

Conference Name: SSHRA 2026 – Social Science & Humanities Research Association International Conference, 13-14 April, Tokyo

Conference Dates: 13-Apr- 2026 to 14-Apr- 2026

Conference Venue: TKP Ichigaya Building, 8 Ichigaya Hachiman-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 162-0844

Appears in: PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences (ISSN 2454-5899)

Publication year: 2026

Lihe Lin, 2026

Volume 2026, pp. 248-271

DOI- <https://doi.org/10.20319/icssh.2026.248271>

This paper can be cited as Lin, L.(2026). Collaborators or Trouble-Makers? The Dual Identity of NGOs in Chinese Rural Governance. SSHRA 2026 – Social Science & Humanities Research Association International Conference, 13-14 April, Tokyo. Proceedings of Social Science and Humanities Research Association (SSHRA), 2026, 248-271

COLLABORATORS OR TROUBLE-MAKERS? THE DUAL IDENTITY OF NGOS IN CHINESE RURAL GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

This study investigates the dynamic tension between the dual identities of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) as collaborators versus trouble-makers within the context of Chinese rural governance. By employing a qualitative single-case study of Organization X in Village Y, H Province of China, this research constructs an analytical framework of ‘Boundary-Crossing Governance’ to elucidate the survival logic and interaction mechanisms of NGOs within a state-led system. The findings reveal a structural conflict between the professional-community logic of

NGOs, which prioritizes long-term endogenous development, and the bureaucratic-administrative logic of local governments, driven by short-term stability and performance metrics. This institutional misalignment precipitates a legitimacy paradox when NGOs shift from service provision to rights advocacy. However, functional boundary-crossing, NGOs impose reverse discipline on administrative power while navigating resistance from systemic inertia. To survive these dilemmas, Organization X demonstrates significant agency by deploying embedded strategies, including discursive isomorphism, gentle professionalism, and localized agent cultivation. The study concludes that such boundary-crossing constitutes a form of constructive friction. Rather than mere conflict, it serves as a critical mechanism for resilient boundary negotiation, allowing NGOs to carve out autonomous spaces rigid institutional interstices and driving the incremental adaptation of China's grassroots governance system.

Keywords:

Boundary-Crossing Governance, Institutional Logics, State-Society Relations, Rural Governance

1. Introduction

The profound transformation of Chinese rural society is reshaping the landscape of grassroots governance with unprecedented breadth and depth. Against the macro-backdrop of the state's vigorous promotion of the Rural Revitalization Strategy and the modernization of the grassroots governance system, the traditional governance model—dominated solely by the government—is facing increasingly complex challenges. On the one hand, as state resources are transferred en masse to rural areas, resource allocation under the project system often encounters the last mile dilemma, and may even trigger “elite capture” and oligarchic governance within villages (Qu, 2012; Deng & Fei, 2020). On the other hand, the trend of atomization in rural society and the lack of peasant subjectivity render unidirectional administrative intervention ineffective in activating endogenous development momentum (Hu & Cui, 2020). This coexistence of government failure and market failure has provided a historic opportunity for NGOs to emerge as a “third dimension of governance” (Shen, 2018).

From the central to the local level, Chinese policy discourse increasingly advocates for and encourages the introduction of social forces, hoping to bridge gaps in public services and revitalize grassroots society through public-private partnerships. Theoretically, NGOs are expected to play multiple roles—as “service providers,” “resource linkers,” and even “innovation catalysts”—forming a partnership of collaborative governance with the government to achieve complementary advantages (Ansell & Gash, 2008). In practice, NGOs have demonstrated unique efficacy in reconstructing the logic of collective action among farmers and promoting participatory governance (Wu & Shi, 2018).

However, the path from ideal to reality is far more tortuous than depicted in policy texts. Within China's unique institutional environment, NGOs exhibit the complex characteristic of “dependent autonomy” (Wang & Song, 2013). The “classified control system” suggests that the state adopts differentiated control strategies for different types of NGOs, meaning that while NGOs obtain resource support, they also face profound institutional constraints (Kang & Han, 2005).

Extensive practice and research have revealed a pervasive tension: under the framework of government purchase of services, the government tends to instrumentalize and project-ize NGOs, strictly confining them to pre-set, non-political service domains (Ma & Cao, 2017). This forms a typical relationship of state-led corporatism or absorptive state-society relations (Teets, 2014; Unger & Chan, 1995).

When NGO actions—whether driven by professionalism or a response to genuine community needs—attempt to break the boundaries of dependency and demonstrate stronger agency, thereby deviating slightly from the government-set trajectory, they are prone to being redefined from “collaborators” to “trouble-makers.” The author keenly captured this phenomenon through preliminary observations of Organization X’s practices in villages of Province H. The accusations of being “untrusted” and “overreaching” (literally “stretching hands too long”), repeatedly mentioned by Director L in interviews, are vivid embodiments of this structural contradiction.

This behavioral deviation and the consequent systemic exclusion constitute the core concern of this study. The author conceptualizes this phenomenon as “Boundary-Crossing Governance.” Here, “boundary-crossing” is not a derogatory term implying judgment, but a neutral analytical concept. It describes the dynamic process in which NGOs, during their participation in governance, exceed the roles, functions, and power boundaries expected or permitted by local governments, thereby triggering tensions, conflicts, and negotiations with the existing governance system. It profoundly reveals the practical dilemma facing NGOs in the current Chinese rural governance system: possessing legal legitimacy, yet struggling with the multiple tensions of social, administrative, and political legitimacy (Geng, 2023).

Although existing studies have begun to explore NGO strategies such as “soft embeddedness” (Lv & Li, 2024) or “gradual embeddedness” (Zheng & Lan, 2021), they mostly focus on static strategy types or macro-evolutionary logic. There remains a lack of in-depth mechanistic explanation regarding how NGOs conduct dynamic “Boundary Work” with the government in specific governance contexts, and

how this micro-game reacts upon the macro-institutional environment. Based on this, the study aims to explore the following core question: In the practical field of contemporary Chinese rural governance, how is the tension of NGO “Boundary-Crossing Governance” generated, manifested, and responded to by different actors? To what extent does it reveal the ambiguity of NGO legitimacy within the current grassroots governance system?

This main question is decomposed into the following sub-questions:

- What is the deviation between the NGO’s self-identity and the government’s role expectation?
- In which specific action boundaries is “boundary-crossing” behavior manifested? What systemic inertia lies behind it?
- Facing exclusion from the governance system, what strategic actions do NGOs adopt?
- What are the theoretical implications of the tension in “Boundary-Crossing Governance” for constructing a new type of state-society relationship?

The value of this study lies in its attempt to transcend the binary discourse of cooperation or conflict in state-society relations. Instead, it delves into the internal logic of conflict, viewing “boundary-crossing” as a form of “constructive disruption” that may stimulate institutional innovation and social vitality. Thus, it provides a more dynamic and explanatory micro-perspective for understanding the relationship between the state and society in transitional China.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Collaborative Governance Theory and Institutional Variations in the Chinese Context

Collaborative Governance theory emerged against the backdrop of post-industrial Western societies grappling with complex public affairs. This theory posits that within fragmented power structures, diverse actors—particularly governments and non-profit organizations—should integrate heterogeneous resources within a shared institutional space through continuous dialogue and reciprocal

negotiation to address “wicked problems” that single actors cannot effectively solve (Ansell & Gash, 2008). In an ideal model, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), leveraging their organizational flexibility, grassroots social capital, and professional expertise, can effectively compensate for the rigid constraints and information asymmetry of government bureaucracies, thereby achieving efficiency gains in public service delivery and social governance.

However, when this theoretical model, rooted in pluralist political traditions, is transplanted into China’s institutional environment characterized by a “strong state and weak society,” it faces profound contextual dislocation and adaptive challenges (Kang & Han, 2005). The development of Chinese NGOs is deeply embedded in state-dominated institutional logic, with their survival resources and legitimacy highly dependent on the state’s policy space and financial support (Saich, 2000; Spires, 2011). Consequently, collaborative practices in China exhibit distinct characteristics of “state-dominated limited polycentrism.” In this mode, the government occupies a dominant position, simultaneously acting as the “contractor,” “regulator,” and “referee,” while NGOs are often positioned as extensions or supplements to administrative functions.

This asymmetric power relationship is further solidified through the “Project System.” As a core techno-governance mechanism for channeling state resources downward, the project system provides survival resources for NGOs. However, its operational logic—characterized by quantification, short-termism, and administrative orientation—tends to fragment NGO actions into isolated task units. This forces a deep alignment between organizational goals and the government’s phased agendas, thereby, to some extent, weakening NGOs’ autonomy and their capacity for long-term community rootedness (Zhou, 2011; He & An, 2018). Teets (2014) summarizes this relationship as “Consultative Authoritarianism,” where the state strategically absorbs NGOs that possess professional service capabilities but do not pose political challenges, while retaining ultimate control. This selective absorption mechanism and

disciplinary logic constitute the institutional antecedents for the emergence of “boundary-crossing” behaviors.

2.2 Fragile Legitimacy: The Disconnect between Formal Recognition and Substantive Acceptance

Legitimacy, a core concept in organizational sociology, refers to the appropriateness of an organizational action within a specific system of social norms, values, and beliefs (Suchman, 1995). For NGOs operating in transitional China, acquiring legitimacy is a multi-dimensional, dynamic game. Scholars generally distinguish between Formal Legitimacy and Substantive Legitimacy. The former primarily refers to legal status obtained through civil affairs registration, establishing organizational compliance; the latter concerns whether the organization can gain intrinsic recognition and trust from key stakeholders, including government officials, community members, and funders (He, 2019; Hsu & Hasmath, 2014).

Existing research indicates that Chinese NGOs universally face a disconnect between formal and substantive legitimacy. Numerous similar studies demonstrate that even with legal status, NGOs struggle to gain substantive legitimacy, particularly substantive acceptance from grassroots governments (Spires, 2011). Taking Organization X in this study as an example: when X strictly adheres to project agreements to engage in technical services like marine monitoring and tidal flat restoration, its actions are deemed compliant. However, when it shifts to organizing fishermen or intervening in rights disputes, it instantly loses substantive legitimacy in the eyes of the local government, and its actions are rapidly “illegalized,” despite its legal status remaining unchanged.

This fragility and high contextual dependence of legitimacy force organizations to develop diverse legitimation strategies. In her classic study, Christine Oliver (1991) proposed five strategic responses to institutional pressures: acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, and manipulation. The actions of Chinese NGOs are a complex hybrid of these strategies. On one hand, they “acquiesce” or “compromise” with government logic by building personal relationships and demonstrating service

performance (Spires, 2011). On the other hand, they engage in strategic “avoidance” and “manipulation” to expand their operational space by skillfully framing issues, seeking media support, or allying with academia (Ho, 2016). This continuous game of legitimacy is precisely the real-world enactment of “boundary-crossing governance” at the micro-level.

2.3 Theoretical Framework: Institutional Logic Conflict and the Agency of “Boundary Work”

To explain why a “legal” organization falls into accusations of being “illegal” due to its “reasonable” actions, we need a theoretical tool capable of penetrating the deep rules and meanings behind actions. New Institutionalism, particularly the Institutional Logics perspective, provides an excellent analytical path. This theory posits that society is composed of multiple institutional fields (e.g., market, state, community, family, profession), each with a unique, supreme “institutional logic”—defined as “the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality” (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012, p. 2).

Applying this framework, the “boundary-crossing” dilemma encountered by Organization X in Village Y can be clearly explained as a collision between two fundamentally different institutional logics within the same governance field:

The Grassroots Government’s “Bureaucratic-Administrative Logic”: Its core principles are hierarchical control, stability-first, efficiency supremacy, and territorial management. Under this logic, society is viewed as an object of management and service, and any spontaneous, uncontrollable action is seen as a potential risk. The value of NGOs lies in their “controllability, effectiveness, and complementarity” as governance tools (Foucault, 1991, on “Governmentality”).

Organization X’s “Professional-Community Logic”: As a professional NGO oriented towards rural community service and empowerment, its actions follow principles of community-based approaches, participatory development, procedural

justice, and professional autonomy. Under this logic, community members are the center of development and subjects of action. The organization's goal is to stimulate endogenous momentum, which naturally requires flexibility, long-term rootedness, and moderate challenges to existing unreasonable power structures (Chambers, 1997, on "Participatory Rural Appraisal").

The conflict of "boundary-crossing governance" erupts precisely at the interface of these two logics. However, merely pointing out logical conflicts is insufficient. Actors are not passively determined by logics. Therefore, this study introduces the concepts of "Institutional Work" and "Boundary Work" to capture the agency of Organization X. Institutional work refers to "the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). When Organization X attempts to introduce new community deliberation rules, it is engaging in the work of "creating" new institutions; conversely, when government officials emphasize their jurisdiction, they are "maintaining" old institutions.

More specifically, the interaction between the two parties is a continuous process of "Boundary Work" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002)—discursive and practical strategies adopted by actors to create, maintain, attack, or blur social and symbolic boundaries (e.g., "us" vs. "them," "in-role" vs. "out-of-role," "professional" vs. "political"). Labeling Organization X as a "trouble-maker" is a typical form of boundary work aimed at excluding it from legitimate governance subjects. Organization X, by framing issues and seeking superior support, is also engaging in boundary work, attempting to re-depict its "boundary-crossing" behaviors as "in-role" and legitimate actions.

2.4 Research Gaps and Contributions

In summary, while existing literature has detailed the macro-institutional constraints (e.g., dependency, classified control) and meso-organizational strategies of state-society relations in China, there remains an explanatory tension at the level of micro-mechanisms. Specifically, there is a lack of in-depth empirical analysis on how

NGOs, within specific governance interstices, define, breakthrough, and reshape governance boundaries through dynamic interaction and gaming. Existing studies often focus on static strategy classifications (e.g., embeddedness, dependency) and rarely view “boundary-crossing” as a governance mechanism with constructive significance.

Based on this, the contribution of this study is twofold: First, it proposes the analytical concept of “Boundary-Crossing Governance,” transcending the simple binary of “cooperation-conflict” to view it as a dynamic process revealing the internal tensions of the governance system. Second, by combining institutional logic and boundary work theories, it deeply dissects how NGOs reconstruct their legitimacy basis through micro-strategic actions amidst multiple logical conflicts, thereby providing a new theoretical perspective for understanding the dynamic evolution of state-society relations in the transitional period.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm, specifically employing the Single-Case Study Method as its core research strategy. The theoretical rationale for selecting this method lies in the nature of the study's central issue—“Boundary-Crossing Governance”—which is essentially a complex dynamic process deeply embedded in specific socio-political contexts, involving interactions among multiple subjects and the construction of meaning. Compared to quantitative research, case studies are more suitable for addressing “how” and “why” research questions, enabling a “Thick Description” of micro-power operations and interaction mechanisms (Geertz, 1973). Following the methodological principles of Yin (2018), this study aims to achieve “Analytical Generalization”—moving from empirical observation to theoretical construction—rather than statistical generalization from samples, through a deep dissection of specific empirical phenomena.

Based on the sampling logic of a “Critical Case,” this study selects the governance practice of Organization X in Village Y, H Province in southern China, as the unit of analysis. Data were derived from semi-structured in-depth interviews

conducted by the researcher with members of Organization X and villagers of Village Y. These were supplemented by textual analysis of the organization's public reports, project documents, meeting minutes, and relevant news coverage to achieve "triangulation," thereby ensuring the reliability of the research. Regarding data analysis, this study employs Thematic Analysis, following the analytical path of "familiarization with data—initial coding—theme construction and definition." Through repeated reading and systematic coding of the raw materials, the researcher identified significant empirical units and, through induction and refinement, constructed core analytical themes regarding role conflict, boundary negotiation, and strategic response (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The entire research process strictly adhered to academic ethics, and all individuals, organizations, and locations involved have been anonymized.

4. Case Analysis

4.1 The Practical Logic of "Boundary-Crossing": The Case of Organization X in Village Y, Province H, China

Organization X is a technology-oriented NGO dedicated to sustainable fisheries and coastal community development. Its actions transcend traditional community technical services, intervening directly in the complex public affairs governance of coastal fishing villages in Province H. Organization X participates in addressing multiple challenges, including ecological degradation (e.g., destructive sea-foraging, encroachment on mangrove reserves), cultural decline, and livelihood transitions. Simultaneously, it designs mechanisms to drive rural community subjectivity, aiming to transform the "project system" into a more sustainable development model. From 2023 to 2025, the author conducted multiple field visits to Village Y, where Organization X is active. Through field observations and interviews with several members of Organization X—including its founder, executive director, and project managers—the author obtained relevant meeting minutes and project documents. By deeply dissecting the specific practices of Organization X in Village Y, this study reveals the underlying logic of the "boundary-crossing" accusations it faces

under the “strong state-weak society” structure, and systematically explains how it transforms tensions into opportunities for governance innovation through a series of sophisticated strategic actions.

4.1.1 Challenge I: The Contextual Paradox of Legitimacy

In July 2025, driven by a massive influx of tourists during the holiday season, Village Y experienced chaotic scenes of “destructive sea-foraging.” Many tourists wantonly damaged coastal tidal flats and vegetation, crossing the red line of the mangrove ecological reserve. Facing this governance crisis triggered by ecological destruction, Organization X’s initial assistance in management—acting as an extension of government functions—received tacit approval. However, when it resorted to media exposure to force administrative intervention, although it successfully resolved the problem, it was severely warned for touching the local government’s bottom line of stability maintenance and public opinion control. This instantaneous reversal of roles from “collaborator” to “potential trouble-maker” profoundly reveals the Contextual Dependence of NGO legitimacy in Chinese grassroots governance.

Under the logic of State Corporatism, the government’s acceptance of NGOs is often based on “instrumental absorption”: their actions are deemed legitimate only when they can bridge public service gaps, reduce governance costs, and pose no challenge to administrative authority (Teets, 2014). However, this legitimacy is fragile and clearly bounded. At the macro-policy level, NGOs are encouraged to act as “beneficial supplements” and “collaborative forces” in the governance system (Wang & Jia, 2002). Yet, in practice, the legitimacy of this supplementary role is often defaulted to a non-problematic auxiliary status. Once an NGO’s action—such as Organization X’s media exposure—directly points to local government management failures, regulatory absences, or formalism in policy execution, the nature of its role undergoes a fundamental reversal: from “collaborator” to “challenger.” This transformation exposes the fragility and contextual dependence of NGO legitimacy in the Chinese context (Spire, 2011). As the case illustrates, although Organization X’s intervention substantially safeguarded the public interest of the village community,

from the perspective of administrative logic, it broke the closed nature of internal control and depleted the trust capital accumulated between the organization and the local government. This indicates that in the current governance system, an NGO's formal legitimacy does not automatically translate into full substantive legitimacy; the latter is constantly subject to dynamic screening by administrative power based on political risk considerations.

4.1.2 Challenge II: The Dynamic Reconstruction of Jurisdictional Boundaries

Organization X's actions in delineating marine ecological red lines and supervising sewage treatment facilities exhibit typical characteristics of "Functional Boundary-Crossing." Against the backdrop of blurred reserve boundaries and inefficient operation of environmental facilities, Organization X transcended the traditional scope of social services, intervening in domains of administrative demarcation and law enforcement supervision that are theoretically monopolized by the government. This intervention was not a direct usurpation of administrative power but a "quasi-public service filling" based on professional capability, occurring in "governance vacuums" where government capacity was insufficient or willingness was lacking (Mertha, 2009).

This boundary-crossing triggered a tug-of-war over power and responsibility. Initially, the local government viewed it with vigilance, perceiving it as an overstepping of authority and an indirect accusation of dereliction of duty. However, Organization X provided solutions to problems the government lacked the capacity to solve, utilizing its professional capabilities (e.g., GIS mapping, data analysis, and community mobilization techniques). This placed the government in a dilemma of "dependent correction": on one hand, it was wary of social forces eroding administrative jurisdiction; on the other hand, it was compelled to rely on their technical solutions to cope with pressures from superior assessments and governance demands.

The key to this tug-of-war lay in Organization X skillfully transforming its boundary-crossing actions into "Reverse Discipline" of administrative power. Rather

than engaging in simple confrontation, they presented objective data and cited explicit legal provisions, shifting the framework of discussion from “who has the right to do it” to “what must be done according to the law.” This negotiation, based on Technical Rationality and legal authority, forced the government to respond within its statutory scope of duties, thereby effectively reshaping and clarifying the action boundaries of both parties. Consequently, boundary-crossing here evolved from a simple violation into a mechanism of “Constructive Friction” that promotes boundary clarity and compels administrative power to return to its proper function (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010).

4.1.3 Challenge III: The Politics of Time and Systemic Inertia

Beyond conflicts over legitimacy boundaries in governance space, a profound game of “Politics of Time” exists between Organization X and the grassroots government. According to Goetz’s (2019) theoretical framework, time is not merely a physical background for politics but an institutionalized power resource and constraint mechanism. Goetz points out that political actors are often constrained by “Political Time” (e.g., tenure, election cycles, annual assessments), which compels them to favor policies with short-term visibility. In contrast, solving complex ecological problems typically requires adherence to cycles of ecological recovery and social capital accumulation, demanding long-term sustained investment.

Interview data from this study reveal that the two parties follow distinctly different temporal logics. The behavior of grassroots officials is constrained by the strict promotion logic of the bureaucracy, where decisions are highly dependent on a tenure system with a 3-5 year cycle. This predisposes them to pursue explicit achievements that are visible and quantifiable in the short term (e.g., infrastructure projects, GDP indicators, and environmental improvement metrics). Conversely, Organization X is dedicated to ecological restoration, community capacity building, and the cultivation of social trust—processes that require long-term investment and whose results often lag behind, making them difficult to measure within existing administrative assessment systems.

This conflict between Instrumental Rationality and Value Rationality (Weber, 1978) constitutes a systemic structural resistance. China's administrative system, through top-down assessment and promotion incentive mechanisms, shapes a strong short-term performance orientation among local officials (Zhou, 2007). Under this logic, deep-seated social and ecological governance work that involves long cycles, high risks, and slow results naturally lacks appeal. Consequently, when Organization X attempts to introduce community-based long-term sustainable development mechanisms, it often encounters passive treatment or misunderstanding from the administrative system. This "Systemic Inertia" constitutes a powerful structural rejection response. It forces NGOs to operate under dual pressures: coping with rigorous administrative compliance costs while striving to maintain project innovation and responsiveness. The experience of Organization X reflects the universal dilemma faced by many advocacy NGOs in China: while pursuing profound social change, they must simultaneously navigate a system that favors immediate, controllable results (Teets, 2014).

4.2 Strategic Survival Logic of Chinese NGOs

Facing the structural tensions imposed by a rigid institutional environment, Organization X did not resort to radical confrontation or passive retreat. Instead, it demonstrated a high degree of "Embedded Agency." This agency does not seek to subvert the existing regime but rather, through a set of contextualized and combined strategies, reconstructs the rules of interaction with the government via flexible and soft boundary actions within the governance structure, thereby carving out sustainable space for practice.

4.2.1 Strategy I: Discursive Isomorphism and Interest Bundling

Organization X proactively re-encoded community empowerment work that might originally have been deemed "sensitive" or "boundary-crossing" (e.g., organizing fishermen's deliberations, youth entrepreneurship) into rhetoric that aligns with the mainstream official discourse system, such as "models of rural revitalization"

or “cases of grassroots governance innovation.” As Director L stated, “Our work must be transformed into their performance achievements.” This strategy represents a deep mechanism of “Interest Bundling” (Hsu & Hasmath, 2014). By aligning the NGO’s organizational goals with the core Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of the local government, Organization X successfully transformed the bilateral relationship from a zero-sum game into a positive-sum game. Consequently, the local government became willing to tolerate or even tacitly approve the NGO’s moderate boundary-crossing to secure these “governance dividends.”

4.2.2 Strategy II: Gentle Professionalism and Technical Empowerment

Addressing the power anxiety triggered by the aforementioned “functional boundary-crossing,” Organization X adopted a strategy of “Gentle Professionalism.” When dealing with contentious issues such as mangrove conservation and pollution monitoring, the organization deliberately stripped away radical overtones from its actions, emphasizing instead “Technical Rationality.” By providing precise GIS ecological maps, visualized monitoring data, and compliance analyses based on legal texts, they constructed a professional discourse that the bureaucratic system could not refuse (Yang, 2017). The essence of this strategy lies in “depoliticization”: it transforms political issues that might be interpreted as challenges to administrative authority into technical consultations on “how to solve problems more scientifically.” In this way, Organization X compensated for its lack of political authority with technical authority, offering government officials a platform for action based on facts and rules. Thus, it maintained a flexible baseline for cooperation while preserving the sharpness of its critique.

4.2.3 Strategy III: Localization of Social Capital and Agent Cultivation

Organization X explicitly positioned itself as a “collaborator” and “cultivator” rather than a dominator. Its core strategy involved investing significant resources in cultivating key local actors, such as the youth entrepreneurship and cultural tourism team led by returning youth. Through the path of “accompaniment–

empowerment–exit,” Organization X supported the local team in transitioning from reliance on external resources to independent operation and even proactively applying for government projects. This strategy achieved dual efficacy: on one hand, by supporting local agents, it effectively reduced the political sensitivity of direct intervention in village affairs by an external NGO; on the other hand, it substantially transformed externally input resources into endogenous Social Capital. When the subjects of governance innovation shifted to the villagers themselves, the legitimacy basis of the project transformed from pure external input to community endogeneity, thereby enhancing the resilience and sustainability of governance practices in the face of administrative pressure.

4.2.4 Strategy IV: Incremental Innovation

Organization X did not attempt grand institutional design but accepted its role as a practitioner, focusing on conducting micro-experiments within specific governance interstices (e.g., an unmanaged tidal flat, a specific livelihood pain point). They followed a logic of “Incremental Institutional Change.” By accumulating successful cases at specific and proving the feasibility of new models, Organization X gradually built sufficient reputational capital and demonstration effects. Ultimately, through a “point-to-surface” approach, it promoted the fine-tuning of local governance concepts and the diffusion of practical models. This path of incremental innovation avoided the systemic backlash that radical change might trigger while realizing a substantive reshaping of the governance structure over the long term.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

5.1 Discussion

Through the case of Organization X, this study challenges the simplistic binary division of state-society relations as either “cooperation” or “conflict” found in existing literature. It reveals that collaborator and trouble-maker are not mutually exclusive, static labels, but dynamic states situated at opposite ends of the same governance continuum. In the institutional context of a “strong state and weak society,”

legitimacy is no longer a legal attribute acquired once and for all, but a “fluid resource” that must be continuously contested for and reconstructed through specific actions. Based on this, the practices of Organization X demonstrate that NGOs utilize this fluidity of identity to function through a path of “Constructive Friction” and “Resilience Building.” By innovating at the margins of governance, they continuously test, negotiate, and redefine the action boundaries between the state and society. Ultimately, while bridging governance gaps, they also provide valuable knowledge and momentum from society for the incremental adaptation and innovation of China’s grassroots governance system (Ho, 2017). This finding holds significant theoretical reconstruction value and practical implications for understanding how, and in what ways, social forces can promote the realization of public value against the backdrop of strong state capacity.

5.2 Conclusion

Using institutional logics and boundary work as an analytical framework, this study systematically dissected how Organization X survives and develops within the interstices of the dual logics of “bureaucracy-administration” and “profession-community.” The study draws the following main conclusions: First, the identity dilemma faced by NGOs stems from the administrative system’s dual attitude of “instrumental absorption” and “political exclusion,” rendering their legitimacy highly context-dependent and extremely fragile. Second, Organization X’s “boundary-crossing” behaviors, while triggering anxiety over jurisdictional power, also achieved “Reverse Discipline” of administrative power through “Technical Rationality” and “Legal Authority,” promoting the reconstruction of governance boundaries. Third, the misalignment of Politics of Time (the government’s tenure logic vs. the NGO’s ecological cycle logic) constitutes a deep structural resistance.

Facing these dilemmas, NGOs have demonstrated strong “Embedded Agency.” Through strategies of Discursive Isomorphism to transform organizational goals into government achievements, Depoliticized Technical Governance to reduce sensitivity, Agent Cultivation to achieve risk blocking and local rootedness, and

ultimately Incremental Innovation to drive community change, they have forged a unique survival wisdom. These strategies constitute the distinctive survival logic of Chinese NGOs: without challenging the macro-regime, they successfully construct autonomous spaces within structural interstices through refined micro-operations, achieving dual growth in organizational resilience and public value.

5.3 Future Directions

Although this study provides explanatory micro-mechanisms based on a critical single case, certain limitations point to directions for future research. First, the specificity of the case (an environmental, technology-oriented NGO) may limit the universal applicability of the conclusions. Future research could expand to different fields and regions to conduct multi-case comparative studies, exploring the similarities and differences in the boundary elasticity and interaction models of “boundary-crossing governance” under different local government governance capacities and degrees of openness.

Second, this study primarily focused on process mechanisms—how NGOs respond to conflict. Future research should further focus on Governance Performance and Long-term Effects. Specifically, can this governance model based on boundary-crossing and negotiation truly translate into institutionalized governance norms? After the external NGO withdraws, do the cultivated local endogenous forces (such as villager autonomous organizations) possess the capacity for sustained operation? Introducing a longitudinal time dimension to trace the evolutionary trajectory of “boundary-crossing governance” over a long period will help comprehensively assess the historical value of this governance model.

5.4 Implications

The findings of this study offer dual implications for optimizing China’s grassroots governance system. For government departments, there is a need to re-examine the governance value of boundary-crossing behaviors. As governance tasks become increasingly complex, the government needs to transform from a singular

controller to a more inclusive “Meta-governor,” enhancing its tolerance for social forces. It should be recognized that moderate “offenses” by NGOs are often valuable signals for discovering governance blind spots and correcting policy deviations, rather than mere political risks. Establishing institutionalized communication channels to absorb this outside-system corrective force as an inside-system driver for innovation is key to enhancing the modernization of grassroots governance.

For NGOs, this study emphasizes that in an environment lacking institutional guarantees, organizations require not only solid professional capabilities but also acute political judgment and strategic execution. This means organizations must learn to find a balance point between compromise and resistance, skillfully utilizing technical, legal, and discursive strategies to translate professional value into administrative language. Through continuous interactive gaming, they can expand their survival space and realize a role transition from passive adaptation to active reshaping.

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