

## *Original Paper*

# From Formalism Rectification to Governance Modernization: The Chinese Logic and Practical Enlightenment of Grassroots Burden Reduction

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Received: December 5, 2025    Accepted: December 19, 2025    Online Published: December 30, 2025  
doi:10.22158/rem.v10n2p332    URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/rem.v10n2p332>

### ***Abstract***

*As the “nerve endings” of national governance, grassroots governance efficiency is directly related to the implementation of national policies and the improvement of people’s well-being. Around 2012, grassroots areas in China generally faced prominent problems such as rampant formalism, imbalance between power and responsibility, and excessive tasks, which seriously restricted governance vitality and service quality. Focusing on the institutional practice of grassroots burden reduction, this paper conducts an analysis from five dimensions: realistic origin, institutional construction, practical forms, governance effectiveness, and optimization paths. By combing the evolutionary process of grassroots burden reduction from policy advocacy to institutional standardization, and combining typical cases from the eastern, central and western regions, this paper reveals the practical value of grassroots burden reduction in addressing formalism, clarifying the boundary between power and responsibility, and empowering grassroots governance. It also analyzes the existing challenges such as policy non-implementation and rebound risks, providing theoretical reference and practical enlightenment for continuously deepening grassroots burden reduction and improving governance efficiency.*

### ***Keywords***

*grassroots burden reduction, formalism, governance efficiency, institutional construction, practical path*

## 1. Introduction

In the late autumn of 2012, in Zhangyi Town, Yuanzhou District, Guyuan City, Ningxia, a township cadre who had been on the job for half a year spent his third all-nighter in the office. On his desk were 15 thick supervision ledgers, the result of him and his colleagues working three consecutive nights to prepare for three simultaneous special inspections: the subsistence allowance verification by the Civil Affairs Department of the autonomous region, the work safety inspection by Guyuan City, and the comprehensive governance and stability assessment by Yuanzhou District. Opening these exquisitely bound volumes, the proportion of repeatedly filled-in information exceeded 40%—the same data on the number of household members of villagers appeared repeatedly in three ledgers: “Party member contact households” for Party building, “subsistence allowance application” for civil affairs, and “key population management” for comprehensive governance, with only the table format changed from horizontal to vertical; the work safety records of the only brick factory in the town were split into reports from three departments: emergency management, market supervision, and environmental protection, requiring separate official seals and signatures from different responsible persons. What made him more guilty was that due to spending a whole week on the ledgers, he missed the scheduled mediation of a housing land dispute between villagers in Huangbao Village on Wednesday, leading to a physical conflict between the two households over the housing land boundary, which ultimately required the intervention of the police station.

Such scenes were common at the grassroots level in China in 2012, and the administrative inertia of “issuing documents at all levels and holding meetings at all levels” had not yet been reversed. A survey of 259 communities in Chaoyang District, Beijing showed that community workers handled an average of 12 reports per day and attended 3.5 meetings, with less than 30% of their time actually spent on serving the masses. The phenomenon of generalized supervision and accountability was prominent. Xixiang County, Hanzhong City, Shaanxi Province, received 127 superior inspections in one year, averaging more than 2 times a week, of which 68% required the accompanying of the main responsible persons. With the popularization of smartphones, “formalism on the fingertips” initially emerged. A township cadre in Shayang County, Jingmen City, Hubei Province, had 37 active work groups on his mobile phone, receiving more than 500 messages per day. The situation of needing to reply to work instructions after 10 p.m. accounted for 45%, and the single item of “taking photos and reporting daily work dynamics” took more than 2 hours.

Excessive grassroots burden not only led to low governance efficiency but also alienated the relationship between cadres and the masses. When cadres spent their energy on “filling in forms and reporting numbers” rather than “solving difficulties”, the masses’ perception of “superficial” work became increasingly strong. In 2019, the General Office of the Central Committee issued the *Notice on Solving Prominent Problems of Formalism to Reduce Burdens on the Grassroots*, which for the first time elevated grassroots burden reduction to a national governance issue; the promulgation of the *Several Provisions on Rectifying Formalism to Reduce Burdens on the Grassroots* in 2024 marked the transformation of

burden reduction work from “campaign-style rectification” to “institutionalized standardization”. This process is not only a targeted treatment for the stubborn diseases of grassroots governance but also a vivid practice of the transformation of national governance philosophy from “control-oriented” to “service-oriented”.

## 2. Grassroots Burden Reduction in China

The development process of grassroots burden reduction in China is essentially a process of institutional adaptation in which the national governance system responds to grassroots demands, which can be roughly divided into three stages: the problem germination period before 2012. With the acceleration of urbanization and the growth of public service demand, the amount of grassroots administrative tasks increased by more than 15% annually, but the allocation of power and responsibility and resource guarantee failed to keep up simultaneously, forming a governance dilemma of “a small horse pulling a large cart”. The policy exploration period from 2013 to 2018: the central government successively issued documents such as the *Eight-Point Regulation on Improving Work Style and Maintaining Close Ties with the Masses*, putting forward principled requirements for issues such as “a mountain of documents and a sea of meetings”. Local governments, such as Zhejiang, implemented the reform of “four lists and one network” and began to explore paths to clarify the boundary between power and responsibility. The institutional finalization period after 2019: in 2019, the General Office of the Central Committee issued the *Notice on Solving Prominent Problems of Formalism to Reduce Burdens on the Grassroots*, which for the first time elevated grassroots burden reduction to a national governance issue and clarified the deployment of the “Grassroots Burden Reduction Year”; the promulgation of the *Several Provisions on Rectifying Formalism to Reduce Burdens on the Grassroots* in 2024 made rigid specifications in 12 aspects including documents and meetings, supervision and assessment, and lists of power and responsibility, marking the transformation of burden reduction work from “campaign-style rectification” to “institutionalized governance”.

The evolution of the grassroots burden reduction system has always adhered to the combination of problem orientation and systematic thinking. In response to the strong reflection of “excessive and redundant government affairs APPs” at the grassroots level in 2022, the Central Cyberspace Administration carried out special rectification, integrating 12,000 various government affairs APPs nationwide and cleaning up more than 6,800 “zombie” and “duplicate” applications; it has always focused on the interaction between top-level design and grassroots innovation. The practical experience of Daqing City, Heilongjiang Province, where the “Qingshutong” system reduced forms by 57.11% and data items by 82.88% through data sharing, was incorporated into the “digital empowerment for burden reduction” clause in the *Several Provisions*; it has always pursued the dialectical unity of burden reduction and capacity enhancement. The *Several Provisions* not only clarify the reduction requirements of “local and departmental documents shall generally not exceed 5,000 words, and special work documents shall not exceed 4,000 words” but also emphasize the quality improvement orientation of

“supporting documents shall directly put forward specific implementation measures and shall not simply copy and replicate higher-level documents”. The four-fold improvement in the efficiency of handling heating subsidies for retired employees is a vivid example of the positive cycle of “burden reduction - efficiency improvement - service”.

The institutional practice of grassroots burden reduction in China is rooted in the socialist governance system with Chinese characteristics, presenting three governance logics:

### *2.1 The Political Logic of Party Building Leadership*

The 2025 Central No. 1 Document specifically emphasizes “continuing to rectify formalism to reduce burdens on the grassroots”, incorporating it into the overall deployment of the rural revitalization strategy. By leveraging the organizational advantages of the Party organization to coordinate resources from all parties and break down departmental interest barriers, Fugu County, Shaanxi Province, established a special work group for burden reduction led by the county Party committee secretary, clarifying 35 overlapping responsibility items within 3 months, which demonstrates the institutional advantage of concentrating resources to accomplish major tasks.

### *2.2 The Practical Logic of Problem Orientation*

Targeting new problems strongly reflected at the grassroots level such as “invisible ranking” and “shirking responsibilities”, measures such as “list-based management” and “targeted rectification” have been adopted. After Rednet reported in 2023 that some localities engaged in disguised ranking through methods such as “giving scores without ranking” and “separate reminders for the last place”, the central level immediately issued the *Notice on Standardizing the Work of Supervision, Assessment, Ranking and Notification*, clarifying that “ranking through notification shall not be used as a disguised form of assessment” and establishing a channel for reporting problem clues. Through the list system reform, a certain region reduced the phenomenon of “shifting responsibilities downward” at the grassroots level by 62% and inter-departmental buck-passing by 58%, accurately solving the structural contradiction of “thousands of lines from above converging on one needle at the grassroots”.

### *2.3 The Systematic Logic of Dynamic Adaptation*

Balancing top-level design and grassroots exploration, the *Several Provisions* unify the regulation of common issues such as documents, meetings, and supervision assessments while encouraging local innovative practices. Fengxiang Town, Dingxi City, Gansu Province, targeting the characteristics of underdeveloped western regions, cleaned up and merged 55 village-level work groups and implemented a system of “no non-urgent matters pushed at night”; Quzhou City, Zhejiang Province, established an “access filing system for government affairs APPs”, integrating 28 existing APPs into 6 comprehensive platforms, forming a governance pattern of upper-lower linkage and adaptation to local conditions. According to the 2025 monitoring data from the Central Social Work Department, formalism has shifted from “explicit traceability” to “implicit game-playing”, such as converting offline ledgers to online filling and centralized inspections to scattered checks. In response, local governments have established a

“dynamic monitoring + regular evaluation” mechanism to continuously optimize burden reduction measures, reflecting the self-improvement capability of the governance system.

### 3. Practical Forms and Typical Cases of Grassroots Burden Reduction

Grassroots burden reduction has formed a “four-in-one” promotion path in practice: integrating formalism rectification as the breakthrough point, clarification of power and responsibility boundaries as the core, technological empowerment for efficiency improvement as the support, and mechanism guarantee construction as the backing, which are organically integrated and work together to systematically solve the grassroots burden problem.

#### 3.1 Rectification of Formalism

The focus is on implementing “three reductions and one standardization”: reducing documents, reducing meetings, reducing inspections, and standardizing the management of government affairs APPs and work groups. The *Several Provisions* clearly require that “central department work meetings shall generally not arrange the participation of municipal, county and lower-level units” and “frequent monthly and quarterly ranking and notification shall not be conducted”, curbing the spread of formalism at the institutional level.

#### 3.2 Clarification of the Boundary Between Power and Responsibility

The “three lists” system has been implemented: basic performance list, supporting performance list, and prohibited items list. Research in a certain region shows that through the list system reform, the phenomenon of “shifting responsibilities downward” at the grassroots level has decreased by 62%, and inter-departmental buck-passing has dropped by 58%. Fugu County, Shaanxi Province, has taken back 78 professional matters that should not be undertaken by the grassroots, including technical work such as environmental monitoring and project acceptance, enabling township cadres to concentrate on implementation.

#### 3.3 Technological Empowerment for Efficiency Improvement

A governance model of “data running instead of cadres running” has been constructed. The “Qingshutong” system developed by Daqing City, Heilongjiang Province, realizes “one-time filling for repeated use, and one-level filling for multi-level use” through interconnection with 25 databases such as the population database and real estate information database. The issuance of heating subsidies for retired employees in Longfeng District has changed from “3 days of manual verification” to “5 minutes of one-click verification”, with efficiency improved by 4 times and the error rate reduced from 12% to 0.3%. A county in Zhejiang has built a “four platforms for grassroots governance”, integrating functions such as market supervision and comprehensive law enforcement, compressing the response time for mass appeals from 48 hours to 8 hours.

#### 3.4 Construction of Mechanism Guarantee

A closed-loop system of “source prevention - process supervision - effect evaluation” has been established. At the source prevention stage, an access filing system for government affairs applications

is implemented; at the process supervision stage, special monitoring of “finger-tip burdens” is carried out, and irregular cases are regularly notified; at the effect evaluation stage, mass satisfaction and cadres’ perception of burden reduction are included in assessments to avoid “reducing burdens through formalism”.

#### **4. The Logic and Framework of the Formulation of the *Several Provisions***

##### *4.1 The Logical Foundation of the Formulation of the Several Provisions: The Dialectical Unity of Theoretical Support and Practical Response*

The formulation of the *Several Provisions* is not a simple policy continuation or problem response, but a systematic institutional construction based on profound governance theories, integrating the triple logic of “problem orientation - institutional continuation - efficiency orientation”. Its logical core not only conforms to the core essence of contemporary public management theories but also accurately responds to the practical dilemmas of China’s grassroots governance, with the three interacting and organically unified.

##### *4.1.1 Problem Orientation: Targeted Correction Based on Governance Failure Theory*

The proliferation of formalism at the grassroots level is essentially a phenomenon of “governance failure”, rooted in unbalanced governance structure, misplaced allocation of power and responsibility, and distorted incentive mechanisms. According to governance failure theory, when the administrative system excessively pursues “control orientation” and takes process compliance and complete traceability as the core assessment criteria, it will trigger “goal displacement” of grassroots organizations—that is, grassroots cadres invest a lot of energy in formalistic work rather than the core goal of public services, ultimately leading to reduced governance efficiency and deviation from public value. The problem-oriented logic of the *Several Provisions* is a precise targeting of such governance failure. Through in-depth analysis of national grassroots burden reduction monitoring data from 2019 to 2023, questionnaires from grassroots cadres in 12 provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central Government), and typical cases, the document accurately identifies the “explicit stubborn diseases” and “implicit new changes” of formalism: the former includes long-standing structural problems such as excessive documents and meetings, generalized supervision and assessment, and arbitrary downward shift of responsibilities; the latter manifests as variant forms of evading supervision such as “red-headed documents turning into white notes”, “offline ledgers converted to online filling”, and “scattered inspections replacing centralized supervision”. The essence of these problems is the erosion of “value rationality” by “instrumental rationality” in grassroots governance—the formal completeness of administrative processes overrides the actual effect of public services. Therefore, the problem orientation of the *Several Provisions* is not simply “treating the head when the head aches”, but a fundamental correction based on governance failure theory: targeting “goal displacement”, strengthening result-oriented assessment; targeting “imbalance between power and responsibility”, clarifying the boundary of hierarchical responsibilities; targeting “distorted incentives”, optimizing the cadre assessment and

evaluation system. It blocks the chain of formalism from the institutional design and promotes the return of grassroots governance to the value origin of “people-centered”.

#### 4.1.2 Institutional Continuation: Institutional Iteration Based on Path Dependence Theory

According to the path dependence theory of new institutionalism, no institutional innovation can be separated from the existing institutional environment and policy path, and successful institutional change is often an adaptive optimization based on inheriting mature experience. Since 2012, China’s grassroots burden reduction policies have gone through three stages of evolution: “principled requirements - special deployment - institutionalized standardization”. The 2013 *Eight-Point Regulation* clarified the principled orientation of opposing formalism; the 2019 *Notice on Solving Prominent Problems of Formalism to Reduce Burdens on the Grassroots* first included burden reduction into the national governance agenda and launched the “Grassroots Burden Reduction Year”; from 2020 to 2023, local governments successively issued local implementation rules, forming a series of replicable and promotable practical experiences. These policy practices constitute the institutional foundation of the *Several Provisions*, and their core achievements such as “streamlining documents and meetings” and “strictly controlling supervision and assessment” have been consolidated in the form of intra-Party regulations by the *Several Provisions*, reflecting the path dependence characteristics of institutional evolution. At the same time, path dependence theory emphasizes that institutions need to address the risk of “lock-in effect”—that is, existing policies may lead to rigid reform due to inertia. To this end, on the basis of inheriting core experiences, the *Several Provisions* have made institutional innovations to address new problems: adding clauses such as “standardizing the management of government affairs APPs”, “prohibiting the secondment of grassroots cadres at will”, and “establishing a fault-tolerance and error-correction mechanism”, which not only maintain policy continuity but also break the coverage blind spots of original policies, realizing institutional iteration of “inheritance - innovation - finalization”. This marks the transformation of grassroots burden reduction from “campaign-style rectification” to “institutionalized governance”, which is in line with the gradual law of institutional change.

#### 4.1.3 Efficiency Orientation: The Unity of Burden Reduction and Capacity Enhancement Based on Collaborative Governance Theory

Collaborative governance theory emphasizes that the core goal of public governance is to achieve “1+1>2” collaborative efficiency by optimizing the governance structure and integrating governance resources. The essence of grassroots burden reduction is not to lower governance standards, but to eliminate governance internal friction caused by formalism, optimize the allocation of governance resources, and improve governance efficiency. According to collaborative governance theory, the inefficiency of grassroots governance often stems from the problem of “fragmentation”—inter-departmental overlapping of power and responsibility, data barriers, and fragmented processes, leading grassroots to fall into the dilemma of “multiple commands” and “repetitive labor”. The efficiency-oriented logic of the *Several Provisions* is to solve such fragmentation through institutional design: horizontally, promoting inter-departmental collaboration, integrating supervision and assessment, and sharing

government affairs data; vertically, clarifying hierarchical power and responsibility to avoid downward shift of responsibilities and layer-by-layer addition of burdens; technically, strengthening digital empowerment to realize “data running instead of cadres running”. This design of “equal emphasis on burden reduction and capacity enhancement” fully conforms to the core demands of collaborative governance theory: releasing governance resources for the grassroots by streamlining formalistic affairs (burden reduction); improving grassroots governance capacity by optimizing the allocation of power and responsibility and strengthening technical support (capacity enhancement); ultimately achieving the governance goal of improved public service efficiency and mass satisfaction (efficiency improvement). Practical cases such as Daqing’s “Qingshutong” system and Zhejiang’s “four platforms for grassroots governance” have verified the feasibility of this logic—burden reduction is not a simple “subtraction”, but the optimal allocation of governance resources through collaborative governance, promoting the transformation of grassroots governance from “extensive” to “precision”.

#### *4.2 The Framework Construction of the Several Provisions: Institutional Coverage Based on Core Dimensions of Grassroots Governance*

The institutional framework constructed by the *Several Provisions* around 7 core areas is formed based on the core dimensions of grassroots governance, high-incidence areas of formalism, and the classification logic of governance function theory. Governance function theory points out that the public policy framework should cover the entire chain of “decision-making - implementation - supervision - guarantee”. The 7 core areas correspond to the key links of grassroots governance, respond to governance function defects, and form a grassroots governance optimization system.

**4.2.1 Streamlining Documents and Meetings: Standardization of Governance Decision-Making Output**  
Documents and meetings are the “decision-making output link” of grassroots governance. Formalism leads to excessive documents and inefficient meetings, resulting in “signal distortion” and “efficiency loss”. The *Several Provisions* list it as the primary area. According to a 2023 survey by the Central Social Work Department, grassroots cadres spend 42% of their daily time handling documents and attending meetings. The document clarifies the “total amount control + quality improvement” standards, quantifies the number of words and duration, and requires documents to include specific implementation measures to solve the problem of “implementing documents with documents”.

#### **4.2.2 Standardizing Supervision, Inspection and Assessment: Scientization of Governance Supervision Link**

Supervision, inspection and assessment are the “supervision link” of grassroots governance. Formalism leads to “incentive alienation” in this link. The *Several Provisions* list it as a core area. Statistics from a province in 2022 show that grassroots receive an average of 117 inspections per year, with ineffective inspections accounting for 38%. Through plan filing, merging items, and prohibiting frequent ranking, the document promotes the transformation of supervision and assessment to “performance orientation”.



#### 4.2.3 Optimizing Cadre Management: Stabilization of Governance Subject Guarantee

Grassroots cadres are the “human support link” of grassroots governance. Formalism causes the imbalance of human resource allocation. The *Several Provisions* include it in the core area. A 2023 survey shows that on average, 5.3 cadres are seconded from each township in county and lower-level units, and 63% of grassroots professional matters exceed legal responsibilities. The document prohibits arbitrary secondment, takes back matters beyond grassroots capabilities, and ensures team stability and performance capacity.

#### 4.2.4 Rectifying Finger-Tip Burdens: Standardization of Governance Technical Tools

Government affairs APPs and other tools are the “technical tools” of grassroots governance. Formalism leads to their “functional alienation”. The *Several Provisions* include it in the core area. 2023 monitoring shows that grassroots cadres have an average of 31 active work groups on their mobile phones, receiving more than 400 messages per day. The document regulates application management, establishes an access filing system, and clarifies that non-urgent matters shall not be pushed at night.

#### 4.2.5 Clarifying the Boundary Between Power and Responsibility: Rationalization of the Foundation of Governance Structure

The allocation of power and responsibility is the “structural foundation” of grassroots governance. Formalism leads to “power-responsibility inversion”. The *Several Provisions* list it as a core area. Research in a certain region shows that 47% of grassroots responsibilities before the reform were upper-level professional matters. The document implements the “three lists” to clarify the boundary between power and responsibility, solving the contradiction of “thousands of lines from above converging on one needle at the grassroots”.

#### 4.2.6 Standardizing Creation and Evaluation Activities: Rationalization of Governance Incentive Mechanisms

Creation and evaluation activities are the “incentive link” of grassroots governance. Formalism leads to their “over-ization”. The *Several Provisions* include it in the core area. Statistics from a province in 2022 show that grassroots need to participate in 83 creation and evaluation activities, with meaningless ones accounting for 29%. The document prohibits arbitrary setting of “one-vote veto”, standardizes activity approval, and allows creation to return to its original purpose.

#### 4.2.7 Strengthening Incentive Guarantee: Long-Termization of Governance Power Support

Incentive guarantee is the “power support” of grassroots governance. Formalism leads to weakened motivation. The *Several Provisions* include it in the core area. A 2023 survey shows that 62% of grassroots cadres believe that “generalized accountability” affects their enthusiasm. The document implements the “three distinctions”, establishes a fault-tolerance mechanism, strengthens resource guarantee, and stimulates cadre vitality.

#### 4.2.8 Synergy of Framework Design: A Closed-Loop Institutional System for Whole-Chain Governance

The 7 core areas follow the governance chain to form a closed-loop system. Streamlining documents and meetings is the premise, standardizing supervision and assessment is the key, optimizing cadre

management and rectifying finger-tip burdens are the support, clarifying the boundary between power and responsibility is the core, standardizing creation and evaluation is the orientation, and strengthening incentive guarantee is the backing. This design covers the entire process, highlights key points, and has both rigid constraints and innovation space, reflecting the concept of systematic governance.

## 5. Implementation Guarantee Mechanisms of the *Several Provisions*

Policy implementation theory points out that the effectiveness of a system depends on whether a guarantee system with “clear subjects, clear responsibilities, appropriate resources, and timely feedback” is constructed. The implementation guarantee mechanism of the *Several Provisions* is based on this theory, integrating responsibility accountability theory, dynamic adjustment theory, and resource dependence theory, constructing a “four-in-one” systematic support framework, solving the problem of “implementation attenuation” of previous grassroots burden reduction policies, and ensuring that the institutional effectiveness is transmitted from the central government to the grassroots “without discount”.

### 5.1 Organizational Leadership Mechanism: Cross-Level Coordination Based on Collaborative Governance Theory

Collaborative governance theory emphasizes that cross-level and inter-departmental governance affairs need to establish an authoritative and unified leadership system to avoid “multiple commands” and “responsibility non-implementation”. The organizational leadership mechanism of the *Several Provisions* follows this theoretical logic, constructing a three-level linkage system of “central coordination - provincial leadership - municipal and county implementation”, clarifying the main responsibility of Party committees (Party groups) at all levels, and ensuring the synergy of policy implementation from the organizational structure.

From a theoretical perspective, grassroots burden reduction involves multiple systems such as Party committees, governments, people’s congresses, and political consultative conferences, as well as multiple departments such as discipline inspection and supervision, organization, publicity, and politics and law. Without unified leadership, it is prone to fragmented problems of “each department sweeping the snow in front of its own door”. Therefore, the *Several Provisions* clearly state that “Party committees (Party groups) at all levels must earnestly fulfill their main responsibilities and include grassroots burden reduction work in their important agenda”, establishing a joint meeting system led by the general office (office) of the Party committee and participated by relevant departments, responsible for overall coordination and supervision and promotion. This design fully conforms to the core demands of collaborative governance theory: integrating scattered governance resources through an authoritative leading body, breaking departmental barriers, and realizing an implementation pattern of “upper-lower linkage and left-right coordination”.

From a practical perspective, in the grassroots burden reduction practice from 2019 to 2023, 67% of regions reflected that “insufficient inter-departmental coordination” was the main obstacle to policy implementation (data from the 2023 National Grassroots Burden Reduction Work White Paper). To this

end, the *Several Provisions* further refine the leadership responsibility: requiring the secretary of the Party committee at all levels to act as the “first responsible person”, personally deploying and supervising; clarifying that the joint meeting system holds a promotion meeting once a month and a special inspection once a quarter to ensure the rapid implementation of cross-departmental and cross-level coordination matters. This leadership mechanism of “top leaders taking charge and supervising top leaders” solves the coordination problem organizationally and provides core guarantee for policy implementation.

### *5.2 Supervision and Accountability Mechanism: Rigid Constraints Based on Responsibility Accountability Theory*

Responsibility accountability theory holds that clear accountability standards, diverse accountability subjects, and standardized accountability procedures are the keys to ensuring that policy implementation does not deviate from the track. The supervision and accountability mechanism of the *Several Provisions* is supported by this theory, constructing a “whole-process, multi-level, and strict-standard” accountability system to make formalism “dare not rebound”.

From a theoretical perspective, responsibility accountability theory emphasizes “equality of power and responsibility”, that is, policy implementation subjects must bear corresponding responsibilities for implementation effects, and must be clearly constrained if they fail to act, act slowly, or act arbitrarily. The supervision and accountability mechanism of the *Several Provisions* transforms this theory into specific systems: first, clarifying accountability subjects, forming a multi-dimensional accountability pattern of “led by discipline inspection and supervision organs, supported by organizational departments, and participated by mass supervision” to avoid the failure of “self-supervision”; second, refining accountability scenarios, listing 12 specific accountability scenarios such as “disguised increase of grassroots burden”, “selective implementation”, and “falsification to cope with inspections”, providing clear basis for accountability; third, standardizing accountability procedures, clarifying the closed-loop process of “investigation and evidence collection - collective research and judgment - result disclosure - rectification and review” to ensure fair and compliant accountability.

From a practical perspective, this mechanism specifically responds to the pain point of “vague accountability” in previous burden reduction policies. A 2022 survey shows that 58% of grassroots cadres believe that “unclear accountability standards” lead to the recurrence of formalism. Through quantitative accountability standards (such as “launching accountability if there are more than 3 illegal documents issued within a year” and “investigating the responsibility of relevant departments if the repetition rate of supervision and assessment exceeds 20%”) and expanding supervision channels (establishing a national unified complaint and reporting platform for grassroots burden reduction, accepting clues 24 hours a day), the *Several Provisions* have constructed an “omnipresent” supervision network. Since 2023, 12,000 units and 37,000 relevant responsible persons nationwide have been held accountable for violating burden reduction regulations, fully verifying the rigid constraint role of the supervision and accountability mechanism, achieving the effect of “accountability of one warning a group”.

### 5.3 Dynamic Adjustment Mechanism: Flexible Optimization Based on Policy Adaptation Theory

Policy adaptation theory points out that the vitality of public policies lies in their adaptability to the realistic environment. The dynamic changes in the grassroots governance environment (such as digital transformation and adjustment of governance tasks) require policies to establish a dynamic mechanism of “feedback-adjustment-optimization” to avoid “one-size-fits-all” and “rigid implementation”. The dynamic adjustment mechanism of the *Several Provisions* follows this theory, constructing a closed-loop system of “monitoring-evaluation-revision” to ensure that the system is always compatible with grassroots reality.

From a theoretical perspective, the formalism problems faced by grassroots burden reduction have “variant characteristics”—after old problems are solved, new variant forms will emerge (such as the transformation from “offline ledgers” to “online filling”). If policies remain unchanged, they are likely to fall into “governance failure”. Therefore, the *Several Provisions* have established three major dynamic mechanisms: first, a regular monitoring mechanism, led by the Central Social Work Department, jointly with the National Bureau of Statistics and other units, establishing a “grassroots burden monitoring indicator system” covering 16 core indicators such as the number of documents and meetings, frequency of supervision and assessment, and cadre pressure level, conducting a national monitoring once a quarter; second, a third-party evaluation mechanism, introducing third-party forces such as universities and research institutions to conduct independent evaluations of policy implementation effects every year, focusing on analyzing policy adaptability issues; third, a timely revision mechanism, clarifying that “the *Several Provisions* will be fully revised every 3 years, and relevant clauses will be added or adjusted according to monitoring and evaluation results and new grassroots demands”.

The practical value of this mechanism lies in breaking the drawback of policies being “solidified once introduced”. For example, 2024 monitoring data showed that some regions had new problems of “forcibly promoting new APPs in the name of ‘digital burden reduction’”. Through the dynamic adjustment mechanism, the *Several Provisions* supplemented clauses such as “necessity demonstration must be conducted for the promotion of government affairs APPs” and “forcible registration and use by grassroots cadres is prohibited”, timely solving the policy coverage blind spots. This “dynamic adaptation” design conforms to the gradual law of policy implementation and ensures the long-term effectiveness of the *Several Provisions*.

### 5.4 Resource Guarantee Mechanism: Performance Support Based on Resource Dependence Theory

Resource dependence theory holds that the implementation capacity of grassroots organizations is highly dependent on human, financial, technical and other resources provided by higher-level authorities. If only requiring grassroots to “reduce burdens” without providing corresponding resource support, policy implementation will fail due to “resource scarcity”. The resource guarantee mechanism of the *Several Provisions* is based on this theory, constructing a comprehensive support system of “resource supply-capacity improvement-technical empowerment”, realizing the synchronous advancement of “burden reduction” and “capacity enhancement”.

From a theoretical perspective, “resource scarcity” in grassroots governance is a long-standing structural contradiction: on the one hand, the governance tasks undertaken by the grassroots continue to increase; on the other hand, human, financial, and technical resources are concentrated at higher levels, leading to grassroots “having responsibilities but no power, and positions but no resources”. According to resource dependence theory, solving this contradiction requires establishing a guarantee mechanism of “resource sinking-capacity matching”. To this end, the *Several Provisions* clarify three types of resource guarantees: first, human resource guarantee, requiring “the preparation of county-level and above organs to tilt towards the grassroots, ensuring that the staffing of township (sub-district) cadres is fully equipped, and prohibiting the secondment of grassroots cadres for more than 6 months”; second, financial guarantee, stipulating that “local finance arranges special funds for grassroots burden reduction every year for capacity-enhancing matters such as government affairs platform integration and informatization construction”. In 2023, the national investment in special funds for grassroots burden reduction reached 42 billion yuan, an increase of 18% compared with 2022; third, technical guarantee, promoting the “extension of the national integrated government service platform to the grassroots, realizing data sharing and process simplification, and providing digital performance tools for the grassroots”, such as promoting “one-stop service” and “mobile office” systems to reduce grassroots administrative costs.

In practice, the resource guarantee mechanism has effectively addressed the concern of “grassroots being unable to perform their duties after burden reduction”. For example, through resource sinking, Zhejiang Province has added 23,000 staffing quotas for townships (sub-districts) and invested 15 billion yuan in the construction of grassroots digital platforms, realizing “online integration of supervision and assessment items and automatic data filling”. The administrative costs of grassroots cadres have been reduced by 40%, and their performance efficiency has been improved by 35%. This “resource empowerment” design fully conforms to the core logic of “burden reduction - capacity enhancement - efficiency improvement”, ensuring that after being freed from the shackles of formalism, the grassroots have sufficient capacity to focus on core governance tasks.

## 6. Political Implications of the Implementation of the *Several Provisions*

The implementation of the *Several Provisions* is not only an institutional innovation at the grassroots governance level but also contains profound political implications. From a political theory perspective, it is essentially a strategic measure for the Communist Party of China to practice its governance philosophy, promote national governance modernization, and consolidate its governance foundation, embodying the “people-centered” development thought, the governance wisdom of “systematic governance”, and the political courage of “self-reform”. Its core value needs to be deeply grasped from a political height.

### *6.1 Consolidating the Party's Governance Foundation: Strengthening the Relationship Between the Party and the Masses Based on the Mass Line Theory*

The mass line theory is the core governance theory of the Communist Party of China, whose core essence is “all for the masses, all relying on the masses, from the masses, to the masses”. The implementation of the *Several Provisions* is essentially a vivid practice of the mass line in grassroots governance. By “unloading the burden” for grassroots cadres, it promotes cadres to get rid of “a mountain of documents and a sea of meetings” and “traceability management”, return to the original purpose of “serving the masses”, and then consolidate the Party's governance foundation.

From a political logic perspective, grassroots cadres are the “last mile” connecting the Party with the masses, and their work status directly affects the relationship between the Party and the masses. Formalism leads to grassroots cadres “floating on the surface”, making it difficult for them to go deep into the masses to understand their demands, and even causing mass dissatisfaction due to excessive traceability and repetitive labor, eroding the Party's governance foundation. According to the mass line theory, the key to solving this problem is to let cadres “sink down”—through streamlining formalistic affairs, the *Several Provisions* have increased the daily time for grassroots cadres to go deep into the masses from 1.2 hours to 3.5 hours (2023 national survey data), and shortened the response time for mass demands from 48 hours to 12 hours, significantly improving the relationship between the Party, cadres and the masses. For example, in the practice of rural revitalization, after getting rid of the pressure of accepting inspections, grassroots cadres have focused on core tasks such as industrial development and people's livelihood security, helping the masses solve practical problems, increasing the masses' satisfaction with the Party by 23 percentage points compared with 2019.

This logical chain of “burden reduction-being close to the people-consolidating the foundation” fully demonstrates the political value of the *Several Provisions*: through institutional design to remove the “intermediate obstacles” in the connection between the Party and the masses, allowing cadres to have “zero-distance” contact with the masses, strengthening the masses' political identity and emotional identity with the Party, thereby consolidating the mass foundation for the Party's long-term governance. This is a distinctive advantage that distinguishes the Communist Party of China from other political parties.

### *6.2 Promoting National Governance Modernization: Improving Institutional Efficiency Based on Governance Modernization Theory*

Governance modernization theory emphasizes that the core of governance modernization is the “institutionalization, standardization, and efficiency of the governance system and governance capacity”. The implementation of the *Several Provisions* is a key measure to promote grassroots governance modernization. By addressing the governance internal friction caused by formalism, optimizing the governance system, and improving governance capacity, it lays a solid foundation for national governance modernization.

From a theoretical perspective, grassroots governance is the “nerve endings” of national governance, and the efficiency of grassroots governance directly determines the overall level of national governance. The “governance fragmentation”, “resource waste”, and “inefficiency” caused by formalism are the core obstacles restricting the modernization of grassroots governance. Through institutional designs such as “collaborative governance”, “clear power and responsibility”, and “digital empowerment”, the *Several Provisions* promote three major transformations in grassroots governance: first, the transformation from “fragmented governance” to “systematic governance”, solving the problem of “multiple commands” through inter-departmental collaboration and clear power and responsibility lists; second, the transformation from “formalistic governance” to “effective governance”, promoting governance to focus on mass needs through result-oriented assessment; third, the transformation from “traditional experience-based governance” to “digital precision governance”, improving governance accuracy through the integration of government affairs platforms and data sharing.

In practice, the implementation of the *Several Provisions* has provided a grassroots model for national governance modernization: the average efficiency of national grassroots governance has increased by 40%, administrative costs have decreased by 30%, and mass satisfaction has increased by 28 percentage points (2023 National Governance Modernization Monitoring Report); in sudden public events such as epidemic prevention and control and flood control and disaster relief, after getting rid of the shackles of formalism, the grassroots emergency response speed has increased by 50%, and the disposal effect has been significantly enhanced. This indicates that the *Several Provisions* are not only a specific policy for grassroots burden reduction but also an important part of the optimization of the national governance system. Its contained concepts of “systematic governance”, “precision governance”, and “efficiency governance” provide a practical path for promoting national governance modernization.

### 6.3 Practicing the People-Centered Development Thought: Value Return Based on the People's Sovereignty Theory

The implementation of the *Several Provisions* has profoundly practiced the people-centered development thought. By eliminating the harm of formalism to the interests of the masses, it allows the achievements of governance to truly benefit the people, realizing the fundamental return of governance value.

From a political logic perspective, the essence of formalism is “being detached from the masses and reality”, and its ultimate victims are the people: excessive inspections and assessments leave grassroots cadres no time to take care of people's livelihood services; repeated form filling increases the cost of the masses' handling affairs; the downward shift of responsibilities leads to no response to the masses' demands. According to the people's sovereignty theory, the value origin of governance is “people's interests”, and all institutional designs of the *Several Provisions* are carried out around “protecting the interests of the masses”: streamlining documents and meetings is to allow cadres to have time to serve the masses; standardizing supervision and assessment is to allow governance to focus on people's livelihood needs; clarifying the boundary between power and responsibility is to allow the masses' demands to be responded to.

Specifically, after the implementation of the *Several Provisions*, grassroots people's livelihood services have been significantly improved: the average processing time for government affairs service items at township (sub-district) levels nationwide has been shortened from 8.5 working days to 3.2 working days, and the proportion of "one trip" for the masses to handle affairs has increased to 92%; the number of mass complaints in people's livelihood fields such as education, medical care, and elderly care has decreased by 67% compared with 2019, and the people's sense of gain, happiness, and security has been significantly enhanced. This "people-centered" value orientation is the core political implication of the *Several Provisions*, demonstrating the Communist Party of China's governance philosophy of "governing for the public and serving the people", and reflecting the essential requirements of socialist democratic politics.

#### *6.4 Shaping a Clean Political Ecosystem: Deepening Style Construction Based on the Comprehensive and Strict Party Self-Governance Theory*

The comprehensive and strict Party self-governance theory emphasizes that style construction is an eternal subject of Party building, and formalism and bureaucracy are the great enemies of the Party and the people, which must be resolutely eradicated. The implementation of the *Several Provisions* is a specific manifestation of comprehensive and strict Party self-governance at the grassroots level. Through institutionalized means to rectify formalism, it shapes a clean and upright political ecosystem, providing a strong guarantee for Party building.

From a theoretical perspective, formalism and bureaucracy share the same root and are stubborn diseases in the Party's style construction. The *Several Provisions* delineate behavioral boundaries with institutional rigidity, transforming style construction requirements into operable and assessable specific norms through the establishment of a negative list of formalism issues, improvement of a regular supervision mechanism, and strengthening of a responsibility accountability system. For example, a local government, through carrying out a "special rectification month for formalism", accurately discovered and rectified 127 problems of "formalism on the fingertips" and cleaned up 34 duplicate and invalid government affairs APPs and work groups by means of big data comparison and mass reporting. This governance model of "system + supervision + accountability" has promoted the formation of a "strict tone, strict measures, and strict atmosphere", urging Party members and cadres to consciously resist formalism, and making seeking truth and pragmatism and solid work the main theme of grassroots work. At the same time, rectifying formalism has promoted the continuous improvement of the Party's style and government style, driving the social style and people's customs to be positive, laying a solid foundation for achieving a clean political ecosystem.

## **7. Conclusion**

China's practice of grassroots burden reduction is essentially a profound reform that addresses the stubborn disease of formalism through governance efficiency revolution and consolidates the foundation of grassroots governance through institutional innovation. From the governance dilemma where the



grassroots were trapped by repeated ledgers and excessive inspections in 2012 to the *Several Provisions* anchoring the direction of institutionalized burden reduction in the form of intra-Party regulations in 2024, this process has not only witnessed the transformation of national governance philosophy from “control-oriented” to “service-oriented” but also demonstrated the strong resilience of the socialist governance system with Chinese characteristics for self-improvement and self-innovation. The differentiated practical explorations in the eastern, central and western regions—from the digital empowerment of Daqing’s “Qingshutong” to the reconstruction of power and responsibility lists in Fugu County, and the refined micro-reform in Fengxiang Town—have collectively verified that grassroots burden reduction is not a simple “subtraction”, but a reconstruction of the governance ecosystem with “burden reduction - capacity enhancement - efficiency improvement” as the core.

Although challenges such as policy non-implementation, imbalance between power and responsibility, and regional differences have not been fully resolved, the promulgation and implementation of the *Several Provisions* have built a complete framework of “problem targeting - institutional guarantee - practical innovation” for continuously deepening burden reduction work. Looking forward, grassroots burden reduction needs to continue to make efforts in three dimensions: breaking institutional obstacles with institutional rigidity, promoting the transformation of power and responsibility allocation from “inversion” to “matching”; bridging the regional governance gap with technical empowerment, so that the achievements of digital burden reduction benefit more grassroots units; fostering a pragmatic orientation with cultural reconstruction, making “lightening the load to do practical things” the value consensus of grassroots governance.

From a deeper era significance, grassroots burden reduction is not only a basic project to promote the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity but also a vivid footnote for the Party to practice the people-centered development thought. When grassroots cadres are freed from the shackles of formalism and invest more energy in the “last mile” of policy implementation, the “forefront” of people’s livelihood services, the “nerve endings” of national governance will become more sensitive, and the flesh-and-blood connection between the Party and the people will become closer. In the magnificent journey of Chinese-style modernization, only by always adhering to Party building leadership, problem orientation, and systematic thinking can grassroots burden reduction continue to release governance vitality, making the grassroots truly the “main battlefield” for policy implementation, the “front line” for improving people’s livelihood, and the “test field” for innovation and creation, laying the most solid foundation for realizing national long-term stability and people’s happiness and well-being.

## Projects

This research is supported by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Project of Chongqing Municipal Education Commission (25SKJD016) and the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (2025CDJSDKPT10) and The Cyberspace Ideological and Political Practice Project of Chongqing University (CQUWLSZ202507).

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