

From the Lifeworld to the Governance Arena: Boundary Mechanisms of Social Capital Transformation in Folk Belief

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Abstract: Since the advent of the Reform and Opening-up era, folk beliefs have gradually emerged as a crucial lens through which to understand local order and grassroots governance; however, the social capital generated by these beliefs does not necessarily translate into governance resources. This article takes the Duangong folk belief in Long County as an example, based on semi-structured interviews. Drawing upon Lin Nan's social capital theory and combining it with the frameworks of "investment-mobilization-return" and "institution-authority-network-function," this study analyzes the mechanisms through which social capital is generated and transformed. Research reveals that the Duangong folk belief system, through ritual interactions, risk narratives, and networks of acquaintances, generates cohesive social capital centered on trust, norms, and strong ties. However, when entering the field of grassroots governance, it is affected by factors such as institutional access, authority connection, network bridging, and functional limitations. Its returns remain primarily within the lifeworld in the form of emotional support and relationship maintenance.

1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening up, folk beliefs have re-entered the academic field of vision [1]. Folk belief is regarded as a crucial window for understanding local order and informal norms [2]. In the context of rural revitalization and modern governance, current research tends to adopt a positive perspective, exploring how folk belief—through mechanisms such as its designation as Intangible Cultural Heritage—become embedded within rural governance systems and is transformed into “governance capital.” [3] The introduction of social capital theory further systematized this approach. It is emphasized that folk belief, acting as a unique form of social capital, can influence grassroots collaboration—through trust, norms, and relational networks—and serve to complement administrative forces in public affairs such as bridge-building, road-paving, and dispute mediation [4].

However, the governance effect of folk belief is not a “natural” process. [5] Its resources do not necessarily bring stronger organizational or social integration functions. [6] There is controversy in the academic community: some scholars believe that it maintains moral order, while others are wary of the possibility of strengthening the control of local elites over resources. [7] The negative function

of social capital also suggests that over-reliance on local relations may have a “squeezing out” effect, [8] thereby affecting the operation of formal institutions. At present, researchers have paid attention to the hierarchy of belief identity and the trend of shrinking folk beliefs from “community integration” to “individual privacy” in the process of urbanization. [9]

Based on this, the core issue of this article is: Under what circumstances is it difficult for the resources generated by folk belief to be transformed into a stabilization mechanism and enter the field of public affairs? Existing studies rarely answer the obstacles in the process of social capital from generation to governance docking. This article takes the “Duangong Folk Belief” in Long County as an example. Duangong Folk Belief is deeply embedded in everyday life, but it has been in an informal state of “existing but not transformed” for a long time. Based on the perspective of Lin Nan’s social capital, the research aims to clarify the field dependence of folk belief in the positive function by analyzing its continuous blocking process in the cross-field transformation of “lifeworld” and “grassroots governance”, and provide a new perspective for delimiting the boundaries of its role in the governance arena.

2. Theoretical framework and research design

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Cross-field Transformation of Social Capital

This article takes Lin Nan’s social capital theory as the starting point for analysis [10], and defines it as a resource embedded in the social relationship structure and can be mobilized through purposeful action [11]. The value of social capital lies not only in its stock, but also in its dynamic process of value addition and transformation through the chain of “investment -mobilization-return”. In order to explain the rupture of social capital of civil beliefs in the docking of local social operation and modern governance, this article integrates a two-dimensional analysis framework.

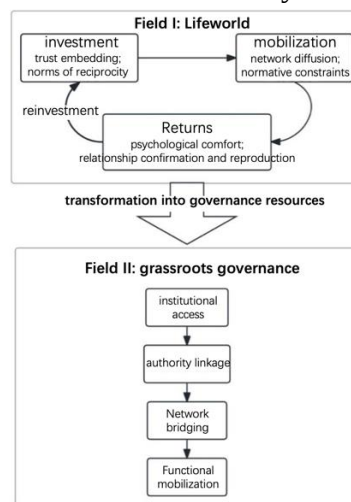


Figure 1. Analytical Framework

As shown in Figure 1, in the lifeworld field, the study focuses on the endogenous circulation mechanism of social capital. Through ritual participation and emotional interaction, the actor completes the “resource investment”; Realize “mobilization” with the help of the experience diffusion of the network of acquaintances; Finally, get the “reward” of psychological comfort and relationship maintenance, thus forming a closed-loop life world field. In the governance arena, the research examines the boundary conditions of resource transformation. If private resources are to be transformed into governance effectiveness, they need to go through the four links of institutional access, authoritative docking, network bridging and functional call to the governance arena in turn.

If any link is broken due to lack of legitimacy or structural misalignment, social capital will be locked in the private domain. Therefore, this article constructs a logical framework of “generation-obstruction-return” to explain the field dependence characteristics of social capital embedded in Duangong folk belief.

2.2 Research design and method

2.2.1 Case selection and research field

This article selects the "Longxian Duangong Faith" in the Western Sichuan Ethnic Corridor as a research case. Long County is located in the intersection of Han, Zang and Yi ethnic cultures. The social ecology has the social characteristics of strong acquaintances and the cultural heritage of pluralistic beliefs. Compared with the belief form that has realized "non-heritage" or "tourism", Duangong folk belief is deeply embedded in the local people's explanation of diseases, risk response and daily interaction, and has a distinct life world attribute. Its stable existence in local society has never been formally incorporated into the characteristics of the governance system, making it an ideal sample for observing how social capital “generated” and “why the transformation is blocked”.

2.2.2 Data collection and interview subjects

The research adopts qualitative research methods and systematically conducts field surveys from 2023 to 2025. The main data collection methods include:

Semi-structured interview: Relying on the contact between researchers and the local area, 10 core respondents were interviewed through the “snowball” method.

The Duangong community: Inspect the inheritance of ceremonies, the source of authority and the logic of resource mobilization.

The community of believers (XZ01-06): It covers different ages and genders, focusing on understanding their input motivation, effect perception and relationship network construction.

Grassroots cadres (GB01-02): To understand the strategies adopted by the formal system to regulate folk belief and role differentiation within governance practices.

Participant observation and image analysis: The researchers went deep into the ceremony site and recorded tens of thousands of words of interview texts and field notes. Relevant photographs and video recordings of rituals were also collected to enable the researcher to identify the structure of social relations underlying ritual practices through their "texture."

2.2.3 Ethics and Research Procedures

The research strictly abides by academic ethics and anonymizes all respondents. In terms of procedure, the research has gone through the process of “local narrative collection” in the early stage to “centralized participation observation” in the middle stage, and then interviewing core insiders in the later stage to identify and analyze the dimension.

3. Returns to Social Capital in the Lifeworld

Within the lifeworld, Duangong folk believes through the logic of “investment-mobilization-return”, Successfully transforms individual actions into stable social capital. This effectiveness does not stem from institutional power, but is deeply rooted in the cultural soil and psychological compensation mechanism of acquaintance society.

3.1 Risk narrative and ritual input: deep embedding of trust

The generation of social capital begins with the active investment of actors in risky situations. In Long County, Duangong folk belief provides a legitimate basis for the resource investment of believers through the “risk narrative of survival uncertainty” [12]. Believers often enter the faith network with the fear of survival threats such as diseases and disasters. By constructing urgent narratives such as “be careful when walking” and “you must do superstition to avoid disasters”, Duangong made individuals change from the daily state to the state of “need to act” [13, 14]. In the interaction, specific Duan Gong (such as “Mr. Pu”) is given an irreplaceable structural position. This exclusive authority strengthens the hierarchy of the network, so that believers are actually approaching the core nodes of the relationship network when investing resources (such as buying chickens and paying for ceremonies), thereby establishing the social structure position of capital investment.

The routineization of ceremonial expenditure, although it involves economic exchange. But in the social context of acquaintances, believers usually don’t bargain or even “give a little more”. This non-market detail gives emotional meaning to economic behavior, so that the relationship of trust gradually precipitates in repetitive ritual practice.

3.2 Experience diffusion and mobilization: active value-added of the network

The key to the effectiveness of social capital lies in the mobilization of resources [15]. Relying on the relationship network of acquaintance society, Duangong folk belief has achieved the exponential diffusion of trust resources. The internalization of Duangong’s authority by the believers comes from the proximity narrative of “prophecy-reality”. When the prophecy is verified in subjective perception, the individual will regard Duan Gong as a reliable source of knowledge. The “sense of reality” from personal experience provides an empirical basis for the accumulation of trust in local networks [16]. Under the differential mode of association, belief practices are not isolated individual behaviors, but are embedded in kinship and territorial networks [17], through which trust is transmitted. When the ceremony was held, the participation of relatives and friends quickly transformed individual experiences into collective beliefs within the family [18]. This transmission path, which relies on the “differential mode of association”, enables trust resources to be transmitted and continuously solidified within the network [19]. When trust spreads beyond family boundaries, faith becomes a local “universal fact”. Even the unbelieving village cadres objectively admit its universality. This consensus has enabled Duangong folk belief to acquire legitimacy within the local social structure.

3.3 Expressive return: psychological certainty and the reproduction of relationships

The social capital generated by Duangong folk belief is finally realized in the world of life in the form of “expressive benefits”, which is reflected in emotional support and structural reinforcement of relationships.

In the risk society, Duan Gong provides a stable psychological comfort mechanism through rituals. Although it cannot solve all real dilemmas, it provides “psychological certainty” and “sense of control” for individuals in the face of diseases or disasters, which relieves anxiety. This emotional return motivates individuals to continue to maintain the existing public relationship network.

The ceremony field is not only a space for faith, but also a social platform for neighborhood relatives to interact. Every ritual activity is a reactivation of the network of existing acquaintances. Believers get to know and communicate with each other through Duangong, so that trust, experience and relationship resources continue to flow back and accumulate within the lifeworld [20]. This field-dependent return has established the vitality of Duangong folk belief to continue in the gap of modern

governance.

4. Mechanisms Hindering the Transformation of Social Capital in the Governance Arena

Although Duangong folk belief has accumulated profound social capital in the lifeworld through the closed loop of “investment-mobilization-return”, However, when these resources tried to cross the border into the governance arena, they encountered serious structural obstruction. Lin Nan pointed out that the effectiveness of social capital depends on the mobilization ability of actors in a specific structure. In the governance practice of Long County, the social capital of Duangong folk belief is locked in the private domain and cannot be transformed into public governance resources. Its blocking mechanism is mainly reflected in the rupture of the four dimensions of system, authority, network and function.

4.1 Lack of institutional access

Under the modern governance system, the premise for resources to enter the public affairs field is to have the formal identity of “identification” and “responsibility”. However, Duangong folk belief faces fundamental access barriers in the institutional environment of Long County. Modern governance requires the participating subjects to have a clear positioning, such as religious organizations or non-profit social organizations. Duangong belief has long been regarded as “superstition” or “informal practice”, lacking the formal institutional identity such as Zang Buddhism or Yi Bimo faith [21]. This classification is not only a value judgment, but also a rigid institutional boundary delimitation.

Grassroots cadres are bound by the institutional identity in the governance field and must follow the formal ideological discourse. The interview shows that village cadres must express their opposition to “superstition” under the role of public office. (Interview code: GB02) [22]. Institutional pressure has led to the institutional disappearance of folk resources from the public agenda. Grassroots governance emphasizes the traceable responsibility mechanism, The practice of Duangong is mostly based on personal experience and informal contracts, and lacks an organized responsibility-sharing institution. The characteristic of not being “institutionalized” makes it difficult to meet the requirements of risk control in modern departmental governance [23].

4.2 Misalignment of Authority Structures

The effective docking of authority is the core link of social capital transformation. In Long County, there is an insurmountable gap between the “charismatic authority” represented by Duangong folk belief and the “legal-rational authority” relied on by governance arena [24]. Duangong’s authority comes from the verification of individual experience, the dissemination of word of mouth and the “spiritual” narrative in the ceremony, which is highly contextual. Governance authority comes from legal authorization and organizational procedures, emphasizing universal rules. The difference in the source of legitimacy makes it impossible for the private influence based on the accumulation of trust to be “translated” into the governing authority recognized by the system [25].

Even if Duangong has a broad mass base in local society, its influence is difficult to be transformed into resources for formal governance. The logic of administrative authority is to go down and pursue responsibility, while Duangong’s authority is to trace the sacredness upwards or dig deep into the tradition. The two are incompatible with each other in terms of logic of power operation, resulting in the lack of legality intermediary in the establishment of collaborative relationships.

4.3 Insufficient network bridging

The type of social capital determines its transformation potential. The social capital generated by Duangong folk belief is a typical “bonding” social capital. While serving the internal order, this structure limits the expansion of its public nature. Duangong folk belief is deeply embedded in the “disorder pattern” of blood and geographical ties, and the trust relationship is highly concentrated in the circle of acquaintances. Although high-density strong relationship networks can reduce the cost of internal transactions, they have strong exclusivity [26] and lack the “Bridging” ability to cross group boundaries.

Grassroots governance involves cross-group collaborative affairs such as environmental improvement and public works, which requires an inclusive collaborative logic. Duangong networks are often limited to specific families or groups of believers, and their mobilization energy shows obvious “bridge failure” in the face of diversified and highly mobile modern governance fields. Due to the lack of “weak relationship” intermediaries docking with the external modern departmental system, the trust resources generated by Duangong folk belief mainly flow back on a small scale, and it is difficult to break through the fence of the lifeworld to enter the public service system [27].

4.4 Functional attribute limitations

From the functional dimension, there is an essential adaptation difference between the resource return provided by Duangong folk belief and the tool demand for governance arena.

The core function of Duangong folk belief is to provide psychological comfort and risk interpretation through rituals, and its rewards are subjective and symbolic. Grassroots governance needs quantitative, operable and evaluable institutional tools, such as rule enforcement and dispute mediation. The functional differences between “existential support” and “institutional tools” determine that it is difficult for folk resources to be called up by the governance system. Grassroots governance is based on the responsibility field of certainty, and any action must comply with the principle of risk avoidance of the hierarchical system. Duan Gong’s behavior has a strong charismatic and efficacy narratives character, and its unverifiable nature challenges the rationality of the rule of law. If the government mobilizes such resources, it means endorsing uncontrollable informal forces, and this responsibility gap eventually leads to the complete failure of functional coordination.

When the social capital of Duangong folk belief was transformed into the governance field, it was not because of the exhaustion of resources, but because of the all-round “transformation barriers”. The negation of the system, the misalignment of authority, the closure of the network and the deviation of functions together make this rich private resource stay outside the boundaries of the governance field.

5. Conclusion

Through the case analysis of the Duangong folk belief in Longxian County, this article systematically reveals the operation logic of social capital of folk beliefs in local society and the boundary mechanism of its cross-field transformation. Duangong folk belief has generated a stable trust structure and symbolic authority in ritual practice and risk narrative with blood and geographical network. This kind of social capital shows strong cohesion characteristics. Its strong reciprocity and strong boundary attributes determine that it mainly serves the needs of private domains within the lifeworld, rather than the collaborative system for public space.

The failure of Duan Gong folk belief to be transformed into public governance resources is not due to the lack of resources themselves, but because of the four mechanisms of institutional access, authoritative docking, network bridging and functional adaptation. First of all, institutional discourse

defines it as “superstition” and deprives it of the legal basis for entering public space. Secondly, there is a structural misalignment between the charismatic authority and the legal governance logic based on empirical verification. At the same time, the closed nature of the acquaintance network limits the cross-circle flow of resources. Finally, the symbolic emotional support provided by the ceremony is difficult to transform into standardized governance tools.

The obstruction of transformation does not mean the failure of social capital. Its return is in the form of psychological appeasement and relationship reproduction. Stay stably in the world of life and maintain the micro-order of local society through field dependence. In the process of modernizing governance arena, instead of simply rejecting such informal practices, it is better to face their functional position in the lifeworld. In the future, governance arena should establish a clearer sense of boundaries. While adhering to the principle of the rule of law in the public sphere, by improving the emotional support capacity of the formal system, we can realize the flexible connection and harmonious coexistence of the lifeworld and the governance field.

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