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Resources, Discourse, and Action: The Operational Logic of Collaborative Governance Among Urban Community Organizations in China

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Abstract: The governance system of Chinese urban communities has undergone continuous reconstruction in the rapid social transformation. The rise of diverse governance entities has led to an increasing complexity in the field of community governance. How to coordinate community organizations with different statuses, resources, and action logics to achieve effective governance has become a core issue that urgently needs to be addressed. Within conventional state-society dichotomies in existing literature, this article proposes an analytical framework of "resources- discourse-action", which is integrated with Giddens' structured theory to examine the interaction and collaboration mechanisms between grassroots community organizations in cities. Through long-term ethnographic research on multiple communities in Shanghai, this article found that although there is a significant asymmetry in resource endowment between primary-level Party organizations and neighborhood committees, homeowner committees, property management companies, and community self-organization, they ultimately achieve a "differential equilibrium" through a complex exchange mechanism embedded in formal institutions and informal practices. The findings of this study have deepened the understanding of the micro-mechanisms of collaborative governance in Chinese urban communities during the transition period, unveiled the underlying logic of multi-stakeholder governance, and offered fresh empirical and theoretical insights into the cooperation between the government and grassroots society.

Keywords: Resource allocation; Discourse practice; Action strategy; Community organizations; Differential equilibrium; Structured Theory

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1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening up, China has undergone comprehensive changes covering various fields such as politics, economy, and society. A new institutionalized relationship structure between the state and society

is forming, which is different from the era of omnipotence [1]. As a microcosm of this macro transformation, urban grassroots social management has undergone a profound evolution from the "unit system" to the "community system." With the commercialization reform of housing, individual identity has undergone a significant temporal and spatial transformation. People have shifted from being highly dependent on their units as "unit people" to becoming "community people" who own property, live in specific geographical spaces, and increasingly pay attention to their own rights and interests [2]. The importance of communities, as the end of national governance and the aggregation point of social life, has been highlighted unprecedentedly. Community construction not only carries the instrumental goal of undertaking the transformation of government functions and the spillover social functions of market reforms, but also embodies the value expectation of rebuilding interpersonal interaction and regional living communities in an atomized society.

However, regarding the path of community construction, there has long been a debate in the academic community between the two paradigms of "state-centeredness" and "social-centeredness." Constrained by the historical path dependence, the administrative orientation has long dominated in practice, leading to common difficulties such as a single community management subject, heavy administrative burden, weak sense of belonging among residents, and indifferent community participation [3]. To solve this dilemma, the theory of "governance" was introduced in the late 1990s, injecting new conceptual resources into community construction. Governance emphasizes the process of managing public affairs through cooperation, negotiation, and partnership among multiple stakeholders [4]. Under the discourse of "community governance", multiple forces such as government, market, and society are expected to participate together to more effectively mobilize residents and reshape atomized living spaces into a community with a sense of identity and cohesion.

This wave of governance discourse, coupled with deepening market reforms, has catalyzed the pluralization of urban community governance actors. In metropolises such as Shanghai, the landscape of community governance has become highly complex. Party organizations (Party branches), residents' committees (RCs), homeowners' associations (HOAs), property management companies (PMCs), and various emerging community self-organizations (CSOs) collectively constitute the actor-network of community governance. These organizations differ in their legal definitions, social divisions of labor, and organizational goals. Functionally interdependent, they present a superficially "blossoming" picture of plurality. In reality, however, harmonious coexistence is far from the norm [5]. The differing interests of various parties often lead to disputes.

Behind the phenomenon of subject differentiation and even conflict, there are hidden changes in community operation mechanisms and changes in the operational logic of different organizations [6]. These constitute key issues that sociology needs to delve deeper into. Therefore, going beyond simple organizational typology and functional descriptions to explore the operational systems within these organizations and the collaborative mechanisms between them is crucial for understanding the actual effectiveness of community governance. Based on this, this article aims to answer the following core question: How do diverse community organizations interact and achieve a relatively stable collaborative operation state in a highly asymmetric grassroots governance field of resource allocation? What operational logic lies behind this collaborative state?

To answer this question, this article chooses Shanghai as the field location for research. As the forefront of China's reform and opening up and a pilot city for community construction, Shanghai has gone through

a complete transformation process from alleyways and public housing units to modern commercial housing communities. The diversity of community organizations and the complexity of interactive processes provide a deep typical case for observing the evolution of grassroots governance in Chinese cities. In terms of research methods, this article did not stop at institutional text analysis but adopted a long-term and multi-point ethnographic method, delving into the texture of daily community life and conducting continuous tracking surveys on multiple communities with different characteristics [7].

The theoretical contribution of this article lies in the re-examination and transformation of Giddens' theory of structural duality, which integrates an analytical framework of "resources-discourse-action" [8]. Unlike existing research that focuses on static structural analysis or action strategies of a single subject, this framework views the three as a dynamic process that repeats itself and constantly reproduces. This effectively reveals how the established resource allocation structure shapes the organization's discourse power and how the organization's discourse power in turn influences its action strategies. Finally, this article proposes the core concept of "differential balance" to summarize the unique operational logic among Chinese urban community organizations that appears stable but is not equal and contains tension but can be maintained.

2. Theoretical review and analytical framework

2.1. Three Approaches to community studies: A critical review

Research on urban communities in China has shown a thriving trend in the past two decades, with scholars attempting to capture the underlying logic of this profound social change from different theoretical perspectives. A systematic review of these research results reveals that they mainly follow three core research approaches.

2.1.1. The "state–society" perspective

The paradigm of the "state-society" relationship is the most widely used and influential theoretical framework in community research. This perspective draws on the research tradition of Western political sociology, viewing communities as important fields for the interaction and cooperation between state and social forces. Some studies follow the "nation-centered theory" and believe that although community governance advocates for diverse participation, primary-level Party organizations and neighborhood committees, as agents of the state, still maintain a decisive influence on communities. The administrative color of communities has not fundamentally disappeared [9]. On the other hand, supporters of the "civil society" perspective are more concerned about the rise of new social forces such as property committees and community self-organization, believing that these organizations represent residents' property rights awareness, self-organization ability, and democratic participation demands [10]. Some scholars have attempted to transcend binary opposition and introduce theories such as "corporatism" or "embedded governance" to argue that the state absorbs and integrates social forces through institutionalized channels, thereby forming a new governance structure. This research path has important value for understanding the macro institutional environment and structure of community governance, but its limitation lies in the tendency to fall into the trap of grand narratives, simplifying complex community processes into abstract interactions between several macro entities, and lacking detailed analysis of the specific operations within organizations and micro coordination mechanisms between different organizations.

2.1.2. The "space–actor" perspective

The second important research approach is the "space actor" analysis. Influenced by scholars such as Lefebvre's spatial theory, some researchers have begun to liberate communities from physical containers and view them as "social spaces" constantly constructed by social relationships and practical activities. The core concern of this perspective is how different actors (residents, organizations, governments) compete for the right to use and define a specific community space through various practical activities (such as square dance venue disputes, garbage room site selection, public space renovation, etc.) and, in this process, produce new social relationships and identity recognition. This type of research greatly enriches the understanding of the politics of daily community life. However, the limitation of this perspective is that its excessive focus on space sometimes overlooks elements that are beyond the space but equally crucial for community operation, especially intangible resources and symbolic discourse.

2.1.3. The "structure–governance" perspective

The third path starts from the governance theory itself, focusing on analyzing how the structure of the community affects governance performance. This type of research leans more towards policy science and public management, focusing on what constitutes an ideal community governance structure and how to design systems to achieve "good governance." Scholars have explored various models such as pluralistic co-governance, participatory governance, and collaborative governance, and attempted to measure the level of community governance through an indicator system [11]. This type of research provides practical references for government policy-making, but often fails to effectively explain the seemingly undesirable but stable "governance" that operates in practice due to its normative assumptions.

Overall, the three perspectives mentioned above each have their own insights, but there is also a common blind spot: the failure to establish a complete and operable middle-level mechanism chain to explain the dynamic transformation relationship between structure, cognition, and action. Specifically, how does the distribution of configurational resources and authoritative resources affect an organization's self-positioning and discourse expression? How does an organization's discourse strategy translate into specific actions in its interactions with other organizations? How do these actions ultimately feedback and reshape the initial structure of resource allocation? To answer these interrelated questions, a more integrated and explanatory theoretical lens is needed.

2.2. Toward integration: A "resources–discourse–action" theoretical framework

To make up for the shortcomings of the above research, this article draws on and reinterprets Anthony Giddens' structural theory, proposing a three-dimensional interactive analytical framework of "resources–discourse–action." Giddens' structural theory aims to break the dualism between structure and action in the sociological tradition, and its core concept of "structural duality" points out that structure is both a medium and a result of action practice. The structure is not external to the rigid framework of actors, but internal to their practical activities, constantly produced and reproduced in the process of actors' "creating history with history" [12]. Giddens defined "structure" as "rules and resources", which is a set of structured characteristics that enable social systems to be "bundled" in the spatiotemporal dimension.

On the basis of Giddens' work, combined with the particularity of the community governance field in this study, the authors have made the following operational modifications to the theory: the authors regard

resources as the core of the structure. It includes both configurational resources, such as government financial appropriations, office space, activity facilities, etc.; This also includes authoritative resources, such as the legal status granted by the legal system and the mobilization ability brought by social relationship networks. The initial configuration of resources constitutes the structural premise for interactions among community organizations.

The authors operationalize *rules* as *discourse*. In Giddens' sense, rules include both formal institutions and informal, procedural codes of action and meaningful symbols. In the community field, these rules become manifest primarily through a series of "narratives" and "rhetorics." For example: What constitutes "good community governance"? Who is the legitimate agent "representing residents' interests"? What does "cooperating with the government" entail? Different answers to these questions constitute the distinct *discourse systems* of different organizations. Discourse is the key mediator between structure (resources) and action; it is both the definition of the organization's own role and interests, formed under a specific resource position, and the practical guide that instructs actors on how to act.

Finally, *action* is the practical moment in the structuration process. Guided by specific discourses, community organizations adopt a range of strategic *actions*, including cooperation, competition, exchange, and resistance. These actions aim to maintain or alter the existing resource allocation pattern to achieve the organization's goals of survival and development. The outcomes of these actions, whether as intended or not, initiate a new cycle of structuration, i.e., through the reallocation (or maintenance) of resources, the existing power structure of the community is either reproduced or modified [13].

This cycle model of "resources → discourse → action → resources" provides the authors with a clear roadmap for analyzing the operational logic of community organizations. It is not a one-way causal chain, but a continuous spiral process. For example, the government injects a large amount of allocation and authoritative resources into neighborhood committees, which shapes the official discourse of neighborhood committees as "dual agents", thereby driving them to adopt strategies of "cooperation" and "absorption" towards organizations such as property committees. These actions, in turn, have consolidated the core hub position of the neighborhood committee in the resource network. Through this framework, the authors can gain a deeper and more dynamic understanding of how the unique "differential balance" among community organizations in Shanghai is achieved and continues to operate.

3. Research design and methods

3.1. Case selection and field access

In order to deeply explore the mutual construction mechanism of "resources discourse action", this article adopts a qualitative comparative case study method and selects three different types of communities in the central urban area of Shanghai as the main field points. The case selection follows the principle of "theoretical sampling", which seeks the maximum difference in key variables to observe the explanatory power of the theoretical framework in different contexts.

Community A: An older, post-reform public housing estate. Built in the late 1980s, its residents are predominantly relocated local middle-aged and elderly people, alongside some renters, forming a typical "acquaintance" or "semi-acquaintance" society. Its organizational ecology exhibits a strong administrative tradition: the RC is powerful; the PMC is a state-owned unit transformed from the former public housing

management office; and CSOs mainly consist of recreational and sports teams.

Community B: A mid-to-high-end commercial commodity housing estate. Completed around 2005, its residents are primarily young nuclear families and urban white-collar workers, with a high degree of atomization, characteristic of a "stranger society." The HOA here is relatively active, having once successfully replaced the PMC, and a subtle tension exists between it and the RC. CSOs are relatively single-type, mainly online-community-based parent-child and pet-owner clubs.

Community C: A high-end, internationally oriented commodity housing estate. With a diverse resident composition including expatriates and high-income domestic groups, property services are highly marketized and professionalized. Residents have extremely high standards for personal privacy and public service quality. Community participation more often manifests as "client-style" bargaining with the PMC rather than traditional resident self-governance.

Fieldwork was conducted intermittently from 2020 to 2023, a longitudinal span that allowed the capture of dynamic changes in intra-community relations. The paths of field access were multiple: for Community A, through formal introduction by the sub-district office; for Community B, leveraging the personal network of a research assistant residing there; and for Community C, through an opportunity provided by the district civil affairs bureau's special research project.

3.2. Data Collection: A triangulated ethnographic strategy

Data collection for this study adhered to the ethnographic principle of "triangulation", employing multiple methods in concert to ensure the richness and reliability of the research materials.

In-depth interviews: Interviews constitute the primary source of data. The authors completed a total of 30 in-depth interviews across the three communities. Interviewees encompassed core members of community organizations (e.g., RC directors/secretaries, HOA directors/members, PMC managers, CSO leaders, n=12), ordinary residents (n=13), and relevant government officials in community governance (cadres from the district civil affairs bureau and sub-district offices, n=5). Interviews centered on the origins of the organization, channels of resource acquisition, interaction narratives with other organizations, decision-making processes in key events, and personal perceptions and evaluations of one's own role and others' roles. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Quoted interview data in the text are labeled with identification codes following the format "Community Code – Organization Type – Serial Number", e.g., (A-JW-01) denotes the first interviewee from the residents' committee in Community A.

Participant observation: The researchers and team members systematically participated in a wide range of activities across the three communities in the role of "quasi-participants." In Community A, the authors assisted as volunteers in the Respect-for-the-Elderly Day activities and Clean-up-the-Homeland campaigns organized by the RC. In Community B, the authors sat in on monthly HOA meetings and several homeowners' general meetings. In Community C, the authors observed the Christmas parent-child activity organized by the PMC. Through these observations, the authors gathered a wealth of first-hand data on non-verbal behaviors, spatial use, and interaction rituals, compensating for potential "rhetorical discrepancies" or "social desirability bias" in interviews.

Archival and documentary analysis: The authors have collected various documents from three communities, including but not limited to: an introduction to the basic situation of the community, an annual work summary and ledger of the neighborhood committee, meeting minutes of the homeowners' committee,

property contracts and service reports, community self-organization articles of association and activity records, as well as notifications and discussions on the community bulletin board and WeChat group. These textual materials provide important evidence for the authors to understand the official discourse and action records of various organizations.

3.3. Data analysis

The data analysis adopts the three-level coding strategy of constructivist grounded theory. Firstly, in the open coding stage, the authors read interview transcripts and field notes line by line, extracting a large number of initial concepts related to "resources", "discourse", and "action", such as "street money is difficult to obtain", "they (the business committee) do not understand the rules", "we are just entertaining ourselves", etc. Next, in the main axis encoding stage, we associate these concepts to form more abstract categories and subcategories, such as "exclusive acquisition of administrative resources", "reproduction of political authority discourse", "cooperation based on resource dependency", etc. Finally, in the selective encoding stage, the authors outline a complete storyline around the core category of "differential balance", which is how asymmetric resource allocation is legitimized through discourse and maintained and fine-tuned through a series of strategic actions, ultimately forming a structured dynamic equilibrium. The entire analysis process is accompanied by continuous memo writing to maintain the theoretical sensitivity of the analysis.

4. Findings: Resources, discourse, and action of community organizations

4.1. Structural Premise: Cooperation based on resource dependency

The interaction between community organizations does not unfold on a blank sheet of paper but is deeply embedded in a resource allocation structure jointly shaped by history and institutions. Research has found that resources are mainly allocated through three channels — government, market, and society. These three channels respectively endow community organizations with different ways of interaction.

4.1.1. Government allocation and the implicit presence of administrative power

The government (here mainly referring to the sub-district Party working committee and office) is the largest supplier of community resources. Its resource input carries a distinct political logic, aiming to effectively guide the direction of community development through resource ties. This allocation is primarily accomplished through targeted transfusion to the RC.

First, regarding allocative resources, the RC's personnel, finances, and assets are all highly dependent on the government. Financially, the RC's operational funds and special community activity funds are mainly appropriated from the sub-district budget, generally following a principle of "expenses following tasks" and reimbursement against invoices. While this ensures the maintenance of basic community public services, it also renders the RC's financial autonomy extremely low. As a cadre from Community A's RC put it: "For every penny we spend, we have to think carefully—can it be reimbursed? Does it meet the sub-district's requirements?" (A-JW-01). Physically, whether it is the supporting public facilities in older estates or the RC office space reserved in commercial estates as mandated, the property rights or use rights are fundamentally controlled by the government. More importantly, in terms of personnel resources, although RCs are nominally elected by residents directly, the sub-district holds decisive influence over the nomination, vetting, and even the final salary payment (formally subsidies) of candidates.

Second, in terms of authoritative resources, government endorsement constitutes the RC's most critical intangible asset. Although government functions have been continuously transformed in recent years, the mindset of "turn to the RC for any issue" remains an inertial response for most residents. The RC is endowed with quasi-official authority in the community, which plays a key role in mediating disputes and mobilizing residents. The identity of a government representative serves as an invisible weight in interactions with other organizations [14]. For example, if an HOA can secure the "co-hosted by RC" header for its activities, its public credibility and appeal within the estate are significantly enhanced.

4.1.2. Market allocation and the profit-seeking nature of market actors

The commodification of housing profoundly altered the governance ecology of the community, introducing purely market actors represented by the PMC. The operating logic of the market mechanism is profit maximization, not the maximization of public services. The resources that a PMC possesses are highly dependent on its market performance.

The allocative resources of a PMC are the property management fees and public revenues it collects through contracts. The rights to manage and use these funds, along with the pricing power linked to service quality, constitute the economic basis for its actions within the community. For communities with higher property fees like Community B, the PMC manager's autonomous operational space and resource allocation capacity are far greater than those of the old PMC in Community A, which is "losing money year after year" and reliant on government subsidies. However, its authoritative resources are extremely scarce, even negative. Due to information asymmetry and conflicts of interest, homeowners inherently harbor a sense of "distrust" toward PMCs, believing they always "collect more money and do less work." The "exhaustion" frequently expressed by PMC managers in interviews stems largely from this lack of authoritative legitimacy. Therefore, securing market profit is the fundamental driver of their actions, and maintaining a good relationship with the RC—which can provide legitimacy and administrative convenience—is one of their key market strategies.

4.1.3. Societal allocation and the growth dilemma of "societal person" resources

After the disintegration of the work-unit system, the transition from "work-unit persons" to "societal persons" theoretically opened up space for the spontaneous growth of social forces. HOAs and various CSOs are the organizational carriers of this mode of societal resource allocation. Their resource potential is theoretically vast, encompassing the time, skills, professional knowledge, social networks, and voluntary spirit based on shared interests of the broad homeowner and resident population.

In transitional China, however, this societal mode of resource extraction faces severe involutionary difficulties. An HOA is supposed to be a powerful self-governance force representing homeowners in overseeing property management, with its core authority deriving from the empowerment of the Property Law and the Property Management Regulations, as well as the authorization of the homeowners' general meeting. In practice, however, transforming this institutional authority into substantive power is exceedingly difficult. The director of the HOA in Community B, a retired senior lawyer well aware of the legally conferred powers, found himself hampered at every turn: "Legally speaking, we are the first party. But in reality, no venue for meetings, no funds for office expenses. If we want to verify data, the PMC counters with 'commercial confidentiality'… Often, we have to turn around and beg the RC to help coordinate."

(B-YWH-01). The situation for CSOs is even more precarious, as their survival is highly dependent on the voluntary spirit and interests of a few core members. The well-known "Sunset Glow" choir in Community A nearly disbanded after their original activity room was temporarily requisitioned by the RC, and they could not find a new rehearsal venue. The team leader lamented helplessly, "An organization like ours, it can dissolve just like that." (A-ZZ-01).

In sum, the three modes of resource allocation shape a complex and unequal topographical map of power within the community: the RC represents the authority of the state; the PMC controls the economic lifeline of marketized services; while the HOA and CSOs are largely situated in resource troughs, possessing only legal or moral legitimacy but frequently trapped in a predicament of having "no straw to make bricks." This asymmetric resource structure is the preconditional foundation upon which all subsequent organizational interactions and discursive constructions are built.

4.2. The construction of discourse: Navigating between "administrative" and "autonomous" identities

Faced with this given resource structure, various community organizations do not mechanically play pre-assigned roles but actively engage in discursive practices to define themselves, strive for legitimacy, and position themselves vis-à-vis others. This discursive construction is a crucial precursor to their actions.

4.2.1. The RC's hybrid discourse: The narrative logic of a "dual agent"

Situated at the intersection of state and society, the RC's discourse must necessarily embody a dual orientation of "reporting upward" and "serving downward." In the face of the government, the RC's narrative focuses on being an "administrative executor" and the "ballast stone for community stability." Its annual work summaries are replete with administrative-laden phrases such as "under the strong leadership of the sub-district Party working committee…", "fulfilling all tasks assigned by higher authorities with quality and quantity guaranteed", "safeguarding peace on our turf." Yet when facing residents, its discourse switches rapidly to that of the "representative of residents' interests" and the "steward of the community big family." At a coordination meeting regarding the consolidation of waste sorting drop-off points in Community B, the RC secretary's speech perfectly blended these two identities: "…This is a unified requirement from the city, a great thing benefiting the country and the people, and our community must carry it out to the letter [administrative discourse]. Of course, regarding the specific siting of points, the reason we've invited everyone here today is precisely to discuss together, to see how we can maximize convenience for every resident and minimize the impact on everyone's daily life [autonomy discourse]."

This hybrid discourse of "administrative" and "autonomous" natures is not a hypocritical double-face but the most rational narrative choice for the RC under the existing resource structure. It is an honest reflection of its own sources of resources, and a highly effective action strategy: by showcasing execution capability upward to secure more administrative resources, and by demonstrating affinity downward to draw upon societal legitimacy, thereby consolidating its organizational status as the "sole legally prescribed core" of the community.

4.2.2. The HOA's oscillating discourse: Between "rights-protection vanguard" and "troublemaker"

The HOA's discourse exhibits a noticeable oscillation and tearing. On the one hand, internally, there is a strong narrative of "defending rights according to law" and "homeowner sovereignty." Especially when

facing substandard PMC services or legacy issues left by developers, HOA directors employ highly marketized discourse, using terms like "master", "first party", "protecting our family property" to mobilize homeowners. However, once this rights-protection discourse turns outward, particularly toward the grassroots government, it is often interpreted by the other side as a "destabilizing factor."

The HOA director in Community B offered an incisive observation: "In the eyes of the RC and the sub-district, if we do well, we are a good helper cooperating with government work; if we have a few more opinions, we are troublemakers, a source of problems. It's very hard to grasp the right degree." (B-YWH-02). To avoid being "stigmatized", many HOAs have had to develop a "cooperative rights-protection" discourse, which, while emphasizing their own legal rights, repeatedly affirms their support for the "community governance structure" and, as far as possible, confines the target of conflict to economic disputes with the PMC, avoiding escalation into a challenge to the grassroots governance system. This discursive self-restraint profoundly reflects their disadvantaged position in the community governance structure.

4.2.3. The CSOs' acquiescent discourse: "Not making trouble is a contribution"

Compared to HOAs, which still have clear legal empowerment as discursive support, the discourse of CSOs is much more modest and "dutiful." A highly representative narrative recurred in the investigation: "We're just a bunch of people with common interests, getting together for our own enjoyment. Not making trouble for the community is the biggest contribution we can make." (Auntie Wang of the dance team in Community A, A-ZZ-02). This discursive strategy can be termed "the wisdom of depoliticized survival." By deliberately downplaying the political nature of their activities, defining them as purely personal hobbies or mutual-benefit acts, CSOs exchange the RC's "non-interference" and provision of basic venue support, while also voluntarily relinquishing their discursive power on major community public issues. They do not see themselves as "governance subjects" but are content to serve as "crowd-warmers" and "vitality decorators" of the community. This discursive positioning is a direct projection of their severely scarce resources and precarious survival status.

Taken together, the three discourses coexist in the community field, but their weight and resonance differ markedly. The RC's "hybrid discourse" occupies the high ground—the loudest, most legitimate mainstream narrative. The HOA's "rights-protection discourse" can stir a strong resonance on specific issues but is constantly under pressure to "calibrate" with the mainstream narrative. The CSOs' "acquiescent discourse" constitutes a silent background hum, a strategy by which the weak exchange survival space through self-marginalization. This discursive hierarchy is determined by the aforementioned resource structure and paves the way for the subsequent strategic actions.

4.3. The reproduction through action: Absorption, resource exchange, and coordination

Discourse is the harbinger of action, while action is the process by which discourse is put into practice and ultimately feeds back into structure. When community organizations confront one another, their action strategies profoundly reflect their position within the "resources–discourse" chain and, through practice, continuously reproduce the power configuration of "differential equilibrium."

4.3.1. Subtle steering: Personnel embedding and platform integration by the RC

Peter Blau's social exchange theory suggests that asymmetric resource dependence creates influence. When other organizations rely heavily on the RC for resources, a dynamic of influence naturally emerges. The RC

holds scarce resources such as venues, funding, and institutional recognition, while HOAs and CSOs often need these resources to sustain their activities. Based on this interdependence, the RC has developed a highly sophisticated, non-coercive approach to coordination.

A key element of this approach is personnel embedding. This is a widely acknowledged, informal arrangement in many communities. In Community A, the RC's civil affairs director concurrently serves as the deputy director of the neighborhood's "Neighborhood Deliberation Council." His role is to help keep the discussions within the community's commonly agreed framework, gently refocusing them when they begin to go off track. In Community B, a retired RC secretary was proposed as a candidate and elected to the HOA, his presence providing an efficient, informal communication bridge between the two bodies. As one sub-district official explained: "We just want someone who understands the bigger picture in key organizations—this way we can hear what's really happening on the ground, share the overall direction, and make sure everyone is working in harmony." (A-Gov-01). Such arrangements allow the RC to subtly align the efforts of other organizations, ensuring their initiatives naturally complement the community's shared plans.

The second strategy is platform integration. The most visible way for a CSO to carry out activities is to take part in an RC-coordinated initiative, such as a "Community Activity Festival" or a "Self-Governance Home" project. This not only guarantees venues and modest funding but, more importantly, offers a form of recognized standing and operational status within the community. However, this kind of inclusion also comes with certain expectations. Organizations that are perceived as not acting in line with the community's shared norms, or whose aims are considered unclear, may find it difficult to be included. As a result, they miss out on the most accessible channels for growth. Through these two main mechanisms, the RC—without issuing direct administrative orders—exercises a gentle but effective steering of other organizations, thereby maintaining its role as the central hub and facilitator in the community governance structure.

4.3.2. Resource exchange: An informal market of mutual needs

The community governance is far from being driven by unilateral power exertion alone. The extensive resource exchange among various organizations forms the basis of the community's vitality and dynamism. This is an informal resource market built upon each actor's comparative advantages.

A common form is space-for-service. The RC provides spatial resources like activity rooms and meeting rooms to CSOs for their use. In return, these CSOs are expected to perform on behalf of the community at major festive events or to organize volunteers to cooperate with RC work during city-wide public health or civility campaigns. The calligraphy association in Community A writes Spring Festival couplets for residents free of charge, and the dance team participates in the sub-district's cultural performances without payment—these can all be seen as "repayment" for the venues provided by the RC.

Another form is funds-for-efficiency. In older estates with very low property fee standards, the PMC operates at a loss and is fundamentally unable to provide high-quality services. In such cases, the RC or the sub-district often uses project-based funding or "rewards as subsidies", taking out a portion of administrative funds to pay the PMC to solve urgent and pressing livelihood issues, such as overall sewer replacement or clearing accumulated debris in stairwells. This essentially supplements market resources with administrative resources to purchase targeted services that yield rapid results, alleviating community conflicts caused by market failure.

Yet another form is authority-for-convenience. As mentioned, when dealing with disputes with the

PMC, the HOA often requests the RC to "preside over" the matter. The RC's quasi-official authority then becomes a borrowable resource for the HOA, bolstering its bargaining power. By "upholding justice", the RC also consolidates its role as the ultimate arbiter of community conflicts and, through this, brings the HOA's actions into a negotiation framework led by itself.

4.3.3. Maintaining coordination: Boundary clarification and role adjustment through dialogue

Interactions within the community inevitably encounter moments where roles can overlap and boundaries become blurred. To prevent coordination from turning into friction, actors continuously engage in a process of mutual adjustment and boundary clarification, aimed at keeping the governance structure balanced and aligned.

The primary area of this boundary work concerns the scope of homeowners' associations' rights-protection activities. When an HOA's actions extend beyond pure property management and begin to touch upon decision-making on community-wide public affairs, they tend to invite a firm but collegial realignment. In Community B, the HOA once attempted to independently organize a hearing on the use of community public revenue without first coordinating with the RC. Upon learning this, the RC secretary promptly invited the HOA director and deputy director for a conversation, the core message being: "We fully support protecting homeowners' legitimate rights and interests, but when it comes to major community matters, we need to work through our established collaborative framework. No group should operate in isolation. The HOA is expected to advance its work in close coordination with the neighborhood's joint consultation mechanism, ensuring that every step is legal and properly conducted." (B-JW-01). In the end, the hearing was postponed, and the format was shifted to an expanded meeting of the joint community consultation conference, bringing together the neighborhood coordination body, the RC, and the HOA. This episode served as a friendly but firm reminder, a gentle realigning of roles that had begun to drift beyond their usual remit, facilitated by the community's coordination mechanisms.

At the same time, there is a parallel process of gentle alignment for emerging social organizations. While community self-governance is widely encouraged, this autonomy tends to flourish best within a cooperative framework. When a CSO displays relatively strong resource mobilization capacity and a desire to act with a high degree of independence, it may encounter an invisible boundary—a sort of glass ceiling of expectations. For example, a public-benefit reading club formed by young mothers in Community A successfully secured an external grant from a private foundation and attempted to independently operate a community library project. The RC reached out proactively, suggesting that the project be brought under the umbrella of the RC's "autonomy fund" for unified coordination, and its leader was invited to serve as a building coordinator. On the surface, this appears entirely supportive, and from the perspective of community coordination, it can be seen as an effort to weave a potentially stand-alone initiative into a well-connected node within the community support network.

Through these actions of resource-sharing and mutual adjustment, the authors see a clear logical loop. The initial distribution of resources shapes the action capital and priority goals of different organizations. To maintain its central convening role, the RC uses its resource advantages and bridging capacities to carry out strategic embedding and coordination. Other organizations, in turn, rely on a semi-autonomous space to gain room for survival and development through resource exchange and bounded negotiation. In the end, all these actions collectively reproduce a stable, though differentiated, collaborative order—what the study calls

differential equilibrium. This equilibrium is not the result of evenly matched forces, but rather the product of effective coordination by the lead actors and the strategic reliance of other organizations within a clearly understood division of roles.

5. Discussion: "Led coordination" and the deep logic of community governance

This article explores the empirically discovered "differential equilibrium" and its underlying "resource-discourse-action" reproduction logic within a broader theoretical framework. It can be found that it is not only an accurate description of China's urban community experience but also provides a new insight beyond existing theoretical paradigms for understanding the operation of state-society relations at the grassroots level.

5.1. Beyond the "state–society" dichotomy: Led coordination

Traditional state–society dichotomies, regardless of their specific stance, presuppose two entities with clear boundaries and a zero-sum fluctuation of power. The picture revealed in this study is far more complex. The government, through the RC as a "quasi-state" organization, deeply embedded itself within and became the core of the community governance network [15]. Nor are societal forces a homogeneous whole but rather a highly differential assemblage in terms of resource endowments and goals.

The core concept of this study—"differential equilibrium"—is precisely a distillation of this complex state. It represents a form of "led coordination." Its core characteristics are: (1) It acknowledges and accommodates the inequality of power and resources among organizations. This equilibrium is not a "negotiated equilibrium" built on the basis of parity of forces, but rather a "guided equilibrium" maintained by a strong leading core (the RC and the grassroots Party branch behind it) through resource integration and institutional creation. (2) Coordination is the key, and leadership is the guarantee. The goal of community governance is no longer simply the execution of singular administrative tasks but also includes the pluralistic provision of public services and conflict mediation. Achieving this goal requires the functional cooperation of different actors such as PMCs, HOAs, and CSOs. The role of RC leadership is not to replace them but to ensure that their actions are directed correctly, their boundaries remain clear, and they can effectively coordinate with one another to serve the overall goals of community development and stability.

5.2. The reproduction of equilibrium from the perspective of structuration theory

Giddens' structuration theory emphasizes that structure is both the medium and the outcome of action. The "resources–discourse–action" framework of this article profoundly corroborates this point. The government's centralized allocation of resources (structure) shapes the RC's dominant discourse as a "dual agent." This discourse not only legitimizes its actions but also defines what counts as reasonable action. Subsequently, through action strategies like "Subtle Steering", the RC internalizes rules within the operations of other organizations, thereby reabsorbing and integrating fluid, potentially autonomous social resources into an administrative-dominated order. The seemingly independent behaviors of HOAs and CSOs are, in reality, carried out within the discursive and resource channels set by administrative power.

Therefore, "differential equilibrium" is not a static endpoint but a process that is continuously reproduced in action. Every successful "subtle steering", every efficient "resource exchange", and every timely "maintaining coordination" consolidates and reinforces the RC's pivotal position and reproduces

the asymmetric pattern of resource allocation. This cyclical process endows what might appear to be a contingent balance with a high degree of resilience and stability, forming the micro-institutional foundation of contemporary Chinese urban community governance.

5.3. Re-examining the RC's "dual role" and its theoretical contribution

This study's findings provide a daily-practice-based response to the perennial academic debate over the RC's "administrativization" versus "autonomization." I argue that viewing these two as opposite ends of a spectrum and seeking to eliminate one is a theoretical myth. From the perspective of maintaining "differential equilibrium", the RC's "duality" is not a system defect to be overcome but rather the structural precondition and essential element for it to perform its core leadership function and sustain the effective operation of the entire governance system.

It is precisely its "administrative" role that grants it the endorsement of state authority and exclusive core resources, forming the hard core of its leadership; it is precisely its "autonomous" role that compels it to maintain an organic connection with community residents and develop a set of socialized and affect-oriented working methods, forming the soft tissue of its leadership. Deprived of either, the RC would be unable to fulfill its pivotal function of threading the needle and integrating coordination among multiple actors. Therefore, the emphasis of reform should not be on eliminating its administrative tinge but on further adjusting and optimizing the internal relationship between its dual roles, enabling it, after completing necessary administrative tasks, to have more time and energy to fulfill its endogenous functions of community mobilization, service, and coordination.

In summary, this article theoretically proposes the concept of "differential equilibrium" through a detailed analysis of the micro-political process in communities and reveals the logic of "collaborative leadership" and the dynamic reproduction mechanism behind it. In theory, this provides a mid-level explanatory framework for understanding the grassroots logic of Chinese-style "state governance", breaking away from the simple judgment of "strong state weak society", forming a unique and effective form of governance.

6. Conclusion

The transformation of contemporary Chinese urban community governance is a micro-social experiment fraught with tensions. Focusing on community organizations as core actors, this article has constructed and applied a "resources–discourse–action" analytical framework to conduct an in-depth qualitative investigation into the collaborative operation logic of several communities in Shanghai.

The findings reveal that a diversified organizational ecology has indeed taken shape in the community, but its operational logic is not a Western-style horizontal network. Rather, it is a power-asymmetric, dynamic system with administrative power as its pivotal core. The secret of its functioning lies in a unique state termed "differentiated equilibrium." The achievement of this equilibrium is rooted in a self-reinforcing cycle of structuration: First, the government-led resource allocation model grants the administrative power represented by the RC an overwhelming advantage in human, financial, material, and authoritative resources, constituting the initial premise of the governance structure. Second, this differential resource endowment shapes the discursive strategies of various organizations in the community field. The RC adeptly employs

a hybrid narrative blending administrative and autonomous elements, firmly occupying the discursive high ground; the HOA's rights-protection discourse oscillates under self-discipline; and CSOs exchange survival space with a depoliticized, acquiescent discourse.

In terms of theoretical contribution, this article operationalizes Giddens' structured theory into a mid-level mechanism that connects structure, cognition, and action, proposing concepts such as "differential balance" and "collaborative leadership", and describing a collaborative governance form that accommodates diverse participation but not equal power. The limitation of the research is that all cases are from Shanghai (a megacity), and the conclusion needs to be cautiously promoted to the outside world. In the future, the scope of comparison can be expanded, and the impact of digital technology can be tracked. Practical inspiration: Innovation in community governance should respect internal logic, recognize "collaborative leadership", and use institutional design to make leadership more transparent, the rule of law more accessible, and collaborative channels more democratic, thereby enhancing community resilience and warmth in dynamic equilibrium.

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