From Fragmented Villages to Territorial Development Communities: A Comparative Analysis of Party-Led Coordination and Inter-Village Organization in Zhejiang, China

Aiwen Liu, Xi'an Gaoxin School for Special Education; Dalian Ocean University

Yida Wang, School of Marxism, Dalian Ocean University

Jing Cai*, School of Marxism, Dalian Ocean University

Abstract

Administrative villages are still the basic units of collective ownership and grassroots governance in rural China. However, many development challenges now go beyond village boundaries. Tourism, ecological resources, agricultural brands, infrastructure, and public services often require cooperation across villages. This article examines how Party-based coordination helps fragmented villages build a territorial development community without changing administrative boundaries. It compares three village clusters in Zhejiang Province: Yushang Rice Country in Yuhang, Jiangnan Xiwang Valley in Linhai, and Badujie in Changxing. Using policy documents, local case materials, government webpages, public reports, and international literature, the study identifies four mechanisms: functional territorialization, coordination between political organizations and operating actors, benefit feedback, and the social use of economic gains. The findings suggest that Party organizations mainly provide coordination support by connecting villages, identifying common issues, and linking local actors with external resources. However, coordination itself does not guarantee successful development. It needs to work with effective operating organizations and clear arrangements for property, risks, benefits, and participation. Evidence of turning economic gains into broader social benefits remains limited. Therefore, this article views Party leadership as a conditional mechanism rather than a sufficient cause of development.

Keywords: Collaborative Governance; Inter-Village Cooperation; Party-Led Coordination; Place-Based Development; Rural Revitalization

1. Introduction

Rural development challenges increasingly extend beyond administrative village boundaries. Labor mobility, ecological systems, tourism resources, infrastructure, and public services often require inter-village cooperation, while collective assets, village governance, and many policy arrangements remain organized around individual villages. This creates a scalar mismatch: villages are often too small to pursue large-scale development but remain institutionally important. Such tensions have become more visible during China's rural restructuring, as population mobility and land-use changes have intensified while resources and governance responsibilities remain fragmented (Long et al., 2016; Woods, 2007). This issue is particularly relevant in Zhejiang Province, where rural revitalization has increasingly emphasized cooperation among neighboring villages. The village-cluster approach promoted in 2025 encourages villages with shared resources or development goals to cooperate while avoiding new administrative layers, forced partnerships, excessive debt, or government substitution for local initiative (Ministry of Finance of the People's Republic of China, 2025; Zhejiang Economic Information Center, 2025). These clusters represent functional territories rather than new administrative units, consistent with place-based development approaches that emphasize locally embedded institutions, capabilities, and assets (Barca et al., 2012; Pike et al., 2007).

Party-led coordination plays an important role in organizing such territorial cooperation. Through joint

Party committees, Party-building alliances, and cross-village arrangements, Party organizations can connect governments, village collectives, enterprises, and social actors, helping establish shared agendas and coordinate resources. However, stronger Party involvement may also blur the boundary between village autonomy and administrative intervention (Hillman, 2025). Therefore, the key question is not whether Party leadership exists, but how it shapes inter-organizational relations and collective action capacity. Meanwhile, coordination does not automatically lead to successful development. Political organizations may mobilize resources but lack operational capabilities, while professional operators may improve efficiency but risk weakening local participation and fair benefit distribution. Research on collaborative governance shows that effective cooperation requires not only shared goals and trust but also institutional arrangements, accountability, and joint-action capacity (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012; Provan & Kenis, 2008). In addition, development outcomes should be assessed beyond economic indicators such as projects, tourism revenue, and asset activation. Whether economic gains generate broader social benefits remains an important question (Platteau, 2004; Shortall, 2008; Deeming & Smyth, 2015; Midgley, 1999).

This article compares three village clusters in Zhejiang Province: Yushang Rice Country in Yuhang District, Jiangnan Xiwang Valley in Linhai City, and Badujie in Changxing County. Although sharing a similar institutional context, the three cases differ in resource conditions and operating models. The study asks how, and under what conditions, Party-led coordination transforms fragmented administrative villages into territorial development communities. The article proposes four mechanisms: functional territorialization, coordination between political organizations and operating actors, benefit feedback, and the social use of economic gains. It argues that Party leadership can provide coordination capacity, but successful development also depends on effective operating organizations, clear institutional arrangements, and the ability to convert economic returns into broader social benefits.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

2.1. Place-Based and Neo-Endogenous Rural Development

Place-based development emphasizes that development opportunities and constraints are shaped by territorial conditions. Rather than applying spatially neutral policies, this approach highlights the importance of local institutions, knowledge, assets, and the distribution of benefits. Barca et al. (2012) argue that place-based interventions are particularly relevant where development constraints arise from locally embedded institutional and coordination failures. Pike et al. (2007) further emphasize that regional development should consider not only economic growth but also who benefits from it. Territory is therefore understood not simply as a geographic space, but as an institutional arrangement involving actors, resources, and power relations. Rural development research has similarly shifted from externally driven and purely endogenous models toward neo-endogenous approaches. While exogenous development may introduce capital and expertise from outside, purely endogenous approaches may underestimate structural constraints and the need for external connections. Neo-endogenous development focuses on how local actors mobilize external resources while maintaining influence over development priorities (Shucksmith, 2010; van der Ploeg et al., 2000). Networks connecting rural areas with markets, governments, firms, and knowledge institutions are therefore central to contemporary rural development (Murdoch, 2000; Woods, 2007). This perspective provides two implications for village clusters. First, development territories may not correspond to administrative boundaries. Tourism resources, agricultural brands, ecological systems, or service networks often require cooperation among multiple villages. Second, external resources do not automatically empower or weaken local communities. Their effects depend on whether local actors possess the organizational capacity to negotiate resource use and benefit distribution (Bosworth et al., 2016; Bock, 2016).

2.2. Collaborative Governance, Network Organization, and Functional Territorialization

Collaborative governance explains why interdependence does not automatically generate cooperation.

Ansell and Gash (2008) identify initial conditions, facilitative leadership, institutional design, and trust-building processes as key factors in cross-boundary collaboration. Emerson et al. (2012) further emphasize the importance of shared motivation and capacity for joint action. These insights are relevant to village clusters because participating villages differ in resources, leadership, and bargaining power, requiring institutional arrangements that support credible cooperation. Network governance research highlights that different organizational forms generate different outcomes. Provan and Kenis (2008) distinguish participant-governed networks, lead-organization networks, and network administrative organizations, suggesting that governance structures should match network characteristics. Inter-village clusters often combine these forms: villages participate in collective decision-making, while a focal organization or operating company may coordinate implementation. Therefore, analysis should focus on how different organizations perform different functions rather than treating the entire arrangement as a single alliance. Metagovernance provides a useful perspective for understanding Party-led coordination. Sørensen and Torfing (2009) argue that metagovernors shape self-organizing networks by establishing rules, connecting actors, and facilitating cooperation rather than directly controlling all activities. Similarly, Party organizations may coordinate villages and external actors by defining shared goals, building institutional links, and resolving collective-action problems. However, coordination capacity does not necessarily equal operational capacity. Polycentric governance further suggests that multiple decision centers can coexist through shared rules and coordination mechanisms (Ostrom, 2010). In village clusters, administrative villages may retain ownership and self-governing functions while cooperating in specific development activities. However, formal preservation of village boundaries does not guarantee effective autonomy if decision-making power over assets, projects, and returns becomes practically centralized.

2.3. Party Leadership, Village Collectives, and Operating Organizations in Rural China

Research on rural China highlights the complex relationship among state coordination, collective property, and village self-government. Village Party branches are embedded within the Party-state system, while villagers' committees and collective economic organizations have different institutional foundations. Previous studies show that rural governance cannot be fully understood through formal organizational structures alone, as authority, accountability, and local practices often overlap (Sun et al., 2013; Tsai, 2007; Zhang et al., 2004). Recent studies indicate a stronger role of Party organizations in village governance. Hillman (2025) shows that deeper Party involvement can enhance policy coordination and implementation capacity, while also creating potential tensions between village autonomy and administrative priorities. In inter-village development, Party coordination may address collective-action problems by connecting villages and government agencies. However, its effectiveness depends on whether coordination creates genuine cooperation rather than administrative control. The relationship between political authority and economic operation is another important issue. Research on local state corporatism demonstrates how political organizations can mobilize resources by linking administrative capacity with economic activities (Oi, 1992; Walder, 1995). Contemporary rural operating companies differ from earlier township and village enterprises, but similar questions remain regarding accountability, risk distribution, and the relationship between public coordination and market operation. Studies on rural shareholding and collective transformation further show that corporatization can clarify asset rights and generate distributable income, but it may also reshape membership relations and decision-making structures (Po, 2008; Kan, 2016; Zhang & Donaldson, 2008). Recent research on rural China therefore emphasizes hybrid governance, in which the state, village organizations, enterprises, and residents perform different but interconnected functions (Shen & Shen, 2018; Liu et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2021). These findings suggest an organizational-coupling perspective: Party organizations provide political coordination, collective institutions represent village interests, operating organizations provide market capabilities, and residents contribute participation and legitimacy. Successful territorial development requires these functions to be connected without being merged into a single authority structure. At the same time, governance risks cannot be ignored. Existing research warns that community-based initiatives may suffer from elite capture, unequal participation, and weak accountability (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Mattingly, 2016; Platteau, 2004). Therefore, analysis of village clusters should examine who controls assets, who bears risks, how benefits are distributed, and whether ordinary residents have meaningful participation.

2.4. Developmental Social Policy and the Socialization of Economic Returns

Developmental social policy challenges the separation between economic growth and social welfare. Midgley (1999) argues that development should connect economic production, redistribution, and welfare rather than treating social support as a post-growth adjustment. Studies of East Asian welfare systems further show that social policies may initially serve economic objectives but can gradually expand toward broader social goals (Holliday, 2000; Kwon, 2005). For rural development, economic success cannot be measured only by increased revenue, tourism projects, or asset activation. The key question is whether economic gains generate wider social benefits. Following developmental social policy perspectives (Deeming & Smyth, 2015), the socialization of economic returns requires observable links between income generation and collective benefits, such as skills development, public services, care support, or assistance for residents beyond direct economic participants. This does not mean that rural operating organizations should replace government welfare functions. Rather, it asks whether economic arrangements expand local capacity to provide shared social goods and whether benefit distribution becomes stable and transparent.

2.5. Analytical Framework and Conditional Propositions

Based on the above literature, this article defines a territorial development community as an inter-village arrangement with three features: sustained coordination, an effective operating organization, and predictable benefit feedback. A formal agreement or alliance is not enough. The key issue is whether villages can build the capacity for collective action while maintaining their administrative and collective identities. The first mechanism is functional territorialization. Party-led coordination identifies problems beyond individual villages, builds communication platforms, and enables cooperation at a larger functional scale. Proposition 1 suggests that Party-led organization can create a functional territory when villages face shared challenges and establish stable coordination procedures without administrative consolidation. The second mechanism is political-market organizational coupling. Party organizations and local governments provide coordination and institutional support, while operating organizations contribute investment, management, and market capabilities. Proposition 2 argues that territorial cooperation becomes development capacity when political coordination is combined with accountable operating organizations and clear role divisions. The third mechanism is institutionalized benefit feedback. Cooperation is more sustainable when property rights, decision-making, risks, and returns are clearly defined. Proposition 3 suggests that inter-village cooperation is more likely to continue when benefits follow transparent rules of contribution and distribution rather than temporary administrative arrangements. The fourth mechanism is the socialization of economic returns. Economic gains support broader development when they improve public goods, resident capabilities, and social welfare beyond direct commercial interests. Proposition 4 argues that territorial development communities deepen when economic returns are reinvested through transparent arrangements that benefit wider groups. These mechanisms may not develop at the same pace. Coordination may exist without effective operation; companies may generate profits without broad participation; and collective income may increase without lasting social reinvestment. Therefore, this framework examines how these mechanisms interact rather than viewing Party leadership itself as evidence of development success.

3. Methodology and Case Materials

This study adopts a structured, focused comparison of three village clusters in Zhejiang Province. Case studies are suitable for examining organizational processes and how similar development challenges are addressed through different institutional arrangements (Gerring, 2004). The cases are not intended to represent all Chinese village clusters. Instead, they are selected to maintain a relatively similar provincial context while showing differences in resource conditions, operating structures, and forms of Party-led coordination. Therefore, the study aims to provide analytical comparison rather than population-level causal inference (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Zhejiang provides an appropriate setting because its rural areas have actively explored collective economic organizations, professional rural operation, and village-cluster development under common-prosperity initiatives. The study examines Yushang Rice Country in Yuhang District, Jiangnan Xiwang Valley in Linhai City, and Badujie in Changxing County. Yushang Rice Country emphasizes joint operation through an eight-village company, Xiwang Valley combines Party coordination, state-owned investment, professional operation, and village participation, while Badujie relies more on shared scenic resources, collective property retention, and joint investment. These differences allow the study to examine how Party-led coordination interacts with organizational and resource conditions.

The study covers the period from 2019 to July 2026 and draws on local case materials, policy documents, government websites, public reports, and international literature. Because many sources were produced by governments, operating organizations, or media reports of successful practices, they may emphasize achievements while providing limited information on conflicts, risks, or unequal outcomes. To reduce overinterpretation, the analysis focuses on publicly verifiable organizational features, including participating villages, coordination arrangements, operating organizations, resource contributions, and benefit mechanisms. Reported figures on tourism, revenue, or collective income are treated as source-based claims rather than independently verified outcomes. The comparison focuses on four mechanisms: functional territorialization, organizational coupling between political coordination and market operation, institutionalized benefit feedback, and the social use of economic returns. The study examines how villages cooperate beyond administrative boundaries, how different actors divide responsibilities, how benefits and risks are distributed, and whether economic gains generate broader social benefits. Since the study does not include interviews, surveys, or internal financial records, it makes stronger claims about organizational arrangements than about actual bargaining processes or long-term performance. The findings should therefore be understood as analytical explanations rather than definitive causal proof.

4. Comparative Case Findings

4.1. Yushang Rice Country: A Party Alliance Coupled with a Joint Operating Company

Yushang Rice Country covers eight administrative villages in Yuhang Subdistrict. According to official materials, the subdistrict promoted Party-led cooperation, and village-owned development companies from the eight villages jointly established Hangzhou Yushang Rice Country Operation and Management Co., Ltd. The company is responsible for integrated planning, branding, operation, and sales (Hangzhou Municipal CPPCC, 2025; Yuhang District Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, 2025). This creates a dual structure: the Party alliance provides coordination, while the company provides a legal and operational platform. The functional territory of Yushang Rice Country is built around shared agricultural landscapes, branding, visitor flows, and complementary village products. Villages retain their administrative status and collective assets, but development issues can be addressed through a common platform. This arrangement reflects functional territorialization rather than administrative integration. Digital platforms, traffic-sharing mechanisms, and professional operators further connect local resources with markets and external knowledge. The case provides strong evidence for the combination of political coordination and operational organization. The joint company allows the cluster to conduct contracts, product development, and brand management beyond the capacity of individual villages. However, available sources do not reveal equity structures, voting rights, risk-sharing arrangements, or decision-making procedures among the eight villages. It is therefore unclear whether all villages have equal influence or whether stronger actors dominate strategic decisions. Public materials describe benefit channels including operating income, employment opportunities, and the strengthening of collective economies. The introduction of rural professional managers may also improve local operational capacity. However, current evidence does not show how returns are distributed among villages or households, nor whether there are stable arrangements linking economic gains to public services or social support. Overall, Yushang Rice Country demonstrates a relatively mature model of Party-led coordination and market operation, but evidence of inclusive benefit sharing and social reinvestment remains limited.

4.2. Jiangnan Xiwang Valley: Party Coordination, Public Capital, and Professional Operation

Jiangnan Xiwang Valley connects six villages with ancient settlements, farmland, traditional houses, and valley landscapes. Public materials describe a model combining Party leadership, state-owned investment, professional operation, and village participation through shares or resource contribution (People's Daily, 2024; Peng, 2024). Compared with Yushang Rice Country, this case shows a more differentiated organizational structure, in which political coordination, capital support, market operation, and collective resources are assigned to different actors. The need for cooperation comes from the spatial and ownership fragmentation of rural resources. Tourism routes, infrastructure, environmental management, and product development require coordination across villages. Party organizations and local government help align villages, coordinate public resources, and reduce transaction costs. State-owned platforms provide investment capacity, while professional operators contribute market knowledge, product design, and destination management. This division of roles reflects the organizational-coupling mechanism proposed in this article.

However, this model also creates potential dependency and accountability issues. Public capital may reduce early investment risks, but available sources do not show whether operating returns can be sustained without continued public support. Villages may contribute land, buildings, or other resources while lacking sufficient information to evaluate contracts and monitor performance. Therefore, the separation of political coordination and market operation is important, but institutional safeguards remain necessary. Compared with the other cases, Xiwang Valley provides stronger evidence of benefit feedback. Public reports describe multiple channels, including rent, dividends, employment, house or land leasing, and resident businesses. Some operating income is also reported to support common-prosperity initiatives, such as entrepreneurship support and assistance for vulnerable groups (People's Daily, 2024). These arrangements suggest that benefits are not limited to collective income but may reach different groups through different pathways. Nevertheless, the available evidence remains incomplete. The sources do not provide detailed rules for fund allocation, beneficiary selection, resident oversight, or risk distribution during market downturns. It is therefore difficult to determine the long-term sustainability and fairness of these mechanisms. Overall, Xiwang Valley provides the strongest evidence among the three cases for organizational coupling and benefit feedback, but whether it can build lasting local capacity beyond external support requires further observation.

4.3. Badujie: Joint Operation, Resource Interdependence, and a Pressure Test

Badujie involves five administrative villages connected by an ancient ginkgo corridor and related cultural, forest, and tourism resources. Because the scenic landscape crosses village boundaries, tourism development requires joint planning, environmental management, and coordinated operation. In 2019, township coordination supported the establishment of a tourism-oriented village-owned company jointly funded by the five villages, with differentiated projects and participation from village collectives, residents, and other investors (Hangzhou Daily, 2025; People's Tribune Online, 2021; Zhejiang Economic Information Center, 2025). Badujie demonstrates functional territorialization through strong resource interdependence. The shared scenic resource creates a practical incentive for cooperation, while the jointly funded company provides an operating platform beyond individual villages. Public materials emphasize voluntary participation, retained collective property rights, joint investment, and risk sharing. These arrangements help reduce concerns about asset loss and maintain village-level interests within the larger development framework. However, Badujie also shows that Party coordination is not the only explanation for cooperation. Compared with Yushang Rice Country, public materials provide less information about cross-village Party arrangements and place greater emphasis on resource complementarity and market opportunities. Villages along the same tourism corridor may cooperate because fragmented management would reduce the value of shared resources.

The case therefore supports a configurational explanation. Party and township coordination may help establish cooperation, while resource connection, collective property rights, and expected market returns provide additional foundations. The jointly funded company may align village interests by linking participation with potential returns. However, available sources do not disclose ownership shares, decision procedures, financing arrangements, or mechanisms for addressing unequal resource contributions. Benefit channels include collective income, employment, resident businesses, and tourism-related asset appreciation. Yet evidence of broader social reinvestment remains limited. The available materials do not identify stable arrangements for using economic returns to support public services, care, training, or assistance. Badujie therefore provides strong evidence that shared resources and joint operation can support territorial cooperation, but less evidence that such cooperation has developed into a broadly inclusive social development model.

5. Discussion

The comparison shows that Party-led inter-village coordination first works as a mechanism of scale building. It creates a functional territory around shared landscapes, brands, visitor routes, or development problems. Such territory is not naturally given but produced through agenda setting, organizational links, and repeated coordination. This finding supports place-based approaches that view territory as an institutional arrangement shaped by local actors and capacities rather than a fixed geographic unit (Barca et al., 2012). Party organizations are able to perform this role because they connect villages with higher-level governments and other local actors. They can define common goals, coordinate resources, and maintain cooperation across administrative boundaries. In this sense, Party coordination functions as a form of metagovernance that enables collective action (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). However, functional territorialization does not mean administrative expansion. Villages retain their collective ownership and self-governing functions, while cooperation occurs through shared organizations and agreements. The key challenge is preventing functional platforms from becoming hidden hierarchies. If companies, townships, or stronger villages dominate decisions without meaningful participation, coordination may weaken rather than strengthen local autonomy. The comparison therefore suggests that Party leadership should be understood as a coordination mechanism rather than direct evidence of successful development.

The cases also show that coordination capacity and development capacity are different. Party organizations can bring actors together, but they cannot replace market operation, contract management, product design, or customer development. Operating companies and professional teams provide these functions by converting territorial cooperation into concrete projects. The three cases demonstrate different forms of political-market coupling: Yushang Rice Country links a Party alliance with a village-owned operating company; Xiwang Valley combines Party coordination with state-owned investment and professional operation; and Badujie connects township coordination with a jointly funded tourism company. These arrangements work when political and market actors perform complementary roles. However, blurred responsibilities may create accountability problems, as administrative actors may influence business decisions and companies may control key information and resources (Oi, 1992; Walder, 1995; Kan, 2016). Sustainable cooperation also depends on institutionalized benefit feedback. Villages and residents contribute different resources, including land, assets, labor, and environmental value. Therefore, benefit arrangements need to recognize diverse contributions while maintaining cooperation among unequal actors. The cases show multiple feedback channels, including rent, dividends, wages, project income, and common funds. Yet the existence of benefits does not guarantee long-term cooperation. Clear rules for contribution, distribution, risk sharing, and decision-making are essential for building trust and reducing uncertainty (Provan & Kenis, 2008). Current evidence remains limited because public sources rarely disclose internal negotiations, financial arrangements, or the perspectives of ordinary collective members. Benefit feedback can therefore be identified as an important mechanism, but its fairness and durability require further verification (Mattingly, 2016; Platteau, 2004).

A further finding concerns the relationship between economic gains and social development. The three cases demonstrate asset activation, tourism development, collective income growth, and employment opportunities. However, evidence that these gains have been transformed into stable social benefits remains limited. A territorial development community requires more than increasing collective revenue; it also requires mechanisms that support public services, resident capabilities, and vulnerable groups (Midgley, 1999). Without clear arrangements for revenue allocation and social investment, common-prosperity goals may remain largely aspirational (Holliday, 2000; Deeming & Smyth, 2015). Finally, Party coordination is not the only explanation for village-cluster development. The three cases also benefit from favorable resources, tourism demand, public investment, and professional management. Badujie particularly shows that shared resources and market opportunities can independently encourage cooperation. Therefore, Party-led coordination should be viewed as a conditional mechanism that interacts with resource conditions, property arrangements, organizational capacity, and market demand. Its effectiveness depends on whether villages face genuine interdependence, operating organizations have professional capabilities, and benefit arrangements are sufficiently transparent. The main risks are organizational decoupling, when companies or coordination platforms replace village participation; benefit decoupling, when economic gains are not fairly distributed; and economic-social decoupling, when collective income increases without broader social investment.

6. Conclusion

This article examined how Party-led coordination enables fragmented administrative villages to form a territorial development community without formal administrative merger. Comparing Yushang Rice Country, Xiwang Valley, and Badujie, the study identifies four mechanisms: functional territorialization, political-market organizational coupling, benefit feedback, and the socialization of economic returns. The findings show that Party-led coordination mainly creates the conditions for cross-village cooperation by connecting actors, aligning resources, and building a shared action space beyond administrative boundaries. However, coordination alone does not produce development. Sustainable outcomes depend on effective operating organizations, clear division of responsibilities, and institutionalized arrangements for property, risk, and benefit distribution. The study also shows that economic growth does not automatically lead to broader social development. Although the cases demonstrate new forms of asset activation, collective income, and employment opportunities, evidence of stable social reinvestment remains limited. Party leadership should therefore be understood as a conditional organizational mechanism rather than a sufficient cause of rural development. Its effects depend on resource conditions, professional capacity, market demand, and inclusive governance arrangements. For practice, village clusters should remain functionally organized rather than become additional administrative layers. Clear rights, accountable organizations, transparent benefit rules, and stable social investment mechanisms are necessary to transform inter-village coordination into more sustainable and inclusive territorial development.

7. Contributions and Limitations

This article contributes to place-based development research by showing that functional territory is an organizational process rather than simply a geographic scale. It also extends collaborative-governance research by identifying political-market coupling as a mechanism that connects coordination with development action. For rural China research, the article distinguishes Party coordination from market operation and highlights the role of village collectives as institutional actors. The findings should be interpreted with caution. The study relies on public sources and cannot fully verify profitability, fairness, or internal decision-making processes. The cases are all from Zhejiang Province, where strong public capacity and market conditions may limit wider generalization. Future research should combine fieldwork and longitudinal comparison to further examine participation, distribution, and the durability of village-cluster cooperation.

Case Source Materials

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Author Biography

1. Aiwen Liu, Master's candidate of Dalian Ocean University. Secretary of the Party Branch and Principal of Xi'an Gaoxin School for Special Education; her research interest is agricultural management.

2. Yida Wang, Graduate student, School of Marxism, Dalian Ocean University. Her research interest is Sinicization of Marxism.

3. Jing Cai, PhD, School of Marxism, Dalian Ocean University, Professor. Her research Interests are Sinicization of Marxism and Ocean Governance. Senior Teacher.