we can mobilize the enthusiasm of participants in rural development by creating a group of authoritative subjects trusted by the villagers [10].

Currently, with the progress of modernization, the state administrative power continues to extend to the countryside [11]. China’s rural grassroots governance has changed from folk clan power to a long-term political and administrative governance model [12]. However, the profound impact of the millennium agricultural civilization is difficult to easily change in just a few decades. Its reform work is extremely difficult, and the effect is also extremely eye-catching [6].

Combined with analyzing China’s social system factors, village party organizations, and village committees are the two major grassroots organizations in rural areas. The former is the grasp of the work of the party and the state at the grassroots level in rural areas [13], while the latter is an autonomous organization of villagers [14]; both promote the implementation of the party’s rural development policy and the stability of social order at the grassroots level in rural areas. This form of rural governance has certain institutional advantages. It can protect the rights of rural residents, mediate disputes, and maintain social order [15]. However, there are also practical obstacles. For example, practical problems include the shortage of rural governance talents, the low prestige of governance institutions, and the absence of villagers’ opinions [16–19].

There are two reasons for these practical governance problems. The first point is that due to the special national conditions of China, the administrative degree of village committees and village party branches is generally high. There is a long-term emphasis on the work of uploading and handing down documents, and there is a lack of strong decision-making executives [19–21]. In addition, most villages are natural villages under the administrative village, without the direct role of the village committee and the village party committee, which aggravates this situation.

Another reason is that China’s country society has gradually formed an acquaintance society due to the characteristics of a low population turnover rate and small regional scale. This traditional rural social relationship network, constructed by consanguinity and geography, shows a certain degree of stability and exclusiveness in the modernization process [22]. In other words, Chinese rural society naturally resists the rational regularity of modernization, and the vertical bureaucratic organization of state power is not good at solving many of the problems of rural governance [23].

Therefore, relying only on the bureaucratic power of the village committee and the village party branch makes it difficult to achieve effective governance in the countryside [24]. To achieve good governance in rural areas, we need a “middleman” as a medium to connect the national grassroots governance institutions with the local society. This “middleman” is often a rural elite with a background of traditional authority in the countryside.

In the case of the Yuanqian Community, under the leadership of the local elite, the villagers took the initiative to strive for the opportunity of the “Co-creation” of a pilot village. They built the village passionately and finally made the Yuanqian Community grow from a declining demolition village to a nationwide typical village of rural revitalization. Xiamen is the birthplace of the national “Co-creation” activities, and the Yuanqian Community is a typical representative of Xiamen’s “Co-creation” activities. In addition, the Yuanqian Community was selected by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development in 2019. It became one of only three selected villages in the province, which is one of the

reasons why we chose this village as a case study. In addition, the case of the Yuanqian Community is extraordinary: the Yuanqian Community spontaneously formed a conspicuous representative of the rural elite in the process of bottom-up development, and the rural elite successfully had the power to govern the village. It is worth noting that this governance power is not conventionally directly given by the higher government but by the collective empowerment of the villagers. Therefore, this is another crucial reason this study chose the Yuanqian Community as the case study.

Based on the above two points, this paper takes the “Co-creation” of the Yuanqian Community as an example to analyze the process of rural governance under the guidance of rural elites, which mainly contributes to the literature in two aspects. First, the research on the “Co-creation” activities of the Yuanqian Community can provide reliable reference and practical experience for the “Co-creation” activities in other parts of China. By analyzing this particular case, we may be able to inspire the construction of an endogenous rural development path in China. Second, the “Co-creation” activity of the Yuanqian Community is very similar to how the international community guides local development, which may provide a new experience for the bottom-up community governance theory and add a Chinese perspective.

2. Literature Review

Scholars generally believe that governance refers to the process by which official or non-governmental public management organizations use public authority to maintain order and meet the needs of the public within a given scope. At this level, the government is not the only source of legitimate power. As long as various institutions, including private individuals, can be recognized by the public, they may become centers of social power at different levels [25]. This theory can also be used for research in the rural community. As a basic and important part of the national governance system, community governance represents the return of public power from government to people [26].

Throughout the historical context of rural economic and social development in various countries, most of them have experienced a trough. In other words, there have been some problems, such as the uncoordinated development of urban and rural areas, the unbalanced construction of ecological civilization, and the decline of traditional rural culture. Countries worldwide have explored many excellent rural revitalization practices according to their cultural systems, resource endowments, and social differences [27].

In the aspect of rural governance, most cases focus on the cultivation of talented elites. Through the continuous training and skill upgrading of local talents, the “One village, one product” movement in Japan lays a solid human resource foundation for the sustainable development of the rural economy [28]. In Taiwan of China, the “Rural Regeneration” program through the combination of community empowerment and residents’ training, returns the power of community development planning to farmers to realize the “bottom-up” development of the village. On this basis, it focuses on supporting the development of community culture and industry so that the countryside can obtain endogenous regeneration power [29].

In 1991, the European Union launched the LEADER pilot project. LEADER is a “bottom-up” endogenous development mode in rural areas. It aims to stimulate rural development at the local level through small-scale actions [30]. Farmers, rural enterprises, local organizations, public authorities, and individuals from different sectors come together to form local action teams (LAGs). LAGs prepare their local development strategies and manage their respective budgets [31].

This LEADER approach, achieved through local action teams, is undoubtedly successful. As LEADER encourages socio-economic participants to work together to produce local products and services with the greatest added value [32]. LEADER has gradually become a new and innovative tool for promoting rural development in some countries [33].

LEADER’s success in rural areas creates the possibility of applying this approach to other areas [34]. Based on the seven principles of LEADER, CLLD is a more extensive community-led local development model used in many aspects, including rural areas. For

example, CLLD was successfully piloted in fisheries and aquaculture areas between 2007 and 2013 [35]. Although CLLD in fisheries and the coastal regions is much smaller and much later than in rural areas, the results of practice have been positive. At present, there are 303 fisheries local action groups (FLAGs) in 21 EU countries [36].

CLLD was integrated for the first time under all European Structural and Investment Funds in the 2014–2020 programming period [35]. Today LEADER/CLLD groups manage tens of thousands of projects with economic, cultural, social and environmental benefits in rural Europe [31].

Similarly, there is a project similar to LEADER/CLLD in Xiamen, China: Co-creation. “Co-creation” is a public participation governance activity put forward by Xiamen in 2013, which is based on China’s national conditions, and explores a new model of community participatory governance [37]. “Co-creation” refers to taking the community as the unit, mass participation as the core, and building a multi-party interactive platform. Under the guidance of professionals, groups representing different interests reach a consensus on the same plane to achieve the goal of multiple subjects to participate in community construction and governance [38].

Unlike the bottom-up participatory governance in Western countries, “Co-creation,” based on breaking the traditional single top-down basis, still emphasizes the consultation and co-governance process between the government and the community, combining top-down and bottom-up approaches [38]. In the practice of “Co-creation” in rural China, although the government is still the main initiator of “Co-creation,” the single action of the government cannot get extensive social participation [39]. Especially for the governance of natural villages, the local government has considered the influence factors of clan relatives and acquaintances [40]. Therefore, rural “Co-creation” should give full play to the villagers’ subjectivity and initiative and explore and summarize the formation of a rural governance model with villagers as the main body [41].

Today, “Co-creation” has done many pilot works nationwide and accumulated much practical experience. Therefore, the study and discussion of the experience of “Co-creation” in the birthplace of Xiamen are of great theoretical and practical significance to rural governance.

Analyze the situation in rural China. China’s long-term urban-rural dual system has led to many problems and challenges, such as the uncoordinated relationship between rural people and land and the weakening of the subject of rural society. It seriously restricts the ability of sustainable development in rural areas [28]. Over the years, the state has issued a number of policy documents for rural governance, such as strengthening the construction of autonomous mass organizations in rural areas, guiding urban talents to go to the countryside, encouraging farmers to return to their hometowns for entrepreneurship and employment, and arranging the first secretary of the village. In fact, these national policies reflect a truth: only human resources are the fundamental power source to promote sustainable rural development [22]. Rural endogenous development is a bottom-up process, and the rural talent elite is the key. Because of their outstanding talent and wealth resources, rural elites have a strong exemplary role and appeal in the countryside. They also have unique advantages in participating in village affairs and promoting rural social development [42].

In the West, there is a dichotomy between the state authority structure and the elite authority structure, but in the traditional Chinese rural society, the elite control the local authority structure, which comes from the needs of the community development and the elites themselves [43]. The study of Chinese mainland village politics has always been the concern of scholars at home and abroad, and it has made for a lot of discussion. This includes “Two-track Politics [44]”, “Gentry Domination [45]”, “Brokerage System [46]”, “Asylum Relationship [47]” theory, and so on. These theories have in common that they all emphasize the role of local elites in the interactive relationship between the state and the people, and believe that local elites are the media for state power to reach the grassroots society [48]. There is no doubt that these theories are classic expositions of the relationship between the state and society in traditional Chinese society. Some scholars have summarized the changes of this research process into different stages, such as the gentleman

theory, rural gentleman theory, local elite theory, and so on [49,50]. In other words, Chinese elites have experienced a process from the state grant, to the intermediary between the government and the people, and then to the concrete practice of the local stage, which emphasizes the folk character [51].

Since the 1980s, American scholars have used the concept of “local elite” rather than “gentry” to reveal the pluralistic characteristics of the local power system in the Ming and Qing dynasties [49]. Since then, the “local elite” has even replaced the gentry elite and become a highly explanatory concept for understanding the local society [51]. Therefore, this paper also chooses the “local elite” concept to discuss. However, there is still no unified and accurate definition of the concept of local elites. The view accepted by most scholars is that Joseph Esherick and others define “local elite” as any individuals or families who exercise domination and control on the local stage below the county level [45]. This definition greatly expands the scope of the gentry elite, including all people at the top of the local society. Compared with the gentry group, the concept of the “local elite” no longer emphasizes its close relationship with the state’s political power, and the status of the elite is no longer regarded as just given by the state. Instead, it pays more attention to the interweaving of elites’ resources, strategies, practices, and structure on the local stage, and the persistence, change, transformation, or retreat of local elites [51].

In recent years, in the research on the role and function of rural elites, Chinese scholars have generally believed that rural elites can improve the current situation of rural areas in many aspects, such as rallying neighbors [52], strengthening soft governance [53,54], and perfecting grassroots democratic autonomy systems [55]. In addition, in previous studies, scholars often assumed that the acquisition of governance power was innate [56,57]. However, in contrast to institutional power and clan power, the power of the local elite is not directly owned; it requires ownership by process of multi-empowerment, especially from local society [58,59].

Therefore, regaining the wisdom and experience of “governing villages by rural elites” may effectively promote the actual development of rural grassroots autonomy, thereby strengthening rural endogenous momentum and achieving sustainable rural development and comprehensive revitalization [60].

3. Methodology

This study adopts qualitative research methods, including interviews and field observations. First of all, organized investigators entered the village to get a general understanding of the situation of the Yuanqian Community in the form of random interviews. Second, they conducted in-depth interviews with villagers, tourists, the village committee secretary, and the farmers’ cooperatives president. During the interview time of 20–30 min, we used a semi-structured dialogue with different individuals to understand the specific situation of the development of the Yuanqian Community from the perspective of multiple participants, as well as their actual views on the development of the village. Third, according to the collected interview data, we synthesized all the data for preliminary analysis and comprehensive research.

Specifically, the author conducted two in-depth surveys in October 2017 and April 2018. According to the relevant data obtained from the field investigation, the interviewees related to the “Co-creation” of the Yuanqian Community were selected (Table 1), and the corresponding interview outline was designed (Table 2). After obtaining the interviewees’ consent, in-depth interviews were conducted according to the outline, and written records were made. All data acquisition was explained to the interviewees in advance with their consent and indicated that it was for scientific research needs.

Table 1. Personal information of interviewees.

Interview Coding	Total Number of Interviewing	Interview Date	Identity Information
YM1	2	19 October 2017 7 April 2018	Chen, President of Jisheng Yuan Cooperative
YM2	1	19 October 2017	The Representatives of Entrepreneurial Team
YW3	1	7 April 2018	The Commentator of the Yuanqian Community
YW4	1	7 April 2018	Resident Planner
YM5	2	19 October 2017 7 April 2018	Director of the Village Community
YM6 YM7	1	19 October 2017	Entrepreneur Representative
YW8 YM9	1	7 April 2018	Entrepreneur Representative
YW9 YM10	1	19 October 2017	Villager Representative
YM11 YW12	1	7 April 2018	Villager Representative
YW13 YW14	1	19 October 2017	Tourist
YM15 YW16	1	7 April 2018	Tourist

Notes: Code Y represents Yuanqian Community; code W/M represents female/male, and the code number represents the serial number of the interviewee. Total Number of Interviewing represents the number of interviews of each interviewee.

Table 2. Interview outline of “Co-creation” in Yuanqian Community.

I. Outline of the Interview with Village Committee
a. Could you give a brief introduction to the specific situation of the Yuanqian Community? b. Could you introduce the specific process of “Co-creation” of the Yuanqian Community? c. What kind of role do you think the village committees have played in “Co-creation”? d. Could you tell me how the policy of “Award Instead of Subsidy” given by the higher government is applied? e. What is the relationship between the village committees and the “Jisheng Yuan Cooperative”?
II. Outline of the Interview with President of Jisheng Yuan Cooperative and the Representatives of Entrepreneurial Team
a. Could you introduce the specific process of “Co-creation” of the Yuanqian Community? b. Could you give a brief introduction to the process of the establishment of the Jisheng Yuan Cooperative? c. Could you introduce the structure of the Jisheng Yuan Cooperative? d. How do ordinary villagers join the cooperative? How many people have joined the village at present? e. Could you tell us something about the operating projects of the Jisheng Yuan Cooperative? How does individual project join the cooperative? f. Could you tell us something about the profit situation and dividend mechanism of the cooperative?

Table 2. Cont.

III. Outline of the Interview with Villager Representative/Tourist/Resident Planner/Entrepreneur Representative	
a.	Have you participated in the “Co-creation” of the Yuanqian Community? Were there any obstacles in the process? How were they resolved?
b.	What do you think of President Chen?
c.	As a villager, what kind of impact do you think the changes in the Yuanqian Community have had on your life over the years?
d.	As a tourist, how do you feel about the Yuanqian Community?
e.	As resident planner, when did you come to the Yuanqian Community? What role did it play in the process of “Co-creation”?
f.	As a resident enterprise, why did you choose the Yuanqian Community?

4. Summary of the Development Stage of the Yuanqian Community

The Yuanqian Community is a natural village. It has a population of approximately 750 and an area of 52.26 hectares (Figure 1). The Yuanqian Community is located on the urban fringe, only half an hour’s drive from the urban built-up area. Before 2014, the villagers’ main sources of income were growing vegetables and working. In the context of the wave of urbanization, a large number of the labor force of the Yuanqian Community poured into the city. Employment away from the village led to a serious population loss in the Yuanqian Community, which once became a “demolition village” and was included in the list of demolition villages.

The Xiamen Municipal Party Committee and the Xiamen Municipal Government issued the “Beautiful Xiamen Strategic Plan” in August 2013 [61], putting forward the concept of “Creating beautiful Xiamen together.” Based on encouraging the participation of residents, with the construction of a rural governance network as the core, and “collusion, co-construction, co-management, co-evaluation and sharing” as the activity means, it provides a new idea for the rural revitalization of Xiamen. The Yuanqian Community is not on the list of pilot villages of “Co-creation.” It is an opportunity obtained from the bottom-up efforts of the whole community. Today, young people in the Yuanqian Community who start businesses outside have returned to their hometowns to build their hometowns. The former “demolition village” has been transformed into a well-known “Fujian-Taiwan ecological and cultural village.” This is a typical new case of rural revitalization, which is of great significance.



Figure 1. Yuanqian Community bitmap.

4.1. Apply for Pilot Village Qualification

Since the Yuanqian Community was designated as a demolition village, the village declined, and the appearance of the village was dirty and messy. In 2014, the “Co-creation” project gained a stage achievement, and several typical villages emerged. After collectively visiting the Xishan Community, a typical village in the Haicang District, the villagers also wanted their village to join the “Co-creation” project. Therefore, as a rural elite, Chen catered to the wishes of the majority of villagers and applied to the streets office to join the pilot village. However, the street office did not make an effective reply, so Chen continued to petition the district government. Asked why he was so persistent in fighting for this opportunity, Chen (YM1) said:

“This is our root; no one wants to see their village torn down. I come back for the Spring Festival every year. If the village is torn down, I can’t find a place to remember my childhood memories. Homesickness is gone. What’s the point of coming back? Therefore, seeing that the government has started the ‘Co-creation’ project, I want to seize this opportunity to fight for the village. I wonder if our village will not have to be torn down if it becomes so beautiful.”

Considering that the Yuanqian Community is adjacent to the Tzu Chi East Palace, there are 39 ancient houses in the village which have specific historical significance and retention value. The district government decided to give the Yuanqian Community a chance to complete the preliminary environmental transformation work in half a month. Under the leadership of the rural elite Chen, the maximum degree of mobilization was achieved by mobilizing the authoritative forces of all parties in the rural society, such as the old village branch secretary, advanced party members, the staff of the system, and the college students of the village. By mobilizing the authoritative forces of all parties in the rural society and achieving maximum mobilization, the villagers soon had a unified will to take the initiative to clear out the main roads in the village and communicate in advance about the illegal structures to be demolished and the scope of the renovation space that would be moved in the future. In only three days, the whole village met the requirements

of the district government and completed the preliminary environmental rectification work of the Yuanqian Community. The district government accepted the action force of the Yuanqian Community, and the Yuanqian Community qualified as a pilot village.

Although China primarily addresses the financing of rural area projects through top-down policies, there is often a lack of consideration from the perspective of residents [62]. However, the “Co-creation” project of the Yuanqian Community has improved this as much as possible. In combination with the actual situation of the Yuanqian Community, the district government has formulated an “Award Instead of Subsidy” policy to provide funds for transforming and promoting material space for the Yuanqian Community. The so-called “Award Instead of Subsidy” means that villagers, enterprises, and other groups that benefit from the transformation of material space sort out the space in the village in advance and take the initiative to sell land for later construction. They will bear all labor and land occupation costs arising from this part. After the approval of the results of the village environmental arrangement, the district government will arrange the district-level planning and design institutes to provide professional planning and design services for the Yuanqian Community, and bear the design costs. After that, the district government allocated funds by uniformly purchasing raw materials and hiring self-organized construction teams in the village to help complete the remaining infrastructure construction of the Yuanqian Community. The “Award Instead of Subsidy” policy ensures the implementation of the relevant policies of “Co-creation,” which not only reduces the cost of government policies but also provides jobs for some villagers. Top-down and bottom-up go hand in hand. The explanation of the Village Community director (YW5) on “Award Instead of Subsidy” was as follows:

“The villagers put in work, labor, and money for construction, mainly to sort out the space in front and back of the house, to take the initiative to sell land, and so on. All labor and land occupation costs generated by this part are converted to 40% of the investment amount. 40% of the early investment was mainly completed by the two village committees and the early team of Jisheng Yuan cooperative. In the later stage, the district government made 60% of the investment to purchase raw materials, and the two village committees organized and hired self-organized construction teams in the village to complete the remaining infrastructure construction. The construction team was founded by the original shareholders of the Jishengyuan cooperative, but the construction team itself was not directly related to the later cooperative.”

4.2. “Co-Creation” Begins

Under the leadership of Party members, the villagers actively participated in transforming the village environment and invested a lot of human resources and material resources. Every household demolished illegal buildings, painted walls, and gave up their own open land and vegetable land to renovate the village’s overall material environment and create public open space. The residents had given up an area of about 10,000 square meters of livestock houses and open spaces, put in more than 1000 workers, and cleaned up about 500 tons of garbage (Table 3). The representatives of the entrepreneurial team (YM2) who returned home to serve as the party branch secretary of the cooperative said:

Table 3. The land contributed by some villagers in the process of environmental renovation.

Interview Coding	The Place Provided	Area
YW9	Pigsty	50 m ²
YM10	Open space	24 m ²
YM11	Vegetable plot	86.19 m ²
YW12	House and pigsty	144.5 m ²
YW17	Toilet	24 m ²

“Seeing that my hometown is implementing ‘Co-creation,’ I also want to make a contribution. As soon as the work of the company was finished, I immediately came back to the village to help.”

The villager representative (YW9) said:

“The design of the facilities in the village can be based on our own opinions and feel that we are part of it. Look, the flower bed at my door was built according to my idea.”

The “Dahe Jiao” pond, which is located in the center of the Yuanqian Community, is not only an important space for discussion, communication, and contact, but also the most important central landscape in the village. However, many years ago, due to the rupture of the village water network, the pond turned into a pool of stagnant water, and the former prosperity ceased to exist. To this end, Chen led the young people to go up the mountain to find the water again, and called on the villagers to collectively clear the silt and introduce live water into the “Dahe Jiao.” After ecological restoration, the pond was full of vitality. Landscape trails are planned around the pond, green plants have been planted, and water tankers have been set up in the center of the pond to form the core landscape.

In addition to the “Dahe Jiao” pond, many of the well-built public spaces in the village have been transformed by people spontaneously. To improve the image of the village entrance, Chen took the lead in demolishing his own metal processing plant. Some villagers vacated their own spaces to improve the overall landscape of the village. Chen (YM1) said:

“The factory is at the entrance to the village. As long as you can see the old factory building as soon as you enter the village, the image of the village is obviously reduced. I also hesitated for a long time, but for the future development of the village, I can no longer keep the factory.”

Some people gave up their vegetable gardens to build high-level public toilets. Others shared the 200-square-meter space and put several tables and chairs under trees for pedestrians to rest. Through the joint efforts of the whole village, the public landscape space of the Yuanqian Community has achieved earth-shaking changes, and the village has taken on a new look.

In this process, the young people in the village have contributed the most. Under the leadership of the elite villagers, the returning youth of the Yuanqian Community spontaneously set up support groups to help elders carry out garbage disposal and environmental improvement work free of charge. The public environment, which no one in the village is willing to govern, is also the garbage cleaning and environmental improvement that the support group takes the initiative to carry out. Many college students who go out in the village also choose to return to the village after graduation and become the think tanks of the village. In the process of village construction, the strength of the young people in the village is a rare and precious resource. Returning college students (YM10), as representatives of villagers, said:

“At that time, I thought that I was the only one who had come back from the city, but I did not expect that there would be many young people in the village, which made me have more confidence in going back to my hometown to start a business.”

However, the process of “Co-creation” of the Yuanqian Community is not smooth. After participating in the “Co-creation” project, some villagers have obtained certain benefits, which has aroused the envy of other villagers. To ease the contradiction, the district government and resident village planners put forward the construction project of a “Beautiful Courtyard.” They found 12 households with good construction conditions, of which six were willing to participate in the plan. The government provided a subsidy of 3000 yuan for each family, which was planned and designed by the local design institute. In the end, only one household achieved results, but it failed to continue to operate and closed down two months later. This thing is like a game. The object of the game is the government and the villagers. Some villagers overestimated their ability to act and underestimated

the difficulty of industrial operation, which eventually led to the failure of the “Beautiful Courtyard” project.

4.3. Jisheng Yuan Cooperative Established

Chen, a villager of this village, as one of the rural elites, identified the business opportunity. He led the idle young people in the village to develop the “urban vegetable plot” project, a kind of rural ecological experience of agriculture in the suburbs. Through replacement, leasing, and other ways to integrate land, the land will be divided into 20 square meters for a unit, with 2400 yuan a year to rent. Chen (YM1) said:

“There used to be a popular social network game called ‘Happy Farm,’ I thought, why can’t we also set up a farm in the Yuanqian Community? The Yuanqian Community is so close to the city that the project may be successful. Moreover, the surrounding villages are doing ‘Co-creation.’ We have to do something different to attract people. Unexpectedly, the idle young people in the village actively participated in the project. They arrived at the vegetable field at 6 a.m., and they were all white and tender, and soon they were tanned even darker than me. Who would want to leave home if there is an excellent opportunity to start a business?”

Because of the convenient transportation near the village, it takes only half an hour to drive to and from the city. In just a few months, the vegetable land was leased out, and the annual income of 20,000 yuan per mu of land was raised to 80,000 yuan per mu per year. After turning ordinary farmland into urban vegetable plots, the varieties of crops also changed, and organic vegetables and valuable Chinese herbal medicine began to be grown, while pineapple orchards, vineyards, and other economic fruit cultivations were developed. Tourists from Xiamen (YW13) said:

“We usually bring our children here on weekends to experience farming, and we can harvest almost 250 kilograms of pollution-free vegetables a year. Today, there is also a big harvest. He feels very fresh when the children see pineapples grow from the soil.”

On 9 May 2014, the Jisheng Yuan Cooperative was officially established, with Chen as its chairman. Urban vegetable plots are the first project of cooperatives. The cooperative renovates the well-preserved dovetail houses in the village and transforms them into community public spaces such as Sinology forums and Happy homes for elders to serve the village residents. After completing the space transformation, the cooperative officially began to start its own business and attract investment, and it gradually developed many diversified industrial forms. An entrepreneur representative from Taiwan who opened a pizza restaurant (YW8) said:

“The environment here is good, close to Taiwan, the climate and living habits are similar, and they have the same origin. And here, it is full of human feelings, and the villagers naturally get along with us. There is no estrangement.”

With the vigorous development of various industries in the village, the economic income of farmers has increased significantly. The Yuanqian Community ultimately eliminated the fate of demolishing the village, achieved effective rural revitalization, and won many honors. On this basis, the Yuanqian Community succinctly summarizes its development process, forms a mature “Yuanqian experience” rural development model, and takes the village as a demonstration base, devoting itself to experience sharing and model export. Yuanqian Community receives exchange and learning teams from all over the country and even overseas. The arrival of the inspection groups has driven the chain operation of a series of industries in the village, such as catering, accommodation, leisure, shopping, to achieve the maximum income. Up to now, the Yuanqian Community has undertaken several high-level forum activities and welcomed more than 100 leaders at all levels to inspect and visit. The scope of influence of the Yuanqian Community has been expanding.

5. The Process of Empowerment of Local Elites

5.1. Empowering Process

Before the beginning of “Co-creation,” Chen was just an ordinary farmer with small assets. Chen owned a profitable metal processing plant in the village and could be regarded as one of the economic elite of the village. In the process of becoming a “Co-creation” pilot village, Chen played a significant promoting role, from which he gained some leadership, mobilization, and organizational strength and became a local rural elite with certain governance power. In the section below, with the background of the rural social environment, the process of local elite empowerment is analyzed in detail based on three aspects: administrative empowerment, social empowerment, and economic empowerment.

5.1.1. Administrative Empowerment

The Yuanqian Community carried out the process of “Co-creation,” which made Chen gradually become the person in charge of the actual transformation project in the village. From the beginning to the end, Chen himself had no institutional background, but in the process of Co-creation, he obtained institutional resources through government projects, was recognized within the system, and thus obtained administrative empowerment. After examining the whole process of the Co-creation of the Yuanqian Community, it can be seen that the two paths of administrative empowerment are the assistance of the Haicang district government and the assistance of the cadres stationed in the village (Figure 2).

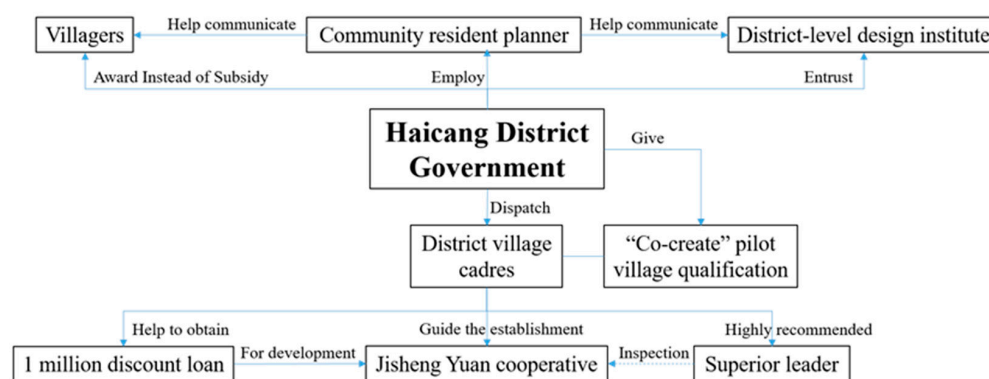


Figure 2. Administrative empowerment model diagram.

The Haicang District Government brings financial and policy convenience to the Yuanqian Community. The district government won the first phase of 200,000 yuan of “Co-creation” financial support for the Yuanqian Community. Combined with the actual situation of the Yuanqian Community, an “Award Instead of Subsidy” policy was formulated. Villagers were urged to devote themselves to labor and actively participate in the transformation. At the same time, the district-level design institute was contracted to provide professional planning and design services for the Yuanqian Community and bear the design costs. The district government also hired Li, a Taiwan planner, to communicate with the planning and design institute on behalf of the villagers to act as a bridge between the government and the villagers. The resident planner Li (YW4) said:

“Xiamen City has launched the ‘Beautiful Xiamen Strategic Planning’, in which ‘Co-creation’, similar to Taiwan’s ‘Community-Building’ mechanism, is taken as the primary operation method of rural development. I followed the team to Haicang District. Then, the village in charge was the Yuanqian Community. The Yuanqian Community was designated as a demolition village a long time ago. Still, when our team went in to do research, we found that there were as many as 39 ancient houses in the Ming and Qing dynasties, and there were a lot of cultural stories to tell. Therefore, I want to import the mode of rural tourism and let the Yuanqian Community out of the fate of being demolished. On the one hand, I choose to stay in the Yuanqian Community because

there are many opportunities on the mainland, and the professional stage is relatively larger. On the other hand, it is because there is a great sense of intimacy and courtesy to Taiwanese compatriots, and the villagers have never rejected me."

The institution of the cadres stationed in the village is a great tradition of rural governance in China, which has played an important role in different periods. The cadres stationed in the village help to connect all the units of the "Co-creation" project and guide the establishment of the farmers' cooperative. The deputy director of the Haicang subdistrict office is responsible for communicating with design companies and construction units on behalf of the Yuanqian Community. The secretary of the Communist Youth League and district party committee guided Chen and other villagers to set up the cooperative and helped invite business tutors and agricultural experts. Moreover, village cadres actively communicated with local agricultural and commercial banks and successfully obtained a 1-million-yuan discount loan for rural youth entrepreneurship and development for the cooperative, which solved the difficulties of cooperative fund operation and large-scale operation. Members of the district party committee have also repeatedly invited leading experts from all walks of life outside the party to guide the work in the Yuanqian Community, which has enhanced the popularity of the Yuanqian Community.

In the process, the village committees of the Yuanqian Community mainly played the role of helpers and coordinators. In the early days of establishing the Jisheng Yuan Cooperative, the two village committees led President Chen of the cooperative to the district to fight for preferential rural policies. After establishing the cooperative, the two village committees cooperated with the cooperative to implement and provide feedback on the relevant policies of the superiors. In the operation of cooperatives, the two village committees also tried their best to open a green channel to help promote their early products. The two village committees have given exceptional support and help to the cooperatives, which have become an intermediate bridge between the Haicang district government and the Yuanqian Community, reflecting the process of rural grassroots autonomous organizations participating in rural governance.

With the expansion of the scale of cooperatives and the improvement of the construction of the mechanism, the government of the Haicang District continues to pay more attention to the cooperatives. When the superior leaders visit the Yuanqian Community, the Haicang District Government will send relevant staff to accompany the contact. The Jisheng Yuan cooperative has won a new project. The relevant responsible departments of the Haicang District Government will actively strive for preferential policies and cooperate with the operation of relevant projects. As the cooperative's president, Chen invisibly obtained administrative empowerment.

5.1.2. Social Empowerment

Clan culture and kinship constitute the background of rural society. In China's long feudal dynasty, the central government's authority seldom intervened in the countryside, and the patriarchal village elders mainly controlled agrarian society. In villages with strong patriarchal concepts, the opinions of elders affect the development of village-level organizations to a great extent. Because elders have a deeper understanding of traditional rules and local knowledge than the young people and are more skillful in using these abilities in rural life [63], elders will be more respected in the village.

Compared with other provinces, Fujian still has a strong clan power. The Yuanqian Community is a village with a single surname, and there is a strong clan relationship in the village. The patriarchal elders of the Yuanqian Community still have a certain say in deciding the major events in the village. When the Yuanqian Community officially began to work together, the village held a meeting on the development planning and design of the Yuanqian Community. Prestigious elders in the village were specially invited to attend the meeting to listen to their views on the development of the village. Elders unanimously supported the transformation of the village, which provided a great help to the promotion of "Co-creation" by the Yuanqian Community. The success of social empowerment is

inseparable from local villagers' consultation and autonomy. Through holding hearings, villagers can fully listen to different opinions and suggestions with the help of professionals so as to resolve potential doubts and contradictions [64].

Therefore, after obtaining a loan of 1 million, the cooperative first renovated an old house in the village and set up a Happy Home for elders to provide activities and leisure places for the local elders. Every year, Double-Ninth Day holds a banquet for elders at this location, invites more than 100 people over the age of 60 in the village to attend the dinner, and provides free treatment to elders. Chen even paid out of his own pocket to distribute the necessities of life to elders in the village. To some extent, the welfare assistance to elders by the Jishengyuan cooperative has established a positive corporate image in the hearts of the villagers (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Banquet for Double-Ninth Day.

Before the development of the industry, we should first serve elders in the village, because if local elites want to play a role in the rural society, they need recognition and authorization from the traditional authority of the village [22]. As long as we get the recognition and support of elders, we can get the recognition of the people in the village to a large extent and achieve twice the result with half the effort. Through the Happy Home for elders and continuous activities of respect for elders, the clan recognized the local elite and thus gained social empowerment.

5.1.3. Economic Empowerment

Because the main task of rural revitalization is economic growth, economic power is also an important part of rural governance power. The essence of the cooperative is a peasant economic organization, and the direct purpose of the management is to develop the rural economy, drive the villagers to become wealthy, and mainly undertake the function of revitalizing the rural economy. Cooperatives not only encourage local people to buy shares in various entities such as funds and land, but also absorb third-party funds to enrich their business projects and then form a variety of industrial configurations such as popular science education and training. The cooperative has gradually become a big platform for the Yuanqian Community to connect with the external market (Figure 4). The post of director of the cooperative is the subject of legalization power recognized by the state. Chen assumed the post of director of the cooperative and became a local elite with economic functions as a main role.

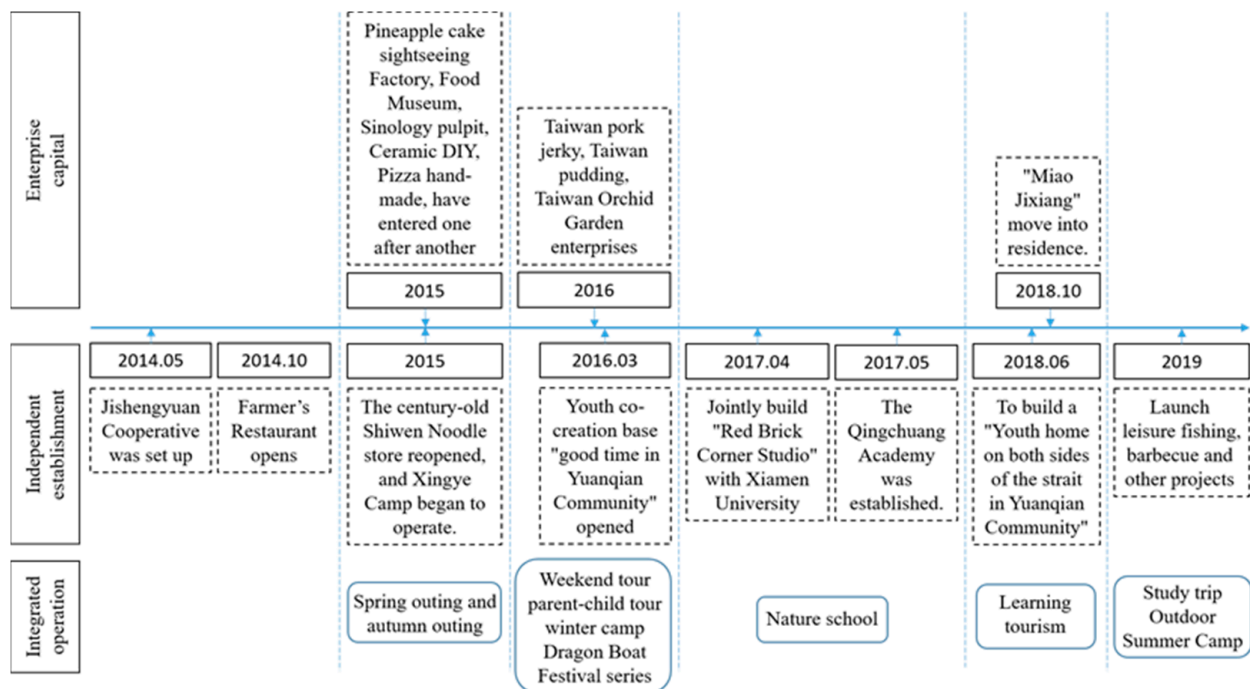


Figure 4. The development process of economic cooperatives.

When villagers choose investment projects, their trust in the manager is more important than the quality of the project itself. Therefore, the cooperative's assets have been operating from the initial investment of 1 million to the present. The income is not all for dividends but mostly used to create more different spaces for entrepreneurship and continue giving back to villages. With the substantial increase in the economic income of cooperatives, nearly 200 jobs have been provided for the village, which has greatly stimulated the villagers' enthusiasm to return to the village for employment and entrepreneurship. Through the development of cultural tourism in the village, Chen has driven the village's economic growth with cooperatives, which have been recognized by the vast majority of villagers, and obtained the economic empowerment of rural governance power.

5.2. Reconstruction of Rural Governance Network

In this case, local elites obtained institutional resources through government projects and were accepted by the administrative system. By carrying out activities to serve elders in the village, he was accepted by the clan. By developing cultural tourism and driving economic growth, he was accepted by the villagers. Chen gained the trinity of administration, becoming the subject of governance and the leader of the rural revitalization. In this process, the rural governance network of the Yuanqian Community was reconstructed, gradually changing from a loose governance network to a new governance network with the local elite as the core (Figure 5).

Local elites understand the local society, and compared with other governance subjects, it is easier to integrate the existing rural resources and tap more available resources. Moreover, as local elites are rooted in the relationship network of the village, they will take more into account the interests of farmers in the village and cater to the ideas of most villagers when leading the development of the village. Therefore, from this level, the organization and leadership of local elites provide a vital endogenous driving force for rural governance and stable development, and the training of local elites may be a breakthrough in the development of endogenous villages.

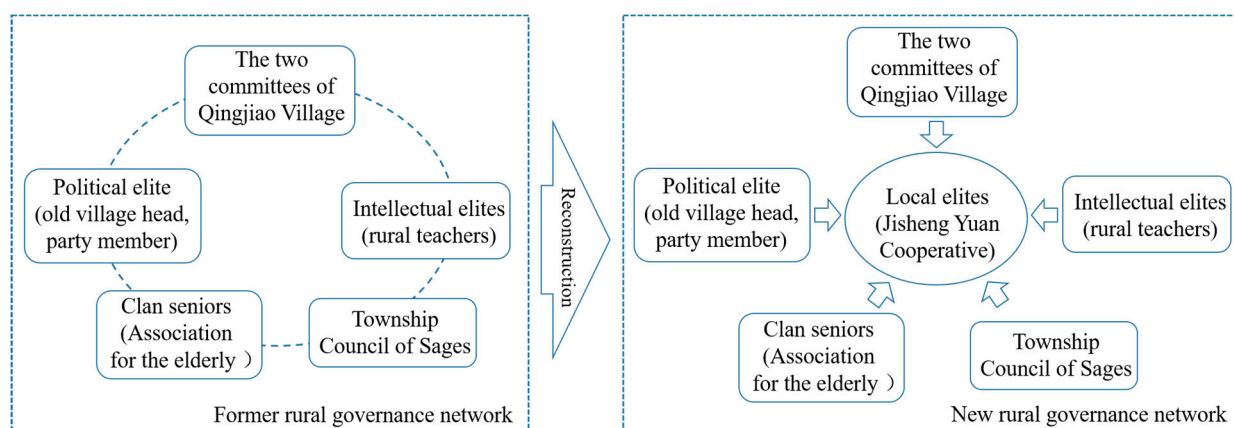


Figure 5. Reconstruction of rural governance network.

In this case, as the local elite of the Yuanqian Community, Chen is an endogenous resource in the countryside. It is easier to obtain the legitimacy and authority of the rural governance power. In addition, the rural cooperative led by the local elite also played a crucial function in continuous hematopoiesis for rural construction. The cooperative's establishment depends on the government's support, but the continuous development in the later stage relies on their independent development. The independent operation mode breaks away from the traditional government "blood transfusion" mode and realizes the village's "self-hematopoiesis" development mode, thus realizing the sustainable development of the rural economy.

6. Rural Sustainable Endogenous Development Path

The evolution of public space is the epitome of the rural governance model and the change of social relations [65]. After the formation of a new governance network with local elites as the core, the Yuanqian Community began a new round of spatial transformation. In the process of the transformation of material space and industrial space, the governance network led by local elites has played a hugely positive role. While transforming the rural material space, it has also changed the traditional land production relations, so that the Yuanqian Community has changed from a traditional village dominated by the primary industry to a modern tourism village with the integrated development of the primary, secondary, and tertiary industries. The upgrading of industrial space brought about by the transformation of material space makes the Yuanqian Community embark on the road of rural sustainable development.

6.1. The Transformation of Rural Space

6.1.1. Renovation of Cultural Space

The Qingjiao Village Yuanqian Community has a long history, traced back to the Northern Song Dynasty over 800 years ago. It is the hometown of Yan Siqi, the king of Taiwan, and the main birthplace of Baosheng Tzu Chi culture, Taiwan's second-largest folk belief. Since 2006, April 18 of every year has been very lively. People from both sides of the strait gather happily to jointly hold the Baosheng Tzu Chi Cultural Festival on both sides of the strait. Baosheng Tzu Chi culture has become an important platform for non-governmental exchanges between the two sides of the strait. Long historical and cultural heritage is the basic condition for developing in-depth cultural rural tourism in the Yuanqian Community. Creating a rich and diverse rural tourism industry can repair the rural cultural customs on the verge of fracture and play a more important role in inheritance and education. The old house with 39 red brick swallowtails in the Yuanqian Community is a vivid sample of the history of exchanges between Fujian and Taiwan, the architectural history of southern Fujian, and other cultures. The village has also built a nostalgic exhibition hall to show the historical changes in the village for thousands of years.

It is combining ancient dwellings, Tzu Chi culture, and Yan patriarchal culture to inherit and carry forward traditional Chinese culture.

The cooperative initiated renovating and protecting the old house and used the renovated old house to create a main venue in the village to promote traditional culture. For example, the development of the official residence “Dafu Di” has become a Chinese studies forum, carried out the experience of carrying forward the traditional culture, and has now become the family training and education base of the Haicang District. After being cleaned up and renovated, Zhongxuan Di, Xuezi Cheng, and other ancient dwellings with the unique Minnan style, as a “cultural symbol,” attracted tourists to visit the Yuanqian Community and promote the development of related industries in the village. At the same time, this has carried out commercial development. Charging 10 yuan per person for each tourist to enter the “rural governance and maintenance fee,” will bring certain benefits to the villagers.

6.1.2. Increase Consumption Space

Before this, the primary source of income for the villagers was growing vegetables and working. The success of the urban vegetable plots undoubtedly brings an opportunity for the agricultural transformation of the Yuanqian Community from a simple rural space to a space combined with tourism and the service industry. The urban vegetable plot project effectively increases the farmland’s value, invigorates the village’s spare land, and maximizes the resources. With the combination of agricultural planting and the ecological landscape, urban vegetable plots also developed other derivative projects, such as establishing a science popularization education park for agricultural products and natural education for urban children.

Due to the improvement of the material environment, and the publicity and promotion supported by the government, more tourists from cities have entered the Yuanqian Community and put forward more requirements for rural experience projects. This is also why cooperatives actively seek external cooperation projects to join. Through the integration of various leisure tourism resources, the Jisheng Yuan cooperative has developed an industrial system that combines agricultural education, rural cultural experience, exhibitions, accommodation, and catering to meet the needs of tourists.

Whether it is local villagers starting a business or foreign enterprises moving in, most people choose to join the Jisheng Yuan cooperative. According to the characteristics that tourists want, most ordinary villagers develop the rural economy with residential accommodations and restaurants, significantly increasing farmers’ income. With the help of government publicity, most of the foreign capital also took the initiative to seek cooperation. Due to the close cultural exchanges between the Yuanqian Community and Taiwan, many Taiwan investment brands are actively docking with cooperatives to open up the rural market. The addition of Taiwan capital not only expands the operating brand of cooperatives, but also brings new attractions to consumers.

6.1.3. Construction of External Publicity Space

The original Yuanqian Community has no special space for external publicity, but now the Yuanqian Community urgently needs some suitable publicity space due to the development requirements. To this end, several exhibition spaces have been set up in the Yuanqian Community to display folk culture, traditional farming, and cultural heritage. Among them, the most important publicity space is Qingchuang Academy, and the commercial utilization of Qingchuang College has become one of the economic sources of the Jisheng Yuan cooperative (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Lectures in Qingchuang College.

The Haicang District Committee set up Qingchuang Academy in conjunction with Haicang Street; funded by the Jisheng Yuan cooperative, it was transformed from an abandoned pigsty. Unlike other community academies, the main functions of Qingchuang Academy are extroverted, open to people from all over the country, and even international friends. The academy often holds experience-sharing meetings to summarize and promote the entrepreneurial experience. With the standard charge of 1500 yuan/3 h, a certain economical income is obtained. Qingchuang Academy also cooperates with the Xiamen Party School as an important educational space for party building. Gradually, Qingchuang College has become a learning and training base within a certain range, receiving learning teams from all over the country. The continuous arrival of the study team has brought training benefits for cooperatives, and supporting catering and other services is also a considerable economic income. It has also become a major part of the economic income of the Yuanqian Community.

6.2. Rural Industry and Sustainable Endogenous Development Path

The transformation of rural space includes material space and industrial space. The material space of the Yuanqian Community has undergone great changes in the process of “Co-creation,” including renovating the cultural space, increasing the consumption space, and building the external publicity space based on the original simple agricultural space and living space. The change of material space is the premise of the transformation of industrial space, so it also brings about the upgrading of industrial. As far as this case is concerned, the Yuanqian Community chose to develop the tertiary industry with a higher output value. Based on the new material space, a set of rural travel industry chains covering catering, retail, experience, research, and other consumption types has been established. At the same time, thanks to the good surrounding traffic conditions, a steady flow of urban visitors comes into the village, so that the Yuanqian Community can continue to operate its travel industry. So far, the Yuanqian Community has successfully stepped into the road of sustainable endogenous development through the upgrading of industrial space.

7. The Expansion of the Scale of Village Influence

7.1. The Changing Process of Influence Scale

The remarkable transformation and promotion of the appearance of the village and the content of the industry has brought the continuous expansion of the influence of the village to the Yuanqian Community.

7.1.1. The Formation of a Typical Village for “Co-Creation” on the City Level

To seek further development, the Yuanqian Community needs to expand its influence and strengthen its publicity to have more room for development. At the district level, due to the outstanding transformation achievements of the Yuanqian Community and the promotion and introduction of district cadres, the achievement of the Yuanqian Community can have a smoother upward channel. At the same time, the Haicang District shot a short film with the entrepreneurship story of the youth in the Yuanqian Community as the background, which brought greater popularity to the Yuanqian Community within a certain range of publicity. Based on this, the Yuanqian Community has rapidly grown into one of several demonstration villages in the Haicang District, and the Yuanqian Community has been selected as an advanced unit of “Co-creation.”

At the municipal level, combined with the achievement of the Yuanqian Community, Xiamen awarded the village the title of “the most beautiful neighborhood” and “the new 24 scenery of beautiful Xiamen,” and the Yuanqian Community became the first Fujian–Taiwan ecological and cultural village in the province. In 2016, the Yuanqian Community was approved as a provincial leisure agriculture demonstration site, and in the following year, it was selected as one of the top 20 tourism villages in Fujian Province.

At the same time, as chairman of the Jisheng Yuan Cooperative, Chen won the honorary title of “the most beautiful farmer” and “model worker” in Xiamen, and Chen won the Xiamen Youth May 4th Medal. In 2016, Chen was awarded the Fujian Youth Wealth Leader and won the Fujian Youth May 4th Medal. At this point, the achievements and influence of the Yuanqian Community had reached a consensus throughout the city, and the Yuanqian Community had become a recognized “Co-creation” typical village in Xiamen.

7.1.2. Rural Revitalization of Typical Villages on a National Scale

After the Yuanqian Community became a typical pilot village, it became an object of inspection led by the leaders of the city and district governments. The inspection and visit of senior leaders became the best gold-lettered signboard for external publicity. Gradually, there was a steady stream of delegations, research groups, and tourist groups from all over the country, which greatly opened the window for the development of the cooperative. The Yuanqian Community took this opportunity to integrate ideas, and to promote the “Yuanqian experience” in the form of lectures and experience-sharing meetings. The future development of the Yuanqian Community will no longer be limited to a rural tourist attraction, but will become an interactive platform to spread the experience of rural revitalization.

In 2015, the Yuanqian Community hosted the Straits Forum “The Same Name Village: Heart to Heart” fellowship activity for the first time, which was displayed in the sixth unit of the eighth Achievement Exhibition of the 18th CPC National Congress. In 2016, CCTV News broadcast focused on the Yuanqian Community grid party branch. In 2018, the Yuanqian Community, as a model of rural revitalization in Xiamen, once again became the main position of the Haicang venue of the Straits Forum. In 2019, in the first batch of selected pilot villages for “Co-creation” activities announced by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, the Yuanqian Community was successfully selected. As a result, Chen, chairman of the Jisheng Yuan Cooperative, was successively named the national youth wealth leader and a national rural culture and tourism talent. The influence of the Yuanqian Community expanded to the whole country. As a result, the influence of the Yuanqian Community has spread to the whole country, and it has become a typical village for rural revitalization in the whole country (Table 4).

Table 4. List of some honors received by the Yuanqian Community.

Time	Honors	Level
2014	“Beautiful Xiamen Co-creation” Advanced Units	Municipal
2014	Xiamen’s “Most Beautiful Neighborhood”	Municipal
2014	Beautiful Xiamen New 24 scenery	Municipal
2014	The first Fujian-Taiwan eco-cultural village in the province	Province
2015	Youth entrepreneurship base on both sides of the Taiwan Strait	Province
2015	Xiamen veteran Party member Volunteer Service Base	Municipal
2016	Excellent demonstration Cooperative of Young Farmers’ Cooperative in Fujian Province	Province
2016	Provincial leisure agriculture demonstration site	Province
2016	Four-star rural tourism management units in Fujian Province	Province
2016	First prize of Fujian Youth Entrepreneurship and Innovation Competition	Province
2017	National demonstration base for rural tourism creators	National
2017	Top 20 tourist villages in Fujian Province	Province
2018	Xiamen demonstration Base for the cultivation of New Professional Farmers	Municipal
2018	Collective pacesetter of the 15th Fujian May 4th Youth Medal	Province
2019	The first batch of selected pilot villages to jointly create a beautiful environment and a happy life across the country	National

7.1.3. Brand Spillover of “Yuanqian Experience”

After gaining a certain influence, the “Yuanqian experience” gradually formed the brand effect and began to spill out. By building a platform, the Yuanqian Community can attract friendly resources and provide a window for the promotion of rural industries and commodities to realize the significance of resource integration and sharing. For example, there is in-depth cooperation with the professional cooperatives of farmers in Dong’an, Fujian Province, to help sell local tundra raspberries in the Jian’ou Mountain village in northern Fujian. The nearby Gulou Farm has joined in to develop carambola picking activities and connect the activities into a series of parent–child travel routes to bring greater benefits to both sides. A “Friendly Rural Alliance” cooperation agreement with the Citan Village in Hainan Province has even been signed to export the governance model based on the aspects of planning, personnel formation, and experience sharing.

Moreover, with the gradual expansion of the influence effect of the platform, the “Yuanqian Experience” has also been externalized. Young people from Kenya, the United Arab Emirates, South Africa, Sweden, and more than 40 countries along the “Belt and Road Initiative” route, as well as Southeast Asia and Europe, have come to the Qingchuang College to gain experience with rural governance and entrepreneurship. The Yuanqian Community has continuously expanded its influence by sharing the “Yuanqian Experience” and exporting the governance model.

7.2. Replicable Operation Mode

The scale of the Yuanqian Community’s influence has been upscaled step by step from the city and district levels to the provincial and national levels. Finally, it has become a model village for rural revitalization in the whole country. With the gradual expansion of its influence, the Yuanqian Community has gradually come to the eyes of more relevant practitioners, and many areas have begun to learn to replicate the model of the Yuanqian Community in order to develop their own villages. Therefore, the development model of the Yuanqian Community is of reference value, and similar villages can learn from its revitalization experience.

8. Discussion and Conclusions

8.1. Discussion

Although various definitions of governance exist in academic circles, most agree with one basic feature. The government is not the only source of legitimate power [12,25]. As long as the public recognizes it, individuals or institutions will likely become centers of social power at all levels [66]. This coincides with the case of “Co-creation” of the Yuanqian Community studied in this paper. Chen, as the local elite of the Yuanqian Community, was

given his power through the recognition of many parties, and thus obtained the authority of governance. On the other hand, in some Chinese villages, although the government's appointment has legitimacy, it does not necessarily have effective authority [6]. It does not necessarily have administrative efficiency. In practice, the long-term existence of this situation will destroy the stability of rural society. It is generally believed that the democratic election system can improve the legitimacy of power and produce a relatively stable authority structure in rural society [6,67]. However, this paper finds that in some traditional villages, there may be other ways to form a stable authority structure, such as establishing a close and effective governance network with local elites as the core. Under the government's reasonable guidance and local elites' leading role, a bottom-up and top-down governance model is formed in the countryside, and the effect of rural revitalization is achieved.

By comparison, we can see that there are great similarities between the EU's LEADER/CLLD movement and China's "Co-creation" project. First, both promote bottom-up development at the grassroots level by stimulating the endogenous development of the local community and the masses [30]. The "Co-creation" of the Yuanqian Community further regards the local elite as the core force to guide rural development. Secondly, both advocate the mode of co-governance of multi-stakeholders [32]. This multi-agent governance network helps gather all parties' resources and achieve effective resource exchange and benefit transformation. Finally, local action groups (LAG) and the Jisheng Yuan cooperative are both local groups with a certain degree of autonomy [31]. Such legitimate institutions can dominate the development direction of the community to a certain extent. It can be seen that although LEADER/CLLD and "Co-creation" are rural development movements under different social backgrounds, they both achieve the same results of changing the mode of rural governance and promoting rural sustainable development. The difference is that Western society has always had the tradition of local participation in public affairs, and the professional organization of the social movement and its professional mobilization are the remarkable characteristics of the Western social movement [68]. However, the local development of China has always been led by the government, and the government has a greater power of intervention in social organizations [69]. On the other hand, the "Co-creation" project, represented by the Yuanqian Community, breaks the traditional pure bottom-up or top-down development mode and forms a special development mode of the combination of bottom-up and top-down.

Scholars have long put forward this view of combining elite forces with government resources in community development to form power cooperation. Zhang believes that in the governance process, actors will transcend their own identity and borrow the resources and power of other actors to realize collaboration between the government and the local elite [70]. From the case of the Yuanqian Community, we can clearly see the example of collaboration between the government and the local elite. Chen, himself of the Yuanqian Community, is only an ordinary villager, neither a member of the village committee nor a member of any political background. However, he used his keen political sense to seize the opportunity of "Co-creation", skillfully made use of the power of the superior government, and constantly used the influence of the government to obtain political resources and smoothly transform them into economic interests. For example, they used "Retired senior officials at and above the provincial level to visit the Yuanqian Community" as the publicity title has enhanced the popularity and influence of the Yuanqian Community and attracted leading teams from all over the country to come to the Yuanqian Community to learn the experience of rural development. Gradually, many receptions of study groups and regular venues for holding parties and mass activities have become a stable source of income for the Yuanqian Community. These events prove that Chen, as the governance core of the Yuanqian Community, can control and use resources and make the government one of the leading service objects of the Yuanqian Community. The government also realized the rural revitalization of the Yuanqian Community with the help of Chen's appeal and influence. This proves that this mode of cooperative governance between the government and local

elites, which was rarely observed more than a decade ago, has become a popular trend in the rural governance model with the help of the “Co-creation” project.

However, for Chinese villages, it is still a minority that form local elites spontaneously at the grassroots level, and most villages still rely on the government to import elites from top to bottom. For example, China has always pursued the policy of “First secretary in the village [71]”: from outstanding young cadres or cadres who have not yet retired but are too old to be selected to be in charge of party organization work in less developed rural areas. Another example is the “Planners Go to the Countryside [71]” project: planners and other professionals go to the countryside to help revitalize the countryside. There are also some university talents who come to practice in rural areas: students and teachers with related academic background. These elites do not come from local rural areas nor have the natural advantages of local elites in rural society. They are strangers in the countryside, so it is difficult to get the trust and recognition of the villagers. In guiding rural development, these elites will inevitably encounter various problems and troubles, and it is still difficult for rural areas to achieve effective development. Therefore, from the Yuanqian Community’s experience, perhaps integrating top-down and bottom-up development models will be better than simple top-down blood transfusion development. However, the focus of discussion and research in the next step is forming a complete set of methodologies and extending it to more needy villages in China.

8.2. Conclusions

8.2.1. Local Elites Reconstruct the Rural Governance Network

The local elite of the Yuanqian Community obtained legal governance power through the trinity of empowerment of administration, society, and economy. After having the governance authority, the local elite has naturally become the core of the rural governance network, and the governance network of the Yuanqian Community has also been reconstructed—from the original loose network structure to the tight rural governance network with local elites as the core. Under the guidance of local elites, the extensive participation of villagers and the continuous attention of the government have led to the formation of a top-down and bottom-up governance model.

8.2.2. Local Elites Governance Network Promotes the Formation of an Endogenous Development Path

The local elites governance network has realized the revitalization of the countryside through the spatial transformation of the village. The transformation of rural material space has brought about the transformation of rural industry. The leading industry of the Yuanqian Community has gradually developed from a single agricultural industry to an industrial form of three-industry integration. Rich rural tourism products reshape the local attractiveness and make traditional villages coruscate new vitality. Therefore, the development of rural tourism through the change of material space and the transformation of industrial space can activate the endogenous power of rural areas and promote the formation of a sustainable endogenous development path.

8.2.3. China’s “Co-Creation” Is an Important Part of the Practice of International Community Participatory Governance

The “Co-creation” project of the Yuanqian Community is very similar to the development model of the EU from LEADER to CLLD. It also pays attention to the guidance of the community, emphasizes the power of public participation, and devotes more of the leading authority of rural development to the local masses and organizations, which greatly encourages the formation of the endogenous driving force of rural development with farmers as the main body. Therefore, it can be considered that China’s “Co-creation” project is also an essential part of the practice of participatory governance in the international community. Extending the development model of the Yuanqian Community to other villages with weak development in China will effectively promote the development of the vast rural areas.

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