

How community-based organizations contribute to social governance in China? A qualitative study base embedding theory

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Abstract. From the perspective of embedding theory, this paper discusses the theoretical appropriateness of embedding community-based organizations in grass-roots governance under the framework of existing models such as "two-way embedding", and proposes the path of "multiple embedding" based on the empirical research in Foshan City, Guangdong Province. Based on the empirical study of Foshan City, we proposed the model of "multiple embedding", including the paths of organizational embedding, service embedding, deliberation embedding, cultural embedding and economic embedding.

1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

NGOs such as philanthropic foundations, social service agencies and social organizations play an indispensable role in grass-roots governance in China. Community-based organizations are social organizations that are initiated and established by community residents, focusing on meeting residents' needs and carrying out activities in urban and rural communities. What kind of interaction exists between community-based organizations and grass-roots governments, communities and residents? Through what path do community-based organizations contribute to social governance? These questions still lack effective argumentation.

Based on the embedding theory and empirical research, this paper explores the paths of community-based organizations contributing to social governance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Karl Polanyi is often regarded as the creator of the concept of embeddedness^[1-3], which originally referred to the constraints of the economy on social, political and ethical institutions. To date, scholars have interpreted "embeddedness" as "a generalized reference to the implantation of one force, system, or structure in another"^[4] and as "the connection of one thing with another and the extent of that connection"^[5].

2.1 Residents embedded in communities

In the field of grassroots social governance, there are Juweihui (resident committee), NGOs and residents.

Residents as the main body of communities, can play the role of the main body of governance in a variety of embedded ways. For example, residents in Suzhou can achieve organizational embedding, technological embedding, and cultural embedding by participating in community governance entities such as grassroots party organizations, neighborhood committees, and self-organizations^[6].

When a sudden public crisis happened, residents' active participation in grassroots governance plays an even more important role. Leng Xiangming and Guo Shuyun^[7] constructed a multiple nested mobilization system for communities, explaining that in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, community residents formed a mobilization system of "individual-organization", "organization-community", and "community-country".

2.2 NGOs embedded in communities

NGOs including social organizations have been actively embedded in the "state-society" governance system. Due to the special characteristics of NGOs, their participation in social governance needs to be recognized by the state on the one hand, and supported by the community on the other hand^[8]. Social organizations show a "two-way embedded" mode^[9-10], integrating the interactive relationship between "government and social organizations", "social organizations and community".

However, when social organizations "enter" communities by providing services purchased by the government or Juweihui, their "foreignness" affects the power and cultural networks in which the organizations are embedded in the communities.^[11] That is to say, the two-way embeddedness may not be realized, or even

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"suspended" above the needs of the community.^[12-13] Social organizations lack a close relationship with the community, and thus are unable to achieve the goal of increasing community trust, and enhancing the efficiency of social governance. Some empirical studies^[14-15] have also verified this claim.

2.3 Community-based organizations and social governance under embedding theory

It is of great practical significance to study the path for NGOs to participate in social governance. However, social organizations that have entered the community arena through the purchase of services have not, in practice, been able to fully "embed" themselves in the community.

Compared with the above-mentioned social organizations, community-based organizations theoretically have more inherent advantages in participating in social governance, avoiding the situation of being "suspended" in the community. And practices in China has provided many evidence.^[16-17] However, they do not fit well with the existing theoretical framework of embedding theory.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper studied community-based organizations in Foshan City, Guangdong Province. By December 2021, 17,000 community-based organizations have been registered in Guangdong Province, among which there are about 2,000 organizations in Foshan City.

The author conducted a qualitative study from June to December 2022, including in-depth interviews with members of community-based organizations, social service agency supervisors, Juweihui members and government officials. 75 interviewees were participated in this study and the records of the interviews exceeded 80,000 words. At the same time, the study analyzed 16 cases reported by official. The interview transcripts and cases were analyzed by NVivo12. After coding the "two-way empowerment" framework was used to construct the multiple embedded paths of community-based organizations contributing to social governance.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

As part of the community social network, community-based organizations are embedded in the grass-roots government for administrative legitimacy and policy resources on the one hand, and in the community for community resources on the other (Figure 1).

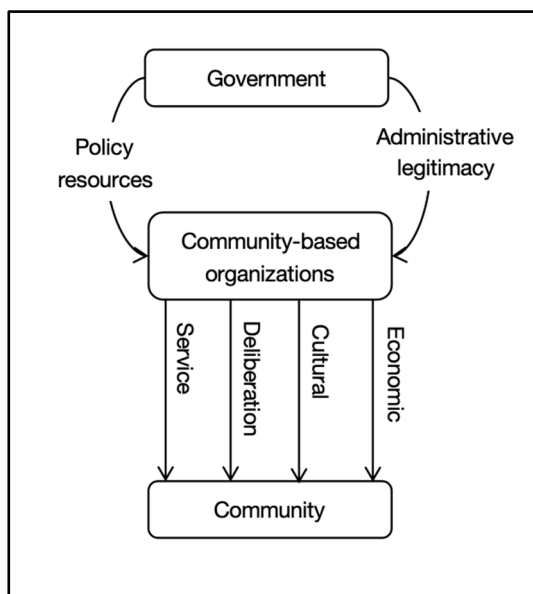


Figure 1. Multiple embedding paths of community-based organizations

First of all, compared with NGOs composed of non-community members, community-based organizations are naturally more able to gain community recognition due to their attribute of being "initiated and established by community residents". At the same time, in accordance with central and local policies and regulations, community-based organizations can be registered with the civil affairs department of governments and gain "administrative legitimacy" to be embedded in the community.

The existence of community-based organizations ensures the rationality of the organizational structure of

community members and provides certain institutional guarantees for them to participate in community governance. It helps to assist Juweihui in realizing their autonomous functions. On the other hand, the "rooted in the community" attribute of community-based organizations enables residents and other community subjects who are interested in serving the community to participate in social governance legally and legitimately through organized forms.

Specifically, grass-roots governments such as Juweihui carry out registration and classification management of community-based organizations, giving

registered organizations administrative legitimacy to carry out their activities in the community, and enabling them to enjoy the rights to recruit members, carry out activities, and obtain financial support. At the same time, community-based organizations gain social legitimacy from the community by gaining the trust and recognition of the residents. Community-based organizations enter the community as formal organizations, and achieve the role of empowering social governance through services, deliberation, culture and economic embedding.

4.1 Service Embedding

According to policies, community-based organizations should give full play in providing community services, expanding residents' participation, fostering community culture and promoting community harmony. As advocated in the policy document, the vast majority of community-based organizations respond to community needs by providing services.

Daily volunteering activities are the main services provided by community-based organizations. "There are some special service teams in my community, for example, he has a river patrol team name 'Hexiaoqing', which is a community-based organization focus on environmental management, and a city guardian team that providing safety supervision services and other publicity initiatives." (Interview transcript 20220917)

Also, functional services for the community have become a major tool for embedding in social governance, which on the one hand meets the needs of community residents in their daily lives, and on the other hand facilitates the community in realizing the integration of information elements, human capital and other resources, cohesion of community forces and improvement of community mobilization capacity.

4.2 Deliberation embedding

Deliberative consultation refers to the process whereby community stakeholders, including Juweihui, community-based organizations and residents, reach consensus on community issues on an equal and voluntary basis in order to solve problems. In communities, deliberation and consultation has proven to be an effective way to achieve cooperation and synergistic communication among multiple governance actors.

"The community has established and perfected the 'triangle model' of grassroots deliberation and consultation in its exploration, i.e., the three major deliberation platforms of the Deliberation and Consultation Council, the Association for the Promotion of Rural Revitalization, and the Community-based Organization, which carry out management of community affairs, community construction, and cultural creation." (Open Case B) Through the consultation mechanism, community-based organizations can achieve deeper participation in social governance and improve the capacity for community self-governance. Through this kind of consultation mechanism guided by Juweihui and deeply participated by community-based organizations,

community needs can be better responded to, community conflicts can be resolved at an early stage.

4.3 Cultural embedding

Community cultural networks, as social attributes inherent in communities, are community norms based on community contexts.^[18] Previous studies have found that when embedded in social governance, third-party social organizations are often caught in the predicament of "local knowledge" backlash, which directly affects their effectiveness in promoting social governance.^[19] In contrast, community-based organizations, as they rooted in the community, are able to strike a better balance between organizational autonomy and cultural adaptability.

For example, "Relying on the rich historical and cultural resources of the XX community, we established a Community Cultural Guiding Team which had extensively recruited community volunteers to provide a special tourism and cultural tour route. This kind of activities not only push our residents to know more our cultural, but also bring harmony and cohesion among residents in the neighborhood." (Open Case I)

Community-based organizations are able to dig deeper into community resources, and tend to be more competent in the inheritance and promotion of community culture. Through the excavation, reproduction and inheritance of community cultural elements, community-based organizations can create community name cards and enliven the community atmosphere through food and cultural tourism services, as well as unite the community in a smooth way and realizing goal of social governance.

4.4 Economic embedding

Although most community-based organizations derive their funding from government subsidies, they are still able to achieve economic embeddedness in their organizations by bringing an inflow of funds to the community economy, promoting the integration of community resources and spurring the development of the community economy.

First of all, community-based organizations can obtain project funding by participating in project ventures and so on. For example, the five administrative districts under Foshan City are each supported by activity funds of up to 50,000 yuan and special support funds.

Secondly, community-based organizations can integrate community resources in response to community needs. For example, Community D contributed more than 10,000 yuan through the Juweihui in 2021, prying more than 80,000 yuan of self-funding from the community to participate in building repair and community construction.

Finally, community-based organizations can also play a role in revitalizing the community economy. For example, a village in District D, based on the community industry and cultural, developed the "banana bud tea" as their special product, created and promoted the ecological experience line, such as Farming Experience Camp, revitalized the village's economy, in which the community

social organizations also play an important role. According to statistics, the village provided 35 tours in 2021, sold 2,730 boxes of "banana bud tea", and generated a profit of more than 160,000 RMB, 20% of which was invested in the community mutual aid fund.

5. CONCLUSION

Since the concept of embeddedness was introduced into China, domestic scholars have consciously carried out theoretical migration, and embedding theory has become an important tool for explaining state and social interactions.

Base on the embedding theory, this paper clarifies the multiple embedding paths of community-based organizations in social governance. This model provides a new perspective for social governance in China, describes the logic of community-based organizations in their interaction with the community. It also lays the foundation for a study of the four-way interaction mechanism of "grass-roots government, Juweihui, community-based organizations and residents".

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