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## Cooperative Production and Adaptive Momentum: The Constructive Logic of the New Rural Governance System in Ethnic Regions of China

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### ABSTRACT

The traditional governance model and hierarchical structure in China's ethnic minority regions are inadequate for advancing farmers' income and modernizing rural governance. Moreover, these traditional structures have resulted in governance challenges including unequal allocation of rural resources, absence of villagers' agency, and lack of resource transparency. This study delves into the systematic structure of the "rural governance system in ethnic minority areas". This study samples advanced ethnic minority township governance models from seven provinces, including Guangxi, Qinghai, and the Tibet Autonomous Region in China, and employs Grounded Theory to encode and analyze sub-elements within their governance systems. Subsequently, it investigates the construction logic of a novel rural governance system. (1) The research reveals that primary-level Party organization play a pivotal role in connecting bilateral delegated agency relationships, thereby establishing a mutually cooperative "chain-like" structure in village governance systems within ethnic minority areas. (2) The study identifies two cooperative production paths of the new rural governance in ethnic minority areas: top-down field-oriented party-government integrated governance and bottom-up legalized multi-subject collaborative governance. (3) By employing "integration means - bilateral mobilization" as the mechanism for momentum adjustment and relying on social autonomy, grassroots party organizations shape the momentum adjustment of the new rural governance system in ethnic minority areas. They do so by leveraging both formal and informal governance methods within this framework. Consequently, this study offers pertinent policy recommendations aimed at resolving the challenges of interest coordination and uneven development in ethnic minority areas amidst China's governance modernization efforts.

**Keywords:** Rural governance system; Political party organization; Grounded theory; Ethnic minority regions

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## 1. Introduction

Since the initiation of reforms and opening-up in 1978, significant socio-economic transformations have unfolded in rural China. Over this period, the Chinese government and the Communist Party of China (CPC) have consistently given precedence to agricultural, rural, and farmer-related issues. At the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, there was a reiterated emphasis on the assertion that “the most arduous and formidable task in building a socialist modernized country still lies in the rural areas.” It is noteworthy that China, being a multi-ethnic country, harbors numerous rural poverty-stricken areas within ethnic-minority-inhabited regions. Addressing effective governance in these locales and augmenting farmers’ productivity and income pose critical challenges for the Chinese government as part of its all-encompassing rural revitalization strategy. Regarding specific issues surrounding ethnic rural development, the Chinese government stresses ethnic unity as a means to preserve political stability within its vast multi-ethnic landscape, promoting the values of “community” ideology and cultural governance. General Secretary Xi Jinping has stressed consolidating the sense of community for the Chinese nation and unwaveringly taking the correct approaches with Chinese characteristics to handling ethnic affairs when addressing the central conference on ethnic affairs, aiming to integrate ethnic endeavors with national development under a unified agenda. The intricate nature of rural issues and the distinctive attributes of ethnic regions have emerged.

Our field investigations have revealed deficiencies in organizational autonomy, inadequate integration of legal resources, and weak economic foundations at the village level in specific ethnic minority rural regions of China. The traditional rural governance model and organizational structure no longer effectively address the needs of diverse stakeholders. Moreover, distinctive ethnic sentiments, religious beliefs, and cultural customs in ethnic regions clash with policy implementation

under the Chinese bureaucratic system, leading to disparities in rural resource allocation, reduced villagers’ agency, and a lack of transparency in resource management in these areas. The rural governance system is a crucial component of China’s modernization efforts, exerting significant influence on governance capacity, agricultural development, and the quality of life for farmers. In China’s No. 1 central document for 2023, the Chinese government explicitly proposed the establishment of the “Party Organization-led Rural Community Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue” rural governance system, integrating party leadership with autonomy, ethical governance, and adherence to the rule of law. In its 2023 Central Document No. 1, the Chinese government explicitly proposed to establish the Rural Governance System of “the Party organization-led rural community governance system featuring a combination of self-governance, the rule of law, and the rule of virtue”. Strengthening the amalgamation of self-governance, rule of virtue, and the rule of law under party leadership is a critical pathway for advancing rural governance modernization. Further examination is necessary to assess the performance of the new governance system when integrated into the ethnic minority rural governance system, identify structural impediments and inhibitory factors among its components, analyze the adjustment process, and elucidate the mechanisms by which party organizations, autonomous entities, and local communities promote effective governance in ethnic minority rural areas.

## 2. The Literature Review of the “Party Organization-led Rural Community Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue”

### 2.1 Research on Rural Governance Systems and the Modernization of Governance Capacity

Manion, M. and other scholars have conducted

comprehensive field investigations into governance systems, revealing that rural Chinese society is a complex interplay of multiple powers, including state, clan, elite, and religious domains<sup>[1]</sup>. This intricate interplay can be examined through the lens of external governance relations or by conducting a micro-power inventory of villages<sup>[2]</sup>. The empirical findings of Chan, K. W. and other researchers support this claim. Nevertheless, the rapid evolution of rural socioeconomics in modern times imposes new demands on grassroots governance systems (Tong, W. et al., 2020)<sup>[3]</sup>. Positioned as the cornerstone of the national governance apparatus, the grassroots governance system plays a crucial role in adapting to the demands of the modern era (Stoyanets, N., Hu, Z., & Chen, J., 2018)<sup>[4]</sup>. Building on this foundation, Looney, K.E. (2015) operationalizes the national governance structure at the grassroots level in China, advocating rational, normative, and autonomous governance as its foundational principles<sup>[5]</sup>. This approach enables the rural governance system to gradually incorporate attributes such as pluralistic participation, autonomy, adherence to the rule of law, standardization, and rationalization (Kennedy, J. J., 2016)<sup>[6]</sup>. Meanwhile, the village-level governance model, symbolic of Chinese-style modernization, is shifting from relative autonomy to a paradigm of party-government “cellularization” and structuring (Day, A. F., 2020)<sup>[7]</sup>, facilitating continuous optimization and the establishment of new organizational structures. Urgent reforms are necessary to realign the existing rural governance paradigm in ethnic minority areas, fostering collaborative synergy among grassroots entities, including political, administrative, societal, entrepreneurial, and communal organizations (Unger, J., 2016)<sup>[8]</sup>. Therefore, it is essential to allocate additional governance space and resources to the rural governance framework in ethnic minority areas<sup>[9]</sup>.

## **2.2 Exploration of the “Party Organization-led Rural Community Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue”**

The “Party Organization-led Rural Community

Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue” governance system refers to a new organizational structure for rural governance. It utilizes the primary-level Party organization as its core, with the rule of law serving as the framework and establishing basic norms. Additionally, the rule of virtue provides the fundamental value guidance, and autonomy acts as the core and primary form of rural governance<sup>[10]</sup>. This structure is composed of four governance methods: collaboration, mutual assistance, complementary advantages, and joint construction. Chinese economic and social transformation has led to a shift in rural governance. Traditional “territorial space” governance has evolved into a complex and diverse “interest space” governance model (Howell, 1998)<sup>[11]</sup>. It addresses overarching urban-rural development crises, including the hollowing of ethnic rural social structure, the absence of autonomous subjects, the weakening of governance authority, and the loss of rural culture (Alpermann, 2004)<sup>[12]</sup>.

Some scholars within the governance system argue that a singular ethnic rural governance model is incapable of attaining Pareto optimality concerning rural public values and interests (Rozelle, S., 2020)<sup>[13]</sup>. They underscore the importance of concentrating on the systematic linkage mechanisms among governance subjects, rules, and tools (Smith, G., 2010)<sup>[14]</sup>. In response, certain scholars have synthesized the experiences of ethnic rural governance practices with governance theories, resulting in the formulation of corresponding meso-level theories (Wang, S., 2007)<sup>[15]</sup>. These theories encompass multi-stakeholder participatory democracy, cooperation governance theory grounded in public spirit and collective action logic, and political game theory rooted in the selective implementation of governance advantages by governments and farmers (Tsai, L. L., 2002)<sup>[16]</sup>. These theories concentrate on elucidating the unified logic of endogeneity and modernity in ethnic rural governance. They emphasize the notable disparities in rural ethnic regions and underscore the roles of

village-level organizations, returning village elites, village regulations, grassroots religious beliefs, and rural culture. This emphasis aims to prevent the overburdening of grass-roots organizations and the erosion of rural governance authority (Wong, H. L., 2017)<sup>[17]</sup>.

### **2.3 Analysis of the applicability of Grounded Theory**

Grounded Theory (GT) employs a systematic approach to focus on analyzing specific phenomena and deriving concrete concepts<sup>[18]</sup>. By establishing a theoretical framework based on these concepts and their interrelationships, GT aims to explain social phenomena, uncover dynamic processes, and identify patterns of change<sup>[19]</sup>. The primary rationale behind the operation of rural governance systems is to abstract the interactive relationships among various stakeholders and the dynamic governance principles by studying complex governance processes<sup>[20]</sup>. This approach aligns with the research characteristics of Grounded Theory, which are based on data, interpretive processes, and pattern recognition. Current researches using Grounded Theory to explore rural governance in China's ethnic regions often summarize specific dimensions of governance systems, such as motives and policy tools, but lack researches on the driving pathways of the governance system<sup>[21]</sup>. This necessitates cross-validation between comprehensive normative analysis and empirical analysis. Moreover, while there has been initial progress in examining the inherent tensions and structural barriers of grass-roots organizations and the governance system model, researches on the driving elements and mechanisms for establishing a new village-level governance system is still exploratory. To address these issues, this study selects exemplary governance case materials from ethnic rural areas as the research subjects and employs Grounded Theory and NIVIVO qualitative research methods. Using political coupling theory and system theory as frameworks, it examines the

operational effectiveness and driving mechanisms of the “Party Organization-led Rural Community Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue” new rural governance system in ethnic rural areas, thus offering insights for optimizing governance policies in ethnic regions.

### **3. Grounded research on the “Party Organization-led Rural Community Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue” in ethnic regions**

This paper ultimately selected 7 typical case materials from ethnic rural areas among the second and third batches of national rural governance demonstration villages and towns designated by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People's Republic of China. These case materials include: Liujia Township in Fuchuan Yao Autonomous County, Hezhou City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region; Haohuahong Town in Huishui County, Qiannan Prefecture, Guizhou Province; Puwen Town in Jinghong City, Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province; Nanmu Township in Qushui County, Lhasa City, Tibet Autonomous Region; Da'an Town in Baisha Li Autonomous County, Hainan Province; Yeliquan Town in Lintan County, Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province; and Baojiadian Town in Manas County, Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture, Xinjiang. These selected cases were recommended by local governments and evaluated by authoritative experts in 10 domains of innovative social governance cases. The evaluation criteria included governance subjects, governance methods, innovative features, governance effects, governance impacts, public participation, etc., and were jointly released by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, the Central Propaganda Department, and the Ministry of Justice. The main

sources of data for this paper include: summary data of national rural governance demonstration villages and towns designated by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of China; empirical surveys and investigations of villages conducted by the research team using semi-structured questionnaires; and relevant public policy texts. Following the procedures of Grounded Theory, this paper utilized NVIVO12 software to interpret the relevant textual materials of the selected 7 cases. The specific process includes two procedures: data collection and data analysis<sup>[22]</sup>. During the data collection process, textual materials were numbered. Selective coding identified core categories that encompassed all other categories, explored the logic of generating new governance systems, and established connections between core categories and main categories, as well as relationships between categories. Finally, by conducting theoretical saturation tests on 3 pre-preserved cases and 1 policy text, an explanatory framework was constructed (as depicted in **Table 1**).

**Table 1** Case Coding Table

Number	Case Name
1	Liuji Township in Fuchuan Yao Autonomous County, Hezhou City Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region
2	Haohuahong Town in Huishui County, Qiannan Prefecture, Guizhou Province; Da'an Town in Baisha Li Autonomous County, Hainan Province; Yeliguan Town in Lintan County, Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province; and Baojiadian Town in Manas County, Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture, Xinjiang.
3	Puwen Town in Jinghong City, Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province
4	Nanmu Township in Qushui County, Lhasa City, Tibet Autonomous Region
5	Da'an Town in Baisha Li Autonomous County, Hainan Province
6	Yeliguan Town in Lintan County, Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province
7	Baojiadian Town in Manas County, Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture, Xinjiang

### 3.1 Category Refinement and Model Construction

#### 3.1.1 Open Coding and Initial Categories

Open coding involves breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data. This phase relies entirely on analyzing the original data to explore initial concepts. These concepts are refined through a process of breaking down, conceptualizing, and recombining the data. In this paper, data from 7 cases and policy texts were imported into NVIVO software. Through the elimination of duplicates, merging similar categories, and employing other methods, 180 original statements and their corresponding 18 initial concepts were deduced, subsequently consolidated into 16 initial categories. (as depicted in **Table 2**).

#### 3.1.2 Main Axis Coding and Primary Categories

Main axis coding, alternatively referred to as associative coding, entails analyzing the relational aspects of conceptual categories derived from open coding. It aims to establish connections between these conceptual categories, differentiate primary from secondary categories, and delineate connections between them. Adhering to the principles of main axis coding, the initial concepts undergo clustering. Consequently, the 17 sub-categories identified through open coding are consolidated into 8 primary categories capable of encompassing and elucidating a wider spectrum of informational content. (as depicted in **Table 3**).

#### 3.1.3 Selective Coding and Core Categories

Selective coding, also referred to as core coding, entails the abstracting of core categories that encompass all subcategories from the conceptual categories and data analysis that have been formed. Core categories hold overarching significance as they can encapsulate all other subcategories within a broad theoretical framework, aligning with the logic of systematic evolution.

Table 2 Open Coding

Number	Original Material (Initial Concepts)	Initial Categories
1	A54 Comprehensive use of WeChat groups to create “smart countryside” (network governance) A79 Developing social governance informatization network platform (digital governance)	Expanding governance space
2	A19 Focusing on the difficulties reflected by the masses	Demand-oriented governance issues
3	A34 Emphasizing the ethnic regional autonomy system and rural revitalization strategy to ensure governance aligns with the correct direction (direction anchoring) A12 Establishing the leadership group and formulating “1+7” supporting documents (institutional design)	Political leadership
4	A18 Establishing the organizational system, with a focus on achieving comprehensive coverage of networked villages	Coverage of party organizations
5	A46 An increasing number of party members are voluntarily joining volunteer teams, highlighting the exemplary role they play	Party member demonstration driving
6	A32 Clan elders play a pivotal role in organizing village activities and mediating grassroots disputes	Traditional ethical relationships
7	A35 Major village development matters are discussed through democratic consultation meetings in the village	Modern concept of democratic consultation
8	A45 Policy implementation is promoted through the political authority vested in the village committee	Formal governance methods
9	A4 Employing moral education as a significant method to nurture the intrinsic capacity of rural governance	Informal governance methods
10	A2 Hastening the development of digital governance and fully harnessing the transformative role of information technology in rural revitalization	Technological governance tools
11	A6 Village rules and clan regulations must adhere to the provisions of the Constitution and laws	Laws and regulations
12	A4 In minority ethnic villages, clan regulations remain integral to the village governance framework	Behavioral norms
13	A9 Village committee personnel conduct thorough visits and investigations to comprehend the needs of the villagers	Collection of opinions
14	A41 The village committee convenes internal meetings to synchronize the viewpoints and proposals of villagers	Integration of opinions
15	A51 Provide feedback on the progress of policy implementation to villagers through a transparent operational mechanism	Feedback of opinions
16	A21 Establishment of a Village Volunteer Service Team	Volunteer organizations
.....	.....	.....
Total	180 original statements	16 categories

**Table 3** Axis Coding and Main Category Definition

<b>Main Category</b>	<b>Subcategory Meaning</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Field Construction	Expand governance space	This entails transcending geographical constraints in ethnic regions, transitioning from territorial boundaries to virtual domains.
Thematic Field Typing	Demand-oriented governance issues	These are governance domains revolving around significant debates and issues, emerging from the needs of ethnic minority communities.
Party Authority	Political leadership	This involves steering governance trajectories in ethnic regions through strategic planning, resulting in the development of diverse institutional frameworks.
	Coverage of party organizations	Establishment of political party units within local ethnic organizations.
The Organization of Autonomy	Party member demonstration driving	Demonstrating leadership by party members, pioneering governance initiatives in rural ethnic areas.
	Establishment of Autonomous Organizations	Ethnic minority villagers establish different types of autonomous organizations.
The Procedualization of Autonomy	Opinion collection	Utilizing various channels and methods to comprehend the demands of ethnic minority villagers.
	Opinion synthesis	Mediating conflicting interests between political parties and ethnic minority self-organizations, fostering consensus.
	Opinion feedback	Feedback provided by local governments or village-level organizations on the demands of ethnic minority villagers.
Mobilization from Society	Participation of villagers	Extensive engagement of villagers across all ethnic groups.
	Elite impetus	Ethnic minority elites mobilize villagers for social governance informally, leveraging resources.
Mobilization for Society	Party member guidance	Exemplary roles played by party members, guiding active involvements of ethnic minority villagers.
	Wide dissemination	Disseminating policy guidelines to encourage villagers' participation in social governance practices.
Chinese moderation governance methods	Exemplary demonstration	Stimulating enthusiasm among rural ethnic villagers to engage in public affairs through exemplary actions and behaviors.
	Formal governance methods	Reliance on governmental authority, encompassing legislation, planning, directives, regulations, etc., to achieve policy objectives.
	informal governance methods	Predominantly utilizing non-coercive measures like emotional mobilization and social support to attain policy goals.
	Technological governance tools	Utilizing contemporary scientific and technological methods.

*A. Driving Force of External Governance Structures*

The relationship between the state and society in China has historically been perceived as a binary separation. Since the advent of reform and opening-up, rural governance has shifted from village autonomy towards a gradual transition to rural governance, wherein state and societal co-construction have emerged as the imperative at the grassroots level (David L,1998)<sup>[23]</sup>. This transformation is characterized by deep integration, marked by mutual benefit and reciprocal dependence, with state governance “authorization” and societal governance “empowerment” manifesting in a bi-directional trajectory, particularly evident in ethnic rural areas. Under the political auspices of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the “ Party Organization-led Rural Community Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue” acts as a mechanism for the downward distribution of state governance resources and organizational governance, bolstering grassroots society’s fundamental support and legitimacy of state governance<sup>[24]</sup>. This process involves enhancing state governance “authorization” and once again empowering grassroots organizations through the authority of party organizations (Holly et.al,2020)<sup>[25]</sup>. The transformation of the state-society relationship from “separation” to “co-construction” serves as the external environmental mechanism that propels the structural transformation of rural governance systems.

*B. Inversion of Internal Governance Rules*

The phenomena of aging and hollowing-out in ethnic rural areas have become increasingly conspicuous. The network of relationships between ethnic groups is gradually unraveling, and formal and informal norms of behavior under strategic and non-strategic approaches have yet to be fully established. The disintegration of neighborhood mutual assistance is persistently occurring, thereby impeding the enhancement of governance effectiveness in ethnic rural areas. The internal logic of “ Party Organization-led Rural Community Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue” centers on the inversion of rural governance rules, seeking to construct autonomy, rule of law, and moral

governance that align with the context of ethnic rural areas through the nexus of new rural elites and rural regulations and conventions. It integrates a rule system that combines external rule of law regulations and internal moral governance rules to bridge the gap in internal governance rules<sup>[26]</sup>. By restructuring internal governance structures and optimizing governance rules and tools through party organization, the overall effectiveness of the internal logic operation of the “ Party Organization-led Rural Community Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue” is augmented.

By amalgamating the analysis of rural governance environments and evolutionary conditions, four core categories can be derived to describe the generation logic of the “ Party Organization-led Rural Community Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue” (as depicted in **Table 4**).

**Table 4** Selective Coding and Core Categories

Main Category	Core Category	
Thematic Field Typing	Field-oriented Governance	Field-oriented Party Integration Governance
Party-building Leadership Collaborative Governance	Field Position and Actor Relations	
Autonomy Organization Autonomy Proceduralization	Multi-stakeholder Governance	
Mobilization from Society Mobilization for Society	Two-way Mobilization Mechanism	Momentum Adaptive Adjustment Strategy
Formal Governance Methods Informal Governance Methods	Chinese moderation governance methods	



### 3.1.4 Theoretical Saturation Test

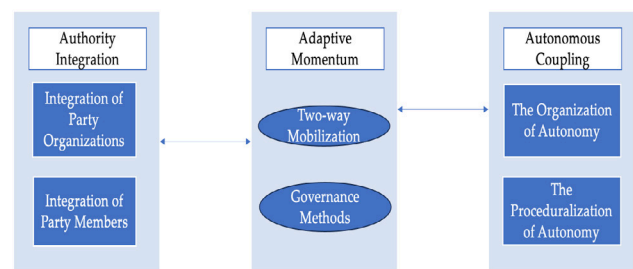
In order to enhance the study’s credibility, this paper included two segments of case text materials from Nangmu Township, Qushui County, Lhasa City, Tibet Autonomous Region, and Liujia Township, Fuchuan Miao Autonomous County, Hezhou City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Additionally, 15 policy and regulatory documents were utilized as “triangulation” materials to assess theoretical saturation. The findings of the test did not reveal any frequently occurring new categories or concepts, nor did they uncover new components within existing categories. Consequently, it is reasonable to conclude that the conclusions drawn possess strong credibility.

## 4. Analysis of the Constructive Logic of the “Party Organization-led Rural Community Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue”

Through open coding, main axis coding, selective coding, and the refinement of corresponding initial, primary, and core categories, this paper constructs an explanatory framework for the driving mode of the “Party Organization-led Rural Community Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue” in ethnic rural areas<sup>[27]</sup>. The practical logic of this governance system includes collaborative production facilitated by primary-level Party organization and the self-governance of villagers, as well as momentum adjustment mechanisms represented by rule of law and rule of virtue.

This paper employs Ernesto Laclau’s concept of “political articulation” to develop an analytical framework<sup>[28]</sup>. Laclau’s theory posits that political articulation involves organizing disparate issues around a central core to construct a coherent ideological discourse. It encompasses various aspects of political sociology, such as discourse construction, organizational mobilization, interest transmission, and coercion. In ethnic regions, governments at all

levels endeavor to reduce governance costs, ensure effective policy implementations, and promote village community developments<sup>[29]</sup>. They utilize the coordinating function of party organizations to establish cooperative production networks, shape public values, and integrate these values into the provision of public services<sup>[30]</sup>. This integration fosters the convergence of instrumental rationality and value rationality. The operational mechanisms of this governance system are consistent with the theoretical framework of political articulation<sup>[31]</sup>. Moreover, this paper underscores the presentation of empirical evidence and the development of the framework within this conceptual framework, thereby elucidating its fundamental mechanisms and driving forces (as depicted in **Figure 1**).



**Figure 1** Practical Pathways of Rural Governance in Ethnic Areas

### 4.1 Authority Fusion: Field-Based Political Party Integration Leading Cooperative Production

Given the accelerated pace of urbanization in China, the boundaries between rural and urban areas are increasingly blurred, increasing the complexity of ethnic rural governance affairs. It is essential to clarify governance domains and tasks as a fundamental prerequisite for exploring the driving mechanisms of constructing rural governance systems.

#### 4.1.1 Spatial Expansion and Issue-oriented Field-based Governance

The innovation of ethnic rural governance models has given rise to micro-governance domains bounded by grids, courtyards, and markets, as well as cross-

city regional cooperative governance domains. The changes in governance domains, while appearing as adjustments to governance territories on the surface, essentially involve absorbing diverse social entities, the vertical extension of governance chains, and the horizontally integrating departmental functions within the framework of maintaining the existing administrative system<sup>[32]</sup>. This is achieved through adjusting power structures by decentralizing resource allocation authority, formal and informal institutional arrangements, with the aim of rebuilding the rural public order and realizing cooperative production.

The expansion of governance space is manifested in extending governance boundaries from the physical reality of territorial boundaries to the governance of digital space and using algorithmic labor tools, breaking free from the constraints of time and space to achieve governance domain transformation (as depicted in **Table 4**, core category 1). While network governance domains and network micro-platforms provide equal opportunities for villagers' participation and communication channels, they also foster new productive forces<sup>[33]</sup>. *Measures such as the establishment of network governance domains based on WeChat groups in Baisha Li Autonomous County, Hainan Province, have expanded traditional ethnic area governance boundaries, creating entirely new governance domains beyond temporal and spatial constraints (as illustrated in Case 5).*

There are regional disparities in development in Chinese ethnic rural areas, compounded by the increasing diversification of social values, rendering government-customized governance objectives and public services inadequate to meet the highly diverse social needs. China's unique power structure and political logic dictate that the Communist Party of China must make adaptive adjustments based on the characteristics of social development to consolidate its governance foundation and leadership position. Embedding party authority is one of the ways to achieve cooperative production, primarily manifested in the integration of party groups and party members.

#### **4.1.2 Party Integration: Leveraging Organizational Mobilization**

Party integration refers to establishing party branches and groups in rural organizational forms. grassroots rural party organizations are not only the endpoint of Communist Party governance but also the key to exerting political authority. The "Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Strengthening the Modernization Construction of Grassroots Governance Systems and Governance Capabilities" proposes actively promoting the cross-appointment of village (community) party organization secretaries to serve as directors of village (residential) committees and members of village (community) "two committees" through legal procedures. Within the "Party Organization-led Rural Community Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue", ethnic areas integrate party organizations with grassroots rural autonomous organizations by adopting a model where village party branch secretaries concurrently serve as village committee directors, effectively fulfilling a crucial role in coordinating resource allocation and promoting rural cooperative production. Additionally, in ethnic rural areas, special consideration is given to local customs and traditions, encouraging and supporting outstanding representatives of ethnic minorities to serve as members of village leadership teams. *In Da'an Town, Baisha Li Autonomous County, Hainan Province, all administrative villages have established village committees and villagers' congresses, dividing several villagers' groups and setting up party groups within them, thus establishing a vertically integrated and horizontally interconnected party organization system (as illustrated in Case 5).*

#### **4.1.3 Member Aggregation: Leveraging Party Networks for Resource Integration Efficiency**

Member aggregation refers to appointing or recommending party members from local governments and enterprises to serve as "first secretaries," resident party members, voluntary

servers, etc., in ethnic areas. Resource integration involves, based on organizational mobilization, party organizations and members leveraging their organizational advantages to provide supporting cooperative production with resources in ethnic rural areas<sup>[34]</sup>. Due to the particularity of governance in ethnic rural areas, tensions may arise between the unique values of ethnic minorities and the policies of the Chinese government, making it difficult to reconcile grassroots contradictions and leading to issues such as low policy implementation efficiency. Since the implementation of China's poverty alleviation strategy, member aggregation has become a critical link in the execution of government policies and resource allocation. The downward distribution of internal party resources can enhance resource flow efficiency, thereby extending the service chain of parties in rural areas. *In Baojiadian Town, Manas County, Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture, Xinjiang, the full utilization of descending party members has seen party members leading local Tibetan cadres and the masses in studying pertinent policy documents from the CPC Central Committee, improving the precision of policy implementation (as illustrated in Case 7).*

The central government determines the positioning of rural development by setting strategic goals, delegates corresponding development tasks to the intermediate government for implementation, and the local government further allocates relevant resources, projects, and funds to villagers in ethnic areas through village-level organizations. Following the reform of the fiscal system, the operation of township governments in ethnic areas relies on financial support from higher-level governments, bearing both significant assessment pressure from higher-level governments and facing difficulties in coordinating with village-level organizations.

Structural barriers exist in integrating the political authority of the Communist Party of China into ethnic areas due to the decline of rural collective economies and the diversification of farmers' value orientations. Firstly, there is weak stability in organizational strength. The current rural primary-

level Party organizations setting model in ethnic areas, centered on administrative villages, have not comprehensively promoted the overall layout of rural revitalization. Additionally, some minority party cadres lack governance capabilities. Secondly, there are defects in operational mechanisms. Due to the conservative development nature of ethnic areas, there is insufficient effective interaction between rural party cadres and ethnic minority groups<sup>[35]</sup>. When facing the masses, grassroots party organizations adopt a one-way, top-down approach to disseminating information, making it difficult to timely and accurately understand the thoughts of ethnic minority groups<sup>[36]</sup>. Therefore, leveraging is necessary the pivotal role of grassroots organizations in bidirectional agency relationships, promoting benign interactions among various entities through both top-down and bottom-up approaches, thereby forming a mutually cooperative production network.

## **4.2 Self-Governance Coupling: The Effective Functioning of Governance Systems within the Comprehensive Framework of People's Democracy**

Grassroots party organizations leverage their political resources to incentivize villagers' involvement in rural governance. This incentive fosters the attainment of democratic consensus and the alignment of diverse values, laying a solid foundation for villagers' engagement in cooperative production. These values, which encompass freedom, equality, and collective action, influence political decisions, reflecting a broad spectrum of public interests.

### **4.2.1 Autonomy Organization: Establishing Organizational Structures for Villagers' Cooperative Production**

In ethnic rural governance practices, traditional informal resources such as local elites and clan elders emerge as predominant groups in rural revitalization endeavors. With their extensive social networks, they serve as vital catalysts for mobilizing support and public participation. However, their

individual capacity to address complex issues is limited, necessitating the formation of organizations to aggregate social resources, enhance rural public value, and promote cooperative production. The Mass Line and political consultation practices of the Communist Party of China facilitate the development of diverse value norms. In ethnic minority rural areas of China, an organizational structure known as “Party Organization-led Rural Community Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue” has been implemented, comprising village party organizations, village committees, village supervision committees, and village collective economic organizations. Villagers’ meetings and representatives’ gatherings facilitate extensive discussions on public issues, fostering villagers’ self-governance through equal dialogue and negotiation, respecting the subjective wishes of diverse ethnic groups, and promoting inclusivity within the village community. Despite their local prestige, many clan elders in ethnic minority rural areas, due to varying education levels, may struggle to express their demands through democratic processes. *For instance, in the Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province, blending democratic structures with local ethnic minority clan culture involves conducting diverse ethnic cultural deliberative activities through village-level support systems, integrating villagers into a deliberative democratic framework and thus consolidating democratic consensus (as illustrated in Case3).* This process involves individuals transitioning from individualism to organized states, thereby shaping the collaborative governance framework of rural areas.

#### **4.2.2 Autonomy Proceduralization: Establishing a Deliberative Framework for Villagers’ Cooperative Production**

The entire process of people’s democracy in China establishes a consultative communication chain between the ruling party and the public, intervening in affairs discussions, decision-making, and benefit distribution through legitimate

rationality and extensive participation. It provides necessary conditions for grassroots democracy in rural areas by emphasizing inclusiveness and legitimacy in democratic practices. Recognized public expression channels allow villagers in ethnic areas to acknowledge the legitimacy of institutions such as villagers’ representative assemblies or councils. Rural cadres and villagers consciously adhere to rules generated through democratic decision-making, integrating their ideas into village public affairs coordination. Responsive mechanisms for diverse demands and public opinion provide avenues for ethnic minority rural self-governance. The specific application of people’s democracy in addressing main contradictions in ethnic rural areas establishes a substantive institutionalized public opinion mechanism, emphasizing political responses to diverse demands. Expanding political activities into daily interactions among citizens maximizes the legitimacy of democratic principles in various political processes. *For example, in the Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Gansu Province, farmer cooperatives and cultural associations were established based on local agricultural and ethnic cultural characteristics, nurturing rural elites with a higher level of democratic political literacy (as illustrated in Case6).* Party organizations are integrated into the governance structures of villagers’ self-governance and social organizations. *Gansu Province’s Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture has established associations responsible for social organizations under the leadership of village party organizations, guiding villagers to participate in autonomous affairs management in an orderly manner (as illustrated in Case6).*

While efficiency in villagers’ self-governance and democratic operations is commendable in certain ethnic minority rural areas, the advancement of villagers’ self-governance encounters impediments stemming from China’s unique state-society dynamics. The emergence of grassroots democracy in Chinese ethnic rural regions is intricately tied to specific historical contexts and governance

frameworks. Nonetheless, the imbalance between state and societal forces, coupled with the absence of essential elements for grassroots democracy in ethnic regions, often impedes the seamless integration of normative democratic principles into the political and social fabric of ethnic rural communities. This discordance between normative values and local ethnic characteristics presents developmental hurdles for grassroots democracy. First, there exists a clash between modern political concepts and cultural traditions. Democracy, being predicated on certain presuppositions, implies that political actors cannot entirely sidestep the influence of ethical, religious, and cultural factors. However, the distinctive religious and cultural traditions in Chinese ethnic regions, along with the longstanding coexistence of ethnic clan organizations with state authority, have resulted in governance inefficiencies. Secondly, there is a disparity in democratic participation. Democratization can be bifurcated into power acquisition and power exercise. In the realm of power acquisition, both formal and informal groups, including ethnic clan organizations, rural elites, and township authorities from ethnic minorities, may curtail villagers' equal participation to varying degrees. Regarding power exercise, as outlined in China's "Organic Law of Village Committees," democratic power exercise encompasses democratic elections, management, decision-making, and supervision. Dominance of village political structures by elite minority groups with kinship ties may engender political disenfranchisement among non-elite factions and Han Chinese, ultimately undermining the efficacy of village democratic governance, decision-making, and supervision. In the governance framework of ethnic minority rural areas, grassroots organizations are driven by political imperatives and, top-down, leverage significant political influence to advance policy implementation. Within the realm of villagers' self-governance, they adopt authoritative-value-informal strategies to forge the adaptive evolutionary traits of a novel rural governance system, thereby fostering the effective

operation of democratic autonomy.

### **4.3 Adaptive Momentum: Mechanism for Adjusting Governance Model through "Two-way Mobilization"**

Under the auspices of China's "Comprehensive Building of a Moderately Prosperous Society" and "Western Development" initiatives, the traditional closed lifestyle structure in ethnic rural areas has been forcefully disrupted, ushering in the gradual emergence of modern production methods. The delayed development in ethnic rural areas has presented significant challenges in policy advancement, exacerbated by the influence of China's "campaign-style" governance, resulting in compulsory and rapid policy changes that have strained the relationship between the national development model and the traditional model in ethnic rural areas. Consequently, this paper conducts empirical research on select cases, revealing that governance by virtue and governance by law, as exemplified in Chinese-style modern governance, play pivotal roles in reconciling public contradictions at the village level and enhancing the efficiency of public affairs governance. Hence, this paper proposes a momentum adjustment mechanism termed "governance model-bidirectional mobilization" to investigate its impact on the governance system of ethnic rural areas.

#### **4.3.1 Adjusting Party Organizations and Personal Relationships through Modern Governance Methods**

Chinese-style modern governance methods uphold the autonomy tradition of ethnic rural areas by integrating national-level legal governance with village-level local legal construction, emphasizing the autonomy of village-level entities in legal construction. While national laws possess universality, the unique development trajectory of ethnic rural areas necessitates localized laws and regulations tailored to ensure effective governance. *For instance, in Haohuahong Town, Huishui County, Qiannan Prefecture, Guizhou Province, internally*

established “Village Elder Service Teams” led by respected local elders promptly adjust and modify clan rules in response to villagers’ needs. Traditional customs also play a role in dispute resolution from an operational standpoint (as illustrated in Case2). Judicial bodies should steer villagers towards resolving disputes in “social courts” to mitigate the excessive use of coercive measures. Moreover, there is a concerted effort to harness the self-organizational capacity of rural areas to adapt governance models. In ethnic rural areas, rural self-organization profoundly influences governance, with villagers forming small groups based on kinship ties, fostering an “endogenous order” where collective action strategies evolve based on local needs. For instance, in Yeli Town, Lintan County, Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province, family associations and folk song associations serve as self-organizing entities, promoting village integration by linking villagers through shared interests and emotional bonds (as illustrated in Case 6). Instead of resorting to coercive measures, the Chinese government incentivizes active participations in rural self-organizations through economic and political inducements, thereby facilitating personal identity shifts. Consequently, by aligning changes in personal political identity and status, party authority becomes more integrated into rural self-organizations, aligning governance principles with ethnic realities.

In recent years, local elites in ethnic areas have spearheaded novel forms of rural charity fundraising, driven by native cultural influences. In Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, villagers, entrepreneurs, and migrant workers engage in small-scale crowdfunding to enhance local infrastructure and support vulnerable groups (as illustrated in Case 3). Leveraging local human resources, social networks, and governance by virtue mitigates the fragility of rural governance systems to some extent. Additionally, considering the lack of legal awareness among villagers in ethnic areas and the dominance of clan culture, timely adjustments to legal implementation based on local customs are imperative.

Rule by virtue, characterized by non-coercive grassroots activation, social capital accumulation, and fundamental power penetration, represents an informal governance approach. Utilizing vital informal resources such as local elites and professional social forces, rule by virtue employs emotional mobilization, social support, and psychological comfort to resolve social conflicts in ethnic rural areas, fostering bottom-up hierarchical mobilization. Conversely, rule by law, a formal governance method reliant on governmental authority, regulates behavior through legislation, supervision, and enforcement, enhancing governance legitimacy and ensuring compliance with rules and regulations. The synergistic application of modern governance methods, including rule by virtue and rule by law, can significantly enhance the governance efficiency of ethnic rural areas, while public welfare initiatives and local cultural influences contribute to mitigating governance system fragility. In governing ethnic rural areas, integrating the unique religious and cultural values of ethnic minorities with informal governance methods, supplemented by rule by virtue and rule by law, is vital for fostering ethnic rural development.

#### **4.3.2 Stimulating Villager Participation Enthusiasm through Bidirectional Mobilization Mechanism**

Mobilization denotes the state’s coordination of diverse governance entities for the collective administration of public affairs. This collective mobilization encompasses two types: government-initiated mobilization and spontaneous mobilization within society. The former originates from administrative directives, while the latter emerges organically. As the ruling party, the Communist Party of China vertically establishes core party organizations within the government, extending the party structure downward. Collaborating with social organizations through a grid-based structure, it addresses the strategic demands of social mobilization. As grassroots governance capabilities

continue to evolve, higher-level authorities empower society, delegate governance responsibilities to grassroots levels, and institutionalize grassroots rights and duties, incorporating them into performance assessments to reinforce enforcement mechanisms. Bottom-up social mobilization is propelled by party member demonstrations, elite advocacy, and mass participation. Grassroots party members assume a dual role as advocates for party initiatives and representatives of ordinary villagers, crucial in championing and implementing party policies, actively involving villagers, and facilitating effective self-governance. In ethnically diverse rural areas, esteemed local figures are pivotal in driving community engagement in grassroots governance, possessing substantial social capital, robust resource acquisition abilities, and a strong sense of public responsibility.

Integrated governance by political parties and multi-party autonomous governance represents the two primary approaches to rural governance in ethnically diverse regions. The fusion of diverse governance methods enables political parties to mobilize within a structured framework and encourages spontaneous social mobilization among villagers, thereby fostering effective grassroots social governance. On one hand, within China’s distinctive pressure-driven system, each administrative level assumes corresponding tasks. Aligned with the unified directives of the ruling party, government officials predominantly employ formal governance methods such as the rule of law to implement various social management systems established by state mechanisms, reflecting the hierarchical logic of the pressure-driven system. On the other hand, issue-oriented governance necessitates addressing the myriad challenges encountered by villagers in their daily lives. Party members, local elites, social organizations, and other stakeholders adopt roles relevant to villagers’ experiences, mobilizing them to participate in grassroots governance through informal means, thus bridging the gap between national systems and social realities. This approach reflects both political and practical considerations, contributing to

the effective functioning of the “ Party Organization-led Rural Community Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue” in ethnically diverse rural areas (as illustrated in **Figure 2**).

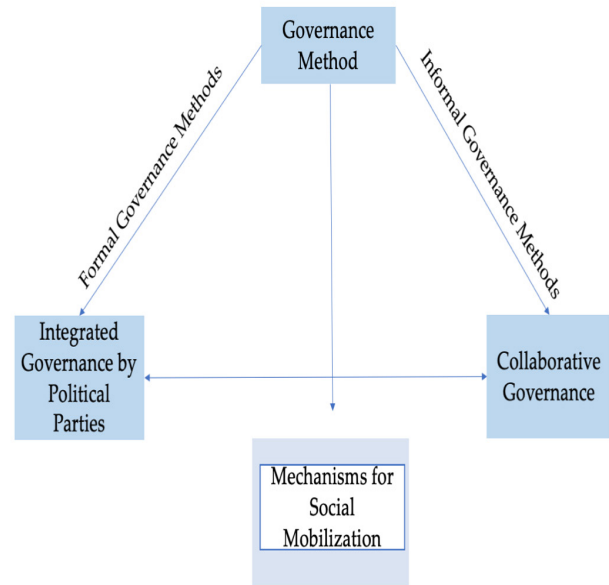


Figure 2 Driving Mechanism Diagram

## 5. Construction of Public Policy Support System under the “ Party Organization-led Rural Community Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue”

This paper establishes a fundamental explanatory framework for the practical logic of governance systems in ethnic rural areas under the “ Party Organization-led Rural Community Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue”. Grounded theory research on the aforementioned cases has been employed for this purpose. Furthermore, adhering to the dynamic approach of “evaluation-feedback optimization,” the paper devises a multidimensional public policy support system. The objective is to integrate dynamic evaluation with optimization, align stable system structures with continuous improvement, and enhance governance efficiency in ethnic regions.

### **5.1 Leveraging Institutional Advantages to Enhance the Public Authority System in Rural Governance**

The enhancement of the public authority system hinges on the establishment of a formal institutional framework compatible with ethnic rural areas. This entails not only the macro-level refinement of ethnic regional autonomy systems but also the fine-tuning of policy guidelines and legal regulations for ethnic rural governance. Measures such as publicity, education, and rural policy implementation are employed to establish channels for the integration of national formal systems into grassroots rural areas<sup>[37]</sup>. This ensures the authority of legal policies and law enforcement agencies in ethnic rural governance.

### **5.2 Activating Endogenous Resources in Rural Areas to Optimize Governance Systems in Ethnic Rural Areas**

The spontaneous order of rural governance serves as a robust complement to and support for constructing order. Maintaining the resilience and adaptability of spontaneous order is paramount for building a modern Chinese-style ethnic rural governance system. Reconstructing the spontaneous order of ethnic rural governance necessitates several actions, including strengthening village community awareness, preserving rural memories, integrating rural public interests, and rejuvenating the public space of ethnic rural governance. Furthermore, it involves actively enticing rural elites to return, nurturing new talents, and reconstructing the talent pool for ethnic rural autonomy. Supporting and nurturing new rural social organizations such as poverty alleviation initiatives, industrial development projects, economic cooperatives, cultural education programs, and voluntary services are also essential. These efforts aim to fortify the organizational foundation of ethnic rural autonomy and promote the creative transformation of ethnic rural cultures, customs, and ethnic consciousness into a modern rural governance culture, thereby reshaping the

inherent norms of ethnic rural autonomy.

### **5.3 Enhancing Market Elements and Mechanisms to Strengthen the Economic Foundation of Governance in Ethnic Rural Areas**

The developmental status of ethnic regions significantly influences the effectiveness and stability of governance in ethnic rural areas. To leverage the role of market order in ethnic rural governance, several steps are imperative. Firstly, it is crucial to actively promote the revitalization and development of ethnic rural industries, thereby enhancing collective economies and improving the quality of life and welfare of ethnic minorities. Secondly, exploring the development of agricultural economic cooperatives in ethnic rural areas using new property rights structures and equity arrangements is essential. This approach aims to bolster the intensive development of rural economies, mitigate risks, and foster participation in market competition. Thirdly, it is imperative to fully harness market mechanisms in providing rural public services and mixed public goods. This includes developing high-value-added eco-cultural tourism projects, cultivating rural brand industries such as ecological farms, digital farms, and shared farms, extending collective economic industrial chains, and reducing imbalances in resource allocation and phenomena of short-term profit-taking.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper utilizes ethnic minority villages and towns in seven provinces as sample cases to explore the construction logic of governance systems in ethnic rural areas. Through grounded theory coding analysis, it was found that political parties have established a three-party cooperative production network comprising political parties, governments, and the public. Villagers participate in village governance through legalized autonomous organizations and institutionalized democratic procedures. Additionally, modern governance methods serve as adaptive momentum within the



governance system, effectively regulating the relationship between the government, the market, and the public to maintain the smooth operation of rural governance systems.

While existing studies often focus on typical grassroots governance cases and analyze the micro-mechanisms of governance in ethnic rural areas, they often lack macro-governance logic analysis from an overall perspective. This limits the extraction of intrinsic mechanisms for abstract issues. The potential contribution of this paper lies in constructing an explanatory framework for governance in ethnic rural areas through empirical analysis of multiple cases, bridging macro-theory and micro-operational assumptions. However, it is emphasized that the model presented in this paper can only promote the improvement of governance effectiveness in ethnic rural areas under certain conditions, and the case samples provided are illustrative. Given the high complexity of rural governance in China, blindly copying and imitating this model may result in resource wastage and homogenization phenomena. Therefore, it is essential to use the “Party Organization-led Rural Community Governance System Featuring a combination of Self-governance, Rule of law, and Rule of virtue” as a reference, adapt it to local circumstances, comprehensively consider the foundation of regional governance, and explore how to better leverage the role of grassroots organizations. This approach can promote the organic integration of autonomy, rule of law, and moral governance, thereby enhancing governance effectiveness.

## Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work. X.L. was responsible for reviewing and editing, validation, supervision, and investigation. Y.X. was responsible for reviewing and editing, conceptualization, visualization, software, and methodology. J.Z. was responsible for validation, supervision, editing and investigation. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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## Ethics Statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Biomedical Ethics Committee of Nankai University No. NKUIRB2022092. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

## Data Availability Statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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