

An Analysis of Self-Assessment and Influencing Factors of Student Village Officials in China

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Abstract

In recent years, with the ongoing implementation of Student Village Officials(or SVO) System in China, the number of Student Village Officials increases accordingly; however, views on SVOs' role in the New Countryside Construction vary. Based on the survey data obtained within Chongqing City, this article conducts a multiple regression analysis on the many factors that influence SVOs' contribution. According to the results, some factors are not proved in this study, which greatly influence SVOs' self-assessment and were thought to have a profound impact on their role, such as gender and experiences as student cadres.

Keywords: student village officials (or SVOs), self-assessment, role, influencing factors, Chongqing

1. Literature Review

The new term "Student Village Official" (or SVO) emerged in China's Cadre management system only a few years ago, referring to college and university graduates who are selected out by governments to work in village administrative units in rural areas. Since the issue of *Opinions on selecting college and university graduates to work in the village (Trial)* in April, 2008, the number of SVOs has been growing steadily; by the end of 2010, around 200,000 college and university graduates have been working as SVOs in rural China.

Years of practice reveals the great potential of this new system; but its shortcomings also become obvious, which are particularly true when considering numerous scholars' diverse views on SVOs' role in the New Countryside Construction. CAO Daoyou and SUN Bo (2008) listed the many problems concerning SVOs, such as their springboard mentality, professional bottleneck and mismatch, low salary, lag-behind of training and management, which have negatively constrained their role; CAO and SUN thus proposed that measures should be taken to complete the SVOs' professional mechanism, straighten out SVOs' role, establish a rational assessment mechanism, improve their wages and benefits, and to strengthen further education and training. WANG Lixin and ZHU Zhe (2010) argued that critical factors, such as the professional mismatch and impure career motivation, limit SVOs' role to play, and suggested a reform in selection mechanism. Based on a summary of the advantageous experiences in Student Village Official System, WANG Wenju et al. (2009) studied the means to stimulate SVOs to play their role, and concluded that SVOs' functions are in the following five aspects: grassroots management, organization and publicity, spiritual civilization, public relations assistants, and routine administrative matters. ZHANG Xingxing et al. (2006) believed that the diversity of roles and vague role orientation of SVOs are the main causes of SVOs' unclear role. From the perspective of straightening out the functional relationship among governments, colleges and universities and SVOs, NIU Qin (2008) put forward for the first time the function of colleges and universities in SVOs' cultivation. WANG Zhigang and Yu YONGmei (2010) analyzed the career motivation, salary and benefits and job satisfaction of SVOs in Beijing, finding that SVOs face issues of unclear functional orientation, low job satisfaction and inadequate effective stimulation, which are the main factors restricting SVOs' role. WANG Yufang (2010) discussed the Student Village Official System from the social support female SVOs receive; she suggested that a system of social

support for female SVOs should be established to help female SVOs adapt quickly into their role. There are four types of such social support: support of harmonious gender culture, support of courses design in colleges and universities, support of government policies of long-term mechanism and emotional support from the family and friends. LI Zhengyu and PENG Kuang (2007) carried out their study from perspectives of self-identity, the psychological distance to farmers and degree of value realization, and held that during the selection of SVOs, it is very necessary to consider the participants' advantages (majors, specialty, etc.) and the special requirements of the villages, which can help SVOs adapt themselves quickly to their positions and play their roles.

According to the literature, current studies on SVOs' role in the New Countryside Construction focus mainly on problems exposed during the implementation of Student Village Official System; these studies then apply theories from management, sociology and psychology into doing logical deduction. Most of these studies are qualitative and countermeasure-oriented, with very limited quantitative and empirical studies. On basis of the field investigation data in Chongqing, authors of this paper conduct a quantitative study on SVOs' role and the influencing factors.

2. The Study

The data presented in this study were generated by a larger study titled as "The establishment of long-term working mechanism on Student Village Officials in the New Countryside Construction". In the larger study, stratified cluster sampling method was used, and qualified participants from 39 counties and districts within Chongqing participated in the questionnaire-based survey in July and August, 2012. Items in the questionnaire cover areas of participants' personal information, current work status and current living condition and so on. 400 copies of the questionnaire were handed out and 362 valid copies were collected in the end, with the effective rate of the questionnaire reaching 90.5%.

According to the questionnaire data, SVOs in Chongqing demonstrate the following prominent features:

- 1) Young age; the vast majority of these SVOs are between the ages of 23 to 30, with more than half of them between the ages of 23 to 25, accounting for 62.3% of the participants;
- 2) More than half of these SVOs are female. The sex ratio of males to females is 48.2: 51.8, with the later 3.6 % higher than the former. This ratio indicates that the SVO profession is more preferable to female graduates;
- 3) There are a large proportion of urban students. 47.6% of these SVOs are urban students, with 12.7% of them coming from municipalities (mainly from Chongqing). These figures indicate that city students do not reject working in rural areas;
- 4) The majority of these SVOs are single;
- 5) Fundamental talents are the majority of SVOs; 88.9% of these SVOs are graduates with bachelor or associate degrees;
- 6) Most of these SVOs graduated from ordinary universities in China, accounting for 63.3% of the total sampling population. Meanwhile, there is a fairly large portion of graduates from "Project 211" universities (Note: The "Project 211" is a strategic cross-century project formulated by the Chinese government for the implementation of the strategy of invigorating the country through science, technology and education.), accounting for 20.6% of the sampling population; a very small number of SVOs are graduates from independent colleges or "Project 985" universities of (Note: Project 985 is a project first announced by CPC General secretary and Chinese President Jiang Ze-min at the 100th anniversary of Peking University on May 4, 1998 to promote the development and reputation of the Chinese higher education system and eponymous after the date of the announcement, May 1998, or 98/5, according to the Chinese date format). Specific information of the samples is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Samples' specific information

	Percentage		Percentage
Gender		Educational background	
Male	48.2	Associate degree	6.1
Female	51.8	Bachelor	82.8
Age		Master	10.3
18-22	6.4	Ph.D	0.8
23-25	62.3	Place of origin	

	Percentage		Percentage
26-30	30.7	Rural area	52.4
Above 30	0.6	County towns	26.0
Political status		Prefecture-level cities	8.3
Communist Party member	56.5	Provincial capitals	0.6
Probationary Communist Party member	19.3	municipalities	12.7
Communist Youth League member	22.0	Graduated from	
the mass	2.2	Project 985 universities	8.2
Marital status		Project 211 universities	20.6
Married	17.9	Ordinary universities	63.3
Single	82.1	Independent colleges	7.9

3. Variables and Descriptive Statistics

3.1 The Dependent Variable and Independent Variable

The dependent variable in this study is the role SVOs play. Generally speaking, the assessment of SVOs' role is influenced by many factors, especially the participants' identity, title and the relationship with SVOs, all of which could have a profound impact on the assessment. Therefore, to facilitate the research, this study adopts the form of SVOs' self-assessment to measure their role. For the purpose of accuracy and objectivity, and to reduce the subjectivity and randomness in SVOs' self-assessment of their role, participants in this study are required, on basis of their actual duty execution, to evaluate their performance in the following aspects: 1). Understanding of villages and farmers, and efficiency in solving villagers' practical problems; 2). Helping the development in the village; 3). Helping the village raise the living standards; 4). Helping the village build up rural custom and civilization; 5). Helping the village improve the village appearance; 6). Helping the village strengthen the democratic management and information construction. Scores in the scale range from 1-4, with higher scores for greater roles in this area. In data processing, respondents' self-assessment scores in these 6 areas were arithmetically averaged to construct a comprehensive index to represent the role SVOs play in the New Countryside Construction; this was used as the dependent variable in this study.

Based on an analysis of earlier research results, this study contains 16 variables, which fall into four categories: demographic characteristics, working conditions, work and life status, personal cognitive status. In the category of demographic characteristics, there are 9 variables, including gender, age, marital status, educational background, major, experiences of student cadres, place of origin, school of graduation, duration of service; in the working conditions category, there are 2 variables: the distance between the village and the township government or sub district offices, and the traffic condition of the village; in the category of work and life status, there are 3 variables: position, place of work and place of residence; there are 2 variables in the personal cognitive status: the degree of familiarity of rural areas, and reasons of their choice to be a SVO. In the statistical process, only the age as a continuous variable is directly elicited from the questionnaire, while other indexes are set as dummy variables for statistical analysis in that they are all nominal variables and ordinal variables.

3.2 Descriptive Statistics

According to the survey results, the synthesis score of the sampling SVOs in their self-assessment is 3.18 points (SD=0.49), showing a generally active and positive picture; the score SVOs get from the aspect of "Understanding of villages and farmers, and efficiency in solving villagers' practical problems" is the highest, 3.57 points. The lowest two scores are from the two aspects of "Helping the development in the village" and "Helping the village raise the living standards", which are 3.05 points and 2.98 points respectively. Scores from the aspects of "Helping the village build up rural custom and civilization", "Helping the village improve the village appearance" and "Helping the village strengthen the democratic management and information construction" are in the middle, which are 3.13 points, 3.15 points and 3.21 points respectively. It is obvious that SVOs think their role and contribution fall mainly into the solving of villagers' daily affairs and the establishment of democratic management, information and spiritual civilization; to help the villagers develop the rural economy and increase farmers' income is apparently these SVOs' disadvantage. Besides the survey questionnaire, the research group also found similar problems in these SVOs' diaries. SVOs are generally having a hard time in handling economic work. Objectively speaking, an ordinary graduate does not enjoy the capacity in developing local economy and leading villagers to a more prosperous life. Therefore, to develop local economy and lead farmers into richness should not be the main obligation of these SVOs.

4. Regression Analysis

To further analyze the degree of impact these independent variables have on the role of SVOs, and in view of the characteristics of the survey data, the multiple linear regression model was used; the SPSS 11.5 and the BACKWARD were used to regress the influencing factors on SVOs' role. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The multiple regression results of SVOs' role and the influencing factors

	B	S.E.	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	22.927	1.897		12.083	0.000
Educational background (associate degree)					
Bachelor	-3.563	1.699	-0.456	-2.099	0.037
Master	-3.335	1.749	-0.351	-1.907	0.057
Ph.D	-4.480	1.835	0.348	-2.442	0.015
Graduated from (independent colleges)					
Ordinary universities	-1.145	0.605	-0.187	-1.892	0.059
"Project 211" universities	-1.681	0.682	-0.231	-2.246	0.014
"Project 985" universities	-1.891	0.816	-0.173	-2.317	0.021
Majors(non-agronomy)					
Agronomy	1.413	0.893	0.107	1.996	0.047
Distance between the village and the town (relatively short)					
Relatively long distance to the town	1.138	0.498	0.121	2.286	0.023
Understanding of rural situations (negative)					
Understand	1.249	0.428	0.154	2,921	0.004
Purposes of being a SVO (short-term)					
Long-term purposes	1.215	0.500	0.129	2.433	0.016
	R Square	Sum of Squares	df	F	
	0.334	1949.176	332	3.581	0.000

Note: Items in the brackets are the reference category of the variable. The independent variable "the distance between the village and the town" refers to the distance between the village where the participant works and the nearest town or sub-district government; it is labeled as "relatively short" when the distance is within 20 kilometers, while distance beyond 20 kilometers is labeled as "relatively long". In the variable "purposes of being a SVO", the "short-term purposes" refers to "work transition, bonus points to the postgraduate entrance examination and the public servant exam, or following the trend"; the "long-term purposes" includes "to exercise at the grassroots level, expand the experience, make contribution to the rural area, construct the hometown and rural areas provide more space for development" and so on.

According the regression results, among the 16 variables, only 6 variables passed the test, which are "Educational background", "Graduated from", "Major", "Distance between the village and the town", "Understanding of the rural situation" and "Purpose of being a SVO"; the other 10 variables were rejected in sequence due to their insignificance, which are "Gender", "Age", "Marital status", "Experience as a student cadre", "Place of Origin", "Duration of service", "Traffic condition of the village", "Position", "Place of work" and "Place of residence". As the regression results indicate, the goodness of fit of the model is 0.334; that is to say, in the self-assessment of these SVOs, 66.6% of the SD is influenced by factors outside the model, which are not considered. Therefore, this issue needs further study. The study of the regression results, however, leads to some valuable conclusive findings.

1) Educational background is a significant influencing factor for SVOs' role. As the regression results show, the regression coefficients (B) of bachelors, masters and Ph.Ds are all negative, which are -3.563, -3.335 and -4.480 respectively. It is evident that SVOs' role is in reverse proportion to their educational background: it does not mean the higher their degree, the higher self-assessment of their role. On the contrary, the lower the education level, the higher the self-assessment of the role. This might be explained in this way: on the one hand, low level of education implies the young age of the SVOs; youngsters usually lack experience and are aggressive, and they

may overestimate their role; on the other hand, this phenomenon partly shows that the main tasks of SVOs are to deal with daily affairs, which is very demanding on their patience, carefulness and working ability and enthusiasm, but does not require a high degree of education. Higher degrees of education will not promote their role; rather, higher degrees of education raise their psychological expectations, resulting in psychological gaps and potential instability to the SAO team;

2) Similar to the educational background, the levels of universities these SVOs graduated from are in reverse proportion to SVOs' role. Graduates from key universities do not enjoy any advantages in their service in comparison to graduates from ordinary universities and independent colleges; graduates from key universities are having a lower self-assessment of their role as SVOs. The reason maybe is the different objects which graduates from different levels of universities refer to. Since SVOs from key universities often select graduates from key universities as their reference group, with the latter's jobs and economic conditions usually better than the former, the comparison will consequently result in negative self-assessment to these SVOs. The reference groups of those SVOs who did not graduate from key universities are usually their classmates; in the eyes of their classmates, the SVO job is probably more decent and excellent, so these SVOs tend to display more satisfaction to their working conditions and realities, which will lead to a more positive self-assessment on their role to play;

3) Majors of these SVOs are one important socio-demographic characteristic to influence SVOs' role. The regression results show that the regression coefficient of the dummy variable "agronomy" is 1.413, indicating that on condition of other conditions remaining unchanged, the self-assessment of the role of agronomy majors SVOs is 1.413 higher than that of SVOs in other majors.

Meanwhile, we set other majors as the dummy variable for regression analysis, but the results were not significant. It is obvious that in such an area like Chongqing with less developed rural economy, the agronomy major is closer to the real needs of rural areas and farmers; SVOs majoring in agronomy enjoy a professional background advantage over other SVOs, which is more conducive to their role.

4) The distance between the village and the town is a significant influencing factor on SVOs role. Since the rural area in Chongqing is mountainous, and the distances from villages to towns vary greatly, samples in this study are grouped into two conditions for study: the distance of village-to-town is within 20 kilometers, and the distance of village-to-town is beyond 20 kilometers. The regression results show that the village-to-town distance is in reverse proportion to SVOs' self-assessment of their role. For those SVOs whose villages are no more than 20 kilometers away from towns, they tend to give a lower self-assessment of their role; while those SVOs whose villages are more than 20 kilometers away from towns tend to give a higher self-assessment of their role. We interpret this phenomenon as the result of differences in the information-guiding role (信息导向作用). Confined by their own abilities and limitations of objective conditions, SVOs' primary role is the information-guiding role, as believed by some scholars (Ma & Zhu, 2011). In general, the more remote villages are ill-informed with a variety of relatively poor conditions. SVOs from economically developed regions can learn from successful practices in economically leading regions more easily, make use of the guiding role of information, and gain achievement. For example, in the investigation of SVOs' diaries, the survey group found that computers in some of these remote villages were not connected to the Internet and were rarely used; SVOs in these villages helped the village committees achieve office automation and informatisation, which was viewed by these SVOs as their main achievement. In outskirts villages, this situation is almost non-existent. Differences in this aspect result in the different self-assessment of their role.

5) Understanding of the situation in rural areas contributes to the play of SVOs' role. Some scholars discovered that limited understanding of the situation in rural areas and over-idealistic career decision are two critical causes of SVOs' insignificance of role and frustration. The regression results of this study support this argument. The regression coefficient of the dummy variable "Understanding of the rural situation" is 1.249, indicating that on condition of other conditions remaining unchanged; the self-assessment of role of those SVOs who have some idea of the situation in rural area is 1.249 higher than those who have no idea of the rural condition at all. Therefore, a systematic pre-service training is necessary for SVOs to form a comprehensive understanding of the situation in rural areas and to empower them with certain psychological capacity, which will be conducive for them to play their role.

6) The purpose of being a SVO constitutes an important influencing factor on their role. Diversity and complexity are two features of their career motivation. Judging from the survey, college and university graduates choose to be SVOs for these reasons: to exercise themselves, accumulate experiences and construct their hometowns; employment pressure; to gain bonus points to the postgraduate entrance exams and public servant

exams; to follow the trend, and so on. Statistically, we group their purposes into two categories: one category is mainly about their personal short-term purposes, including the forced choice of a job under great employment pressure, the priority admission in the public servant exam and the postgraduate entrance exam, as well as to follow the trend; the other category is mainly about their personal long-term purposes, including to exercise at the grassroots level to expand their experience, construct the hometown, make contribution to the rural area, and rural areas provide more space for development and so on. The regression results show that those SVOs who have lofty goals have a higher self-assessment of their role than those SVOs who view their current job as a springboard. The reason for this may be related to the greater subjective initiative brought by the former who treat the SVO job as a career for long-term commitment. Therefore, the current preferential policies, such as the bonus-point policy in the postgraduate entrance exam and the public servant exam, encourage graduates to devote themselves to the rural area construction, but also to some extent limit SVOs' role to play.

7) A number of factors, which were believed to affect SVOs' role in previous studies, are not confirmed in this study. First of all, sex does not constitute an obstacle to SVOs' role. Statistically, male and female SVOs did not exhibit differences in self-assessment of their role. In the survey we find many female SVOs have achieved good results. Secondly, some scholars believe that students, who served as class cadres during university years and acquired some organizational and management skills, may be more suitable for SVO posts. Our investigation, however, did not confirm this argument. SVOs with experiences of class cadres in universities did not exhibit more excellence than SVOs with no such experiences. Finally, the SVOs did not exhibit any difference in role due to the different specific job duties. In practice, these SVOs might be assistants to the party branch secretary, assistants to the director of the village committee, Deputy Branch secretary, Deputy Director of the village committee, and other posts. The specific rates of these posts are 24%, 50.3%, 8%, 1.4% and 16.3% respectively. Judging from the regression results, SVOs in different posts did not show any difference in their assessment of their role. This may be related to the ubiquitous issue of fuzzy orientation of SVOs.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions

The survey results show that in Chongqing SVOs' assessment on their role is relatively high, and they believe that the main focus of their role is on the solving of farmers' daily affairs, democratic management, construction of informatization and spiritual civilization; their assessment on their role in helping farmers develop rural economy and increase farmers' income is relatively low. According to the analysis of influencing factors, of all the socio-demographic characteristics possessed by these SVOs, only three factors have a significant impact on their role: educational background, schools they graduated from and majors. Meanwhile, the research on the SVOs' cognition as a variable was included in this study, and we find that the more familiar SVOs are with rural situation and the purer and more realistic of their purposes, the more active attitude they have on their role and duties, resulting in a positive evaluation of their role.

In addition, it should be noted that, due to the constraint of research conditions, this study does not address variables at the related institutional levels, such as SVOs' role orientation, post duties, wages and benefits, resulting in modest explanatory power of the regression model. Moreover, the interactive effects of different variables affecting the role of college and university students' self-evaluation on SVOs should also be included in the model in future studies; improvement of these issues will be achieved in future studies.

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