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**AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP
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OF VILLAGE CADRES AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN
WESTERN CHINA**

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An Empirical Investigation of the Relationship between the Competency and Social Capital of Village Cadres and Rural Development in Western China

Hui LIU¹

Abstract

The critical role of village cadres in China's rural development, especially western rural development, has attracted significant academic attention. However, existing research mainly focuses on qualitative discussions at the institutional level, and fewer studies are in-depth empirical investigations. Using field survey data of rural areas in Shaanxi Province of China in 2011, an in-depth empirical investigation of the relationship between village cadre competency and rural development, as well as the moderating effect of the village cadre social capital in this relationship, were explored in this study. Results show that three dimensions of village cadre competency (i.e., achievement motivation, individual influence and administrative leadership capabilities) are positively correlated with rural development. Achievement motivation of village cadres can stimulate individual behaviors, and individual influence and administrative leadership capabilities can benefit the establishment of a confidence mechanism and promote social innovation. Furthermore, the social capital of village cadres strengthens the positive relationship between village cadre competency and rural development. When village cadres possess richer network resources in social capital, their competency can easily promote rural development through mobilization of the social structure. The results obtained in this study reveal the relationships between village cadre competency, social capital, and rural development, which also support the discussion of social transformational development in rural areas at the micro-level to a certain extent.

Keywords: village cadres, competency, social capital, rural development.

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Introduction

In contrast to other factors that influence rural development, the significant role of village cadres in rural development in western China has received increasing attention from scholars. Since the reform, the gap between the rural development of western and mid-eastern China has grown. In economic terms, well-off households comprise 15% of the households in western villages, whereas they comprise more than 40% and 60% of the households in central and eastern villages, respectively. In terms of population quality, well-off households comprise 34.1%, 17.9%, and 45% of the households in the eastern, central, and western villages, respectively. The gap has grown by 79.1 percentage points between the eastern and western villages and 62.9 percentage points between the central and western villages (Department of Rural Survey of National Bureau of Statistics, 2010). In general, the economic development of the rural areas in western China is relatively backward, with villagers often receiving less education than their counterparts in other regions. Thus, under the prevalent influence of conservative ideologies and weak innovative ideas, village cadres theoretically exert significant influence.

Village autonomy in China has a 30-year history since Hezhai Village in Yizhou City of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region first achieved self-governance (Wang, 2014). During this period, numerous village collectives rapidly developed because of the individual influence of village cadres, such as Huaxi Village in Jiangsu Province, Fubao Village in Yunan Province, Nanjie Village in Henan Province, and Xiaogang Village in Anhui Province. Studies have shown that, apart from external forces, village cadres constitute a critical part of the economic, social, and ecological development of rural areas. The personal competency of village cadres is especially important in serving as the backbone for villagers confronted with a myriad of rural development challenges (Song, 2009; Wang, 2012; Chen 2015). Nevertheless, the vast majority of research on the role of village cadres in rural development has been qualitative, indicating both a gap and opportunity for empirical research.

This study conducts an empirical analysis of the relationship between the competency of village cadres and rural development, as well as the moderating effect of the social capital of village cadres in this relationship. Using a unique data collected from the villages of Shaanxi Province, China, this study examines the role of village cadres in rural development and provides a reference for the modes by which endogenetic power can be utilized to change the backward conditions prevalent in the rural areas of western China. Multiple regression analysis is used to inspect and analyze the influence of the competency of village cadres on rural development and the regulative function of their social capital. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 proposes the research hypotheses, which are based on the literature review. Section 3 describes

the data source and concept operationalization of various variables. Sections 4 and 5 analyze and discuss the results of the investigation. The conclusions are summarized in Section 6.

Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

Relationship between Village Cadres and Rural Development

Village cadres have a significant role in rural society, politics, and economic development. The consciousness of responsibility and working competence of these individuals are directly associated with rural development (Wang & Ning, 2009). Given the prevailing phenomena of “capable persons governing the village” and “elites governing the village,” studies on capable persons and elites in villages also incorporate investigations on the relationship between village cadres and rural development (Paniagua, 2015; Smith, 2015; Ansoms, 2009). Zheng (2009) identified that village elites lead farmer organizations because of their strong organization and coordination capabilities, personal influence, charisma, and individual interests. In addition, they act as advocates and supporters of rural social ethics because of their acquaintance and semi-acquaintance with social characteristics in rural areas. As such, village elites have an irreplaceable role in the construction of rural civilization. Based on the research of villages in Jinlin, Ni and Wang (2013) showed that village elites take advantage of their own economic and social resources to positively push rural development forward.

Many scholars are aware of the significant role of village cadres in rural development, given their multiple identities of being leaders in the creation of farmer wealth, advocates of agricultural technology, and keepers of rural social stability. However, although it has been the subject of in-depth discussions, the exact role of these individuals in rural development, particularly the manner by which their personal capabilities and traits influence such development, is greatly limited in terms of conceptual explanation, not to mention systematic empirical research. Thus, this subject needs further investigation. Based on a model of the competency of village cadres (Liu & Liang, 2012), this research examines the link between village cadres and rural development and empirically analyzes the relationship of various factors. The competence factors of village cadres can be classified into three dimensions: achievement motivation, individual influence, and administrative leadership capabilities. In addition, these factors exhibit 12 specific indicators: upward mobility, capture of opportunities, strategy, persuasive power, organization capability, decision capability, consciousness of responsibility, achievement, personal prestige, coordination capability, communication capability, and lucrative capability. These dimensions and indicators represent the external behavior and internal motivations of village cadres, as embodied in their

competency under specific working conditions. The subsequent chapters of this paper illustrate the influence of village cadre competency on rural development from the above three dimensions and propose the corresponding research hypotheses.

Influences of the Achievement Motivation of Village Cadres on Rural Development

Achievement motivation, which is also known as achievement requirement or achievement orientation, is a dimension of village cadre competency that includes four specific indicators: upward mobility, consciousness of responsibility, capture of opportunities, and sense of achievement. Considerable research demonstrates the close relationship between achievement motivation and personal working performance. In a large-scale empirical investigation, McClelland (1962) concluded that a corporation with numerous employees with great achievement motivation develops rapidly and that a country with a large number of such corporations may enjoy faster economic growth than the average global level.

Scholars also recognize the correlation between achievement motivation and work behaviors. For example, Bartkus and Howell (1999) pointed out that an employee with high achievement motivation exhibits not only a longer working time but also a more positive attitude despite frustrations and criticism than an employee with low achievement motivation. Highly motivated employees are inclined to improve their working performance through their own efforts. Barling and Bosweel (1995) added that employees with high achievement motivation proactively work. Other scholars concluded that such employees show their competitiveness through strong governance potential and efficient working method (Ward, 1995). Achievement motivation is a necessary element for the promotion of general managers into senior leaders because the objective orientation of this element may urge individuals to regulate their behavior and spontaneously invest time, energy, and other creative resources in accordance with their creative performance orientation (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). Yin, Huang and Wang (2013) proposed that the achievement motivation of private enterprise leaders in China is positively related to the internalization degree of enterprises.

Few studies have examined the relationship between the achievement motivation of village cadres and rural development, whereas others have focused on the relationship between the individual qualities of village cadres and rural development, particularly the functions of their upward mobility, sense of responsibility, and brave spirit in promoting this progress. Considering the cases of brilliant village cadres, we can also conclude that village cadres with high achievement motivation have a strong sense of upward mobility and responsibility in achieving practical governance work. These individuals are firm, persistent, and

reliable in confronting hurdles. Thus, the achievement motivation of village cadres is the source power of rural development.

Based on the analyses above, this study proposes the following hypothesis: *Hypothesis 1a*: The achievement motivation of village cadres is significantly positively correlated with rural development.

Effects of the Individual Influence of Village Cadres on Rural Development

Village cadres act as the first-line village managers, and their individual influence mainly refer to their capabilities to change the mentality and behavior of their fellowmen in relation to the governance of village affairs. According to the nature of influence, research divides leadership influence into two categories: power and non-power influence. In contrast to most leaders in enterprises and institutions, village cadres possess limited power and therefore depend on non-power influence to lead a village.

Studies reveal that the non-power influence of leaders has an important role in governance activities. This kind of influence propels villagers to voluntarily adhere to the direction of the leaders, thereby assuring the perfect implementation of leadership power, the synthesis of organizational cohesion, and the promotion of team effectiveness. In addition, non-power influence determines the place and image of leaders in the mind of coordinated objects and therefore establishes the success of the ultimate coordination behavior of the leaders. In other words, non-power influence provides leaders with a strong drive to accomplish their tasks (Xue, 2009).

The influence of village cadres is characterized by their spontaneous individual influence, which is a synthesis of their personal charm and prestige. Emotional communication, relationship coordination, and calling function form the basis of such influence and constitute the charismatic leadership style of village cadres. “Charm” is the spontaneous attractiveness and influencing power of leaders on their subordinates. Other scholars also give evidence to the promotion function of charm-oriented leadership style on team performance (Zehir, 2014; Vlachos, Panagopoulos, & Rapp, 2013; Hu & Weng, 2015). Considering the cases of brilliant village cadres, we can also conclude that the individual influence of village cadres definitely has an important role in the governance of village affairs. A decent and responsible village cadre with high personal prestige can easily obtain the trust and support of his fellow villagers, thereby providing great motivation. In other words, the individual influence of village cadres constitutes the core power of village cohesion and rural development.

Given the above discussion, this study proposes the following hypothesis: *Hypothesis 1b*: The individual influence of village cadres is significantly positively correlated with rural development.

Influences of the Administrative Leadership Capabilities of Village Cadres on Rural Development

The third dimension of the village cadre competency involves administrative leadership capabilities, which include coordination, decision, communication, and lucrative capabilities. Scholars confirm the positive role of such capabilities in promoting governance performance and realizing governance objectives (Carter, 2009; Qiao, Song, & Wei, 2012).

Given the continuous advancements in the rural economy, the phenomenon of “capable person governing the village” has prevailed in recent years, and “village capable persons” have an irreplaceable role in rural economic development. Lu (2011) claimed that the “capable person governing the village” can bring about favorable governance performance, help operate the village public power, and innovate the first-line governance methods of the village. Capable persons in a village have strong administrative leadership capabilities, extensive knowledge, and creative minds. These individuals can generally lead their fellow villagers to create wealth as a group.

Considering the cases of brilliant village cadres, we can also conclude that the administrative leadership capabilities of village cadres certainly have an important role in dealing with practical village affairs, establishing the interpersonal relationships of the villagers, and creating wealth. In particular, village cadres with strong organizational and communication skills can easily coordinate interpersonal relationships within the community, stimulate the enthusiasm of villagers, and seize timely opportunities. The capability to create wealth is the fundamental assurance of the role of village cadres as leaders. For most rural areas in western China, the capability of village cadres to create wealth determines whether or not the local villagers can overcome poverty, achieve prosperity, and improve their quality of life. In conclusion, the administrative leadership capabilities of village cadres provide efficient assurance in promoting rural development.

As such, this study formulates the following hypothesis: *Hypothesis 1c*: The administrative leadership capabilities of village cadres are significantly positively correlated with rural development.

Social Capital of Village Cadres and Rural Development

The academic field is yet to achieve a consensus in defining social capital, which is interpreted by many scholars from various perspectives. Bourdieu (1986) regarded social capital as “a practical or potential synthesis of resources that acts

as a persistent network with familiar and institutionalized relationships, namely, a synthesis of group members' identity," and the capacity or amount of capital contained in the connection determines the size of social capital. Coleman (1990) considered social capital as an aspect of social structure and "a social structural resource of individual capital." In practical implementation, social capital includes both individual and group levels (Wang, 2009). Individual-level social capital emphasizes the resources embedded in the social connections of individuals that can be obtained and used in certain activities with precise objectives. By contrast, group-level social capital refers to social connection resources that can be obtained and mobilized by a group that acts as an action unit.

Village cadres possess individual-level social capital. Considering all the perspectives of scholars, this research defines the social capital of village cadres as a kind of social resource that extensively exists in the individual social networks of these leaders. These resources can be invested and used to achieve specific objectives. The social capital of individuals can be determined by two factors. The first factor is the size of social relation network that can be obtained and utilized effectively by individuals. The second is the amount of capital that can be obtained by individuals in relevant social networks (Julia, 2011). Following the work of Bourdieu, this research employs these factors to examine the social capital of village cadres. First, network structure is adopted to mainly inspect most fundamental structural conditions of the social relation network of village cadres, such as network size and density. Second, the resources embedded in individual social networks are mainly used to examine the occupational characteristics of all members and corresponding social status resources in the social networks of village cadres.

Size of the Social Network of Village Cadres

The size of the social network of village cadres refers to the overall quantity of the related members existing in such network, thereby reflecting the extent of the leaders' social circle. Studies on social support networks indicate that, with a large social network, individuals can gain further support from network members. The theory of social capital also assumes that the size of social relation network determines whether or not individuals can obtain sufficient social capital. When an individual has extensive relations with the outside world, it has numerous channels through which to obtain or utilize various resources at present or in the future (Lin, 2005). Thus, the size of the social network of village cadres is a key element in their individual social capital. In other words, if village cadres possess a large-sized social network, then they can obtain a relatively large social capital.

Density of the Social Network of Village Cadres

The density of the social network of village cadres reflects their position in the network and is equal to the ratio between the quantity of practical and potential relations in this network. Certain scholars observe a significantly positive relation between the relationship and intimacy of members in the network. The relation among relatives is generally stronger than that among friends and acquaintances who have only a few strong relations (Bian, 1997). Thus, researchers usually consider the ratio between the number of relatives and all members in a network as the estimated value of the density of the social capital network of individuals. Given a high ratio of relatives in their social network, individuals can hardly obtain uniform and valuable social resources from their social network and therefore have an inadequate amount of social capital.

Social Network Resources of Village Cadres

The social network resources of village cadres consist of their overall information on all occupations and social statuses contained in such network that may be represented by network resource grade. If village cadres have abundant network resources, then their networks may consist of numerous members with high social status. In turn, village cadres may obtain a large social capital.

Relation is a cultural production in China that can be transformed into the social capital of individuals. This element is conducive to building a favorable relation with the outside world and elevating business performance. Through social relations, individuals can compensate for their own defects by obtaining and utilizing external resources, such as the knowledge, information, and capital of other network members (Ian, Jamie, & Paresh, 2015). Social capital is also important for village cadres. Yu, He, and Yang (2011) examined 59 villages in Guangdong Province and determined that the clan background and family social network of village cadres are significantly positively related to their working performance. In their analyses of X Village in G City, Tan and Cai (2015) concluded that elite village cadres have more social capital than commoners and therefore greatly influence rural development.

Proposal of Research Hypotheses on Regulation Effect

From the case analysis of brilliant village cadres, the author has observed that the social capital of village cadres has an important role in addressing practical village affairs.

First, village cadres can easily overcome all the hurdles they encounter in developing the rural economy, including capital shortage and technological issues, when they have several acquaintances and funding channels.

“Before I took office, our village did not have any concrete roads yet. The surface of roads turned into mud every time it rained. Immediately after I assumed office, the first thing I did is to repair the several roads of our village. However, the allocated funds from the county were inadequate, thus, I had to use my own savings and even lend money from friends. I have done business before I became a village head, hence, my friends trust me. Finally, I settled all my financial issues and repaired the village roads. This undertaking has allowed me to gain recognition and respect from the villagers” (Reported by Mr. RONG, who is the headman of Miaodi village).

Second, village cadres with close relationships with other leaders in villages or counties can easily limit their expenditures or programs for their own villages.

“The agriculture and research institutes in the county and province collaborate to promote the planting technology for organic vegetables, and five villages are required to be the pilot villages in our county. Fortunately, our village has been chosen. After knowing this news, I actively seized the opportunity. I am already familiar with the leaders in the county because I often work for them. I always visit them at festivals. These leaders also highly praise my work. I clearly presented my resolution. Ultimately, our village became one of the pilot villages for planting organic vegetables. County leaders allocated funds and distributed technicians to give advice in planting. Since then, the life of my fellow villagers has greatly improved” (Reported by Mr. ZHANG, who is the headman of Babao village).

Third, village cadres with extensive social interaction scale and knowledge can easily seize opportunities, break norms, and lead villagers to make breakthroughs.

“I was born in 1965 and worked in a village construction company when I was 17. Before I went back to our village, I sold construction materials for several years. In 1995, I was elected as the manager of a village construction company. At the end of 2005, I took office as the village secretary. Our village is located in the poor suburb of a county with a population of over 1200 and inadequate resources. Land dilapidation is relatively serious in our area. When I became the village secretary, I began to utilize investment promotions to activate the village economy. However, the village committee and villagers did not support my plan at first because they did not realize the importance of integration of resources. I have some creative ideas because of my experiences through the years. I think that farmers cannot create wealth if they stick to their old concepts all the time. I then invited several company employers to invest in the programs of our villages. For two years, my fellow villagers gained increased income. Compared with other villages, the most obvious characteristic of our village is insufficient creative thinking” (Reported by Mr. QIN, who is the headman of Xiangshui village).

This research believes that the social capital of village cadres has a regulative role in the relationship between their competency and rural development. A high social capital level is conducive for the competency of village cadres at work and

therefore promotes rural development. By contrast, a low level of social capital of village cadres can negatively affect their competence at work and therefore impede rural development.

Given the above analyses, this study hypothesizes the following:

Hypothesis 2a: The size of the network of village cadres has a positive regulative influence on the relationship between the competency of village cadres (i.e., achievement motivation, individual influences, and administrative leadership capabilities) and rural development.

Hypothesis 2b: The density of the network of village cadres has a negative regulative influence on the relationship between the competency of village cadres (i.e., achievement motivation, individual influences, and administrative leadership capabilities) and rural development.

Hypothesis 2c: The network resources of village cadres have a positive regulative influence on the relationship between the competency of village cadres (i.e., achievement motivation, individual influences, and administrative leadership capabilities) and rural development.

Data and Research Variables

Data Source

This research adopts a questionnaire to collect relevant data from the trainee resources of the “Training Course of Village Party Branch Secretary and Villager’s Committee Director for New Rural Construction” in Northwest Agriculture and Forestry University. The training course covers the entire Shaanxi Province, and every region receives its own specific training. This study adopts a probability and random sampling method to investigate 727 village cadres in seven regions (i.e., Weinan, Hanzhong, Ankang, Yulin, Xian, Tongchuan, and Baoji) of Shaanxi Province. The investigation was conducted from March 2011 until August 2011. We accordingly complemented the collected data by performing two additional investigations in March 2013 and May 2014. A total of 628 questionnaires were collected, 415 of which were effective. In other words, the recovery rate and the effective recovery rate of the questionnaire were 86.4% and 57.1%, respectively.

Although the scale design of this research is based on mature scales with favorable reliability and validity at home and abroad, the author still modified and adjusted the questionnaire according to the research objectives and respondent characteristics. Considering the influence of domestic social culture, the author also examines the reliability and validity of the developed questionnaire. The Cronbach's α of each dimension of the village cadre competency is obtained. The achievement motivation, individual influence, and administrative leadership

capabilities of the village cadres are 0.705 (Table 1), 0.718 (Table 2), and 0.714 (Table 3), respectively. The competency tables of the village cadres are characterized by a relatively high reliability. To measure the structure validity of the questionnaire, this research also conducts factor analysis. Consistent with the three dimensions in the competency tables, this research altogether extracts three factors (Table 5) to calculate the value of Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) as 0.893 (Table 4). Based on the judgment of Wu (2010), the competency tables of the village cadres evidently exhibit favorable structure validity.

Table 1. Reliability Test of the Achievement Motivation of Village Cadres

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	CITC	Cronbach's α if Item Deleted	Cronbach's α
am1	16.734	6.837	0.480	0.650	0.705
am2	16.697	6.886	0.407	0.680	
am3	16.649	6.596	0.557	0.619	
am4	16.770	6.887	0.506	0.641	
am5	17.309	6.717	0.385	0.694	

Note: "am" is the abbreviation of "achievement motivation". "am1-am5" represent the different items used to test the achievement motivation of village cadres.

Table 2. Reliability Test of the Individual Influence of Village Cadres

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	CITC	Cronbach's α if Item Deleted	Cronbach's α
ii1	24.835	12.378	0.375	0.698	0.718
ii2	25.713	10.574	0.335	0.728	
ii3	25.484	10.698	0.537	0.657	
ii4	25.007	11.451	0.438	0.683	
ii5	25.064	11.282	0.564	0.658	
ii6	25.149	11.393	0.432	0.685	

Note: "ii" is the abbreviation of "individual influence". "ii1-ii6" denote the different items used to test the individual influence of village cadres.

Table 3. Reliability Test of the Administrative Leadership Capabilities of Village Cadres

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	CITC	Cronbach's α if Item Deleted	Cronbach's α
alc1	32.077	18.243	0.412	0.686	0.714
alc2	31.981	18.185	0.470	0.679	
alc3	32.141	17.312	0.542	0.664	
alc4	32.361	17.432	0.428	0.682	
alc5	32.917	16.775	0.415	0.686	
alc6	32.022	17.574	0.488	0.673	
alc7	32.237	18.083	0.363	0.694	
alc8	31.979	18.296	0.463	0.680	

Note: "alc" is the abbreviation of "administrative leadership capabilities". "alc1-alc8" refer to the different items used to test the administrative leadership capabilities of village cadres.

Table 4. KMO and Bartlett's Test

KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.893
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1958.761
	Df	190.000
	Sig.	.000

Table 5. Factor Analysis Results of the Competency of Village Cadres

	Descriptive Statistics		Factor Loading Matrix		
	Mean Value	Standard Deviation	1	2	3
am1	4.306	0.8921	0.231	0.659	0.092
am2	4.342	0.9640	0.305	0.575	-0.101
am3	4.391	0.8773	0.272	0.690	0.170
am4	4.270	0.8509	0.367	0.561	0.207
am5	3.730	1.0407	0.219	0.567	0.027
ii1	4.504	0.7277	0.662	0.190	0.396
ii2	4.626	0.8423	0.228	0.164	0.513
ii3	3.854	0.9289	0.444	0.118	0.639
ii4	4.331	0.8787	0.566	0.127	0.114
ii5	4.274	0.7771	0.578	0.142	0.413
ii6	4.189	0.8999	0.532	-0.065	0.295
ii7	4.561	0.7629	0.554	0.000	0.148
alc1	4.274	0.8312	0.587	0.078	-0.320
alc2	4.370	0.7682	0.603	0.163	-0.278
alc3	4.210	0.8484	0.712	-0.010	-0.058
alc4	3.990	0.9730	0.520	0.130	0.040
alc5	3.434	1.1242	0.497	0.056	0.167
alc6	4.329	0.8644	0.649	0.025	0.071
alc7	4.114	0.9370	0.538	0.088	-0.216
alc8	4.372	0.7554	0.592	0.079	-0.008
Variance Contribution rate (%)			41.243	26.905	9.17
Cumulative Variance Contribution rate (%)					77.318

The whole examination process was conducted in a unified collective manner. To obtain accurate data, the author has to declare that the examined data can be used only for scientific research purposes, and the respondents can anonymously answer the questionnaire without writing down their names and contact information. The time of inquiry is controlled and set at only 40 min on the average. In terms of data input and cleaning, the author conforms to strict quality assurance process and further assures the reliability of the data. *Tables 6 and 7* show the basic sampling conditions of the study.

Table 6. Overall Characteristics of the Sampled Village Cadres

Population variable	Classification	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	401	97
	Female	14	3
Age	Below 25 years	8	1.9
	26-45 years	163	39.3
	46-60 years	230	55.4
	Above 60 years	14	3.4
Education Level	Primary school	5	1.2
	Junior high school	122	29.4
	Technical secondary school	44	10.6
	Senior high school	200	48.2
Position	Junior college or above	44	10.6
	Villager's committee director	216	52.1
Identity Characteristics	Village party branch secretary	199	47.9
	Demobilized serviceman	45	10.8
	Village capable persons in economy	129	31.1
	Village capable persons in technology	59	14.2
	General public	143	34.5
	Populous families in village	9	2.2
Economic Conditions	Others	30	7.2
	At the bottom	6	1.4
	Below average	89	21.4
	Above average	294	70.8
	In the front	26	6.3
Time in Office	Below three years	59	14.2%
	3-5 years	65	15.7%
	6-10 years	90	21.7%
	11-15 years	92	22.2%
	16-20 years	42	10.1%
Sampling Number	More than 20 years	65	13.0%
	415		

Table 7. Overall Characteristics of the Sampled Villages

Variable	Classification	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Region	Weinan	56	13.49%
	Hanzhong	84	20.24%
	Ankang	71	17.11%
	Yulin	52	12.53%
	Xi'an	43	10.36%
	Tongchuan	49	11.81%
	Baoji	60	14.46%
Geographical Features	Mountainous area	86	20.72%
	Hill	81	19.52%
	Plain	248	59.76%
Development Degree	Economically well-developed village	24	5.78%
	Economically moderately developed village	266	64.1%
	Economically underdeveloped village	125	30.12%
Poverty Degree	Poor villages at the national level	17	4.1%
	Poor villages at the provincial level	55	13.25%
	Poor villages at the county level	140	33.73%
	Non-poor village	203	48.92%
Sampling Number	415		

Concept Operationalization of Various Variables

This research mainly discusses the relationship between the competency of village cadres and rural development. The independent, dependent, regulated, and control variables are the village cadre competency, degree of rural development, social capital of village cadres, and other influencing factors of rural development.

Independent Variable: Measurement of the Competency of Village Cadres

The competency of village cadres consists of their achievement motivation, individual influence, and administrative leadership capabilities, which are used to measure such variable. The research scale item is obtained from three primary sources. The first source is the set of reliable measurement questions, which have been repeatedly examined in the relevant literature. The second resource is the modification of mature scales in line with practical conditions in the existing literature, with words accessible to village cadres. The third source is the behavioral description of the competency of village cadres obtained from in-depth interviews among the respondents. A five-point Likert scale is adopted for scale grading. The research requires a judgment between practical and descriptive behavior, in which 1 implies strongly disagree, 2 refers to disagree, 3 denotes

neither agree nor disagree, 4 signifies agree, and 5 depicts strongly agree. To ensure the effect of measurement and avoid inertial answers, the author designs a part of reverse scoring questions. The succeeding sections illustrate the operationalization method and the basis of the indicator concepts.

Dependent Variable: Measurement of Rural Development

The dependent variable of this research is rural development, which can be reflected by constructing a rural development indicator system and measuring rural development indicators (Table 8). This research obtains data on rural development conditions through a questionnaire administered to village cadres. Given that most designed rural development indicators are not directly used as questions in the survey, the author selects accessible questions for village cadres. The specific indicator values are then calculated after data collection, and entropy principal component analysis is performed to weigh all indicators and determine the ultimate rural development indicators (Liu & Wang, 2012).

Table 8. Assessment System of the Rural Development Indicators

Target Layer	Criterion Layer	Indicator Layer	Code
Rural development indicator /A	Production Development B1	Proportion of non-farmer employees	C1
		Village assets	C2
		Village fixed-asset investment	C3
		Village irrigation construction	C4
		Annual income of village enterprises	C5
	Well-Off Life B2	Coverage rate of rural cooperative medical services	C6
		Coverage rate of rural old-age security	C7
		Per capita income	C8
		Dwelling condition	C9
		Drinking water condition	C10
	Rural Civilization B3	Gross enrollment rate of high school education	C11
		Number of annual village activities	C12
		Proportion of undergraduates	C13
	Clean Village Appearance B4	Village road condition	C14
	Democratic Governance B5	Publicity of village affairs	C15
		Condition of villagers' participation in important village affairs	C16

Regulated Variable: Measurement of the Social Capital of Village Cadres

This research adopts the social network module, “New Year Greeting Network,” to measure the social capital of village cadres. This module is an instrument of social network analysis based on a localization method proposed according to practical social conditions in China. In particular, this module refers to a social network formed by respondents when they greet people (through various methods such as calling, texting messages, and visits) during the Spring Festival in China. The “New Year Greeting Network” has been widely used in domestic social studies and has evident reliability. (Zhao, 2006; Wang, 2009; Hu & Yang, 2011).

The research questionnaire asks the village cadres to specify the number of their relatives, friends, and acquaintances they mutually greet during the 2011 Spring Festival through various methods (e.g., calling, texting messages, or personal visits). The questionnaire also lists six occupations, including leaders (above the village level), people in self-employment ventures (above managers, peasant entrepreneurs), employees in the financial industry (e.g., employees in banks, rural credit association, etc.), employees in the public security system, employees in industrial and commercial tax systems, and lawyers. Respondents have to answer whether or not the relatives, friends, or acquaintances they greeted during the festivity have the aforementioned occupations. The selected occupation types and valuation of occupation prestige grade are both based on the counterparts used by Zhao (2006) in urban and rural resident social capital research. The New Year Network can be used to examine the size, density, and resources of the network of village cadres.

(1) Network size. This element can be directly calculated through the data in the New Year Greeting Network. The data pertain to the overall information on relatives, friends, and acquaintances who visit village cadres during Spring Festivals. Network size reflects the number of members of the core social network of village cadres.

(2) Network density. The inspection of the social network density of village cadres involves the examination of their personal intimacy with the members of their network members. Many scholars have proven that the calculated proportion of relatives in individual social networks can be regarded as an approximate indicator of one’s network density (Wang, 2009; Bian, 2011). Thus, this research considers the proportion of relatives visited by village cadres during Spring Festivals as the value of their network density.

(3) Network resources. The resources in the individual social network of village cadres can be calculated through the comprehensive statistics of the occupation type and the occupation status in the New Year Greeting Network. The author lists six occupation types in the questionnaire and investigates whether or not the people visited by the village cadres during the Spring Festival have these

occupations. “1” represents yes, whereas “0” means no. Regardless of the number of relatives, friends, or acquaintances that are employed in a certain occupation, this research assigns “1” to this occupation. The number of occupation types in the New Year Greeting Network can be calculated by adding up all the types. Based on the occupation prestige *Table* developed by Bian and Zhao, this research combines all the grades of occupation status and then obtains the total points of the occupation status of village cadres in the New Year Greeting Network. “Number of occupation types” and “total points of occupation status” reflect a certain aspect of the social network resources of village cadres, thereby indicating that a relatively strong relationship between the factors exists. Thus, the values of these variables cannot be determined through simple addition. To simplify the data, this research adopts the method introduced by Zhao (2006) to calculate the comprehensive points of the social network resources of village cadres. In particular, this research utilizes a common factor to present the main characteristics of two variables in the factor analysis of the number of occupation types and total points of occupation status in the New Year Network of village cadres. The calculated factor value is then set as the new variable to represent the social resource amount indicator embedded in the social network of village cadres. For convenience in analysis and understanding, the author transforms the lowest grade into 1 and the highest into 100. High grades imply that abundant social resources are embedded in the social network of village cadres.

Description of Control Variable and Other Limitations

Considering the practical conditions of the respondents, this research ultimately selects two control variables: village natural resource endowment and geographical location. These variables both reflect the basic natural conditions of villages and have a significant role in rural development (Karelakis, Zafeiriou, Galanopoulos, & Koutroumanidis 2013; Risku-Norja, Voutilainen, & Yli-Viikari, 2011; Liu, 2002). Villages in remote areas usually have limited information sources, incur high transportation cost, and therefore have restricted economic development. Considering that rural development is an accumulative process, this research considers the time in the office of village cadres as a limitation in a sample screening to illustrate the influence of the competency of village cadres on rural development. This research then selects the village cadres who have had a term of more than three years as samples in the final causal relationship analysis. Because if the duration of the term of village cadres exceeds three years (more than two sessions), then the villagers have recognized the working competence and performance of these leaders. In addition, rural development conditions substantiate the efforts of these leaders.

Result Analysis

Pearson correlation was performed first between the independent, dependent, control, and regulative variables. According to the analysis, the achievement motivation, individual influence, and administrative leadership capabilities of village cadres are all positively correlated with rural development. Moreover, the geographic location of villages is also positively correlated with rural development. Finally, the network resources of village cadres are positively correlated with rural development. The above findings preliminarily verify the expected hypotheses. In the following sections, this research conducts a more precise examination of the relationships among all the variables through multiple regression analysis.

Competency of Village Cadre and Rural Development

The study proposes three hypotheses regarding the relationship between rural development and the achievement motivation of village cadres, their individual influence, and their administrative leadership capabilities. A regression model is constructed to test these hypotheses. Rural development is the dependent variable, and achievement motivation, individual influence, and administrative leadership capabilities of village cadres are the independent variables. The natural endowment and geographic location of a village are included in the regression as control variables, and the sample is restricted to village cadres who have held office for a minimum of three years ($n = 355$).

Table 9. Regression Analysis – Dimensions of Village Cadre Competency and Rural Development

Variable	Unstandard Coefficients	t	Sig.	Tolerance	Variance Inflation Factor
(Constant)	1.352***	5.537	0.000		
Achievement Motivation	0.247**	1.854	0.012	0.687	1.455
Individual Influence	0.473**	2.714	0.007	0.578	1.731
Administrative Leadership Capabilities	0.112*	1.661	0.046	0.562	1.779
Control variable1_Natural Resources	-0.156	-3.143	0.279	0.941	1.063
Control variable2_Geographic Location	0.308**	3.761	0.002	0.926	1.079
Model Statistics					
Durbin-Watson	R Square	Adjusted R Square	F	Sig.	
1.876	0.68	0.55	4.303**	0.001	

The results of the regression model are shown in *Table 9*. The coefficients for the independent and control variables are in the second column of the *Table*. Notably, the regression coefficients on achievement motivation and administrative leadership capability are both positive and significant at the five percent level, thereby providing empirical support for hypotheses 1a and 1c. The regression coefficient on individual influence is positive and significant at the one percent level, thereby providing strong empirical support for hypothesis 1b. With respect to the control variables, geographic location is significant and therefore an influence on rural development. By contrast, natural resource endowment is insignificant and is therefore unlikely to influence rural development.

The reliability of the regression model is also considered. The model's *F*-statistic is 4.303 and has a corresponding *p* value of 0.001 (< 0.005), which is statistically significant. The model's Durbin–Watson statistic is 1.876, and the upper and lower bounds of this statistic are 1.718 and 1.820, respectively, when $n = 355$, $k = 5$, and at significance level of 0.005. If $d_u < DW < 4 - d_u$, then no serial correlation exists in the model's random disturbance terms. Furthermore, if the five variables of the model have multiple collinearity, then the maximum tolerance value (TOL) is less than 0.10, and the maximum variance inflation factor (VIF) is greater than 10. In this model, the TOL is 0.562, and the VIF is 1.799, suggesting no multiple collinearity. Finally, the thesis scatter plots the standardized predicted value *ZPRED on the x-axis and the standardized residual on the y-axis to evaluate the heteroskedasticity of the model. According to the scatter plot, the data are randomly distributed above and below zero, indicating no heteroskedasticity in the model.

Regulative Function of the Social Capital of Village Cadres

A hierarchical regression model is constructed to test the above hypotheses. To analyze regulative functions, researchers generally use hierarchical regression methods (Wang & Li, 2011). The study ran a regression on explanatory, explained, and regulative variables to obtain the goodness of fit R_1^2 , and corresponding *F*- and *T*-statistics. The study then conducted regression on the explanatory variables, explained variables, and product item (i.e., “explanatory variables” multiplied with “regulative variables”) to obtain the goodness of fit R_2^2 and the corresponding *F*- and *T*-statistics. If $R_2^2 > R_1^2$ and the *F*- and *T*-statistics in the regressions vary significantly, then the regulative function may be significant.

Regulative Function of Network Size on the Relationship between Village Cadre Competency and Rural Development

Prior to running the hierarchical regressions described above, computations on the data are required to minimize multicollinearity. Specifically, a new variable is created from the product of two variables: the competency and network size of village cadres. Before the product is taken, the mean of each variable is subtracted from each respective data point. The variable resulting from the product of village cadre competency and network size serves as the independent variable in the regression testing of hypothesis 2a. Similar to hypotheses 1a to 1c, rural development is the dependent variable, and the natural endowment and geographic location of the village are the control variables of the regression.

Table 10 shows that the regression coefficient of the product item of village cadre competency and network size is not significant ($R_2^2 < R_1^2$). Hence, variations in the network size of village cadres will not change the impact of their competency on rural development. In other words, expansion of the network size of village cadres would not significantly change the influence of village cadre competency on rural development. Therefore, the study finds no empirical support for hypothesis 2a.

Table 10. Regression Analysis – Moderating Effect of Network Size on the Relationship between Village Cadre Competency and Rural Development

Variable	First Step		Second Step	
	Unstandard Coefficients	t	Unstandard Coefficients	t
(Constant)	1.531	5.412	1.536	5.434
Competency	0.020	0.322	0.023	0.374
Control Variable1_Natural Resources	-0.171	-3.447	-0.172	-3.473
Control Variable 2_Geographic Location	0.283*	3.360	0.284	3.367
Regulative Variable 1_Network Size	0.001	0.115	-0.002	-0.418
Competency*Network Size			-0.007	-1.187
Model Statistics				
Durbin-Watson	1.604		1.601	
Adjusted R Square	0.484		0.482	
F	5.418***		4.621***	

Regulative Function of Network Density on the Relationship between Village Cadre Competency and Rural Development

Similar to hypothesis 2a, computations on the data are required before running the hierarchical regression testing of hypothesis 2b to minimize multicollinearity. Here, a new variable is created from the product of village cadre competency and network density. Before the product is taken, the mean of each variable is subtracted from each respective data point. The variable resulting from the product of village cadre competency and network density serves as the independent variable in the regression testing of hypothesis 2b. All the same dependent and control variables are exactly the same as in prior regressions.

Table 11 shows that the regression coefficient of the product item of village cadre competency and network density is not significant ($R_2^2 < R_1^2$). Hence, variations in the network density of village cadres will not change the impact of their competency on rural development. In other words, increase of the network density of village cadres would not significantly change the influence of village cadre competency on rural development. Therefore, the study finds no empirical support for hypothesis 2b.

Table 11. Regression Analysis – Moderating Effect of Network Density on the Relationship between Village Cadre Competency and Rural Development

Variable	First Step		Second Step	
	Unstandard Coefficients	t	Unstandard Coefficients	t
(Constant)	1.453	5.152	1.427	5.075
Competency	0.026	0.297	0.035*	0.402
Control variable1_Natural Resources	-0.159	-3.165	-0.154	-3.089
Control Variable 2_Geographic Location	0.197	2.579	0.202**	2.676
Regulative Variable 1_Network Density	0.007	0.074	-0.024	0.468
Competency*Network Density			-0.052	-0.947
Model Statistics				
Durbin-Watson	1.612		1.609	
Adjusted R Square	0.432		0.417	
F	4.932***		3.999**	

Regulative Function of Network Resources on the Relationship between Village Cadre Competency and Rural Development

Similar to hypotheses 2a and 2b, computations on the data are required before running the hierarchical regression testing of hypothesis 2c to minimize multicollinearity. Here, a new variable is created from the product of village cadre competency and network resources. Before the product is taken, the mean of each variable is subtracted from each respective data point. The variable resulting from the product of village cadre competency and network resources serves as the independent variable in the regression testing of hypothesis 2c. All the same dependent and control variables are exactly the same as in prior regressions.

Table 12. Regression Analysis – Moderating Effect of Network Resources on the Relationship between Village Cadre Competency and Rural Development

Variable	First Step		Second Step	
	Unstandard Coefficients	t	Unstandard Coefficients	t
(Constant)	1.494	5.293	1.492	5.277
Competency	0.020	0.417	0.023*	0.446
Control Variable1_Natural Resources	-0.159	-3.205	-0.157	-3.139
Control Variable 2_Geographic Location	0.286	3.398	0.285*	3.376
Regulative Variable 1_Network Resources	0.102	1.719	0.105*	1.761
Competency*Network Resources			0.082**	0.853
Model Statistics				
Durbin-Watson	1.635		1.638	
Adjusted R Square	0.371		0.457	
F	4.446**		5.343***	

Table 12 reveals that the coefficient of the product item of village cadre competency and network resources is significant ($R_2^2 > R_1^2$), which indicates that the network resources of village cadres could positively regulate the relationship between village cadre competency and rural development. In other words, increasing the network resources of village cadres will significantly enhance the positive effect of village cadre competency on rural development, and vice versa. Hence, the study finds empirical support for hypothesis 2c.

Discussion

The above analysis supports hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c, which state that the three dimensions of village cadre competency (i.e., achievement motivation, individual influence, and administrative leadership capability) are positively correlated with rural development.

The first dimension of village cadre competency, achievement motivation, refers to the strong desire of an individual to accomplish a given goal. It is empirically evident in this context that stronger achievement motivation of village cadres leads to greater rural development. Given that a strong motivation can markedly stimulate action, then, in a certain sense, individual achievement motivation is the key element that drives individual success. In other words, village cadre achievement motivation is the driving force of rural development. Given the importance of achievement motivation of village cadres for rural development, the basic demands should be satisfied. However, grassroots cadres, especially in rural areas of western China, receive low wages and unfavorable social benefits. Worse, limited promotion opportunities are available, thereby impeding the work enthusiasm and, by extension, the achievement motivation of village cadres. Hence, village cadres should be guaranteed a higher wage rate, and their social benefits should be increased. In addition, their medical treatment and old-age insurance should be improved. These changes and improvements will enable village cadres to devote themselves wholeheartedly to their work. The government should provide village cadres with learning opportunities, aside from meeting their basic wage and medical needs. For example, country and municipal governments can assign village cadres in rural areas of western China to conduct field investigations in developed eastern rural areas. During investigation periods, the village cadres will receive opportunities to learn advanced wealth creation and administrative development ideas. These excursions can broaden the horizons of village cadres and stimulate their motivation to decrease economic disparity across regions.

The second dimension of village cadre competency, individual influence, is the impact of the personality and personal characteristics of a village cadre on the outlook and behaviors of villagers. It is empirically evident in this context that a higher degree of this individual influence leads to greater rural development, implying that village cadres with more personal charm and prestige may be better equipped to enlist the trust and support of villagers in rural matters. Accordingly, the individual influence of village cadres seems to be a core ingredient in social cohesion and rural development. To amplify the effect of individual influence on rural development, a method that combines ideological preaching with work-style training can be utilized to create a pragmatic atmosphere among village cadres. As soon as the reputations of village cadres are established, their rallying power and influence on rural development can be enhanced.

The third dimension of village cadre competency, administrative leadership capabilities, refers to the cadre's organization, communication, and coordination skills. In this context, greater administrative leadership capability evidently leads to greater rural development. Given that they are heavily involved in village matters, relationships among villagers, and wealth-creating endeavors, village cadres with stronger organization and communication skills can better coordinate villagers and mobilize morale. Similarly, village cadres with stronger decision-making skills may be more inclined to seize wealth-creating opportunities, which represent a fundamental task of village cadres. In most villages in rural areas of western China, the wealth-creating skills of village cadres determine whether or not local villagers can overcome poverty and improve their quality of life. The government should combine training with work–experience exchange to improve the administrative leadership capabilities of village cadres. Training can promote the theoretical awareness of village cadres, while work–experience exchange among village cadres will enable them to acquire a wide repertoire of practices and lessons. This approach, which combines theoretical training with practical experience, is conducive to elevating village cadre management level in real affairs.

In addition to the dimensions of village cadre competency, a control variable, geographic location is also positively and significantly correlated with rural development. This correlation indicates that an advantageous location offers benefits to local rural development, whereas a disadvantageous location impedes rural development. By contrast, the other control variable, rural natural endowment is insignificant, indicating that these endowments do not affect rural development. This may be explained by the fact that the sample villages are all located in Shaanxi Province, where natural resource conditions are relatively homogeneous.

The results of the analysis also shed light on the value of the social capital of village cadres. Among the three dimensions of their social capital (i.e., network size, network density, and network resources), only network resources strengthen the relationship between village cadre competency and rural development. As western villages of China develop slowly, the social network of village cadres is often confined to the social interactions between relatives and friends. Relatives and friends are relatively homogeneous, thereby restricting the kind of information to which village cadres are exposed. In other words, a village cadre is less likely to hear about new and fresh opportunities from people within a homogenous network. Also problematic is that the interactions between relatives and friends are centered on personal matters rather than on public matters, which are important for both rural development and village cadre competency. The insignificance of these dimensions of social capital may be attributed to the socio-cultural environment specific to western rural villages of China. As the socio-cultural environment in western rural areas is relatively closed, it is less affected by external

thoughts. Therefore, the thinking model of villagers there is conservative and traditional. Conservative village cadres from these areas may be reluctant to ask for help. As a result, they may not effectively use their social network in a way that will affect the relationship between competency and rural development.

Conclusions

According to how to evaluate the importance of village cadres in rural development, using the unique field data of villages in Shaanxi Province of China in 2011, this study conducts an in-depth empirical investigation of the relationship between village cadre competency and rural development, as well as the moderating effect of the social capital of village cadres in this relationship. The conclusions of the study may be summarized as follows:

(1) Three dimensions of village cadre competency (i.e., achievement motivation, individual influence, and administrative leadership capability), are positively correlated with rural development. As these dimensions increase, so do village production, civilization, quality of life, and democracy. The achievement motivation of village cadres can stimulate individual behaviors, while their individual influence and administrative leadership capability can benefit the establishment of a confidence mechanism and promote innovation. These competences of village cadres construct the core power and effective insurance of rural development.

(2) Among the three dimensions of their social capital (i.e., network size, network density, and network resources), only network resources strengthen the positive correlation between village cadre competency and rural development. A village cadre with a larger percentage of high social status members in its social network has better leverage with which to impact rural development through mobilization of the social structure. In this way, social capital can regulate the relationship between village cadre competency and rural development.

The critical role of village cadres in China's rural development, especially in western China, has received increased attention from researchers. Nevertheless, only few researchers have conducted empirical investigations primarily because of the difficulty in collecting field data on village cadres who live scattered, which implies a gap in rural development theory. This study addresses this gap by providing an in-depth empirical investigation of the relationship between village cadre competency and rural development using the unique field data of villages in Shaanxi Province, China. An important limitation of the study is that the data is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. Assessment of village cadre competency undergoes a specific process, and influential consequences of competency on rural development may carry with it a certain hysteresis nature. Cross-section

data cannot reflect completely the dynamic changing process of the effects that village cadre competency has had on rural development, but it can provide firmer hypotheses for causality analysis. Future research can consider follow-up field investigation to obtain field data on time-varying factors. Follow-up studies should enlarge the sample source to include in particular, eastern coastal villages and other villages to enable multi-regional comparison. Future research can also emphasize the exploration of regional differences in rural development as determined by village cadre competency, and provide relevant research conclusions.

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