Role of home key to social governance

SOCIOLOGY

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In social governance, the "home" can be roughly divided into four roles: as an object, subject, source of values, and method for policy implementation. For decades, social governance researchers have primarily focused on the first two roles, particularly the first, while the third and fourth roles have been largely overlooked. Moreover, whether the home serves as the object of governance or the subject of governance, its position is not unified and may be strategically used as an implementation tool in governance practices. Therefore, in daily social governance practices, a detailed empirical analysis of the relationships between the four roles of the home can provide new perspectives on the dynamic between the home and social governance, amid the transformation of social governance and modern homes, offering valuable insights for effective governance.

A village-run senior self-service apartment in X village, S County, Zhejiang Province. Photo: PROVIDED TO CSST

Field investigation

In the summer of 2022, our research team conducted a social survey in County S, eastern Zhejiang Province. A group surveying healthcare and residences for older citizens visited three village-run senior self-service apartments, two specialized senior care homes, and three relatively simple town-run senior care homes. Overall, when trying to meet the profound needs of aging citizens, differences among the three types of senior care facilities were complex and yielded unexpected results. Overt differences, such as the expense and the quality of services existed, but other factors were more difficult to measure. These included whether senior living communities changed people's living habits, severed their interpersonal connections, or provided residents with the opportunity to receive care while maintaining the freedom of living in a "home."

If establishments disrupted older residents' social networks by placing them in urban living models or used a modern service industry approach, which treated residents as guests, older residents described a deep sense of restraint and did not feel "at home." In contrast, many town-run senior care homes, often due to underfunding or outdated design, inadvertently created the ideal conditions for older citizens to retain their old rural way of life and relationships in a new setting, effectively recreating a sense of "home." Employing older residents in simple tasks within the homes gave residents a sense of ownership, allowing them to consider their private living space in senior care homes completely as their own and even treating the entire senior care facility as their home.

However, we must admit that the above-mentioned senior care models, to varying degrees, all distance aging citizens from their original homes and families. There is a fundamental divide between their reality and the "home" that older people yearn for. A village-run senior self-service apartment is not a resident's private property and comes with many inconveniences, but it provides older residents with a private space they can decorate, while maintaining a "bowl-of-soup" delivery distance from their children's homes, making mutual care possible among families.

Town-run senior care homes compress the amount of private space available to residents, but the low cost and informal atmosphere somewhat simulate the daily life that older people are accustomed to. High-end senior care homes provide excellent and professional healthcare services, but these spaces and lifestyles vastly differ from the norm for older residents. For these people, the "home" here is not the real home they expect and know.

The development of senior care models in rural areas is largely the result of state-led social governance practices. Field data mentioned above raises questions about the relationship between the "home" and social governance. Meeting the core family needs of young farmers often comes at the expense of their parents' generation, by sacrificing the idea of a multigenerational home. These rural parents are forced to leave their homes and settle in senior self-service apartments, township senior care homes, or high-end senior care homes. However, the opportunities to rebuild their vision of a "home" may vary according to the scenario. Therefore, helping older rural individuals regain a sense of "home" should be a primary-level social governance goal in rural areas.

Social governance involving families should respect the basic rights of modern individuals. To do this, it must cultivate and activate family subjectivity and values. This involves designing and implementing social policies to protect and recreate family values, appropriately limiting the effectiveness of family models in terms of institutions and philosophies. In turn, respect for family values and subjectivity should constrain the power of social governance, if the "home" is treated as both a method and an object.

For older rural individuals caught in the vortex of policies and strategies related to homestead allocation, new rural construction, senior care, and other aspects of rural social governance, the central question is whether or not the government can address their deep-seated emotional ties and longing for home.

Understanding the core of Chinese family values involves knowledge of ancestor worship, concepts such as "filial piety," and the hierarchical structure constructed from it. Sociological evidence of this respect for family values is seen in the elaborate strategies developed by families for self-preservation and continuity, passed down from one generation to the next, as well as the tenacity and flexibility displayed by families. Protection of these family values and the perseverance of the Chinese-style family have led to it being known as a "community of hardship."

'Freedom' as key word

We have also observed a change in how older people view themselves and their role in the family. In conversations with the older adults in senior self-service apartments and nursing homes, researchers repeatedly witnessed discussions of "freedom" and "restriction."'Restriction" is evident in aspects such as living with children in their homes, or moving into small Western-style houses, as well as the standardized life doled out in nursing homes. In other words, "freedom" is the key word used to express older rural individuals' concept of "home." The term "home" here has two intertwined and distinct connotations: "homeland" and "family." If the desires for these two "homes" were combined, it would undoubtedly be a harmonious blend of "freedom" and "family happiness" for aging residents.

However, whether the older rural people's longing for "home" can be fully realized depends largely on primary-level social governance strategies employed in rural areas. First, the above cases represent a concrete application of social development strategies promoted in China in recent years. Whether in urban or rural areas, investments in people's livelihoods, including urban renewal, rural house renovations, various welfare and charity activities, implicitly contain the "family metaphor." This is not only an inherent element of all Chinese welfare systems but also the result of the combination of Chinese Confucian political traditions and the modern political concept of "serving the people."

Second, in the implementation of people's livelihood policies, the family's subjectivity has been clearly demonstrated. Improving the rural living environment caters to the farmers' desire for a better life. Establishing rural nursing homes alleviates housing issues for older people in rural areas who lack caretakers within their families. Therefore, farmers are likely to actively support and participate in such initiatives. Even if rural nursing homes, as a new phenomenon in rural areas, are initially rejected by farmers, the presence of these nursing homes will inevitably unconsciously influence their values and behavioral choices in the long run.

Third, relinquishment of the home's traditional subjectivity by the older generation and the acquisition of the home's subjectivity by the younger generation are closely related to differentiated understandings and applications of family values in primary-level rural governance. In China, there are two dimensions of family ethical values: unconditional filial piety and social succession. The former is well-known, while the latter has two possible interpretations. One reflects the traditional family's fundamental pursuit of the continuation of bloodlines, wherein Chinese society uses various methods to consolidate parent-child relationships. The other interpretation involves children altering the social status of parents or parents' concerns about their own status.

In cases of homestead allocation and rural housing renewal, primary-level governance strategies typically focus on social succession as a family value, but this ethic is applied utilitarianly, translating to policies which actively encourage adult children to surpass their living parents' social status. At the same time, older citizens, also driven by the need for social succession and to avoid family conflicts, are forced to prematurely give up their homestead rights and property rights for the happiness of future generations, sacrificing their personal interests once again.

Path forward

The consequences arising from this are twofold. First, Confucian filial piety, which is a fundamental Chinese family value, has begun to alienate family members in the context of new rural construction. Second, there is a loss of ontological security and a sense of freedom for the elderly. In terms of senior care models, institutions tend to select the most useful family values and use them for promotion, launching a process which ultimately distances families. First, they persuade children to send their elderly parents to nursing homes to guarantee that their retirement is comfortable, emphasizing virtues like filial piety. Then, the more "filial" the children are, the more they are tempted to spend on nursing home services for their parents. But in expensive nursing homes, their aging parents are distanced from their accustomed lifestyles and the familial happiness they expect. Ultimately, this further contributes to the gap between "home" as a method and as a value.

From the perspective of people's livelihoods, filial piety manifests itself in both ethical claims of paternalism and the imagination of the nation, cities, towns, and villages as harmonious and full of happy large families, with governance as the means to achieve this goal. The specific governance methods resemble the meticulous care parents provide to their children in traditional Chinese families. However, governance as a method to construct "homes" has, to a certain extent, resulted in erosion of basic family ethics in the daily lives of older rural people. In some rural contexts, basic family values were discarded when they conflicted with the specific goals of social governance.

Therefore, what some older individuals in rural County S face, in the context of new rural construction, can be traced to the primary-level social governance strategy of treating the family as a governance tool. For aging residents, they hope to preserve family values, seek ontological security in their own homes, and continue to draw familial happiness from relationships with their children who are physically close. However, governance strategies are based on external goals, and the strategies apply family values as a tool which can be used to meet those goals. This complicates relationships between parents and children, and tilts the balance of decision-making power towards the younger generation. The introduction of high-end senior care models into rural areas, even if presented as a new model through which adult children can show filial piety to their parents, unintentionally creates a sense of "restriction" and "homelessness" for aging residents due to its strong emphasis on professionalism, scientific methods, cleanliness, and public space rather than the needs of their residents.

In the context of social governance involving the "home," it is crucial to grasp the deeper connotations of family values in a comprehensive, contemporary, and accurate manner and respect all subjects within the family, especially respecting the subjectivity of older individuals. In policy formulation and strategy selection, the primary goal should be holistic family values, avoiding the potential fragmentation of subjects within a family. If social governance struggles to achieve this goal or even disrupts the idea of "home," then avoiding "over-governance" might be the most appropriate principle for future governance design and practice.

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