

Examining rural environmental governance in everyday settings

SOCIOLOGY

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The improvement of the rural environment reflects urban and rural residents' pursuit of a better life, and it is also a part of rural vitalization. Academics have long studied rural environmental governance in China, including theoretical and empirical research which delves into social change, institutional transformation, cultural values, and other perspectives. In practice, the impact of environmental problems in residents' daily lives have exceeded impacts in the field of production.

Therefore, environmental issues in daily life need to be carefully examined. In the study of environmental sociology, we are witnessing a theoretical shift towards a focus on everyday life. Scholars hope to explore the social and cultural reasons behind environmental problems to better explain their social roots. In this light, based on the practice of rural environmental governance, this article will discuss the causes and solutions of rural environmental governance dilemmas—from the perspective of daily life.

In the 1970s, Alvin Gouldner, an American sociologist, pointed out the challenges to “order” and “progress” faced by classical sociology, and proposed “reflexive sociology” as a solution. As Gouldner writes in his book *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*: “The ultimate goal of a reflexive sociology is the deepening of the sociologist's own awareness, of who and what he is, in a specific society at any given time.”

At almost the same time, environmental sociology was born and developed rapidly. As a branch of sociology, environmental sociology also faces the classical sociology crisis. One of the main criticisms, or questions, is environmental sociology's potential effect on environmental decline. It is apparent that this doubt has a strong humanistic concern, especially in the context of severe environmental decline across the globe. As contemporary residents witness more and more environmental decline and resulting social problems not only in the production field, but also in everyday life, quite a large number of scholars have begun to search for “reflexive responses.”

Among them, most representative theories include the following: living environmentalism, theory of practice, and a socio-technical paradigm. The three different theoretical paradigms have similar research directions on daily life, and each has its own strengths and weaknesses in the interpretation of environmental problems.

Taking account of the investigation data from Xiangyang Village, this article tries to integrate the socio-technical paradigm and living environmentalism to observe the subjec-



Workers help villagers install underground storage tanks for a sanitary toilet in a remote village in Hunan Province, Aug. 25, 2021. Photo: CFP

tive choices of social members, to establish a new analytical framework for describing and analyzing the green transformation of rural daily life and environmental governance practices in recent years.

Targeted poverty alleviation

In the implementation of a targeted poverty alleviation strategy, the government plays a central leading role and invests significantly in human and financial resources. In addition, other enterprises, public institutions, and social organizations also provide great support. It can be said that people from all walks of life have been activated to achieve the common goal of economic development, in which process the rural environment has been improved.

Objectively speaking, though rural environmental governance is not the core goal of targeted poverty alleviation, harmonious development between economic development and environmental governance is demonstrated. The reasons are twofold. First, influenced by top-level strategic design, a consensus has been reached at national and social levels that environmental governance falls under the purview of livelihood issues, which is the key to targeted poverty alleviation's success. Second, the concept of “clear waters and green mountains are invaluable assets” has been widely accepted by society as a whole and become an important principle in the socio-technical field. However, although the concept has taken root at the medium and micro levels, rural environmental governance and green development still faces considerable resistance.

Socio-technical limitations

To improve the quality of people's lives and safeguard their health, China has embarked on a “toilet revolution” in rural areas, from the 1990s on. According to statistics from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, as of 2018, over 10 million rural toilets had been upgraded, accounting for more than

half the total in rural areas.

The “toilet revolution” is, first, a concrete response to people's ever-growing needs for a better life in the new era. But also, it is the inevitable result of urbanization and the development of modern civilization over the years. From a technical point of view, improper disposal of human and animal waste leads to land and water pollution, which not only harms the health of rural residents, but also may endanger nearby urban centers, so it is beneficial for both parties to carry out the “toilet revolution.”

In reality, rural residents, who have limited knowledge on the topic, have different concerns about the “toilet revolution” than government departments and technology experts do. Local residents have three main concerns about the construction of indoor toilets. First, the technology is not mature enough and there are no underground drainage pipes in rural areas. Second, it is contrary to living habits. Third, the wait-and-see attitude toward the countryside's future makes villagers reluctant to adopt these new practices.

In many cases, we found that “hollow villages” and infrastructure limitations make it difficult to realize technological innovation. In addition, rural residents' recognition of technological innovation not only depends on whether it has a positive impact on the environment, but also depends on their own habits and needs. The most important element is the transformation of our social structure. Increasing social mobility and uncertainty make rural residents focus more on short-term personal interests, rather than long-term social environmental benefits.

Challenges to rural life logic

In the daily life of rural residents, there has always been a rational life logic that maximizes the usage of energy resources. This rationality is manifested in a series of rural residents' self-interested actions. For example, the Chinese *huokang*

(firewood- or straw-heated earthen stoves) are an ancient integrated home system for cooking, sleeping, domestic heating, and ventilation that are widely popular in rural homes in northern China. Apart from the effective use of energy in cooking and heating, even the straw ash can be reused as fertilizer. Through the technological innovation of *huokang*, and the living habits of eating two meals, rural residents have shown their ingenuity in the sustainable use of energy. It is evident that the traditional logic of rural life, and the self-interested action strategy of residents, are in harmony with environmental governance and green development.

Now, as production conditions advance, the mechanization of large-scale agriculture makes straw no longer a popular type of energy in daily life, but a new pollution source. Moreover, affected by urbanization, rural areas are now seeing more electronic waste and plastic products. From this point of view, the rational living logic of rural residents directly leads to self-interested action strategies, and in today's world, some seemingly beneficial daily life practices which try to reduce energy costs in fact cause more serious damage and pollution to the environment.

Possible solutions

Based on the above analysis, it is safe to say that the macro-level and socio-technical transformation are somewhat disconnected from daily life practices at the micro-level, let alone from achieving long-term effective environmental governance. Therefore, rural environmental governance not only calls for top-level design and ecological innovation, but also requires green transformation in everyday life.

Some scholars pointed out that building a green development system is a systematic project, which cannot be accomplished overnight. It needs scientific and comprehensive institutional support. One of the ways to realize such system engineer-

ing in the field of daily life is through lifestyle transformation. For rural society, a number of social policies and technological innovations can promote the reconstruction of practice, and the corresponding social culture can also change, and eventually form a relatively stable lifestyle which ensures the sustainable development of environmental governance. In short, systemic change needs institutional and technical support, and also to adapt to the needs of social culture, to obtain the support of local actors and then promote the realization of systemic change.

Some scholars believe that in terms of rural pollution sources, three key social elements should be highlighted, namely: technology, systems, and organization. However, whether we focus on the source, process, or end of rural environmental governance, if we fail to see the logic of residents' daily life practices and ignore the role of rural cultural customs, we are likely to fail. Therefore, the system, technology, and other ecological innovations must make everyday life an important variable, and also consider social culture, values, and other variables, so as to maximize the significance of ecological innovation and promote the overall reform of our social system.

All in all, rural environmental governance is an environmental sociological issue that deserves more attention. In the course of China's rural environmental governance, it has gone through several stages, from the initial ignorance to environmental problems, to subjective avoidance of environmental problems, and finally facing up to rural environmental problems. In terms of governance, we have moved from general environmental governance to specific and sustainable environmental governance, from development before governance to development with governance, and now the emphasis on ecological environment and optimization of environmental governance.

As environmental issues gain more attention on national levels, people's perception of rural environmental governance has also transformed from viewing environmental governance as a burden on economic development, to now seeing it as a driving force. These changes have laid a foundation for the in-depth development of rural environmental governance.

Going forward, we can draw a timeline to summarize changes in rural environmental governance practices, in order to uncover more trajectories in rural green life and green development, and summarize the ways we can promote rural green lifestyles, so as to deepen the study of rural environmental governance.

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