

“Her Power” in the Countryside: A Discourse Analysis Study of Rural Female Cadres’ Image in the China Women's News WeChat Official Account (2022-2025)

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Abstract. “Her power” refers to the unique influence women exert in social development. For rural grassroots female cadres, it manifests as promoting governance innovation with flexibility and tenacity. They combine delicate empathy with bold responsibility: patiently mediating neighborhood conflicts and caring for vulnerable groups, while courageously leading industrial development and policy implementation. As a link between policies and villagers, they break gender barriers, demonstrating dedication in poverty alleviation and rural revitalization, serving as a vital force in grassroots governance and a vivid example of “women holding up half the sky”. Against the dual backdrop of rural revitalization and deepening gender equality, this study examines how China Women's News (2022-2025) constructs discourse around rural female cadres through content and discourse analysis. It finds that the newspaper portrays them as capable, dedicated, and innovative, highlighting their core role in rural governance—driving economic growth and boosting community cohesion. While gradually incorporating gender-inclusive discourse to break stereotypes, it insufficiently explores their structural gender dilemmas, such as resource access barriers and conflicts with traditional roles. The research suggests the current discourse, while affirming female leadership, needs stronger critical reflection on systemic gender challenges.

Keywords: China Women's News, female village cadres, discourse analysis, gender equality, female image

1. Introduction

As China's rural revitalization strategy advances, rural female cadres have emerged as vital forces in grassroots governance, contributing significantly to economic growth, public service improvement, and social stability. Their involvement enriches rural governance structures and signifies progress in rural gender equality. China Women's News, a mainstream media focusing on women's issues, has long highlighted rural women's development, with its reports on rural female cadres shaping public perception and social discourse. Existing research on rural female cadres primarily involves sociological surveys and case studies, lacking in-depth exploration of media discourse. Discourse analysis, which deciphers meaning construction through language, can effectively reveal how media texts shape social images via linguistic choices and narratives. This study examines China Women's

News reports on rural female cadres (2022-2025) using content analysis [1] and critical discourse analysis. It aims to answer: What themes and discourse features characterize these reports? What image of rural female cadres do they construct? What are the strengths and limitations of this construction? The research is expected to provide theoretical references for optimizing rural female cadres' media images, deepen understanding of gender equality in rural governance, and offer practical insights for advancing rural revitalization.

2. Definitions of core concepts and theoretical basis

2.1. Definition of core concepts

Rural grassroots female cadres refer to female staff members who hold positions in party and government management, public services and other fields at the township level and below in administrative villages (communities) in China. They cover posts such as village party branch secretaries, village committee directors, women's federation chairpersons, and village group leaders [2]. They face rural people directly, undertake grass-roots governance responsibilities such as policy implementation, industrial development, and people's livelihood services, and serve as an important link between the government and rural society.

Discourse construction refers to the process in which the media shapes, interprets and disseminates the image of rural grassroots female cadres by selecting specific narrative perspectives, content materials, and expression methods [3]. This process is not a simple objective presentation, but incorporates factors such as the media's stance, social and cultural concepts, and power structures, ultimately forming the public's cognitive impression of this group.

2.2. Theoretical basis

Framing theory emphasizes that the media selects, organizes, and presents information according to certain criteria when reporting, forming a specific "frame", which in turn influences the audience's understanding of events or characters. In this study, framing theory can be used to analyze the WeChat official account of "China Women's News" in its reports on rural grassroots female cadres, exploring through which frames (such as the "devotee frame", "innovator frame", "tradition and modernity integration frame", etc.) the content is organized, and how these frames highlight certain characteristics of this group, thereby affecting the audience's perception [4].

Gender studies theory focuses on the construction of gender roles, gender power relations, and gender inequality in social culture [5]. Applying it to this study can deeply analyze whether there are gender stereotypes in the media discourse when presenting rural grassroots female cadres (such as overemphasizing "women's tenderness and carefulness" while ignoring their leadership ability), and the social gender concepts behind the reported discourse, providing theoretical support for exploring the expression of gender traits in the image of female cadres [6].

3. Overview of reports on rural female cadres in "China Women's News"

3.1. Sample processing

This study takes the reports related to rural grassroots female cadres published by the WeChat official account of "China Women's News" from January 1, 2022 to December 31, 2025 as the research object. The sample selection is carried out through the built-in search function of the WeChat official account, using core keywords such as "female village official", "female village

party secretary", and "rural grassroots female cadre" for retrieval. After initially obtaining relevant articles, invalid contents such as duplicate reports, advertising promotions, and irrelevant information are eliminated through manual screening, and finally an effective sample database is determined [7]. At the same time, basic data such as the release time, reading volume, and number of messages of the samples are recorded to provide raw data support for subsequent analysis.

3.2. Quantity and distribution

Table 1. Reports on “rural female cadres” in the Wechat official account data [1]

Rank	Region	Number of Reports	Proportion	Key Reported Figures
1	Guangxi	4	16%	Yang Ning (3), Huang Wenxiu (1)
2	Henan	3	12%	Zhang Guifang (3)
3	Guizhou	2	8%	Yu Liufen, Du Fujia
3	Jiangxi	2	8%	Shi Yulian, etc.
3	Chongqing	2	8%	Wang Enmei, Tan Yuchun
6	Hubei	1	4%	Cheng Ju
6	Shandong	1	4%	Zhang Shouying
6	Shanxi	1	4%	Liu Guizhen
6	Hebei	1	4%	Ju Yanmei
6	Jiangsu	1	4%	Lin Yaping, Chen Yuelu
6	Sichuan	1	4%	He Xiaoqing
6	Shannxi	1	4%	Wang Qing
6	Xizang	1	4%	Huang Haifen

In Table 1, In terms of quantity, 2022 had the most reports, 14 in total, mainly linked to themes like “The Style of 20th National Congress Deputies”. 2023 saw 3 reports from the series on “post-95 female village party secretary” Zhang Guifang; 2024 had 6, influenced by events such as resident village secretary. He Xiaoqing’s incident; and 2025 had 2 as of June. There were annual fluctuations, with reports concentrated around March's Women's Day and October-November’s 20th National Congress publicity.

Regionally, Guangxi led with 4 reports, focusing on Yang Ning and Huang Wenxiu; Henan’s 3 reports all centered on Zhang Guifang; Guizhou, Jiangxi and Chongqing each had 2, and other regions had 1 each. This shows reports concentrated in key poverty alleviation areas and scattered elsewhere, tied to the spread of grassroots female cadres' typical deeds and policy publicity, reflecting media focus on representative rural grassroots female cadres.

4. Discourse construction of the image of rural female cadres

4.1. Presentation of professional roles

The WeChat official account portrays rural grassroots female cadres as multi-dimensional professional figures. It highlights their role as promoters of rural development through such terms as “bellwether” and “doer”, exemplified by leading villagers in developing industries and resolving disputes. The discourse not only emphasizes the public responsibilities of female village cadres but

also reflects their professional resilience with expressions like “solving difficult problems and tackling tough tasks”, breaking the gender stereotype of “female weakness” [8].

4.2. Expression of gender traits

The reports blend traditional and modern elements to depict rural female cadres’ gender traits. For instance, female cadres resolve disputes with patience and engage left-behind women in training through emotional understanding, creating the “flexible governance” narrative by bridging private traits and public service. At the same time, the reports use the “combining hardness with softness” comparative discourse to break gender stereotypes [9]. Meanwhile, this dual portrayal meets societal expectations of femininity while demonstrating professional competence, creating a multifaceted image of female cadres who understand both policies and people.

5. Value and limitations of discourse construction

5.1. Positive value of discourse construction

At the individual level, through narratives about the abilities and specific deeds of female grassroots cadres, the discourse has strengthened the professional identity and social dignity of rural female cadres. It has not only enhanced their voice in grassroots governance but also provided a model for women's participation in public affairs, encouraging more rural women to break free from the constraints of “family roles” and actively engage in rural construction.

At the social level, the discourse has promoted the popularization of gender equality concepts by breaking the stereotypes of “women being weak” and “lacking governance capabilities”. Narratives such as “combining firmness with gentleness” and “the unique value of female perspectives” in the reports have reconstructed society’s perception of the relationship between women and public affairs.

At the practical level, the emphasis in the discourse on the roles of female cadres, such as “connecting with women's groups” and “paying attention to details of people’s livelihood”, has directly promoted the implementation of rural women’s rights and interests [5]. For example, practices highlighted in the discourse have not only provided a channel for women to voice their opinions but also injected female strength into rural revitalization, achieving a positive interaction between discourse guidance and practical advancement.

5.2. Practical limitations of discourse construction

The discourse explains female cadres’ successes and difficulties mainly at the individual level, rarely delving into deep-seated structural issues. It highlights personal traits like “tenacity” when they overcome work barriers but overlooks systemic factors: the “male-dominated grassroots power structure” and “traditional gender norms that subtly bar women from politics” [10]. This overemphasis on individual drive masks the structural roots of gender inequality in rural governance, hindering efforts to seek institutional support.

The discourse tends to focus on “star cadres”—those with honors or who push major projects—while neglecting most ordinary rural female cadres [11]. Little attention is paid to the group’s diversity: differing predicaments faced by cadres of varying ages, education levels, or tenure are overlooked. This narrows societal understanding to “a few outstanding examples”, failing to reflect the group’s overall reality.

The discourse shapes an overly “perfect” image of female cadres, lacking authenticity. It over stresses a “balance of toughness and softness”, which clashes with reality, where many struggle with work-family conflicts or show vulnerability under pressure (details often downplayed) [12]. Labels like “devoted” and “pragmatic” highlight professionalism but ignore personal dimensions: emotional needs and individual aspirations. This reduces them to “symbolic figures”, lacking human warmth and realness.

6. Paths to optimize media discourse

6.1. In-depth exploration of gender perspective

The media needs to go beyond superficial gender narratives and construct a more critical gender perspective. On one hand, it should proactively reveal the structural gender barriers faced by rural grassroots female cadres. For example, reports should explicitly present such realistic predicaments as “male dominance in village-level decision-making power”, avoiding oversimplifying individual success as merely “personal struggle” [13]. Instead, they should link success to the influence of institutional environments and social concepts, guiding the public to pay attention to the deep-seated obstacles to gender equality.

On the other hand, it is necessary to explore the unique value of female experiences rather than labeling them “female perspectives”. For instance, by recording how female cadres design policies with gender-sensitive thinking, their differentiated contributions to rural governance can be demonstrated. Meanwhile, it is important to construct narratives of “gender collaboration” to break the limitation that “women’s issues are only concerned by women”, promoting the formation of a social consensus on gender equality.

6.2. Diversified expansion of narrative dimensions

To break the limitations of “stereotypical” narratives, the media needs to expand narrative dimensions from three aspects: subject, content, and perspective. In terms of narrative subjects, more opportunities should be given to ordinary rural grassroots female cadres to voice their opinions [3]. For example, through forms like “village work diaries” and “work vlogs”, the daily work status of non-star cadres can be presented—including the fatigue from handling trivial matters, the helplessness when mediating conflicts, and the joy of gaining villagers’ recognition.

In terms of narrative content, it is necessary to go beyond the single dimension of “professional achievements” and focus on the multiple identities and real experiences of female cadres: not only recording their professional performance as governors but also presenting the conflicts in their family roles as daughters, mothers, and wives, as well as their confusion and transformation in personal growth [7]. In terms of narrative perspective, multi-subject evaluations from villagers, colleagues, and family members should be introduced to supplement the multi-faceted nature of female cadres’ images through “others’ perspectives”, avoiding the one-sided subjective shaping by the media.

6.3. Balance between authenticity and publicity

Firstly, it should avoid “overly perfect” publicity and appropriately present the mistakes and difficulties female cadres encounter in their work. For example, reporting real scenarios such as setbacks in project promotion and villagers’ misunderstanding in policy implementation, and

showing their reflection and improvement process, can make the image more authentic and enhance audience resonance [1].

Secondly, it is necessary to balance publicity orientation and problem awareness. While affirming the contributions of female cadres, it should not avoid gender-related issues in rural governance. By integrating real-world cases with robust data, the campaign can spark constructive dialogue—centered, for example, on how institutional design can guarantee female cadres genuine decision-making authority—turning advocacy into a catalyst for tangible reform.

Thirdly, small-person narratives should be adopted instead of grand narratives. For example, through a series of detailed scenes, the professional status can be presented from a life-oriented perspective, which not only conveys the warmth of grassroots governance but also avoids deliberate sensationalism, allowing real details to naturally carry publicity value.

7. Conclusion

This study conducts a discourse analysis of reports on rural grassroots female cadres in the WeChat official account of China Women's News from 2022 to 2025, with the core goal of exploring the presentation logic of rural “her power” in media discourse. They not only showcase these women's talents in leading villagers to develop industries and solve governance problems, but also highlight their warmth in patiently mediating conflicts and caring for vulnerable groups, creating a unique tension between “competence” and “approach-ability”. It is worth noting that this study has limitations: the sample only focuses on the single platform of China Women's News and fails to cover the differences in reports from media at different levels and of different types, which may restrict the generalizability of the conclusions.

Future research can be deepened in two aspects: first, expanding the sample to include local women's media and comprehensive media, and through cross-platform comparison, exploring the commonalities and differences in the narratives of “her power” among different media; second, combining in-depth interviews with journalists and grassroots female cadres to analyze the interaction mechanism between media frameworks and practical experiences, further revealing the social and cultural logic behind the construction of the “her power” image, thus providing a richer perspective for understanding the relationship between gender and rural governance. Future research can be extended to local women’s media and comprehensive media for cross-platform comparison, and combined with in-depth interviews with journalists and female cadres, to deeply explore the interaction mechanism and underlying social logic behind the construction of the “her power” image.

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