Bo Feng
School of Government, Central University of Finance and Economics, Beijing, China.
(email: fengb@email.cufe.edu.cn)

Hua Xing
School of Government, Central University of Finance and Economics, Beijing, China.
email: xinghua@cufe.edu.cn

Bo Feng is a doctoral candidate at the Central University of Finance and Economics. He obtained a Master's degree from Northeastern University in the United States. His research interests include public administration and leadership. His email address is fengb@email.cufe.edu.cn.

Hua Xing is a professor in the School of Government at Central University of Finance and Economics. His research focuses on regional collaboration and urban governance. His email address xinghua@cufe.edu.cn

How Can Regional Collaborative Governance Promote Public Value Through Relational Leadership? Grounded Research Based on Inter-Provincial Collaboration Between Guangdong, Hunan, and Guangxi in China

Abstract

Studies on regional collaborative governance based on China's institutional context are abundant, but the leadership perspective behind regional collaborative governance has rarely been discussed in previous studies. Based on a review of relational leadership theory, this study adopts the grounded theory methodology to study the three cities bordering Guangdong, Hunan, and Guangxi provinces, condensing the components of relational leadership in regional collaborative governance and the general explanatory framework. The research found that relational leadership in regional collaborative governance is composed of mission-driven, social capital, governance resources, trust shaping, common learning, interaction mechanisms, and public value. Among them, mission-driven is the motivation, social capital and governance resources are the basic conditions, trust shaping and common learning are actions, the interaction mechanism is the carrier, and public value creation is the goal. At present, the main problem of regional collaborative governance is that the governance mechanism is "built but not run." It is necessary to build an effective network governance system through the relational leadership of leaders, improve the overall public leadership of regional governance, and promote a governance system to operate more effectively. This research not only explores the dynamic leadership process of regional collaborative governance, but also enriches the micro perspective of regional collaborative governance research, expands the theoretical space of collaborative leadership, makes up the "leadership deficit" in the field of regional collaborative governance, and has reference significance and practical enlightenment for further promoting the performance of collaborative governance in the cross-region context.

Keywords:

relational leadership; collaborative governance; public value; social capital

Introduction

Against the background of globalization, regional collaborative governance has become the mainstream form of economic and social development. Scholars have explored regional collaborative governance from different perspectives and have made significant contributions to the influence of vertical intervention on horizontal intergovernmental collaboration (Kwon & Feiock, 2010), collaboration mechanism selection (Yi et al., 2018), collaboration network structure (Hawkins, 2016; Provan & Kenis, 2008), and other aspects. Existing studies have explored cross-regional collaborative governance from the perspective of "institution-structure," focusing on mechanism design and institution construction in collaborative governance. Cross-regional collaboration is a dynamic process that involves the participation of multiple subjects. Interaction among these subjects constitutes a horizontal network of mutual equality and creates public value through networked collaboration (Moore, 1995). Owing to their characteristics of self-organization, horizontal networks are prone to power friction and blurred responsibility. Due to conflicts in collaboration objectives, the performance of regional collaborative governance cannot be effectively realized, resulting in the failure of public value. Therefore, to ensure the realization of regional collaborative governance goals, it is necessary to properly manage the collaborative network and promote the orderly participation of various collaborative subjects through the effective leadership of network agents.

In the context of the Chinese governance system, cadres at all levels are key agents of regional collaborative governance and constitute the main actors in promoting cross-regional collaboration. However, under the block relationship system of the Chinese local government, cadres at all levels are only responsible for superior cadres in their respective administrative areas or business lines, and there is no direct management connection with cadres in neighboring administrative areas. The authority based on the "leader-follower" relationship in the traditional bureaucratic system is not really applicable in this scenario. The public leadership structure based on creating public value no longer follows the traditional single leading subject but is realized through the linkage of multiple leading subjects in the collaborative network (Beer, 2019).Therefore, breaking the administrative boundary without breaking administrative subordination, promoting cross-regional coordination and collaboration by effectively playing the role of leadership, improving the performance of collaboration, and creating public value has become a major challenge for administrative cadres in each area and is also a key issue in improving regional collaborative governance.

In recent years, scholars have noticed the importance of leadership in the process of collaborative governance, which can effectively promote the achievement of collaboration and improve the performance of collaborative governance (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Carlson, 2007; Huxham & Vangen, 2000). Therefore, the study of regional collaborative governance should not only focus on the design of the system level but also pay attention to the role of leadership in the process of collaboration. Uhl-Bien (2006) proposed the relational leadership theory based on the discussion of the relationship between multiple leaders in the collaborative network. As a form of leadership based on collaborative relationships, relational leadership can effectively coordinate and manage collaborative networks to create public value (Ayres 2019). In the process of cross-regional collaborative governance, tension is caused by a highly conflicting environment, which challenges the creation of public value. Therefore, relational leadership plays an important role in alleviating network tension (Yi et al., 2018).

Therefore, we need to explain relational leadership in the process of regional collaborative governance at both theoretical and practical levels, including the components of relational leadership in regional collaborative governance. What is the relational process in relational leadership practice? How does relational leadership help to meet the challenges of regional collaborative governance?

Based on the practice cases of collaborative governance of three cities in the interprovincial border of Guangdong, Hunan, and Guangxi in China, this study adopts the qualitative research method of grounded theory to describe the local practice pattern and dynamic operating mechanism of relational leadership in the regional collaborative governance process. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The following section reviews the current research frontiers on relational leadership. Section will introduce the research methods and the data analysis process. The fourth part constructs the theoretical model of relational leadership in regional collaborative governance and analyzes the dynamic mechanism of leadership operations. Finally, the study reflects on how to better play the role of relational leadership in solving problems in the process of regional collaborative governance and promote the creation of public value.

Literature Review

It is generally believed that the concept of leadership is derived from private sector management practices. The leadership trait school, which originated in the early 20th century, focused on the personality and traits of leaders, while the leadership behavior school, which emerged in the 1950s, began to focus on the behavior style of leaders. The contingency and situational schools of leadership, which emerged in the 1960s, focused on the situation of leaders. In the 1970s, the transformational leadership school and the charismatic leadership school focused

on the interactive relationship between leaders and followers, and in recent years, the biological evolution school, the information processing school, and the neuroscience school arose along with the interdisciplinary research. Although leadership research has experienced a change in the research paradigms of several schools, most of the existing studies have discussed leadership from the starting point of a single leader and have exerted the role of leadership through longitudinal influence transmission similar to bureaucracy. In a collaborative network, a single leader is convenient for commanding and controlling the overall network, and leadership that strictly relies on hierarchical transmission ensures efficient policy implementation. However, there are also problems, such as poor adaptability to the external environment, lack of ability to solve the dynamic problems of the collaborative network, and lack of innovative expression in the process of collaboration (Kapucu & Hu, 2016).

In the current study of collaborative governance, with the increasing complexity of the external environment and the increasing diversification of governance subjects, governance problems begin to cross traditional administrative divisions, levels, and organizational boundaries, and wicked problems with high complexity and high-value conflicts (Bao et al., 2013). The concept of network governance has emerged in this context. Scholars believe that public value should be created through networked governance and collaboration involving multiple subjects rather than focusing on formal bureaucratic authority (Crosby, 2017). The hierarchical distance between different participants in the collaborative governance network is relatively ambiguous, which is reflected in the equal-collaboration relationship. Different participants assume the leadership role, and the output performance of the collaborative network often cannot be determined by the formal leadership behavior of a single participant (Huxham & Vangen, 2000).

Therefore, the traditional leadership theory faces a dilemma when explaining the practical problems of collaborative scenarios. The public leadership activities "embedded in the complex interactive network of multiple subjects" call for a leadership model that effectively deals with "wicked problems" to enhance the ability of collaborative governance to create public value (Uhl-bien et al., 2007).

Uhl-Bien (2006) proposed the theory of relational leadership based on the discussion of the relationship between multiple leaders in collaborative networks, and defined it as "a social influence process through which emergent coordination (i.e., evolving social order) and change (e.g., new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviors, and ideologies) are constructed and produced' (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Relational leadership is not a trait or behavior of individual leaders but a phenomenon produced in multi-agent interaction. Leadership is jointly constructed in the social interaction process (Fairhurst & Uhl-bien, 2012). Relational leadership regards collaboration as a complex relationship network composed of constantly changing individuals, with constantly complex interactions between individual members and collaborative networks (Abell & Simons, 2000). In this case, power is not concentrated within specific individuals but is distributed throughout the entire network (Bryson et al., 2017). Relational leadership is regarded as a collective achievement and the result of a generative process in which participants in joint efforts achieve common goals through communication (Page et al., 2015). Komives et al. (2013) emphasize that leadership is a relational process in which people participate in collaboration to create change, which will benefit the realization of public interests. Therefore, relational leadership does not pay attention to the individual characteristics of specific leaders but focuses on the process of social interaction among collaborative participants; that is, leadership is a process of relationship construction.

Based on this, scholars have begun to explore the components and implementation strategies of relational leadership. Based on case studies, Akram et al. (2016) believed that high social capital is the main characteristic of relational leadership. Komives et al. (2013) propose that relational leadership consists of five elements, including inclusion, empowerment, purposefulness, ethical behavior and process orientation. Carifio (2010) focuses on empowerment behavior in relational leadership and believes that empowerment can promote trust in the network and effectively improve collaborative performance. Hilaire (2008) proposed that trust is the foundation of relational leadership, and trust can promote the establishment of relationships and realize resource exchange. Gittell et al. (2012) emphasized that interactive structures and processes are important media for relational leadership. Regarding the realization strategy of relational leadership, Sancino et al. (2022) identified four ways to realize relational leadership based on the interaction between mayors in Italy and citizens, public managers, and politicians in local governance: centralized leadership, semi-inclusive leadership, conventional leadership, and multi-participant leadership. Kinder et al.(2021) studied how relational leadership promotes self-organizing collaboration in a collaborative governance ecosystem in the context of lacking a central leader, and proposed that effective relational leadership mobilizes social groups by creating and using collective consciousness and links group intention with collaborative behavior under the role of shared learning. Ayres (2018) proposed that relational leadership uses social connections and relationships to pursue network goals, which is especially important for network leaders without abundant resources or formal authority. Orr and Bennett (2016) explored the relational dimension of leadership by observing storytelling and narration as important tools in relational leadership. They argued that leadership

influence and control can be effectively achieved through expressive narrative processes, which include making emotional connections with people and exerting influence by focusing on collaborative processes rather than bureaucratic authority.

It can be seen that as a leading theory of leadership research, relational leadership provides a new perspective and theoretical contribution to collaborative network governance. However, while existing research has achieved preliminary results in relevant links, there are still some problems, such as poor logical sorting of relations and unclear definitions of public value connotations in regional collaborative governance. Therefore, it is necessary to form a unified analytical framework based on Chinese local practical fields to explain the overall operational process of relational leadership. This study will take regional collaborative governance in the context of China as the research field to conduct grounded research, expound the existing theories of relational leadership, and try to construct the general explanatory framework and operational mechanism logic of relational leadership in regional collaborative governance.

Methods
Research methods

Grounded theory is a qualitative research method based on the empirical materials proposed by Glaser and Strauss. Grounded research starts directly from the original data and abstracts the theory step-by-step from the bottom-up (Strauss, 1987). By summarizing complex social phenomena, grounded theory excavates the dynamic process and change law and then goes to the theoretical construction process of formal theory evolution (Glaser, 1978). It has been pointed out that the grounded theory method in the study of public management is applicable to the problems of factor identification, process interpretation and exploratory exploration of

new phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). The relational leadership of regional collaborative governance in the context of the Chinese governance system includes multiple levels of content. Extracting the component factors of relational leadership belongs to the problem of factor identification, while exploring the dynamic logic of relational leadership in the process of regional collaborative governance belongs to the problem of process interpretation. The construction of an explanatory framework for relational leadership in regional collaborative governance based on grounded theory and the identification of components of relational leadership are of great value in the construction of relational leadership theory in a local context.

Case introduction

Due to the problems of the administrative economy, marginal effects, and high transaction costs, the inter-provincial border region shows basic characteristics such as economic underdevelopment, obvious administrative segmentation, and certain conflicts in economic activities (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021). The inter-provincial border area is a key area for coordinated development in China. Therefore, this study selected collaborative governance practice cases of three cities in the inter-provincial border of Guangdong Province, Hunan Province, and Guangxi Province.

Qingyuan City in Guangdong Province, Yongzhou City in Hunan Province, and Hezhou City in Guangxi Province are located at the junction of Guangdong, Hunan, and Guangxi provinces. They have the same ethnic cultural background and frequent personnel flow, which provides a practical foundation for coordinated development. However, as it is located at the intersection of provincial administrative divisions, the economic development level of this region has lagged behind the surrounding areas due to its low-end agriculture and

inconvenient transportation. Hezhou takes the initiative to establish inter-provincial collaboration relations, making full use of the geographical advantages of Hezhou bordering Guangdong and Hunan to actively promote collaboration. In 2020, with the signing of the joint construction agreement among the three provinces, the three cities bordering each other entered the fast track of regional collaborative governance. Under the strong promotion of the leading cadres at all levels of the three cities, they have realized joint prevention and coordination of administrative law enforcement, cross-provincial government services, three-dimensional interconnection of transportation facilities, and deep integration of industrial development. Collaboration and governance in many public fields has achieved remarkable results.

Data Collections

Based on the three stages of regional collaborative governance–initial tendency formation, collaborative consensus-reaching, and collaborative governance implementation–this study obtains various types of data and materials through semi-structured interviews, literature collection, and media report crawling. From January 2022 to October 2024, the author conducted field research in the three cities several times. The main interviewees were: (1) city-level cadres, mainly administrative heads of each city, five in total; (2) Department-level cadres: 12 in total, including the main leaders of various municipal departments, commissions, and bureaus; (3) Section-level cadres, mainly department heads of each unit, 15 in total; (4) General public: 10 in total; a total of 43 interview materials were obtained. Through the above methods, case data and materials are collected in a more comprehensive way to provide a more complete and reliable basis for research data analysis.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory was realized through a three-level coding process. The original concept and initial category are extracted by open coding, the sub-category and main category are extracted by spindle coding, the core category is summarized by selective coding, the connection between various categories is sought, and the theory is constructed by deduction (Campbell, 2013). In this process, researchers, experts, and scholars in related fields repeatedly examine and discuss similarities and differences in coding to improve the reliability and validity of coding. There was 83.9% agreement between the author and the other coder. Scholars of qualitative methods have suggested that a conformance level of more than 80% between coders is acceptable (Campbell, 2013).

Open Coding

Open coding is the process of labeling, conceptualizing, and categorizing the original data. This stage requires adherence to the principle of openness, close to the primary material line-by-line code, from the initial category. In this study, 43 interview data points were imported into NVivo12 software for analysis, and 569 labels and 121 concepts were obtained through open coding. After concept induction by eliminating duplications and merging similar concepts, 39 effective concepts were abstracted and summarized.

Spindle coding

Spindle coding, also known as associative coding, is based on open coding, identifying and establishing the relationship between categories by analyzing and constantly comparing the connection between initial categories, and further forming sub-categories and core categories (Creswell, 2014). In this study, NVivo12 is used to cluster and analyze the coverage rate of the original materials of the three cities' collaborative

governance and to extract and construct the reference of sub-categories. According to semantic relations, the initial categories formed by the original coding were compared, summarized, and abstracted, and finally extracted into 17 sub-categories and seven main categories: mission-driven, social capital, governance resources, trust shaping, common learning, interaction mechanism, and public value. The coding results are presented in Table 1.

Selective coding

Selective coding, also known as core coding, summarizes the core categories that cover all categories from the conceptual categories that have been formed. Based on the core categories, the relationship between them and the main category was explored, and these categories were connected by narrative lines", thus building a theoretical framework (Creswell, 2014). Based on the relationships between the seven main categories, this study constructs a relational leadership model of regional

Theoretical saturation test

Grounded theory advocates that, after the completion of theory construction, it is necessary to test the saturation of theory by alternately collecting and analyzing data; if the theory is not saturated, data should be collected again to develop concepts and categories (Creswell, 2014). Based on the analysis of the original materials, a theoretical framework for relational leadership in regional collaborative governance was preliminarily constructed. To further test whether the theory is saturated, this study reserved 30 official news reports as triangular materials to test the saturation of the theory. The test results show no new changes to clarify concepts, determine categories, and construct theories. Therefore, it can be considered that the theoretical model passed the theoretical

Table 1.
Spindle coding analysis

Core Category	Sub-core category	Connotation
Mission-driven	Political consciousness	Effective governance
	Promotion drive	Responsible for public
		Serve the people
	Governing goal	Speed up regional integration
Social capital	Social relation network	Schoolmate relationship
		Rural relationship
		Colleague relationship
		Officer-businessman relationship
Governance resources	Legislative authorization	Joint legislation
	Policy instruments	Signing of joint construction agreement
		Joint prevention and control
	Financial support	Special financial fund
		ppp project
Trust shaping	Identity	Emotional resonance
		Story telling
		Ethnic integration
		Identity consensus
	Establish consensus	Common goals
		Confidence transmission
		Reinforcement encouragement
	Honor promise	Resource commitment
		Performance pledge
Common learning	Cognitive convergence	Mobilization activity
		Learning mechanism
	Value response	Logic of practice
		Common actions
Interaction mechanism	Institutional empowerment	Joint conference
		Collaboration mechanism
		Universal communication
	Administrative activities	Investigation and research
		Symposium
		Offline visit
		Field coordination meeting
Public value	Economic development	Economic growth rate
		Revenue growth rate
	Well-being promotion	Government efficiency
		Life convenient
	Ecological sustainable development	Joint control of water pollution
		Joint control of air pollution

saturation test and had strong reliability and explanatory power.

Construction and Interpretation of Relational Leadership Theory Model

Based on a grounded analysis of regional collaborative governance cases, this study constructs a relational leadership model in regional collaborative governance, as shown in Figure 1. First, driven by the mission to create public value, leading cadres construct an overall action framework for regional collaborative governance as the starting point of action. Second, social capital and governance resources constitute the basic conditions for the relational leadership of leading cadres in regional collaborative governance. Under the joint action of governance resources and interaction mechanisms, trust shaping is realized, further promoting the realization of the interaction mechanism. At the same time, trust shaping and interaction mechanisms together constitute common learning, and the interaction mechanism acts as a carrier to promote the realization of the goal

of public value. Finally, driven by the mission, social capital, and governance resources form the foundation support, common learning, trust shaping, and interaction mechanisms work together, and regional collaborative governance can be effectively realized, further creating public value, thus presenting the process mechanism of regional collaborative governance relational leadership.

Key elements of the relational leadership model

Mission-driven

Mission driving is the original driving force of the cadre's mission vision in the process of leading transregional collaborative governance. Mission-driven leadership, as a concentrated embodiment of the value concept of relational leadership, includes the cadre policy of "dare to take responsibility and serve the people" and the governing goal of "accelerating the process of regional integration" as the core. As the entrusted agents of the government, cadres shoulder all the great mission of "serving the people" and
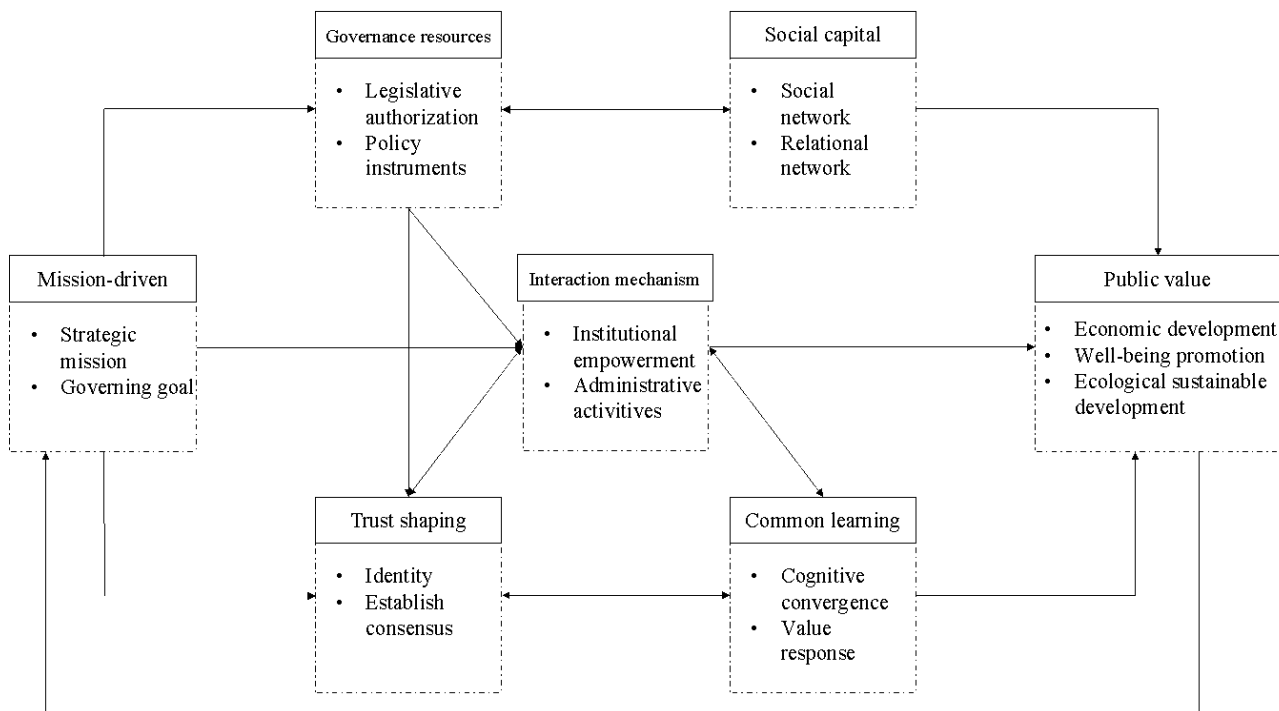

Figure 1. Regional collaborative governance relational leadership model
Source: Processed by the author

the vision of public value, which is internalized into the conscious action of leading cadres and promotes the effective realization of the goal of regional collaborative governance.

Social capital

Social capital is a basic condition of relational leadership in regional collaborative governance. Academics define the concept of social capital mainly at the micro, meso, and macro levels, and the social capital of leading cadres is mainly reflected at the micro level. Social capital at the micro level is understood as the "connection" between individuals, which is the resource that individuals can invest in and utilize to achieve individual or group goals (Akram et al., 2016). In the field of regional collaborative governance, the social capital of leading cadres includes interpersonal resources and relationship networks with public value in their social structure. Human relationships are the complexity of human exchanges in the environment and strength of the relationship network. Relationship energy drives leading cadres to transform regional collaborative governance intentions into concrete actions through indirect means. The accumulation of social capital makes it easier for leading cadres to reach an understanding and form consensus on the handling of specific public affairs, thus promoting the establishment of formal collaborative relations and the development of collaborative projects.

Governance resources

Governance resources are the ability of leading cadres to promote regional collaborative governance to create public value. As an important basic condition to promote the formation of regional collaborative governance relational leadership, governance resources are mainly manifested as collaborative legislative authorization, policy incentives, financial support, and other means of governance. In addition, organizational, financial, and policy support provided by the superior government, such as coordination and promotion at the provincial level, the allocation of special resources at the line level, and the performance evaluation orientation of local governments, form important governance empowerment. Governance resources provide tool support for relational leadership to play its role and provide favorable conditions for fulfilling commitments, building trust, and forming effective interactive mechanisms.

Trust shaping

In regional collaboration networks, trust helps reduce transaction costs; improve relationship stability; promote learning, knowledge exchange, and innovation; and overcome collective action dilemmas (Goodsell, 2011). Trust shaping is a process that aims to build trust relationships between subjects through identity identification, consensus establishment, and commitment fulfillment. Trust building is mainly embodied in the realization of identity through storytelling, emotional resonance, ethnic integration, party members and cadre identity, establishment of consensus by stating common goals, conveying confidence, strengthening encouragement, and then, based on the scientific leadership process, to improve regional collaboration performance, fulfill collaboration commitments, and further strengthen trust. Relational leadership shapes the power of breaking through multiple agents through trust, effectively promoting the improvement of the relationship between agents, and turns it into an important supporting factor for regional collaboration.

Common learning

In the relational leadership behavior of regional collaborative governance, common learning refers to the realization of collaborative knowledge sharing and the formation of capability effects by carrying out mobilization activities and organizing cross-regional exchanges and learning.

Cognitive convergence occurs when collaborative participants gradually gain an enhanced overlap between their cognitive structures, driving the formation of collective consciousness. At the same time, common tasks are used to form an action experience, based on the task of forming a common way of action, to achieve collaborative action convergence. Cross-regional collaborative governance presents nonlinear behavioral characteristics and requires joint learning to coordinate behavioral and cognitive differences among different subjects. As a complementary condition of interaction mechanisms, common learning can break the heterogeneous thinking and cognitive mode caused by regional cultural differences, promote the realization of cross-regional behavioral consistency, enhance the cohesion of regional collaboration, establish a positive collaborative atmosphere, and promote the successful realization of goals.

Interaction mechanism

The interaction mechanism refers to the interactive process, collaborative system, and communication mode in the collaborative network composed of subjects participating in collaborative governance between regions, which is the structural characteristic of relational leadership in regional collaborative governance. This is embodied in institutional empowerment, such as joint meeting systems, collaborative working mechanisms, public service remote communication mechanisms, administrative activities, special symposiums, and on-site coordination meetings. Relational leadership takes an interactive mechanism as a carrier. In regional collaborative governance, the interaction mechanism helps different participants to clarify their power boundaries, realize effective communication and mutual supervision, ensure the smooth progress of collaborative governance, and play a positive role in effective governance.

Public value

From the perspective of result-oriented public value, public value is the political coordination expression of citizens' collective preference, and it emphasizes that public value is the result of a collaborative network composed of citizens, public organizations, and other subjects (Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004). In the field of regional collaborative governance, relational leadership guides all types of participants to interact effectively and strive to achieve the established goals of collaborative performance to create public value, including high-quality economic development, effective improvement of people's well-being, and sustainable ecological development of participating regions, while establishing and maintaining cross-regional trust to respond to citizens' collective preferences.

To further understand the above relationship, this study explains the realization mechanism of relational leadership on public value creation in regional collaborative governance through a case analysis of the border regions of Guangdong, Hunan, and Guangxi provinces.

Process mechanism analysis of relational Leadership in regional collaborative governance

Formation of regional collaborative governance tendency

In the process of advancing regional integration, cadres at various levels implement a national regional coordinated development strategy. Qingyuan City, Yongzhou City, and Hezhou City are located in the border regions of Guangdong, Hunan, and Guangxi Provinces. As they are located in the inter-provincial edge region, their economic development has lagged behind that of the surrounding areas for a long time. Thus, realizing the rise of the edge through regional collaborative development has become a strategic path choice for these three cities. To establish efficient and orderly regional

collaborative governance, it is necessary to first build close intergovernmental relations. In addition to the market and bureaucracy systems, the regulation of intergovernmental relations is related to the relationship network of officials, and the regulation of private relations is one of the ways of intergovernmental relations regulation (Hansen et al., 2020). Through relationship docking and resource integration of cadres in the three cities, the formation of a regional collaborative governance tendency is promoted.

Establish relationship and active approaches: In terms of economic development, Hezhou City of Guangxi lags behind the two neighboring cities and has the strongest desire for regional collaborative development. The leading cadres of Hezhou City take the initiative to seize the opportunity for regional coordinated development, take the initiative to act under the drive of mission, and take positive actions to connect with the two neighboring cities.

> *The economic development of the city is relatively weak. Only by closely connecting with the Greater Bay Area, actively integrating into it, and forming complementary advantages with Yongzhou, Hunan Province, can we achieve high-quality economic and social development of Hezhou.* (Interview 36)

Enhancing the interaction of local government officials in various ways and channels and promoting their multiple cross-connections are crucial to the accumulation and cultivation of trust capital (Chen et al., 2016). The leading cadres of Hezhou City gave full play to the social capital advantage of relational leadership, took the initiative to contact the human resources and relationship networks of the two neighboring cities, and obtained the initial intention of collaboration with the leading cadres of the two neighboring cities by establishing informal communication channels.

> *The main leaders of the three cities participated in continuing education training. We were in the same class at that time, and we had a common discussion of the idea of regional collaboration. At that time, we said that we would have further communication after coming back.* (Interview 28)

Integrate relations and coordinate resources: Under the intensive visits of leading cadres at all levels in Hezhou City, officials of the three places have established a positive interactive relationship, which has played a role in promoting the formation of a good intergovernmental relationship and reaching the intention of collaboration. The leading cadres of Hezhou City also coordinated governance resources by linking vertical relations and won the support of the autonomous region for Hezhou to carry out regional collaborative governance, obtaining incentives in terms of collaborative policies and funds, which further established the trust relationship with the two neighboring cities and promoted the formation of the foundation support and connection bond of collaborative governance.

> *We often have to ask for policies from our superiors. The province proposes building our city into a demonstration area for regional collaboration, which is a major opportunity to promote regional development. We should make good use of our policy advantages and take the initiative to strive for collaboration.* (Interview 29)

Reach consensus on regional collaborative governance

After the parties have established the initial tendency of collaboration, the collaboration between the three places begins to enter the substantive system construction and mechanism design stages. At this stage, the demarcation of the collaboration scope and the design of collaboration mechanisms have become the main tasks placed on the leading cadres in charge of each city to

promote collaborative governance (O'Flynn, 2007). Leaders need to break administrative boundaries without breaking administrative subordination; form effective communication, collaboration, and interaction modes; and maximize collaboration performance with existing resource endowments. The construction process of relational leadership in the consensus-reaching stage of regional collaborative governance is as follows:

Information acquisition and sharing: Qingyuan City of Guangdong Province belongs to the core radiation area of the Greater Bay Area and is ahead of Yongzhou City of Hunan Province and Hezhou City of Guangxi Province in terms of its economic volume. The cadres of Hezhou City made a breakthrough in economic development, and fully communicated and exchanged views with the cadres of Qingyuan City on regional collaborative development to reach a consensus on collaboration.

Hezhou City has also set up a working group composed of leaders from the National Development and Reform Commission and other departments to conduct a comprehensive survey of residents and enterprises in the border areas of the province to understand the public's thoughts and appeals and to win the trust of the people. Hezhou City and Yongzhou City also held an inter-provincial border area development forum, feedback, and discussion on border development planning. Hezhou City invited the main leaders of Qingyuan and Yongzhou to visit Hezhou City to learn about the local customs and development potential. From 2018 to 2020, the administrative heads of the three places exchanged visits more than five times a year and reached a consensus through different forms of information acquisition and sharing.

Relationship improvement and mobilization activities: Relationship leadership can be effectively achieved through expressive storytelling and narrative processes (Orr and

Bennett, 2016). The cadres of the three cities narrated the historical exchanges and development processes between the three cities on different occasions, closely combined with the common ground of the three cities with the same ethnic and cultural background, stimulated the emotional resonance between the cadres and masses of the three cities, and improved the formal relations between the three cities through collaborative story narration.

It has been mentioned many times by the team members from Qingyuan City of Guangdong Province dispatched to Hezhou City of Guangxi Province:

> *My hometown is Guangxi, so I have special feelings for this area, and my work is very identity.* (Interview 16)

The cadres of the three cities also held on-site symposiums many times, and passed on the prospects of future collaboration through the statement of common goals. The cadres of the three cities reached consensus and trust:

> *Yongzhou will work hand in hand with Qingyuan and Hezhou to carry out innovative inter-provincial and regional joint construction activities and gather maximum positive energy.* (Interview 39)

Under the collaboration consensus formed by the high-level cadres, the cadres at all levels of the three cities also expressed profound expectations for deepening the collaboration between the three cities in a wider range of fields and further fed back into the leadership behavior of the cadres in the collaborative governance relationship.

Collaborative trust building: The combination of mission-driven and governance resources drives the formation of trust building among the three places. Trust reduces the transaction costs of local collaboration. Based on solid trust, local cadres began to focus on the interaction mechanism and coordination

system of regional collaborative governance. A collaborative governance network was gradually formed, jointly constructed by cadres at all levels of the three regions and other participants, and regional collaborative governance made substantial progress.

> *The cadres of the three cities showed positive attitudes. I feel that the collaboration between the three cities will continue to deepen, and the economic development of our town will benefit greatly from the collaboration of the three cities.* (Interview 16)

Promotion of regional collaborative governance

In the promotion stage of regional collaborative governance, the governments of the three cities carry out joint actions based on the concrete measurement of "cost-benefit." In the process of collaboration, the three cities must face network tension brought about by the highly conflicted environment, which poses a challenge to the creation of public value. By playing the moderating role of relational leadership, the three cities have realized the construction of interactive mechanisms, resolution of collaborative conflicts, and realization of public value.

Construction of an interactive mechanism: The interactive mechanism is the core carrier of the role of cross-regional collaborative governance relational leadership. A collaborative interactive mechanism was constructed under the joint action of mission-driven governance resources and trust shaping. Through administrative activities, such as investigation, on-site coordination meetings, and office-holding exchanges of cadres, the cadres of the three cities promote mutual exchanges among cadres and timely solve the coordination problems caused by regional barriers in the process of regional collaboration and governance.

Active acting is the concentrated embodiment of the mission-driven relational leadership of cadres in regional collaborative governance,

and is the initial condition of the interaction mechanism. The collaborative construction of inter-provincial border areas involves a large number of complicated affairs, which require cadres at all three levels to actively participate in the process of collaboration.

> *The leaders of Hezhou City took the initiative to contact the director in charge of my home, and helped us actively coordinate the cross-provincial land and government approval, and our factory was put into operation within the same month.* (Interview 18)

By strengthening institutional empowerment, the division of labor among all parties can be defined, collaborative forces can be fully integrated, and the smooth operation of collaborative governance can be promoted. The solution of coordination problems and the implementation of a collaboration system realize the fulfillment of commitments and further strengthen trust.

> *In view of the problem of the inter-provincial border road, the leaders of the three cities held a centralized on-site coordination meeting, the relevant responsible people were called over, the scene to solve the problem in the process of road repair.* (Interview 8)

As a complementary force to interactive mechanisms, joint learning is an important form of relational leadership. In a collaborative governance network, leadership is embodied in the process of new learning and behavior (Cristofoli et al., 2021). Through the cadre exchange and learning mechanism, cadres can carry out cross-regional and cross-field administrative leadership activities, which can increase information transmission between different cities, improve cognitive convergence, and strengthen the density of relationship networks and consistency of action. Simultaneously, cross-regional collaboration among cadres oriented by common tasks can create learning experiences

for leading cadres in various cities and further promote collaboration in multiple fields. Since September 2020, 39 cadres and 410 professional and technical personnel have been selected for temporary exchange. Through the exchange of personnel on temporary posts and other means, the administrative division barrier of cadres has been effectively broken, inter-regional contact between cadres has been strengthened, cross-regional policy coordination has improved, and policy diffusion has been strengthened.

Resolution of collaboration conflicts: Intergovernmental collaboration cannot avoid problems such as inconsistent actions in the process of collaboration promotion due to the potential conflict of territorial objectives and interests (Feiock, 2013). For example, cross-boundary water pollution problems occurring at administrative boundaries mostly result from negative externalities brought upstream to downstream, which are closely related to the economic interests of the administrative area, making it difficult to promote collaborative governance (Doberstein 2016). The He River is a first-level tributary of the Xijiang River, which is the main stream of the Pearl River Basin, and its main tributaries pass through the cities of Hezhou and Qingyuan. For a long time, owing to the influence of industrial and domestic sewage, coupled with the border of the province, the He River has not been effectively treated, and the overall water quality situation is not optimistic. Because of the lack of effective incentives, river water management departments between the two places often fail to deal with river pollution control work.

After senior leaders of the two cities reached a consensus on regional collaborative governance, local departments began to follow suit. Hu, as the temporary deputy director of the Ecological Environment Bureau dispatched by Qingyuan City to Hezhou City for counterpart collaboration, began to actively promote the exploration of the

inter-provincial joint protection and governance of Hejiang due to his certain governance resources and interpersonal resources in his hometown. On the one hand, Hu actively communicated with the superior authorities about the river linkage management plan and obtained the recognition and support of the superior leaders through the way of "diligent reporting." On the other hand, Hu strengthened the communication and coordination with the main leaders of Yongzhou City, his hometown. He passed on to the work plan through a formal working mechanism and collaboration intention through the official network. Under the active promotion of Hu, the two cities soon carried out cross-provincial river comprehensive joint management actions, forming a basin horizontal ecological protection compensation mechanism.

Realization of public value: In the process of regional collaborative governance, the promotion of leaders is an important driving force that makes stakeholders willing to invest time and energy to participate in collaboration (Pestoff, 2018). By using relationship-oriented soft power instead of the hard way of command and control, relational leaders can balance the interests of relevant parties, strengthen coordination and consistency among stakeholders, and promote the continuous development of regional collaboration. Leaders integrate relationships among multiple stakeholders through relational leadership strategies, and the resulting relationship network can generate trust and long-term interaction, reduce the cost of collecting information from other actors in collaboration, bring satisfaction, and avoid opportunism (Fung, 2006). Therefore, the relational resource integration among leaders can effectively deliver the value mission and promote the realization of the goal of public value creation:

Promoting the coordinated development of the three cities and realizing the rise of the edge is the basic value orientation of Qingyuan

City, Yongzhou City, and Hezhou City to carry out collaboration and is also the basic action of cadres at all levels to follow. Under the limitation of inherent administrative subordination, the cadres of the three cities break the administrative boundary through relational leadership, take the collaborative development strategy as guidance, weave a tight collaborative relationship network, integrate all kinds of governance resources at all levels, and jointly promote the creation of public value.

> *For example, I am the cadre of Yongzhou, but I can not only consider the interests of my Yongzhou in the process of promoting regional collaboration, I also have to consider the benefits you Hezhou, Qingyuan can get, because only in the premise of you all get benefits we can get better development.* (Interview 22)

The leading cadres of the three cities built a long-term relationship and interaction by participating in collaborative actions, constantly passing on the value mission, unifying the thoughts of various subjects, internalizing them in participating in the construction of regional collaborative governance, and working together to promote the creation of public value.

Under the role of relational leadership, the initiative of all participants in the collaboration network was fully mobilized, and the overall collaboration force of the three cities was effectively integrated and amplified. On this basis, it has solved the problems of collaborative governance obstacles and backward economic development caused by the segmentation of interprovincial marginal regions and urban administrative regions for a long time. Collaboration in administrative law enforcement, government services, transportation facilities, industrial development, and other aspects has achieved remarkable results and has promoted the rise of marginal regions. In short, the relational leadership of regional collaborative governance creates public value

between regions, including high-quality economic development, improvement of people's well-being, and ecological sustainable development.

Conclusion

Regional collaborative governance is a hot topic in current theoretical research. However, few studies have systematically analyzed the micro leadership mechanism in the process of regional collaboration, especially the lack of discussion on the role of leadership in the process of horizontal inter-regional collaboration, which forms a great contrast with the extensive practice of regional collaborative governance. Based on in-depth interview data of leading cadres and public groups in the collaborative governance field of three cities in the interprovincial border regions of Guangdong, Hunan, and Guangxi, this study uses the grounded theory method to build a relational leadership model of regional collaborative governance in the context of China. The core elements of relational leadership in regional collaborative governance include mission drive, social capital, political resources, trust shaping, common learning, interactive mechanisms, and public value. These factors constitute the motivation and foundation for the formation of relational leadership in the field of regional collaborative governance as well as the basic conditions, influencing factors, and output results of leadership behavior processes. Based on grounded theory, the internal relationship between the core elements of leadership was described in detail, and the dynamic process mechanism of the initiation, formation, function, and output of relational leadership was extracted.

The question of how cadres in horizontal and equal positions lead to trans-regional collaborative governance leadership was answered. The study finds that:

First, in the collaborative governance network, leadership is not transmitted through the hierarchy in traditional leadership theory,

but focuses on the process of making all the members involved in the collaboration interact in a new way to give full play to their advantages, and emphasizes the interdependence of all members in the network, which forms the basis of relational leadership. The effectiveness of collaborative governance networks is based on relationship-building and maintaining effective interactions between collaborative partners. The key to relational leadership is not the use of power or "influence," but rather the ability of the collaborative leadership process to allow participants to reach agreement and form concerted action.

Second, a large number of collaboration mechanisms have been established in regional collaborative governance, but the root cause is that cadres at all levels are the key subjects in promoting regional collaborative governance and the terminal implementer of regional coordinated development strategies and policies. At present, the main problem of regional collaborative governance is establishing but not operating governance mechanisms. It is necessary to build an effective network governance system through the relational leadership of leaders, improve the overall leadership of regional governance, and promote effective operation of the governance system.

Third, relational leadership in regional collaborative governance runs based on the systematic relationship logic among mission-driven, social capital, governance resources, trust shaping, common learning, interaction mechanisms, and public value. It runs through the entire process of forming the tendency of collaborative governance, reaching the consensus of collaborative governance, implementing collaborative governance, and expanding boundaries. Cadres who participate in collaborative governance scenarios are mission-driven, supported by governance resources and social capital, characterized by trust shaping and

common learning, and carried out by interactive mechanisms, with the ultimate goal of creating public value.

The theoretical contributions of this study are as follows.

First, the theory of relational leadership is embedded into the field of regional collaborative governance, and the theoretical model of regional collaborative governance relational leadership is constructed by analyzing the realization logic of relational leadership contained in the case. Incorporating the elements of relational leadership into the dynamic sequence of regional collaborative governance breaks the unitary defects of regional collaborative governance on resource dependence and institutional demand under static conditions, and expands the theoretical space of regional collaborative governance.

Second, this study innovatively puts forward relational leadership with the goal of creating public value. Relational leadership with the creation of public value as the core is not only the value pursuit of regional collaborative governance but also the biggest difference between public and private leadership. This study develops the connotation of leadership theory based on public value creation, profoundly describes the publicity and value of leadership, and constructs a dynamic framework of relational leadership from mission-driven to public value creation.

As an exploratory study, using the grounded theory method to condense and describe the core elements of relationship leadership in regional collaborative governance, it discusses and explains the process mechanism of relationship leadership to create public value, which is of certain reference value for the update of the theoretical system of regional collaborative governance and the promotion of practice work. However, further research is needed. First, the quality of the data collected through interviews will inevitably be affected by the subjective cognitive bias of

individuals. Whether the theoretical model established based on this has a high universality needs to be followed by a large-sample investigation and confirmatory analysis. In the future, qualitative and quantitative research methods should be used to address these shortcomings. Second, although this study attempts to be representative and typical in the selection of cases, the practice based on the three provinces also has certain particularities, which may affect the universality of the overall conclusion. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct further comparative research from the perspective of multiple cases and develop the relational leadership theory of regional collaborative governance.

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