

A Study of the “Two-Way Interaction” Governance Model in Ethnic Region

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Abstract

Grassroots governance in ethnic regions is a crucial part of the national governance system, facing the core challenge of reconciling the structural tension between the standardized logic of bureaucracy and local knowledge systems. Existing research, often trapped in the dichotomy of “state-centrism” and “society-centrism,” fails to adequately explain the cultural adaptation dilemmas in policy implementation. Drawing on Giddens’ “Structuration Theory,” this paper constructs an analytical framework of “Symbiotic Interactive Governance” to elucidate the complex mechanism of “bidirectional interaction” between the state and society at the grassroots level. The study argues that effective governance in ethnic regions is not a process of one-way embedding or passive adaptation, but rather an active process of institutional innovation and strategic evolution. Through the synergistic advancement of three pathways, “institutional integration,” “strategic innovation,” and “elite consolidation,” grassroots actors can transform external tensions into endogenous drivers, ultimately achieving a “symbiotic” order that moves from tension balance to value co-creation. This research offers a new theoretical perspective for understanding the mutually constitutive evolution of state-society relations in contemporary China and provides a reference for advancing the modernization of governance in ethnic regions.

Keywords

ethnic regions, grassroots governance, bidirectional interaction, symbiotic governance, structuration theory

1. Introduction

Grassroots governance in ethnic minority regions is an important component of the national governance system, closely related to ethnic unity, national solidarity, and coordinated regional development. The grassroots level serves as the foundation for governing the country and securing its stability, forming the basis of the Party’s governance, the source of its strength (Li et al., 2025). At the National Conference on Ethnic Unity and Progress in September 2024, General Secretary Xi Jinping profoundly pointed out: “We must adhere to the main line of forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation and continuously advance the cause of ethnic unity and progress,” which establishes the fundamental guideline for the Party’s ethnic work in the new era. The 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China further emphasized “improving

grassroots governance platforms supported by grid-based management, refined services, and informatization,” providing an action guide for enhancing governance capacity in ethnic minority regions. However, current grassroots governance in ethnic minority regions still faces significant dilemmas in effectively adapting rigid policy implementation requirements to flexible local cultural demands. For example, issues such as the incompatibility between rural revitalization indicators, ecological protection red lines, and ethnic customary laws or religious practices in certain aspects persist. Therefore, it is urgent to innovate governance mechanisms that, while fulfilling national policy requirements, fully incorporate reasonable elements of local knowledge, exploring paths for the organic unity of rigid policy execution and flexible cultural adaptation. In-depth research on the mechanisms of policy implementation and cultural adaptation in grassroots governance in ethnic minority regions, systematic summarization of practical experiences from various localities, and continuous improvement of the governance system will enable, on the new journey of building a modern socialist country in all respects, the advancement of Party-led grassroots governance, transforming grassroots Party organizations into strong combat fortresses that effectively realize the Party’s leadership (Xi, 2022). This is a concrete measure to implement the spirit of the Central Ethnic Work Conference and an inevitable requirement for promoting long-term stability and high-quality development in ethnic minority regions.

Among them, policy implementation in grassroots governance in ethnic minority regions faces significant cultural adaptation dilemmas, which often emphasize the state’s unilateral embedding while neglecting the local society’s counter-embedding institutions, thereby attracting analysis from numerous scholars. Existing research primarily focuses on how the state achieves top-down social penetration through mechanisms such as “balanced looseness and tightness” governance (He, 2025), village cadre stationing systems (Xu, 2024), and “administrative contracting, (Tian, 2021)” yet relatively overlooks the role of local society’s cultural counter-embedding: through diverse mechanisms like cultural nurturing, subject internalization, and social action, in coordination with multiple governance paths including economic, administrative, and market approaches, to achieve collaborative good governance, laying the necessary cultural foundation and governance safeguards for building grassroots communities into regional social life communities (Sun and Tian, 2022). The theoretical gaps in existing studies lead to insufficient understanding of interactive mechanisms in ethnic regional governance, manifesting in two opposing research perspectives: on one hand, the state perspective views “embedding” as a unidirectional penetration process, following the traditional “bringing government to the countryside” theory; on the other hand, the society perspective emphasizes local resistance, adhering to theoretical traditions such as “weapons of the weak.” While these two perspectives reveal certain facets of governance in ethnic minority regions, neither fully captures the complexity and dynamism of state-society interactions. The state-dominant interpretive model simplifies “embedding” as linear transmission, while from the societal level, it often overestimates local resistance capabilities. Both paradigms fail to fully present how institutional structures and folk forces dynamically shape each other in governance practice. The “bidirectional mutual constitution” analytical path focuses on how bureaucratic normative systems and local experiential knowledge, through negotiation and compromise in interactions, gradually revise to achieve governance order innovation, thereby providing cognitive tools for precisely grasping the pluralistic dimensions of ethnic minority region governance.

Therefore, the research problem of this article has gradually become clear: the core issue in grassroots governance in ethnic minority regions lies in the competition and cooperation of structural tensions between bureaucratic standardization and local knowledge systems. The state promotes unified governance norms through standardized institutions such as “One Agreement and Four Committees,” requiring the grassroots to strictly follow established procedures. In ethnic minority regions like Li communities, however, the authority-based decision-making mechanisms of Li elders rooted in traditional customs still play a significant role, leading to contradictions in the dual-institution operation in practice. The “bidirectional interaction” perspective provides a new framework for understanding this tension. In the top-down dimension of the state, the bureaucratic system drives the penetration of state will through rigid requirements such as policies, regulations, and performance evaluations. In the bottom-up dimension of society, grassroots regimes must adapt to local social structures composed of informal authorities like religious leaders and kinship networks. The essence of this tension lies in: modern state-building pursues unified norms, emphasizing rational-legal authority; while local traditions focus on flexibility and adaptation, relying on traditional authority. Understanding this tension and its adaptation mechanisms holds important significance for advancing the modernization of governance in ethnic minority regions.

The expected contributions of this study are as follows: it proposes a “bidirectional interaction” model, breaking through the traditional theoretical presupposition of “zero-sum game between state and society.” This model reveals the dynamic process of mutual construction between the state and society in governance practice, as exemplified by cases in Dai communities where national policies are creatively integrated with traditional systems. At the theoretical level, this innovation helps understand the transformation mechanisms between informal and formal institutions and proposes the new concept of “symbiotic governance order.” At the practical level, the research findings provide important references for frontier governance and urban ethnic work, suggesting pathways such as establishing cultural translation mechanisms and flexible evaluation standards to advance the modernization of governance in ethnic minority regions, further improving the mechanisms for grassroots mass autonomy under the leadership of grassroots Party organizations, perfecting the systems and working mechanisms for grassroots democracy, and broadening channels for orderly participation of various grassroots organizations and the masses in grassroots governance (Xinhua News Agency, 2024).

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The social governance in ethnic minority regions exhibits a unity of particularity and universality in relation to national state-society governance (Li, 2023). Current research is predominantly dominated by two paradigms, “state-centrism” and ‘society-centrism,” which respectively emphasize the development of modernization through the forces of society or the state (Chen and Wang, 2025). The former highlights how the state achieves power devolution through mechanisms such as institutional embedding, project operations, and administrative contracting, yet it overlooks the agency of local societies. The latter focuses on the persistence of informal institutions and local resistance strategies but often falls into binary oppositional narratives. Both paradigms struggle to adequately explain the cultural adaptation dilemmas that arise in policy implementation. To address this, this section integrates the theory of structuration and the dual dimensions of embedded governance to construct a “bidirectional embedded governance” framework. From the perspective of mutual constitution between the state and society, it reexamines the complex mechanisms of grassroots governance in ethnic minority regions, providing theoretical support for subsequent research.

2.1 Genealogy and Critique of Existing Research

The state-centrist paradigm emphasizes how the state achieves power devolution through mechanisms such as institutional embedding, project-based operations, and administrative contracting, viewing governance as a unidirectional process of state penetration into society. “Interest calculation” serves as a key logic in this paradigm for explaining how state institutions shape and constitute social behaviors (Cao, 2021). While this paradigm profoundly reveals the dominant role of the state in shaping grassroots governance orders, its theoretical limitations lie in simplifying complex local societies into homogeneous passive recipients, reducing diverse local social landscapes to a “container” awaiting filling or an “object” to be arbitrarily molded. This severely underestimates the agency, cultural resilience, and counter-shaping capabilities inherent in society itself. It fails to adequately explain why the same national policies produce differentiated practical effects in different cultural contexts and struggles to address how local knowledge, traditional authority, and informal networks inversely influence and reshape the state’s governance logic through ongoing reverse adaptation and reconstruction. This theoretical blind spot is particularly pronounced in the complex contexts of ethnic minority regions where diverse cultures intersect, necessitating the introduction of more dialogic theoretical frameworks to overcome its explanatory limitations.

The society-centrist paradigm emphasizes the agency of local societies in deconstructing and reconstructing national policies through informal rules, cultural resilience, and everyday practical strategies. In reality, society-centrism manifests in various forms, existing as clusters of knowledge that focus on societal responses and resistance to the state (Cao, 2017), highlighting local autonomy and resilience. By examining the persistence of informal institutions, the strategic cooperation and resistance of local elites, and the “weapons of the weak” among grassroots populace, this paradigm effectively compensates for the state-centrist oversight of local agency, revealing the processes of “adaptation” and “localization” that national policies encounter during grassroots implementation. However, this paradigm tends to fall into “state-society” binary oppositional narratives, predisposing interactions toward zero-sum games and thereby neglecting the abundant practices of

mutual construction, mutual leveraging, and symbiotic prosperity between the two. It struggles to explain the prevalent cases in ethnic minority regions where state and societal forces actively collaborate to produce “1+1>2” governance synergies.

Nevertheless, both paradigms are trapped in the narrative dilemma of state-society binary opposition, making it difficult to explain their mutual constitutive relations in governance practices. In recent years, the academic community has begun attempting to break through this binary opposition. For instance, synergies between disembedding development and relational embedding (Qin and Xu, 2025), urban-rural integration from urban and local perspectives (Xiong and Yuan, 2021), and cultural-tourism integration under central-local relations (Li, 2021). These research directions offer new perspectives for understanding governance complexity but have yet to form a systematic framework for bidirectional interaction analysis. This theoretical progress indicates that future research needs to transcend simplistic binary oppositional thinking and pay greater attention to the mutual constitutive mechanisms between the state and society at the practical level. The effectiveness of grassroots governance not only depends on the rationality of institutional design but also relies on the “collaborative governance” models formed through specific interactions between the state and society. Such models can organically integrate the rigid constraints of formal institutions with the flexible adaptations of informal relations, maximizing governance efficacy.

2.2 Refinement and Integration of Core Theoretical Tools

“Structuration” is the core of British sociologist Anthony Giddens’ theory of structuration, referring to the duality principle between structure and action, primarily used to analyze the relationship between individuals’ social actions, their agency, and social structures (Li and Deng, 2021). Giddens’ theory of structuration provides important insights for understanding agency in grassroots governance. The theory emphasizes that while actors are constrained by structures, they can also reproduce or alter structures through everyday practices. In ethnic minority region governance, grassroots cadres serve both as implementers of national policies and translators of local knowledge, with their strategic actions continuously reshaping governance orders. For example, in Dai communities in Yunnan, national regulations are converted into ethnic language proclamations, adhering to institutional requirements while vitalizing traditional communication methods.

Embedded governance theory needs to shift from unidirectional analysis to bidirectional interaction, achieving the interplay between institutional embedding and relational embedding. Institutional embedding manifests as the state promoting governance objectives through formal channels such as laws, policies, and organizational systems; relational embedding refers to governance actions rooted in local informal networks and cultural traditions. The interaction between these two forms constitutes the dynamic process of governance in ethnic minority regions. Establishing and perfecting embedded governance mechanisms in the social governance systems of ethnic minority regions can effectively leverage the strengths of the Party, the state, and other social actors, enhancing social governance efficacy and advancing the modernization of social governance in ethnic minority regions (Sai, 2025). This perspective provides a theoretical foundation for understanding adaptations and adjustments in policy implementation.

2.3 Construction of the “Symbiotic Interactive Governance” Analytical Framework

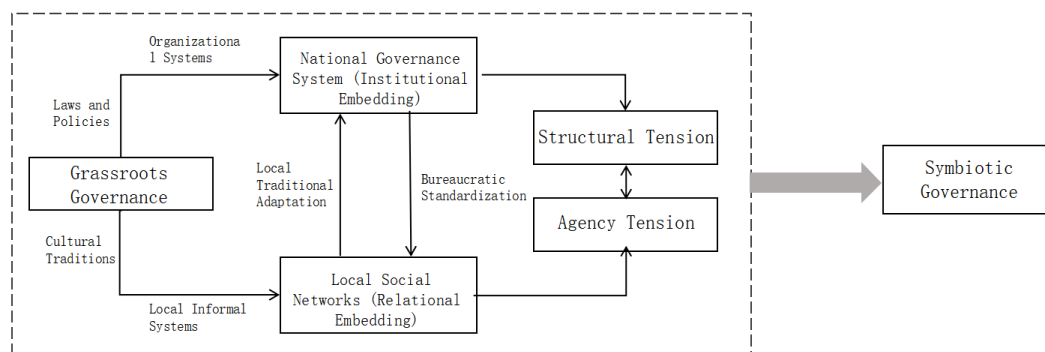
Based on the above theoretical integration, this article proposes a “symbiotic interactive governance” framework. The core of this framework lies in systematically elucidating the sources of tension in dual embedding, adaptation mechanisms, and symbiotic effects. The tension of “dual embedding” essentially stems from the direct collision of two operational logics in the grassroots governance arena: under traditional bureaucratic structures, grassroots governance processes often embody unidirectional administrative contracting relationships, where higher-level administrative authorities package governance tasks and responsibilities through project systems and target responsibility systems, delegating them to grassroots governments for execution (Xu and Song, 2025). In contrast, local logics emphasize particularity, contextualization, traditional authority, and relational ethics; they advocate for early involvement of implementing agencies in the policy process to participate in decision-making and respect local factors to allow flexible execution (Ma, 2015). It requires governance approaches to use “a different key for each lock.” Adaptation mechanisms manifest as the synergy between formal institutional innovations and informal strategic applications by grassroots actors. For instance, Dai communities in Yunnan combine traditional moral

education systems with modern point-based systems, while pastoral areas in Inner Mongolia integrate traditional mediation models into comprehensive governance systems. These practices indicate that successful governance requires seeking dynamic balance between institutional rigidity and cultural flexibility.

Successful bidirectional embedding can generate governance synergies, such as in Gongcheng Yao Autonomous County, Guangxi, where “bilingual mediation rooms” integrate national laws with customary laws, enhancing dispute resolution efficiency while strengthening community cohesion. This symbiotic effect is reflected in the simultaneous improvement of institutional efficacy and public satisfaction, providing pathway references for constructing a new governance landscape in ethnic minority regions. The core innovation of this framework lies in proposing “symbiotic embedded governance” as an ideal type. It describes a stable relational form between the state and society characterized by mutual dependence, functional complementarity, and value co-creation, formed through processes of mutual embedding and adaptation. By introducing the perspective of structuration, it emphasizes the creative practices of grassroots cadres in reconciling institutional and relational embedding, offering a new theoretical perspective for advancing the modernization of governance in ethnic minority regions. This transcends simple “cooperation,” stressing an organic and systemic linkage.

This section systematically reviews existing research paradigms, revealing their theoretical limitations in explaining governance practices in ethnic minority regions, and thereby proposes the new analytical framework of “symbiotic interactive governance.” The innovation of this framework lies in: first, breaking through the binary oppositional thinking of “state-society” in traditional research and emphasizing their mutual constitutive relations in governance practices; second, revealing the dynamic balance mechanisms of policy implementation and cultural adaptation in grassroots governance through the dual perspectives of institutional and relational embedding; finally, providing a new theoretical perspective for understanding tension generation and resolution pathways in ethnic minority region governance. The theoretical framework constructed in this section not only lays the foundation for subsequent empirical analysis but also offers theoretical references for advancing the modernization of governance in ethnic minority regions.

Figure 1: Analytical Framework of This Article



Source: Compiled by the author

3. The Tension Mechanism of “Bidirectional Interaction”—An Analytical Framework of Structure-Agency

This section aims to dissect the intrinsic logic and operational mechanisms of “bidirectional interaction.” This tension is not merely a simple deviation in policy implementation but is rooted in the deep-seated relative contradictions between the state and society in the grassroots governance arena, manifested and reinforced through the everyday practices of grassroots actors. There exists an inherent tension between the standardized governance requirements promoted by the state and the informal rules formed by local societies based on ethnic customary laws. Grassroots cadres, as “dual agents,” must both complete administrative tasks and respond to the special needs of the masses, facing role conflicts. Giddens’ theory of structuration provides a

key perspective for understanding this mechanism, revealing the dynamic process by which actors, while constrained by structures, continuously reshape governance structures through strategic actions. This is precisely the core mechanism for the generation and adaptation of tensions in “bidirectional interaction.”

3.1 Structural Tension: Competition and Integration of Three Legitimacy Logics

The structural tension in grassroots governance in ethnic minority regions essentially constitutes a complex process of mutual competition and integration among three legitimacy logics in the grassroots arena. This analytical framework seeks to reveal the deep contradictions arising from the interactions between the national governance system and local social structures, as well as their resolution mechanisms.

In the practice of grassroots governance in ethnic minority regions, the tension between rational-legal legitimacy and traditional legitimacy is most pronounced. Rational-legal legitimacy derives from the state’s unified written laws, bureaucratic regulations, and policy directives. The rational implications within the realm of legitimacy not only rest on certain cultural traditions and value conceptions, embodying public recognition of the legitimacy of the political system; they also encompass the processes of legalizing and standardizing political institutions and behaviors under modern constitutional structures, as well as the public’s comprehensive cognition of the actual effects of political governance, the degree of social justice realization, and the safeguarding of citizens’ rights (Li, 2019a). Typical manifestations include the universal implementation of the Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees of the People’s Republic of China and the standardized promotion of grid-based management. This form of legitimacy demands “treating everyone equally,” pursuing formal equality and the predictability of rules. However, traditional legitimacy still holds a deep social foundation in ethnic minority regions. From ancient societies to the development of modern states, the complex associations between law and political power are its typical features (Habermas, 2015), such as elders, headmen, and religious figures, whose authority is established on the sanctity of historical continuity, emphasizing respect for specific cultures and local knowledge, and pursuing “governance according to customs.” For example, the “folk song mediation” mechanisms among the Dong and Miao ethnic groups in Guizhou (Leng and Chen, 2024), the “mosque mediation” mechanisms among the Hui in Gansu (Bai, 2011), and the “communal eating mediation” mechanisms among the Qiang in Sichuan (Luo and He, 2019) continue to play important roles in dispute resolution and public affairs decision-making. These traditional authorities are grounded in ethnic customary laws and the sanctity of historical transmission, emphasizing the governance wisdom of “governance according to customs.” This tension in grassroots governance specifically manifests as: when the state’s promotion of the Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees coexists with local traditional “headman deliberation” decision-making mechanisms, grassroots regimes face fundamental qualitative issues in governance links such as organizational mobilization and resource allocation—whether to “follow the law” or “act according to old customs”—which easily leads to the fragmentation of governance authority.

Second, the tension between project-based logic and communal ethics logic also exerts influence on grassroots governance in ethnic minority regions. As the primary mode of national resource devolution, project-based mechanisms embody the technical rationality features of modern state governance. Based on the policy objectives of superior governments, they control projects through specialized and projectized fund allocation, reducing execution arbitrariness (Hu et al., 2025), with core value orientations of “efficiency” and “controllability.” This logic seeks to ensure the precise implementation of state will through standardized process designs, achieving calculable, assessable, and accountable resources. In the practice of targeted poverty alleviation in ethnic minority regions, project-based mechanisms manifest specifically as establishing and filing cards for poor households, precision targeting to households, and tailored measures per household—refined governance techniques that require directing resources directly at specific impoverished groups. However, the communal ethics logic long formed within ethnic communities often follows “differential patterns” based on kinship and geography or the ethics of shared reciprocity in communities. In pastoral areas of Inner Mongolia, the traditional “suruk” system (Dai and Bao, 2007) embodies the mutual aid ideology of shared livestock herds; in southwestern ethnic minority regions, “communal eating” customs reflect egalitarian notions of “sharing meat with all.” The core of this logic is “reciprocity” and community-defined “fairness,” emphasizing intra-community resource sharing and risk-sharing. The tension between the two is particularly prominent in targeted poverty alleviation practices. When the state’s “precision to households” requirements encounter the community’s “share for everyone” concept, it often leads to two consequences: on one hand, “elite capture,” where traditional authority figures within the community exploit their status to monopolize

project resources; on the other hand, dissipation of policy resources, weakening poverty alleviation effects. Ultimately, this may bring adverse effects such as the bureaucratization of grassroots governance (Wang, 2016), vicious inter-governmental competition (Yang, 2017), decline in local autonomy, and exacerbated regional differentiation.

Finally, the competition between standardized knowledge and local knowledge also presents its tensions. National governance relies on a standardized knowledge system that is quantifiable, comparable, and reportable. This knowledge is “decontextualized,” emphasizing universality and technical normativity. In the field of ecological governance, it manifests as ecological red line delineation based on remote sensing technology (Guo, 2025) and standardized schemes for converting pasture to grassland (Cui et al., 2020), with authority grounded in scientific and objective foundations. In contrast, local knowledge refers to embodied experiences accumulated by the populace in living arenas, including intuitive grasps of unique cultural contexts, discourse systems, and interaction modes (Yang and Lv, 2023), characterized by high contextualization. The authority of local knowledge stems from generations of accumulated practical experience and local consensus. The tension is particularly evident in the implementation of ecological protection policies. Pastoralists in Qinghai can judge livestock carrying capacity by observing subtle changes in grasslands; ethnic minorities in Yunnan’s mountainous areas schedule farming activities based on phenological knowledge; these often align more closely with local realities than standardized data. This tension not only reflects conflicts between different knowledge systems but also reveals the deep contradictions between technical rationality and local wisdom in modern state governance.

3.2 Agency Tension: Role Conflicts and Behavioral Paradoxes of Grassroots Officials

The structural tensions generated by the collision between institutional logics and local logics, as described above, ultimately do not remain at the abstract theoretical level but concretely materialize and transmit to individual grassroots officials, plunging them into typical role conflicts and practical dilemmas. This conflict not only reflects contradictions between institutions and reality but also profoundly reveals the complex facets of national governance in grassroots practices.

Grassroots officials in ethnic minority region governance play dual roles. As “state agents,” they are required by the bureaucratic system to strictly adhere to policy texts and implement superior directives without compromise. Their performance evaluations and career advancements (Dou et al., 2025) depend on the intensity and completion rate of superior policy execution. However, as “social interpreters,” they must directly confront the real demands and cultural contexts of local societies. The practices of grassroots officials in ethnic minority regions embody reconciling the unified institutional logic of national governance with the cultural wisdom of local societal particularity and ecology. Village-resident cadres in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region need to coordinate national general language policies with minority language environments, implementing the “Uyghur-Han bilingual translation talent program” (Shen, 2025); grassroots cadres in Tibetan pastoral areas must seek balance between ecological protection policies and nomadic traditions. Successful governance does not eliminate tensions but transforms them into sources of governance innovation through the “strategic actions” of grassroots officials. Through the synergy of institutional embedding and relational embedding, they establish dynamic balance between the dual roles of “state agent” and “social interpreter,” ultimately fostering resilient “symbiotic” orders in specific cultural-ecological arenas.

The contradiction between the rigid requirements of policy execution and the flexible demands of operational practices constitutes the core paradox faced by grassroots officials. On one hand, superior departments reinforce the rigidity of policy execution through quantified indicators and performance assessments, with assessment targets for governments and civil servants becoming diversified and multifaceted in form, including increasingly numerous fuzzy targets in ecology and social governance that are difficult to quantify. Under the principles of territorial management and administrative contracting, grassroots governments bear heavy responsibilities, shouldering “bottom-line” duties for various social risks (Li, 2019b). On the other hand, the complexity and cultural particularity of ethnic minority societies require policy execution to undergo “localization” adaptations. In the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan, targeted poverty alleviation policies demand precision to households, but resource allocation concepts rooted in Yi clan culture necessitate that grassroots cadres maintain appropriate flexibility in policy execution. This paradox compels grassroots officials to constantly seek balance points between “policy red lines” and

“practical wisdom.” They cannot completely deviate from policy requirements nor ignore local realities; their adaptive behaviors may at any time be defined as “irregular operations” by superiors or interpreted as “ineffective execution” at the social level. This tightrope-walking balance art tests the political acumen and work capabilities of grassroots officials.

Table 1: Manifestations of Tensions in Governance Practices in Ethnic Minority Regions

Governance Category	Regional Case	Tension Manifestation
Cultural Mediation	Guizhou Dong and Miao “Folk Song Mediation”	Legitimacy Logic Competition
	Gansu Hui “Mosque Mediation”	Tension between Modern Constitutional Structure and
	Sichuan Qiang “Communal Eating Mediation”	Traditional Legitimacy Type
Cultural Adaptation	Xinjiang “Uyghur-Han Bilingual Translation Talent Program”	Tension between National General Language Policy and Minority Ethnic Languages
Resource Allocation	Inner Mongolia “Suruk System”	Structural Tension
	Southwest Region “Communal Eating System”	between Project Logic and Communal Ethics Logic
Ecological Governance	Qinghai “Remote Sensing Technology Ecological Red Line”	Agency Tension between National Governance’ s Unified Institutional Logic and Local
	Tibet “Ecological Protection Policy”	Society’ s Particular Ecological

Source: Compiled by the author

4. Generation Pathways of Symbiotic Governance: From Tension Balancing to Value Co-Creation

Building on the in-depth analysis of the tension mechanisms in “bidirectional interaction,” this section is dedicated to constructing a systematic theoretical framework through case studies to elucidate the generation pathways and developmental logic of symbiotic governance. This process is not a mere reconciliation of contradictions or passive adaptation but an active process of institutional innovation and strategic evolution. Its core mechanism lies in the parallel advancement of three tracks, institutional integration, strategic innovation, and elite integration, to transform exogenous tensions into endogenous dynamics, ultimately achieving a leap from temporary “balanced states” to sustainable “co-creative states.”

4.1 Institutional Integration Pathway: Constructing Interlocking Governance Structures

In the modernization process of grassroots governance in ethnic minority regions, the institutional integration pathway plays a foundational role. The core of this pathway lies in systematic institutional reforms that establish institutionalized dialogue platforms between the state’s unified rules and local diverse knowledge at the formal institutional level, thereby achieving organic unity between “rigid institutions” and “flexible governance” at the structural level. The establishment of this pathway marks a profound shift in ethnic minority region governance from simple policy execution to institutional innovation.

The establishment of coupled organizational architectures serves as a concrete manifestation of the institutional integration pathway at the organizational carrier level, constructing harmonious matching structures between “state-community” and “community-society. (Zhu, 2018)” In practice, this organizational innovation primarily manifests as the deep integration of national administrative systems with local traditional governance resources in terms of organizational structures, personnel configurations, and operational

mechanisms. For example, in the grassroots governance innovation in Menghai County, Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, the implemented “Three-Three” working method systematically integrates institutions to precisely bridge the tensions between national unified norms and the special contexts of border ethnic minority regions, serving as a paradigm for the efficient synergy between “institutional embedding” and “relational embedding.” Such coupled organizations demonstrate three institutional functions in practice: first, they effectively facilitate the modern transformation of traditional authorities, converting informal influences based on personal charisma into institutionalized participation rights; second, they construct a “buffer zone” for policy formulation, allowing national policies to undergo sufficient localization adaptations before implementation; finally, they form “bidirectional channels” for information communication, ensuring the upward transmission of grassroots appeals while promoting the downward conveyance of policy intentions. This organizational innovation not only enhances the inclusivity of governance structures but also essentially reconstructs the interaction modes between the state and society in the grassroots governance arena.

The design of inclusive policy procedures represents an important innovation in the operational mechanism level of the institutional integration pathway. This innovation focuses on establishing institutionalized mechanisms for absorbing local knowledge at key nodes throughout the policy process. For instance, in the grassroots governance practices in Kunming City, Yunnan Province, by constructing an interlocking governance structure of “Party committee leadership, government responsibility, social collaboration, and public participation,” it effectively achieves the organic coupling of institutional embedding and relational embedding, forming a governance pattern of “coming to Kunming means becoming one family.” (Yunnan Provincial Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission, 2024) This procedural innovation operates through three core mechanisms: first, embedding negotiation mechanisms at the policy formulation front-end, such as establishing democratic deliberation platforms like “residents’ councils” and “courtyard negotiations,” to ensure that diverse actors, including ethnic minority representatives, can participate from the policy planning stage, thereby guaranteeing alignment with local cultures, customs, and actual needs from the source; second, constructing collaborative service mechanisms at the policy execution mid-end and incorporating soft indicators like “community identification” into the assessment system to drive the shift from “management-oriented” to “service-oriented” policies; finally, strengthening feedback and adaptation mechanisms at the policy evaluation back-end, conducting regular assessments of policy effects and utilizing digital tools such as the “smart cloud community service platform” to collect public opinions, forming a virtuous closed loop of “policy formulation—execution—feedback—optimization” that ensures policies can dynamically adjust based on actual conditions, continuously improving their adaptability and effectiveness. These mechanisms collectively constitute a complete policy cycle, not only operationalizing and proceduralizing the concept of “governance according to customs” but also achieving a creative integration of national governance uniformity and local developmental particularity at deeper levels, providing an effective institutional outlet for resolving tensions in grassroots governance (Kunming Municipal People's Government, 2025).

Through the dual innovations in organizational architecture and policy procedures, the institutional integration pathway effectively resolves the inherent tensions between the uniformity requirements of national governance and local particularity at the practical level. It not only provides institutional platforms for dialogue and negotiation among different governance logics but also achieves a deep reconstruction of governance structures by incorporating local knowledge into formal governance processes. Such institutional-level innovations lay a solid foundation for building a grassroots governance system with Chinese characteristics and features of ethnic minority regions.

4.2 Strategic Innovation Pathway: Developing the Art of Adaptive Agency

Within the elastic space provided by institutional structures, grassroots actors develop distinctive adaptive arts through a series of creative strategic practices, vividly embodying symbiotic governance at the micro level. These strategic innovations not only demonstrate the flexibility of grassroots governance but also showcase the creative transformation in the interactions between the state and society.

Discourse translation strategies require grassroots cadres to act as “cultural interpreters,” engaging in meticulous “discourse reframing” work. In the targeted poverty alleviation practices in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, grassroots cadres translate “targeted poverty alleviation” policies into the familiar “Degu Mediation” discourse system of the Yi people, using metaphors like “one account per

family, one strategy per household” to explain precise assistance concepts. This discourse translation not only eliminates barriers to policy understanding but also establishes resonance at the emotional level, enabling national policies to be comprehended and accepted by the populace in a grounded manner. This translation process holds significant symbolic political implications. By converting abstract policy concepts into concrete local knowledge, grassroots cadres preserve the core essence of policies while achieving a localized reconstruction of policy discourse. This discursive innovation facilitates effective docking between state will and local cognition at the symbolic level, to a certain extent clearing cognitive obstacles in policy execution.

Affective governance strategies emphasize enhancing governance efficacy by cultivating and utilizing emotional resources. A community is a living organism connected by certain bonds, with emotional experiences serving as the fundamental way to sustain social solidarity (Fu, 2023). In the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, grassroots cadres extensively carry out “ethnic unity as a family” activities, establishing deep emotional bonds with ethnic minority masses through paired kinship recognition, holiday condolences, and other everyday practices. This emotional investment not only improves cadre-mass relations but also plays a role as a “social safety valve” in critical moments. The art of relational operations is reflected in the ingenious use of local social capital by grassroots cadres. When handling sensitive issues, cadres often leverage long-established interpersonal trust to resolve conflicts through methods like “saving face” and “appealing to sentiment.” This relational operation is not a substitute for formal institutions but a necessary supplement, providing flexible problem-solving channels when institutional rigidity may trigger conflicts.

Symbolic political strategies shape collective identity through carefully designed symbolic practices. In Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, grassroots governments ingeniously combine ethnic unity propaganda boards with traditional Dai architectural elements. This symbolic design not only beautifies the environment but also subtly reinforces national identity in everyday life. Meanwhile, the innovative use of ceremonial activities is another important dimension of symbolic politics. In the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, traditional festivals like the Naadam Conference organically incorporate flag-raising ceremonies and national policy propaganda, transforming ethnic cultural activities into effective carriers for disseminating mainstream values. This juxtaposition and fusion of symbols promote identification with the Chinese national community among different ethnic groups at emotional and cognitive levels. These strategic innovations collectively constitute the “micropolitics” art of grassroots governance. They are not deviations from formal institutions but creative practices within institutional frameworks. Through these strategies, grassroots cadres successfully transform the macro-logic of national governance into micro-narratives of local practices, converting unified policy requirements into specific action plans, ultimately maximizing governance efficacy. Such strategic innovations based on local knowledge provide important insights for building resilient grassroots governance systems.

4.3 Elite Integration Pathway: Forging Cross-Boundary Actor Networks

As key carriers of institutions and strategies, elite groups exert decisive influence on governance efficacy through their roles and orientations. The core essence of the elite integration pathway lies in forging “cross-boundary actors” who can navigate freely between the state and society through “bidirectional absorption” and “bidirectional socialization” mechanisms, thereby breaking down barriers between the system and society and constructing solid governance alliances.

The state absorbs influential traditional and modern elites in ethnic minority regions into the governance system through institutionalized political arrangements and honor conferrals, while local elites proactively utilize institutions and resources to form independent networks (Ge and Xuan, 2025). For example, in regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang, respected religious figures, esteemed ethnic elders, and successful entrepreneurs are recommended as representatives to people’s congresses at various levels or members of political consultative conferences, or appointed as government advisors and people’s mediators. This “institutionalization” process is not mere co-optation but endows them with institutional identities and participation channels, enabling them to understand national governance objectives and logics from within the system while retaining their original social authority and foundations. Its key function lies in achieving “bidirectional representation” for local elites. These elite roles undergo fundamental transformation: from potential negotiation objects outside the system to “social representatives within the system.” They can leverage their social prestige to persuade and mobilize followers in ways that community members find easy

to understand and accept, effectively supporting national policies and significantly reducing implementation resistance; at the same time, relying on their institutional identities, they smoothly feedback authentic, specific grassroots appeals and local knowledge to decision-making levels, making policy designs more aligned with realities. For incoming cadres (such as village-resident cadres and selected graduates), emphasis is placed on promoting their deep “localization,” directly engaging with the populace (Duan, 2021) through practical actions to follow the mass line, achieving a transformation from “state agents” to “social interpreters.” This process combines compulsion and incentives, requiring them to learn local ethnic languages, deeply participate in important community activities like the Tibetan “Wanguo Festival” and Yi “Torch Festival,” and using integration degree and fact-accomplishment performance as core assessment indicators. This is essentially a profound “bidirectional socialization” baptism for elites within the system. Cadres who have fully rooted through “localization” are no longer mere “megaphones” holding policy documents but transform into “cultural mediators” who understand local cultural nuances and possess deep “local knowledge.” They are capable of precisely diagnosing the integration points between policy requirements and local realities, with their devised adaptation strategies exhibiting greater creativity and acceptability. Through the aforementioned bidirectional elite integration pathway, the state and society achieve deep connections and benign interactions at the node of “cross-boundary actors,” providing solid talent support and network foundations for symbiotic governance.

These three pathways interweave and reinforce each other, collectively driving the transformation of governance models from rigid embedding to flexible mutual constitution. Their core lies in creatively converting structural tensions in the governance process into innovative dynamics through institutional arrangements and practical strategies, ultimately achieving the organic integration of national governance uniformity and local particularity.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The core theoretical contribution of this study lies in breaking through the traditional binary opposition of “state-centrism” and “society-centrism,” proposing an analytical paradigm of “bidirectional interaction-symbiotic evolution.” The innovativeness of this paradigm is primarily embodied in the following three levels. First, this research reinterprets the core connotation of “interaction.” Traditional studies often simplify interaction to unidirectional state penetration into society or society’s passive response, whereas this framework emphasizes that interaction is an ongoing process of bidirectional construction and mutual shaping. The state influences the direction and rhythm of social development through institutional and policy provisions, while society, through its profound local knowledge, cultural logic, and informal norms, continuously inversely influences and reshapes the implementation modes and governance efficacy of national policies. This interaction is not a zero-sum game but one that fosters new governance forms in dynamic balance.

Second, this research deepens the theoretical connotation of “symbiotic governance.” “Symbiosis” is not static coexistence or simple compromise but refers to the functional complementarity and value co-creation achieved by the state and society through effective interactions while preserving their respective core characteristics. Specifically, national policies gain greater adaptability and vitality by absorbing local wisdom, such as incorporating reasonable elements from ethnic customary laws into modern mediation systems; meanwhile, local traditions achieve innovative development in modern contexts through institutional recognition and resource support at the national level. This process represents an active “creative transformation” rather than unidirectional absorption or substitution.

Finally, this research reveals the dialectical relationship between governance tensions and institutional innovation. The study confirms that the tensions between bureaucratic standardization logic and local particularity logic are not purely governance obstacles but intrinsic drivers propelling the continuous evolution of governance systems. Such tensions compel grassroots actors to continuously explore innovations in practice, developing adaptive strategies such as institutional coupling, strategic translation, and elite integration, thereby steadily advancing governance systems toward greater inclusivity and resilience.

Based on the theoretical findings of “symbiotic interactive governance,” this study proposes the following operable policy recommendations. At the institutional innovation level, it is suggested to construct flexible governance structures. In the grassroots governance systems of ethnic minority regions, formal establishment

and institutionalized operation of multi-participatory platforms such as “ethnic affairs consultation committees” should be pursued, incorporating them into statutory procedures for grassroots governance. Simultaneously, a policy cultural adaptability assessment mechanism should be established, requiring major policies to undergo joint review by ethnic cultural experts, community representatives, and stakeholders during the formulation stage to ensure cultural compatibility from the source.

In terms of cadre training, a cross-cultural governance capability system needs to be built. Beyond traditional policy execution assessments, emphasis should be placed on enhancing grassroots cadres’ “cultural translation” and “cross-boundary coordination” abilities. Specifically, this can be achieved by establishing a “bilingual competency certification system for cadres in ethnic minority regions,” incorporating local language proficiency into promotion evaluation indicators; and conducting regular immersive ethnic culture training to enable cadres to truly understand local cultural logics, cultivating composite governance talents who possess both national vision and local wisdom.

In performance evaluation mechanisms, cultural sensitivity evaluation indicators should be innovated. In project approvals, resource allocations, and performance assessments, qualitative indicators such as “community acceptance” and “cultural protection effectiveness” should be added to complement economic development indicators. For example, in ecological protection project evaluations, assessments should cover both improvements in ecological indicators and the cultural impacts on traditional livelihoods, forming a more comprehensive evaluation system. Furthermore, it is recommended to establish bidirectional knowledge transformation platforms. By setting up an “ethnic wisdom database,” traditional ecological knowledge, dispute mediation mechanisms, and other local knowledge from various ethnic groups can be systematically collected and organized, incorporating them into policy formulation reference systems.

Finally, conflict resolution mechanisms should be improved. “Ethnic affairs mediation rooms” should be universally established at the grassroots level, staffed by personnel with dual backgrounds in national laws and ethnic customary laws, providing institutionalized channels for resolving conflicts arising from different governance logics and preventing the accumulation and escalation of contradictions. These policy recommendations collectively form a systematic solution spanning institutional design, talent cultivation, and evaluation mechanisms, aiming to translate symbiotic interaction concepts into concrete governance practices and propel grassroots governance in ethnic minority regions toward greater inclusivity, effectiveness, and sustainability.

Although this study constructs a theoretical framework for “symbiotic interactive governance,” it also raises several theoretical issues warranting further exploration. First, the measurement issue of “symbiosis degree.” While we propose the ideal type of symbiotic governance, scientifically quantifying the “degree of symbiosis” across different regions and establishing operable assessment indicator systems remains a methodological challenge.

Second, the boundary conditions of “adaptation thresholds.” Symbiotic governance requires maintaining a delicate balance between not undermining policy bottom lines and not excessively compromising local characteristics. However, where this balance’s critical point lies necessitates more comparative case studies to explore adaptation boundaries under varying economic development levels, ethnic compositions, and historical traditions.

Finally, new challenges in the digital governance era. With the widespread application of digital technologies in grassroots governance, traditional “dual embedding” is undergoing reconstruction. This will become an important direction for future research. Additionally, the applicability boundaries of this research framework merit further discussion. Although we focus on ethnic minority regions, the tensions of “dual embedding” also exist between urban and rural areas and across different regions. Whether and how this analytical framework can be applied to governance research in other contexts requires more testing and refinement.

The “dual embedding” phenomenon in grassroots governance in ethnic minority regions profoundly reflects the complex interactions between contemporary China’s state-building and social development. Our research indicates that successful governance is not achieved through the complete overlay of state logic onto social logic but through creative institutional arrangements and strategic practices that enable organic integration of

the two logics while preserving their respective characteristics. The value of the “symbiotic embedded governance” framework lies not only in providing a new theoretical tool for understanding governance in ethnic minority regions but also in revealing a key feature of China’s governance system: under the premise of upholding national uniformity, universal rules and specific contexts are creatively combined through resilient local practices. This combination is not a temporary expedient but a vital source of resilience and adaptability in China’s governance system. In today’s rapidly advancing globalization and modernization, constructing shared governance orders among groups with diverse cultural backgrounds and development levels is a global challenge. The “symbiotic embedded governance” practices developed in grassroots governance in China’s ethnic minority regions may offer valuable Chinese wisdom for contemplating this global issue.

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Conflicts of Interest

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