



**Compilation of Research Papers
on Swift Response to Public
Complaints in Beijing
(2024)**

**BEIJING FORUM ON
SWIFT RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMPLAINTS**

December, 2024 BEIJING, CHINA

P R E F A C E

A city belongs to its people, and the people are the core of a city. The goal of urban governance is to put people first and realize their aspirations for a better life. The mission of a government is to refine governance systems and enhance the quality of life for all.

What are the focuses, ways and measures of governance? Through evolving agendas, shifting actors and transforming systems, Beijing's Swift Response to Public Complaints reform not only embodies the wisdom of local governance but also offers inspirations for other cities in China and the world.

Beijing, as both China's capital and a city of global prominence, stands at the intersection of national distinction and international relevance. With 21.86 million inhabitants, Beijing leads China's ten megacities with over 10 million residents and thirteen major cities with a population between 5 and 10 million. Globally, New York and London both have a population near 10 million, while Tokyo and São Paulo each has more than 20 million inhabitants. Beijing exemplifies the distinctive traits of Chinese megacities while grappling with the universal challenges of urban governance.

Beijing's Swift Response to Public Complaints reform is a mechanism intended to provide efficient and responsive services to the public by proactively and swiftly addressing requests made by individuals, legal entities or other organizations, including inquiries, requests for assistance, complaints, reports of irregularities and suggestions within the administrative purview of Beijing. The reform also harnesses technologies such as the Internet, big data and artificial intelligence to promote the scenario-based application of data governance.

Beijing's Swift Response to Public Complaints reform exemplifies the principle of aligning governmental actions with public needs. The will of the people stands as the highest authority in governance, and it is paramount to recognize the profound interconnections between development and stability, livelihoods and public sentiment. Sustainable progress is achieved only when the benefits of development are directed toward improving lives and fostering unity. By placing public concerns at the core of annual priorities and instituting rigorous evaluation systems centered on public satisfaction, the reform transforms the "People's City" philosophy into meaningful action — serving, facilitating and reassuring its citizens.

In the face of global urban governance challenges, cities must navigate between harnessing

rapid advancements in economy, society, technology, and ecology and maintaining stability, harmony, security, openness and inclusivity. Beijing's Swift Response to Public Complaints reform embodies a dynamic cycle of "from the people, to the people", serving not only as a model of innovation but also as a catalyst for advancing disciplines such as political science, public management, policy studies, administrative science, and urban governance.

As the backbone of modernization, cities are pivotal to national governance system and capacity. Cities must become arenas for cultures to be preserved and developed, for civilizations to engage in exchanges based on mutual respect, and for nations to foster dialogue and inclusivity. By doing so, cities will propel the world toward peace, security, prosperity and progress, advancing the shared values of humanity.

CONTENTS

1	Constructing a People-Centered Mega-city Governance System: Intrinsic Values and Theoretic Summaries of Beijing's Reform of Swift Response to Public Complaints
12	Probe into the Governance of Mega Cities and People's Sense of Gain: An Empirical Analysis Based on Beijing's Reform of Swift Responses to Public Complaints
29	The Evolution of Urban Grassroots Governance in China: A Case Study of Beijing
50	Democratic Supervision System with Chinese Characteristics: From the Perspective of the People's Supervision System Based on Swift Response to Public Complaints
77	Models of People-Oriented City: A Comparative Analysis of Beijing and New York
92	Exploring Cultural Alignment in Smart City Open Innovation: The Case of Beijing's "Swift Response to Public Complaints" Reform
113	"Swift Response to Public Complaints" as a Reform in Government-People Interaction and a Practical Innovation in the "Mass Line"
127	Research on Scene Creation and Governance Mechanisms in People's Cities
145	Campaign-Style Governance and Accelerated Formation of Fundamental Solutions: A Case Study of Beijing's "Theme of the Month" Mechanism

159	A Grounded Theory Research on the Agile Governance System of “Swift Response to Public Complaints” at the Grassroots Level—A Practical Model of the Process of Issues Submitted to Higher-level Government Departments and Assessed by the Public in Pinggu District of Beijing
190	Beijing’s Application and Development of the Fengqiao Model in the New Era: Promoting the Building of a Social Governance Community Through the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” Mechanism

Constructing a People-Centered Mega-city Governance System: Intrinsic Values and Theoretic Summaries of Beijing's Reform of Swift Response to Public Complaints

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ABSTRACT: Cities are crucial carriers of modernization, with urban governance constituting a significant aspect of the modernization of national governance systems and capabilities. As cities belong to the people, it is imperative to uphold the principal role of the people in urban construction and development. To this end, it is necessary to chart a development path for mega-cities that aligns with Chinese characteristics, reflects contemporary features, and leverages the advantages of China’s socialist system. Beijing’s Reform of Swift Response to Public Complaints has consistently adhered to a people-centered development philosophy, centred around public demands to drive governance in mega-cities, thereby fulfilling the people’s aspirations for a better urban life. This reform vividly demonstrates the political commitment and actions of urban managers in the new era to align with public sentiment, listen to public opinion, gather public wisdom, and benefit the people’s livelihood. It reflects continuous innovation in urban governance methods, institutional improvement, and the conversion of institutional advantages into tangible outcomes at the grassroots level, embodying the practice of whole-process people’s democracy. Beijing’s Reform of Swift Response to Public Complaints exhibits distinct autonomy, a prominent people-oriented nature, extensive solidarity, genuine effectiveness, and innovative adaptability. It provides a vivid example for adhering to a people-oriented governance system in mega-

¹ This study was supported by a grant from the Beijing Social Science Foundation's project “Study on Deepening the Reform of Swift Response to Public Complaints and Building a People’s City” (Project No. 23ZDA001) and the “Academic Theory Research Program on Beijing’s Reform of Swift Responses to Public Complaints from an International Perspective” commissioned by Beijing Municipal Administration of Government Services and Data Management. Main author: Zhang Shuhua, Professor, Institute of Political Science, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and Institute for Capital Governance, CASS; Yang Kangkang, Associate Professor, Institute of Political Science, CASS.

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This study was supported by a grant from the “Academic Theory Research Program on Beijing’s Reform of Swift Response to Public Complaints from an International Perspective” commissioned by Beijing Municipal Administration of Government Services and Data Management.

cities and contributes Beijing's wisdom and experience to the exploration of modernizing national governance systems and capabilities.

KEYWORDS: People-Centered Approach; Mega-City Governance; Swift Response to Public Complaints; Governance Mechanism; Institutional Strengths

Cities serve as an essential platform for modernization, with urban governance constituting a crucial component of modernizing the system and enhancing governance capacity. As General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized, "Citizens define their city. Therefore, the effectiveness of urban administration should be evaluated based on citizens' satisfaction and the convenience they experience in their daily lives." This perspective underscores the importance of upholding the people's central role. To this end, it is essential to explore a distinctive course for mega-city development that embodies Chinese characteristics, aligns with the demands of the times, and demonstrates the strengths of our socialist system.

The *Swift Response to Public Complaints* initiative prioritizes public demands as the primary goal for its work, integrating a people-centered vision into all aspects of work. By ensuring that all relevant responsibilities are fulfilled, that the initiative strives to ensure that modernization offers greater benefits to citizens in a fair way. This has generated a new mode of mega-city governance driven by public demands, representing a vivid practice of Whole-Process People's Democracy. It provides an exemplary case for comprehensive deepening reforms while adhering to people-first principles. Moreover, it offers valuable experience in pursuing the modernization of the state governance systems and capacities.

1. Cities for the People: Value Orientations in Beijing's Reform of *Swift Response to Public Complaints*

Cities serve and belong to the people. General Secretary Xi Jinping asserted, "The fundamental purpose of advancing urban governance is to give people a greater sense of accomplishment, happiness, and security. We must resolve the most practical problems of the greatest and most immediate concern to the people while continuously enhancing equitable access to basic public services." A people-oriented urban governance system, rooted in the Communist Party of China's (CPC) foundational purpose and mission, reflects both the Party's enduring commitment to serving the people and its focus on addressing the pressing needs of public management today. This governance model not only inherits but also enriches the CPC's longstanding experience and traditions in social governance.

1.1 Putting the People First: Standpoint in Beijing's Reform of *Swift Response to Public Complaints*

Since the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012, the Central Committee of the CPC has become keenly aware of the crucial role of cities in national socioeconomic development and improving people's well-being. It has blazed a people-centered trail in city development with Chinese characteristics through continuously upholding Party leadership in city governance and adhering to the principle of "cities for the people." General Secretary Xi Jinping's expositions on city development have clarified the principles underlying socialist urban development with Chinese characteristics. These expositions fundamentally address the essential question of whom city construction and development should rely upon and serve. They have guiding significance for advancing the modernization of urban governance systems and governance capacity, as well as for constructing modern cities that are livable and vibrant with distinctive

features.

People are at the core of cities, and urban governance must serve people's fundamental interests. *Swift Response to Public Complaints* can only succeed by adhering to the people-first principle, maintaining a firm commitment to the people, and ensuring that urban governance is for the people, by the people, and to the benefit of the people. Only in this way can urban governance effectively address pressing challenges that threaten public safety, constrain urban development, and are of prime concern to the people. For the people's sense of fulfillment, happiness, and security, we must focus on matters of most urgent concern to the people and strive to coordinate the relationship between socioeconomic development and urban governance by tackling the salient pain points and difficulties.

Developing Whole-Process People's Democracy helps to resolve difficulties, warm hearts, and pool the wisdom of our people. Setting up local legislative outreach points and People's Congress liaison offices offers a channel to collect public opinion, offer legal protection, and exercise democratic oversight. In addition, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) should be actively engaged to coordinate relationships, mediate disputes, and continuously build consensus. Efforts should also be made to leverage new types of economic and social organizations as well as groups in new forms of employment to encourage broader public participation in governance so that proposals can better integrate with *Swift Response to Public Complaints*. By fully utilizing this program as a bridge, governance can bring people's hearts closer, better balance needs and interests, and adjust social relationships. It also supports the people's enthusiasm, initiative, and creativity while enabling effective self-service, self-supervision, and self-management.

Refining the basic public service system and improving people's well-being necessitates unwavering efforts to solve the pressing difficulties and problems that concern the people most. Guided by the "Seven Accesses"¹ and "Five Expectations"² requirements, efforts should focus on addressing inadequacies in public well-being, ensuring fair access to basic public services, optimizing the layout of basic public service facilities, and delivering more tangible benefits to the people. It is essential to prioritize resolving issues that are of significant public concern and require urgent action. Additionally, governance must strive to satisfy the people's diverse, multi-level, and multifaceted needs to bring more sense of fulfillment, happiness, and security.

Adhering to sound assessment mechanisms that win the approval of our people raises public participation. We must improve the mechanism of public assessment by adopting rule-of-law thinking to guide the people in expressing legitimate demands. To promote citizen participation in urban governance and democratic oversight practices, we must optimize public hearing systems and assessment mechanisms to encourage more active, inclusive and systematic participation and heighten public awareness of laws and social responsibility.

1 The concept of "Seven Accesses" was raised in the Report to the 19th CPC National Congress, which emphasized the need to improve people's lives, address their concerns, strengthen areas of weakness through development, and promote social fairness and justice. The seven aspects include people's access to childcare, education, employment, medical services, elderly care, housing, and social assistance.

2 The concept of "Five Expectations" was proposed by the city of Beijing, and highlights new elements in people's growing needs for a better life, including convenience, livability, diversified choices, as well as fairness and safety in society. This concept recognizes that the principal challenge facing Chinese society in the new era is to ensure balanced and adequate development in order to meet people's ever-growing needs for a better life.

1.2 People-Centered Philosophy: Values in Beijing's Reform of *Swift Response to Public Complaints*

Cities belong to and serve the people. The fundamental purpose of advancing urban governance is to enhance people's sense of fulfillment, well-being, and security. People are both the creators and beneficiaries of urban modernization. "Urban development must implement the people-centered philosophy of development, enabling the people to live happier lives. People's satisfaction is the ultimate standard for evaluating excellence." The fundamental pursuit of urban modernization is to meet people's expectations and achieve the well-rounded development of urban residents.

The "people-centered philosophy of development" embodies the fundamental political stance of *Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era*, which provides the direction for advancing the modernization of urban governance systems and governance capacities. *Swift Response to Public Complaints* represents a vivid example of adhering to the people-centered development philosophy.

Cities are a hallmark of human achievement and a symbol of progress, serving as a crucial carrier of modernization while bearing witness to the transformative impact of technological revolutions on human life. Urban modernization is not only an essential component of the Chinese path to modernization but also a splendid chapter in the story of China's governance in the new era. Since Reform and Opening-up, China has witnessed a rapid and unprecedented rise in urbanization, with the proportion of permanent urban residents increasing from less than 20% to over 60%. This extraordinary transformation, achieved through a balance of order and vitality, represents a historical milestone in global urbanization.

Projections indicate that during the 15th Five-Year Plan Period (2026-2030), China's urbanization rate will reach approximately 70%, with over 1 billion Chinese residents living in cities by 2035. The level of urban development and governance will be pivotal in determining whether the aspirations of the people for a better life and the goals of sustainable urban development can be achieved. The future vision for Chinese cities centers on creating a people-oriented living environment, enhancing urban services, and fostering inclusive urban development, which aligns with the broader mission of Chinese cities in the new era.

The people-centered approach, relying on the people to build and manage cities, represents the fundamental direction for modernizing China's urban governance system and capacity. As the nation's capital, Beijing holds a unique position as a global metropolis, renowned for its rich cultural heritage and as a mega-city that concentrates the country's political, economic, cultural, and technological resources. Moreover, Beijing has become a pioneer in reforming and promoting pilot zones for innovation and modernizing urban governance during the new era. By driving *Swift Response to Public Complaints* through Party-building, Beijing has forged a stronger connection between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the people, effectively leveraging systematic change to address the challenges of mega-city governance. The initiative thoroughly implements the guiding principles of General Secretary Xi Jinping's important address, the CPC's mass line and urban work policies for the new era, pools the people's voices and needs as its fundamental objective, responds to appeals of Chinese urban governance. By pooling the people's voices and addressing their needs as its fundamental objective, it exemplifies the philosophy of governance "by the people and for the people."

1.3 People's Aspiration for a Better Life: The Goal of Beijing's Reform of *Swift Response to Public Complaints*

Benefiting the people is the fundamental principle of governance. The *Swift Response to Public Complaints* aims to fulfill people's desire for a better life. General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized, "We must strive to realize, safeguard, and advance the fundamental interests of all our people. To this end, we must do everything within our capacity to resolve the most practical problems that are of the greatest

and most immediate concern to the people. We will stay engaged with our people and their communities, adopt more measures that deliver real benefits to the people and win their approval, and work hard to resolve the pressing difficulties and problems that concern them most. We will improve the basic public services system to raise public service standards and make public services more equitable and accessible". The CPC serves the people wholeheartedly in pursuit of their well-being, and all its work is dedicated to achieving people's interests.

Cities belong to the people, and at the heart of every city are its residents. The principle of putting people first requires continuous improvement in the functions of cities and the people's quality of life. Since citizens are the core of urban life, the top priority of city construction is to create livable, comfortable environments that foster well-being and provide equitable access to resources for public benefit. Development must aim to create a better life for residents, ensuring that their needs are met through fair, reasonable, and inclusive institutional arrangements. This ensures that all people can share in the benefits of urban growth. As the centers for economic, political, cultural, and social activities, cities are pivotal to regional development and the integration of urban and rural areas. They drive urbanization and modernization, with the evolution of urban and rural areas being interdependent and coordinated. The new urbanization strategy featuring urban-rural integration represents a distinctive path of urban development with Chinese characteristics. People who settle in cities harbor expectations for modernization, including better education, stable employment, access to well-developed healthcare and health services, and improved living conditions.

To meet people's aspirations for better cities, it is imperative to transform urban development and governance patterns to carry out reform comprehensively. This transformation must embrace new concepts, mechanisms, and methods that allow urban governance to effectively respond to the diverse needs of the population. These needs span across daily necessities, education, employment, healthcare, elderly care, culture and sports, living environments, and social order. Upgrading urban infrastructures and improving people's health and living standards requires addressing pressing and long-standing issues during rapid urbanization to achieve social justice and shared prosperity for our people.

2. Cities by the People: Mechanisms of Beijing's Reform of *Swift Response to Public Complaints*

The concept of "the people" is the defining purpose of *Swift Response to Public Complaints*. This initiative takes the people's voices and needs as its fundamental goal, exploring a new path of urban governance that prioritizes the people. The initiative fully leverages the role of the People's Congress, further improves the effectiveness of consultative democracy, and continuously strengthens democracy at the grassroots level. It has created a new pattern based on collaboration, participation, and shared benefits, effectively promoting the modernization of urban governance.

2.1 Giving Full Play to the Role of the People's Congress

General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out: "Both deepening the reforms and strengthening the rule of law should function as the two wings of a bird, or as wheels on both sides of a vehicle." The *Swift Response to Public Complaints* has consistently based efforts on the people's interests and adhered to the rule of law. *The Regulations on Beijing's Swift Response to Public Complaints Reform Program* was enacted to serve the people. In legislating the regulation, deputies to people's congresses have played a

pivotal role, strengthening their ties with the public at local legislative outreach points. In deputies' liaison stations, deputies' offices, government websites, and news media, more than 11, 000 deputies, 67, 000 civil servants working at the primary level, and citizens, and 3, 500 members of CPPCC who conducted in-depth research, collectively gathered more than 9, 000 suggestions. These engagements, facilitated through deputies' liaison stations, deputies' offices, government websites, and news media, have enabled the collection of over 9, 000 suggestions from more than 11, 000 deputies, 67, 000 civil servants at the grassroots level, and 3, 500 CPPCC members. By translating the CPC's guidelines and policies into local regulations through legal procedures, this legislation has institutionalized effective practices that directly address people's needs. It has created a comprehensive policy system centered on the *Regulations on Beijing's Swift Response to Public Complaints Reform*, covering diverse areas such as urban culture, community environment, and property management. This legislation clarifies the direction, consolidates consensus, and advances the reform process.

2.2 Enhancing Efficiency of Consultative Democracy

The Report to the 20th CPC National Congress stresses that we must uphold and improve the CPC-led multiparty cooperation and political consultation system and ensure the integration of Party leadership, the united front, and consultative democracy. We must give play to the CPPCC's role as a specialized consultative body and ensure that it coordinates efforts to promote democracy and unity while making proposals on state affairs and building consensus. Improvements must be made in institutions, standards, and procedures to help the CPPCC guarantee that in-depth consultations and interactions are conducted, opinions are fully expressed, and a broad consensus is built. Efforts should also be made to improve the systems and mechanisms through which CPPCC committees exercise democratic oversight, and their members remain engaged with people from various sectors, which is the basic guideline for developing consultative democracy in the new era. *Swift Response to Public Complaints* reflects people's primary status in urban governance. By providing diverse and institutionalized channels for citizens to engage in governance, people can run the city and achieve aspirations for a better life by fully expressing their opinions and participating in consultation and decision-making.

Socialist consultative democracy, as a unique form and distinctive strength of China's socialist democracy, is also vividly reflected across various aspects of the reform program. With the "Theme of the Month" initiative, Beijing CPPCC launched the democratic oversight program titled "Committee Members from All Sectors Participate, Theme of the Month Build Consensus." The initiative engages various special committee groups in program supervision through systematic research and discussions. These groups focus on issues concerning the people's immediate interests, conducting field visits to communities, corporations, and public institutions to gather public opinions and collect suggestions. Then, the collected feedback is presented at monthly group meetings and work sessions where experts are invited to provide policy recommendations. Such a process integrates democratic oversight, coordinated consensus, and informed decision-making. At the primary level, mechanisms such as yard discussion halls, round-table sessions, chit-chat councils, "five-sphere integrated" mediation, and sub-district coordinators provide platforms for diverse social groups to engage in governance. These platforms address issues of public concern, fostering governance that is grounded in dialogue, communication, and public participation. By enhancing channels for interaction between the government and the people, these mechanisms ensure that governance reflects the needs and aspirations of the people, improving both the efficiency and quality of the *Swift Response to Public Complaints*.

2.3 Consolidating and Improving Democracy at the Primary Level

The Report to the 20th CPC National Congress highlights the vital role of primary-level democracy as a cornerstone of whole-process people's democracy, stressing that the people should be the actual

subjects and agents of primary-level governance practice. General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized, “A nation will only prosper when its village thrives. We must devote special effort to the modernization of primary-level governance.” The *Swift Response to Public Complaints* has consistently focused on solving front-line problems at the primary level, boldly exploring and innovating in practice. Through “A Hot-line for Concerns” and “One Form to Fill” initiatives, it has effectively solved bottlenecks such as “what can be seen cannot be managed, and what can be managed cannot be seen.” The reform aims to unleash the people’s enthusiasm and creativity to participate more actively in governance. By establishing law-based mechanisms to safeguard citizens’ rights, the initiative exemplifies the practice of whole-process people’s democracy at the community level. Technological advancements, particularly in information technology, artificial intelligence (AI), and big data, have been harnessed to upgrade and transform various aspects of primary-level governance. Investing in information infrastructure, developing intelligent participation platforms, and ensuring seamless integration of online and offline channels (especially building fast, convenient, and efficient intelligent democratic participation platforms at the primary level) are essential for enhancing the convenience, efficiency, and intelligence of primary-level governance.

3. People-Oriented Urban Governance Mechanisms: Institutional Value and Theoretical Crystallization of Beijing’s Reform of *Swift Response to Public Complaints*

Swift Response to Public Complaints fully demonstrates the political commitment and responsibility of city administrators in the new era to align with the will and expectations of the people and benefit people’s well-being. It reflects the unwavering efforts to innovate urban governance methods, improve institutional frameworks, and transform institutional advantages into effective primary-level urban governance. This reform serves as a Beijing model for advancing the modernization of urban governance, not only within China but also globally. It offers a governance pathway that is rooted in Chinese characteristics, resonates with the demands of contemporary urban challenges, and highlights the systemic advantages.

3.1 Distinctive Autonomy

The pursuit of democracy, freedom, the rule of law, and human rights is a universal aspiration of humanity. However, diverse sociopolitical conditions, historical legacies, and cultural traditions have led nations to forge distinct paths toward achieving these ideals. As the saying goes, “Things are born to be different.” No two political systems in the world are entirely identical, and each nation’s choice of political system and developmental pathway must align with its unique national context. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out: “There are different pathways to well-being, and the peoples of all countries are entitled to choose their own path and institutional model. In essence, this is what well-being entails. Democracy is the right of every country’s people rather than a few nations’ prerogatives. There is no fixed model of democracy; it manifests itself in many forms.” The mega-city governance system of *Swift Response to Public Complaints* is deeply rooted in China’s national circumstances. It represents the CPC’s successful experience in leading the people in urban construction, demonstrates the Chinese people’s great innovation in political systems, fully reflects the will of the Chinese people, adapts to China’s and the new era’s development requirements, and displays unique advantages in advancing the modernization of national governance systems and capacities. Moreover, it has made a significant contribution to the political advancement of humanity.

Advancing the modernization of urban governance and developing Whole-Process People's Democracy necessitates the integration of Party leadership, the people's role as masters of the country, and law-based governance. The leadership of the CPC is the defining feature of Chinese socialism and the distinctive strength of this system. Advancing modernization of urban governance must uphold Party leadership to provide fundamental political guarantees and adhere to the people-centered principle, ensuring the people's role as masters of the country—the people's city by the people and for the people—which is the fundamental starting point and ultimate goal for formulating all policies. It also requires adhering to the rule of law in city governance to achieve law-based governance systematically.

3.2 Prominent People-Centered Character

“The people must always be uppermost in our minds, and our Party has upheld its fundamental purpose of wholeheartedly serving the people.” The CPC stays committed to its mission as each one of the Party members must always breathe the same air as the people, share the same future, and stay genuinely connected to them. Only by adhering to the people-centered philosophy of development—ensuring that development is for the people, by the people, and the people share in its fruits—can we establish a correct vision of development and modernization.

In fundamental contrast to Western oligarchic politics and plutocratic governance masked by periodic voting, the essence of socialist democracy lies in the people's role as the masters of the country. *Swift Response to Public Complaints* emphasizes the primary status of the people. Over the past five years, this reform has consistently upheld the people-first principle and development philosophy, adhering to Whole-Process People's Democracy, emphasizing the people's status, and fully safeguarding their rights to information, participation, expression, and supervision. It entitles the people to raise concerns, participate in governance, share benefits, and oversee procedures. It vividly demonstrates and implements the essence of people's democracy—its extensiveness, authenticity, and effectiveness—allowing Whole-Process People's Democracy to take root in a tangible and robust sense. This democratic system places the people above all else, relies firmly on the people, and consistently works for the benefit of the people. Through comprehensive institutional procedures and participatory practices, it ensures that the state system, polity, and all aspects of state governance fully embody the requirements of the people's position as masters of the country, enabling them to run the country and fully exercise their democratic rights.

3.3 Extensive Unity and Solidarity

Socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics manifests in two primary forms: the exercise of democratic rights by the people through elections and voting, and the extensive process of consultation among various sectors of society before major decisions are made, aiming to achieve broad consensus on key issues. These two forms of democracy complement one another and are integral to China's unique political system while exemplifying its distinctive institutional strengths. In contrast, Western democratic systems typically prioritize competitive elections and voting as the primary mechanisms for citizen participation. However, this model, with its singular focus on electoral processes, presents an oversimplified understanding of democracy. It often distorts the essence of democratic participation by reducing it to periodic voting. Moreover, in many Western democracies, electoral and parliamentary politics have evolved into systems dominated by elite factions, often operating under a majority rule framework. This development has led to a political environment where decision-making becomes a zero-sum game between different groups or parties, resulting in frequent conflicts and divisions within society.

General Secretary Xi Jinping noted: “A democracy that only gives people voting rights without extensive participatory rights, where people are only awakened during voting and dormant afterward, is merely formalities for formalities' sake.” Whole-Process People's Democracy transcends the narrow conception of intermittent voting rights, instead adhering to a people-centered approach that ensures

genuine democratic rights across political, economic, social, cultural, and ecological domains. *Swift Response to Public Complaints* is, in a sense, Whole-Process People's Democracy.

In the context of urban construction and development, citizens play a leading role in managing community affairs through discussion. General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized that "Only by enabling all citizens to participate, starting with neighborhood issues, transforming the relationship between citizens and government from 'you and me' to 'us', from 'being required to do' to 'doing together', can we truly achieve collaborative urban governance." Seeking the greatest common denominator of societal aspirations represents the essence of Whole-Process People's Democracy. Through *Swift Response to Public Complaints*, community officials utilize various platforms—discussion halls, round-table sessions, local councils, and group chats on WeChat—to address residents' concerns, defuse public discontent, and organize group meetings. They adopt innovative working methods such as "Let the people decide," whereby citizens' demands are resolved through public deliberation, establishing a multi-level, comprehensive primary-level democratic consultation framework characterized by "Manage their affairs, Mediate their disputes, Discuss and Deliberate their matters." This reform emphasizes coordinating interests, resolving various contradictions, and pooling efforts of diverse sectors to seek common ground and achieve a concerted result. It continuously strengthens the CPC's class foundation, expands public support, and builds up China's strength, aligning with the larger goal of realizing the Chinese Dream.

3.4 Genuine Effectiveness

Chinese democracy is a high-quality, development-oriented democracy. The people's willingness is the key indicator for measuring the authenticity of democracy. The well-being of the people is an essential indicator of the quality of democracy. General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized, "The Party measures the job performance of its members by how much good they have done for the people." *Swift Response to Public Complaints* has transformed the previous approach whereby the government decides and delivers benefits to the people, establishing a people-centered position that actively addresses concerns and resolves issues of the people.

Meanwhile, it has developed a feedback mechanism that evaluates response, satisfaction, and resolution rates. This mechanism not only ensures that citizens are actively involved in urban governance but also shifts the focus of administrative work towards enabling citizens to participate in, and benefit from, the ongoing development of the city. Through the establishment of effective institutional mechanisms and norms, Chinese democracy integrates a wide range of democratic elements, encompassing all aspects of the democratic process across various sectors of society. It is the most extensive, genuine, and effective Socialist Democracy. Whole-Process People's Democracy, as practiced in China, successfully merges process-oriented democracy with result-oriented democracy, procedural democracy with substantive democracy, direct democracy with indirect democracy, and people's democracy with the will of the state. This comprehensive approach to democracy prevents the common pitfall of political promises made during elections that are later abandoned and demonstrates that the people's democratic rights are genuine.

3.5 Innovation that Advances with the Times

The Mass Line is the CPC's lifeline and fundamental work principle. General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized: "We have always been and will always be obligated to do everything in the interests of the people and rely on their strength and carry out the principle of 'from the people, to the people,' translating the Party's policies into the people's conscientious action and implementing the mass line in all aspects of state governance." As China faces new social dynamics and challenges in the new era, the expansion of community work at the primary level and the identification of key breakthroughs in mass work under evolving conditions have become critical for the effective implementation of the

Mass Line. *Swift Response to Public Complaints* is the lever for implementing the Mass Line amid new developments, empowering online and offline work through technology. It addresses people's concerns and daily matters affecting their lives, ensuring that solutions resonate with them. The program deals with complaints and appeals, pioneering new fields and methodologies for the Party's Mass Line. *Swift Response to Public Complaints* leverages new technological means to establish a platform that logs public demands, integrating previously fragmented service hotlines across different governmental branches and departments. *Swift Response to Public Complaints* creates a Party-led primary-level governance and public service mechanism that combines the Mass Line with modern technologies such as the Internet and big data, linking community work with systematic urban governance mechanisms to establish a horizontal, intelligent, and efficient digital platform.

Big data from public service hot-lines serves as a digital channel for the government to identify livelihood issues and maintain direct communication with the public. The digital twin city in an integrated network provides a visible and precise map for the government to understand urban operations and public concerns. Public concerns reflect both individual and communal needs and help identify and address operational bottlenecks and key issues citizens are most concerned about in urban management. *Swift Response to Public Complaints* functions as a digital indicator of primary-level community work, providing new growth drivers and methodologies for current and future city management and government decision-making, enabling urban policies to improve urban functions more effectively, more sensitively capture citizen needs, and more precisely refine people's well-being.

General Secretary Xi Jinping stressed, "The people's concerns are my concerns, and the people's expectations are my goals." We must "respond whenever the people call." *Swift Response to Public Complaints* emerged and developed as a typical example of urban governance in response to the times. With its people-first principle and refined governance approach, it demonstrates distinctive characteristics of the era and institutional strengths. It has successfully explored innovative paths for the modernization of governance in mega-cities, offering a unique model for the modernization of urban management. Furthermore, it has contributed significantly to the development of a Beijing-specific approach that aligns with China's governance objectives, thereby shaping the broader discourse on modernizing state governance systems and enhancing administrative capacities.

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Probe into the Governance of Mega Cities and People's Sense of Gain: An Empirical Analysis Based on Beijing's Reform of Swift Responses to Public Complaints

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ABSTRACT: Characterized by the diversity and complexity of a large population, governance in mega cities poses many challenges. Embracing the people-centered development philosophy, Beijing has innovated the traditional mechanism by deepening reform of swift responses to public complaints (RSRPC), thus fully empowering citizens to play a central role in establishing a model for mega city governance. As an essential indicator of governance performance and effectiveness of reform, people's sense of gain provides a critical perspective for evaluating the outcomes of Beijing's RSRPC. This study analyzes the impact of RSRPC on sense of gain based on social quality theory. Questionnaire method has been adopted in this study by collecting 1015 valid samples involved in the swift response system for public complaints. A moderated mediation model was tested, which showed that RSRPC has a significant positive impact on the improvement of people's sense of gain, and public service satisfaction plays a mediating role in the above relationship. At the same time, perception of social development and perception of social justice play an inverse moderating role in the relationship between RSRPC and public service satisfaction, and between RSRPC and people's sense of gain, respectively. This study provides new methodologies and objectives for modernizing and improving mega-city governance, and enhancing people's well-being.

KEYWORDS: *Mega-City governance; reform for swift responses to public complaints; sense of gain; public service satisfaction; perceptions of social development and social justice*

¹ This study was supported by a grant from the Beijing Social Science Foundation's project "Study on Deepening the Reform of Swift Response to Public Complaints and Building a People's City" (Project No. 23ZDA001) and the "Academic Theory Research Program on Beijing's Reform of Swift Responses to Public Complaints from an International Perspective" commissioned by Beijing Municipal Administration of Government Services and Data Management. Main author: Zheng Jianjun, Professor, Institute of Political Science, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and Institute for Capital Governance, CASS; Zhao Dongdong, PhD Candidate, School of Politics and Public Administration, Wuhan University; Tan Shuyu, Research Assistant, Center for Computational Politics, School of Government, University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

1. Introduction

As a subjective feeling based on “objective gain”, sense of gain is the positive psychological perception of individuals or groups in the continuous improvement of self-situation and self-condition (Zheng, 2020). Sense of gain embodies the people-centered philosophy of the Communist Party of China. It not only represents the extent to which people’s needs are currently met and social justice is promoted, but also aligns closely with satisfying people’s aspirations for a better life (Tan, 2021). Nowadays, sense of gain has become a benchmark for reform and development of the society, as well as for assessing how well people’s needs being met (Xing & Niu, 2017). For this reason, factors related to and tactics on enhancing people’s sense of gain have been looked into by many scholars. Most studies have been carried out from the perspectives of socio-economic status (Tan, Dou, & Dong, 2020; Wang, Yang, Hu, & Chen, 2020), Internet use (Yuan & Tao, 2019) and public service (Yu, 2021; Zhang & Huo, 2022), analyzing ways to improve sense of gain through meeting individual’s material needs. However, the objective “gain” is not equivalent to subjective “gain” (Xiang, 2019), and the horizontal comparison of these aspects will reduce people’s sense of gain, leading to a “dulling” of sense of gain (Feng & Luo, 2018; Xin, 2016). In view of the above, the all-round social progress and high-quality development shall become the key to fulfillment, and relevant studies shall also focus on society orientation, the social nature of human beings, and interpersonal interaction (Nie & Cai, 2021; Xu & Li, 2021; Zhang & Hu, 2022).

As stated in “the Notice on Modification of the Standard for the Classification of City Scale” issued by the State Council of the People’s Republic of China in 2014, there are ten mega cities in China by 2022. As an aggregation of various entities, the mega city, notable for its complexity and plurality, has been confronted with complicated and challenging issues in governance (Dong & Wang, 2022). The governance of mega cities in China involves various challenges, such as the variety of factors to be governed, rapid changes in governance scenarios, increased morphological heterogeneity of society, intersecting social issues, and demands for high-standard governance (Jiang, 2022). However, the traditional methods of administration are no longer suitable for the governance of mega cities, which are characterized by populations with high mobility.

Constrained by limited access to information, low efficiency in resource allocation, and imbalanced assignment of power and responsibility, the local government is unable to make accurate decisions on risk prevention for key issues and to meet the exact demands of the public (Hu, 2022), thereby impeding improvements in people’s sense of gain. To address this Beijing Municipal Party Committee and Municipal Government, guided by the people’s needs, have steadily promoted the reform on swift responses to public complaints and the innovation in the mode of governance (Zheng, Wang, Chen, & Han, 2023). Nevertheless, people’s sense of gain needs to be the benchmark for measuring the effectiveness of social reform and development of the society.

According to society quality theory, the values necessary for achieving of social development include righteousness (justice), solidarity, equality, and human dignity. For this reason, this theory proposes four indicators, i.e., economic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment, to monitor and evaluate social development. Among these conditional factors, social empowerment is considered central because it represents the most important pursuit of social development, i.e. human dignity, and is of great significance in enhancing quality of life (Cui & Zhou, 2021). Beijing’s reform of swift responses to public complaints (RSRPC) has increased opportunities and expanded rights for people’s involvement in political activities. Therefore, this study mainly examines whether the reform has effectively enhanced the quality of society and the people’s sense of gain? Some scholars have argued that the development

goals in the new era should go beyond the bottom line to ensure a better economy and focus more on social integration, inclusion, and empowerment (Lin, 2019). However, other studies also indicate that economic security, compared with the other three factors, has a particularly strong influence on sense of gain (Nie & Cai, 2021; Xu & Li, 2021; Zhang & Hu, 2022). Therefore, by analyzing public service satisfaction variables, this study assesses economic security as a favorable factor in improving people's sense of gain to evaluate its current effectiveness and influencing mechanism. The relative importance of each sub-system within the overall society quality varies due to different stages of social development (Cui & Zhou, 2021). This study intends to explore whether the differentiated perceptions of social development and social justice among individuals caused by the unbalanced and limitations of the society in China's current stage of development have affected the positive effect of the RSRPC on people's sense of gain.

2. Literature review and research hypotheses

2.1 The Reform of Swift Responses to Public Complaints and Sense of Gain

In the governance of mega cities, Beijing is following the people-centered development philosophy by steadily promoting the RSRPC to actively address issues of public concern. The 12345 hotline and its online platform operate effectively in addressing public concerns. These practices focus on the needs of the people by building an effective governance system for this mega city, with well-established social services that enhance people's well-being in many aspects and meet their expectations for a better life, ensuring that the benefits of development reach all people more equitably. Meanwhile, the mechanism for swiftly responding to public complaints is becoming more robust and more efficient, with people actively participating as problem solvers, beneficiaries of rights, participants and supervisors in the governance process. In addition, the RSRPC has established an evaluation index system, in which social services are graded based on response rate, problem solving rate, and people's satisfaction as core indicators. Social services are generally aimed at improving people's well-being in seven aspects and meeting their expectations for a better life in five areas. Consequently, the feedback and suggestions from the people have become important indicators of the performance of governments and departments at all levels (Zheng et al., 2023). The RSRPC embodies the concept of "putting the people first" regarding its purpose, means, and evaluation.

Since the RSRPC, the 12345 hotline has received more than hundreds of millions of complaints from the public, with 94% of the cases handled and 95% of complainants satisfied (Jing, 2023). There are two reasons for people's improving sense of gain. Firstly, a new model for mega city governance based on the mechanism for swiftly responding to public complaints has been established. Under this new governance model, the ways of thinking and working styles of Party members have been transformed, reducing the negative impact on administration execution caused by personal relations or even invisible authorities, thus improving the effectiveness of social governance (Jiang, 2019). This reform has not only solved "pressing difficulties and problems that concern the people most", but also meets the needs of the people. Secondly, those who have made public complaints can enhance their communication with the government, strengthening their sense of participation and ability to engage in political affairs.

Based on the above analysis, this study proposes Hypothesis 1: The RSRPC has a significant positive impact on people's sense of gain.

2.2 The mediation of public service satisfaction

Public service satisfaction is a psychological reaction and perception of the gap between the

expected outcomes and the actual experience of public services (Guan, 2014). Subjective factors exert a greater impact on public service satisfaction than objective factors (Gong & Zhong, 2017). Through empirical researches find that objective factors, such as the government institutional reform (Zheng, Luo, & Liu, 2023) and public services (Fan & Jin, 2016), have a prominent positive effect on public service satisfaction. However, the effect of public participation is worthy of further discussion. On the one hand, expanding people's democratic participation in the process of providing public services related to people's welfare can significantly enhance individuals' satisfaction with public service. This mechanism is that democratic participation can correct fiscal expenditure biases, optimize public service decision-making, and enhance government trust (Guan, 2015).

On the other hand, the positive effects of government structural adjustments and public services supply on public service satisfaction are moderated by citizen participation. A higher rate of public participation leads to greater positive impacts on public service satisfaction (Fan & Jin, 2016; Zheng et al., 2023). As a result, by addressing people's needs through broad participation, the RSRPC will significantly increase individual public service satisfaction.

People's sense of gain depends on services delivered to meet their needs, especially high-quality and equitable public services (Cao & Li, 2017). At the current stage, more attention shall be paid to basic public services such as education, elderly care, health care, and employment, which are essential for ensuring people's survival and development (Wen, 2020). However, in reality, the people's living needs are diverse, personalized and critical; and insufficient and mismatched basic public services have become main constraints to improve people's sense of gain (Yuan & Cao, 2018). In view of this, a sound mechanism of public services is a prerequisite for improving people's sense of gain (Wen & Liu, 2018). However, there is some inconsistency between real benefits and sense of gain. Satisfaction involves both factual judgment and value judgment, with a dual attribute of objectivity and subjectivity. It is a transition from objective payoff to sense of gain (Yuan & Cao, 2018). People's satisfaction with public services which meet their needs can be measured by public service satisfaction, the improvement of which will positively impact sense of gain.

According to the analysis above, this thesis proposes Hypothesis 2: Public service satisfaction mediates the relationship between the RSRPC and sense of gain.

2.3 The moderation by perception of social development and social justice

The perception of social development is an individual's understanding of societal changes and progress, which is of vital importance for how they perceive and understand the current situation, and has an impact on their future actions (Chen & Xie, 2017). The mode and depth of the individual's perception of social development vary from person to person, and they may be unaware of these changes affecting them (Trommsdorff, 2000). Therefore, while people's sense of gain is determined by social development, it in turn does not necessarily result in improved sense of gain (Cao & Li, 2017). Social development is a complicated and tense process that, while enhancing people's well-being, can also lead to some negative factors affecting quality of the society, such as aggravated social divisions and increased social instability. These negative factors will adversely impact the individual's perception of social development and sense of gain. At the same time, a negative perception of social development also weakens the positive impact of individual's real benefits on their positive psychological reaction. Thus, the impact of the RSRPC on sense of gain may vary depending on an individual's perception of social development.

Based on the above analysis, this study proposes Hypothesis 3a: Perception of social development positively moderates the relationship between the RSRPC and sense of gain. Hypothesis 3b: Perception of social development positively moderates the relationship between the RSRPC and public service satisfaction.

The perception of social justice refers to individuals' feeling about social equality, and their perception of equal status in modern society (Cao, Huang, & Lv, 2017). Compared with objective indicators, the cognition and evaluation of social inequality have a more significant and direct impact on individuals' feelings (Li, Tang, & Qin, 2012). It is proved by existing studies that perception of social justice is a key factor influencing people's sense of gain. The more equal an individual feels, the more sense of gain (Feng & Luo, 2018; Nie & Cai, 2021). The perception of social justice is also a critical conditional variable in the relationship between actual earnings and sense of gain. When people perceive greater social justice, their actual earnings (such as income and social status) have a stronger influence on sense of gain (Huang, Zhang, & Zhao, 2017). On the contrary, a weaker perception of social justice can lead to a diminished impact on sense of gain (Xin, 2016). In view of this, when individuals have a stronger perception of social justice, the RSRPC is more effective in transforming actual earnings into sense of gain. As public service satisfaction is evaluated by actual earnings, it successfully converts to sense of gain when people perceive greater social justice.

Based on the above analysis, this study proposes Hypothesis 4a: Perception of social justice positively moderates the relationship between the RSRPC and sense of gain; Hypothesis 4b: Perception of social justice positively moderates the relationship between public service satisfaction and sense of gain.

In summary, this study proposes the following hypothetical model (Figure 1). In this model, the RSRPC enhances sense of gain through public service satisfaction, and the direct relationship and the mediation relationship mentioned above are moderated by perception of social development and social justice.

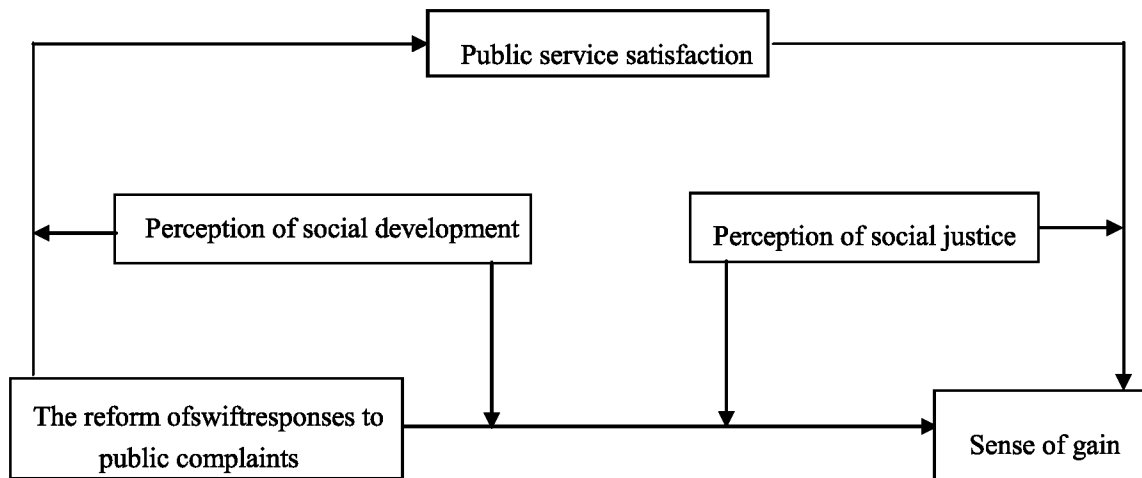


Figure 1 Hypothetical Model

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

The research data was collected online from December 2022 to January 2023. A total of 1,557 responses were obtained through a questionnaire survey conducted among residents who have lived in 16 municipal districts in Beijing for more than half a year. After excluding samples unrelated to the RSRPC, 1,015 valid responses were included in the analyses. Among them, 468 (46.11%) are male and 547 (53.89%) are female. The participants' age ranges from 21 to 60, with an average age of 34.31.

(SD = 7.49). The distribution of valid samples by other demographic indicators and their percentages are as follows. In terms of education, “junior high school and below” comprises 39 respondents (3.84%), “high school (including higher vocational college)” is 63 (6.21%), “college” is 199 (19.61%), “undergraduate” is 315 (31.03%), and “postgraduate and above” is 399 (39.31%). Regarding household registration, 660 (65.02%) are Beijing household residents and 355 (34.98%) are non-Beijing household residents. For political affiliation, there are 469 general masses (46.21%), 399 Communist Party of China members (39.31%), 105 members of Communist Youth League (10.34%), and 42 members of Democratic Parties or Non-party Affiliates (4.14%). Regarding marital status, 301 participants are unmarried (29.66%), 213 are married without children (20.99%), and 501 are married with children (49.35%).

3.2 Variables Measurement

3.2.1 The reform of swift responses to public complaints

In this research, participation of the public in the RSRPC is used as a proxy variable for evaluating this mechanism. According to the “Report on Guiding the Party-led Reform of Swift Responses to Public Complaints in Beijing” released in 2022 (Zheng et al., 2023), this study compiled a questionnaire to evaluate and measure the primary conditions of the reform and the operation of swift responses to public complaints. The questionnaire includes nine items measuring the swift responses to public complaints across three dimensions, including response rate, solution rate, and satisfaction rate (3 items per dimension), to evaluate people’s perception of the effectiveness of the swift responses to public complaints. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). An average score was calculated for all items, with higher scores indicating a more positive evaluation of the swift response process to in addressing public complaints. The test of questionnaire validity shows that $\chi^2 = 86.73$, $df = 24$, $CFI = 0.99$, $TLI = 0.98$, $RMSEA = 0.051$, $SRMR = 0.018$, with all item loadings ranging from 0.73 to 0.84. The reliability coefficients (Cronbach’s α) for the three dimensions range from 0.82 to 0.84, and the overall Cronbach’s α of the questionnaire was 0.92.

3.2.2 Public Service Satisfaction

According to existing research findings (Yang, 2018), this study measures public service satisfaction across four dimensions, including adequacy, accessibility, balance, and universality. The questionnaire consists of four items, each rated on a five-point scale from 1 (Very Dissatisfied) to 5 (Very Satisfied). Higher average scores across all items indicate that individuals are more satisfied with the public service received. In this research, the Cronbach’s α of the questionnaire was 0.89.

3.2.3 Sense of Gain

Sense of gain is measured by a questionnaire developed by Zheng (2020). The questionnaire consists of 11 items covering three dimensions such as social development (4 items), improvement of people’s welfare (4 items) and self-realization (3 items). Each item is rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Higher average scores across the 11 items indicates that individuals have stronger sense of gain. The validity test of questionnaire shows that $\chi^2 = 210.23$, $df = 41$, $CFI = 0.97$, $TLI = 0.95$, $RMSEA = 0.064$, $SRMR = 0.028$, with item loadings ranging from 0.62 to 0.79. The reliability coefficients (Cronbach’s α) for the three dimensions range from 0.76 to 0.85, and the overall Cronbach’s α of the questionnaire is 0.89.

3.2.4 Perception of Social Development

The perception of social development is measured across five aspects (including economy, education, social welfare, accommodations, and social crime) based on two dimensions: development speed (five items) and evaluation (five items), using a questionnaire developed by Huang and Cui (2010). The questionnaire is rated on a 5-point scale with options ranging from 1 (Very Negative/Very Slow) to 5 (Very Positive/Very Fast). Higher average scores across the ten items indicate a perception of more robust

social development. The validity test of the questionnaire showed the following results: $\chi^2 = 209.02$, $df = 34$, $CFI = 0.97$, $TLI = 0.95$, $RMSEA = 0.071$, $SRMR = 0.029$, and the question loadings ranges from 0.58 to 0.83. The reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α) for development speed and evaluation are respectively 0.84 and 0.88, with an overall Cronbach's α of 0.90 for the entire questionnaire.

3.2.5 Perception of Social Justice

The perception of social justice is measured using a questionnaire developed by Zhou et al. (2015). The questionnaire consists of five items and is rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). A higher average score indicates a stronger perception of social justice. In this research, the Cronbach's α for the questionnaire is 0.78.

3.3 Statistical Analysis Strategy

SPSS 26.0 and Mplus 8.3 are used for data management and analysis, following these steps. Firstly, the discriminant validity of the variable structure is checked and potential common method bias by Structural Equation Modeling is identified. Secondly, the main, mediating, and moderating effects are tested after descriptive statistics analysis, controlling the relevant variable indicators. Finally, interaction plots and simple slope tests are conducted, and the moderated mediating effects are further analyzed.

4. Hypothesis testing and results

4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Common Method Bias

The measurement model is evaluated using the confirmatory factor analysis in Mplus 8.3. Based on the baseline model, this study constructs five alternatives competing models. Model A combines "the RSRPC and public service satisfaction" into one factor; Model B combines "the RSRPC and perception of social development" into one factor; Model C combines "the RSRPC and perception of social justice" into one factor; Model D combines "the RSRPC, perception of social development, and public service satisfaction" into one factor; Model E combines "the RSRPC, perception of social development, public service satisfaction, and perception of social justice" into one factor. Before formal analysis, the items for the three variables (the RSRPC, perception of social development, and sense of gain) are grouped using the priori questionnaire structure method. The new indicators generated from item parceling are used for the confirmatory factor analysis and comparison of fits among models. As shown in Table 1, the baseline model fits are the best indicators ($\chi^2=483.72$, $df=94$, $RMSEA=0.064$, $SRMR=0.031$, $CFI=0.96$, $TLI=0.95$) compared to the other alternative competing models. The baseline model in this study includes five core focus variables, representing distinct constructs with good discriminant validity.

Table 1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis (n=1015)

	χ^2	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf)
Baseline model: RSRPC; PSD; PSS; PSJ; SG	483.72	94	0.96	0.95	0.064	0.031	
Model A: RSRPC + PSS; PSD; PSJ; SG	1687.56	98	0.83	0.79	0.126	0.056	1203.84*** (4)
Model B: RSRPC + PSD; PSS; PSJ; SG	1038.96	98	0.90	0.88	0.097	0.072	555.24*** (4)
Model C: RSRPC + PSJ; PSD; PSS; SG	1494.65	98	0.85	0.82	0.118	0.101	1010.93*** (4)

	χ^2	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf)
Model D: RSRPC + PSD + PSS; PSJ; SG	1876.85	101	0.81	0.77	0.132	0.062	1393.13*** (7)
Model E: RSRPC + PSD + PSS + PSJ; SG	2525.62	103	0.74	0.70	0.152	0.085	2041.90*** (9)

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; RSRPC = the reform of swift responses to public complaints, PSD = perception of social development, PSS = public service satisfaction, PSJ = perception of social justice, SG = sense of gain.

The data of this study is obtained through respondents' self-report, which leads to common method variance (CMV) due to the use of a single data collection method. According to relevant recommendations (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), common method bias is examined in two ways. Firstly, the potential influence of CMV is assessed using Harman's one-factor test. A principal factor analysis is conducted without rotation. According to the results, there are five factors with eigenvalues greater than one, and the extracted factors explain 67.19% of the total variance. Among these, the first factor explains 36.72% of the variance (less than 40%), indicating that no dominant factor accounts for the majority of variance. Secondly, a bi-factor model is constructed with two types of methods and traits based on the baseline model, controlling for unmeasured latent method factors. The confirmatory factor analysis shows that the fit indices of the bi-factor model ($\chi^2 = 564.38$, $df = 87$, $CFI = 0.95$, $TLI = 0.93$, $RMSEA = 0.074$, $SRMR = 0.043$) do not significantly improve compared to the baseline model. The above results indicate that common method bias in this study is not severe, allowing the analysis of subsequent hypotheses to proceed.

4.2 Descriptive statistics

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables and related demographic indicators in this study. Significant correlations are observed between the predictor variable, the outcome variable, the mediator, and the two moderators. Demographic indicators such as gender, age, education, marital status, political affiliation, and household registration significantly correlate with the core variables of this study, and will be controlled in the subsequent hypothesis test.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Variables (n=1015)

	RSRPC	PSD	PSS	PSJ	SG
RSRPC	1				
PSD	0.58**	1			
PSS	0.57**	0.65**	1		
PSJ	0.43**	0.51**	0.49**	1	
SG	0.44**	0.59**	0.52**	0.64**	1
gender	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.11**	0.03
marital status	0.17**	0.13**	0.19**	0.09**	0.01
household registration	0.00	0.01	0.03	0.07*	0.15**
education	0.14**	0.04	0.07*	0.01	0.03
political affiliation	0.04	0.00	0.04	0.02	0.08**
age	0.03	0.08**	0.07*	0.04	0.04
<i>M</i>	3.57	3.32	3.40	4.63	4.62
<i>SD</i>	0.97	0.84	0.97	1.36	1.22

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. gender (1=male, 2=female), marital status (1=unmarried, 2= married without children, 3=married)

with children), household registration (1=Beijing household residents, 2=non-Beijing household residents), education [1= junior high school and below, 2= high school (including higher vocational college), 3=college, 4=undergraduate, 5=postgraduate and above], political affiliation (1=general masses, 2=Communist Party of China, 3=Communist Youth League, 4= Democratic Parties or Non-party Affiliates) are category variables; RSRPC = the reform of swift responses to public complaints, PSD = perception of social development, PSS = public service satisfaction, PSJ = perception of social justice, SG =sense of gain.

4.3 Testing for the main effect and mediating effect

To examine Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2, the main and mediating effects are tested using stepwise regression analysis. Firstly, mean-centering was applied to the main variables. Secondly, the control variables are transformed and assigned values, including converting categorical variables into dummy variables (e.g., gender, marital status, household registration, political affiliation) and assigning “1” to “5” to education indicators ranging from “junior high school and below” to “postgraduate and above”. Thirdly, a variance inflation factor test is carried out to check for multicollinearity, with no VIF values exceeding 1.54. The stepwise regression analysis results (see Table 3) indicate that the RSRPC has a significant effect on people's sense of gain, $b = 0.58$, $t = 16.49$, $p < 0.001$. Additionally, the RSRPC has a noticeable effect on public service satisfaction, $b = 0.55$, $t = 21.18$, $p < 0.001$. When both the predictor and mediator variable are included in the model, public service satisfaction significantly affects sense of gain ($b = 0.52$, $t = 13.09$, $p < 0.001$). Meanwhile, the positive effect of the RSRPC on sense of gain decreases but remains significant ($b = 0.30$, $t = 7.55$, $p < 0.001$).

To test the mediating effect of public service satisfaction, analyses are conducted using the PROCESS, with 5,000 bootstrap samples drawn from the original data ($n = 1015$) by random sampling for a bias-corrected bootstrap 95% CI. The results show that the mediating effect of public service satisfaction is significant in the relationship between the RSRPC and sense of gain (index of mediation = 0.28, $se = 0.03$, 95%CI = [0.23, 0.35]), accounting for 48.28% of the total effect of the RSRPC on sense of gain.

Table 3 The Results of Main Effect and Mediating Effect Models (n=1015)

	SG		PSS		SG	
	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>
age	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
education	0.03	0.04	0.02	0.03	0.01	0.03
gender = male	0.09	0.07	0.06	0.05	0.06	0.06
MS = unmarried	0.02	0.09	0.18*	0.07	0.12	0.09
MS = married without children	0.05	0.09	0.19**	0.07	0.15	0.08
HR = Beijing household residents	0.02	0.08	0.03	0.06	0.00	0.07
PA = masses	0.35*	0.17	0.23	0.13	0.24	0.16
PA = Communist Party of China	0.00	0.18	0.16	0.14	0.08	0.17
PA = Communist Youth League	0.15	0.20	0.50**	0.15	0.11	0.19
RSRPC	0.58***	0.04	0.55***	0.03	0.30***	0.04
PSS					0.52***	0.04
R^2	0.25***		0.35***		0.36***	
F	30.35***		48.78***		46.82***	

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. MS= marital status, HR = household registration, PA = political affiliation; RSRPC = the reform of swift responses to public complaints, PSS = public service satisfaction, SG =sense of gain.

4.4 Testing for the moderating effect

After conducting the mean-centering and converting categorical variables into dummy variables, the variance inflation factor is checked for multicollinearity, with no VIF values exceeding 1.79, indicating that multicollinearity is not serious in this study. The results of testing for the regulating effect are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 The Results of Regulating Effect Model (n=1015)

	PSS		SG		SG		SG	
	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>
age	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
education	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.03	0.02	0.03
gender = male	0.04	0.04	0.06	0.06	0.09	0.06	0.07	0.06
MS = unmarried	0.15*	0.06	0.08	0.08	0.16*	0.08	0.13	0.08
MS = married without children	0.11	0.06	0.16*	0.08	0.18*	0.07	0.13	0.07
HR = Beijing household residents	0.05	0.05	0.07	0.07	0.04	0.07	0.01	0.07
PA = masses	0.15	0.11	0.26	0.16	0.20	0.14	0.29	0.15
PA = Communist Party of China	0.07	0.12	0.10	0.16	0.04	0.15	0.04	0.15
PA = Communist Youth League	0.45**	0.13	0.11	0.18	0.01	0.17	0.18	0.17
RSRPC	0.25***	0.03	0.20***	0.04			0.29***	0.03
PSD	0.55***	0.03	0.73***	0.04				
RSRPC×PSD	0.07**	0.02	0.03	0.03				
PSS					0.38***	0.03		
PSJ					0.44***	0.02	0.48***	0.02
PSS × PSJ					0.01	0.02		
RSRPC × PSJ							0.04*	0.02
<i>R</i> ²	0.50***		0.41***		0.50***		0.48***	
<i>F</i>	75.93***		53.63***		76.00***		69.89***	

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. MS= marital status, HR = household registration, PA = political affiliation; RSRPC = the reform of swift responses to public complaints, PSD = perception of social development, PSS = public service satisfaction, PSJ = perception of social justice, SG = sense of gain.

When examining the moderating effect of perception of social development on the relationship between the RSRPC and public service satisfaction, both the RSRPC ($b = 0.25$, $t = 8.22$, $p < 0.001$) and perception of social development ($b = 0.55$, $t = 17.09$, $p < 0.001$) have a significant impact on public service satisfaction. Meanwhile, the interaction between the RSRPC and perception of social development significantly affects public service satisfaction ($b = -0.07$, $t = 2.88$, $p < 0.01$). The above results indicate that the moderating effect of perception of social development is significant. The interaction diagram (see Figure 2) is drawn as follows, and a simple slope test is also conducted to examine the different effects of the RSRPC on public service satisfaction at high and low levels (1 SD above and below M) of perception of social development. There is a significant positive relationship between the RSRPC and public service satisfaction at the high level of perception of social development (b simple slope = 0.19, $se = 0.04$, $t = 4.56$, $p < 0.001$). Meanwhile, the impact of the RSRPC on public service satisfaction is very significant at the low level of perceived social development (b simple slope = 0.30, $se = 0.03$, $t = 10.16$, $p < 0.001$). As perception of social development decreases, the impact of the RSRPC on public service satisfaction enhances significantly, with a notable difference in slopes between the high and low perception of social

development groups ($Z = 2.20, p < 0.05$).

In the examining the moderating effect of perception of social development on the relationship between the RSRPC and sense of gain, both the RSRPC ($b=0.20, t=4.89, p < 0.001$) and perception of social development ($b = 0.73, t = 16.52, p < 0.001$) have a significant effect on sense of gain. However, the interaction between the RSRPC and perception of social development has no significant impact on sense of gain ($b = -0.03, t = -0.95, p = 0.34$). The above results indicate that the moderating effect of perception of social development is insignificant.

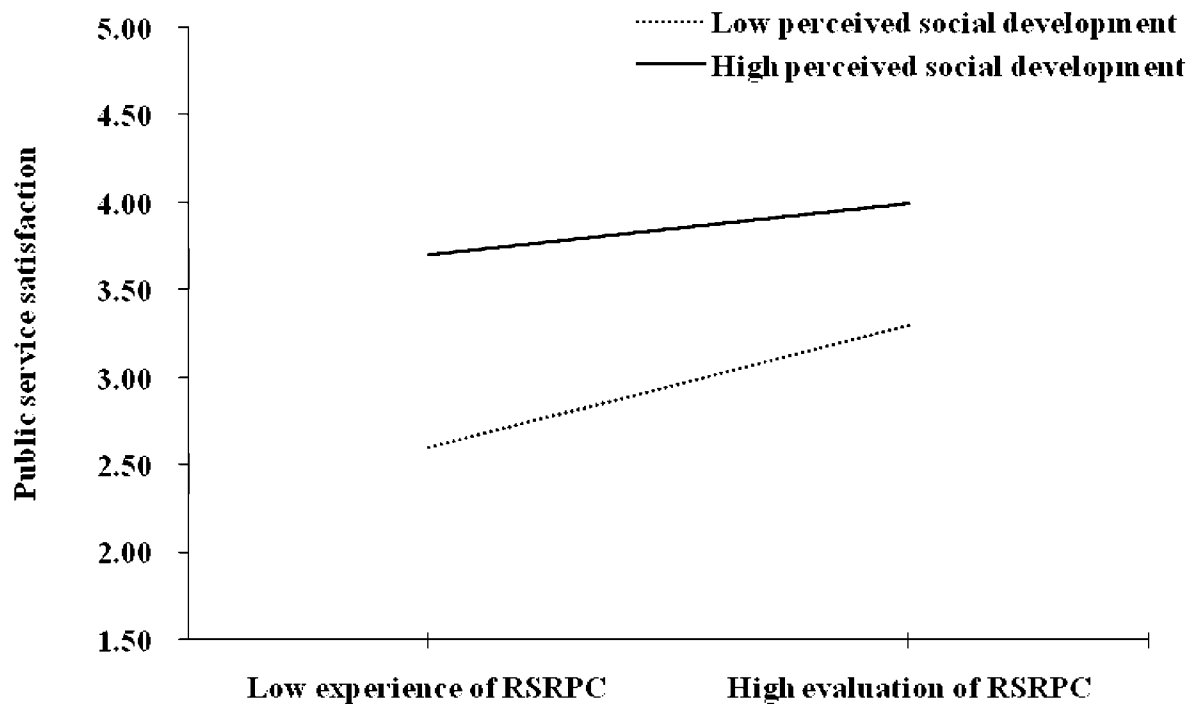


Figure 2 Relations between the RSRPC and Perception of Social Development

In the examining the moderating effect of perception of social justice on the relationship between public service satisfaction and sense of gain, both public service satisfaction ($b = 0.38, t = 11.54, p < 0.001$) and perception of social justice ($b = 0.44, t = 18.43, p < 0.001$) have a significant effect on sense of gain. However, the interaction between public service satisfaction and perception of social justice has no significant effect on sense of gain ($b = -0.01, t = -0.51, p = 0.62$). The above results indicate that the regulating effect of perception of social justice is insignificant.

In examining the moderating effect of perception of social justice on the relationship between the RSRPC and sense of gain, both the RSRPC ($b = 0.29, t = 8.68, p < 0.001$) and perception of social justice ($b = 0.48, t = 20.52, p < 0.001$) have a significant effect on sense of gain. Meanwhile, the interaction between the RSRPC and the perception of social justice significantly affects sense of gain ($b = -0.04, t = -2.49, p < 0.05$). The above results indicate that the moderating effect of perception of social justice is significant. The interaction diagram (see Figure 3) is drawn as follows and a simple slope test was conducted to examine the different effects of the RSRPC on sense of gain at high and low levels (1 SD above and below M) of perception of social justice. At a high level of perception of social justice, the relationship between the RSRPC and sense of gain is insignificant (b simple slope = $-0.03, se = 0.05, t = -0.64, p = 0.52$). However, at a low level of perception of social justice, the RSRPC significantly impacts

sense of gain (b simple slope = 0.16, se = 0.05, t = 3.05, p < 0.01).

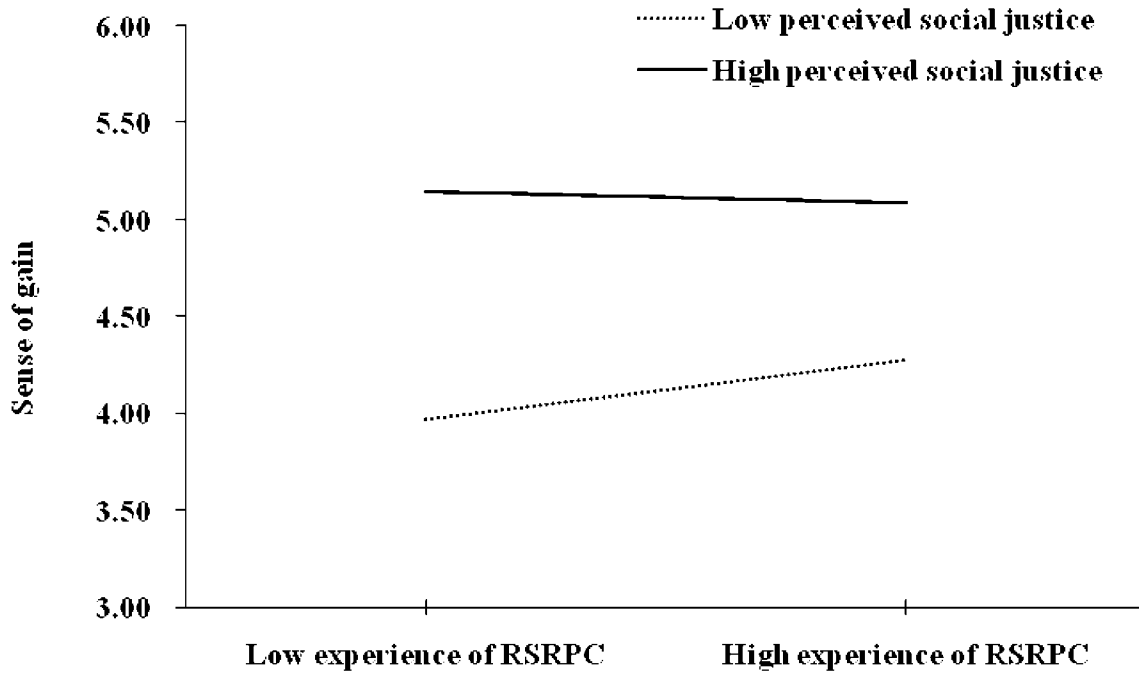


Figure 3 Relations between the RSRPC and Perception of Social Justice

4.5 Testing for moderated mediation model

To examine the moderation of perception of social development and the mediating path of public service satisfaction on the relationship between the RSRPC and sense of gain, the moderated mediation model is tested using the PROCESS program (bootstrap = 5000). The results show that (see Table 5) the indirect effect of the RSRPC through public service satisfaction on sense of gain is significant at the low level of perception of social development (effect size = 0.051、SE = 0.01). When perception of social development is high, the indirect effect of the RSRPC through public service satisfaction on sense of gain is also significant (effect size = 0.031、SE=0.01). In the mediating path of “the RSRPC → public service satisfaction →sense of gain”, perception of social development has a significant moderating effect. There is a significant difference in the mediating effects of public service satisfaction between high and low levels of perception of social development (their difference of mediating effect = -0.020, SE = 0.01, 95% CI = [-0.035, -0.007], excluding 0).

Table 5 The Results of Regulated Mediation Model (n=1015)

Regulated mediating pathways	moderator PSD	Effect size	95% Confidence Interval
RSRPC → PSS → SG	Low PSD group (M-SD)	0.051	[0.025, 0.080]
	High PSD group (M+SD)	0.031	[0.014, 0.054]
	The difference between High and low PSD	0.020	[-0.035, -0.007]

Note: RSRPC = the reform of swift responses to public complaints, PSD = perception of social development, PSS = public service satisfaction, SG = sense of gain.

5. Discussion

5.1 The functions and implications of the RSRPC

Based on social quality theory, this study explores the impact mechanism of Beijing's RSRPC on sense of gain, enriching the theoretical understanding of people's sense of gain in the new era, thus providing new ideas and development directions for enhancing social quality and meeting people's needs for a better life.

Firstly, there is a significant positive correlation between experiencing swift responses to public complaints and people's sense of gain. Under the traditional governance model, social participation channels are limited, making it difficult for the government to gather public opinion, resulting in problems such as misalignment between government supply and public demand, as well as ineffective social governance (Zhan & Zhang, 2019). Beijing's RSRPC establishes a new model of collaborative governance between the government and society, adhering to the principle of pluralistic participation and allowing social forces to actively participate in the modernization of the state governance capacity. This model aligns well with the ontological requirement of the social quality – "sociality". Within the mechanism of the swift responses to public complaints, the people become both the "whistle-blowers" of governance problems and evaluators and supervisors of grass-roots governance, continuously encouraging the government's proactive response to the people (Ma, Jin, & Meng, 2020). Beijing's RSRPC enhances positive interaction between the government and the people, surpassing the limitations of traditional governance, and further elevating the capacity and effectiveness of governance in a mega city. As a key yardstick for evaluating the effectiveness of social governance, the improvement of people's sense of gain directly reflects the impact of Beijing's RSRPC on strengthening the capacity and effectiveness of mega city governance.

Secondly, public service satisfaction is an important mediating factor in the relationship between the RSRPC and sense of gain. There are diverse public needs for different individuals; therefore, indiscriminate public services can lead to differentiated subjective evaluations. When demand deviation reaches beyond acceptable levels of satisfaction, people may have a "relative deprivation", not "gain" when making social comparisons. In Beijing's RSRPC, the 12345 hotline and its online platform were established based on the previous hotline. This platform provides access to information inquiries, suggestion submissions, administration supervision and public complaints (Jiang, 2019). The interaction between the government and the people is becoming more dynamic. There is a better understanding of the people's real needs and increased pressure on the government to respond. The RSRPC encourages the government to make more scientific and democratic public service decisions, providing high-quality and equitable public services that meet the people's differentiated needs for public services. This approach enhances satisfaction with public services, thus improving people's sense of gain.

Thirdly, perception of social development and social justice play an inverse moderating role in the relationship between RSRPC and public service satisfaction, and between RSRPC and people's sense of gain, respectively. This result shows that when perceptions of social development and social justice are lower, the positive effects of RSRPC on public service satisfaction and sense of gain are stronger. Nowadays, China faces challenges of unbalanced and inadequate social development, such as deepening social polarization, decreasing social cohesion, and prominent social exclusion, which hinder high-quality social development and the enhancement of sense of gain. Through active participation, people can effectively communicate their demands and problems, reducing uncertainty in the process of social governance in mega cities. This active participation positively impacts the effectiveness of social governance and offsets the negative effects of unbalanced and insufficient social development on sense of gain.

5.2 Practical implications

This study has three practical implications for promoting the modernization of governance in extra-large cities and enhancing sense of gain.

Firstly, the orderly participation of multiple stakeholders in governance practices shall be expanded, with a social governance system centered on people's needs. Party Committees and governments at all levels shall learn from Beijing's RSRPC, and actively utilize new tools and platforms to broaden channels for the institutionalized participation by various stakeholders in governance. This includes keeping mechanisms for the expression of interests and demands unimpeded and proactively addressing the reasonable demands of the public. A positive mechanism for interaction between the government and the people can be set up to integrate all stakeholders' participation into the entire governance process. This approach aims to stimulate people's enthusiasm and initiative for participation, fully harnessing the strengths and wisdom of all parties involved.

Secondly, social development and people's welfare should be prioritized, with a focus on protecting and improving people's livelihoods. Party Committees and governments at all levels should always focus on people's welfare, solving pressing issues and meeting public needs for a better life. Additionally, efforts should be made to improve the social security system, optimize the allocation of social resources to the fullest extent, and promote high-quality social development to better support people's aspirations for self-development.

Thirdly, the distribution system should be reformed to promote social justice, ensuring that the benefits of modernization reach a broader segment of the public. Efforts should focus on both expanding economic growth ("making a bigger cake") and ensuring fair distribution, as well as providing improved basic public services and welfares to address critical daily issues concerning people's livelihoods. It is equally important to promote social equity and to narrow regional and group disparities so that people can share the fruits of reform and development. Meanwhile, public sentiment should be a key criterion for measuring the progress of social development, aligning economic and social achievements with individuals' needs and perceptions of development.

5.3 Research limitations

Although this study provides meaningful findings on how the RSRPC affects sense of gain, some limitations still need improvement. Firstly, the design of this study aims to examine the role and significance of the RSRPC in influencing sense of gain, but the data collection for core variables focuses on the same period. In order to enhance the level of confirmability of causality among variables, future research can use longitudinal data for diachronic studies or perform horizontal comparisons with other regions.

Second, given the rapid economic and social development and diversification of public interests, there are specific differences in the social needs and demand fulfillment status of different groups (gender, generation, class, etc.). However, this study has not sufficiently accounted for variations in how the mechanism of swift responses to public complaints impacts sense of gain among these groups. Future research could incorporate heterogeneity tests to examine the impact on sense of gain at the group level.

Thirdly, in analyzing the relationship between the RSRPC and sense of gain, this study does not include the characteristics and influences of multi-stakeholder participation in the research model. However, one of the critical paths to modernizing urban governance is to realize and strengthen active governance through the participation of multiple stakeholder, including citizens, when the RSRPC is driving mega city governance (Zheng et al., 2023). Future research can examine the roles of different groups of participants, such as Party and government departments, citizens, market entities, social organizations, etc., and examine the mechanism and impact of the reform RSRPC on perception of better life using the status of participation as a moderated variable.

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The Evolution of Urban Grassroots Governance in China: A Case Study of Beijing

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ABSTRACT: How does a state govern society effectively? This is a fundamental question in social science research. Using a political system analysis framework, this paper explores the evolution of urban grassroots governance in China as a dynamic process where the government continuously adjusts its governance techniques and methods through vertical coordination within the bureaucratic system, responding to social changes and the evolving needs of residents. Urban governments, facing governance challenges and demands at different stages of economic and social development, are shaped by top-down directives from the central government, while simultaneously absorbing innovations from grassroots initiatives. This dual process has led to ongoing adjustments in governance techniques, organizational structures, and resource allocation. The case study of Beijing’s grassroots social governance system traces its transformation across several phases. The analysis begins with the work unit system during the planned economy era, characterized by centralized governance under the state-run society model. It then examines the post-reform period, marked by the separation of government and society, the establishment of the community-based system, and the emergence of diverse governance actors. Following 2000, the adoption of social management concepts and the spread of grid-based management further shaped the city’s governance. In the new era, the capacity of grassroots governments to respond efficiently to public demands has significantly improved, as demonstrated by the “swift response to public complaints” reform. In addition, Beijing has undertaken a series of new initiatives in advocating proactive governance and constructing grassroots governance communities in recent years. This paper provides a theoretical framework and empirical foundation for understanding the transformation and development of urban grassroots governance in China over the past several decades.

KEYWORDS: Grassroots governance; urban governance; governance transformation; Chinese modernization; political system analysis

1 This paper represents a preliminary outcome of the key research project of the Capital High-End Think Tank, “Enhancing Urban Resilience through Swift Response to Public Complaints” (Project No. 2023PKUZKZD007). Project Lead: Yan Jirong, Dean of the School of Government at Peking University, Director of the Institute of Public Governance, and Professor. Key Participant: Zhang Zhiyuan, Assistant Professor at the School of International and Public Affairs, Shanghai Jiao Tong University

1. Introduction

How can we explain the transformation and development of urban grassroots social governance practices in China? Looking back at classical theories, Marx viewed the socialist revolution as the ultimate solution to the intensifying class conflicts and unequal distribution of wealth that followed the Industrial Revolution (Marx & Karl, 1990). Durkheim, addressing the challenges of social disorder, moral decline, and rising suicide rates, advocated for rebuilding social solidarity through the development of social organizations and professional groups (Durkheim, 1952). Polanyi explained the changes in modern society as a “double movement”, the spreading of the market system and a protective counter-movement tending towards its restriction (Polanyi, 2001). With the rise of modernization theory and state-society relations paradigms after World War II, social governance development has increasingly been examined in the context of economic modernization and the cooperation and conflict between the state and society (Lipset, 1959). Despite the differences in historical context and research perspectives, these theorists point to the new problems and demands brought about by social changes, and the continuous reform and improvement of social governance in response to the challenges posed by modernization.

Looking back at the evolution of urban grassroots governance since the founding of the People's Republic of China, a clear pattern emerges. During the planned economy era, the work unit system was implemented in urban areas, with the omnipotent government taking full responsibility for social affairs, marking the “state-run society” phase. Following the market-orientated reforms, the government actively “shed powers,” delegating grassroots governance responsibilities to streets and communities. This period witnessed the rapid rise of various social governance actors, though it also weakened the government's capacity for grassroots governance (Wu, 2002). As economic development, urbanization, and industrialization introduced new governance challenges, the government gradually re-engaged in social management functions—such as labor, social security, education, healthcare, and housing—and established grid-based management as a key organizational model. This model served as an intermediary layer between the government and society, increasingly empowered with functions and resources, allowing for comprehensive management and service delivery at the grassroots level (Teets & Hurst, 2014). In recent years, the principle that cities should be built by the people and for the people and “government responsiveness” have gained prominence, shifting grassroots governance from top-down administrative control to more bottom-up responses to public demands. Governance has become increasingly oriented towards meeting public needs, with grassroots priorities being adjusted accordingly. The development of information technology has further enhanced the efficiency and intelligence of urban governance, making it more responsive and convenient.

It is clear that in addressing the challenges posed by social changes, the Party and the state have implemented a series of effective governance measures. These efforts have improved organizational structures, optimized resource allocation, and integrated new governance technologies, resulting in a unique system of urban grassroots governance in China. Unlike Western theories, where social governance tends to be more passive, fragmented, and reactive, China's governance reform has consistently upheld the Party's overall leadership, blending top-down guidance with grassroots innovation. This approach has enabled the state to break free from institutional inertia and vested interests. By adapting governance methods and technologies to meet social needs and local conditions, China has achieved sustained progress in urban grassroots governance.

This paper employs a political system analysis framework, using the transformation of Beijing's urban grassroots governance system as a case study. It examines how the interplay of top-down and

bottom-up dynamics within the government system has shaped specific governance approaches in response to changes in economic development, political systems, and social structure. Additionally, the paper explores how these governance methods have evolved and expanded in response to shifting social demands, driving the continuous development and refinement of urban grassroots governance. This framework provides a foundation for understanding and explaining the evolutionary trajectory of urban grassroots governance in China and capturing its core evolutionary logic.

2. The Analytical Framework of Urban Grassroots Social Governance

In recent years, grassroots social governance has become a prominent topic in academic research, with its roots in Western governance theories. Rosenau defined governance as the regulatory mechanisms in a sphere of activity (Rosenau, 1992). Since the 1970s, many Western countries have faced fiscal crises driven by the continual expansion of public expenditure, leading to inefficiencies in government operations and growing tensions between public demands for democracy and the rigidity of bureaucratic systems. Social governance emerged as a reflection on and response to these challenges. It advocated redefining the role and functions of a government and lays more emphasis on cooperative relationships between the government and various social actors. Government responsiveness, according to this theory, should not only react to social demands but also actively promote collaboration among different social actors to seek solutions to social issues. “Good governance” is regarded as the ultimate goal, with its core being the realization of “citizen values.” (Chhotray, Stoker, Chhotray, & Stoker, 2009)

As part of Western governance theory, social governance is grounded in the Hypothesis of Economic Man, with a foundation in social centrism and individualism. Over years of practice, Chinese scholars have come to recognize that the process of social governance transformation in China differs from that in Western countries. Today, grassroots social governance in China places a strong emphasis on balancing public authority with citizens’ rights. This is reflected in the report delivered at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which described a law-based social governance system in which “Party committees exercise leadership, government assumes responsibility, non-governmental actors provide assistance and the public get involved.” The 19th CPC National Congress further stressed the importance of “keeping up with people’s ever-growing needs for a better life” and “continuing to promote social fairness and justice.” The 20th CPC National Congress expanded on this by introducing the concept of “fostering a community of social governance in which everyone fulfills their responsibilities and shares the benefits.” Following this line of thought, this paper argues that grassroots social governance refers to a process in which multiple actors take coordinated actions to find effective solutions and implement them in addressing the issues related to public management, public services, public facilities, public environment, public activities and other affairs at the grassroots level.

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the government has continuously enhanced its governance capacity through reforms and innovations in grassroots social governance, actively addressing social problems and conflicts and promoting the iterative development of governance models. How, then, can we understand the change of grassroots social governance in China and its driving forces? This paper argues that social demands and government responsiveness serve as the primary forces driving such transformation. In *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi introduced the concept of the “double movement” to explain social development (Polanyi, 2001). Since the Industrial Revolution, the rise of the market economy had reshaped the relationship between the economy and society, subordinating society to market

and transforming the elements of production including labor, land and money into commodities. As a result, social relations were embedded in the economic system as the adjunct, worsening the hardships of ordinary people. In response to the threat posed by a self-regulating market, society initiated a counter-movement to protect itself. The tension between free market forces and social protection extended into the political realm, fueling political struggles throughout the 19th and 20th centuries over issues such as political rights, class interests and ideologies. Although Polanyi's argument has been criticized for romanticizing early societies, overlooking the role of the state, and failing to recognize the positive effects of economic growth, his analytical framework still provides a theoretical explanation for the interaction between actors and objects in the process of social changes. This framework has been further expanded in subsequent theoretical developments.

In the modernization theories that emerged after World War II, political development was viewed as the outcome of the transition from traditional societies to modern societies. Economically, such shift entailed moving from an economy dominated by primary industries to one where industry and services took precedence. In terms of social structure, modernization brought about changes such as increased occupational specialization, greater population mobility and a high concentration of people in urban areas. Politically, this transition was accompanied by the modernization of political systems, which could be seen as the "double movement," including the replacement of traditional, kinship-based authority with secular, national political authority. Political structures and functions became more differentiated, with specialized departments for legal, administrative, military and other affairs taking charge of political decision-making and implementation (Yan, 2006). Additionally, the expansion of political participation and the establishment of democratic institutions enabled the public to engage in politics directly or indirectly through mechanisms such as elections and self-governance, granting people greater control over governments. Cross-national empirical research also showed that economic growth and social structural modernization were strongly correlated with the democratization of state power (Przeworski, 2000). However, the classic modernization theory also had clear shortcomings, such as viewing modernization as a simple and linear process and assuming that the modernization path taken by modern Western states was a universal model that all non-Western countries must follow. It overlooked the diversity and complexity of modernization paths.

To address the limitations of the modernization theory, Huntington introduced an institutionalism perspective, suggesting that the establishment of formal rules to absorb social demands was the key to addressing the challenges of social modernization (Huntington, 2006). In *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Huntington argued that the greatest difference between political systems lied not in the divide between democracy and authoritarianism, but in the level of institutionalization. Social modernization increased society's capacity for mobilization and promoted social demands, potentially challenging the existing political order. The appropriate response, according to Huntington, was to raise the level of institutionalization and establish democratic political systems in urban areas. His theory implied that political systems should actively pursue institutional reforms and innovations to meet the challenges posed by social changes.

From a macro perspective, social changes indeed provide a broad context for explaining the transformation of a government's social management systems, particularly in urban governance (Xu, 2011). The response to changes in the socio-economic structure and the social problems arising therefrom has long been a driving force behind the evolution of grassroots social governance systems. For example, the work unit system was long regarded by scholars as a highly efficient governance tool under the planned economy, allowing the Party to organize, mobilize, educate and manage urban residents (Bray, 2005). In the 1990s, the work unit system gradually gave way to the community-based system due to

the transformation of state-owned enterprises, the rise of non-state employment and other issues brought about by marketizing reforms (Derleth & Koldyk, 2004). In the 2000s, as social management became more complex, social conflicts increased, and public demands for services grew, grid-based governance became a key governance mechanism to strengthen the Party's and governments' leadership in grassroots (Tang, 2020).

However, the evolution of China's urban grassroots governance system should not be seen merely as a response to social changes. In the face of specific social problems and governance needs, urban governments have multiple policy tools available. For example, in the absence of the grassroots governance system after the reform and opening-up period, the government could either delegate its power to society, allowing social management and public services being handled through social autonomy, or enhance the administrative intervention by strengthening the control and management of the grassroots through the top-down allocation of functions, funds and personnel (Gu & Wu, 2010). We must take into account the complexity of interactions within the government as a large hierarchical organization. For instance, the rapid expansion of grid-based management in cities across the country after the 2010s was closely linked to the Party's emphasis on grid-based management at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee, as well as policy learning and competition between local governments.

Therefore, compared with existing studies that build a connection between socio-economic structural changes and transformations in political systems from a macro perspective, this paper attempting to combine the macro-level social demand-government responsiveness with an analysis of internal governmental relationships aims to create a comprehensive framework for understanding urban grassroots governance through a politically systematic approach, as specifically shown in Figure 1.

Firstly, social changes are the precursor to the transformation of the urban governance system. Modernization is generally viewed as the process, starting in the 17th century, that marks the shift from agrarian societies to industrial ones, characterized by secularization, population mobility and job specialization. Post-modernization refers to the transition from industrial societies to post-industrial societies, bringing development trends such as globalization, information technology, pluralism and individualization. Both modernization and post-modernization have led to changes in economic, political and social dimensions, which have raised new governance challenges. Modernization has brought issues such as urban-rural gaps, public safety concerns and environmental pollution, while post-modernization has brought challenges such as identity crises, global risks, the impact of digital technology and social fragmentation.

Secondly, in dealing with governance challenges, the choice of governance models by urban governments is influenced by multiple actors within the government's bureaucratic system. In China's unitary bureaucratic system, urban governments are first guided by top-down central policies (Zhang, 2009). The overall aims and objectives of social governance and grassroots governance set by the Party and the state's decision-making centers directly guide urban governments' governance reforms (Chen, Christensen, & Ma, 2019). Grassroots innovations, such as initiatives from street-level governments and district authorities, serve as potential options for urban governments' reforms. These grassroots actors, operating on the front lines and being closest to the social issues, often devise innovative governance models based on their specific conditions, which then may trigger governance reforms at the urban level. Additionally, the personal preferences, ideas and past experiences of urban government leaders often affect the adoption of specific governance mechanisms or tools as the immediate decisive factors for governance reforms.

Finally, responsive governance is reflected in the changes in governance techniques, organizational

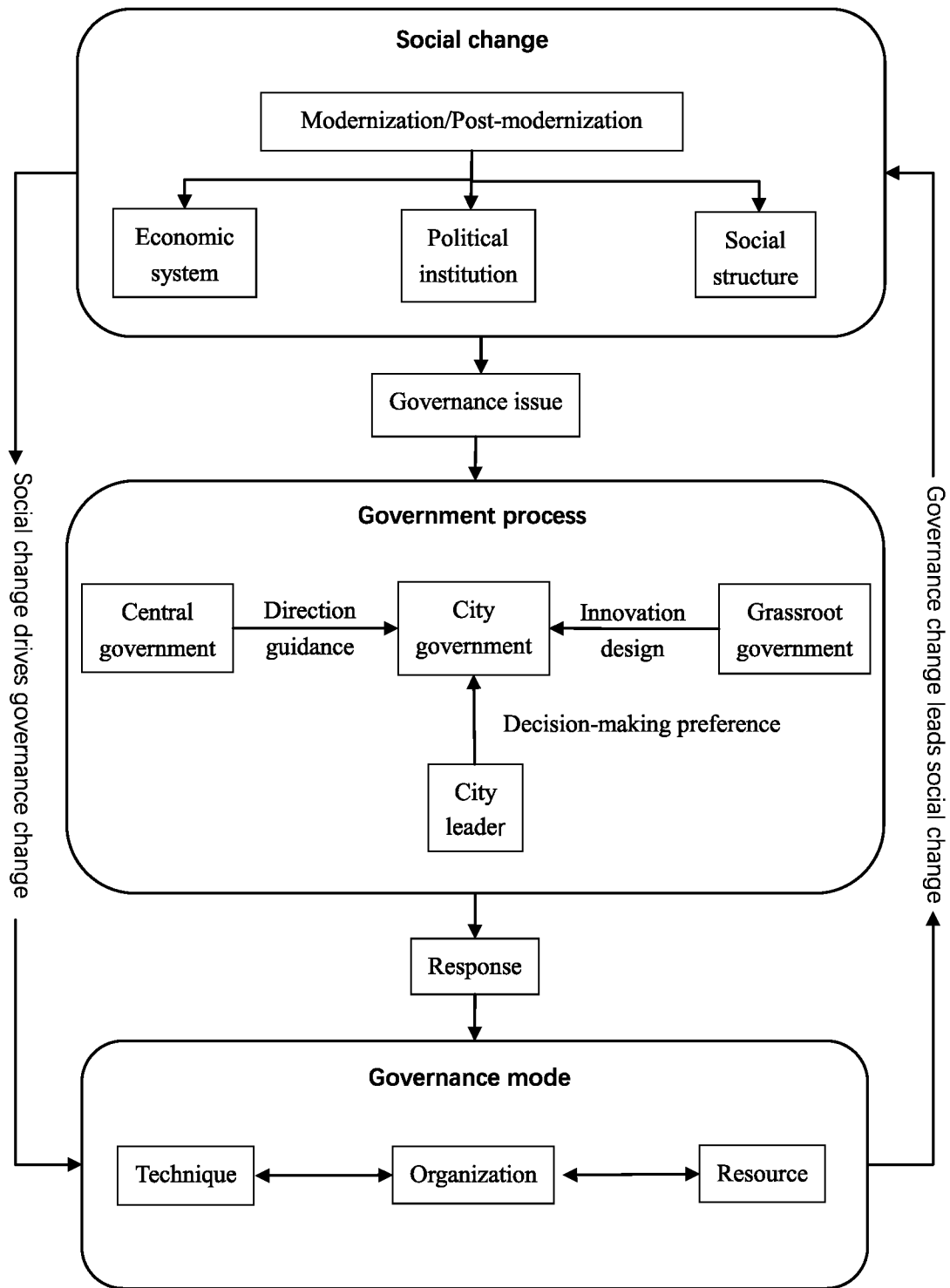


Figure 1: The Analytical Framework of the Evolution of Urban Grassroots Social Governance

structures and resource allocation. In the context of informatization, intelligent systems and data orientation, various new technologies such as big data, artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things can be applied to urban grassroots governance. Organizational structures reflect the forms (like work units, communities or grid-based systems) through which the government can have control and management, and provide services at the grassroots level. Resource allocation refers to the distribution of functions, personnel and material resources among various organizations, such as different bureaucratic departments and the district-level governments and town governments or communities. The innovation and expansion of grassroots governance approaches can resolve some social challenges in a given period, but often leaves certain problems unsolved or may create new challenges as a result of economic and social development. These emerging issues then become the driving force for the next cycle of grassroots governance reforms. This forms a demand-responsiveness cycle that underpins the iterative development of urban grassroots governance.

3. The Evolution of Beijing's Urban Grassroots Governance

This paper uses the transformation of Beijing's grassroots governance system as a case study to analyze and interpret the development and evolution patterns of urban grassroots governance in China. As the capital of China, Beijing has accumulated extensive governance experience and introduced numerous innovations during its urbanization process. Specifically, since the founding of the People's Republic of China, Beijing, with the large presence of government agencies and state-owned enterprises, has developed a work unit-based urban grassroots governance system that continues to exert long-lasting influence. In order to adapt to the rapid development of market economy and diversified ownerships, after the reform and opening-up, particularly in the 1990s, the community-based system was introduced to fill the governance gaps left by the decline of the work unit system (Bray, 2009). Meanwhile, market forces and social actors began to play a greater role in grassroots governance. By the 2000s, as urban management issues increased and Beijing prepared itself for the Olympic Games, the city pioneered and promoted the grid-based management model, supported by the widely-used information technology. This significantly enhanced the city's capacity for social management and the provision of public services at the grassroots level. In the new era, in response to the growing social demands and complex governance needs, Beijing initiated the "swift response to public complaints" reform, shifting from a top-down administrative approach to a bottom-up, demand-driven governance model.

The primary data sources for this analysis include documents such as Beijing Local Chronicles, Beijing Yearbook, Annual Report on Social Governance Development of Beijing, various policy documents issued by the Beijing government, and extensive field research results provided by the author on urban governance in Beijing.

3.1 Phase 1.0: Work-unit-based governance

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the country established a highly centralized planned economy, managing production and daily life through planned mechanisms. The work unit system became the primary model of social management in urban areas, with the vast majority of residents working in state-owned enterprises, public institutions, and government agencies. These organizations not only handled economic production but also assumed numerous social duties, providing services such as employment, education, healthcare, and elderly care. The government relied on these state-owned units to manage and control society, while providing comprehensive social services and

making individuals dependent on their work units. Through this “state-run society” model, the state integrated urban residents into a management system, effectively achieving grassroots social integration and control. At the same time, sub-district offices and residents’ committees were responsible for managing those outside of the work unit system, such as the unemployed and those receiving social assistance, and addressing the remaining parts left out of work units’ control.

The “omnipotent government” model was invented in response to the specific needs of the time. Ideologically, Marx and Engels envisioned a communist system where private ownership of production materials would be abolished, and the state would no longer function as an oppressive tool but would assume the role of social management. This ideology laid the groundwork for the formation of the omnipotent government. Additionally, the centralized social management model of the Soviet Union provided a direct reference for China’s urban governance system. After years of warfare and social instability, both the Party and the people shared a strong desire to rapidly overcome China’s backward economic conditions. International tensions and economic blockades against China further prompted the government to concentrate labor, material resources, and financial resources on developing heavy industry through its administrative function. This strategy was aligned with the demands of the time and received broad social support. The “state-run society” model, characterized by the work unit system and compatible with the planned economy system, encouraged all urban residents to engage in the programs supported by the government. Meanwhile, the centralized management and resource allocation mechanisms helped balance equity and efficiency in a context of material scarcity.

During this period, grassroots governance in Beijing was also based on the work unit system, and the roles of sub-district offices and residents’ committees had not yet fully developed. During the Liberation War, after the People’s Liberation Army took charge of Peiping (now Beijing), sub-district governments and grassroots work teams were temporarily abolished, and management was centralized at the municipal level. However, this led to the lack of organization and social disorder at the grassroots level. In response, by the end of 1952, Beijing began experimenting with the establishment of residents’ committees. With the implementation of the *Regulations on the Organization of Urban Sub-district Offices* and the *Regulations on the Organization of Urban Residents’ Committees* in 1954, Beijing established a system of sub-district offices and residents’ committees throughout the city.

However, the roles of sub-district offices and residents’ committees should not be overestimated at this time in grassroots social governance. In a report delivered in 1953, Peng Zhen, then the first secretary of the Beijing Municipal Party Committee, described the function of residents’ committees as “organizing the residents who are outside of factories, shops, government offices, and schools.” In other words, the primary governance mechanism was still the work unit system, while sub-district offices and residents’ committees played a supplementary role. The work unit not only served as a workplace but also managed various social affairs, such as marriage, childbirth, illness, funerals, and security, and provided all kinds of social welfare, encapsulated in the concept of “work unit-run society.”

Before the founding of the People’s Republic of China, grassroots governance in Beijing was carried out through the “baojia” system, which conducted the grassroots governance through personal surveillance and espionage. After the liberation of Peiping, the new government abolished this reactionary system and addressed grassroots management issues by mobilizing the masses. According to early documents on the construction of residents’ committees in Beijing, social relationships within the committee’s jurisdiction were still akin to rural, acquaintance-based societies, where governance relied on familiar relationships. Especially after the establishment of the work unit system, people in the same community were often not only neighbors but also colleagues, maintaining close social interactions. Therefore, traditional social governance methods based on familiarity were still applicable.

This social management model developed alongside the planned economy and gradually declined as a market economy emerged. Although this model played a positive role during its time, it led to the merging of society with the state, making them indistinguishable. In the “state-run society” model, on the one hand, there was a highly centralized state and government, and on the other hand, there were numerous relatively isolated and self-contained units. While this model fostered high levels of mobilization and efficiency in times of external pressure, it restricted individual freedom of movement and personal development. The top-down resource allocation was not conducive to economic growth and might easily breed bureaucracy, corruption, and abuse of power. As a result, after China’s economic reform toward a market-oriented economy began in 1978, the social management model in urban areas began to change.

3.2 Phase 2.0: Community-based governance

With the advancement of the reform and opening-up, the market and society gradually separated from the state, posing challenges to the work unit-based governance model that had been rooted in the planned economy. As China’s ownership structure transitioned from a single public ownership model to a socialist market economy where public ownership played the dominant role while developing together with other forms of ownership, significant changes occurred in the social structure. Social and economic components, employment patterns, and interest relationships diversified, and large numbers of people began working outside the state-owned units. The highly centralized work unit-based governance system could no longer accommodate this increasingly pluralistic social structure or the growing differentiation among social groups. During the 1980s and 1990s, the government actively launched reforms such as the separation of the government from enterprises and society and the state-owned enterprise reform. Various state-owned entities either voluntarily adjusted their roles or, due to reform pressures, passively abandoned many of the social functions they had previously assumed. As a result, the work unit-based social management system gradually disintegrated (Heberer & Göbel, 2011).

In response to this trend, the Ministry of Civil Affairs introduced the slogan “social welfare managed by society” in the early 1980s. Sub-districts and communities, which had previously played a supplementary role in the work unit system, became the main forces in social governance. As China’s socio-economic system transitioned, the government also recognized the need for a “limited state.” During the institutional reforms of 1988 and 1993, the government actively reduced its functions, departments, and personnel, and gradually abandoned many of its functions in economic and social management. During this period, the government redefined its role by focusing on maintaining public order, providing public services, and regulating the market, while other responsibilities were increasingly delegated to market forces and social organizations. China’s social structure gradually evolved into a tripartite system comprising the state, the market, and the community. On the one hand, by the separation of the government from enterprises, the government was able to delegate social functions it could not efficiently manage to the market, thus reducing the cost of social management while catering to the needs of various social interest groups. On the other hand, issues emerging during the development of the market economy, such as urban management, environmental protection, and public safety, needed resolving. Sub-district offices and communities became the ideal entities to assume these social responsibilities. In 1989, the *Urban Residents’ Committee Organization Law* was promulgated and implemented, and the concept of community governance began to be widely accepted by both government departments and society. The *Opinions on Promoting the Construction of Urban Communities Across the Country* shared by the State Council in 2000 marked that the establishment of communities became the core of urban grassroots governance.

This period also witnessed the rapid emergence and development of various social governance

actors. For instance, in 1988, the State Council revised and promulgated the *Regulations on the Registration and Administration of Social Organizations* and the *Interim Regulations on the Registration and Administration of Private Non-Enterprise Units*, signaling a shift of the government's management approach from restriction and prohibition to supervision and guidance. This shift had a positive impact on the development of social organizations in China, leading to a significant increase in their numbers and influence in social governance. At the same time, with the housing reforms of 1998 and a property boom, community autonomy became a new element in social governance. In this new environment, community residents, linked by property ownership, actively participated in self-management and self-service activities within their communities. Additionally, conflicts of interest arising out of the commercialization of property services and urban development prompted homeowners to voluntarily engage in rights protection activities, further contributing to the diversification of social governance forces during this period.

In Beijing, the work unit-based system persisted as the dominant model of grassroots governance for a longer period than in other cities. Until the 1990s, the community system had not fully replaced the work unit system. However, after the 1990s, as the reforms deepened and the needs of urban residents diversified, the problems at the urban grassroots level left by the decline of the work unit system became increasingly apparent. From 1998 to 2004, Beijing held five consecutive urban management conferences, during which the reforms focusing primarily on building up the community system were emphasized. With the central government's support, the Beijing municipal government decentralized certain management authorities and expanded the autonomy of community organizations. The primary goal was to improve the quality of life for community residents by relying on social forces and community resources to strengthen the function of communities, to cultivate and develop community service organizations, and to establish a socialized service network independent of work unit. In 2000, the Beijing municipal government further emphasized community autonomy, stating that "anything related to self-management and self-regulation should be handed over to society and residents themselves." During this period, multifunctional community centers, senior care institutions, and other service facilities were established, and the nature of community services shifted from being welfare-oriented to providing public services for all residents.

Simultaneously, Beijing clarified the urban management system during this period, adopting a "two-level government and three-level management" model, carrying out territorial management and having a focus on grassroots governance. Sub-district offices became the primary administrative units responsible for implementing comprehensive management functions in their areas. This produced a "vertical specialization and horizontal coordination" model of governance, where sub-district offices, as administrative units, could comprehensively manage their areas with support from governments at a higher level. Beijing also ensured adequate fiscal support for sub-district offices, preventing them from engaging in profit-making activities and allowing them to focus solely on managing grassroots affairs. Over time, sub-district offices were granted additional functions in areas such as environmental sanitation, green spaces, housing management, municipal facilities, and outdoor advertising. In a word, the goal at the phase was to strengthen the responsibilities and functions of sub-district offices and residents' committees in grassroots governance, enabling them to take on a more significant role in urban grassroots governance.

At the same time, new governance actors emerged, including property management companies and homeowners. After the 1990s, particularly after the commercialization of housing, property management companies began to play a vital part in community management, especially in that of private residential complexes. These companies provided professional services and helped improve the quality of life in

these communities. Meanwhile, property owners, with an increasing awareness of their property rights, began to participate in community affairs to safeguard their rights. Frequent conflicts then arose between property management companies, driven by market logic, and homeowners, driven by life or rights-based concerns. These property-related disputes became major issues in community governance during this period.

3.3 Phase 3.0: Grid-based governance

As economic development and urbanization continued to accelerate, a series of governance challenges emerged. The 2003 SARS outbreak exposed the shortcomings of government response to public health emergencies. Following this, issues such as food safety, environmental protection, market regulation, and the protection of vulnerable groups began to surface continuously, signaling that the “small government” model was no longer suitable for social governance. The government began to re-engage in social management and public services, gradually transforming into a service-oriented and responsible government. At the Fourth Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee in 2004, building a harmonious socialist society was identified as a major strategic task, and “social construction” was officially established alongside “economic construction,” “political construction,” and “cultural construction” as one of the four core components of modernization. In May 2011, the CPC Central Committee convened a meeting to discuss strengthening and innovating social management. This meeting not only highlighted the significance of innovation in social management but also outlined the direction for innovation: We will “improve the social governance model under which Party committees exercise leadership, governments assume responsibilities, non-governmental actors provide assistance, and the public get involved. We will strengthen public participation and rule of law in social governance, and make such governance smarter and more specialized.”

As social management became a core governance objective, several innovations in grassroots governance emerged during this period, with grid-based management being one of the most representative models. In 2004, Dongcheng District of Beijing pioneered the “ten-thousand-square-meter grid-based management” system, which marked an important reform in urban management nationwide. The grid-based management system divided the entire district into multiple grids of 10,000 square meters, with each grid being assigned to a designated person responsible for monitoring and managing that space around the clock. The goal was to ensure full-time, comprehensive, and layer management. The grid-based management system had the advantage of “horizontal and vertical coverage,” meaning that it extended governance to all corners of society. It also provided a more precise and effective management framework for dealing with grassroots issues, from community safety to urban cleanliness and public health emergencies.

During this period, the public service function of grassroots governance was also significantly strengthened. While the rapid development of the market economy improved the overall income levels of residents, it also intensified inequalities. Public discontent over unequal income distribution and insufficient public services often resulted in protests, revealing the underlying social tensions (Kan & Ku, 2021). To address this, the government needed to enhance its redistributive capacity and fill the gaps in public services. Grid-based management became an important tool in this effort, as it enabled the government to provide more comprehensive services. In July 2010, Beijing began piloting grid-based social service management in districts such as Dongcheng, Chaoyang, and Shunyi. The scope of the grid-based management expanded from monitoring urban infrastructure to public services.

Another key feature of Beijing’s grid-based governance during this period was the application of information technology in grassroots management. In May 2012, the Beijing Municipal Party Committee and the municipal government issued the *Opinions on Promoting the Construction of a Grid-Based*

Social Service Management System, which highlighted the need to “use electronic maps and modern information technology to incorporate people, land, objects, events, and organizations into the grid, and integrate social management resources and responsibilities into the grid.” The integration of information technology enabled the government which engaged in the Safe Beijing Program during the 2008 Olympic Games to enhance its capacity for monitoring and managing the urban environment, public safety, and social services.

However, while social management made progress in addressing existing social problems, new challenges emerged. The main issue was that social management remained a government-oriented model of grassroots governance. On the one hand, the government’s authority as the manager was too centralized, leading to a strong “top-down” orientation, so that public demands were not always adequately satisfied. On the other hand, the government took on the majority of administrative management functions, placing a heavy burden on government agencies. In the case of grid-based management, for example, the model was designed to enhance state capacity, but in practice, it revealed “organizational dysfunction.” The governance capacity of grid-based management remained limited. Even though the government decentralized its structure down to the grid level, each grid manager still had to oversee thousands or even tens of thousands of residents. In their daily work, grid managers could only post notifications or report major anomalies within their grids. Yet, under the administrative system that “authorities at higher levels are like thousands of threads and governments at the community level are the single needle that weaves”, tasks handed down from various sectors required execution, reporting, and evaluation by grid managers, which increased the burden on grassroots staff who struggled to cope with a multitude of top-down directives. Furthermore, grid-based management, as an extension of the administrative system, still faced inherent issues such as information asymmetry and distorted communication within the bureaucratic structure.

3.4 Phase 4.0: Responsive governance

At the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee in November 2013, improving and developing the socialist system with Chinese characteristics and modernizing the national governance system and governance capacity were set as the overarching objective of reforms. The *Decision on Several Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reform*, adopted at the plenary session, included a specific chapter on the innovation of the social governance system. This was the first time the concept of “social governance” appeared in an official Party document, marking the entry of grassroots governance into a new stage. Social management, which is primarily government-oriented and focuses on the exercise of public power, emphasizes the roles and responsibilities of the government. Social governance involves not only government departments but also social organizations and other actors. It emphasizes shared responsibilities among all organizations and individuals in society and advocates for collective construction and shared benefits (Changkun, Weiqi, & Ying, 2022). The *Report to the 19th CPC National Congress* further noted that China’s principal contradiction had shifted from “people’s ever-growing material and cultural needs versus backward social production” to “people’s growing needs for a better life versus unbalanced and inadequate development.” The report also called that “We will strengthen institution building in social governance and improve the social governance model under which Party committees exercise leadership, governments assume responsibilities, non-governmental actors provide assistance, and the public get involved. We will strengthen public participation and rule of law in social governance, and make such governance smarter and more specialized.”

Guided by this top-level design, China’s grassroots social governance innovation entered a period of rapid development, with various governance models emerging. At the same time, this period witnessed the rapid development of the internet and information technology, and digital governance tools were

increasingly applied in social governance. These tools provided powerful support for improving the coverage, convenience, and cost efficiency of governance. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of health codes and big data made large-scale population tracking and precise management possible, achieving results that would have been impossible with traditional, labor-intensive methods. Additionally, advances in information technology enabled the implementation of a multi-center governance model at the grassroots level. For instance, online governance interactions and government service hotlines significantly expanded the channels through which the public could express their opinions to the government, making governance more transparent and increasing the capacity and willingness of grassroots governments to respond to public demands. Emerging technologies such as block chain have also shifted away from traditional centralized hardware systems, enabling peer-to-peer, secure, and efficient information sharing, and thereby technologically challenging the government's dominant position in the governance system.

Beijing's "swift response to public complaints" reform is a prime example of social governance innovation during this period. As for governance demands, Beijing's governance in the new era revealed many issues in governing a megacity. By 2012, Beijing's population had reached 20 million, with an urbanization rate exceeding 80%, close to that of high-income countries. GDP per capita had reached 92,800 yuan, ranking first among all provinces and municipalities in China. However, rapid urbanization also brought a series of governance challenges. First, the large population led to some governance issues such as air pollution, traffic congestion, housing shortages, water scarcity, and public safety concerns—known collectively as "urban diseases," which intensified after 2010. Second, Beijing became a diverse city. In 2012, the non-local population totaled 7.73 million, accounting for 38% of the city's residents, with varying living conditions, occupations, and lifestyles, significantly complicating grassroots governance. Lastly, as the capital of China, Beijing faced unique political sensitivity in urban governance, where even minor issues might have political implications. The limitations of traditional grassroots governance methods made it difficult to report issues to higher-level authorities in a timely manner, which easily posed potential governance risks.

The *Beijing Urban Master Plan (2016-2035)* provided a roadmap and direction for a new phase of urban governance in Beijing. During his first inspection tour of Beijing on February 26, 2014, President Xi Jinping laid out the strategic position of Beijing as China's political center, cultural center, international exchange hub, and technology innovation center. He also emphasized the need to streamline non-core functions of the capital, effectively control population size, promote balanced regional population distribution, and improve the quality of urban infrastructure. These guiding principles were formalized in the *Beijing Urban Master Plan (2016-2035)*, released in September 2017, which clarified the transition from expansive growth to "reduction-based but high-quality" development. The Plan specifically highlighted the need to "actively respond to public concerns" and "improve the urban governance system," laying the foundation for subsequent grassroots governance reforms.

The "quick response to community calls" reform in Pinggu District provided an innovative grassroots governance solution for Beijing's transformation in this phase. In 2016, a fatal illegal gold mining accident in Jinhaihu Town, Pinggu District, exposed the limitations of the existing governance system: sub-district offices and township governments were responsible for local governance but lacked enforcement power, while district-level enforcement agencies, despite possessing necessary authority, were too distant from the site to respond promptly with their decentralized power. To address the persistent problem of illegal mining, Pinggu District devised an innovative enforcement and response mechanism known as the "quick response to community calls" reform. Under this system, when township governments or sub-district offices detected governance issues, they would "make a call" and the relevant

enforcement agencies were required to respond within 30 minutes, forming a coordinated enforcement effort. This reform granted township governments and sub-district offices the authority to command enforcement agencies, ensuring that issues could be resolved promptly and effectively, and addressing the “last mile” challenge in grassroots governance.

The success of the “quick response to community calls” reform in Pinggu District not only addressed local governance challenges but also provided a solution to the broader governance issues faced by Beijing as a megacity. Governance of megacities is inherently complex, and the fragmentation of governance responsibilities in existing systems often hindered the capacity of grassroots departments to respond to public demands and resolve governance issues. As a result, the “quick response to community calls” reform received strong support from Beijing’s leadership.

In January 2018, the Beijing Municipal Reform Leadership Group adopted the *Implementation Plan for CPC Building-led Governance System Innovation in Subdistricts and Townships* for “quick response to community calls”, which institutionalized the reform across the city’s 169 subdistricts and townships as the top reform priority of 2018. Under the leadership of Cai Qi, the Secretary of the CPC Beijing Municipal Committee, the reform was piloted across the city, and the results were overwhelmingly positive. The Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform also praised Beijing’s reforms at its fifth meeting.

The success of the reform pilots, combined with the central government’s support, prompted Beijing to expand the “quick response to community calls” reform to cover all 333 subdistricts and townships in the city as of January 1, 2019. This reform was then integrated into the “swift response to public complaints” initiative, which introduced a new performance evaluation system based on the handling of citizen complaints received through the 12345 hotline. Beijing integrated more than 60 service hotlines into a unified 12345 platform, which handled all complaints from residents, categorized them based on urgency, and forwarded them to relevant government departments for quick response (Wei, Wang, Zhai, & Li, 2023). Government agencies were required to resolve issues within a specified time frame and provide feedback to the complaints. The 12345 hotline center conducted follow-up calls to assess citizen satisfaction, and performance evaluations were based on response rates, problem-solving rates, and satisfaction levels. These evaluations were published monthly, and poor performance could result in disciplinary action. The “swift response to public complaints” reform significantly improved grassroots governments’ capacity and willingness to respond to public demands and enhanced the overall quality of public services in Beijing. improve the social governance system based on collaboration, participation, and shared benefits,

3.5 Phase 5.0 Collaborative governance

The *Report to the 20th CPC National Congress* emphasizes the need to “improve the social governance system based on collaboration, participation, and shared benefits, enhance the efficiency of social governance, maintain open and regular channels for learning about people’s concerns, handle their claims, and protect their rights and interests, and foster a community of social governance in which everyone fulfills their responsibilities and shares in the benefits”. This statement clarifies the people-centered approach to social governance, defines the critical role of multiple stakeholders in governance, and sets the ultimate goal of constructing a “social governance community”.

The *Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Further Deepening Reform Comprehensively to Advance Chinese Modernization* adopted at the third plenary session of the 20th CPC Central Committee in July 2024, further elaborated on the development of urban grassroots governance, such as “enhancing the Party organization-led urban and rural community governance system based on self-governance, the rule of law, and the rule of virtue, and improving the social

governance system based on collaboration, participation, and benefit sharing”, “strengthening the ranks of social workers, and advancing the development of the volunteer service system”, “improving the social governance capacity of cities, and ensuring that citizen hotlines and other public service platforms function more effectively”. These measures provide a more detailed framework for the development of urban grassroots governance.

As the focus of governance shifts further downward, subdistrict and township governments, as well as communities, are taking on increasingly significant grassroots governance functions. While this shift enhances the ability of grassroots departments to respond to and address residents’ demands, it also places burdens on these departments. The widespread application of information technology in public administration has revealed its drawbacks, particularly within the governance structure of “thousands of threads above, one needle below”. Enhanced supervision and evaluation capabilities of higher-level departments over grassroots units have led to issues such as “digital burdens” and “superficial formalism at one’s fingertips”. In recent years, with the central government advocating for “austerity for Party and government bodies” and “spending every penny where it matters most,” improving the efficiency of urban grassroots governance and avoiding excessive and ineffective use of resources has become a pressing issue.

A new topic has been introduced in the *Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, namely the construction of a social governance community and the formation of a governance pattern in which all members of society have responsibilities, fulfil their obligations and enjoy the benefits. In addition, the report sets out a goal for solving the current problems of grassroots governance. Urban residents, as key participants in grassroots governance, often display polarized attitudes. Under normal circumstances, residents tend to be indifferent or minimally engaged in community governance, showing “weak participation” or “non-participation”. However, when disputes arise, such as property management conflicts or issues related to public services, residents often engage in intense and confrontational participation, expressing demands through protests or collective actions, sometimes escalating into mass incidents with broader social impacts. Neither prolonged political apathy nor sporadic bursts of activism represent a healthy state of resident participation in community governance.

During this period, Beijing’s urban grassroots governance model has undergone continuous updates and improvements. In the early stages of the Swift Response to Public Complaints reform, the focus was on leveraging the 12345 government hotline to enhance grassroots departments’ responsiveness to public demands. Assessment and ranking of grassroots governments and related departments were based on metrics such as responsiveness rates. However, as the reform entered a deeper phase, new governance challenges emerged, such as the overreliance on government administration for grassroots affairs, which fostered a spectator mentality among residents. This created a mindset of “turn to the government or community for everything”, with low levels of resident participation in community activities. Additionally, grassroots departments played a passive role in the Swift Response to Public Complaints reform, as their agendas were either dictated by top-down administrative orders or driven by bottom-up demands. This resulted in a coexistence of administrative domination and fragmented governance.

To address these new challenges, Beijing proposed transitioning from “responding upon receipt” to “proactive governance.” On the one hand, institutional mechanisms were introduced to enhance the government’s ability to set governance agendas based on public opinion. For example, in 2021, the “Monthly Focus” initiative identified 27 issues in 12 categories from hotline big data, prioritizing pressing public concerns as entry points for proactive governance. Citywide efforts resolved many grassroots challenges that were previously unattainable. On the other hand, grassroots governments and communities

were encouraged to adopt various methods suited to local conditions to identify and address potential governance issues proactively. For instance, the Lai Guangying Subdistrict in Beijing's Chaoyang District promoted a "Report Instantly" mechanism, enabling residents to report issues in real time to community or subdistrict departments for prompt feedback and resolution. This approach not only reduced the burden on the 12345 hotline but also strengthened mutual trust, responsibility, and a sense of belonging among diverse stakeholders through close communication and collaboration between communities and residents.

Moreover, incentivizing diverse stakeholders to participate more actively in grassroots governance became a key focus of Beijing's governance reforms during this period. Several subdistrict and township governments innovated in this area. For example, a points-based system was widely implemented to regulate deviant social behaviors and mobilize social forces for governance by linking points to rewards. Shunyi District pioneered a points-based governance pilot, establishing a points management ledger where Party members earned individual points and residents earned household points. Points could be redeemed for rewards quarterly, creating an atmosphere of "everyone can participate, and everyone benefits", thus fostering the sustainable development of grassroots governance. Similarly, the Dahongmen Subdistrict in Fengtai District introduced the "Community Partner" system to address complex governance challenges in older neighborhoods. This model integrated subdistricts, partner organizations, industry experts, communities, and engaged residents across sectors and domains to collaboratively address issues. These grassroots innovations aim to mobilize social forces and encourage positive participation in governance, ultimately forming a social governance community where everyone is responsible and fulfills their duties.

4. Analysis of the Evolution of Urban Grassroots Governance Based on Historical Examination

Based on the previous analysis of the transformation of urban grassroots governance in China using Beijing as a case study, we can summarize the evolutionary logic of urban grassroots governance in China. In the face of changes in political systems, economic structures, and social configurations, as well as the resulting demands for urban governance, municipal governments—under the dual forces of top-down pressure and bottom-up innovation—continuously adjust governance methods, including technological tools, organizational structures, and resource allocation. This ongoing adjustment has driven the development and innovation of urban grassroots governance in China. Specifically, we can outline the key characteristics of the evolution regarding China's urban grassroots governance as follows:

4.1 Impetus for Evolution: A Comprehensive Response to Social Demands and the Joint Action of Multiple Actors

The transformation of urban governance systems is not simply a mechanical response to social needs. Rather, it resembles a system driven by systems theory in politics. First, social change provides a basic context for the transformation of urban governance systems. If we review key moments in the transformation of urban governance in China, we can find that they coincide with significant changes in the socio-economic structure. For example, after the founding of the People's Republic of China, with the establishment of the socialist system and the planned economy, the work unit-based system became the main organizational form of grassroots governance, characterized by centralized control. Through the work unit system, the government exercised comprehensive control and management, and

provided services for urban residents. During the market economy transition and rapid urbanization brought by the reform and opening-up, the work unit-based system gradually broke up, and sub-district offices and residents' committees assumed the primary functions of urban grassroots governance. As the market economy continued to develop and urbanization intensified, the grid-based organizational structure emerged, delegating more governance functions to grassroots governments, which took on more responsibilities in social management, public service delivery, and the maintenance of social order.

While social change necessitated adjustments in the grassroots governance model, the specific direction of this evolution depends on the government's innovation and decision-making within the bureaucratic system. First, the central government sets the direction for governance reforms based on national governance trends and future planning through policy documents, official statements, and meetings. For example, the establishment of the community system was closely tied to the *Opinions on Promoting the Construction of Urban Communities across the Country* issued at the turn of the century. Similarly, the spread and promotion of the grid-based system was driven by the policy direction set by the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee, which called for "grid-based management." Second, grassroots innovations provide alternative solutions to urban governance reforms. Grassroots governments, as the most dynamic and innovative components of the national governance system, often develop creative reform initiatives based on their unique conditions and needs. The final decision on which governance model will be adopted on a city-wide scale depends largely on the preferences and ideas of the leaders of a municipal government.

This logic demonstrates that the evolution of China's urban grassroots governance is not, as modernization theory suggests, an inevitable outcome of social structural changes. Nor should it be viewed merely as the product of decisions made within a closed government bureaucratic system, as some studies suggest. Instead, it is an open, pluralistic decision-making system capable of integrating multiple interests. There is a dynamic relationship between society and the government that social demands as input can influence governance reforms as output, enabling municipal governments to continuously respond to social changes. Within the bureaucratic system, there is an interactive process between the top-down mechanism and the bottom-up mechanism. The governance model that may finally emerge is the result of the integration of various ideas and interests, which reflects the distinct characteristics of China's urban governance experience.

4.2 Evolutionary Model: Maintaining Stability in the Governance System While Updating Governance Mechanisms and Technologies

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the fundamental governance structure, with Party leadership at its core, has remained stable, although the urban governance system in China can be divided into several progressive stages. During the period characterized by the work unit system, the Party managed and provided services to urban residents through various state-owned enterprises and institutions. In the community system era, the Party's role was strengthened through community Party branches, which guided and coordinated community committees in managing residents' lives, community affairs, and other administrative tasks. After the 18th CPC National Congress, Party leadership in grassroots governance was further enhanced by constructing Party coordination mechanisms, promoting Party members to report to grassroots organizations, and establishing Party and community service centers. This continuity of Party leadership ensures that the evolution of the urban governance system keeps on-going and that reforms proceed with continuity.

While the overall governance structure remains stable, governance mechanisms can be adjusted more flexibly and tailored to specific needs. This flexibility is reflected in organizational forms. For instance, sub-district offices and residents' committees were established in the 1950s, but at that time, the

work unit-based system better suited the needs of a planned economy, so sub-district offices and residents' committees played only a supplementary role and managed those outside state-owned enterprises and institutions. However, after the reform and opening-up, as the number of people working outside state-owned enterprises and institutions increased, sub-district offices and residents' committees replaced work units to be the main entities responsible for grassroots social management. Flexibility in governance mechanisms is also evident in resource allocation. For example, the relationship between vertical lines and horizontal lines has always been central to the urban grassroots governance system, and recent reforms, such as the "quick response to community calls" system, are aimed at redistributing resources and responsibilities between the two systems. This restructuring addresses issues such as insufficient and fragmented enforcement capacities, enabling a more integrated approach to increasingly complex urban governance challenges.

Moreover, another key feature of China's urban governance system is the active adoption of new governance technologies and tools. With the rapid advances in information technology such as the internet, big data, and artificial intelligence, digital governance tools have been widely applied in grassroots governance. One prominent example is the "swift response to public complaints" reform in Beijing, which is based on the 12345 hotline. The government can use first-hand information from citizens submitted online to gather public demands. Information technology helps address long-standing issues in grassroots governance, such as communication gaps within the bureaucratic system and the lack of public representatives in decision-making processes. The application of technology also drives the reform of governance mechanisms. Transparency, data sharing, and platform collaboration inherent in internet technology require grassroots governance systems to become more transparent, open, and collaborative so that governance mechanisms can be perfected.

4.3 Evolutionary Outcome: "Cumulative Development" in Governance Mechanisms and Technology

The modernization theory tends to describe social change and the resulting transformation of governance systems as a process of systemic update. For example, in the agricultural era, society consisted of nomadic tribes or small farming families, and social management was based on patriarchal structures such as tribes, clans, and communes. In the industrial era, these social forms disintegrated and were replaced by social organizations linked by production relations, and social management became reliant on the bureaucratic-administrative system. In other words, each stage of change, whether in social structure (demanding side) or in governance model (responding side), replaces and surpasses the previous stage.

However, a historical examination of the transformation of China's urban governance system reveals the logic of "cumulative development" rather than the "replacement development" posited by the modernization theory. In other words, while new governance mechanisms and tools are continuously introduced into the governance system, the old mechanisms remain in force and effect. For example, the work unit system widely used during the planned economy era still exists in certain forms today. In Beijing, for instance, various government units still play a significant role in urban governance. Some government units directly participate in community affairs; some community members belong to the same unit. Under such situations, the work unit still plays a vital role. Thus, new governance mechanisms and old ones coexist in urban grassroots governance and both of them can be applied as needed.

Additionally, "cumulative development" is also reflected in the organic integration of old and new governance mechanisms. For instance, in Beijing, the grid-based system has not diminished in importance due to the introduction of new governance models such as "quick response to community calls" and "swift response to public complaints". Instead, the combination of these models has formed a "hotline plus grid" governance model. Beijing has aligned the categorization of problems identified by the grid-

based management system with the classification standards of the 12345 hotline, creating a unified standard for issue resolution. This integration enables data matching and aggregation between the hotline and grid-based system. Currently, the system matches the hotline's 18 primary categories, 67 secondary categories, and 150 tertiary categories with the grid management system's 104 part-related issues and 82 event-related issues in some districts. This matching helps find out highly-frequent, unresolved problems and take them as the focus of urban governance, laying the data foundation for addressing urban management issues proactively.

5. Conclusion

The different phases of China's urban grassroots governance reforms reflect various combinations of governance elements—such as organizational structures, resource allocation, and mechanism design—under distinct historical contexts and governance needs. These phases demonstrate the responsiveness and adaptability of urban social governance in China. During the planned economy era, the omnipotent government took charge of all social affairs, marking the “state-run society” phase. After the market-oriented reform, the government began to shed powers, relinquishing a range of functions in economic and social management, and transitioning to the governance based on sub-district offices and residents' committees. This period witnessed the rapid emergence and development of diverse governance actors. As governance challenges grew alongside economic development, urbanization, and industrialization, the government resumed its social governance responsibilities including labor, social security, education, healthcare, housing, public safety, and dispute resolution, and introduced a model represented by the grid-based management. With concepts such as the “building of a city by the people and for the people” and “government responsiveness” taking root, grassroots governance shifted from the top-down administration to bottom-up responses to citizen demands, making public needs the focus of grassroots governance. Relying on advances in information technology, governance has become increasingly intelligent and convenient.

Throughout the evolution of China's urban grassroots governance, the driving force behind the reforms is the government's proactive response to social changes and residents' needs, facilitated by vertical coordination within the bureaucratic system. The model of evolution reflects the stability in the governance system; governance mechanisms and technologies are continuously upgraded. The result is the “cumulative development” of governance mechanisms and technologies, leading to the expansion of the governance methods.

China's urban grassroots governance reforms, as an essential part of Chinese modernization, exhibit both the uniqueness of China's governance and general trends in urban governance transformation. First, the comprehensive Party leadership has not only provided a clear direction for urban grassroots governance but also enhanced the continuity of governance reforms. Whether during the phase of “state-run society” in the early economic reform period or during the multi-actors participation phase in the marketization, Party leadership has been involved. This leadership has ensured that urban grassroots governance remains strategically consistent across different historical periods, avoiding the discontinuities caused by policy shifts and allowing innovations and developments at each stage to be built on prior achievements in order to ensure cumulative progress.

Second, the core logic of urban grassroots governance evolution is the combination of the top-down mechanism and the bottom-up mechanism within the “demand-responsiveness” framework.

Every adjustment and reform in urban governance, whether in resource allocation or mechanism design, ultimately aims to better respond to the practical needs arising out of social change. For instance, early grassroots governance models focused more on providing basic social management and public services. As social conflicts grew, governance evolved towards a more responsive and refined approach to address complex social problems. The focus of this logic is the changing needs of the people and corresponding governance upgrades to meet those needs.

Lastly, China's urban grassroots governance demonstrates strong dynamic characteristics, continuously adapting to new social demands while actively incorporating new governance technologies. With the widespread application of information and intelligent technology, new tools have been widely integrated into grassroots governance practices. Both applying the grid-based system to enhance precision in grassroots governance and building expression and response mechanisms around public demands to achieve a demand-oriented grassroots governance system reflect the ongoing evolution of grassroots governance. The system has gradually transitioned from traditional administrative management to a modern, intelligent model.

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Democratic Supervision System with Chinese Characteristics: From the Perspective of the People's Supervision System Based on Swift Response to Public Complaints

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ABSTRACT: Featuring the CPC's leadership, governmental responsibility, democratic consultation, social coordination, public participation, legal guarantee and technological support, the People's Supervision System is part of the mechanism of *Swift Response to Public Complaints*. Under the background of China's efforts to deepen reform comprehensively to advance Chinese modernization, the People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* is led by the Communist Party of China. With the Party's theoretical and organizational guidance, it follows the concept of "putting the people first", and coordinates and brings together various supervisory bodies and stakeholders, reflecting its political attribute. The Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints provides an institutional framework by setting out the supervisory targets, the scope of supervisory matters, the powers (or rights) and of the supervisors and the supervised, embodying the rule of law in the supervision. Whole-process people's democracy is practised under the People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints*, in an effort to address public complaints without delay, and protect the supervisory rights of the people throughout the whole process, which highlights the democratic attribute of the system. With division of responsibilities, mutual cooperation and mutual checks, people's congresses, government departments, the supervisory committees, courts and procuratorates exercise their respective supervisory power by heeding the public opinion and urging government departments to perform public governance responsibilities, which highlights the effectiveness of this system. With the adoption of digital technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data, the

¹ This paper is a phased research result of Beijing's high-end think tank project "People's Supervision System based on Swift Response to Public Complaints" (Project No.2023PKUZKZD008). Project leader: Wang Lei, professor of Peking University Law School. Project participants: Zhou Xiaoqi, doctoral candidate of Peking University; Ren Dekun, doctoral candidate of Peking University; Tie Jingke, doctoral candidate of Peking University.

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People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* has broadened supervisory channels, filled the digital divide and eliminated cross-departmental barriers, leveraging the role of data in empowering the supervisory process. Under the leadership of the Party and the rule of law, the People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* is an innovative step to act on President Xi Jinping's important instruction of "combining self-supervision and public oversight as a strong driving force". It highlights the political, democratic, and law-based nature of supervision and its effectiveness, reflecting distinct Chinese characteristics. It is an innovative endeavor to practise the concept of whole-process people's democracy in the field of supervision and a vivid embodiment of the efforts to modernize the state governance system and capacity, providing Beijing's experience for developing the people's supervision system for Chinese modernization in the new era.

KEYWORDS: Swift Response to Public Complaints; People's Supervision System; Whole-Process People's Democracy; Law-Based Governance in All Fields; Chinese Modernization

1. Introduction

The Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Further Deepening Reform Comprehensively to Advance Chinese Modernization has clarified that the overall goal of further deepening reform is to continue to improve and develop the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics and modernize China's system and capacity for governance. Supervision is an inherent element of governance. The supervision system is part of China's governance system. To oversee power is always one of the core issues of Party building and national governance. Most countries and regions have carried out practices and put into institutional frameworks for supervision in accordance with their own polity (Guo & Zhang, 2023). In the face of challenges such as fragmentation of administrative system, unequal distribution of resources and diversification of public demands in the process of urban governance, it is necessary to keep government power in check and urge the government to actively perform its governance duties through oversight. This involves multiple stakeholders such as political parties, the public, and state organs, and is related to various aspects such as improving mechanisms, developing new methods, pooling expertise and coordinating resources for oversight. It is an extremely complex systematic endeavor.

"The systems thinking is a fundamental idea and working method." (Xi, 2020) "Apply systems thinking" is an important viewpoint and methodology of Marxism. A system refers to an organic whole with a specific structure and function, and is composed of interrelated and interacting elements which interplay with the external environment. As a comprehensive mega-city governance mechanism, *Swift Response to Public Complaints* in Beijing is a system in itself. According to Article 3 of the Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints, "*The Work of Swift Response to Public Complaints* shall adopt a people-centered approach, follow the guidance of the Party Committees, pursue reform and innovation, shift the focus to the community level, and create inter-departmental synergy. Under this system, the CPC leadership, the government responsibility, democratic consultation, social coordination, public participation, legal guarantee and technological support shall reinforce each other." As a part of the mechanism of *Swift Response to Public Complaints*, the People's Supervision System shares the same basic principles and core characteristics as the mechanism.

1.1 The Goal of the People's Supervision System based on Swift Response to Public Complaints

The goal of a system not only clarifies the basic logic of its design and operation, but is also a key

criterion for measuring its performance and effect and therefore makes clear how a system should be improved. The People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* has a twofold goal, that is, the system should not only highlight the "democracy" of supervision, but also maintain the "effectiveness" of supervision.

Public oversight, if not combined with oversight by public powers, will lack coercive and binding force. Meanwhile, it must be recognized that although the traditional self-supervision by public powers is coercive, it inevitably has inherent flaws. For example, due to the complex demographic structure, diversified economic forms, and strong social mobility of modern cities, escalation of disputes and even public opinion incidents occur from time to time. By relying only on the power and resources of public authorities, it is impossible to locate and track potential social risks in a timely manner and identify problems in supervision, and as a result, more often than not, "the government tries hard while the people don't recognize it" (Research Center for Data Governance, Tsinghua University, 2022).

As the *White Paper on China: Democracy That Works* points out, democracy starts with the full expression of the people's wishes, but if people can only voice their wishes but have no way to fulfill them, that is no real democracy. The People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* not only requires the public hotline service agency to handle the demands of ordinary people without thresholds, but also adopts various measures to fulfill its commitments, that is, to effectively urge the responsible departments to investigate problems and plug loopholes in a timely manner. Therefore, in the People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints*, the process of "submitting complaints" is a form of external supervision by ordinary people, while the process of "handling complaints" is a form of internal supervision by public powers. As the "front end" and "back end" of the People's Supervision System, the two processes aim to achieve the goal of the "democracy" of supervision and the "effectiveness" of supervision simultaneously, which means the system focuses on not only the "full expression of the people's wishes", but also the "fulfillment of the people's wishes".

1.2 The Environment of People's Supervision System based on Swift Response to Public Complaints

According to the classical understanding, the word "system" derives from the ancient Greek word *sunistemi*, which refers to a whole composed of various elements (Gao, 2005). These elements maintain a certain mutual relationship between each other, and each has its own specific position in the whole. Unlike traditional system theory, which focuses on the interior of the system and the relationship between the whole and its components, German sociologist Luhmann's system theory reflects on the relationship between the system and its environment. According to Luhmann, relationship to the environment is constitutive in system formation (Luhmann, 1995). Therefore, the structures and processes of a system are only possible in relation to an environment, and they can only be understood if considered in this relationship. We can even say that a system is its relation to its environment (Luhmann, 1982).

The People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* is not a closed system. Rather, it is an open one in the context of China's efforts to comprehensively deepen reform to advance Chinese modernization. It is formed under China's political party system, legal system, democratic system and public power system and under the context of fast-developing digital technologies. Its openness to the above institutional environment has created an "input-change-output" cycle between the system and its environment, which helps avoid rigidity and maintain vitality of the system.

2. Leadership of the CPC: Political Pillar of the People's Supervision System Based on Swift Response to Public Complaints

Unlike political parties in Western countries, whose aim is to express individual interests, and campaign to win as many votes as possible, the CPC is a powerful political organization that permeates into every dimension of social affairs and organizes, leads, manages and guides the entire society and the whole country, playing an important role in organizing the society, uniting the people and governing the nation (Li, 2020). As stipulated in Article 4 of the Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints, “the city (Beijing) shall, under the unified leadership of the CPC Beijing Municipal Committee, establish and improve the leadership system and working mechanism for *Swift Response to Public Complaints*, and plan and promote the work of *Swift Response to Public Complaints* as a whole”. As the most important element, the leadership of CPC has influenced and shaped, from theoretical and organizational aspects, the People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* in its formation, development and improvement. Leadership by the CPC is the fundamental political underpinning to ensure that the entire Swift Response to Public Complaints does not deviate from what is intended.

2.1 Theoretical Leadership of the CPC

2.1.1 Combining “Public Scrutiny” and “Self-Reform”: The Theoretical Basis and Political Foundation

In 1945, Mao Zedong had a far-reaching dialogue with Mr. Huang Yanpei, a democrat, in Yan'an. In response to Huang's question on how to escape the historical cycle of rapid rise and fall, Mao replied, “Our Communist Party has found a new way to escape the historical cycle. This is democracy. The government will not dare slacken its effort only under the people's scrutiny. The government will not perish only when everyone rises up and takes up responsibility.” (*Chronicle of Mao Zedong*, 2013) In 2022, in the report to the 20th National Congress of the CPC, President Xi Jinping solemnly declared that “Through painstaking efforts, the Party has found a second answer to the question of how to escape the historical cycle of rise and fall. The answer is self-reform.”

President Xi Jinping emphasizes that, “over the past one hundred years, the Party has ensured its lasting vitality and robust growth by relying on developing people's democracy and accepting public scrutiny from outside the Party, and on strengthening self-governance and self-reform within the Party. It has had the courage and determination to uphold the truth and correct mistakes.” (Xi, 2023) It can be seen that “public scrutiny” places greater emphasis on supervision by the ordinary people outside the system of public power, while “self-reform” places greater emphasis on self-supervision of the Party and self-supervision within the system of public power. In fact, the courage to carry out self-reform and accept public oversight are intrinsically consistent. Both are rooted in the Party's founding mission (Xi, 2023), which is to pursue happiness for the Chinese people and rejuvenation for the Chinese nation.

In the People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints*, “public oversight” mainly takes the form of supervision by ordinary people outside the public power system, and “self-reform” mainly takes the form of self-supervision within the public power system. The underlying reason why the two can be integrated is that their ultimate purposes and values are highly consistent. Both aim to ensure that power is exercised for the public good and the fruits of development are shared by the people. Although the two elements act in different domains, they are logically consistent and mutually reinforcing in practice. Together, they have provided a solid theoretical basis and political foundation for the implementation of President Xi Jinping's important instruction of “combining self-supervision and

public oversight as a powerful driving force”.

2.1.2 Public Oversight: Carry Forward the CPC's Mass Line and the Fengqiao Model

President Xi Jinping emphasizes that “we are always humbled by the people. We must turn to the competent and the wise for advice and fully respect the people's wishes, experience, rights and roles.” (Xi, 2021) The core innovation of the supervision system with regard to *Swift Response to Public Complaints* is that it manifests the CPC's people-centered philosophy of development, inherits and develops the Party's mass line¹ and the Fengqiao Model², respects the people's principal position and pioneering spirit, and receives complaints through the government hotlines without imposing any thresholds to maximize public participation in community-level governance, allowing the public to act as a “whistleblower,” “assessor,” “judge,” and “scorer”. Such a supervisory system guarantees the people's management of community-level public affairs in accordance with the law and carries forward whole-process people's democracy. It aims to meet the people's needs to their satisfaction, and match the supply of public services with the people's real needs to the greatest extent. It can help the public supervisory organs to identify the pressing difficulties and problems calling for supervision, resolve the disputes at the community level and enhance the efficiency of self-supervision of public powers.

2.1.3 Self-Reform: Follow a People-centered Approach in the Supervision of Public Powers

Firstly, self-reform is reflected in the constant improvement in values, which requires the removal of obsolete bureaucracy and formalism.

“In the people, the Party has its roots, its lifeblood, and its source of strength.” (Xi, 2021) The Communist Party of China comes from the people, is rooted in the people, and is dedicated to serving the people. Putting the people first is the most fundamental value that the Communist Party of China practices. Although the nature and purposes of the Party as well as the Constitution and the Organization Law all require public authorities to be people-oriented in the exercise of their powers, there is always a gap between what should be and what is. For example, administrative organs adopt a typical hierarchical organization structure, and if administrative organs at a higher level exert pressure on those at a lower level as the main way to urge them to realize the aspirations of the people, it may lead to “goal displacement”. In this case, performance appraisal, which is intended as a means, will become the ultimate goal, and the focus of lower-level administrative organs will shift from fulfilling their statutory duties and addressing the people's demands to obtaining better performance ratings. Thus, what is supposed to be long-term supervision will be turned into cursory supervision, distorting the original intent and purpose of the supervision. Therefore, leadership by the CPC is the fundamental political guarantee for the mechanism of *Swift Response to Public Complaints* to be faithfully observed. Only under the strong and all-encompassing leadership of the CPC, can the idea of “putting the people first” be practised to the letter in People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints*, and can public powers overcome bureaucracy and formalism in the self-supervision to maintain the original aspiration and mission to serve the people.

Secondly, an important way of self-reform is proactive reform of institutional mechanisms.

Traditional self-supervision of public powers, especially internal supervision of the administrative

1 Mass line is a political strategy adopted by the CPC, emphasizing close ties between leaders and the masses, listening to the opinions and needs of the masses in order to better formulate and implement policies.

2 The Fengqiao model refers to the experience created by the people in Fengqiao Town, Zhuji City, Zhejiang Province, in the early 1960s, the essence of which is “mobilizing and relying on the masses, insisting on not handing over the disputes to the superior government by solving them at the grassroots level”.

organs, is unidirectional. Although *China: Democracy That Works* clearly emphasizes that in terms of administrative supervision, “different organs supervise each other, and conduct internal supervision from top to bottom and from bottom to top”, the hierarchical system improves the efficiency of administrative organizations by emphasizing the leadership of superiors over subordinate, while in fact, it diminishes the feasibility of mutual supervision and bottom-up supervision, as it has well-defined governance jurisdiction and rules, and emphasizes the clear division of activities.

As a result of the top-down hierarchical system, the upper administrative organs tend to impose the targets in supervising the performance of the lower ones in the name of making sure responsibility is fulfilled at each level. In fact, the upper organ's responsibility for governance is shifted to lower ones, resulting in the “abuse of accountability”. As a result, the lower-level organs, especially the community-level ones, face enormous tasks and pressures and the risk of accountability, even though they lack sufficient power and human, material and financial resources. This creates excessive burdens for community-level administrative organs and leaves little room for them to take the initiative and make innovations. Meanwhile, the community-level organs, when supervised by their superiors, will in turn pass these pressures and orders to the public. Thus, the “superimposed pressures” created by the top-down hierarchical supervisory system will be reflected in the vicious interactions between the government and the people.

The mechanism of *Swift Response to Public Complaints* was formerly known as the *Quick response to Community Calls*¹. Although the *Quick Response to Community Calls* has evolved into what it is today, delegating power to the sub-districts/townships at the primary level to make them the core of social governance has been an integral part of *Swift Response to Public Complaints System*. For example, Article 3 of the Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints stipulates that its work shall follow the principles of “shifting the focus to primary and community level, and creating inter-departmental synergy”; Article 5 stipulates that “neighbourhood offices and township people's governments shall play the role of community level coordination, command and control, and promptly handle requests within their jurisdiction”.

It is undoubtedly a break away from the traditional bureaucratic, hierarchical system to play the principal role of the lowest-level townships and villages in social governance, and give them the power to direct and press district people's government departments and their branch agencies in a bottom-up manner. It is a vivid embodiment of the CPC's continuous self-reform to break away from stereotypes. By giving the community-level organs, which are closer to the people, greater power to govern, the mechanism ensures the coupling of power with responsibility, and therefore effectively alleviates the overloaded pressure of the community level and the abuse of accountability brought by the traditional supervision by public powers.

2.2 Organizational Leadership of the CPC

From the organizational level, the People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* involves the public as non-public-power supervisor as well as various state organs (such as people's congresses, supervisory commissions, courts and procuratorates.) as public-power organs. Given the overlapping of their supervisory rights and powers, the Communist Party of China plays a necessary role of exercising overall leadership and coordinating their efforts. The CPC's firm leadership will keep all supervisory stakeholders motivated to the greatest extent, reduce their mutual hindrances and focus on

¹ *Quick response to Community Calls* is a reform measure adopted by Beijing government, which makes the subdistricts/townships the mobilizers and coordinators of community-level administrative law enforcement.

the goal of serving the people.

To translate the Party's philosophy of exercising power for the people into concrete actions of officials at all levels, Beijing has been focusing on the building of the Party's organizations to give full play its strength in guiding urban governance innovation.

By organizing monthly group study sessions, Beijing Municipal Party Committee works to arm the city's Party organizations at all levels with governance theories to make sure officials at all levels achieve unity in thinking, will and action, and the Capital's primary- and community-level governance always maintains the correct political direction. For example, the Secretary of the Municipal Party Committee hosts a monthly meeting to review the work of district committees and departmental Party secretaries and informs them of the monthly ranking in *Swift Response to Public Complaints*. Aiming to tackle issues frequently raised by the people in community level governance, a "Theme of the Month" mechanism has been established, in which municipal leaders dispatch special work groups on a separate basis to supervise the implementation of community-level tasks. The Municipal Party Committee has set up a special task force on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* to be responsible for the top-level design, overall planning and progress under the leadership of the Commission for Deepening Overall Reform of the CPC Beijing Municipal Committee.

Beijing also actively works to improve the organizational setup in the governance at the three levels of the city, districts and sub-districts (townships, communities and villages), to make sure the organizational system serves the purpose of governance (Wang, 2024). For example, by emphasizing the leading role of the CPC, a "hotline + grid" model has been established to effectively coordinate the government, communities, enterprises and other stakeholders, bring together those working on the ground, including street heads, alley stewards and assistants, community workers and volunteers to create synergies in the community-level governance and significantly improve the efficiency in urging the government to perform public duties according to the law.

3. Legal Guarantee: The Legal Governance Model of the People's Supervision System Based on Swift Response to Public Complaints

The rule of law is an important guarantee for China's modernization. China has always worked hard to improve the standards, procedures and laws for supervision. To advance law-based governance is not only a constitutional obligation expressly stipulated in Article 5 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China. To deepen legal reform and incorporate reform achievements into the legal framework in a timely manner is what the Communist Party of China has championed. In 2021, the Standing Committee of Beijing Municipal People's Congress adopted Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints, the first of its kind in the country. Even from an international point of view, Beijing is a frontrunner in law-making on non-emergency government service hotlines. Most cities in the United States do not have legislation on 311.¹ Compared to relational governance that relies on commitment, trust and interpersonal relationships (T. Nam & K. Nam, 2013), the People's Supervision

1 The Chapter 3 "Non-emergency City Services" of Title 23 "Communications" in The New York City Administrative Code has regulations on 311, but not detailed. City of Boston Municipal Code, The Philadelphia Code mention 311 in some articles. Seattle Municipal Code, Charter of Baltimore City, Code of Public Local Laws, Baltimore City Code do not mention 311.

System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* has a solid legal foundation created by the Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints.

3.1 The Statutory Supervisors

3.1.1 Claimants as the Statutory Supervisors

Article 8 and Article 9 of the Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints set out the rights and obligations of the claimants, who may come up with demands for the purpose of upholding their own or others' legitimate rights and interests, as well as public interests. However, they should truthfully express their demands and be responsible for the authenticity of what they say. They should cooperate with and respect the staff members responsible for addressing their concerns, and give an impartial judgement over the handling process.

Firstly, the claimants have statutory supervisory rights.

The legalization of the public's supervisory right is particularly important. According to the German jurist Georg Jellinek, the complaints of the people to the government are defined as claims based on *de facto* interests in nature, which means the claimant does not have a statutory right asking the government to satisfy his interests (Jellinek, 2012). Therefore, legally speaking, filing a complaint based on *de facto* interests is, in essence, not a right of oversight used to urge the government to perform its statutory duties. Instead, it is a petition asking for favor from the government. In contrast, the promulgation of the Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints establishes the status of the claimants as statutory supervisors, legalizing the claimant's petition to request the government to give favor as a statutory right to oversee the administrative organs in performing their duties.

Secondly, the claimants have equal supervisory rights.

Regardless of their identity and status, the claimants can equally come up with their opinions and requests through the platform of *Swift Response to Public Complaints*. This equality is not only reflected in the acceptance of complaints, but also in the fairness and transparency of the processing of complaints, which can enhance the people's trust in the government.

Thirdly, the claimants have individual and specific supervisory rights.

Whether the people enjoy democratic rights not only depends on whether they have the right to vote in elections, but also depends on whether they have the right for continual participation in daily political affairs. In the traditional election-centered democratic model, the simple majority rule is adopted, and while the people can express their diversified and personalized concerns or suggestions, it is difficult for them to be addressed or taken up, resulting in poor sense of participation by individuals. In contrast, the People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* gives the claimants personalized and specific supervisory rights, so that every issue they have raised, big or small, will be attended to.

Fourthly, the claimant's supervisory rights cover both individual and social levels.

The concerns raised by the claimants can be related to the protection of individual rights at the micro level, such as consumer rights and labor rights, or to the urban governance and public decision-making at the macro level, such as urban planning and environmental protection. This multiple-level supervisory mode contributes to the formation of an all-round public oversight network. Meanwhile, the Regulations encourages claimants not only to pay attention to safeguarding individual rights and interests, but also to actively participate in protecting public interests. This will contribute to a more harmonious and inclusive social environment. As the government needs to take into account the needs of different groups in formulating policies to serve public interest as well as to accommodate individual differences, this will also promote sound and democratic government decision-making and make the work of the government more efficient, transparent and fairer.

3.1.2 Other Statutory Supervisors

In addition to the claimants, the Regulations also clearly stipulates the statutory supervision duties of other public supervisory bodies. For example, Article 5 stipulates that the Beijing People's Government shall strengthen the supervision and inspection of the work of *Swift Response to Public Complaints*; the municipal service department of Beijing government shall supervise the work of the 12345 hotline service agency (T. Nam, 2012; T. Nam & K. Nam, 2013); the 12345 hotline service agency shall supervise the handling of complaints. Article 35 stipulates that supervisory commissions (Wiseman, 2014) at all levels in Beijing shall carry out special campaigns to oversee the performance of *Swift Response to Public Complaints* and urge all relevant departments to perform their duties in accordance with the Regulations.

Firstly, the Beijing Municipal People's Government bears the important responsibility for the overall supervision and inspection of the work of *Swift Response to Public Complaints*, which includes, but is not limited to, the supervision of policy implementation, resource allocation, and process optimization to ensure that policy objectives are achieved and that people's demands are responded to in a timely and effective manner.

Secondly, the Beijing Municipal government service department, as the department directly in charge of 12345 citizen hotline service agency, focuses on the professionalism, procedures and efficiency of the hotline service. This requires government service departments to establish and improve the oversight mechanism, regularly evaluate the hotline service, identify problems and urge corrective actions.

Thirdly, as a bridge connecting the government and the public, the citizen hotline service agency plays a dual role in the supervision system. For one thing, it should accept the supervision by upper departments; for another, it should also supervise the handling of complaints to ensure that they can be addressed in accordance with the procedures and standards within a specified time frame.

Fourthly, the supervisory commissions at all levels in Beijing, as specialized supervisory organs, are responsible for strengthening the special supervision of *Swift Response to Public Complaints*, monitoring the behavior of government departments and their staff members at all levels, to ensure lawful performance of duties and integrity in government. Supervisory organs conduct authoritative, independent and professional oversight, and are an important force in ensuring the integrity and efficiency of the mechanism of *Swift Response to Public Complaints*.

3.2 The Statutory Scope of the Supervisory Matters and the Statutory Obligations of the Supervised

Unlike the contractual governance model, in which the obligation of each government department to handle complaints from 311 comes from the service level agreements signed with the customer service center, under *Swift Response to Public Complaints* system, the scope and the obligation of complaints handling by all government departments are uniformly stipulated in the Regulations. In terms of the scope of matters, economic development, urban construction, social management, public services, and people's life all belong to the areas where a request or a concern can be raised.¹ Accordingly, according to the provisions of Article 5 of the Regulations, government departments, the organizations authorized by laws and regulations to manage public affairs, and the enterprises and institutions bearing public functions are those subject to the oversight.

1 In New York, where the mayor traditionally has strong power, the 311 hotline can provide more than 6,000 types of services, while in Los Angeles, where the city council has stronger power, the 311 hotline can only provide 1,500 types of services. Even so, New York 311, coverage is limited in nature compared to Beijing 12345, which accepts complaints without thresholds.

3.3 Law-based governance

3.3.1 From Contractual Supervision Model to Statutory Supervision Model

The obligation of each government department to handle complaints from 311 comes from the service level agreements (SLAs) signed with the 311 customer service center, (Wiseman, 2014) representing contractual governance model in nature. Meanwhile, contracts are laws between parties.¹ From this perspective, unlike purely relational governance, which relies entirely on unwritten rules and personal relationships, contractual governance relies on formal, legally binding written agreements to provide a legal institutional framework (Goo, Rao, Kishore, & Nam, 2009). However, given the difference between the agreement and the law, there are significant differences between the contractual governance and the People's Supervision System's law-based governance. The advantage of the former is that the obligations stipulated in the agreement are more specific and detailed, and can be flexibly adjusted according to the performance of government department. But from the perspective of supervision, it has obvious transactional, informal and private attributes.

Any form of public power comes from the authorization of the people. Given the public nature of power, oversight of the government is a typical process of public governance. According to Article 2 of the Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints, the purpose of this mechanism is to "promptly respond to the pressing concerns of the people, and provide effective channels and ways for the public to participate in social governance and public policy-making." It can be concluded that the system not only undertakes the role of providing services for different sectors, but more importantly, it undertakes the public responsibility of urging the government departments to perform their governance duties. In fact, considering that China's administrative public interest litigation is not perfect enough, it is necessary to play the role of *Swift Response to Public Complaints* in supervising the government's performance of public governance duties. By setting up a platform for public oversight, the government can promote democratic and sound decision-making by responding to the concerns of the ordinary people in a timely manner. It embodies the public value orientation in the process of exercising the people's supervisory rights.

3.3.2 From the Courts- and Parliament-Centered Supervision Model to the Administrative Obligations-Centered Law-based Supervision Model

Generally speaking, the Parliament and courts are the main public bodies that conduct oversight of the government's performance of public governance duties. There are two main ways of supervision by the Parliament: one is to appoint, remove or impeach government members, deny government bills or even dissolve the government by exercising their voting rights; the other is to monitor the work of the government through the establishment of an inquiry commission or ombudsman accountable to the Parliament. The former is inclined to be politicized for the sake of interests of a particular party of organization, and deviates from the original intention of exercising supervisory power for the people. For example, compared with a "unified government" where the Parliament is controlled by the same party, a "divided government" where it is not the case will face greater political resistance from elected bodies. (T. Nam, 2012) As for the inquiry commission or ombudsman, though they are independent of political parties to a certain extent, the threshold for starting supervision is high and the efficiency is low -- for example, the Parliamentary Ombudsman in the United Kingdom has a very limited jurisdiction, and no active investigation power, with high cost and long time for case investigation (Wang, 2023). In general, the Parliament does have supervisory tools and capabilities, but as it is pointed out, "Parliaments in formally

1 As French Civil Code stipulates, *Les conventions légalement formées tiennent lieu de loi à ceux qui les ont faites.*

democratic regimes do adopt oversight tools, as if they were to effectively oversee the government actions, but these tools are not used or, at least, are not used effectively. Hence, in the case of formal democracy, the form of democratic government is respected but not its substance.”¹

For oversight by courts, the first typical problem is the high supervision threshold. The initiation of litigation needs to meet a series of requirements. For example, the matter in question must fall into the jurisdiction of the court, and the plaintiff and the defendant must be eligible. The second is its strict requirements for procedures. The litigation process is more cumbersome, and may also go through appeals, resulting in lower supervisory efficiency and higher costs (Levin & Colliers, 1985).

On the contrary, the People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* imposes specific legal obligations on the government departments receiving complaints by conferring legal supervisory rights and powers to the public and upper government departments, which means “winning people's backing, approval, endorsement and making them satisfied” will be taken as the fundamental criteria for judging the effectiveness of supervision, so as to avoid its politicization brought about by parliamentary oversight in the context of party rivalry. Otherwise, instead of purely pursuing procedural justice, the People's Supervision System pays more attention to the substantive solution of problems, ensuring that every reasonable complaint could receive prompt attention and handling. This significantly improves the efficiency of problem solving and avoids the accumulation and complication of problems caused by delay.

3.3.3 From the “Hard Law” Based Supervision Model to the Supervision Model Based on Both “Hard Law” and “Soft Law”

In traditional context, the supervision of the government's performance of duties is often “rigid”. It is based on “hard law” that generates clear legal responsibilities and highlights the mutual confrontation between public authorities, placing greater emphasis on regulating the government rather than urging it to undertake governance responsibility. In the view of liberalism, the purpose of political power is for the “Public Good” (Locke, 1998). However, according to the classical assumption, the supervision by public powers should adopt the logic of free competition of Adam Smith, that is, it is not necessary to preset a public interest target for the supervisory bodies to work together to achieve. Rather, they should use the power conferred by the Constitution and laws to the fullest according to the idea that “ambition must be made to counteract ambition” (Hamilton, Madison, & Jay, 2009) and achieve mutual checks and balance between public authorities automatically through their power conflict and pursue the public good. Therefore, under the mode of separation of powers, the supervision model is a typical one based on “hard law”, easily leading to mutual hindrances among state organs and is not conducive to maximizing public interests.

Different from the model of separation of powers, which emphasizes the confrontation between different state organs, the People's Supervision System pursues the value of “putting the people first” and the goal of achieving high efficiency and low cost in solving problems. This, by nature, determines that the public supervisory bodies are not antagonistic, but share a harmonious relationship featuring division of responsibility, mutual cooperation and mutual checks. Therefore, for the oversight by public powers in the people's supervision system, the flexible supervision model based on “soft law” plays an irreplaceable role:

Firstly, “soft law” is the principal administrative mechanism used to elaborate the legal standards and political values underlying bureaucratic decision-making (Sossin & Smith, 2003). From this perspective,

1 Riccardo Pelizzod, Democracy and Oversight, available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research/130, p.14

“soft law” should be seen as an element of the larger array of ethical influences which govern an official’s judgment (Sossin & Smith, 2003). Especially in the context of administrative discretion, although administrative organs bear the objective legal obligation to realize public interests, such obligation often does not correspond to the subjective public rights of administrative counterparts. This means that unless the discretionary space of the administrative organ is reduced to zero, the claimant cannot request the administrative organ with the discretionary power to act through the “hard law” mechanism such as administrative litigation. In this case, “soft law”, as administrative ethics, has great significance as it steers administrative organs to exercise their discretionary power properly. The People’s Supervision based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* transforms the pursuit of “people first” into legal purposes and principles, and accepts all complaints without threshold, encouragingly rather than forcibly, to meet the needs of the claimants to the greatest extent. It has become the legal administrative ethics that administrative organs must consider in the process of handling complaints. As the internal supervision mechanism for administrative behavior, the “soft law” administrative ethics embodies the combination of rule of law and rule of virtue.

Secondly, “soft law” set out provisions to encourage actions, and it can also be manifested in the form of guidance, consultation and suggestions. The use of the above flexible ways to urge the relevant organs to perform their duties properly is a major feature of China’s supervisory system. For example, in China’s record & review system, when the reviewing organ finds that there are problems concerning constitutionality and legality of normative documents, it should first suggest the enacting organ to modify them, rather than directly revoke them. Similarly, in Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints, the wording “coordination” repeatedly appears, and the tougher wording “supervise” and the softer wording “urge” and “coordinate” have been used simultaneously. It is the first choice for the supervisory bodies to use the above-mentioned “soft law” method without coercive force to urge the responsible government departments to perform their public governance duties. This method is more targeted and flexible, and is easier for the supervised bodies to accept. The highly confrontational supervisory method based on the “hard law” is its last resort. This kind of supervisory mechanism which emphasizes “division of responsibility and cooperation” rather than “constraint and confrontation”, forms a relatively flat cooperative working mechanism among various supervisory bodies and between the supervisors and the supervised. Through information sharing, co-working and other means, various departments can quickly coordinate resources and jointly urge the government departments to solve problems, thus realizing the effective integration of resources and improving the overall work efficiency.

4. Whole-Process People’s Democracy: Public Oversight Mechanism in the People’s Supervision System Based on Swift Response to Public Complaints

Swift Response to Public Complaints pioneered by Beijing, is a novel practice in the new era of encouraging the people to supervise the government and everyone to take responsibility. The report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasizes that the CPC must follow the principle of “from the people, to the people, ” maintain a close bond with the people, and accept their criticism and oversight; and the CPC must breathe the same air as the people, share the same future, and stay truly connected to them. The mechanism of *Swift Response to Public Complaints* has unblocked “the last mile” of serving the people with meticulous services at the community level, in an effort to improve

super-large city governance. *The mechanism of Swift Response to Public Complaints* is a new practice which follows the CPC's mass line in responding to the calls of the people, so that disputes will not be handed over to superior government. In doing so, the mechanism revitalizes the Fengqiao Model, and is a manifestation of acting on the founding mission and responsibility of the Communist Party of China in the new era. Under *Swift Response to Public Complaints*, "receiving complaints" is the foundation, which is an important innovative way to widely listen to the concerns and wishes of the people to collect the broadest public opinion. Meanwhile, since the 18th CPC National Congress, the CPC has enriched and developed the concept of "governance of cities by the people and for the people", and formed an urban governance model with Chinese characteristics. As an important part of mega-city governance innovation, *Swift Response to Public Complaints* in Beijing adheres to the people-centered approach in modernizing the capital city's governance system and capacity, fully implementing the concept that "cities should be built for the people". It is a living example of acting on Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.

4.1 Public Oversight Mechanism under Traditional Democratic Concepts

Supervision is a structural and functional element of democracy. From a historical point of view, different democratic concepts have profoundly influenced the development of the system of oversight over public powers. For example, direct democracy implemented in ancient Greece produced the practice of Ostracism, which can be deemed as a sort of "reverse" election, for it is a method of temporary banishment without trial or special accusation. Modern western countries, questioning the rationality of direct democracy, pursues representative democracy to mainly rely on mutual checks between legislative, executive and judicial powers to keep one another in line.

4.1.1 Defects of Electoral Supervision Mechanism under Traditional Democratic Concepts

Whether under direct democracy or representative democracy, the operation mechanism is highly dependent on elections. The supervision mechanism as a result of them has the following characteristics:

Firstly, public oversight is subordinated to democratic election mechanism.

According to the classic understanding of democracy by Western political thinkers such as Schumpeter and Huntington, the central procedure of democracy is the selection of leaders through competitive elections by the people they govern (Huntington, 1991). In other words, elections are the essence of democracy, from which other features of the democratic system arise. Therefore, supervision from the public is not essential in itself under the context of this democratic system, but only a secondary mechanism attached to democratic elections. In this way, public oversight is narrowed down to supervision only by voters through elections and by the Parliament on behalf of voters after elections are completed. This creates the problem that Rousseau observed, "the people of England believe itself to be free; it is quite wrong: it is free only during the elections of Members of Parliament. Once they are elected, the people are enslaved, it is nothing." (Rousseau, 1994)

Secondly, electoral supervision mechanism has thresholds.

Whether it is direct democracy in ancient Greece or representative democracy in modern times, there are explicit restrictions on those participating in democratic elections in terms of age, length of residence, etc. For example, only adult male citizens in ancient Greek city-states had the right to vote. Under a representative system, only adult citizens have the right to vote. In addition, the electoral democratic supervision model also has implicit thresholds. The number of and distance to polling stations, voter registration system, and whether internet voting is allowed will all affect the cost of voting. According to the "rational voter" hypothesis, considering that the large number of voters in large election campaigns will dilute the expected benefits that each voter can get from voting, though the above costs are trivial, they are still enough to affect the enthusiasm of voters to turn out (Blais & Daoust, 2019). In addition,

due to information asymmetry, the public may have limited access to information, making it difficult for them to learn about government behavior and public affairs in a timely and comprehensive manner and thus affecting the effectiveness of supervision by them. Due to lack of expertise in some professional areas (such as environmental protection and food safety), the public may be unable to conduct rational and effective supervision, which reduces election supervision to a vent for their discontent.

Thirdly, the electoral supervision mechanism serves only limited interests.

With ever-growing economy and technology, contemporary cities attract more and more people, and people's demands are increasingly diversified because of diverging interests among different groups. Therefore, mega-cities have become a complex non-linear system. Although under ideal economic assumptions, through free competition and market mechanism, the self-interested behavior of individuals would ultimately serve to enhance the overall well-being of society. However, in the complex system of urban governance, for one thing, due to the divergent interests among different groups, public oversight can easily be eroded by capital groups, local interest groups and other external forces. In the United States, for example, due to the complexity of the procedures of representative democracy, political decisions are in fact manipulated by elites. Politicians and interest groups "are able to fashion and, within very wide limits, even to create the will of the people," (Schumpeter, 2022) inducing the voters to come up with requests in their own favor. This has dramatically compromised the public nature of supervision by them and has even reduced the supervision to a means by political elites to bargain for their personal and party's interests. For another, even if from the individual perspective, although the supervisory opinions put forward by some individuals seem to be rational, given the adoption of "one person, one vote" plus "majority rule", the simple superposition of individuals' "rationality" can easily lead to collective irrationality.

4.1.2 Defects of Non-Electoral Supervision Mechanism under Traditional Democratic Concepts

It is undeniable that although the electoral democratic supervision mechanism occupies the central position under the traditional democratic concepts, there are still some non-electoral public supervision mechanisms.

Firstly, supervision by public opinion via news organizations.

Public opinion via news organizations is a channel for democratic supervision other than elections, but the supervisory opinions conveyed through the media are limited and are often screened by public powers and big capital. That is why, in some countries, symbolic speech is known as the "printing press for the poor" (Loewy, 1970) -- due to the absence of a low-cost, unfiltered public oversight channel in which ordinary people can directly participate, they have to resort to flag-burning and other potentially illegal actions to convey their discontent with the government.¹

Secondly, the petition system.

The petition system in the western context originated in the reign of Edward I in the 14th century. By the 18th and 19th centuries, as a common form of protest and request in the British House of Commons, the petition system had become an important and direct democratic supervision channel which was supplementary to electoral supervision. The popularity of petitioning owed much to the fact that it offered a very flexible means of expressing concern, available in theory at least to everybody at any time (Kümin & Würigler, 1997). However, petitions are not legally binding on public authorities; in essence, petition is just a request for favor from the monarch or Parliament, as indicated by the name of early petitions--English "humble petitions" and German "untertänige Suppliken" (Kümin & Würigler, 1997). In the United States, the First Amendment of the Constitution explicitly states that people have the right to "petition the

¹ See *United States v. O'Brien*, 391 U.S. 367 (1968).

government for redress of a grievance". Although some argue that the right to petition the government should include a demand that the government listen or respond to public opinion, the Supreme Court clearly states that "nothing in the First Amendment or in this Court's case law interpreting it suggests that the rights to speak, associate, and petition require government policymakers to listen or respond to communications of members of the public on public issues,"¹ This means the so-called "petition right" in the US Constitution only protects the expression of demands to the government from being suppressed, which is actually just a right to free speech in a special context.

Since the public is not given the right to compel the government to fulfill the statutory obligations under the petition system, it is only a "soft constraint", and the government will not easily change course unless moral pressure is exerted through public opinion or public security incidents are sparked by large-scale mass action. Generally, the requests put forward by the public through the petition system tend to be ignored and the effectiveness of supervision will be lost, which may increase social tensions and strengthen the distrust between the people and the government.

4.2 Whole-Process People's Democracy-based Public Oversight Mechanism in the People's Supervision System based on Swift Response to Public Complaints

According to the political scientist John Keane, after the two stages of development--direct democracy and representative democracy, democracy is gradually evolving into "monitory democracy". It is characterized by, first, the emphasis on the expansion of democracy to people of humbler status, and the low requirements for supervision (unlike elections, all stakeholders associated with public powers are able to execute democratic supervision, without restrictions on age, nationality, etc.) (Wu, 2023) determines that it can significantly expand the democratic stakeholders; second, democracy should mean public scrutiny and public control of decision-makers; (Keane, 2009) third, democracy is not equivalent to elections. Monitory democracy is a new historical form of democracy, a variety of "post-parliamentary" politics defined by the rapid growth of many different kinds of extra-parliamentary, power-scrutinising mechanisms (Keane, 2009). From the above three points, we can conclude that the so-called "monitory democracy" has great similarities with the Chinese concept of "whole-process people's democracy", which emphasizes the participation of all across all domains and sectors and in the whole process of democracy.

One of the essential requirements of Chinese modernization is to uphold whole-process people's democracy. One of the essential requirements of Chinese Modernization is to uphold whole-process people's democracy. People's supervision system based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* follows a people-centered approach, aims to solve specific problems faced by the people, and actively develops whole-process people's democratic supervision. By guaranteeing the public's right to information, participation, and evaluation, this approach has enhanced preventive supervision (ex ante), participatory supervision (in-process), and accountability supervision (ex post), and put in place oversight covering all aspects of the democratic process and all sectors of society. This is a broad, genuine and effective model of democratic supervision. It avoids the drawbacks of traditional supervision models, under which the people do not know how to, do not dare to or want to conduct oversight, and makes the supervision more democratic.

Unlike western democratic concepts which place too much emphasis on electoral democracy, the concept of whole-process people's democracy advocated by China highlights the universality and full process, and covers all sectors. It emphasizes integrating process-oriented democracy with results-oriented democracy, procedural democracy with substantive democracy, direct democracy with indirect democracy, and people's democracy with the will of the state. Thus, public oversight in the People's

1 Minnesota Board for Community Colleges v. Knight, 465 U.S. 271 (1984).

Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* has the following characteristics:

Firstly, the broadest supervisors. According to the provisions of Article 7 of the Regulations, to achieve the maximum coverage of democratic supervisory rights, there are no restrictions on age, length of residence, etc. to conduct oversight.

Secondly, no thresholds in terms of the subject matters. The principle of “no thresholds” is upheld. Anyone can make a claim with regard to economic development, urban construction, social management, public services, people’s life, etc., and urge the government to fulfill its public duties, giving individuals more say and stronger sense of democratic participation.

Thirdly, the integrity of the supervision process. Generally speaking, supervision is regarded as the last step in the exercise of power (Wu, 2023). Under whole-process people’s democracy that highlights the coordination between democratic oversight and democratic elections, consultations, decision-making, and management, the People’s Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* includes not only ex post supervision, but also ex ante and in-process supervision. For example, it has established a set of mechanisms and taken proactive measures to urge responsible departments to perform their duties and see that problems are addressed at the source and disputes are resolved as they emerge at the community level.

Fourthly, the effectiveness of public oversight. In the People’s Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints*, the effectiveness of public oversight is reflected in two aspects: firstly, the complaint-receiving government departments have the obligation to fulfill the governance responsibility according to public supervisory opinions. Otherwise, they will have to bear the legal responsibility. In addition, public oversight does not exist in isolation. Through its combination with subsequent forms of oversight by public powers, the requests or concerns of the public will be transformed into supervisory opinions of the supervisory bodies, and thus obtain coercive power.

5. State Organs Undertaking Responsibility: Oversight by Public Powers in the People’s Supervision System Based on Swift Response to Public Complaints

In the People’s Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints*, public oversight is at the “front end” of the system, whose aim is to identify problems, report concerns, and provide supervisory opinions. It is a wide collection of public supervisory opinions with significant democratic legitimacy. However, considering lack of coercive power in public oversight, it is essential for public powers at the “back end” to step in, which can effectively urge relevant departments to undertake their duties, promote the coordination and cooperation among the competent departments and make sure the issues raised are addressed fairly, legally and promptly.

Only by combining public oversight with oversight by public powers, and turning the supervisory opinions and suggestions of the people into the will of the state, can public oversight obtain powerful effectiveness. In this way, the pseudo-democratic trap that “the people’s will can only be expressed, but cannot be realized” is avoided in practice.

5.1 Oversight by People’s Congresses

5.1.1 The Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints Provides an Institutional Framework for Supervision.

The legislative power and the supervisory power are two important functions and powers entrusted

to people's congresses by the Constitution. In practice, the exercise of legislative power may also have a supervisory effect (Jiang, 2023). President Xi attaches great importance to the role of institution building in the oversight over power, stressing that we should "step up institutional oversight" (Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the Communist Party of China, et al., 2022), "ensure power is exercised in an institutional cage", "give higher priority to institution building and governance capacity building" and "govern power, affairs and people with institutions" (Xi, 2021). Under this background, the most important and effective way of supervision by people's congresses and their standing committees is to establish a set of effective supervisory institutions by exercising legislative power. Only in this way can the state organs be rigorous in exercising their power and be aware of what are their responsibilities and what is forbidden, to ensure power is exercised and scrutinized under the rule of law.

On September 24, 2021, the Standing Committee of the Beijing Municipal People's Congress promulgated Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints, a reform measure pioneered by Beijing designed to provide an institutional framework for serving the public. During the drafting process of the Regulations, a special working group of the legislature came to 16 districts to solicit opinions from more than 120 organizations such as relevant government departments, subdistricts, enterprises and public institutions. Before the first deliberation of the draft Regulations, members of the Social Development Affairs Committee of the Municipal People's Congress visited the citizen hotline service center, and took the role of operators to find out how work orders are assigned, whether a follow-up call is needed, and how performance evaluation is conducted. Before the second deliberation, nearly 10,000 deputies in the city communicated with more than 60,000 citizens, collected more than 7,500 suggestions either face to face or through the media, which has forged strong consensus of the public. This is a vivid illustration of how the Party's policies and people's will are translated into law through legal procedures, the whole process of which is distinctly democratic. The Regulations puts into place a no-threshold mechanism for receiving complaints, requires the first department receiving the complaint to bear the responsibility, specifies the work order assignment mechanism and the period for complaint handling, takes the "three rates" (response rate, problem resolution rate and people's satisfaction rate) as the core criteria for performance evaluation, to see to it that relevant government department performs its duty. In a word, this provides an institutional instrument for law-based, systematic, long-term and source-targeted oversight over government departments which undertake responsibilities for addressing public complaints.

5.1.2 Carrying Out Supervision through Law Enforcement Inspection and Special Inquiry

In order to promote the implementation of the Regulations and deliver better services to the people, people's congresses at city and district levels in Beijing carry out law enforcement inspection in a well-coordinated way and make clear their respective focuses. In doing so, people's congresses make a list of pressing concerns of the public and special inquiries are conducted on heads of relevant government departments according to the list. This has enhanced the rigorousness and performance of oversight by people's congresses.

5.2 Administrative Supervision

Administrative supervision, or internal supervision of the government, refers to oversight conducted by the administrative organs over themselves. The state administrative organs, in accordance with their statutory authority, procedures and methods, supervise their own operational and administrative acts (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021). There are three basic forms of administrative supervision, which are top-bottom, bottom-top and mutual supervision.

According to the provisions of Article 5, Article 21 and Article 22 of the Regulations, the whole process of complaints handling involves government departments at various levels. Considering

administrative agencies are the main player in addressing complaints, administrative supervision is the main and most valid form of self-supervision by public powers urging the responsible departments to perform their duties in an effective and efficient way.

5.2.1 The Top-Bottom Administrative Supervision

The top-bottom administrative supervision can also be called administrative supervision based on hierarchical relationships. Because the administrative branch has the most typical hierarchical structure, where the superior leads the subordinate and the subordinate obeys the superior, as President Xi Jinping pointed out, the supervision over subordinates by superiors, especially supervision over head of an inferior department by head of a superior department, is the most effective supervisory form (Xi, 2016).

The administrative hierarchical supervision in the mechanism of *Swift Response to Public Complaints* manifests itself as a whole closed-loop pressure mechanism, which includes ex ante guidance, in-process monitoring and ex post evaluation. For some subdistricts/townships with poor evaluation performance, an interview will be held to call attention to their problems and remind them to deal with complaints swiftly and satisfyingly; when the complaints are being handled by relevant departments, the superior administrative organs will keep on tracking and monitoring the progress, especially for those tough problems that have long gone unresolved; for the claims that have been settled, an evaluation will be conducted on the number of complaints received, the number of return calls, response rate, resolution rate, satisfaction rate, etc., with the response rate, resolution rate and satisfaction rate as the core criteria. To effectively urge the subordinate departments to perform their duties in accordance with the Regulations and efficiently address the demands of the people, their performance ranking will be reported within a certain scope.

5.2.2 The Bottom-Top Administrative Supervision

Though it's seemingly against the nature of bureaucratic system, bottom-top administrative supervision does exist in the People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints*. That is because this mechanism is built on the *Quick Response to Community Calls*, which makes the subdistricts/townships become the mobilizers and coordinators of administrative law enforcement. Once violations are detected by the community-level organs, superior government departments must respond within the prescribed time limit. It means that the logic of traditional hierarchical bureaucracy has been broken, and the focus of governance has been shifted to subdistricts/townships and other community-level administrative organs, who have supervisory power to urge the superior government departments to perform their duties.

5.2.3 The Mutual Administrative Supervision

There are four forms of the mutual administrative supervision in the People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints*.

First, the department that is the first to receive a complaint has the power to supervise other related departments.

As provided in Article 14 of the Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints, the department that is the first to receive a complaint should undertake the responsibility for handling the complaint and shall not shift it to other departments. The department in question shall take the lead in coordinating the efforts when the handling process involves other departments. The latter is obliged to cooperate and submit the results to the former within the prescribed time limit, and, if the complaint cannot be resolved on time, explain the reasons and report the progress to the former. This gives the former the power to oversee the latter. This mechanism embodies the convergence of public oversight and oversight by public powers. The responsibility of the department that is the first to receive a complaint ensures that all the non-mandatory demands or supervisory opinions put forward by ordinary

people will be transformed into mandatory responsibilities borne by the government. And its power to lead and coordinate the handling process ensures that the requests of ordinary people can be fulfilled to the greatest extent.

Second, the citizen hotline service agency has the power to supervise the responsible departments.¹

The citizen hotline service agency is the axis of the People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints*. Its tasks include not only conveying the supervisory opinions of the claimants to corresponding government departments, and according to Article 12 of the Regulations, but also handing over the complaints to the district people's government and coordinating the efforts to address them.

However, it does not mean that the citizen hotline service agency is simply an instrument. According to the Article 5 of the Regulations, the civil hotline service agency itself is also responsible for supervising the handling of complaints. Specifically, it takes on a supervisory role in the process of work order assignation and follow-up call by urging the responsible departments to address issues promptly. As stipulated in Article 12 and 13 of the Regulations, the civil hotline service agency has the power to dispatch work orders, and specify the processing time limit. This means it has considerable control over which administrative department should be responsible and how long that department should take to handle the complaints. Article 15 provides that the responsible department shall report progress to the civil hotline service agency within the prescribed time limit, giving the latter the right to know and the power to monitor the handling process. Article 23 stipulates that when it is past the deadline, the citizen hotline service agency shall follow up the matter with the claimant through telephone, SMS, the Internet or other means to gather his or her opinions, which will be taken as a criterion for performance evaluation. It is worth mentioning that the citizen hotline service agency has adopted digital technology to enable the automation of regular, real-time and follow-up supervision (Meng, Zhang, & Wu, 2023).

Third, coordination and supervision by district command and dispatch Centers.

For particularly tough issues that need the efforts of multiple departments to solve, the governments of several districts of Beijing have set up command and dispatch centers to coordinate and supervise the handling process (Meng, Zhang, & Wu, 2023). The work of *Swift Response to Public Complaints* often involves multiple government departments, and the command and dispatch centers can play a role as a bridge by connecting them and promoting information sharing and cooperation. It will help break down cross-departmental barriers, and create synergy in addressing the problems of ordinary people. Through the supervision by the command and dispatch centers, the government can identify and address problems existing in its work, optimize the work process, allocate resources more reasonably and improve the efficiency and quality in handling complaints. Take the command and dispatch center of the Daxing District as an example, in addition to coordinating relevant departments assigning work orders 24 hours a day, there are 20 staff members responsible for collecting and sorting out the messages of citizens at people.com.cn, beijing.gov.cn and bjdx.gov.cn, and communicating with the citizens and relevant departments in the earliest time possible.²

1 Of course, strictly speaking, the citizen hotline service agency is not an administrative organ, but a public institution managed by the *Beijing Municipal Administration of Government Services*, and it's possible to say that the citizen hotline service agency exercises the power of supervision on behalf of the *Beijing Municipal Administration of Government Services*.

2 Available at: http://www.ctg.albany.edu/publications/journals/icegov_2012_philly311>; Access: August 2024, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-07/11/content_5408155.htm. (Last visited on August 20, 2024).

5.3 Oversight by Supervisory Commissions

Supervisory commissions perform their duties by, in accordance with the law, by overseeing and inspecting the political conduct, the exercise of public power and moral integrity of public officials, and by urging relevant organs and institutions to strengthen education, management and supervision of their staff. Different from other forms of oversight by public powers, the oversight by supervisory commissions covers all working in the public sector who exercise public power. According to the Supervision Law, supervisory commissions can impose an administrative sanction on a functionary that violates the law, pursue the liability of the leader who performs his or her duties ineffectively or neglects his or her duties and refer investigation findings of a suspected duty-related crime to the people's procuratorate for its review and prosecution. President Xi Jinping emphasizes that accountability is not just about a matter itself, and the person responsible for the matter should be held accountable (Xi, 2015). This means the oversight by supervisory commissions is an important way to ensure that public officials are held liable for the violations of the law.

According to Article 35 of the Regulations, supervisory commissions carry out special supervision as the main way to oversee the performance of the mechanism of *Swift Response to Public Complaints*. The following methods may be adopted.

5.3.1 Regular Supervision on the Handling of Work Orders

Supervisory commissions carry out regular, whole-process oversight on the handling of life-related issues raised, track the progress in the processing of work orders, and look into whether the issues are addressed swiftly and responsibly to the satisfaction of the claimant. Supervisory commissions will take resolute measures to investigate and combat pointless formalities and bureaucratism, and hold accountable officials who fail to perform their duties or behave irresponsibly, and relevant public officials will be given a warning or an administrative sanction, or be dealt with according to the law.

5.3.2 Giving Supervisory Opinions

Supervisory commissions can have a whole picture of the performance of the supervised organization immediately according to the evaluation ranking, adjust the focus of supervision for the next step in a timely manner, and find out why the issues fail to be addressed satisfactorily by looking into them one by one from their scheduling, the real demands of the claimant and how the communication went on. If similar problems occur repeatedly, supervisory commissions will issue supervisory suggestions to the responsible department and urge it to integrate Swift Response to Public Complaints into their day-to-day work and to take concrete actions to address the concerns even before they are raised.

5.4 Judicial Supervision

The judicial and procuratorial organs, in accordance with their statutory authority and procedures, supervise the exercise of public power mandated by the people. Judicial supervision is the most forceful form of oversight of the CPC and the state; it is the ultimate "line of defense" to ensure proper exercise of public power.

Judicial supervision in the mechanism of Swift Response to Public Complaints mainly plays a role in the following two aspects: Firstly, by feeding the data of 12345 citizen service hotline into the procuratorial supervision management platform, the procuratorial organs can obtain corresponding clues or materials based on the demands and concerns from the people, and then decide whether to file an administrative public-interest litigation or whether to lodge a protest against the judgement. The court can also assess the possible social governance consequences of a trial based on people's demands provided by *Swift Response to Public Complaints* system, and issue a corresponding verdict within its discretion. Secondly, the procuratorial organs and courts of Beijing can use the hotline 12345 to find out prominent

problems in social governance that cause frequent disputes, affect economic and social development and harm people's rights and interests. Then they can participate in the process of "proactive governance" by issuing procuratorial and judicial suggestions to relevant public authorities, which is a flexible judicial supervision method, urge them to perform their duties according to the law, and assist them in tackling the source of problems, and effectively resolving social disputes at the community level. For example, the Huairou District Procuratorate, by entering keywords "exercising", "damaged" and "equipment", found 127 entries of data related to sports and fitness equipment among more than 8,000 from 12345 hotline, and helped to launch a comprehensive overhaul of public sports and fitness equipment in the whole district, by issuing procuratorial suggestions to relevant competent departments and local governments.¹ Zhangjiawan People's Court of Tongzhou District has taken the initiative to integrate into the mechanism of *Swift Response to Public Complaints*, and established a two-way liaison mechanism with the local government. In 2022, Zhangjiawan Court participated in the handling of nearly 900 tough problems of 12345 through consultation, guidance, joint coordination, etc., provided 54 pieces of legal advice and issued 7 judicial suggestions.²

6. Technological Support: Digital Technology in the People's Supervision System Based on Swift Response to Public Complaints

The degree of digitization has increasingly become an important indicator to measure the modernization level of social governance, and the impact of digital technology on urban governance is gradually becoming prominent.

In 2023, the Central Committee of CPC and the State Council issued the Overall Layout Plan for the Development of Digital China, which proposed the goal of "significantly improving the digital and intelligent level of government affairs" by 2025. It envisions a clear path for accelerating the development of digital government. Thus, digitalization has become an important strategic choice for the modernization of China's social governance system.

According to the requirements of the central government, Beijing has set up a specific government bureau which integrates the work of *Swift Response to Public Complaints* and data management. Based on the citizen service hotline and focusing on data collection and analysis, *Swift Response to Public Complaints System* is not only a people-centered governance revolution, but also a digital governance revolution. In the process of constructing a modern, coordinated, agile, efficient, intelligent, accurate, open and transparent people's supervision system, the use of digital technology in the collection, integration, sharing, and opening of data based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints provides* important support for the effective combination of the supervision by ordinary people and the supervision by public powers.

6.1 Digital technology Enables Public Oversight

6.1.1 Expanding Data Collection Channels and Enriching Data Resources for Supervision

Public oversight is at the front end of the People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints*, which shows the distinct democratic character of the system. To build a People's

1 Available at: https://www.spp.gov.cn/dfjcdt/202210/t20221011_585261.shtml, (Last visited on April 12, 2024).

2 Available at: <https://www.court.gov.cn/zixun/xiangqing/378811.html>, (Last visited on April 12, 2024).

Supervision System with the oversight by the public as the driving force and guidance, it is essential to regard the opinions of ordinary people as an important data resource, unblock the channels of data collection, and ensure the democracy, authenticity, accuracy and timeliness of data collection.

In this regard, under *Swift Response to Public Complaints* mechanism, “no threshold” is imposed in addressing complaints, the regional restrictions of data collection under the traditional bureaucratic system have been removed, and by handling the concerns of the public comprehensively through various channels, the information related to people’s life can be collected in a broad, rapid and effective way. At present, the 12345 hotline has integrated all the existing government service hotlines in Beijing, unified the data of complaints and opened up online channels for handling complaints to build a platform covering all government websites in Beijing to ensure that the diversified and dynamic opinions of the public can be immediately conveyed to competent departments. This has stimulated the enthusiasm and creativity of the people to participate in public supervision through digital technology.

6.1.2 Bridging the “Digital Divide” and Promoting Open Access to the Data Collected

According to Article 2 of the Regulations, one of the basic purposes of the system is to provide effective channels and ways for the public to participate in social governance and policy-making by sorting out and analyzing massive data on people’s wellbeing. Given the differences in the ability of different groups to use data, Beijing government takes very seriously the building of a transparent, fair digital government to achieve the goal of being “digitally inclusive”. The mechanism of *Swift Response to Public Complaints* relies on the big data platform to ensure that citizens have the right to search, access and use data produced in the process of handling complaints. And through the release of the work report on *Swift Response to Public Complaints*, Beijing government has safeguarded the people’s right to know and supervise in the process of solving complaints.

6.2 Digital Technology Empowers Self-Supervision by Public Powers

6.2.1 Eliminating the “Information Silos” and “Departmental Barriers”

The Guiding Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Development of Digital Government points out that it is necessary to strengthen data convergence and integration, sharing and opening up, development and utilization, promote the orderly flow of data according to law, give full play to the role of data as a basic resource and a driver for innovation, and inform government decision-making and improve the efficiency of management and services. In order to eliminate digital barriers for supervision, it is essential to further activate data elements on the basis of broadening the channels for collecting information related to people’s wellbeing through the system of *Swift Response to Public Complaints*, and ensure that data is accessible, that is, easy to obtain, to understand and to use.

The standardization of government data is the premise of realizing the sharing and opening of government data. The problems concerning people’s wellbeing faced by *Swift Response to Public Complaints* are diverse, primary, specific and complex. By digitizing residents’ demands, big data on residents’ concerns take shape. Local departments can better understand various needs of residents with the help of data mining, which can help the government to identify potential difficulties and key issues in social governance, and carry out proactive governance (Meng, Zhang, & Wu, 2023).

At the same time, the supervision by public powers at the back end of the People’s Supervision System combines various forms of supervision within the state organ system, such as supervision by the people’s congresses, and administrative, supervisory and judicial organs. However, although these above-mentioned organs serve to supervise the government, they are “segmented” from the organizational sense, which leads to difficulties in cross-department cooperation and data sharing (Meng, Zhang, & Wu, 2023). The People’s Supervision System can realize supervision data sharing and optimization through resource coordination, break through system barriers horizontally and hierarchical barriers vertically that

hinder data sharing, create a stable and efficient supervisory mechanism, and improve the effectiveness of internal supervision.

6.2.2 Enhancing the Government's Ability to Respond Quickly and Solve Problems Efficiently by the Application of Modern Digital Technology

Self-supervision by public powers at the back end of the People's Supervision System provides the system with a high degree of efficiency. To build an effective supervision system with self-supervision of state organs as an important guarantee, it is necessary to use digital technologies such as big data and cloud computing to realize the innovation of the means, mode and concept of supervision.

First, *Swift Response to Public Complaints* uses artificial intelligence technology to establish a sound and efficient complaints management & feedback mechanism. The 12345 digital platform enables different departments to simultaneously address the demands of the public, and leverages the role of big data for analysis and integration, and realizes the seamless connection of intelligent translation, automatic work order assignment, intelligent follow-up through artificial intelligence technology. Thus, the system of *Swift Response to Public Complaints* can quickly classify the specific requests of the public, accurately direct them to competent departments, realize the whole-chain real-time supervision from their proposal to their resolution, and help solve the long-standing problems of slow feedback.

Second, the system of Swift Response to Public Complaints takes big data technology to drive smart governance and proactive governance. It is emphasized by President Xi that it is necessary to make full use of big data platforms, comprehensively analyze risk factors, and improve the ability to perceive, predict and prevent risk factors. Relying on the 12345 platform, the Beijing Municipal Government harnesses artificial intelligence technology to integrate and analyze the data, tap into its intrinsic value, generate regular analysis reports and special reports, to help predict the focus and direction of future work, make the social governance intelligent and proactive, and shift away from "post-supervision" to "pre-supervision".

In short, as an important link in whole-process people's democracy, the People's Supervision needs to be constantly improved, and innovative ways and means need to be adopted. An effective way to do so is to promote the building of the People's Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* by playing the driving role of data. As the Beijing Municipal Administration of Government Services and Data Management was set up to combine digital management functions, Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints has made special provisions on the collection of data, the development and operation of a unified digital platform, and the application of digital technology, to promote technological innovation and institutional reform and emphasize the role of data in empowering the supervision by ordinary people and self-supervision by public powers. It is a new attempt to improve the modernization level of supervision system and supervision ability in the digital era.

7. Conclusion

With the unified leadership of the Party and the introduction of the Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints, public oversight and the supervision by public powers are organically combined. In this process, "filing complaints" is the embodiment of the supervision by ordinary people, while "handling complaints" relies on the supervision by public powers. As the "front end" and "back end" of the People's Supervision System, they correspond to the two elements of "people's scrutiny" and "self-reform", echoing the "full expression of the people's wishes" and

“fulfillment of the people’s wishes”. The whole system is endowed with distinct democracy and remarkable efficiency. By combining the two forms of supervision, the mechanism of Swift Response to Public Complaints has created greater synergy. At the same time, the system integrates various types of supervision such as the supervision which aims at urging the government to undertake responsibility, detection and response, ex ante preventive supervision, in-process participatory supervision and ex post accountability supervision, which vividly reflects the whole-chain and all-dimensional nature and full coverage of the People’s Supervision under the concept of whole-process people’s democracy.

The report of the 20th CPC National Congress stresses that China will “promote the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation through a Chinese path to modernization”. A people-centered approach is a defining feature of a Chinese path to modernization. It is a natural requirement of a Chinese path to modernization to uphold the leadership of the Communist Party of China, develop whole-process people’s democracy, and ensure the people’s status as masters of the country is reflected in the Party’s concrete policies and measures for governing the country, and in the work of Party and state organs in all aspects and at all levels. In this context, the People’s Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* follows the leadership of CPC, acts on the President Xi Jinping’s important instruction “the cities should be built by the people and for the people”, practices whole-process people’s democracy, and honors the firm commitment of addressing public complaints without delay. Under the leadership of the Communist Party of China and the guidance of the core value of “putting the people first”, and with the digital technology empowering public oversight as well as oversight by public powers, the People’s Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* has combined “public scrutiny” and “self-reform”, the supervision by ordinary people and by public powers, and the various types of supervision. The People’s Supervision System based on *Swift Response to Public Complaints* is a vivid embodiment of the efforts to modernize the state governance system and capacity in supervisory field, which provides Beijing’s experience for developing the people’s supervision system for the Chinese modernization in the new era.

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Models of People-Oriented City: A Comparative Analysis of Beijing and New York

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ABSTRACT: With the rapid application of digital technology in human society, how it influences urban governance has become a central focus in contemporary research. Traditionally, studies on urban governance have focused on the dynamics between government and business. However, recent research underscores the importance of citizen engagement, particularly through the empowerment offered by digital tools. This article advances this discourse by revisiting existing theories and presenting a new framework that centers on government-citizen interactions, including three dimensions - governing structure, institutional framework, and interdepartmental collaboration. Using this framework, this article employs a comparative analysis of digital governance practices in Beijing and New York City, proposing a model of “people-oriented city”. This model emphasizes the capacity of municipal governments to effectively gather, comprehend, and respond to citizen needs. Both Beijing and New York have established citizen service hotlines (12345 and 311 respectively) and utilized advanced digital technologies to enable citizens to voice their demands and complaints. Despite these similarities, the two cities exhibit different approaches to government responsiveness. They differ in terms of governing structure, institutional framework, and collaboration mechanism. Beijing employs a more top-down model characterized by centralized leadership to ensure strong responsiveness, while New York adopts a horizontal, collaborative approach that encourages interdepartmental cooperation in addressing citizen requests. This article expands the scope of urban governance studies by highlighting government-citizen interaction in the digital era. By integrating both Chinese and American experiences, this article

1 This article is funded by the Beijing Social Science Foundation High-End Think Tank Project “Research on the Governance Models of Mega-Cities Driven by Swift Response to Public Complaints” (Project No. A-20230106). Principal investigator: Meng Tianguang, Tenured Professor and Party Secretary of the School of Social Sciences, Vice Director of the Lab on Computational Social Sciences and State Governance, Vice Dean of the Institute for Digital Government and Governance, Tsinghua University. Project members: Yan Yu, Assistant Professor of the School of Government, Beijing Normal University; Du Yuchun, Research Assistant Professor at the Center on Data and Government, Tsinghua University; Huang Minxuan, Research Assistant Professor at the Center on Data and Government, Tsinghua University; Zhan Yuxi, Research Assistant Professor at the Center on Data and Government, Tsinghua University.

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introduces a more comprehensive analytical framework for understanding digital governance. The findings contribute both theoretically and empirically to the growing field of urban governance, providing insights into how digitalization enhances governance practices across diverse global contexts.

KEYWORDS: People-Oriented City, Urban Governance, Digital Technology

1. Introduction: Urban Governance in the Era of Digitalization

Ever since the first introduction of “Smart City” by IBM in 2009, the idea of applying cutting-edge digital technology to urban governance has attracted worldwide attention. Digital technology, including the Internet of Things, big data, and artificial intelligence (AI) in a broader sense, has been treated as a major driver of development and innovation in each aspect of our human society (Fountain, 2004). In urban areas, digital technology has also been given high expectations to address long-lasting challenges, from traffic congestion and environmental pollution to public safety and resource allocation (Jiang, 2021).

Urban governance is a relatively new terminology, but one of its core questions “Who governs” has been long debated by political scientists, sociologists, and scholars from other disciplines. Two prominent theories are contributed by Floyd Hunter and Robert Dahl, with the former proposing an elite-driven type (Hunter, 1953) and the latter proposing a pluralist perspective (Dahl, 1961). Following their debates, scholars have developed several theories to describe and explain the governing structure of urban space, although most achievements are based on American experiences (Pierre, 2005). Since the 1980s, urban regime theory has been the dominant paradigm in studies of urban governance. With this paradigm, urban scholars have identified the crux of urban governance as the interplay between politics and the economy, or more specifically, the relationship between the government and the business (Judd, 1988).

However, the emphasis on the government-business relationship has been criticized for oversimplifying the complexity of urban governance and overlooking experiences outside the United States. In fact, according to the most recent studies on urban governance, surveys and interviews with scholars and practitioners as respondents have reached a consensus that citizen participation in local issues and government decision-making has been viewed as one of the most vital topics for urban governance (Da Cruz, et al, 2019). Song et al. (2023) even point out that citizenship is the core element of urban development and governance, in which citizens should frequently and meaningfully interact with the government and businesses in urban issues.

Following this new trend, this article conducts a comparative analysis of Beijing and New York City (hereafter referred to as New York), focusing on their citizen service hotlines - Beijing's 12345 (hereafter Beijing12345) and New York's 311 (hereafter NYC311). Our analysis reveals that while both cities leverage advanced digital technologies to enhance citizen accessibility and responsiveness, they adopt notably different governance approaches. Beijing employs a top-down model characterized by centralized leadership and administrative reforms that prioritize swift responses to citizen requests and complaints. In contrast, New York embraces a horizontal, collaborative framework that fosters interdepartmental cooperation through agreements. These distinct approaches reflect the underlying governance styles of each city, highlighting how structural differences in leadership, institutional frameworks, and collaboration mechanisms influence the effectiveness of government responsiveness in urban governance.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The second section first reviews past studies on urban governance and points out that one major shortcoming in the existing studies is the overlooking of citizens' needs. To fill the gap, this article proposes a theoretical framework highlighting the inclusion of

citizens' involvement and their impacts on urban governance. In the following third section, this article explains why Beijing and New York are chosen for comparison, introduces these two cases, and presents the methods used to collect and analyze materials. Both Beijing and New York have not only applied digital technologies to improve the accessibility and efficiency of their citizen service hotlines, but have also established laws and regulations to enhance the functioning of request handling. While both cities have evolved into what this article refers to as "people-oriented cities", they differ in the structure and institutions through which the municipal governments respond to citizen requests. The fourth section compares these two cases across three dimensions: governing structure, institutional framework, and collaboration mechanism. Section Five concludes this article with a discussion on the limitations of this study and the potential directions of future research.

2. Bringing Citizen Back to Urban Governance

With rapid urbanization sweeping across the world, urban areas have become the major residence for global population. Studies on urban space have focused on questions such as how cities are governed, how policies are formulated, and how power dynamics shape urban life. These questions also represent the major directions in the field of urban governance. This section first summarizes the major theories regarding models of urban governance and then proposes a new theoretical framework emphasizing a new trend in this field, that is, citizen participation.

2.1 Previous Studies on Models of Urban Governance

Although urban governance, as an application of governance theory in urban space, is a relatively new concept, studies on the structure, institutions, process, and outcomes in urban space have been a vital topic in this field. To date, there are several theories, mostly based on American cases, explaining how cities are governed. These include elite theory, pluralism, neo-Marxist theory, growth machine theory, and urban regime theory.

First, elite theory posits that a small and cohesive group of powerful elites controls decision-making processes in urban settings. Such a group is often composed of business leaders, political leaders, and influential community members. One of the most prominent works in elite theory is Floyd Hunter's book *Community Power Structure* (1953), which provided a detailed analysis of how a select group of elites shaped the policies and development decisions in Atlanta, Georgia. Hunter's work demonstrated that, despite the appearance of democratic governance, power is concentrated and that the general population has limited influence over urban governance. Unlike pluralism (explained later), which suggests that power is widely dispersed among various interest groups, elite theory argues that these elites wield disproportionate amount of influence and make decisions that primarily serve their interests rather than the public good. This focus on the concentration of power among a few has made elite theory a critical perspective for analyzing power dynamics and decision-making in cities.

Second, pluralism theory suggests that power in urban governance is distributed among a wide array of diverse and competing interest groups, each with varying degrees of influence. One of the most prominent works of pluralism theory is Robert Dahl's monograph *Who Governs?* (1961), a groundbreaking study of power dynamics in New Haven, Connecticut. His research showed that a variety of groups had access to the decision-making process, and that decisions were often a result of bargaining and alliances, rather than the dictates of a ruling elite. His work laid the foundation for understanding urban governance as a dynamic and participatory process, highlighting the importance of multiple centers

of influence in shaping urban policies and decisions. Unlike elite theory, which posits that power is concentrated among a few elites, pluralism argues that no single group dominates the political landscape. Instead, decision-making results from negotiation, compromise, and competition among multiple groups, including civic organizations, business interests, labor unions, and other community stakeholders. This competition among various groups is expected to lead to more balanced and democratic governance, as no single entity can unilaterally control outcomes.

Third, Neo-Marxist theory in urban politics focuses on the ways capitalist economic structures and class relations shape the development and governance of cities (Harvey, 1985). Drawing on Marxist principles, this theory argues that urban spaces are arenas of social conflict, driven by the imperative of capital accumulation and the exploitation of labor. Neo-Marxists contend that the organization of cities under capitalism leads to spatial inequalities, commodification of land, and the displacement of lower-income communities. The theory emphasizes that urban policies and planning are heavily influenced by the needs of capital, resulting in urban development projects that prioritize economic growth and the interests of the elite over social equity and community welfare. Readers may notice similarities between Neo-Marxist theory and elite theory, as both highlight the dominance of elites. However, Neo-Marxist theory adopts a more critical stance by focusing on the negative consequences of this power dynamic, particularly its impact on society.

Fourth, growth machine theory posits that urban development is primarily driven by a coalition of local elites who seek to enhance economic growth and increase land values for their own benefits (Molotch, 1976). This coalition, often consisting of real estate developers, business leaders, local politicians, and media outlets, views the city as a “growth machine” whose primary goal is to maximize economic expansion and land value. The main argument of growth machine theory is that urban policies are heavily influenced by these growth coalitions, which prioritize development projects that enhance their economic interests, often at the expense of broader social or environmental considerations. This theory argues that decisions about land use, zoning, and urban planning are primarily driven by the desire to attract investment and promote growth.

Fifth, urban regime theory focuses on the informal arrangements and coalitions between public and private actors that form to govern cities and achieve specific policy goals. The main argument of urban regime theory is that urban governance is not solely determined by formal governmental structures but rather by the ability of diverse actors, including business leaders, politicians, and community groups, to collaborate and form governing coalitions or “regimes”. These regimes are defined by their capacity to mobilize resources, coordinate activities, and influence policy to meet their collective objectives. Unlike growth machine theory, which centers on economic growth as the primary motivator, urban regime theory recognizes a variety of goals. The most prominent work in this field is Clarence Stone’s *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946-1988* (1989), which provides an empirical study of Atlanta’s governance and illustrates how different coalitions formed over time to address various urban challenges. Stone’s work highlights the significance of power-sharing arrangements in urban governance and the necessity of cooperation among public and private actors to effectively manage city affairs, making it foundational research for understanding the dynamics of urban politics.

While each of the above theories offers valuable insights into the complexities of urban governance and the distribution of power, they also share limitations that invite critical examination. One common critique of these theories is their tendency to overemphasize the influence of economic elites while neglecting regular citizens. For instance, while both elite theory and growth machine theory focus heavily on the influence of powerful economic actors and local elites, they often understate the agency of grassroots organizations, social movements, and non-elite actors who can also significantly impact urban

politics. Subsequent studies built upon these theories even consider the influence of business and social elites as primary factors shaping diverse patterns of urban governance (Pierre, 1999).

Moreover, previous theories have been critiqued for potential regional bias (Davis, 2002; Mossberger & Stoker, 2001; Pierre, 2014; Ward, 1996), as they predominantly derive from studies of Western (mostly American) cities and may not fully capture the nuances of urban governance in diverse global contexts. Cities in developing countries, for example, often operate under different political, economic, and social dynamics that these theories do not adequately address. This highlights a need for more inclusive theoretical frameworks that incorporate a wider range of urban experiences and governance models.

2.2 A New Framework Focusing on Government-Citizen Interaction

More recently, urban scholars and even practitioners have realized the importance of citizen participation in urban governance. Based on a systematic review of 408 publications, Da Cruz et al. (2019) emphasize that citizen participation in decision-making processes is the most dominant theme in urban governance research, with over a third of the publications focusing on this issue. This highlights the academic interest in enhancing democratic engagement and community involvement in shaping urban policies and planning. Similarly, Song et al. (2023) emphasize the significance of citizen participation as a core element in urban governance, reflecting the growing academic and practical interest in involving communities directly in decision-making processes. This suggests that as urban governance research evolves, there is a shift toward more democratic and inclusive forms of administration, where the public is not just a recipient of policies but an active participant in shaping them. Citizen participation is viewed as crucial for enhancing the transparency, accountability, and effectiveness of urban governance, leading to more responsive and adaptable cities. Their research also touches on the challenges of integrating citizen voices, particularly in the context of rapid urbanization and increasing diversity, highlighting the need for innovative methods and platforms to facilitate meaningful engagement.

Over the past decade, some scholars have incorporated citizen participation into their analysis of urban governance and developed new typologies. For example, Hendriks (2014) presents a typology of urban governance based on two main dimensions: the actors of and approaches to urban decision-making. Decision makers can be economic and social elites or ordinary citizens, while approaches can be “selective choice” and “integrative deliberation”. In his typology, Hendriks (2014) proposes four ideal-typical models of urban governance, including urban regime, urban market, urban trust, and urban platform. First, the urban regime model combines a focus on real decision makers, such as business elites and other key figures in society, with a selective approach to decision-making. It is characterized by exclusive alliances between a small number of powerful actors who drive urban development, often with limited public participation. Second, the urban market model emphasizes individual citizens and a selective mode of choice. This model views the public domain as a marketplace where citizens, acting as consumers, can choose from a range of public goods and services. Third, the urban trust model brings together a decision-making elite with an integrative and deliberative approach. This model is more inclusive than the urban regime model, involving a wider range of stakeholders in a communicative and cooperative manner. It aims to balance different interests and fosters a more consensual approach to governance. Lastly, in the urban platform model, there is a strong focus on ordinary citizens and an emphasis on integrative deliberation. The urban platform envisions the public realm as an open forum where all citizens can participate in decision-making processes. It encourages dialogue, inclusivity, and a comprehensive approach to urban governance.

Building upon previous research, this article seeks to underscore the critical role of citizen participation and its impact on government responsiveness in urban governance, particularly in the era of digital transformation. To effectively integrate government-citizen interaction into our theoretical

framework, this article utilizes an institutionalist perspective. Here, “institution” is understood as a comprehensive system of values, norms, mechanisms, and practices that shape or constrain political behavior and decision-making processes (Pierre, 1999).

In examining the scope and impact of government-citizen interaction in urban governance, this article delves into three fundamental theoretical dimensions: governing structure, institutional framework, and interdepartmental collaboration. Through a comparative analysis of Beijing and New York, the article specifically explores how citizen service hotlines function as vital mechanisms within the governance of these two metropolitan areas. By focusing on the operational dynamics of these hotlines, this article aims to illuminate how they facilitate citizen engagement, streamline communication between residents and government entities, and ultimately enhance the responsiveness of urban governance. The comparison of Beijing’s 12345 hotline and New York’s 311 system allows for a nuanced understanding of different approaches each city employs to harness citizen input effectively. Furthermore, this analysis not only highlights the distinct characteristics of governance in these cities but also underscores the broader implications for urban management in the digital age. Through this exploration, the article seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the role of citizen participation in shaping more effective and inclusive urban governance practices.

3. Research Design: Case Selection and Methods

3.1 Case Selection

To test the applicability of the theoretical framework proposed in the previous section, the authors conduct a comparative case study of Beijing and New York City. The selection of these two cities is based on several important considerations that make them ideal for a comparative analysis.

First, although Beijing and New York City differ significantly in terms of their national political systems and institutional contexts, both cities share key characteristics as global mega-cities. Both cities are home to massive populations and serve as economic and cultural hubs, concentrating vast resources and industries within their urban landscapes. These common features mean that both cities face similar urban governance challenges, often referred to as “big city diseases”, such as traffic congestion, environmental pollution, and strains on public infrastructure. Furthermore, the increasing awareness of individual rights and growing public demands for better services and governance are common issues in both cities. Thus, despite their differing national backgrounds, Beijing and New York provide a fertile ground for comparative analysis of how these cities address common challenges through public service mechanisms like citizen service hotlines.

Second, both Beijing and New York City have successfully implemented citizen service hotlines (12345 and 311, respectively) to engage with the public and manage urban governance issues. In both cities, these hotlines have become central tools for collecting and responding to citizen concerns. These systems provide valuable insights into how technologies and administration can be leveraged to enhance government-citizen interaction, making them highly relevant for the study of urban governance. Their success in integrating technological innovations and promoting responsive governance makes these two cities comparable in the context of analyzing citizen engagement and service delivery.

Third, the availability of comprehensive materials and data from both cities supports a robust comparative analysis. For both Beijing12345 and NYC311, there is ample documentation, including official reports, service records, and phone call data, that details the functioning, performance, and impact

of these hotlines. Additionally, previous studies and fieldwork in both cities offer qualitative insights into how these hotlines are operated and managed. This availability of materials makes it feasible to conduct an in-depth comparative case study, allowing for a thorough exploration of both the similarities and differences between the two systems.

3.2 Case Introduction: Beijing12345 and NYC311

3.2.1 Beijing 12345 Hotline

With a 32-year history, the Beijing 12345 Citizen Service has undergone several adjustments and upgrades. In January 2019, the Beijing Convenience Call Center was renamed the Beijing Citizen Service Hotline Center with its primary function of serving residents, and later it also became available to enterprises on October 12. The hotline has set up a 24/7 working system throughout the year to receive citizen requests, which unifies the working procedures and standards across governments and departments at all levels under the immediate response mechanism. Each request must be addressed to residents in a point-to-point manner, so that “every request receives a response”.

Ever since then, multiple technical and administrative innovations have been implemented to handle a fast-growing volume of citizen requests. In 2019, The hotline received more than 6.96 million calls, a 27.5% increase compared to 2018. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the hotline played an extremely important role in collecting a wide range of demands, ranging from prevention and control policies to medical treatment. In 2023, the volume of citizen calls via the 12345 hotline has reached 21.44 million.

Inspired by the advanced experience of urban governance both domestically and abroad, in early 2019 Beijing launched the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform (hereafter SRPC) with the 12345 hotline as the major channel to collect citizens’ demands. After receiving phone calls gathered by the 12345 hotline, the municipal government sends the demands of the public directly to the sub-district and grassroots governments. According to the principle of “whoever receives the call shall take charge of it”, any government department or agency needs to respond to citizens in a timely and effective way. For complex demands that need to be solved across departments or even levels, the sub-district and grassroots governments initiate the requests and invite other departments to respond. The municipal government coordinates and mobilizes the forces of various agencies to respond to requests and solve problems with the least time possible. By doing so, the SRPC reform aims to improve the quality of urban governance by solving problems that surround the public, resulting in a streamlined and efficient governance system.

3.2.2 New York 311 Hotline

With over 20 years of service, the New York City 311 Hotline has become a vital component of the city’s non-emergency service framework. It was officially launched in 2003 under Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s administration with the primary function of providing residents, businesses, and visitors with streamlined access to city services. The introduction of NYC311 aimed to centralize non-emergency requests that were previously managed through a fragmented system of over 40 different agency hotlines. Available 24/7, NYC311 covers a wide array of services, from noise complaints to housing issues, allowing New Yorkers to interact with the municipal government through phones, mobile apps, and online platforms.

Since its inception, NYC311 has undergone several key upgrades to enhance its efficiency and responsiveness (Nam, 2014a, 2014b). Within its first year, the system was able to handle service requests in more than 180 languages, demonstrating its commitment to diversity and inclusiveness. Technological applications, such as the launch of the NYC311 mobile app in 2009 and its integration with social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, have transformed NYC311 from a traditional call center into a versatile, multi-channel service delivery platform. These innovations have not only improved user experience but also allowed the system to manage an ever-growing volume of citizen requests.

In recent years, NYC311 has experienced a significant increase in service demands. During the COVID-19 pandemic, NYC311 played a crucial role in disseminating essential health information and directing residents to services like food assistance and testing sites. Its role expanded to cover pandemic-related inquiries, demonstrating the system's flexibility in responding to emerging urban challenges. During the fiscal year 2024, NYC311 has received 38.2 million contacts from New Yorkers across the phone system, website, and social media channels.¹

NYC311 ensures that service requests are promptly routed to the relevant city departments. Each department works in close coordination with NYC311 to ensure that requests are addressed in a timely manner, maintaining high standards of service delivery. This collaborative approach forms the backbone of NYC311's performance, ensuring that residents' needs are met efficiently, whether during routine operations or in times of crisis. Inspired by global best practices and technological advancements NYC311 continues to refine its processes. Recent efforts include enhancing data-sharing mechanisms between agencies to improve real-time monitoring and response efficiency.

3.3 Methods

The research methods applied in this article are divided into two main steps: material collection and data analysis. The first step in this research involved gathering a variety of materials and data for both the Beijing 12345 and NYC311 cases. These materials include official documents, reports, and data available on government websites, which provide foundational information on the structure, governance, and functioning of the two hotlines. The authors relied heavily on public resources such as city regulations, service reports, and technology implementation documents to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the hotline systems.

In addition to desk research, fieldwork was conducted to gather first-hand information about the operational aspects of both hotlines. For Beijing 12345, the authors visited the hotline's call center, conducted interviews with staff members, and observed how citizen requests are processed. Due to the logistical and financial challenges of international travel, particularly regarding the NYC311 case, the authors supplemented their field research with remote interviews. Several U.S.-based scholars and practitioners with expertise in public service delivery systems were consulted. These interviews helped provide deeper insights into the everyday functioning of NYC311 and its cross-agency collaboration.

To analyze these materials, the authors employ both individual case analysis and comparative case analysis. For each hotline, the formal structure, institutional framework, and working mechanisms are examined. This includes an in-depth analysis of how citizen requests are received, categorized, and routed to the appropriate government agencies. Once the individual case studies are completed, the authors proceed to compare and contrast the two systems. Using a comparative case analysis approach, the authors explore the similarities and differences between Beijing 12345 and NYC311, particularly in how they handle cross-level and interdepartmental collaboration. The analysis also drew upon the theoretical framework of urban governance to understand how each system reflects the unique administrative, cultural, and technological environments of its respective cities. This approach enables a nuanced comparison of the performance of these two hotlines in addressing citizen needs and enhancing government responsiveness.

1 Fiscal year in NYC begins on July 1 and ends on June 30 of the following year. Thus, fiscal year 2024 refers to the period from July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024. Statistics comes from "Fiscal 2024 Mayor's Management Report",

<https://www.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/mmr2024/MMR-2024-Cover.pdf>, access on September 23th, 2024.

4. People-Oriented City: A Comparative Analysis of Beijing12345 and NYC311

By incorporating digital technologies, such as websites and mobile apps, both Beijing and NYC have enhanced the accessibility of their citizen service hotlines. These innovations offer residents a vital platform to report their needs, concerns, and complaints. As the volume of citizen requests increases, these two municipal governments gain deeper insights into the daily functioning of urban life, enabling them to respond more effectively and make more informed decisions to address public issues. This growing capacity to understand urban spaces through citizen input forms a strong foundation for building a people-oriented city, centered around responsive and inclusive governance.

However, creating channels for citizen participation is not sufficient on its own. The more important and challenging task for both Beijing and NYC is to efficiently and effectively respond to citizen requests. Based on analyses of government documents, publicly available information, and interviews, this article identifies differences between the two cities in three critical areas: governing structure, institutional framework, and interdepartmental collaboration. These distinctions highlight how each city navigates the complex task of integrating citizen feedback into its governance processes.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Beijing12345 and NYC311

	Beijing 12345	New York 311
Governing structure	Administrative-oriented	Technology-oriented
Institutional framework	Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints	Service Level Agreements (SLAs)
Interdepartmental Collaboration	Vertical collaboration	Horizontal negotiation

First, governing structure examines the overall system through which the citizen service hotlines operate. While both Beijing12345 and NYC311 have garnered significant attention from municipal leaders, their governing structures differ notably. As the following analysis shows, Beijing12345 is more administrative-oriented, with multiple administrative reforms aimed at enhancing efficiency and effectiveness in responding to citizen requests. In contrast, NYC311 is more technology-driven, continuously introducing advanced digital technologies to improve accessibility and service coverage. It is important to note that this contrast doesn't imply that Beijing lacks technological advancement or that NYC is devoid of administrative improvements. The success of both hotlines stems from a combination of administrative and technological reforms. The distinction lies in the primary focus of their operations.

The creation of the Beijing 12345 hotline can be traced back to the late 1980s when it was originally known as the "Mayor's Hotline". However, it was only since 2019 that Beijing 12345 has been recognized as one of the most significant municipal-level projects. This heightened importance is attributed not only to technological advancements but also to critical administrative reforms, particularly the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" reform launched in 2019.

In terms of governing structure, the SRPC reform underscores the essential role of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) leadership, ensuring that the CCP's political and organizational authority is strengthened in the entire governance system. This approach integrates resources and strengths across the city to create a governance model focused on addressing citizens' needs. Within this framework, the Beijing Municipal Committee of the CCP plays a central leadership role, coordinating efforts among various government departments, grassroots governments, and communities to effectively resolve issues. Furthermore, to enhance the daily operations of Beijing 12345, the Beijing Municipal Administration of Government Services and Data Management has implemented multiple administrative reforms aimed at

establishing a new institutional framework. This framework facilitates the handling of citizen requests, fosters collaboration across departments and different levels of government, and incorporates performance evaluation mechanisms.

Alongside administrative reforms, Beijing 12345 has introduced several digital technologies to enhance its functionality and performance. Since 2019, it has integrated 64 government hotlines from various sectors and districts across the city, enabling a single hotline to receive and process citizen calls swiftly. The hotline also actively develops online platforms, creating a unified online working system that incorporates nearly twenty online channels, including the leaders' message board on the People's Daily, national government service complaint channels, WeChat, the State Council's Online Supervision platform, government Weibo accounts, news outlets, and mobile apps. More recently, the hotline has expanded its use of technologies such as cloud computing and artificial intelligence, establishing a standardized knowledge base system across the city. By leveraging voice recognition technologies, it achieves request handling, task assignment, and automated follow-up. Additionally, the hotline has introduced virtual online agents to provide real-time online services, allowing citizens' inquiries to receive immediate responses and achieving an 80.6% resolution rate for consultation-related questions.

In the governing structure of NYC311, the mayor and the City Office of Technology and Innovation (OTI), previously known as the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT), play crucial roles in leadership and oversight. Their collaboration ensures that the hotline operates efficiently and effectively, enabling it to meet the rising needs of New Yorkers. Since its inception under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, NYC311 has been central to the city's efforts to streamline government services and improving citizen engagement. The mayor's office sets the priorities for NYC311, aligning it with broader city governance strategies such as improving transparency, accessibility, and efficiency in public services. OTI has historically been responsible for managing NYC311's technological infrastructure and ensuring its effective operation. This department oversees the back-end systems, software, and telecommunications that allow NYC311 to handle millions of service requests efficiently. OTI also ensures that the system is continually upgraded to keep pace with technological advancements and changes in public needs. Under OTI's oversight, NYC311 has expanded from a simple phone-based service to a multi-platform system that includes web-based requests, mobile apps, social media, and AI-driven chatbots.

Under the oversight of the OTI, NYC311 has consistently prioritized upgrading its technological infrastructure over the past twenty years to keep pace with the rapidly growing volume of requests and the increasing expectations of New Yorkers regarding its operations. Administrative reforms, including the centralization of 40 different agency call centers and the establishment of service level agreements with other departments, are also part of NYC311's evolution. However, from its early days using the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system to its later embrace of open APIs and mobile app solutions, NYC311 remains committed to being at the forefront of digital technology. One of the most important technological reforms in NYC311 is the implementation of CRM software. The CRM system allows for real-time tracking of service requests and seamless coordination between different government agencies. This technology enables NYC311 to efficiently handle millions of service requests annually, and also improves transparency by allowing citizens to track the status of their complaints online. Furthermore, as new digital technologies are adopted, NYC311 has expanded beyond its initial phone-based service model. In 2009, NYC311 launched a mobile app, followed by integration with SMS, Twitter, and other digital platforms. This digital transformation allows citizens to access city services through multiple channels, thereby improving accessibility. Citizens can now submit service requests, track their progress, and receive updates through digital mediums. These advancements significantly expand NYC311's

coverage and make it more convenient for users to engage with the system. NYC311 has also embraced business intelligence (BI) tools to enhance performance management and reporting. By implementing advanced analytics and reporting systems, NYC311 can now generate insights into service delivery trends, agency performance, and customer satisfaction. These data-driven insights have been instrumental in driving continuous improvement in how the municipal government manages non-emergency services.

Second, institutional framework serves as the foundation for the operational effectiveness of citizen service hotlines. Both Beijing12345 and NYC311 have developed and implemented various institutions to streamline the entire process of handling citizen requests. However, a significant difference between these two hotlines lies in the comprehensiveness of their institutional structures. Specifically, Beijing has enacted a dedicated law in 2021 to formalize and institutionalize the entire request-handling process. This legal framework ensures clarity and accountability in how citizen requests are processed and responded to. In contrast, NYC 311 primarily relies on existing laws and regulations to address citizen inquiries. Although the 311 call center has established Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with other agencies to enhance collaboration, its operational framework is not as codified as that of Beijing's hotline. This distinction highlights the varying approaches each city takes toward institutionalizing citizen engagement and underscores the importance of robust legal frameworks in enhancing the responsiveness of municipal services.

As for Beijing12345, the most prominent institution is the administrative regulation published in 2021, titled "Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints". The main content of this regulation can be divided into five dimensions: value, leadership, working flow, evaluation, and accountability. The value dimension emphasizes the primary role of Beijing 12345 in serving the public, requiring timely and efficient responses to citizens' urgent needs and concerns. The leadership dimension highlights the central role and responsibilities of the Chinese Communist Party and the government, while also encouraging the involvement and participation of the public. The working flow dimension details the steps involved in handling citizen requests, including reception, classification, assignment, processing, and feedback. The evaluation dimension establishes a comprehensive assessment system centered on core indicators such as response rate, resolution rate, and satisfaction rate, incorporating these metrics into the overall performance evaluation of the government. Lastly, to ensure accountability, the regulation specifies the supervision and legal responsibilities during the operation of Beijing12345. This arrangement ensures that the process of addressing citizen requests is efficient, transparent, and subject to public and media oversight.

Currently, there are three laws and rules to ensure that NYC311's operations meet the needs of New Yorkers effectively. Among these, one is specifically designed for NYC311, and the other two apply to both NYC311 and other government agencies. To enhance accountability and responsiveness, NYC311 has established Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with various agencies. SLAs set clear expectations for response times and service quality for different types of requests, enabling NYC311 to track performance metrics and ensure compliance. These agreements are crucial for maintaining high standards of service delivery, as they require agencies to prioritize requests received through NYC311 and provide timely updates to residents. Moreover, The City Administrative Procedure Act (CAPA) is a foundational legal framework that explains how city agencies, including those involved with NYC311, create and implement rules. CAPA not only mandates transparency in government rule-making, but also encourages citizen engagement in this process. This ensures that NYC311 operates under a clear set of guidelines, making it accountable to the public and enhancing trust in city government. In addition, NYC311 operates under specific local laws and provisions set forth in the New York City Charter. These laws outline the responsibilities of city agencies in responding to service requests and establish standards for timeliness

and quality of service. The NYC Charter stipulates that all city agencies must cooperate with NYC311 to ensure that citizen inquiries are managed effectively and efficiently.

Lastly, interdepartmental collaboration examines the mechanisms that facilitate cooperation among government agencies. In practice, citizen requests often involve complex issues that cannot be resolved by a single department; instead, they typically require collaboration across multiple entities. Both Beijing12345 and NYC311 have established rules and mechanisms to promote this interdepartmental cooperation, albeit through different models. Beijing employs a vertical model, enabling lower-level governments (particularly grassroots governments) to seek support and guidance from higher-level authorities. In contrast, NYC utilizes Service Level Agreements (SLAs) to build partnerships with various agencies, enabling them to collectively address the needs of citizens.

To enhance interdepartmental collaboration, Beijing implemented a mechanism called “Quick Response to Community Calls” (Chuishao Baodao)¹ in 2018. This system enables lower-level governments, primarily grassroots administrations, to coordinate with higher-level authorities. When grassroots governments receive a citizen request from the 12345 call center, if they find out the handling of that request require cross-level cooperation, they can send a request to government agencies at the upper level. These departments are then required to “report in”, meaning they must respond swiftly and arrive on-site to collaboratively address the issue with the grassroots government. As the key actors responsible in this process, grassroots governments integrate local resources and coordinate with relevant upper-level departments to effectively research and resolve the identified problems. Under the “Quick Response to Community Calls” mechanism, these departments are obligated to respond and address issues within a specified time-frame, ensuring that public demands are met promptly.

Currently, NYC311 operates under a well-defined framework that mandates cooperation among city agencies. A key element of cross-agency collaboration within NYC311 is the implementation of Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with various city departments. These agreements define the expected response times and quality standards for different types of service requests. By holding agencies accountable to these benchmarks, NYC311 ensures that requests are prioritized and addressed promptly. This collaborative approach enhances operational efficiency and fosters a culture of accountability across departments. In addition, NYC311 promotes regular meetings between its leadership and representatives from various city agencies to discuss performance metrics, service delivery standards, and areas for improvement. These meetings serve as a platform for agencies to share insights, address challenges, and then enhance the overall user experience. The collaborative dialogue helps identify recurring issues that may require inter-agency coordination, ensuring a comprehensive approach to problem-solving.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This analysis reveals significant insights into the functioning of citizen service hotlines in Beijing and New York, highlighting how digital technologies, governance structures, institutional framework, and interdepartmental collaboration shape citizen participation in urban governance. Both cities have embraced technological advancements to enhance the accessibility of their hotlines, providing vital platforms for residents to voice their needs and concerns. However, the effectiveness of these systems relies heavily on the cities' ability to respond efficiently to citizen requests.

¹ The corresponding Chinese is 吹哨报到.

The comparative examination underscores critical differences in the governance models adopted by each city. Beijing's administrative-oriented approach, bolstered by the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" reform, emphasizes a top-down structure where the Chinese Communist Party plays a pivotal role in directing responses to citizen issues. This framework enables a streamlined and integrated response mechanism that harnesses resources across various governmental layers. Conversely, New York's technology-oriented model prioritizes digital engagement and relies on SLAs to ensure timely responses through horizontal collaboration among agencies. This allows for greater flexibility and adaptability in addressing citizen needs. The institutional frameworks of both hotlines further reflect their differing operational philosophies. Beijing's recent legal reforms have established a clear and comprehensive structure for managing citizen requests, emphasizing accountability and performance metrics. In contrast, while NYC311 utilizes existing regulations to guide its operations, its reliance on SLAs highlights a more informal yet effective approach to maintaining service standards. This difference points to the importance of robust legal frameworks in ensuring accountability and responsiveness in urban governance. Moreover, the mechanisms for interdepartmental collaboration illustrate how both cities tackle complex citizen requests. Beijing's "Quick Response to Community Calls" mechanism enables grassroots governments to engage higher-level authorities, fostering a coordinated response to citizen issues. In contrast, NYC311's collaborative framework encourages regular communication and accountability among agencies, ensuring that citizen needs are met comprehensively and efficiently.

Overall, the findings indicate that while both Beijing and New York have made strides in enhancing citizen participation through their respective hotlines, the effectiveness of these systems hinges on their unique governance structure, institutional framework, and collaborative mechanism. Moving forward, both cities can learn from each other's approaches to improve responsiveness and inclusiveness in urban governance. For Beijing, further embracing technology could enhance the efficiency of its administrative processes, while for New York, more comprehensive legal frameworks may bolster accountability and public trust. Ultimately, fostering a people-oriented city requires a continuous commitment to integrating citizen feedback into governance practices, ensuring that all voices are heard and addressed effectively.

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Exploring Cultural Alignment in Smart City Open Innovation: The Case of Beijing's "Swift Response to Public Complaints" Reform

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ABSTRACT: The objective of the smart city strategy is to integrate various urban resources, encompassing energy use, transportation, and citizen participation, to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of city operations. Despite its growing importance, there remains a lack of a robust theoretical framework to guide policymakers in designing effective smart city innovation strategies. This paper aims to contribute to the smart city literature by leveraging Hofstede's national culture framework to inform the strategic design of a smart city innovation framework. The "Swift Response to Public Complaints" reform in Beijing exemplifies the digital transformation of China's government hotline system and is an important aspect of the construction of smart cities. This paper reviews and compares the two successful citizen co-creation innovation strategic models, Living Lab from Europe and Fab Lab from the United States, through the lens of the national culture framework. Drawing on a six-year action study of the Beijing reform, grounded in both the Living Lab and Fab Lab experiments, the analysis reveals that alignment between national culture dimensions and innovation strategy significantly enhances outcomes in both process and product innovation. Based on these findings, the study introduces the concept of "cultural alignment" for the smart city innovation framework.

KEYWORDS: smart city strategy, Swift Response to Public Complaints, Living Lab, Fab Lab, national cultural alignment

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1. Introduction

Smart cities have gained immense popularity around the world with advancements in information technology, particularly the Internet of Things (IoT), cloud computing, and big data processing, as well as their applications in urban governance and services. These technologies have been increasingly applied to urban governance and service delivery, leading to a surge in research and case studies exploring smart city initiatives (Bakıcı et al. 2013; Caragliu et al. 2011; Cowley et al. 2018; Joss et al. 2019; Mahizhnan 1999; Martin et al. 2018). Such initiatives emphasize fostering citizen's capacities for learning and innovation (Allwinkle and Cruickshank 2011; Kourtiti and Nijkamp 2012; Neirotti et al. 2014). The success of smart city initiatives is widely attributed to three fundamental pillars, technology infrastructure, software application deployment, and open innovation by citizens (Paskaleva 2011; Schaffers et al. 2011). A smart city is both human-centered and people-focused (Cowley et al. 2018). It's expected that the technology-empowered smart city environment has created an opportunity for open innovation, whereby every citizen is expected to contribute to the technology acceptance and exploitation process.

Open innovation has garnered attention from both scholars and practitioners due to the technology advancement (Lichtenthaler 2011). Under an open innovation framework, organizations seek to explore innovation products/processes not only internally but also externally. Open innovation has been regarded as the core of innovation. Practically, two popular strategic models—Living Lab from Europe and Fab Lab from the U.S.—are often referenced in smart city planning projects (Almirall and Wareham 2011; Bakıcı et al. 2013; De Leon et al. 2006; Edwards-Schachter et al. 2012; ENoLL 2015; Feurstein et al. 2008; Liedtke et al. 2012). Living Lab is a new model for R&D and innovation that aligns with the Lisbon strategy in Europe. It focuses on experimentation and co-creation real-life settings, involving users, researchers, firms, and public institutions to corroboratively devise new solutions, products, services or business models (Almirall and Wareham 2011; De Moor et al. 2010; Edwards-Schachter et al. 2012; Liedtke et al. 2012; Wareham et al. 2009). In contrast, the Fab Lab model, developed at MIT, provides a comprehensive suite of tools to support all aspects of technology development, encompassing design, fabrication, testing, debugging, monitoring, analysis, and documentation. The core philosophy underlying Fab Labs revolves around personal fabrication (Gershenfeld 2008), where each citizen is encouraged to engage in innovation using various technological tools.

Despite extensive research on these two smart city innovation models, there remains a gap in understanding which model is most appropriate for specific applications and why. This study thus addresses two primary research questions: (1) Is the smart city open innovation strategy model universally applicable, or is it context-dependent? (2) If it is context-dependent, in what situations will Living Labs and Fab Labs be more effective?

This study seeks to fill in this research gap and address these questions by examining the smart city open innovation strategy through the lens of the national culture framework. The study includes an action research project examining Beijing's Swift Response to Public Complaints (SRPC) reform, with both Living Lab and Fab Lab models assessed within the framework of national culture. Beijing's SRPC reform is a project supported by the digital transformation of the government hotline, a key component of smart city development. Currently, digital government hotline systems have been developed in many cities around the world, such as the 311 system in the United States and the 12345 system in China. The Chinese 12345 hotline of local governments is a non-emergency telephone service, akin to 311 in the U.S., 120 in Korea, and 115 in Germany, designed to serve as a centralized access point for citizens seeking municipal services. In the digital age, local governments globally have embraced various

information and communication technologies (ICTs) to facilitate the digital transformation of government hotlines, thereby enhancing government management and service capacity.

The digital government hotline system now integrates multiple channels, combining telephony with social media and smartphone-based ICT applications (apps). This transition from a single-channel to a multi-channel system marks a significant advancement in smart city development. For example, San Francisco's 311 system integrates both Twitter and a mobile app, Open311, to foster technological innovation (Matthew 2021).

The SRPC analysis suggests that the smart city innovation strategies are closely linked with the national or regional culture of the city implementing the project. When national cultural dimensions align with innovation strategy, smart governance outcomes are more successful in both process and product innovation. This study offers guidance on aligning smart city innovation strategies with cultural and technological considerations. Following the principles of action research (Davison et al. 2004; Davison et al. 2012), this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on the smart city and open innovation strategies; Section 3 discusses the national cultural framework and its impact on smart city open innovation strategy; Section 4 outlines the research methodology; Section 5 presents the development of Beijing's SRPC project; Section 6 discusses the action research findings; and Section 7 concludes with implications and limitations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Smart City

The vision and concept of smart cities can be traced to the 1980s, a period when advancements in computing led to the automation of various business applications, including calculation and functional systems in different departments (Mahizhnan 1999). However, it was not until the 2000s—with the widespread availability of internet infrastructure in large metropolitan areas and the rise of new sensor technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT) and connected devices—that “smart city” as a formal term gradually gained attention from practitioners, governments, stakeholders, and academics.

In academia, the smart city concept has emerged as a fast-growing area of study across multiple disciplines¹. Although there is no universally accepted definition, the general conceptualization of a smart city involves the optimization of various city resources, including infrastructure such as energy, water, waste management, transportation, environmental systems, and recycling. It also encompasses public sectors like public safety, transportation and civic services, as well as business sectors, all combined to improve urban life quality through information and communication technologies (Bowerman et al. 2000; Chourabi et al. 2012; LazaroIU and Roscia 2012). For instance, several early adopters of smart city initiatives, such as Barcelona (Bakıcı et al. 2013), have emphasized integrating infrastructure, information, and human capital to enhance overall efficiency in various areas, as previously articulated by IBM. As early as 2002, Southampton was recognized as a smart city for the introduction of a city card that enabled citizens to access government services online (Bendzsa 2002).

1 Allen, B., Tamindaal, L. E., Bickerton, S. H., & Cho, W. 2020. “Does Citizen Coproduction Lead to Better Urban Services in Smart Cities Projects? An Empirical Study on E-participation in a Mobile Big Data Platform,” *Government Information Quarterly* 37(1). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2019.101412>. N.PAG-N.PAG.

The growing popularity of smart city initiatives has resulted in numerous multidisciplinary studies examining their development. Much research has focused on the energy efficiency of smart cities (Lazaroiu and Roscia 2012), while other studies have emphasized their technical infrastructure (Al-Hader and Rodzi 2009; Filipponi et al. 2010). The smart city vision encompasses nearly every aspect of city operations, including healthcare, education, traffic management, airports, rail, energy and utilities, social services, public safety, retail, communications, and economic development. Public sectors such as education, business, transportation, and social services all contribute to the evolution of smart cities.

Meijer and Bolivar (2016) analyzed various approaches in smart city literature and identified three main areas of focus: a technology focus (smart technologies), a human resource/capital focus (smart people), and a governance focus (smart collaboration)¹. Among these studies, open innovation is recognized as a critical enabler of smart city success (Paskaleva 2011; Schaffers et al. 2011). For instance, in a review of six papers in a special issue on smart cities, Allwinkle and Cruickshank (2011) noted that most people view existing smart cities as overly self-congratulatory; definitions of smart cities should not only emphasize technology but also include social capital and public interaction. Specifically, smart cities should offer more citizen-focused services, akin to those provided by myEdinburgh.org, which incorporates e-learning into smart city planning (Deakin and Allwinkle 2007).

Innovation plays a crucial role in smart city initiatives from both product and process perspectives (Edwards-Schachter et al. 2012; Kourtiti and Nijkamp 2012; Nam and Pardo 2011). To bring a smart city vision to life, each citizen should be prepared to embrace new technologies, new processes and operational methods. Smart city strategies should focus on encouraging citizens to utilize new infrastructure and ICT technologies that will ultimately enable them to become "smart citizens". Economically, the aggregation and integration of various talents can boost productivity through various forms of human capital externalities; particularly in densely populated areas with abundant human capital, "smart café cities" emerge, where knowledge spillovers become more localized (Fu 2007). In other words, when people with similar interests gather, the likelihood of generating new knowledge and engaging in innovative activities surpasses that of a disconnected populace.

2.2 Smart City Open Innovation Strategies in Europe

Many countries have formulated strategic plans to launch smart city projects. Previous studies on successful smart city initiatives have generated two types of practical open innovation strategies by establishing small innovation labs to stimulate user participation and innovation: Living Labs in Europe and Fab Labs in the U.S. The Barcelona smart city model initially adopted the Living Lab strategy (Bakıcı et al. 2013) but later experimented with the Fab Lab model as well. Interestingly, in Chinese smart city projects, both the Living Lab and Fab Lab models are employed (Lijing et al. 2014). While most current studies remain in the exploratory phase, few have delved into the major differences between these two models in detail. We contend that Living Labs and Fab Labs differ in many ways due to their origins and the social contexts from which they emerged. In the following sections, we introduce the Living Lab and Fab Lab concepts and analyze the ideologies driving these two innovation models.

2.3 Living Lab in Europe

The Living Lab concept is a new approach to R&D and innovation that sought to support the Lisbon Strategy in Europe from 2001 to 2010. The Lisbon Strategy aimed to make the EU "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with

1 Meijer, A., & Bolivar, M. 2016. "Governing the Smart city: A Review of the Literature on Smart Urban Governance," *Int. Rev. Adm. Sci.* 82(2), pp.392-408.

more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” by 2010. Although most of the Lisbon Strategy’s goals were not achieved by 2010, Living Labs—focused on co-creation and grassroots participation in real-life settings—became increasingly popular within smart city initiatives promoting open and social innovation. Specifically, a Living Lab refers to a comprehensive urban laboratory for service development and innovation through experimentation and co-creation with actual users in real-world environments. Here, users collaborate with researchers, firms, and public institutions to create new solutions, products, services and business models (Almirall and Wareham 2011; Edwards-Schachter et al. 2012; Feurstein et al. 2008; Liedtke et al. 2012). The criteria for establishing a Living Lab include co-creation, exploration, experimentation, and evaluation (ENoLL 2015). The primary goal of a Living Lab is to involve users in the co-creation of new products, services, or approaches. The European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL), established in 2006, includes 19 Living Labs spanning 15 countries (Edwards-Schachter et al. 2012).

Living Labs’ features can be generalized across three levels: at the top level, the aim is to improve the quality of life for the public; at the intermediate level, Living Labs focus on an application-oriented, integrated innovation system and collaborative procedures to generate new processes, services, and approaches; and at the base level, Living Labs emphasize extensive public engagement and diverse roles within the innovation system, involving users in co-creating new strategies. An illustration of these features is presented in Figure 1.

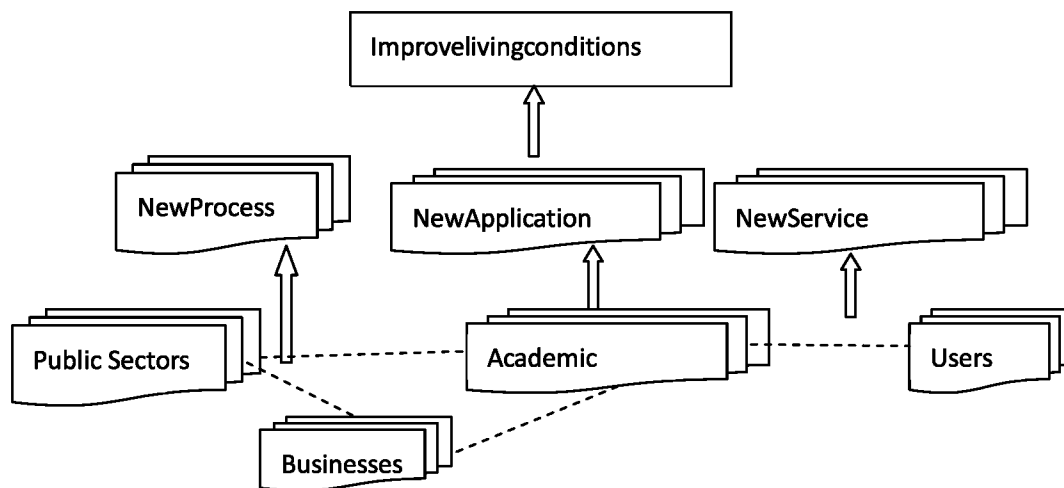


Figure 1. The Living Lab Illustration

Bringing the Living Lab concept into a smart city context, it can be challenging to identify the features described above. The first classical Living Lab case—the mobile interactive system in Madeira, Portugal—is a prime example of using mobile communication technology to enhance interactions among urban residents across the unique terrain of the two Madeira islands (Christensen and Raynor 2003). Urban and peri-urban areas have consistently been the focal points for Living Lab development worldwide, as cities naturally serve as testing grounds where the interests of users, public administrations, and businesses converge with sufficient density. Living Labs transcend experimental facilities; their philosophy centers on transforming users from traditional, passive receivers into active contributors within the value creation process.

In smart city initiatives, Living Labs advocate for a user-centric research methodology that emphasizes sensing, prototyping, validating and refining complex solutions in diverse and evolving real

life contexts, as demonstrated in various smart city projects (Bakıcı et al. 2013). Consequently, a key objective of Living Labs is to establish a new innovation system in which users or citizens serve as active participants rather than passive receivers (Almirall and Wareham 2011; De Leon et al. 2006; Edwards-Schachter et al. 2012; Liedtke et al. 2012; Song et al. 2009).

2.4 Fab Lab in the United States

Personal fabrication is the core idea of the Fab Lab concept (Diez 2012). Fab Labs are equipped with the tools that support every stage of technology development: design, fabrication, testing and debugging, monitoring and analysis, and documentation. Personal computers serve as core design tools and synergize with nearly every other tool in the lab. These computers facilitate 2D and 3D mechanical design and modeling, simulations, data analysis, electronic and computational device design, printed circuit boards layout, programming, interfaces for fabrication tools, internet access for communication and information retrieval, and documentation. Among the fabrication tools, two readily accessible commercial devices stand out for immediate field use to gather information: the Roland 3D milling and scanning machine and the Roland vinyl cutter. Each tool can be operated using standard, commercially available software to develop a range of applications. For debugging and iterating a printed circuit board (PCB) design, specific basic electronic equipment is selected as part of the standard testing and instrumentation equipment in every Fab Lab (Mandavilli 2006; Song et al. 2009).

Within Fab Labs, multiple fabrication laboratories can be set up, each equipped with an initial selection of tools for design, modeling, prototyping, fabrication, testing, monitoring, and documentation. A diverse group of colleagues, community leaders, educators, and engineers working in different rural communities worldwide utilize these tools to develop solutions tailored to address local challenges.

Fab Lab's ideological foundation, which is embedded in the development of a smart city, lies in transforming the city into an innovative hub that congregates resources or even functions into a large-scale laboratory. Compared to Living Labs, Fab Labs exhibit three generalizable features. At the top level, Fab Labs aim to empower individuals with greater innovation capability through flexible resource allocation. At the intermediate level, unlike Living Labs, Fab Labs do not emphasize collaborative procedures but view the innovation system primarily as a supporting model rather than a production paradigm. Finally, at the base level, Fab Labs encourage broad public participation while placing greater emphasis on cultivating individuals as sources of innovation. The following Figure 2 illustrates the features of Fab Labs.

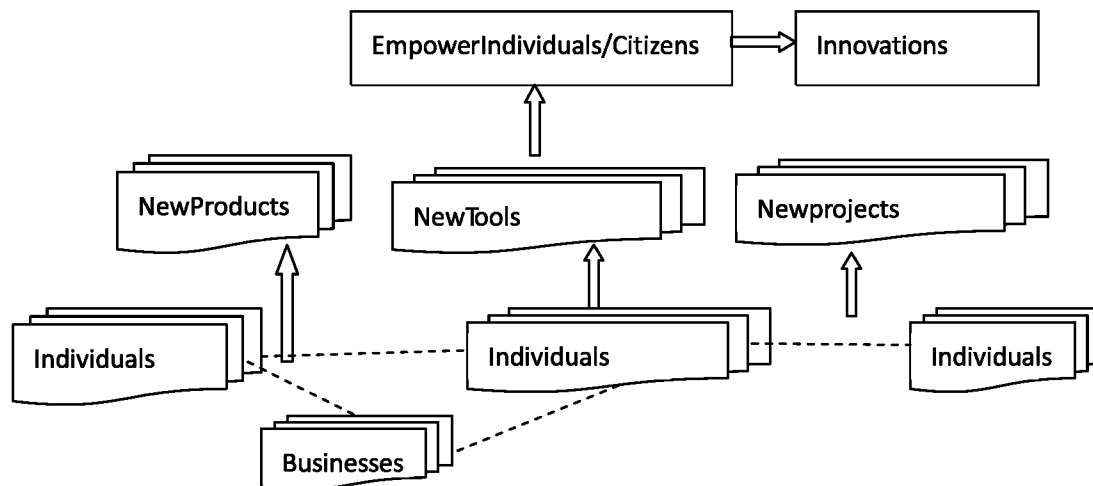


Figure 2. The Fab Lab Illustration

3. Theoretical Framework: Exploring How Culture Influences Smart City Open Innovation Strategy

3.1 Hofstede's Cultural Consequences Framework

Hofstede's contributions are indispensable to cultural research in the management field, particularly with his cultural consequence theory (Parboteeah and Cullen 2003; Schuler and Rogovsky 1998; Taras et al. 2010; Walsham 2002). Hofstede defined national culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another," suggesting that national differences can be interpreted through the lens of national culture (Hofstede 2001b). The original version of Hofstede's model, developed in the 1970s, included four dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, and masculinity-femininity.

In the 1970s, Hofstede conducted a survey involving more than 110,000 employees of a multinational corporation IBM over a period of five years. This survey encompassed employees from around the world, and an analysis revealed four cultural dimensions that differentiated employees in IBM's regional offices. These dimensions are defined as follows (Hofstede 2001b):

Power Distance (PDI): highest degree of distance across social groups (e.g., boss v. employee).

Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI): discomfort with the unknown; desire to reduce ambiguity.
Individualism/Collectivism (IDV): the importance of the individual versus the group.

Masculinity/Femininity (MAS): the emphasis on stereotypically "masculine" goals (power and achievement) / "feminine" goals and attributes (caring and consensus).

It was later observed that these four dimensions provided limited insights into Eastern cultures, leading to the addition of a fifth dimension: long-term orientation (LTO), also referred to as Confucian dynamism. This dimension captures the extent to which a culture encourages its members to accept deferred gratification of their material, social, and emotional needs (Hofstede and Bond 1988; Hofstede 2001b). Collectively, these five dimensions constitute what is commonly known as Hofstede's national cultural consequences framework, known as the Five Cultural Dimensions Model. Through this framework, countries can be evaluated on their cultural attributes.

Hofstede aimed to devise an objective system for cultural evaluation that could be applied across the international community. However, debates regarding the model's effectiveness persist (Taras et al. 2010; Verbeke 2000). For example, one criticism of Hofstede's approach is that all data were collected from a single company, IBM. Hofstede responded by explaining that his theory rests on the assumption that the cultural attributes of IBM personnel in a particular country can reflect the broader culture of that country. Despite ongoing debates, over the past two decades, Hofstede's research and theoretical framework have been extensively utilized across diverse fields, including public administration (Bochner 1994; Merkin et al. 2014; Sivakumar and Nakata 2001). Researchers have applied Hofstede's framework to cross-cultural studies in public policy, public management strategies, and social capital (Bashir et al. 2011; Inkeles 2000; Pillay 2008). Consequently, we have selected Hofstede's five-dimensional model as the comparative framework for this study.

3.2 The Distinctions between European and U.S. Culture and Their Impact on the Ideological Frameworks of Innovation

Using Hofstede's national cultural consequences framework and scores derived from empirical survey data (Hofstede 2001), we can analyze the construction and development of Living Labs and Fab Labs as two distinct innovation modes. This analysis centers on the cultural differences between Europe and the United States, as illustrated in Table 1. Data from the U.S. were directly obtained from Hofstede's

survey (Hofstede 2015), while European data were calculated based on Hofstede's 2015 survey.

To calculate the score for Europe as a whole, the primary practitioners of Living Labs listed on the European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL) website (<http://www.openlivinglabs.eu/>) were selected. The standard for inclusion required member states to have over ten Living Labs or active members. Twelve European countries met this criterion: Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the U.K. The mean values of these scores constitute the European results. Notably, Hofstede emphasized the separate index scores for Belgium's Flemish and Walloon regions, so these were considered independently in calculating the mean values.

Table 1. Cultural Differences between Europe and the U.S.

	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI	LTOWVS
EuropeMean	49	64	43	73	56
U.S.	40	91	62	46	26

As Table 1 illustrates, power distance and long-term orientation are quite similar for the U.S. and Europe. However, there are notable differences in individualism, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance between the two cultural contexts. We may infer that these cultural differences influence their innovative concepts and modes, namely, Living Labs and Fab Labs. Using Hofstede's five-dimensional framework, we can further explain the ideologies underlying both Living Labs and Fab Labs as follows.

The masculinity score of the U.S. is significantly higher than that of European countries. According to Hofstede (2001), cultures with higher masculinity dimension scores are more likely to foster performance-based societies, whereas those with higher femininity scores tend to prioritize welfare-oriented societies. This difference in cultural focus explains the fundamental philosophies behind Living Labs and Fab Labs, as well as their distinct objectives in smart city initiatives. The Living Lab model, which originated in Europe, prioritizes enhancing citizens' well-being in living conditions such as clothing, food, housing, and transportation. European smart city initiatives therefore frequently promote innovation within specific aspects of citizens' daily lives, an approach associated with high femininity. In contrast, the Fab Lab model focuses on providing opportunities for citizen participation in innovative activities aimed at transforming tools and projects, reflecting a performance-oriented and masculinity-driven perspective.

The U.S. exhibits a notably higher score on individualism compared to Europe, which further shapes the innovation practices within each cultural context. Fab Labs provide a platform for individuals to bolster their innovative capabilities, exemplifying an individualism-oriented model of innovation. Conversely, Living Labs aim to establish a collaborative social innovation system where citizens fulfill specific roles and engage in co-innovation activities, making it a collectivism-oriented model. Although both models emphasize grassroots participation, their implementation philosophies differ considerably. The outcomes of Living Labs are often the result of joint decision-making, whereas Fab Labs are more inclined to facilitate individual innovation processes.

Europe's higher score in uncertainty avoidance indicates a greater anxiety toward uncertainty compared to the U.S. This cultural trait helps explain why European countries prioritize establishing precise laws, regulations and governance structures to ensure effective city management. In terms of innovation, Europe's high uncertainty avoidance leads to a strong focus on user experience and feedback mechanisms in the Living Lab model, ensuring the cohesiveness of the Living Lab innovation system. Fab Labs, by contrast, operate more akin to individual exploration or personal adventure or exploration, where a lesser concern for failure permits a more experimental approach.

4. Research Methodology

We employed in-depth interviews and an action research approach to explore the role of cultural alignment in the smart city open innovation strategy, focusing on the case of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” (SRPC) reform in Beijing.

4.1 Action Research

This study employs an action research approach to examine the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” (SRPC) project aimed at enhancing urban governance in Beijing, the capital city of China, through innovations in mobile communication technology. As Stringer (2013) elucidates, “A common approach to action research envisages processes of inquiry based on a practitioner’s reflections on his/her professional practices.” As a clinical method (Baskerville and Myers 2004), action research has been widely applied in recent years to drive organizational change and address practical problems in both information systems and innovation diffusion research (Gattringer et al. 2017; Kohli and Kettinger 2004; Mathiassen et al. 2012; Puhakainen and Siponen 2010; Ram and Montibeller 2013; Suopajarvi 2016).

In planning and conducting this action research, we followed the principles suggested by Davison et al. (2004). To establish a research-client agreement, we invited one of the project leaders to co-author this study. The project leader, as a key decision-maker, has been deeply involved in every stage of the digital transformation of government hotlines project’s implementation. Serving as both the researcher and a team member, he facilitated communication between the project leadership and research teams, sharing theoretical insights that supported the project execution. This approach aligns with the fundamental criterion of action research, which necessitates active engagement between researchers and the subject under study (Kohli & Kettinger 2004). We adhered to the action research cycle, comprising diagnosis, action planning, action taking, evaluation, and specifying learning, as shown in Figure 3.

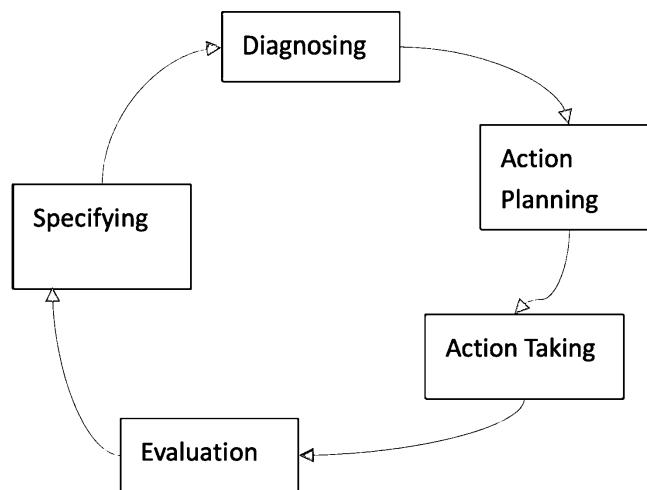


Figure 3. Action Research Cycle (Based on Baskerville 2001; Evered 1978)

4.2 Case Selection

The 12345 hotline service enables ordinary citizens to inquire, report issues, and seek assistance by calling the number or submitting requests online. Upon receiving citizens’ inquiries or complaints, the 12345 hotline call center categorizes and assigns cases to the appropriate grassroots governments or agencies based on the nature and jurisdiction of each matter. The 12345 hotline aligns with the CPC’s people-centered philosophy, emphasizing that urban governance should prioritize the needs of residents,

which serve as an effective tool for strengthening citizen–government interactions and enhancing citizen satisfaction with government services (Wei et al. 2023).

Since 2012, Chinese local governments have gradually expanded internet channels for government hotlines, including websites, mobile applications, and WeChat, while also establishing a digital hotline record system and a data analysis platform. The digital hotline system offers a more sophisticated solution compared to traditional 12345 hotlines, allowing citizens to submit non-emergency service requests with geographically tagged locations and images, and to monitor the entire service delivery process (Tang et al. 2019; Xu and Tang 2020).

In Beijing, extensive digital transformation efforts have led to the development of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” model, aiming at providing prompt, effective and timely responses to citizens’ inquiries, requests, and complaints. This digital transformation of the 12345 hotline has emerged as an essential strategy for advancing Beijing’s smart city initiatives. As a province-level government directly administered by the central government, the Beijing Municipal Government (BMG) comprises 16 prefecture-level districts, overseeing 333 subordinate county-level townships, towns, and street-level governments (hereafter referred to as grassroots governments) as of 2020. The municipality spans a geographic area of 16, 410.54 square kilometers (6336.15 square miles) and has a population of 21.89 million.

As China’s national administrative center and a leading hub for internet development, Beijing boasts rich governance experience and a strong impetus for reform, supported by leading tech companies. Its data governance practices and approaches are more advanced than those of other cities in China. This paper, therefore, delves into Beijing’s reform of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” as a case study to systematically explore how culture influences the strategic development of government hotline systems.

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

As discussed in the literature review, most smart city studies are in an early development stage and are largely case studies with limited theoretical analysis (Bakıcı et al. 2013; Edwards-Schachter et al. 2012) or conceptual propositions without real case applications (Nam and Pardo 2011). Given the nascent state of smart city research, building theory through qualitative analysis, such as case studies, is crucial for advancing the field (Chen and Hirschheim 2004). Moving beyond simple case analysis, this study seeks to reveal the evolution of project strategies and their cultural implications through an action research method. As a canonical action research (CAR) study, we have drawn on several seminal works in related research areas (Davison et al. 2004; Gatringer et al. 2017; Kohli and Kettinger 2004).

Data collection methods include: (1) participatory observation—on-site research conducted at the municipal 12345 citizen hotline service center, along with participation in relevant work meetings; (2) in-depth interviews—interview subjects included staff members from the Beijing Municipal Urban Management Commission, the Municipal Government Affairs Service Bureau, the Municipal Citizen Hotline Service Center, the Tongzhou District Urban Reference Center, the Shijingshan District Urban Reference Center, the Sanlitun Street Citizen Appeal Disposal Center; and (3) document analysis—policy documents, conference materials, and news reports were compiled and analyzed.

The digital transformation of Beijing’s 12345 hotline began in 2012 and was officially rebranded as “Swift Response to Public Complaints” (SPRC) in 2019. Based on major strategic shifts, the implementation process has been divided into three development phases from 2012 to the present (see Table 2 for further details on the three phases).

Table 2. Three Development Phases of SRPC

Phases	Time	Tags	Description
Development I	2012-2019	Initialization (Living Lab Model)	Government-led digital transformation
Development II	2019-2021	Vibration (Living Lab to Fab Lab)	Emphasis on active response to residents' demands
Development III	2021-present	Integration (Living Lab + Fab Lab for China)	Two-way empowerment of government and citizens through data

Research materials were collected following classical qualitative research principles in information systems and other social sciences (Yin 2014). Documents were gathered and interviews conducted for each of the three phases. Additionally, the third author was involved throughout all three phases, playing an important role from project's inception to the current stage. Meanwhile, the first author participated in key strategic discussions regarding the SRPC project since 2012. Several research articles and project records from the authors were also used as study materials. To enhance the reliability and validity of the study, triangulation was employed through multiple interviews conducted between 2021 and 2024. A total of eight individuals, including Gang Song, who were directly involved in the project's execution, participated in interviews lasting approximately one hour each. Interview questions focused on five key aspects of intervention: diagnosing, action planning, action taking, evaluation, and specifying learning for the SRPC project across its three phases (Davison et al. 2004). All interviewees were key SRPC project managers responsible for either information management or project management. Their identities were kept confidential, and the data collected was used exclusively for research purposes. Following the interviews, the data were coded and analyzed based on CAR criteria. The coding scheme was developed through iterative readings of interview transcripts by three coders, followed by cross-comparisons.

5. Changes in Open Innovation Strategy of the SRPC Project

Based on interviews and previous documentation, we have summarized the three development phases of the SRPC project into five categories: diagnosing, action planning, action taking, evaluation, and specifying leaning (see Table 3). The summarized descriptions for the three key phases are followed by an analysis of the case with the lens of the national culture framework.

Table 3 Characteristics of the Three Development Phases

Phases	Diagnosing	Action Planning	Action Taking	Evaluation	Specifying Learning
INTV 1	The modes of urban governance are rigid, with limited motivation for innovation	Experimentation and testing in SRPC (Living Lab Model)	Opened internet hotline channels and developed a digital 12345 hotline platform	Partially achieved user-oriented innovation, but fell short of public demand	Process-driven participation suppresses the aspirations of social organizations or individuals; low uncertainty avoidance reduces conformity
INTV 2	Thresholds hindered innovation and failed to effectively stimulate public participation	Citizen-led SRPC (Fab Lab Model)	Digital platforms and applications were developed to meet citizens' needs and encourage civic engagement	Encouraged innovation in participation at grassroots levels, but it lacked continuity	Bottom-up SRPC innovation activities struggle to assume critical roles; low individualism fosters dependence on the public sector

Phases	Diagnosing	Action Planning	Action Taking	Evaluation	Specifying Learning
INTV 3	Public participation lacked continuity, and innovation efforts were scattered, lacking synergy	Integrated process-driven and voluntary participation; strategic use of planning tools	Big data analytics and intelligence tools enabled two-way convenience for officials and citizens	Integrated previous results effectively, achieving improved outcomes	Development planning tools integrate diverse innovation perspectives within the Chinese cultural context; high power distance and long-term orientation favor formal planning

5.1 The First Phase (Living Lab, 2012-2018) : Pilot Exploration and Integration of the 12345 Hotline

In 2012, the Beijing Municipal Government initiated the digital upgrade of the 12345 hotline, aiming to establish a comprehensive and integrated government service platform. The first step involved introducing internet-based channels, such as portal websites and micro-blogs, to enhance public participation and address the limitations of traditional government hotlines, which were hindered by restricted access, low engagement, and poor user experience. Next, hotlines from various government departments, including civil affairs, health, and environmental protection, were integrated into a centralized service platform. This allowed the system to handle public appeals beyond traditional phone lines. This resulted in the Beijing 12345 hotline system connecting all 333 streets and towns, 65 municipal departments, and 48 public service enterprises onto a unified digital platform. Finally, the digital 12345 hotline reception and processing platform was enhanced to include complex appeal sorting, major appeal consultation, emergency response coordination, and additional systems for non-emergency service acceptance, comprehensive knowledge-based analysis, urban risk early warning, and monitoring applications.

The first phase of the 12345 hotline's digital transformation closely resembles a Living Lab approach. Acting as a unified "front end" for various government departments, the 12345 hotline center accepts citizens inquiries, routing them to the relevant government agencies, with each department simultaneously addressing the public's demands. The digital hotline incorporates intelligent tools into the service process to automate and streamline tasks such as information lookup, inquiry logging, case dispatch and citizen feedback, thereby simplifying service interactions. The collection, analysis, and testing of citizen inquiries form an iterative interaction loop between citizens and government entities. The digital platform and technology for the 12345 hotline were developed by external stakeholders, who tested and verified their designs with government input to align with initial goals and operational standards. Digital technologies facilitate collaborative governance between the public and government, as well as across government departments, enhancing both transparency and interactivity (Sjoberg, Mellon, and Peixoto 2017; Tang and Ho 2019).

At this stage, the digital transformation primarily focused on process innovation and efficiency enhancement, therefore with minimal improvement in the convenience and accessibility of government services through the 12345 hotline. Citizen feedback mechanisms were typically designed for specific cases or services. Yuan, a hotline operator commented, "At that time, public's recognition of the government hotline was low, and usage rates were limited." The connection rate and standardization of the 12345 hotline's internet channels were suboptimal. Interdepartmental and government-business collaboration encountered obstacles, and operational challenges hindered the responsiveness of the 12345 hotline.

5.2 The Second Phase (Fab Lab, 2019-2021) : Swift Response to Public Complaints

The second phase can be characterized as a Fab Lab phase due to its incorporation of Fab Lab

principles. The Fab Lab model, suitable for diverse technological and cultural contexts, enables greater citizen-driven innovation. Since 2019, the digital transformation of the 12345 hotline adopted more Fab Lab elements, boosting citizen engagement and satisfaction—this initiative is known as the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” (SRPC) reform.

The first objective was to enhance interaction between the call center and citizens by upgrading the digital 12345 hotline platform. In 2020, a smart assistance platform for hotline operators was launched to standardize appeal processing and improve citizens service experience. This unified system integrates 13 internet channels, including the Beijing 12345 WeChat account, “Beijingtoon” app, and an online message board. A streamlined appeal recording system was developed to log information across 7 categories and 72 elements, enabling quick access to various elements and graphical updates on workflow status. Additionally, the 360° navigator system can convert speech to text, flag sensitive content through keyword analysis, and suggest shortcuts. Additionally, the Q&A knowledge base provides functionalities for knowledge management and retrieval, offering operators easy access to 145, 700 knowledge items.

The second objective aimed at dynamically tracking citizens’ diverse needs. The Beijing 12345 hotline has emerged as a repository of big data on citizen demands, which comprehensively reflects citizen concerns and focuses on livelihood issues. During data collection, the hotline center standardized information formats for citizen details and appeals. At the analysis stage, big data technology was leveraged to delve into the data pertaining to citizens’ needs, thereby enhancing the precision of analytics and applications. Furthermore, a public opinion data platform was established to analyze demand types, quantity, regional data, and satisfaction levels, producing daily, weekly, monthly, and annual reports to inform government strategies and solutions for pressing social issues.

The third objective was to bolster government responsiveness and address citizens’ needs. The Beijing hotline implemented a tiered response system, comprising four levels: feedback within 2 hours, 24 hours, 7 days, and 15 days depending on urgency. For example, cases of potential public property loss are addressed within 2 hours, while basic living security issues necessitate a 24-hour response. A digital complaint supervision system enables hotline operators to monitor response progress in real time. Additionally, citizens are empowered to evaluate and supervise responses: routine follow-up calls confirm whether government responses met citizen expectations, and a multi-channel follow-up system via phone, SMS, and online channels tracks results. Monthly evaluations assess the performance of the 333 grassroots governments based on three key indicators: response rate, resolution rate, and satisfaction rate. To enhance coverage, accuracy and feedback quality, the Beijing Hotline Center developed a comprehensive evaluation platform to highlight recurring service issues and continuously refines response quality.

The adoption of digital technology has fostered citizen participation and innovation. In Beijing, it has become common knowledge that calling 12345 is the most effective way to seek government assistance. However, the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” (SRPC) reform is confronted with challenges. Between January 1, 2019 and November 30, 2021, the hotline handled 31.34 million cases, with peak daily volumes reaching 56, 000 cases and a daily average of 40, 000. As demand grows, grassroots governments are under pressure to manage these volumes, which now include a rising number of unreasonable inquiries. For instance, some callers involved in illegal activities, such as parking violations, have used the hotline to contest penalties; others have sought to reopen cases previously closed through judicial channels. Managing and filtering such inquiries, while also educating the public on the appropriate use of the hotline, has become a new challenge. Some scholars argue that the high efficacy of the 12345 hotline might lead citizens to become overly dependent on the government for resolving community-level issues, potentially undermining social capital and raising governance costs.

5.3 The Third Phase (2021-present) : Solving Complaints Before They Arise

Since 2021, two major advancements have created new opportunities and challenges for the Digital Government Hotline Transformation. Institutionally, the "Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints" were enacted in September 2021 to ensure continued hotline reform. Technologically, breakthroughs in big data and artificial intelligence, particularly with large AI models, have deepened social applications. To proactively address citizens' needs and ease the government's workload, the 12345 hotline reform entered a new phase called "Solving Complaints Before They Occur." A related policy, "Guiding Opinions on Solving Complaints Before They Occur", was issued to support this goal. This proactive approach requires the government to improve its capacity of identifying, monitoring, and addressing social governance issues. Initially, the full potential of hotline data was under-exploited due to financial constraints and a lack of skilled personnel. The core feature of this phase, however, is data-driven intelligence, aimed at balancing individual and societal objectives.

Firstly, intelligent algorithms and platforms aggregate, classify, analyze, predict, and visually present the big data generated by the 12345 hotline to uncover urban governance issues proactively. To guarantee data accuracy, consistency, and security, the Beijing Hotline Center has formulated a data management policy and developed an intelligent data analysis system capable of tracking query process, generating statistics, exporting data, and managing its utilization. While a single citizen's inquiry may not fully represent the city's operations, Beijing leverages a city-wide big data platform to aggregate multi-source, heterogeneous data. Additionally, a visual decision-making platform has been built to analyze hotline data in a more dynamic manner, enabling the government to identify patterns and trends in citizen demands and allocate resources more effectively to public needs. By identifying sensitive incidents and regional risks, the platform significantly enhances the government's risk monitoring and early warning capabilities and integrates data-driven policy recommendations into local planning, aligning with China's cultural emphasis on long-term orientation.

Secondly, data analysis is used to identify citizens' key concerns and recurring social governance challenges, facilitating thematic governance on similar issues. The Beijing Hotline Center uses natural language processing and machine learning to extract critical information from hotline data, identifying patterns based on season, region, personalization, and evolving trends in citizen demands. Priority is given to critical areas such as public health, social security, accident and disaster response. Furthermore, Beijing also uses historical 12345 data to identify frequent and complex issues with public impact, thereby facilitating proactive governance efforts. In 2021, for example, 27 thematic issues—including online consumption disputes and the renovation of older communities—were identified, and actionable plans were formulated, with project-based implementation and full-process supervision.

Thirdly, based on data sharing, the government has expanded collaboration with other entities to resolve inquiries effectively. The "hotline + grid" service model stands as a key measure in achieving the goal of "Solving Complaints Before They Occur". A cross-departmental, multi-level and cross-regional "hotline + grid" data collaboration system enables real-time data sharing and integration, enabling the comparison and analysis of hotline and grid issues to identify and address systemic challenges. Additionally, Beijing leverages the city management system and grid-based community workers to extend the 12345 hotline's reach into grassroots governance. For example, Shunyi District has established 25 second-level, 569 third-level and 4, 058 fourth-level cell grids in its Urban Management and Supervision Center, significantly enhancing collaborative, proactive, and intelligent governance.

5.4 Cultural Analysis of the Smart City Strategy

Reflecting on twelve years of development and drawing inspiration from the Living Lab and Fab Lab innovation models, the SRPC project in Beijing has focused on user experience and social participation,

striving to create an open innovation platform under the vision of “the City Makes Life Happier” while shaping public values. Despite the development of innovative solutions, overall outcomes have been less successful than anticipated. Interview transcripts indicate a consensus among interviewees that the SRPC project’s sustainability for innovation has been limited and that public engagement has fallen short of expectation. Using the national culture framework, this study examines the SRPC project’s successes, shortcomings, and potential future challenges.

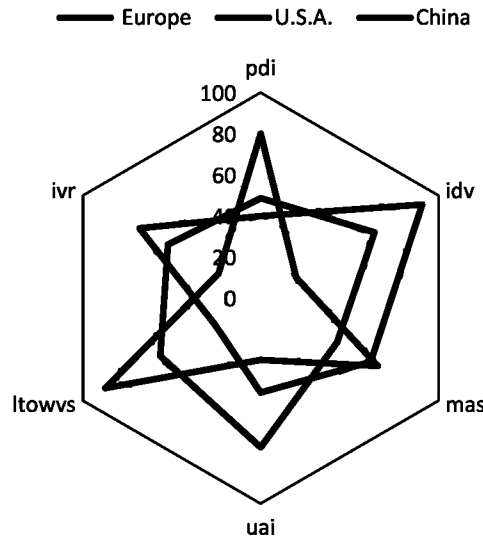


Figure 4. Scores of Five Cultural Dimensions for Europe, the U.S. and China

Figure 4 presents China’s scores across the five dimensions of Hofstede’s Cultural Consequences, illustrating the substantial disparities between China and Europe/the U.S. China’s scores are based on empirical survey data from Hofstede (2015). Examining the development history of the Beijing Digital Government Hotline Transformation project through the cultural lens offers further proof that cultural background significantly impacts innovation models.

In the early stages, the ideological framework of the Beijing Digital Government Hotline Transformation closely resembled the European Living Lab model. However, from a cultural perspective, China’s scores for masculinity and uncertainty avoidance align more closely with those of the U.S., placing the Digital Transformation project in a challenging position following its inception. On one hand, the project’s exclusive emphasis on citizens’ experiences made it difficult to sustain public engagement and support in a society where the masculinity score is markedly higher than that in Europe. On the other hand, China’s low uncertainty avoidance score contributed to a lack of sustained interest in feedback and evaluation stages, ultimately causing the Living Lab model, which operates successfully in Europe, to function as an open-loop process in China, initiated but lacking a clear conclusion.

When the Fab Lab approach was introduced in 2019, it began to address some of the issues from the initial phase. By incorporating the American-style incentive system and performance appraisal, with a focus on masculinity and a spirit of exploration, the project gained new momentum. However, given that China’s strong collectivist cultural context, which is more prominent than that of Europe, participants tend to favor collaborative innovation over individualistic approaches. This raises the question of whether integrating the two models is optimal. The current Digital Government Hotline Transformation model might be described as a Living Lab incorporating performance appraisal and standardization or as a group-oriented Fab Lab rather than an individual-focused one. While tension exists between collaboration

and low enthusiasm for auxiliary activities like evaluation, this hybrid model seems to be more likely in advancing Beijing's transformation into a smart city compared to previous models.

The influence China's distinctive cultural characteristic environment on smart city development cannot be overlooked. Compared with Europe and the U.S., China is characterized by high power distance and strong long-term orientation, with the latter a hallmark of Confucian culture. This cultural context presents both challenges and opportunities for the smart city innovation system in China. The primary challenge lies in managing the significant authority granted to leaders, which may hinder innovation. A key challenge in China's smart city development, therefore, is balancing the government's authority with public-driven innovation. Moreover, China's high score in long-term orientation indicates a cultural preference for long-term planning in urban development. This approach favors projects that offer enduring benefits over short-term gains. In this respect, the Beijing Digital Government Hotline Transformation project is well-aligned with long-term cultural values. By establishing standardized protocols from the outset, the project has also provided a blueprint that can guide other Chinese cities in implementing smart city initiatives.

6. Discussions

The purpose of this study was to explore the smart city open innovation strategy using Hofstede's national culture framework through an action research study of the Beijing Digital Government Hotline Transformation project. Two smart city open innovation models, the Living Lab in Europe and Fab Lab in the U.S., served as theoretical foundations for the action research implementation. Guided by the national cultural consequences framework, the project went through three developmental phases: the exclusive adoption of the Living Lab model, the exclusive adoption of the Fab Lab model, and a mixed Living Lab and Fab Lab model. Our findings indicate that both open innovation models exhibited varying levels of success in the Digital Government Hotline Transformation project, albeit with challenges.

Specifically, when the Living Lab model was adopted, the project successfully engaged users in a virtual AIP platform, fostering innovation and leading to the development of multiple city management e-services. In contrast, the adoption of the Fab Lab model resulted in individual users displaying greater enthusiasm for idea generation, but this enthusiasm came at the expense of collective participation. According to the national culture framework, Chinese culture is characterized by high collectivism, masculinity, long-term orientation, power distance, and low uncertainty avoidance. While the Living Lab model aligns with cultures that demonstrate high individualism and uncertainty avoidance, the Fab Lab model is better suited to cultures characterized by high individualism and masculinity.

This study underscores the paramount importance of cultural alignment for the success of smart city projects. The project's success can be attributed to cultural dimensions that align with the ideological foundations of the innovation mode. Conversely, failed aspects emerged when cultural dimensions conflicted with the ideology of the innovation mode. While alignment between ICT and organizational strategy is not new in IS research (Chan and Reich 2007), it is notable that national cultural alignment with technology strategy significantly influences the success of smart city projects. Interestingly, IS alignment is applicable to both centralized or decentralized organizational structures, yet no formal structure exists in the smart city context. Further research could explore how cultural alignment compares to IT alignment at the organizational level.

As with many IS projects, the success of smart city project implementation depends on effective user

interaction. A smart city strategy should not simply apply novel information technologies but should also involve a process that seeks to improve urban life through human-centered innovation. The convergence of ICT has led to a knowledge-based society where the traditional boundary between science labs and R&D activities is dissolving. Citizens are now pivotal players in the innovation process of smart city projects. By emphasizing user-centered, demand-driven, open innovation, and co-innovation, a new innovation model, known as Innovation 2.0, has emerged. This user-centered approach contrasts with traditional innovation models and could greatly benefit the development of smarter cities.

However, open innovation systems vary under different cultural contexts. Both the Living Lab and Fab Lab aspire for global application, particularly in developing countries, which frequently welcome innovation support from developed nations to gain a late-mover advantage. Our findings indicate that smart city strategies must align with cultural values to optimize project outcomes.

The cultural alignment perspective for smart city strategy offers a valuable starting point for future research on smart city projects. As research on smart cities progresses, the cultural alignment identified in this study may pave the way for other smart city studies. Similar to IT alignment theory in organizational IS projects, future studies could develop a smart city alignment model where culture plays a central role. It is anticipated that city-specific models, akin to organizational IS alignment models like the Strategic Alignment Model (Henderson and Venkatraman 1993) and MIT 90s alignment model (Coltman et al. 2015), will emerge.

7. Conclusion

This study has successfully analyzed a smart city case through Hofstede's national culture framework, revealing that aligning smart city strategy with cultural values bolsters project success, while misalignment may hinder it. This study marks the initial attempt to apply a structured theoretical framework to the analysis of smart city strategy and is the first to integrate cultural dimensions into smart city strategy. Future researchers can leverage this study as a foundational reference for analyzing and comparing smart city projects.

The findings provide valuable insights for practitioners working on smart city projects, particularly in developing countries. The study underscores the significance of reflecting on the cultural environment in which the innovation model is implemented and its integration with local culture. An ideological system that is fully aligned with the local cultural context is more likely to achieve sustained vitality and greater scope for development in developing countries.

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“Swift Response to Public Complaints” as a Reform in Government-People Interaction and a Practical Innovation in the “Mass Line”

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ABSTRACT: The “mass line” is the lifeline of the Party and the fundamental approach to the Party’s work. In the innovation and development of the mass line in the new era, it is crucial to construct a mechanism centered on the interaction between the government and the people for the implementation of the mass line. In practice, the People’s Government of Beijing Municipality has developed a new form of government-people interaction featuring “swift response to public complaints”, an innovative mechanism for implementing the mass line. The government-people interaction featuring “swift response to public complaints” distinguishes itself from those in Western countries through its clear administrative advantages. It adopts the mass line as its fundamental principle, maintaining a people-centered stance. This approach improves the relationship between the government and its citizens while enhancing the quality of public services and the level of social governance. It achieves this by boosting the efficiency of government response, enhancing the trust of citizens, solving practical problems, optimizing the procedures, promoting social harmony, bolstering government image, facilitating technological innovation, and shaping positive interactions.

KEYWORDS: mass line; government-people interaction; swift response to public complaints; public demands

1. Background

The “mass line” is the lifeline of the Party and the fundamental approach to the Party’s work. It is a

1 This paper is the phased result of the key project of Beijing Social Science Foundation “Research on Social Governance Community in the Reform of Swift Response to Public Complaints” (Project No. 23FXA023). Project Leader: Zhang Shijun, Doctor of law, Professor of the School of Law, Capital University of Economics and Business. Written by Chen Hanfei, Associate Professor of Law School, Capital University of Economics and Business, Doctor of law.

Research Group of the “Research on the Social Governance Community in the Reform of Swift Response to Public Complaints”

This paper is a phased result of the key project “Research on the Social Governance Community in the Reform of Swift Response to Public Complaints” (23FXA001) sponsored by Beijing Social Science Foundation. Chen Hanfei, the designated writer of this paper, is a doctorate holder and associate professor at the Law School of Capital University of Economics and Business.

winning strategy in revolution, construction, and reform, running through the Party's century-long journey of development. It is generally believed that the concept of the "mass line" first appeared in the Letter of Instructions from the Central Committee to the Front Committee of the Fourth Army of the Red Army written in September 1929 (known as the Letter of September, jointly drafted by Li Lisan, Zhou Enlai, and Chen Yi). The letter described the relationship between the "Red Army" and "the masses or mass organizations", positioning it as a method for the Party to rely on the people in carrying out military work (Zhou, 1980). After that, the connotations of the "mass line" were elucidated twice. The first elucidation can be found in *On Some Issues Concerning Leadership Methods* written by Mao Zedong in 1943, which interpreted the mass line from the perspective of leadership and working methods and elevated it to the level of philosophical epistemology (Mao, 1981). The second, and the more comprehensive one, can be found in *On the Party*, a report on amending the Party constitution by Liu Shaoqi at the Seventh National Congress of the Communist Party of China held in 1945, which summarized the mass line as two essentials: the mass viewpoint and the mass approach (Liu, 1981). Since then, the mass line, with its connotation and denotation substantially completed and set, has developed into a theory of Party-people relations with Chinese characteristics. The connotations of the mass line formed in 1943 and 1945 have been inherited in many cases, including the report by Deng Xiaoping on amending the Party constitution at the Eighth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 1956, the Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Historical Issues Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China in June 1981, and General Secretary Xi Jinping's Speech at the Celebration of the 100th Anniversary of the Founding of the Communist Party of China.

The mass line, grounded in its established connotations, can be broadly categorized into two interconnected aspects: the mass viewpoint (worldview) and the mass approach (methodology). The essence of the mass viewpoint lies in the principle "everything for the people, everything relying on the people", which requires believing in, relying on, understanding, serving, and liberating the people, and always maintaining close ties between the Party and the people. Conversely, the core of the mass approach adheres to the principle of "coming from the people and going to the people" which involves absorbing ideas "from the people" before conveying the policies derived from those ideas back "to the people" and employing working methods that the people enjoy addressing their issues. Both aspects center on "the people".

The term "the masses" retains the connotation of the (ruled) "subjects" in traditional political culture, reflecting its incomplete conceptual transition to "the people". On one side, the ruling party recognizes the principal role of "the masses" in historical development as the driving force behind historical progress. This leads to the mass viewpoint that emphasizes learning from, believing in and relying on the people. This contrasts with certain Western psychological portrayals of "the masses" as impulsive, suggestible, credulous, emotionally prone to being exaggerated, simplistic, biased, arbitrary, and conservative (Bon, 2015). On the other side, the ruling party views "the masses" as the primary class of society, that must be continuously educated and awakened, fostering a political education model of "vanguard-masses" as the basic premise for engaging, relying on, and drawing ideas from the people before disseminating the resultant policies.

With the creative conceptual shift of "the masses" from the (ruled) "subjects" to "the people", the "official-subjects" structure in the traditional political context was replaced by an "official-people" structure, and the corresponding contradictions evolved into "official-people" dynamics (Kong, 2016). According to the theory of Modern Bureaucracy, this official-people structure primarily assumes the form of the government-people structure (with "government" generically referring to state authority entities). This relationship encapsulates the mass viewpoint and the mass approach of the mass line, highlighting

that official–people relations become government-people interactions mapping on all fronts. Observed from the perspective of national governance, government-people interactions function as a vehicle for the ruling party to build up connections with, rely on, and mobilize the people for their participation in social governance. In this context, governance at the primary and community level becomes a domain especially important for government-people interactions, serving as the forefront where officials directly communicate and interact with the people, and as a crucial unit for alleviating tensions between officials and the people.

Given the close correlation between government-people interaction and the mass line, it is necessary to examine the historical evolution of the mass line from the perspective of changes in the relations between the government and the people, as reflected in their interactions. What changes, then, has the mass line, centered on government-people interaction, embraced since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949? The report to the 18th CPC National Congress issued a warning to the whole Party about the "danger of becoming distanced from the people" (Gao, 2013) and highlighted the practical difficulty in implementing the mass line, which involves absorbing ideas "from the people" before conveying the policies derived from those ideas back "to the people" (Xu, 2014). In response to the Party's warning and practical challenges, what measures can be taken to reform the government-people interaction to innovate and develop the mass line while continuously strengthening the close bond between the Party and the people in line with the development of the times?

Focusing on the changes in government-people interaction since 1949, this article examines the development of the mass line in three stages since the founding of the People's Republic of China. It argues that the government-people interaction model, centered on "swift response to public complaints", which emerged after the 18th CPC National Congress, represents a new evolution of the traditional mass line, imparting it with new connotations suited to the new era. The reform of swift response to public complaints has significantly facilitated, strengthened and improved the communication between the Party and the people, offering a platform-based, dynamic, persistent, and law-based model of interaction. This model places people at the center, respecting their principal position, desires, creativity, experiences, rights, and contributions in practical activities, thus unlocking creative potential. It also fosters democratic awareness, public service consciousness, and service-oriented mindsets among Party officials, transforming their leadership and work practices, and enhancing the efficiency of Party committees and governments in serving the people. This model embodies an innovative development of the mass line in the new era, fully reflecting the governance philosophy in the new era that "the people's city should be built by the people and for the people".

2. Historical Practices of the Mass Line: Diverse Types of Government-People Interaction

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the mass line has evolved unrelentingly, shaping various models of government-people interaction. The development of government-people interactions progressed through two stages in history, one characterized by mass movement and the other by the division of function. The latter, or the government-people interaction featuring the division of function, consists of three types focused on political representation, the people's judicature, and public complaint handling for maintaining stability.

The first type of government-people interaction is characterized by mass movement. As the predominant form of the incipient practice of the mass line, it was derived in the early years after the founding of the People's Republic of China when the mass line was carried out through mass movements.

This model of government-people interaction possesses four defining characteristics. Firstly, the primary purpose of this interaction mode is, with the help of bottom-up mass movements, to overcome the drawbacks of Modern Bureaucracy such as responsibility shirking, inefficiency, procrastination, accountability limited to superiors, poor communication, hierarchical barriers, inadequate supervision, rigidity in organization, lack of innovation, occupation solidification, slackness, overstaffing and operational failures. Secondly, it relies on the personal authority of leaders as its driving force, with the goal setting, main tasks, implementation process, organizational methods, depth, and timing of the end of mass movements invariably determined by the will of leaders. Thirdly, it attempts to rebuild the government-people communication mechanism by enabling the masses to self-organize and achieve self-liberation, thereby dismantling the previously established hierarchical systems and institutional frameworks, forming a mass-dominated government-people interaction relationship. Fourthly, without necessary institutional guarantees, this model risks devolving into extreme “anarchism”, contributing to its potential destructiveness and lack of sustainability. Nevertheless, it can still address, to a certain extent, the difficulties of the bureaucratic system and its organizational failures. The “movement-based” governance mechanism formed on this basis can “(temporarily) break the rigid and programmed patterns of the bureaucratic system. It is designed to break or rectify the original bureaucratic system and its regular mechanism and replace them with top-down political mobilization to deploy resources, concentrate energy and attention from all sides to complete a specific task” (Zhou, 2017). Therefore, in the new era, “government-people interaction featuring mass movement” retains its governance role by cooperating with the system of Modern Bureaucracy in forms of “central work” and “comprehensive governance”, strengthening government-people interaction and facilitating communication between the ruling party and the people when necessary.

The second type is characterized by the division of function. Since the reform and opening up in 1978, the implementation of the mass line has rested chiefly on the functional division of Modern Bureaucracy, thus forming legislative, judicial, and administrative mechanisms in practice, bringing forth the “government-people interaction model featuring the division of function”. Specifically, this model manifests in three forms. The first one is the government-people interaction featuring political representation derived from two representative theories. The first is the “vanguard-masses” representative theory shaped out of the proletarian party building theory. Its connotation includes the nature and the mission of a proletarian political party and how the party handles the relationship between the party and the people in the construction of state power. The second is the representative theory of “the people’s congress-deputies-the people”. With the system of the people’s congress as its institutional manifestation, it is a theoretical projection of the first representative theory in the context of government form. However, there is a theoretical and practical tension between these two representative theories, which may, to a certain extent, affect the “government-people interaction featuring political representation”. The second one is the government-people interaction featuring the people’s judicature. The tradition of the people’s judicature originated from the judicial practice in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region and gradually matured during subsequent revolutions and political power construction, forming judicial philosophies, techniques, and practices characterized by Party leadership and the mass line. “The choice of the people’s judicature to adopt the mass line is essentially a response to the asynchrony between the rise of Modern Bureaucracy and the establishment of a modern state.” (Su, 2016) The people’s judicature, with its trait of the mass line, is set to be dynamic, active and demotic. “Judicial activism” is a necessary measure to alleviate fundamental social contradictions in China (such as contradictions between officials and the people) and address social disputes. It is also an appropriate response to social criticisms and objections (Gu, 2010). This alleviation, as well as the response, is precisely the inevitable requirement

for the judicature to fulfill its mission of government-people interaction. The third is government-people interaction featuring public complaint handling for maintaining stability. This government-people interaction mode, an embodiment of the mass line at the administrative level, performs government-people interaction from the national and social perspectives. From a national perspective, public complaints can function as a way for the central government to connect with units at the primary level and collect public opinion. From a social perspective, public complaints can serve as a mechanism for the people to address issues and safeguard their own interests. Therefore, the public complaint system is a direct testing mechanism for the Party’s basic political line and the mass line, and even serves as the foundation of its political legitimacy. The legislation on the public complaint system attempts to enhance its role in resolving conflicts while limiting its role in mobilizing the masses, positioning it as a remedy parallel to litigation, mediation and others. However, this approach has not resolved the institutional tension in the public complaint system.

3. Practical Innovation of the Mass Line: Government-People Interaction Featuring “Swift Response to Public Complaints”

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, the mass line has entered a new stage of leaps and bounds and innovation, marked by four major manifestations. Firstly, upholding the principal position of the people, the CPC Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core introduced the concept of “the people’s stance” centered on the people. Secondly, General Secretary Xi Jinping made the new statement that “the mass line is the lifeline of the Party and the fundamental approach to the Party’s work”. Thirdly, a series of mass line themed educational activities was conducted among Party members. Fourthly, an innovative approach known as “online mass line” was introduced and mandated for effective implementation to fulfill the demand for “improvement and creativity in the approaches to maintaining close ties with the people” (Guidelines of the CPC Central Committee on Strengthening the Party’s Political Building, 2019). In the innovation and development of the mass line in the new era, constructing a realistic mechanism centered on government-people interaction has become a crucial and unavoidable issue. To this end, extensive explorations have been carried out in practice by local governments across the country. Notably, the People’s Government of Beijing Municipality devised the type of “government-people interaction featuring swift response to public complaints”, contributing creatively to the mechanism for implementing the mass line.

Guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, the “swift response to public complaints” reform of the People’s Government of Beijing Municipality is the practical and detailed implementation of the important speeches of General Secretary Xi Jinping addressed to the Municipality that demand the focus on the urgent needs of the people and the exploration for new paths to super-large city governance at the primary level in the new era. Since 2017, the “swift response to public complaints” reform of the Municipality has progressed through three stages. The first stage is the mechanism of “quick response to community calls” created and piloted by Pinggu District. To effectively address the persistent issues of illegal gold mining, hillside excavations and sand theft within their jurisdiction, sub-districts, towns and townships of Pinggu District creatively proposed the mechanism of “quick response to community calls” which demands the “presence” of authorities on the “whistle” of sub-districts, towns and townships. Featuring responsive and collective

law enforcement led by townships, the mechanism has proved effective. In February 2018, after further summarizing Pinggu's mechanism of "quick response to community calls", the Municipality applied it to its 16 districts. In November 2018, General Secretary Xi Jinping presided over the fifth meeting of the Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform, fully acknowledging the mechanism of "quick response to community calls" of the People's Government of Beijing Municipality. The second stage is "swift response to public complaints," an extension from "quick response to community calls" to "quick response to resident calls", which focuses on the handling of the people's demands and the accommodation of their needs. Since June 2019, the municipality of Beijing has successively issued policy documents such as the Implementation Plan for Optimizing and Upgrading the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" with the Citizen Service Hotline and the Opinions on Further Deepening the Reform of "Swift Response to Public Complaints", establishing and improving the "swift response to public complaints" in terms of its working mechanism and structure. The third stage is characterized by "proactive governance" which demands the shift of the "swift response to public complaints" from "being reactive to complaints" to "taking proactive measures to address complaints before they are raised" by means of "theme of the month", "categorized treatment in sub-districts, towns and townships" and others. One of the two landmark accomplishments of this stage is the promulgation of Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints which incorporates "swift response to public complaints" into the legal framework. The second one is the deliberation and adoption of the Guiding Opinions on Taking Proactive Measures to Address Complaints Before They Are Raised which specifies the paths and mechanisms for proactive governance and source governance (G. Zhang & Q. Zhang, 2022).

Basically, the process of swift response to public complaints consists of six steps: reception, assignment, response, handling, feedback, and appraisal, each centered on the people's demands. In the first step, or "reception", all the citizen helplines across the Municipality, despite of their functions and locations, were merged into the citizen service hotline of 12345 for unified management and response. "Response", the second step, involves differentiated, graded management of the demands according to their types and priorities, to improve the pertinence of the handling. The third step "assignment" involves drafting a dynamic responsibility directory for swift response to public complaints, segmented according to the jurisdiction and functions of multifarious public entities. This directory includes 343 sub-districts, towns and townships, 65 municipal departments, and 49 public serving enterprises and institutions. All these entities are incorporated into the 12345 hotline for direct, dual, or consultative assignment based on the type and nature of the public demands. The next step is problem-solving, which requires targeted approaches tailored to specific demands. Complex, cross-departmental issues entail on-site collaboration and deliberation of related authorities at the "whistle" of sub-districts, towns and townships. For cross-industry or cross-regional demands, a hierarchical coordination mechanism is adopted. Critical and difficult demands are submitted to the superior Party committees or relevant departments for coordinated resolution. In the fifth step—feedback, the 12345 hotline contacts complainants in a point-to-point way to collect feedback from them on the responsiveness and results of the handling as well as the attitude of the staff via phone calls, text messages and the Internet. This ensures that the case handling process remains accessible and that staff performance are monitored. Appraisal is the last step, where the complaint handling performance of Party and government leadership teams and Party officials at various levels is routinely assessed with an appraisal system. This appraisal system aligns with the requirements for offering better social services in seven aspects (i.e., childcare, education, employment, medical services, elderly care, housing and social assistance) and meeting public expectations for a better life in five areas (i.e., a life that is convenient and comfortable, with more choices, in a fair and safe society) besides core indicators including responsiveness, settlement, and satisfaction. The results of the appraisal serve as critical

references for case analysis, situation assessment and the rating, selection and appointment of officials.

The reform of swift response to public complaints represents an innovation in the mode of government-people interaction and marks progress with the mass line of the Party. Firstly, it is the latest development of the mass line of the Party in the new era. As a practice embodying the mass viewpoint of "everything for the people, everything relying on the people", a mechanism giving swift response to public demands where the people's needs remain the top priorities has been established on the platform of the 12345 hotline, accentuating the principal position of the people in the governance of a super-large city. The necessity of trusting and relying on the people when addressing their demands prompts government officials to actively listen to public opinion, communicate with the people, and maintain contact with them. The emphasis on the people's feedback and satisfaction encourages governments at various levels to consider the people's demands, opinions, and feelings seriously in social governance, thus reflecting the mass approach of "coming from the people and going to the people" which requires absorbing ideas "from the people" before conveying the policies derived from those ideas back "to the people". Therefore, from the perspective of either the mass viewpoint or the mass approach, "swift response to public complaints" is an innovative development of the mass line. Secondly, "swift response to public complaints" proposes an effective mechanism for implementing the mass line, which might otherwise face immediate obstacles, such as interests conflicts stemming from class differentiation among the people, bureaucratism that alienates officials from the people, and outdated mechanisms for communication between officials and the people due to rapid social development (Xu, 2014). With the 12345 hotline, "swift response to public complaints" serves as a new communication mechanism between officials and the people, offering response "accessible by a single phone number" to public demands. By categorizing demands, assigning them efficiently to relevant authorities, and tracking the progress and the feedback, "swift response to public complaints" empowers the people with the power to identify problems and oversee the process of their resolution, contributing to the innovative development of the mechanisms for the implementation of the mass line. Thirdly, "swift response to public complaints" fosters a healthy and efficient government-people interaction. As an essential criterion for assessing the integrated development of law-based governance in countries, governments and societies, a healthy and efficient government-people interaction requires the government to transform into a service-oriented entity that responds efficiently and promptly to public demands. However, due to the fragmented administrative functions, government-people interaction is prone to responsibility shirking and inefficiency in practice, hindering the expression of public demands and the response to them, deteriorating the relationship between the government and the people, and alienating the officials from the masses. With the integration of 64 citizen helplines of multifarious municipal authorities into one, the reform of "swift response to public complaints" replaces the partitioned administrative entities with a unified management system capable of offering "classified response" "accessibility via a single hotline", "immediate assignment", "collaborative handling", and "individualized feedback". This tangible effectiveness and practicality impress the people and foster a harmonious pattern of government-people interaction.

"Government-people interaction featuring swift response to public complaints" represents a new development in its pattern by comparison with the previous ones. Firstly, it advances the previous model of "government-people interaction featuring mass movement" at the initial stage of the practice of the mass line. While this model has advantages in overcoming bureaucratic drawbacks and uniting and mobilizing the masses, it has disadvantages such as excessive reliance on the individual will of leaders and unconventional measures, lack of institutional guarantees, and risks of being uncontrollable in practice. "Government-people interaction featuring swift response to public complaints" retains the social mobilization trait of the previous model by accepting public demands without barriers and

encouraging them to voice their interests, criticisms, suggestions, and supervision opinions, thus providing a strong impetus for government service reform and the implementation of the mass line which serves as a foundation for the continuation of the political legitimacy of the government. At the same time, “government-people interaction featuring swift response to public complaints”, despite its social mobilization trait, is not incompatible with Modern Bureaucracy. Instead, it relies on the routines of Modern Bureaucracy for operation, and eventually, it resolves public demands within the existing system of Modern Bureaucracy. Therefore, compared to “government-people interaction featuring mass movement”, “government-people interaction featuring swift response to public complaints” achieves harmony between mass mobilization and Modern Bureaucracy, central work and routine work, and movement-based governance and routine governance.

Secondly, “government-people interaction featuring swift response to public complaints” creatively advances the model of “government-people interaction featuring the division of function” at the stage of the diversified practice of the mass line. On the one hand, “government-people interaction featuring the division of function” abandons the de-bureaucratization approach of the “government-people interaction featuring mass movement” and reconstructs the government-people interaction based on the hierarchical division of state power, forming government-people interaction patterns characterized by “political representation”, “the people’s judicature” and “public complaint handling for maintaining stability”. On the other hand, it creates barriers, built out of the division of function, to proper government-people interactions in practice, resulting in responsibility shirking and procrastination in receiving and addressing public demands, thus leading government-people interaction to self-consuming internal friction. The most typical examples are litigation-related public complaints. The complainers, after encountering difficulties in seeking litigation relief from judicial authorities, resort to public complaints for help, which, according to the division of function, is supposed to be provided by “government-people interaction featuring the people’s judicature”. Upon receiving the complaints, however, the complaint handling authorities, according to the division of function, forward the complaints back to judicial authorities, thus forming a vicious circle where the complaints end in failure. With the help of a mechanism where the person who first receives a public complaint should be responsible for the coordination of its solution, the government-people interaction featuring “swift response to public complaints” focuses on issues of public concern and mobilizes relevant authorities to collaborate, thus breaking the fragmented structure of the government-people interaction featuring “the division of function”, effectively preventing responsibility shirking among multiple responsible entities. Furthermore, government-people interaction featuring “swift response to public complaints” overcomes the inherent drawbacks of other patterns characterized by “political representation”, “the people’s judicature” and “public complaint handling for maintaining stability”, innovatively developing government-people relations with the assistance of information technology.

Thirdly, compared to the first two patterns, the government-people interaction featuring “swift response to public complaints” is firmly guaranteed by law. Without systematic and definite legislative embodiment, the first two patterns merely have some scattered presence within institutional systems based on functional divisions, making coordinated interaction at the institutional level difficult. The Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints institutionalizes the government-people interaction featuring “swift response to public complaints” for the first time through local legislation, promoting the law-based implementation of the mass line in the new era. With a legislative purpose centered on the people, it incorporates community-level governance reform guided by Party building into the legal framework. Particularly, it establishes a law-based presence of the diversified participation mechanism under proactive governance, which is highly innovative and exemplary (G. Zhang & Q. Zhang, 2022).

Moreover, government-people interaction featuring “swift response to public complaints” establishes

a new platform for the "online mass line." On this platform, the three links of the mass line (investigation and collection, discussion and integration, and policy feedback), as well as procedures including preceding government information disclosure and succeeding public oversight, can be effectively institutionalized with the online platform, significantly reducing the costs and time of mass line practices (Wu, 2016). In the "public domain" of government-people interaction established by the mechanism of "swift response to public complaints", the people can not only express their interests and demands, engage in social mobilization, but also effectively participate in public affairs. This fosters communication rationality and deliberative democracy between the government and the people, further strengthening the close bond between the Party and the people.

4. The Main Advantages of the Government-People Interaction Featuring "Swift Response to Public Complaints" from a Chinese-Western Comparative Perspective

The patterns of government-people interaction in Western countries are diverse, varying according to national and political systems. Generally, they can be summarized into the following nine categories.

The first is democratic election, which is the most fundamental form of government-people interaction, enabling citizens to periodically choose their government representatives and leaders and directly participate in political decision-making by voting. The second involves parliaments and public hearings. Parliaments or congresses serve as crucial bridges between citizens and governments, while public hearings are a way of working in representative democracy that allows citizens, experts, and stakeholders to express their views on a particular piece of legislation or policy. The third is public participation. The Western theories of participatory democracy advocate that through broad and deep participation in local political practices in primary level communities and workplaces, the political capacity and interest of citizens can be cultivated, thus preparing them for participation in democratic practices at higher levels, including the national one. For example, some countries have mechanisms such as citizens' advisory committees or participatory budgeting to ensure that public opinion is reflected in policy-making. The fourth involves supervision by media and public opinion. Free and independent media, known as the "fourth estate," are vital channels for government-people interaction in Western countries. They not only report government activities but also supervise the government through investigations and commentaries, besides exposing corruption and misconduct. Moreover, social media platforms facilitate citizens' expression of opinions and political discussions. The fifth category includes demonstrations and protests. Citizens in Western countries have the right to express dissatisfaction and demands through peaceful demonstrations and protests, which may attract government and public attention and promote social changes and policy adjustments. The sixth features legal proceedings and judicial supervision. Citizens and groups can challenge government decisions or policies through public interest litigation, administrative reconsideration, and other legal means, seeking justice and safeguarding rights within the judicial system. The seventh is based on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and citizen groups. NGOs and citizen groups play significant roles in government-people interaction. Usually, these organizations represent specific social groups or interests and influence government decisions and public policies through lobbying, advocacy and service provision. The eighth includes social surveys and research reports. Social science research institutions and think tanks in Western countries conduct surveys and publish reports reflecting public opinion and social dynamics, providing references for government decision-making. Their findings often reveal deep-seated social issues, thus promoting

policy improvements. The ninth involves e-government and digital platforms. With the development of information technology, e-government and digital platforms are becoming increasingly prevalent in Western countries. Governments interact with citizens through websites, social media and dedicated apps, providing government information, online services, and feedback channels.

While these patterns effectively promote democracy and government transparency, they also have drawbacks and challenges, mainly manifested in the following aspects. Firstly, the electoral system has some limitations. The Western democratic election system faces difficulties such as substantial inequality in citizen rights, inefficiency in the operation of state power, and severe power corruption (Shao, 2017). Additionally, the periodicity of elections can prompt politicians to make short-sighted decisions, leaving long-term structural problems unresolved. Voter apathy is another challenge, where some citizens lack interest or confidence in politics, resulting in low voter turnout and election results that cannot fully reflect public opinion. Furthermore, in the context of money-driven politics, the manipulation of elections by capital can easily lead to election results that deviate from the real wishes of ordinary people. Secondly, public participation is imbalanced. While taking participation as its core and basis, the theory of Western participatory democracy ignores to a certain extent the reality of participation and the people's real need for participation. In particular, the limitation of participation and autonomy to specific levels and issues, and the difficulties in extending them to all political and public fields render it a mere revision of representative democracy (Chen, 2014). For example, insufficient expertise on complex issues like policies and others can make it impossible for ordinary citizens to express their opinions adequately and accurately. Thirdly, supervision by media and public opinion acts as a double-edged sword. While media oversight is crucial, issues such as media bias, media manipulation and information overload can arise, especially in modern times when Western governments have more sophisticated means to control the media (Zhang, 2008). Fourthly, demonstrations and protests bring about negative impacts. Frequent demonstrations and protests can destabilize society, and disrupt daily life and economic development, some of which may lead to violence, thus damaging public property and jeopardizing public safety. Fifthly, legal proceedings and judicial supervision have their limitations. Laws are made because of the need for litigation, and the results of litigation will naturally lead to the creation of new laws. Creating and using laws to an excessive degree will trigger problems such as "the explosion of laws", excessive litigation and liability crisis, so that the legal system that does not create profits permeates, infects, controls and inhibits the development of society (Wang, 1994). Complicated and time-consuming judicial procedures render the litigation costs and time costs unbearable for ordinary citizens. Sixthly, NGOs and citizen groups face constraints. The role that NGOs play in maintaining the effective operation of democratic politics, with its functions like "interest expression" and "interest aggregation", is quite limited, due to multifarious restrictions such as legal obstacles, resource dependence, professionalism, belief in marketization and limited human, financial and material resources, which make it difficult for NGOs to make a substantial impact on government decision-making (Salamon & Geller, 2008). Seventhly, social surveys and research reports are not without their flaws, especially in the accuracy of survey data and the lag in policy implementation. Eighthly, e-governments and digital platforms present challenges, such as digital divides that hinder some senior citizens and low-income people, and other issues, including data privacy and network security that can be brought about by online interaction. Ninthly, lobbying and interest groups have negative influences. Powerful interest groups influence policy-making through lobbying, making it difficult for the public to know the exchanges of interests and political transactions behind the scenes.

Compared to the main patterns of government-people interaction in Western countries and their drawbacks, China's innovative pattern of government-people interaction centered on "swift response to

public complaints" demonstrates marked advantages. The advantages of government-people interaction featuring "swift response to public complaints" are mainly reflected in the following aspects: Firstly, the mass line is combined with and deployed for the construction and the thorough practice of the whole-process people's democracy. Unlike Western countries of electoral politics, China implements the whole-process people's democracy which gives priority to the expression and concentration of the people's demands, for which the mass line provides guiding principles, working methods and road maps (Wan & Du, 2022). The measures, from "quick response to community calls" to "swift response to public complaints", from "proactive governance" to "addressing complaints before they are raised", and from "source governance" to "endpoint solution", are always people-centered, offering responsive solutions for citizens' demands, securing the principal position of the people in every link of the governance process, thus raising the level of the people's happiness in daily life through the implementation of the whole-process people's democracy. Secondly, government-people interaction featuring "swift response to public complaints" expands the channels for public participation and enhances public trust and satisfaction. The contact between Party officials and the people is strengthened through the mechanism of "swift response to public complaints". That the public can directly express their interest demands to Party and government organs, and that public opinion and demands can obtain immediate feedback, increase the people's sense of belonging and sense of participation in social affairs. At the same time, the publication of the process and results of the complaints and demands increases the transparency of the government's work, making it easier for citizens to understand the government's operations and decision-making process. Thirdly, it prevents responsibility shirking of Modern Bureaucracy and improves the overall efficiency of government-people interaction. Government-people interaction featuring "swift response to public complaints" overcomes the drawbacks of Modern Bureaucracy and requires government departments to deal with citizens' complaints or demands immediately upon receiving them, which improves the efficiency and speed of the government's response to citizens' demands and prevents functional departments from shirking responsibilities and procrastinating as found in the Western system of checks and balances. Fourthly, by building a social governance community, the mechanism of government-people interaction featuring "swift response to public complaints" solves practical problems accurately and effectively. Combining the mass line with the building of the social governance community at the primary level, this mechanism helps the government to promptly identify and solve specific problems in urban management (such as road maintenance, garbage disposal, etc.), thereby improving the accuracy and effectiveness. Additionally, by collecting and analyzing extensive citizen complaint data, the government can better comprehend social needs and issues, thus making decisions and allocating resources scientifically, which contributes to the building of a social governance community in which everyone has responsibilities, fulfills responsibilities and enjoys benefits. Fifthly, government-people interaction featuring "swift response to public complaints" forms a holistic governance model and optimizes government workflow. The holistic governance requires the governing body to solve problems from the perspective of the society as a whole, and to overcome the drawbacks of the simple and isolated problem-solving under the traditional bureaucracy (Dunsire, 1990). It is the basis for later theories including new public service, collaborative government governance, networked governance and other theoretical forms. Following the principles of being positive, proactive and inclusive, the holistic governance breaks down departmentalism, lack of coordination, class barriers and identity segmentation (Gao, 2010), thus enhancing the vitality of social entities to jointly participate in social governance at the primary level. While requiring government departments to simplify internal procedures, the mechanism of "swift response to public complaints" attempts to break down departmental barriers, promote cross-departmental collaboration among government functional departments, and solve the pressing difficulties

and problems that concern the people most from a holistic governance perspective. In the sixth place, government-people interaction featuring “swift response to public complaints” maintains social order and stability by preventing and resolving social conflicts. Unlike the higher-cost dispute resolution model in the West, “swift response to public complaints” can fairly prevent and resolve social conflicts and disputes, reduce the cost of dispute resolution, and help maintain social order and stability. In the seventh place, government-people interaction featuring “swift response to public complaints” enhances the credibility and image of the government, promotes technological innovation, and improves the pertinence of services. Compared with the lack of credibility in the Western government-citizen interaction model, “swift response to public complaints” enables the government to improve its credibility by responding to citizens’ needs in a timely manner while creating an image of efficiency and responsibility, thereby consolidating its ruling foundation. At the same time, the reliance of “swift response to public complaints” on advanced information technologies such as big data and artificial intelligence greatly promotes the informatization and digitalization of the government, which plays a critical role in promoting the formation of smart and efficient governance systems in extra-large and super-large cities.

In summary, government-people interaction featuring “swift response to public complaints”, rooted in the mass line and adhering to a people-centered stance, significantly improves the relationship between the government and citizens. It enhances the quality of public services and the level of social governance through heightened government responsiveness, reinforced citizen trust, effective problem-solving, optimized government workflows, and promoted social harmony. Additionally, it contributes to an improved government image, accelerated technological innovation, and the establishment of a positive interaction pattern. This model, with its evident advantages over Western counterparts, offers an efficient, transparent, and interactive governance solution for modern urban management in both China and the West.

5. Conclusion

The fine traditions of “everything for the people, everything relying on the people” and “coming from the people and going to the people” established by the Communist Party of China over its century-long journey are not only crucial to the Party in revolution, construction and reform, but also the foundation for the continuation of its political legitimacy. The Resolution on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century adopted at the sixth plenary session of the 19th CPC Central Committee in 2021 systematically summarizes the invaluable experiences gained throughout the Party’s century-long arduous journey of tireless efforts, prominently featuring the “people-centered” philosophy. “Adhering to the people-centered philosophy” requires the Party to “lead the people to great new victories for socialism with Chinese characteristics” based on “adhering to the Party’s mass line” (The Resolution on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century, 2021). The history of the Party over the past century is precisely one of ceaseless exploration, practice, and improvement of the mass line.

Etymologically, the term “mass” in the “mass line” originates from the creative use of an indigenous term. After the term “mass line” took shape, the “masses” gradually replaced the (ruled) “subjects” and the “populace” as the dominant discourse, although it retained its inherent connotation of (ruled) “subjects”. The incomplete conceptual transition of the “masses” to “the people” turns it partially a vehicle of “official-subjects” interaction, assuming the form of “official-people” interaction in the discourse of the mass line and as “government-people” interaction in the discourse of Modern Bureaucracy.

Therefore, by observing the evolution of the mass line through the changing patterns of government-people interaction, we can explore the basic laws underlying the development of the mass line practice.

Based on such observation, this article examines the development of the mass line since the founding of the People's Republic of China in three stages. "Government-people interaction featuring mass movement" represents the initial practice of the mass line at its first stage. While it had advantages in overcoming bureaucratic drawbacks, it also had disadvantages, such as excessive reliance on the individual will of leaders and unconventional measures, and lack of institutional guarantees, thus diminishing gradually after the reform and opening-up. The second stage of the mass line is represented by diversified practice typified by "government-people interaction featuring the division of function". Drawing on Modern Bureaucracy and the division of function, this stage forms government-people interaction patterns characterized by "political representation", "the people's judicature" and "public complaint handling for maintaining stability", corresponding respectively to law-making, adjudication and execution in the separation of powers. The third stage of the mass line is marked by innovation in its practice, exemplified by the formation of government-people interaction featuring "swift response to public complaints". The reform of "swift response to public complaints" has introduced a new mechanism of government-people interaction which advances the mass line of the Party. "Government-people interaction featuring swift response to public complaints" is not only an improvement on the "government-people interaction featuring mass movement" formed during the initial practice of the mass line at its first stage, but also an advance on the "government-people interaction featuring the division of function" formed during the diversified practice of the mass line at its second stage. This paper argues that "swift response to public complaints", by fostering a harmonious government-people relation through interaction, marks the development of the mass line in the new era, demonstrating clear advantages over the patterns of government-people interaction in Western countries.

The reform of "swift response to public complaints" signifies a profound governance revolution that continues to evolve for the better. The Party's mass line, as a vital lifeline, will keep innovating in step with the times. "Swift response to public complaints" provides a promising path for the further development of the connotation of the mass line in the new era. In the future, the reform will be refined further based on its current achievements. The systematic and thorough implementation of "swift response to public complaints" will contribute to the "Beijing Model" of social governance at the primary and community levels in super-large cities, serving as an exemplar of strengthened relations between the Party and the people in the governance of such cities in the new era.

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Research on Scene Creation and Governance Mechanisms in People's Cities

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ABSTRACT: Scene creation in “people’s cities” plays a vital role in advancing people-centered urban governance. It aims to integrate a city’s physical spaces, social and cultural assets, and economic elements to create scenes that cater to diverse resident needs, reflect the unique characteristics of the city, and promote a sense of humanistic connection. By enhancing both livability and comfort, these scenes transform cities into accessible and enjoyable spaces that strengthen urban development and competitiveness. Based on a comparative analysis of innovative practices in Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu, this paper identifies five essential types of scenes in people’s cities: commercial and consumption scenes, public service scenes, natural and ecological scenes, cultural and social scenes, and transport and commuting scenes. Additionally, five guiding principles for creating these scenes in people’s cities are outlined: enhancing quality of life, fostering urban cultural identity, developing scene creation plans, creating project list models, and encouraging public involvement. Further, this paper explores the complementary relationship between the “swift response to public complaints” mechanism and scene creation in people’s cities. By deepening our understanding of this relationship and optimizing scene development based on the mechanism, people’s city initiatives can effectively meet citizens’ growing aspirations for an improved quality of life, elevate urban governance standards, and comprehensively meet community needs.

KEYWORDS: people’s cities; scene creation; swift response to public complaints; Beijing; comparative study

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1. Introduction

In November 2019, General Secretary Xi Jinping proposed the concept that “The cities are built by

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the people and are for the people” during his inspection in Shanghai. This people-centered development philosophy reflects the core principle of Marxism and is a fundamental attribute of socialist cities. To accelerate the transformation of development modes in megacities, it is crucial to implement the vision of building people’s cities, prioritizing the livability and safety of urban environments, and continuously fulfilling the public’s evolving expectations for an improved quality of life.

Scenes are regarded as symbolic frameworks of urban life, crafted within physical spaces that go beyond mere locations. The scene theory emphasizes that urban space is enriched by various scenes that frame people’s daily activities, including living, consumption, experiences, and aesthetics, while considering people’s needs, feelings, and behaviors. In people’s cities, scene creation focuses on people’s life needs, experiences, aesthetics, and emotional well-being. By cultivating appealing and shared public spaces that bring together commercial elements, civic engagement, facilities, and other elements, cities can strengthen their support systems and improve services for their residents.

Based on the core concept of people’s cities and existing research, this paper summarizes and refines five primary dimensions of scene creation for people’s cities, namely, commercial consumption, public services, natural ecology, social and humanities, as well as transport and commuting. By comparing scene creation practices in such people’s cities as Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu, this paper identifies the guiding principles for developing people-centered urban scenes. Notably, Beijing’s “swift response to public complaints” mechanism plays an important role in creating scenes in the course of building itself into a people’s city, offering both theoretical insights and practical guidance for advancing megacity governance in the new era.

2. Theoretical Framework for Scene Creation in Building People’s Cities

2.1 Current research on the development pathways for people’s cities

In Chinese academic circles, research on developing people’s cities mainly focuses on urban planning and public administration. From the perspective of urban planning, existing research mainly emphasizes the “people-centered” spatial design, reflecting the people’s dominant position in spatial games (Jin, Y., Cui, Y. et al., 2021). This approach underscores the creativity of individuals in shaping diverse public spaces such as squares, parks, and streets to meet the needs of different demographic groups (Wei, C. H., 2023). These spaces serve not only as places for leisure but also as important venues for social interaction and cultural exchange. For example, some cities preserve their historical and cultural attributes by transforming old neighborhoods (Zhou, Y. N., & Li, B. W., 2024), reviving the historical memory of cities while improving the living quality of their residents. At the same time, underscoring the universal nature of urban planning and ensuring the accessibility and public ownership of spaces are the core connotations of people’s cities (Zhu, J. R., Wang, Y. R. et al., 2024). As for public administration, existing research highlights the role of multiple stakeholders. It emphasizes both the government’s leading role and the synergy of social organizations, fully engaging enterprises and citizens in urban development (Sang, Y. C., 2023). Such participation fosters intelligent, collaborative, and resilient governance of cities to create reasonable public spaces, allocate public resources in a prudent and balanced manner, and provide practical and reliable public services (Guo, Q., & Li, L. S., 2024), thereby creating people’s cities. These two perspectives propose distinct pathways to urban development, focusing on the subjects and objects of city-building, respectively. Urban planning can sometimes overemphasize the technological and physical aspects of spatial renewal, while public administration may adopt a more subjective, top-down

perspective, regarding citizens as passive recipients of governance rather than active contributors to urban development.

Scene creation offers a fresh perspective in building people's cities, effectively overcoming the limitations of traditional frameworks. First, it broadens urban development theories by prioritizing people's needs, experiences, and emotions rather than focusing solely on economic growth and spatial planning, as is typical in traditional perspectives. It introduces a new perspective and dimension to urban development theories, enriching their scope. Second, it expands social governance theories by emphasizing the collaborative involvement of multiple stakeholders such as the government, enterprises, social organizations, and residents. Enabled by the mechanism of "swift response to public complaints", a social governance system based on collaboration, participation and shared benefits is formed. This governance model of joint participation of multiple stakeholders provides new practical experience for developing social governance theories. Third, scene creation deepens urban sociology by focusing on people's activities and experiences. By emphasizing the interactive relationship between human and spaces, this perspective opens new avenues for developing urban sociology and points out a new direction for the development of urban sociology with Chinese characteristics.

2.2 Scene creation perspective in people's cities

The theory of scenes originates from the studies of urban amenities (C. Wu et al., 2019) and can be traced back to the 1950s. Amenities were first proposed as an independent variable in urban development and later became an important factor in predicting regional population growth. This concept also reminds urban planners and policymakers to preserve a city's beauty and comfort amid economic growth (Ullman, 1954). While international scholars have defined amenities in various ways across different stages and fields of research, the core attributes remain consistent: amenities are elements that provide residents with comfortable and enjoyable experiences, encompassing facilities, activities, and services that improve urban life quality (McNulty et al., 1985; Wang, 2014; T. N. Clark, 2003). Unlike other economic indicators, such as wage levels and housing costs, amenities are uniquely human-centered. They represent the distinctive characteristics of facilities that bring subjective enjoyment and are used to assess the attractiveness of a city's environment and lifestyle (Blum, 2001; Irwin, 1977; Silver & Clark, 2014).

However, isolated or atomized amenities alone cannot sufficiently measure residents' satisfaction with their vision of a fulfilling life or fully assess a city's quality of life (Silver, 2012; Glaeser et al., 2001; Florida, 2004). Assessing whether a city meets people's needs for an improved quality of life requires more than simply counting amenities. It is not only about quantity, but also about how amenities are combined, along with their aesthetic features and the lifestyle values they convey (J. Wu et al., 2022; J. Wu & Ye, 2020). Scene analysis effectively addresses this need for "wholeness" and "quality" in assessing amenities. Existing international urban studies demonstrate that systematic combinations of amenities form different scenes which reflect a place's aesthetic character, shape different lifestyles and degrees of life quality, and appeal to different groups, thus driving intrinsic regional development (T. N. Clark & Silver, 2016; Daniel et al., 2010; J. Wu et al., 2021). This is evident in the development of world-leading cities. The scene theory emphasizes the aesthetic quality and functional layout of urban spaces. It holds that the organic combination of amenities, activities, and cultural implications jointly create attractive urban scenes (C. Wu et al., 2019). The construction of people's cities similarly attaches importance to enhancing the quality of urban spaces, creating livable, work-friendly and travel-friendly urban environments, and optimizing urban infrastructure, public service facilities, as well as ecological environments. These efforts enhance urban comfort and convenience, and people can live a better life in cities (D. E. Clark & Kahn, 1988; Glaeser et al., 2001).

Therefore, the scene creation perspective considers a city's unique characteristics, the enjoyable

experiences it provides, and the aesthetic values it embodies. This multidimensional approach surpasses traditional urban analysis by emphasizing the relevant emotional and meaningful aspects of spaces (Silver & Clark, 2014). From this perspective, urban development becomes a process of meeting the needs of residents, providing them with diverse services, cultural experiences, and economic opportunities.

Scenes can be classified in various ways. This research aims to explore the types of scenes in urban development that truly respond to residents' needs, in line with the essence of people's cities. Drawing on traditional Chinese culture and insights from the humanities and social sciences on quality of life, art, aesthetics, and lifestyle, this research examines China's innovative practices in urban development and conducts observations and interviews on the daily needs of current urban residents. From these efforts, five primary scene types central to people's cities have been identified: commercial and consumption scenes, public service scenes, natural and ecological scenes, social and humanistic scenes, and transport and commuting scenes. As urban residents' varied and evolving needs are met, their sense of a fulfilling life grows, further enriching these scenes. Thus, the strength of these five types of urban scenes serves as a key indicator of successful scene creation in people's cities.

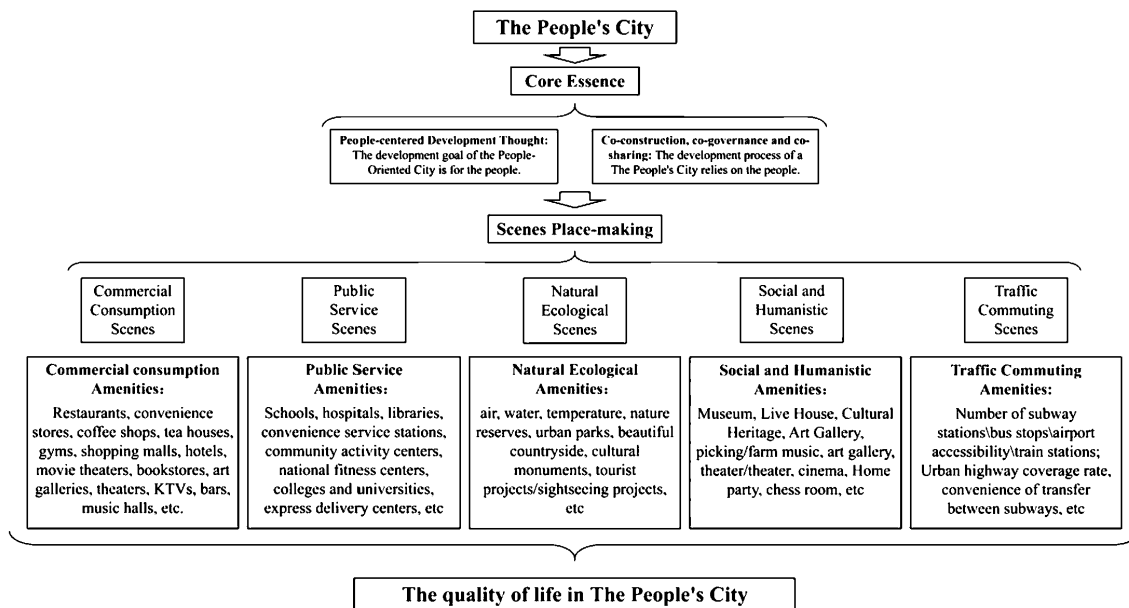


Figure 1 Theoretical Framework of Scene Creation Pathways in People's Cities

a. Commercial and Consumption Scenes: In the construction of people's cities, commercial and consumption scenes are spaces designed around commercial activities, integrating multiple elements and experiences to meet the material and spiritual needs of residents. These scenes, mainly composed of commercial amenities, serve as more than just economic hubs. They are essential spaces for people's living, social interaction, leisure, and cultural engagement. By meeting a wide range of community needs, these scenes play a critical role in driving economic growth, enhancing urban quality, and supporting both material and spiritual well-being.

b. Public Service Scenes: In the construction of people's cities, public service scenes are spaces and situations created through the interaction of various elements to address residents' public service needs, primarily through public amenities. These scenes encompass a range of functions, including providing public service facilities, delivering high-quality services, promoting social engagement, and reinforcing cultural values. They are essential for ensuring a high quality of life, bridging urban-rural gaps, reducing

social inequalities, and fostering a sense of social responsibility and civic consciousness among residents.

c. Natural and Ecological Scenes: Natural and ecological scenes are specific spaces and situations created by integrating natural ecological elements into urban areas, fostering a harmonious coexistence between urban living and the natural environment. Composed primarily of natural amenities, these scenes provide residents with beautiful environments and valuable ecological services. They hold profound ecological, social, and cultural significance, playing a critical role in enhancing a city's aesthetics and appeal, improving residents' quality of life, promoting sustainable urban development, and cultivating residents' awareness of ecological protection.

d. Social and Humanistic Scenes: Social and humanistic scenes are specific spaces and situations created through the interaction of various social and humanistic elements, focusing on meeting people's needs for social connection, cultural engagement, and spiritual enrichment. Composed of various social and cultural amenities, these scenes represent the soul and charm of the city. They fulfill the spiritual needs of residents, strengthen urban cohesion and foster a sense of belonging. Additionally, they encourage social communication and interaction, enhance a city's cultural identity, and enrich its cultural heritage and unique characteristics. By integrating social and humanistic elements, preserving and utilizing cultural heritage, and expanding educational resources, cities can cultivate richer, diverse and harmonious social and humanistic scenes, making urban environments more desirable for residents.

e. Transport and Commuting Scenes: Transport and commuting scenes are designed to meet residents' daily travel needs, centered around transportation amenities. They include multiple aspects such as traffic infrastructure, travel services and experiences, as well as transit culture and values. They play a significant role in meeting residents' travel needs, fostering industrial clustering and innovative urban development, and enhancing residents' travel satisfaction and well-being. Through strategies such as scientific planning, high-quality services delivery, and cultural cultivation, cities can create convenient, efficient, comfortable, and safe transport and commuting scenes to empower urban growth and enhance residents' quality of life.

3. Practical Mechanisms of Scene Creation in People's Cities

Based on the above analysis, this research has identified five essential types of scenes that align with the core connotations of people's cities. The following section compares scene creation practices in the development of people's cities in Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu, focusing on the guiding principles that underpin these efforts.

3.1 Commercial and consumption scenes: Focusing on the integrated development of diverse urban consumption modes

For commercial and consumption scenes, Beijing has formulated the Action Plan on Promoting the Integrated and High-quality Development of Multiple Consumption Modes, encouraging districts to create innovative, integrated consumption scenes and explore new urban consumption spaces in key areas such as blocks, waterfronts, near-mountain areas, events, performances, nighttime activities, and digital spaces. The plan focuses on cultivating seven types of consumption scenes including blocks, near-mountain areas, water-friendly areas, events, performing arts, nighttime activities, and digital platforms, with about 50 demonstration projects. For example, Beijing explores block-based consumption scenes by tapping into the historical and cultural significance of blocks, enriching experiential business forms, beautifying public spaces, and promoting the establishment of national demonstration pedestrian streets.

It supports the transformation and upgrading of public areas in commercial and consumption spaces and pedestrian streets, enriching the consumer experience, and unlocking new consumption potential. Additionally, the city supports the green and intelligent transformation of existing exhibition facilities.

The National Development and Reform Commission, along with other departments, has issued the Measures for Creating New Consumption Scenarios and Fostering New Growth Points in Consumption, which promotes the integration of business, tourism, culture, and sports into shopping scenarios. Shanghai has introduced a number of measures to strengthen innovation in the consumption market and boost overall consumption. These efforts include positioning the city as a global hub for new product launches, creating a vibrant consumption atmosphere, and attracting domestic and foreign mid-to-high-end brands by encouraging the establishment of flagship stores. Additionally, the city hosts the Global Gourmet Festival and enhances the consumer appeal of “One River and One Creek” by encouraging activities such as product launches on cruises along Huangpu River and Suzhou Creek.

Chengdu has introduced the “16 Measures” to promote new consumption development. The city aims to create ten major consumption scenes around Sichuan-style cuisine, music experiences, sleepless-town atmosphere, panda-themed attractions, Tianfu culture and tourism, harmonious rural settings, convention and exhibition venues, sports events, park greenways, and education and medical care facilities. Furthermore, Chengdu has adopted the approach of “shaping every scene into a model case”, offering incentives to exceptional and iconic demonstration areas. The city also focuses on creating new community-based consumption settings that address residents’ needs for convenience and quality, aiming to establish a comprehensive life-service ecosystem. Outdoor vending is permitted in designated commercial zones, shopping districts, and tourist attractions to foster a vibrant street market culture. Additionally, to stimulate consumer spending, Chengdu leverages its landmark nighttime economy hubs to host events and encourages local governments to collaborate with enterprises to promote nighttime economic activities.

In developing commercial and consumption scenes, cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu prioritize the integrated development of diverse consumption modes. This strategy aims to bolster each city’s appeal and competitiveness in consumer spending.

Each city’s approach has its unique characteristics. Beijing emphasizes leveraging its historical and cultural connotations and creating consumption scenes by utilizing natural landscape resources. The mechanism of “swift response to public complaints” has played an important role in creating and developing consumption scenes in different regions and industries, promoting the diversification of consumption scenes. For example, by promptly addressing issues reflected in complaints, Beijing revitalizes older neighborhoods, invests in renovations and upgrades, and incorporates new business models and cultural elements to craft distinctive consumption environments. These efforts aim to enrich the consumer landscape, offering a wider array of choices and experiences for consumers. Shanghai’s approach emphasizes internationalization and fashion-forward trends, focusing on attracting global brands and innovating service-oriented consumption. The city aims to establish itself as a global hub for new product launches and optimizing its international consumption environment. Chengdu highlights its local characteristics, focusing on the creation of community consumption scenes and nighttime economic activities while encouraging outdoor stalls to boost consumption vitality and create consumption scenes with a unique Chengdu charm.

Table 1 Comparison of Policies for Consumption Scene Development in Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu

City	Policies for Consumption Scene Development	Key Types of Consumption Scenes
Beijing	The <i>Action Plan on Promoting the Integrated and High-quality Development of Multiple Consumption Modes</i> proposes 18 specific measures under the “7+7+4” framework. The goal is to establish an ecological pattern for integrated consumption development by 2025.	Seven types of consumption scenes, namely blocks, near-mountain areas, water-friendly areas, events, performing arts, nighttime activities, and digital platforms.
Shanghai	The <i>Implementation Plan for Improving the Quality and Expanding the Scale of Service Consumption in Shanghai</i> outlines 37 measures across 11 fields, including cultural tourism, education, elderly care, and housing, aiming to establish a national and global benchmark for excellence in service consumption.	In cultural and tourism consumption, the focus is on enhancing cultural service experiences and creating high-quality cultural and tourism scenes; in sports consumption, on developing top-tier events and activities; in health consumption, on enriching the supply of rehabilitation services; in elderly care services, on developing community-based and home-based elderly care options; in information consumption, on renovating and upgrading infrastructure; in financial consumption, on expanding consumer-oriented insurance products; in education consumption, on advancing international education services; in catering consumption, on gathering diverse culinary brands; in domestic service consumption, on expanding the availability of domestic services; in housing consumption, on supporting the growth of housing rental enterprises; and in traffic consumption, on developing cruise-service consumption.
Chengdu	The <i>Implementation Plan for Chengdu to Accelerate the Building of an International Consumption-centered City</i> outlines six key projects: building new consumption hubs, creating new consumption spaces, shaping distinctive consumption scenes, cultivating diverse consumption patterns, forming a new consumption layout, and enhancing consumption environments.	Scenes featuring Sichuan-style cuisine, live music, sleepless-town atmosphere, panda-themed attractions, Tianfu culture and tourism, harmonious rural settings, convention and exhibition venues, sports events, park greenways, and education and medical care services.

3.2 Public service scenes: Focusing on improving quality of life

In the development of public service scenes, Beijing embraces a people-centered approach, effectively improving the equality of basic public services and broadening the coverage of inclusive public services. For example, the Basic Public Service Development Plan during the 13th Five-Year Plan Period of Beijing aims to achieve a greater equality in the provision of basic public services across the capital. Additionally, Beijing seeks to significantly boost the capacity and efficiency of its service provision. Its “swift response to public complaints” mechanism represents a reform in Party-led grassroots governance. Guided by the people-first and demand-oriented principles, the mechanism focuses on addressing the concerns, annoyances, and distresses of the citizens. A long-term mechanism has been established to ensure swift response to public complaints, reinforcing the commitment to serve the people.

Shanghai adheres to optimizing the layout of basic public service resources, enhancing the public

service capacity of new towns, and introducing high-level, professional, and characteristic public service brands. The city plays a radiating and driving role in major projects related to medical and health care, education, culture, and sports. Public services in urban and rural areas are promoted and improved according to different goals. Meanwhile, Shanghai promotes the construction of the “15-minute community life circles” across the city, with a refined approach at the grassroot level to deliver services within “community life circles” that strike a balance between service frequency and coverage area. This strategy aims to find the “optimal ratio” that balances public service frequency and their service areas, thereby enhancing the accessibility and service quality for the community. For example, the “layer-by-layer” layout of public fitness facilities in the JuYuan New District addresses diverse community needs, while community meal-assistance services are also refined through a “layer-by-layer” layout. In addition, Shanghai has created “people’s squares”, i.e., one-stop service centers with a certain scale, which provide integrated, multi-functional, and convenient services designed to meet the needs of all age groups in surrounding neighborhoods.

Chengdu proposes to create a model of happiness within the people’s city that aligns with the construction of a park-city demonstration area practicing a new development concept. The city plans to establish a balanced, inclusive, fair, and convenient public service system by 2025. As part of its inclusive society initiative, Chengdu is committed to supporting the “elderly and children” as well as other vulnerable groups to promote social mutual assistance. The city emphasizes the development of large-scale, vibrant community complexes designed to support healthy living. These complexes will include provisions for elderly care with nursing beds and educational facilities for infants and young children, serving as central hubs for a wide range of public services and social interactions to meet the community’s various needs. Additionally, Chengdu strengthens its basic public service functions by advancing key livelihood projects in six major categories, such as elderly-care services.

Table 2 Comparison of the Construction Practices of “15-Minute Community Life Circles” in Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu

City	Objectives for building “15-minute community life circles”	Pathways for building “15-minute community life circles”
Beijing	The city plans to build 856 15-minute community life circles, with over 400 already completed and full coverage anticipated by 2025.	These circles prioritize essential services for residents, such as elderly care, convenience services, and dining, while also include quality-of-life services.
Shanghai	In 2024, Shanghai plans to implement more than 3, 800 projects to improve people’s wellbeing, open spaces linked to 40 units, carry out pilot projects for embedded service facilities in at least 100 communities, and launch at least 30 new pilot initiatives. The city also aims to build or renovate 110 “people’s squares” and 50 “Liuyi pavilions”.	It focuses on multi-functional “people’s squares” with compound services and “Liuyi pavilions” as versatile facilities designed to meet diverse community needs, including spaces for public discussion.
Chengdu	By the end of 2024, Chengdu expects to complete the pilot construction of 100 “15-Minute Happy Community Life Circles.” Each circle encompasses a 15-minute walking radius in urban areas or a 15-minute cycling radius in rural areas, centered on a comprehensive community service hub with strategically distributed service points.	Chengdu focuses on inclusive, all-age and all-time coverage, integrating urban and rural areas to ensure comprehensive access to essential services. The city aims to create multi-functional living units that address community needs across all life stages.

In developing public service scenes, cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu innovate the delivery methods and models of public services to meet the increasingly diverse needs of residents. Their efforts focus on improving the quality and standards of basic public services while striving to achieve greater equalization of public services.

Each city adopts a distinct approach in creating public service scenes. Beijing emphasizes on driving progress through institutional innovation. Through reform measures such as “swift response to public complaints”, the city quickly addresses the concerns of its residents, demonstrating its humanistic spirit, empathy, and an ideal vision for urban life. On one hand, addressing complaints immediately ensures that residents’ service-related concerns are resolved promptly. Whether the concern is damaged municipal facilities, inconvenient public transportation, or disparities in educational and medical resources, the relevant departments respond promptly to every complaint. This proactive approach significantly reduces the time required to address these issues. On the other hand, analyzing the volume and nature of complaints enables relevant departments to identify the weaknesses in public services and implement targeted improvements. For example, recurring complaints about traffic congestion may prompt transportation and education departments to collaborate on solutions, such as optimizing bus routes and designating temporary parking areas. Shanghai focuses on refining the allocation of public service resources, introducing “life-circle layers” within the broader “community life circles” framework. The city is also vigorously advancing the development of distinctive projects like “people’s squares”, enhancing the quality and accessibility of public services. Chengdu prioritizes support for vulnerable groups, accelerating the development of 13 key public service areas and creating an age-friendly and inclusive social environment.

3.3 Natural and ecological scenes: Focusing on the harmonious coexistence between human and nature

In developing natural and ecological scenes, Beijing focuses on the development of its “sub-center” areas and ecological conservation zones. Over the past decade, the city has expanded its green spaces by 2.43 million mu (approximately 162, 000 hectares), with a forest coverage rate of 44.8% and an urban green coverage rate of 49.3%. Additionally, Beijing has accelerated the planning and construction of Yanshan-Saihanba National Park and Chaobai River National Forest Park, enhanced forest management and rehabilitated low-yield forest areas to improve ecosystem quality. Efforts are also underway to restore rivers, lakes, and wetland ecosystems, enforce stringent farmland protection policies, and safeguard biodiversity. At the same time, Beijing promotes the seamless integration of urban blocks, shared facilities, and multifunctional spaces, creating diverse garden-like living environments.

Shanghai has launched initiatives to create a beautiful and sustainable urban environment. Recognizing its unique high-density urban landscape and estuarine and marine resources, the city aims to become a leading model of socialist modernization where humans and nature coexist in harmony. Shanghai has created an ecological spatial pattern based on the concept of “One River, One Creek, and One Belt”. The city is transforming the banks of the Huangpu River and Suzhou Creek into attractive, recreational spaces for its citizens. Furthermore, Shanghai is committed to constructing and enhancing the ecological park belt encircling the urban area, offering more opportunities for citizens to engage with nature. At the same time, Shanghai is exploring environmental governance practices under the framework of “building a people’s city”. At the municipal level, it has enacted and is implementing the Regulations of Shanghai Municipality on Municipal Solid Waste Management, leading the trend of waste classification. The city also vigorously promotes the renewal and renovation of riverside areas such as Yangpu riverside and Xuhui riverside, engaging market forces in urban environment governance as well as renewal and renovation.

Chengdu is leading ecological development through its “park city” initiative, implementing the “Five-Green Nourishing the City” action plan. The action plan includes the planning and construction of Longquan Mountain Urban Forest Park as the city’s “green heart”, Giant Panda National Park as its “green lung”, the Tianfu Greenway network as its vibrant “green vein”, the Huancheng Ecological Zone as a “green ring”, and the Jinjiang Park as an urban high-quality “green axis”. To further enrich its urban landscape, Chengdu has launched the “Hundred-Flowers Beautifying the City” action plan. It has also implemented the “Thousand-Parks Integrated into the City” action plan to expand nature reserves and coordinate park development, creating spaces for citizens to relax, exercise, and enjoy natural surroundings. In addition, Chengdu has ingeniously woven ecological benefits into the fabric of daily life, creating a vibrant chain of eco-friendly scenes. By launching demonstration routes and an interactive map, the city ensures that these resources are accessible and enrich the lives of its residents. This approach embodies the philosophy that a thriving ecology should be accessible to all residents while improving their quality of life.

Table 3 Comparison of Park Construction Practices in Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu

City	Number of parks	Forest coverage rate	Characteristics of parks
Beijing	1065	44.9%	<p>Prominent cultural characteristics: Parks in Beijing focus on historical and cultural heritage, with many parks linked to significant historical events or cultural celebrities.</p> <p>Comprehensive and diverse functions: Beijing’s parks serve a wide range of purposes. In addition to providing leisure and recreational spaces for residents, some parks also play roles in patriotic education, ecological conservation, science education, and cultural exhibitions, creating a multi-functional experience for visitors.</p>
Shanghai	832	18.8%	<p>Citizen-oriented designs: Shanghai has a relatively large number of pocket parks and rural parks, all of which are open 24 hours a day. Among the 477 urban parks, 335 operate around the clock, fully meeting citizens’ leisure needs at any time of day.</p> <p>Prominent thematic functions: Shanghai adopts a “park+” approach, enhancing each park’s offerings with themes related to art, culture, revolutionary resources, sports, and other areas. This approach enhances the service quality of parks and provides visitors with deeper, more engaging experiences.</p>
Chengdu	1556	59.5%	<p>Transformation of ecological value: Chengdu’s park development focuses on integrating ecological value with urban growth, fostering a harmonious coexistence between human and nature. For example, Tianfu Art Park is surrounded by numerous residential communities and is not far from Happy Valley and major shopping malls. This strategic positioning not only provides a place for residents to relax and have fun, but also closely combines with the functional layout of the city, reflecting the characteristics of a “park city”.</p> <p>Strong artistic and cultural atmosphere: Some parks in Chengdu have distinct artistic and cultural characteristics. For instance, Chengdu East District Music Park is China’s only music-themed interactive experience hub and digital music industry cluster. It combines business offices, performance and exhibition spaces, and music training facilities, reflecting Chengdu’s unique music culture.</p>

Overall, these cities actively embody the concept of “building people’s cities”, striving to improve the quality of the urban ecological environment and provide citizens with more pleasant living environments. Urban parks and greenways in Beijing, wetland ecological spaces in Shanghai, and the Huancheng ecological belt in Chengdu all provide spaces for citizens to relax, exercise and connect with nature, meeting their aspirations for a better quality of life. At the same time, these cities have attached great importance to ecosystem protection and restoration and explored pathways to achieve harmonious coexistence between human and nature. By transforming ecological resources into development advantages, these cities create a positive synergy between economic development and ecological protection.

In terms of creating natural and ecological scenes, each city adopts a unique approach. Beijing adopts a proactive approach to enhancing its park landscapes, leveraging the “swift response to public complaints” mechanism to foster the development of vibrant park settings. When citizens file complaints regarding idle or underutilized spaces, the park management team promptly implements reasonable planning and renovations. For example, abandoned sites have been transformed into leisure squares, gardens, or sports facilities, optimizing the utilization of park spaces. As an international metropolis, Shanghai focuses on the ecological and spatial balance in the development of natural and ecological scenes. It continuously expands green spaces in areas such as “on the ring”, “inside the ring” and in “new towns”. (with “ring” referring to the city’s ring roads.) Its primary greenway network has been largely completed, connecting ecological spaces with residential and production zones, forming a sound ecological pattern and achieving multiple functional goals. Chengdu stands out for its commitment to building itself into a park city where ecological harmony and urban growth coexist. The city emphasizes delivering ecological benefits to its residents, ensuring that they can fully enjoy the fruits of its ecological development. By establishing demonstration routes for new ecologically-beneficial scenarios and implementing other innovative measures, Chengdu ensures that its citizens to directly experience and benefit from the outcomes of its ecological initiatives.

3.4 Social and humanistic scenes: Focusing on the inheritance of urban history and culture

In developing social and humanistic scenes, Beijing actively promotes the protection of its rich historical and cultural heritage. It strengthens the protection and renovation of world cultural heritage sites, such as the Forbidden City and the Great Wall, while also safeguarding traditional residential areas such as hutong and siheyuan, ensuring the continuity of its historical and cultural identity. Beijing is also a leader in advancing cultural and creative sectors. Through supportive policies, the city has cultivated a thriving ecosystem for these dynamic industries. Notable among its efforts is the establishment of cultural and creative industrial parks, such as the renowned 798 Art Zone. This hub has become a magnet for numerous cultural and creative businesses and talents, driving innovation and growth within the sector. It also offers citizens a wide range of cultural consumption options and new employment opportunities.

Shanghai is dedicated to creating high-quality cultural spaces and has built internationally renowned venues, such as Shanghai Museum, Shanghai Grand Theatre, and Shanghai Science and Technology Museum, which enhance the city’s cultural landscape. Meanwhile, the city enriches its cultural offerings by hosting large-scale international events and exhibitions, such as Shanghai International Film Festival, Shanghai Book Fair, and Shanghai Tourism Festival to meet the cultural needs of citizens at different levels.

Drawing from its unique cultural heritage, Chengdu deeply explores and promotes Tianfu culture, including ancient Shu culture, Three Kingdoms culture, and rich poetic traditions, embedding these elements into daily life through cultural events and dedicated venues. At the same time, leveraging its abundant tourism resources and cultural characteristics, Chengdu promotes the deep integration of

culture and tourism. It has crafted distinctive cultural tourism districts, such as the historic Jinli Street and Kuanzhai Alleys, infused with local charm and traditions. Attractions like the Mount Qingcheng-Dujiangyan scenic area and the Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding further elevate Chengdu's cultural influence and its reputation as a premier tourist destination.

Table 4 Number of Cultural Facilities in Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu

City	Museums	Municipal-and district-level public libraries	Theatres	World cultural heritage sites	Cultural industry parks
Beijing	226	20	200	7	450
Shanghai	165	20	130	0	137
Chengdu	160	22	37	1	80

In developing social and humanistic scenes, Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu all focus on the integration of urban renewal with cultural inheritance. By tapping into local historical and cultural resources, these cities create distinctive social and humanistic scenes in various ways, fostering a sense of belonging and happiness among residents.

The three cities adopt distinct approaches to developing social and humanistic scenes. First, each city reflects their unique cultural identities. Beijing leverages its deep historical roots, rich traditional culture, and revolutionary sites to prioritize the preservation and inheritance of historical heritage, reinforcing the city's cultural and political significance as the nation's capital. In addition, its "swift response to public complaints" mechanism plays an important role in creating cultural scenes. Through this mechanism, citizens can voice their desires for cultural activities, such as performances, lectures, and art exhibitions, enabling relevant departments to organize targeted events that cater to the diverse needs of different community groups. For example, if residents express interest in child-friendly cultural activities, cultural departments can collaborate with schools and communities to organize performances at children's theaters or parent-child reading sessions. Similarly, feedback from residents helps shape comprehensive preservation plans for historic districts, ensuring the protection of historical features while enhancing the cultural ambiance and the quality of life in these areas. Shanghai is characterized by its Shanghai-style culture. Being an international cultural metropolis, it focuses on the integration and innovation of Chinese and western cultures, showcasing its charm of a global city. Chengdu capitalizes on its abundant natural and cultural resources, highlights its Tianfu culture and other local traditions, and creates an image of a livable and leisure-oriented city.

Second, these cities vary in their priorities regarding cultural industry development. Beijing excels in cultural and creative industries, with a particular focus on integrating technology with culture. Shanghai adopts an international perspective, leveraging its strength in finance and trade to support cultural development. This strategy has solidified its status as a global cultural hub. Chengdu, by contrast, emphasizes the fusion of culture and tourism, leveraging its tourism resources to enhance and expand its cultural influence.

3.5 Transport and commuting scenes: Focusing on making travel easier for citizens

In developing transport and commuting scenes, Beijing attaches great importance to its rail transit infrastructure. The city boasts an extensive rail network with a total operating mileage of 836 kilometers and 490 stations, including 83 transfer stations. With an average daily ridership exceeding 10 million passengers, rail transit serves as the backbone of Beijing's transportation system. Beijing vigorously promotes the integration of its four rail transit networks. This includes harmonizing station construction with urban planning and coordinating rail services with ground transportation and slow-traffic systems.

Suburban rail development is another priority, with new suburban lines, such as the sub-center line, now operational and increasing service capacity. The comprehensive transportation hub at Beijing's sub-center station is set to become a pivotal anchor for the "Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei on Rails" initiative, facilitating seamless connectivity and regional integration.

Shanghai is dedicated to enhancing the interconnectivity and streamlining the operations of its public transportation network, including subway and bus systems. The city is committed to boosting the efficiency and reach of these services, ensuring that residents can navigate the urban landscape with greater ease and speed. At the same time, Shanghai pays attention to human-centered design and supporting facilities at public transportation stations, elevating passengers' travel experiences. In addition, Shanghai is embracing intelligent transportation technologies, leveraging tools such as big data and artificial intelligence to improve traffic management. By optimizing traffic signal control systems, implementing real-time traffic flow monitoring, and enhancing the precision of its traffic management strategies, the city is effectively alleviating traffic congestion and streamlining commutes. For instance, Shanghai has implemented an intelligent transportation system that prioritizes buses at traffic signals, significantly reducing their wait times at intersections.

Table 5 Development Status of Urban Public Transportation in Beijing and Shanghai

City	Urban road mileage (km)	Rail transit operating mileage (km)	Number of rail transit lines in operation	Number of buses in operation	Number of public transport lines in operation
Beijing	6256	836	27	23385	1285
Shanghai	5965	831	20	17351	1576

In developing commuting scenes, both Beijing and Shanghai view rail transit as a cornerstone of urban commuting. They are promoting the construction of subways and suburban railways to enhance the capacity and operational efficiency of urban transit, addressing the growing needs of citizens. To make travel easier for citizens, optimizing the connection between different transportation modes is a key priority. Both cities have integrated their bus networks with rail transit systems, aiming to streamline the transfer process for citizens. This approach reduces both the time and financial costs of commuting.

However, there are notable distinctions between these two cities. Beijing, with its more centralized urban functions and distinct spatial separation between residential and business areas, focuses on addressing long-distance commuting challenges and optimizing resource allocation and traffic management through advanced technologies. The "swift response to public complaints" mechanism plays a crucial role in this process. For instance, when residents report issues such as inefficient bus routes or inconvenient stop locations, these complaints are promptly addressed. Bus companies can adjust routes and optimize stop locations based on citizens' feedback to improve accessibility, such as providing nearby bus stops for underserved communities. In contrast, Shanghai, as an international metropolis with a more diversified distribution of urban functions, places a significant emphasis on human-centered design and supporting facilities at public transportation stations. This emphasis is reflected in carefully designed station amenities that prioritize the needs and comfort of commuters. As a result, Shanghai offers an enhanced travel experience, with shorter transfer times and greater convenience, setting it apart from other major cities, including Beijing.

4. Practical Principles for Scene Creation in People's Cities

4.1 Guided by the goal of creating a better life

Cities serve as a vessel of human civilization, and improving urban livability is a universally pursued goal (Kloosterman, 2014). Continuous enhancement of public comfort through scene creation is the key to building cities that attract and retain people. International urban studies consistently highlight a strong correlation between the quality of urban amenities and the pace of urban development. Cities offering a higher quality of life and more abundant urban amenities tend to experience faster growth, while those lacking these features often face slower development. Inadequate living conditions and infrastructure can lead to a brain drain, which can further exacerbate the challenges faced by cities with underdeveloped amenities and potentially triggering a cycle of decline (Ullman, 1954). As China's cities shift from rapid growth to high-quality development, with a rising middle-income group and higher per capita income, expectations for an improved quality of life are growing. Placing the creation of a better life at the core of urban scene creation helps meet residents' diverse needs and enhances their quality of life. In addition, developing distinctive and appealing urban scenes, such as historical and cultural blocks, art hubs, and scientific and technological innovation centers, bolsters a city's brand image and competitiveness. These efforts boost the city's reputation, attracting investment, talent, and enterprises, thereby fostering economic growth and social progress. Moreover, effective promotion amplifies a city's global influence and competitiveness by showcasing its unique attributes in the global urban landscape.

4.2 Centered on urban spiritual culture

Urban spiritual culture forms the soul and identity of a city, embodying its historical memory, values, and humanistic spirit. Creating scenes around a city's spiritual culture enhances its quality of life and appeal. These scenes reflect the city's core values, lifestyle, and cultural character, playing a vital role in attracting talent and investment. A strong cultural atmosphere and great development potential make cities more attractive to both individuals and businesses. By placing urban spiritual culture at the heart of scene creation, cities can elevate their appeal, draw in talent and investment, and drive economic growth and social progress.

4.3 Guided by scene creation plans

A comprehensive scene creation plan provides strategic guidance for a city to drive innovation in scene development on a macro scale. To implement large-scale scene creation, city governments must define a clear framework and agenda, specifying where scenes are developed, as well as how they will be created and evaluated. This requires robust top-level design and strong municipal leadership. As innovative urban practices, some new scene creation initiatives may "conflict" with existing policies. Relying on traditional policies to oversee such initiatives could hinder their effectiveness. Through structured scene creation plans, cities can integrate successful experiences and practices from current initiatives into broader urban programs. Identifying successful domains and projects, particularly in emerging areas like arts, culture, sports, and park-based activities—including basketball, dance, and pottery—will be essential to future planning.

4.4 Starting with a project list model

The project list model serves as a crucial mechanism for implementing a city's scene creation plans and also an effective tool for advancing urban development through scene creation. An "urban opportunity list" systematically presents urban development needs in alignment with citizens' aspirations for a better life.

By analyzing and organizing a city's complex needs in areas such as planning, infrastructure, resource allocation, and solution selection, the model produces clear project lists with measurable

objectives. These project-based, index-driven, and list-oriented outlines help the supply side to gain a comprehensive understanding of urban demands. This approach facilitates the efficient allocation of resources, significantly improving the accuracy and effectiveness of scene creation efforts.

4.5 Promoted through public participation

Public participation is indispensable to scene creation. It brings diverse perspectives and creative input, fosters a sense of ownership, and improves the quality and sustainability of each scene. First, public participation provides a wealth of viewpoints and creativity, as people from various ages, professions, and backgrounds contribute their unique experiences and needs. Involving the public in scene creation enriches the process with diverse ideas. Second, engaging the public strengthens their sense of identity and belonging to the created scenes, which enhances community cohesion and supports the long-term success of these scenes. Finally, local residents possess intimate knowledge of their neighborhoods and needs, allowing them to identify issues that professionals might overlook. For example, residents may identify areas susceptible to waterlogging during the rainy season or propose ways to improve underutilized public facilities. Such feedback allows for timely modifications to scene creation plans, enhancing their effectiveness. Thus, successful scene creation depends on active dialogue with residents, listening to their preferences, and incorporating community feedback into planning decisions. Rather than operating under the assumption that "If we build it, people will come," planners should understand what people truly want and evaluate nearby projects.

5. Conclusion

The mechanism of "swift response to public complaints" is an important driving force for scene creation in people's cities. First, this mechanism allows for timely responses to citizens' demands for public services, optimizing public service scenes. For example, when residents report disparities in educational resources, relevant departments can improve fairness and quality in education by adjusting school district boundaries and facilitating teacher mobility. Similarly, in healthcare, citizen complaints about challenges like difficulty in making medical appointments and lengthy registration times can be promptly addressed by deploying additional resources and streamlining administrative procedures. These measures help create a more efficient and accessible medical service scene.

Second, "swift response to public complaints" acts as a vital bridge between residents and community-level governance, improving the harmony of community life scenes. Community issues reported by residents, such as disputes over property management services and conflicts between neighbors, can be solved promptly and effectively through this mechanism. By solving these concerns in a timely manner, this mechanism not only improves the overall community living environment but also fosters stronger neighborly relationships among residents, contributing to a warmer and more cohesive community atmosphere.

Scene creation in people's cities provides a supportive environment for the "swift response to public complaints" mechanism. Developing people's city prioritizes citizen-centered governance and encourages active community involvement. In this context, scene creation cultivates citizens' participatory skills and fosters a sense of shared responsibility for urban development, motivating residents to engage proactively in initiatives like "swift response to public complaints." This active involvement not only expands the pool of insights for addressing complaints but also provides valuable ideas and practical solutions. Moreover, as citizens participate in governance, they gain a deeper understanding

of governmental operations and contribute to problem-solving efforts, which strengthens their sense of connection and increases satisfaction with urban governance.

In summary, pathways for scene creation in people's cities are of great theoretical value and make prominent contributions to urban development. Beijing's "swift response to public complaints" initiative, in particular, offers an innovative approach to scene creation and urban governance within the people's city framework. This mechanism has not only enhanced citizens' awareness and capacity for active participation but also offered new insights into improving the quality of life.

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Campaign-Style Governance and Accelerated Formation of Fundamental Solutions: A Case Study of Beijing's "Theme of the Month" Mechanism

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ABSTRACT: Taking Beijing's "Theme of the Month" mechanism as an example, this paper discusses the role of campaign-style governance in promoting the formation of fundamental solutions. The formation of fundamental solutions is a government decision-making issue, essentially about how the power operation mechanism of campaign-style governance influences decision-making behavior in bureaucratic departments. Bureaucratic governance faces three tensions: the rule-oriented attitude versus the livelihood-oriented nature of issues, ambiguity in the division of labor versus problem complexity, and resource scarcity versus issue urgency. These tensions result in delayed decision-making when addressing frequent common challenges at the municipal level. The "Theme of the Month" campaign-style governance helps achieve top-down political drive, precise demand-driven political input, moderate pressure escalation in political incentives, and holistic organizational restructuring in political integration. Through top-down political leadership, campaign-style governance reshapes bureaucracy from both value and structural perspectives and achieves two-pronged mobilization by combining pressure and support, thereby accelerating the formation of fundamental solutions. The formation of fundamental solutions is a gradual and continuous process—during routine bureaucratic governance, it progresses at a steady pace. In contrast, during campaign-style governance, it accelerates, indicating that the incremental decision-making model is non-uniform in speed.

KEYWORDS: "Theme of the Month"; campaign-style governance; bureaucratic system; government decision-making; long-term governance

1 This paper is a phased achievement of the Beijing Social Science Fund project titled "Demand-Driven Mechanisms in 'Theme of the Month' Problem Solving Governance" (Project No. 23JCB003). Project Leader: Yang Rong, Professor at the School of Sociology, Beijing University of Technology. Main participants in the project: Chen Feng, Vice Dean (in charge of the administrative work) and Professor of the School of Sociology, Beijing University of Technology; An Yongjun, Associate Professor at the School of Sociology, Beijing University of Technology.

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1. Introduction

Temporary and fundamental solutions are two aspects of social governance that are dialectically unified. Compared to temporary solutions, fundamental solutions are more important but challenging to identify. Finding fundamental solutions is key to responding to public needs and enhancing governance effectiveness. Essentially, the search for fundamental solutions is a public decision-making issue where relevant bureaucratic departments identify the underlying causes of governance problems and formulate corresponding policies. Therefore, discussing the formation of fundamental solutions requires studying the government's public decision-making behavior.

In classical rational decision-making theory, rationality is understood as comprehensive rationality, which assumes that decision-makers can identify all possible alternatives for achieving a specific goal and assess the utility of each alternative before selecting the optimal one. However, the theory of bounded rationality soon challenged this notion of comprehensive rationality. Herbert Simon (1989) argued that decision-makers are limited by external conditions and their cognitive abilities, making omniscience and omnipotence impossible during the decision-making process. Based on bounded rationality, Simon proposed the satisficing model, where decision-makers seek satisfactory rather than optimal solutions, selecting the option that satisfies them most within the constraints of their information and computational abilities. However, the satisficing model still operates within the framework of rational decision-making, viewing decision-making as a sensible choice process that distinguishes facts from values, prioritizing science and efficiency.

In contrast, Charles Lindblom (1959), building on his critique of the incremental rational decision model, proposed the incremental decision-making model. He viewed the decision-making process as a gradual process of modification and supplementation based on previous policies, involving bargaining and compromise among various political forces and interest groups. The incremental decision-making model expanded the scope from focusing solely on facts to incorporating values, broadened the range of decision-makers from a single entity to multiple stakeholders, and shifted the focus of policy-making from goals to processes (Shen, 2020), further advancing the study of decision-making models.

It is important to note that in Lindblom's incremental decision-making model, the decision-making process is viewed as gradual accumulation, where quantitative changes eventually lead to qualitative transformations. This is understood as a stable and uniform process. Suppose the formation of fundamental solutions is understood as an incremental process. In that case, it becomes apparent that when the government prioritizes a particular issue and concentrates governance resources on its solution, as in the case of campaign-style governance, the speed at which relevant bureaucratic departments explore fundamental solutions significantly increases. Many long-standing problems can be addressed relatively quickly, indicating that incremental decision-making is not necessarily a process of uniform speed. Building on this observation, this paper argues that the power operation mechanism influences the pace of incremental decision-making. Under different power mechanisms, the speed of incremental progress varies. Under the power mechanism of campaign-style governance, in particular, the formation of fundamental solutions can be accelerated. This suggests that while the incremental decision-making model is continuous, its pace is not uniform.

Campaign-style governance refers to governance actions for special purposes initiated by the government to address specific issues (Zang & Xu, 2014). It is based on the local Party committee's urgent mobilization and structural reorganization of the government's bureaucratic system. Campaign-style governance is a temporary restructuring of the bureaucratic system characterized by its

unconventional nature. In contrast, bureaucratic governance operates under the pressure of routine governance, adhering to regular responsibilities and procedures and following a standardized approach. Campaign-style and bureaucratic governance represent two distinct power mechanisms within the government institution: the former is unconventional, while the latter is routine (Zhou, 2012). Some scholars argue that campaign-style governance reflects informal politics in the policy domain (Dittmer, 1995), with adaptive qualities that help ensure the effectiveness of formal institutions and the stability of organizations (Tsai, 2006). However, from the perspective of governance outcomes, many scholars believe that while campaign-style governance can achieve notable short-term results during the campaign, issues tend to resurface after the campaign ends (Wedeman, 2005). In other words, campaign-style governance is more effective at addressing symptoms than root causes, making it challenging to achieve sustainable governance. The governance measures often lack continuity, and long-term mechanisms are not established or maintained. Recent studies, however, indicate that campaign-style governance can lead to long-term governance. The institutions and mechanisms established during the campaign period can persist into bureaucratic governance and remain effective (Wang, 2018). These studies, however, primarily focus on the persistence of institutions without addressing how decision-makers can identify and implement these long-term, fundamental solutions. Therefore, the central question this paper aims to answer is how campaign-style governance accelerates government decision-making, specifically speeding up the formation of fundamental solutions within a shorter time frame.

This paper adopts a case study approach, using Beijing's "Theme of the Month" mechanism as a practical case for discussion. The research materials were collected from the author's field research on several municipal-level departments in Beijing, including the Beijing Municipal Administration of Government Services and Data Management, the Beijing Municipal Commission of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, and the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, as well as subdistricts, towns and townships in Beijing. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, and a large number of primary policy documents were obtained from relevant departments. In 2021, Beijing established the "Theme of the Month" mechanism, which selects issues for governance based on citizen demands recorded through the previous year's 12345 hotline. These issues are typically those that have been widely and prominently reported by primary-level communities and citizens, have proven difficult to resolve over the long term, and are well-suited for new policy solutions coordinated at the municipal level. The mechanism operates through top-down political leadership, with monthly scheduling and solution-focused supervision. It centers on one theme each month and selects 1-2 specific issues. For each issue, a designated deputy mayor in charge of the field takes overall responsibility, with one department leading the effort and other relevant organizations providing support to proactively promote problem-solving and enhance citizens' satisfaction.

This paper selects the "Theme of the Month" as a typical case for study for two reasons. First is the typicality and innovativeness of the mechanism. Under this mechanism, the governance on those issues, most frequently and commonly raised by citizens, had been carried out for a year, making it a classic example of campaign-style governance. Moreover, the tasks under the "Theme of the Month" are determined through big data analysis of citizen demands, representing an innovative citizen-centered governance mechanism. Since its implementation in 2021, it has been practiced for three years and has achieved notable effects, making it worthy of in-depth exploration. Second, the "Theme of the Month" mechanism meets the research needs. This study examines the accelerating impact of campaign-style governance on generating fundamental solutions. The "Theme of the Month" mobilizes municipal-level departments, which are the key decision-makers in addressing governance issues within the city. Additionally, a distinctive feature of the "Theme of the Month" mechanism

is its emphasis on solving problems at the policy and root levels, making it highly relevant to the research needs of this study.

2. The Limitations of Bureaucracy and the Emergence of High-Frequency Common Issues at the Municipal Level

2.1 The Expression of Citizen Demands and the Emergence of High-Frequency Common Issues at the Municipal Level

A notable feature of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” mechanism is its “one single phone number for all problems,” meaning that all issues within the municipal scope can be reported to the municipal government through the 12345 hotline. This serves as a governance tool that takes the municipality as a unit. Since the municipal government is at a higher level, other government layers lie between it and the primary-level communities. After being filtered through multiple layers, information from the primary level can easily become distorted, hindering the municipal government’s access to firsthand information from the primary level. The “Swift Response to Public Complaints” mechanism achieves direct interaction between citizens and the municipal government, allowing primary-level information to reach the municipal government directly and enabling the municipal government to respond to citizen demands rapidly.

By analyzing annual big data on citizen demands, it is possible to identify those high-frequency common issues with high complaint rates, but low resolution rates and low satisfaction rates, thus improving the agility of municipal governance. The high frequency of these issues indicates a broad impact, while low resolution and satisfaction rates highlight the inadequacy of governance effectiveness. For example, the issue of installing elevators in old buildings was the first among the 17 issues identified under the “Theme of the Month” mechanism for 2022. The core problem is the gap between the residents’ demands and expectations for elevator installations and the government’s actual progress, necessitating further efforts from the government to meet the residents’ needs effectively.

Specifically, high-frequency common issues at the municipal level have the following characteristics: First, they are livelihood-related. These challenges are identified through big data analysis of citizen demands, primarily focusing on urgent and pressing issues closely related to citizens’ daily lives, indicating a solid livelihood attribute. Second, they are complex. The low resolution and satisfaction rates for high-frequency common issues under the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” mechanism are closely related to their inherent complexity, often involving multiple fields or stakeholders. This requires interdepartmental and cross-sectional coordination within the government and collaboration between the government and society, therefore posing a significant test for the government’s governance capabilities. Third, they are urgent. These challenges occur frequently but have low resolution and satisfaction rates, often representing long-standing issues that the government has not yet effectively addressed. The substantial gap between governance outcomes and citizen needs underscores the urgency of addressing these problems.

2.2 The Limitations of Bureaucratic Governance and the Lag in Government Decision-Making

The causes of high-frequency common problems at the municipal level are multifaceted, with one significant reason being the incompatibility between the government’s existing policy decisions and problem-solving efforts, where relevant departments have yet to identify fundamental solutions and fail to achieve effective governance. The lag in government decision-making is not due to the limited decision-

making capacity of government departments but is instead constrained by the inherent limitations of bureaucracy. These limitations are manifested in the following three areas.

2.2.1 The Tension Between Regulatory Orientation and Civic Needs

A typical characteristic of bureaucracy is its adherence to established rules and regulations, which includes two main aspects. First, the responsibilities of each institution are predefined by regulations, and they fulfill their duties within the scope of these responsibilities. Second, each institution operates according to fixed procedures, with its actions constrained by the rules and regulations. The regulatory orientation is a significant source of the bureaucratic system's technical superiority, facilitating efficient governance of stable and repetitive routine issues. However, this regulatory orientation can also lead to rigidity within the bureaucracy, turning officials into bureaucrats who mechanically follow the rules. This rigid adherence can sometimes exceed technical requirements, effectively transforming "instrumental values into ultimate values." (Merton, 1952)

Chinese government officials are not politically indifferent; instead, they uphold the "people-centered" political philosophy integrated into their daily work. Officials are expected to be both "red and expert," meaning they must actively implement the "people-centered" governance philosophy while possessing professional knowledge and technical expertise. This expectation of political initiative helps, to some extent, mitigate the rigidity of bureaucracy. However, the regulatory orientation of bureaucracy can cause officials at all levels to fall into routine governance practices, neglecting timely identification and response to civic needs. This is particularly true for livelihood issues closely tied to the well-being of the people, where sensitivity to such demands diminishes, and political initiative is insufficiently mobilized. The frequent common challenges reflected in citizen demands are typically livelihood-related, presenting significant governance challenges. Adhering to existing approaches often yields limited results, and innovative governance strategies are needed. Yet, the government tends to respond and govern according to bureaucratic procedures. Without strong political leadership, government officials lack the motivation to break through routine procedures and pursue innovative solutions.

2.2.2 The Tension Between Ambiguity in the Division of Labor and Problem Complexity

Existing research has highlighted the tension between bureaucratic division of labor and cross-boundary issues (Li & Yang, 2023). However, overemphasizing the division of labor in bureaucratic systems can overlook their integrative function. Bureaucracy is a rational governance structure with horizontal division of labor and vertical integration, allowing for comprehensive governance of most issues. However, the division of responsibilities within the bureaucracy is often based on a rational generalization of stable, repetitive routine tasks while the social environment constantly evolves. Government governance frequently encounters new and emerging issues. In an attempt to make the division of labor as adaptable as possible, bureaucratic divisions are often vague, lacking specific scenario-based definitions of responsibilities.

Frequent common challenges at the municipal level, on the other hand, are often complex, spanning multiple fields and requiring coordinated governance across several departments and systemic governance across multiple levels. This complexity demands more refined divisions of responsibilities. However, the gap between the vagueness of the bureaucratic division of responsibility and the refined governance requirements for solving complex problems often leads to buck-passing and blame-shifting between departments, preventing the government from forming a cohesive governance effort. For instance, the post-conversion operation management of coal-to-clean energy is a task added as part of air quality control initiatives. It involves multiple departments, such as the Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, the Finance Bureau, the Development and Reform Commission, and the Commission of Urban Management. Since it is a new task, the existing division of responsibilities does not specify the roles of

each department. It is necessary for each department to form a stable division of responsibilities around the new task.

2.2.3 The Tension Between Resource Scarcity and Problem Urgency

Limited by tax-bearing capacity, the scale of bureaucratic organizations that any society can bear is inevitably limited. Moreover, a larger bureaucratic organization does not necessarily result in higher governance efficiency. Due to internal organizational inefficiencies inherent in bureaucratic systems, the size of bureaucratic organizations should be constrained within certain limits. Over-bureaucratization can lead to excessive red tape, bloated institutions, and inefficiencies, such as officials shirking their duties. Therefore, the organizational scale of bureaucracy is inherently limited, as are the administrative resources it can provide. The Chinese government has broader functions and, under the political concept of being “people-centered,” it has a greater pursuit of governance efficiency, making the scarcity of resources within its bureaucratic system even more pronounced.

With the constraint of resource scarcity, the government must consider the cost factor when addressing various issues, and the limited governance resources must be optimally allocated with a “people-centered” approach. In bureaucratic governance, the effectiveness of governance is constrained by the cost factor, and the available administrative resources are limited. However, high-frequency and common issues at the municipal level are demands closely related to people’s livelihood and are more urgent governance issues. There is a certain tension between the scarcity of resources and the urgency of these problems.

3. The Top-Down Political Drive of the “Theme of the Month” Campaign-Style Governance

A defining feature of campaign-style governance is its top-down political drive, meaning implementation politically driven from the top. Under the “Theme of the Month” mechanism, governance issues are elevated from departmental tasks to central concerns of municipal leaders. The elevation of the governance level showcases a top-down political drive, where the higher the governance level, the more effective the leadership of the Party, and the more pronounced the political nature of this top-down drive. Moreover, the “Theme of the Month” represents a mechanism-based innovation guided by the Party leadership, directly overseen and coordinated by the Municipal Party Committee. This gives it a distinctly political character, hence its top-down political drive. Within the “Theme of the Month” mechanism, the principal leaders of the Municipal Party Committee hold monthly meetings specifically focused on the “Swift Response to Public Complaints,” during which they receive reports on the overall situation of the “Theme of the Month” and the progress of specific issues of the month. Other leaders, such as the main leaders of the Municipal Government, the municipal leaders in charge, and the leaders of the special task force of the Municipal Committee for Comprehensive Reform on “Swift Response to Public Complaints,” also conduct regular and ad hoc coordination, ensuring that the principal responsibilities of municipal departments are enforced through top-down coordination. Under this top-down political drive, the task environment and organizational structure of municipal departments change significantly, and their task pressure increases notably. Additionally, the organizational structure between departments and lower-level governments has been restructured to enhance collaboration and accountability.

3.1 Political Input: Precisely Fulfilling Public Demands

The issues for the “Theme of the Month” are selected by the special task force office of the Municipal Committee for Comprehensive Reform on “Swift Response to Public Complaints,” (hereinafter referred to as the Special Task Force Office), focusing primarily on issues with a high rate

of citizen demands and low rate of fulfillment. While the number of citizen demands is an essential indicator for selection, whether an issue is ultimately included depends on scientific analysis. Firstly, the "Theme of the Month" is a proactive governance mechanism designed by the municipal government for top-down systemic governance. It focuses on solving issues that require reform and innovative measures at the municipal level, which means problems that need to be solved through top-level design at the municipal level. Issues related to primary-level implementation or enforcement are generally not included in the "Theme of the Month" selection range. Secondly, selecting the "Theme of the Month" issues requires thorough communication and consultation with the city-level departments, fully considering and incorporating their professional opinions to ensure that issues within the scope of government responsibility and departmental capability are included. Based on these considerations, in 2021, the "Theme of the Month" selected 27 specific issues, such as difficulties obtaining property certificates, wage arrears, and refunding prepaid consumption. Over 600 tasks were completed throughout the year, and over 110 policies and regulations were introduced. In 2022, the "Theme of the Month" focused on 17 specific issues, including installing elevators in old buildings, constructing centralized charging facilities for electric bicycles in residential areas, and addressing insufficient centralized heating, with over 400 tasks completed and more than 100 policies and regulations introduced. In 2023, 18 issues were selected for campaign-style governance, such as regulating property fees, rural road management, water supply assurance, power supply assurance, and unblocked fire evacuation routes. In 2024, the focus was on 13 issues, including paid staggered sharing of public parking resources around communities, comprehensive traffic management around school campuses, and travel agency management.

Problem-oriented governance is the objective of the "Theme of the Month" campaign-style governance, and its input has a distinctively political nature. This is because the governance goals of the "Theme of the Month" come from citizen demands, which clearly reflects the "people-centered" political philosophy. It is a campaign-style governance driven by citizen demands and achieves a close connection between government governance and citizen needs. Moreover, the issues selected for the "Theme of the Month" have a "small incision" feature, meaning that they are highly focused on the issues of greatest concern to the residents and where governance effectiveness has been the poorest. This approach directly targets the pain points of resident concerns and significantly improves the responsiveness of the "Theme of the Month" governance.

Furthermore, some issues are continuously included in the "Theme of the Month" for ongoing governance. Based on the problems identified and revealed in the previous year's governance, the focus is further refined in the following year. For example, in 2021, the "Theme of the Month" included the "Rural Infrastructure Issues," which covered various aspects such as roads, sewage, street lighting, and public toilet renovations. After a year of governance, it was found necessary to further focus on the "small incision" issues of rural infrastructure. Consequently, the "Theme of the Month" in 2022 focused on "Rural Sewage Management." After an effective mechanism has been formed for rural sewage management, the focus in 2023 was put on "Rural Road Management," achieving truly precise governance with a "small incision" approach.

3.2 Political Incentives: Moderate Pressure Escalation

To enhance the governance effectiveness of municipal-level departments, Beijing has established a "Theme of the Month" incentive mechanism. For instance, the main responsible department and some cooperating departments can receive additional points in the annual assessment of "Swift Response to Public Complaints." Moreover, the Municipal Commission for Discipline Inspection and the Supervision Commission have established a comprehensive disciplinary accountability mechanism for "Theme of the Month." The Municipal Administration of Government Services and Data Management, in coordination with the Municipal

Party Committee and the Municipal Government Supervision Office, has set up a joint daily supervision and key inspection mechanism to conduct routine oversight of the “Theme of the Month.”

Although the pressure on municipal departments has significantly increased, it remains moderate, as reflected in the mechanism’s dual focus on immediate and long-term solutions. The “Theme of the Month” mechanism requires each main responsible department to submit a “One Solution, Three Lists” at the beginning of the year. This requirement includes a problem solution, a responsibility list, a task list, and a policy list, which outline the annual governance plan and ensure that the task objectives set at the beginning of the year are completed by the end of the year. The “One Solution, Three Lists” focuses on finding effective solutions to high-frequency and common problems. The mechanism aims to elevate citizens’ satisfaction rates by establishing and implementing effective solutions. It serves as a governance approach that addresses both symptoms and root causes. Municipal departments can take the long view and deal with the root cause of the problems partially due to the positive incentive of “Theme of the Month,” which allows them to integrate short-term task objectives into long-term governance plans.

3.3 Political Integration: Holistic Organizational Restructuring

Guided by problem-oriented governance and facilitated through top-down integrative efforts, a coordinated mechanism can be established among different departments and levels of government to achieve holistic organizational restructuring. A single municipal department is identified to lead on a specific issue, with related units coordinating and districts implementing the measures, forming a three-tier coordination mechanism involving the municipal, district, and subdistrict (town or township) levels to ensure implementation collectively. To strengthen collaboration between departments and between departments and district-level governments, the main responsible municipal departments are granted the authority to apply for bonus points for the cooperating departments and district governments. Such bonus points have a significant role in motivating cooperation from other departments and district governments. Additionally, the “Theme of the Month” mechanism is linked with the “Governance-Oriented Subdistrict and Township” mechanism to achieve vertical and horizontal integration and coordination.

On the one hand, governance-oriented subdistricts, towns and townships are prioritized as areas for transforming the outcomes of the “Theme of the Month” work. Special policy training sessions on issues like the construction management and maintenance of urban green space, and the replacement of coal-to-clean energy equipment in rural areas, including policy interpretation, Q&A sessions, and demonstrations of best practices, have been widely welcomed by frontline primary-level personnel. On the other hand, in coordination with the Municipal Office for Special Task Force on “Streamlining, Rectifying, and Promoting Enhancement,” a representative mechanism is established to regularly gather opinions and suggestions from governance-oriented subdistricts, towns and townships for the “Theme of the Month,” to prompt municipal departments to undertake systematic governance.

4. Top-Down Political Drive and Accelerated Formation of Fundamental Solutions

4.1 Top-Down Political Drive, Bureaucratic Restructuring, and Accelerated Formation of Fundamental Solutions

The “Theme of the Month” mechanism can reshape the bureaucratic system through a top-down political drive, overcoming the incompatibility between the bureaucracy and the governance issues. This restructuring of the bureaucracy accelerates the formation of fundamental solutions. The reshaping of the bureaucratic system under the “Theme of the Month” mechanism is primarily reflected in two aspects:

first, the strengthening of value orientation, which involves reinforcing the “people-centered” political ideology at all levels through campaign-style governance and consciously implementing this ideology in daily governance; second, the adjustment of governance structure, which entails modifying the division of responsibilities within the bureaucratic system to align them with governance issues.

First is the strengthening of value orientation within the bureaucratic organization. As mentioned earlier, under the rule-oriented operation of bureaucracy, officials can easily become rule-following bureaucrats who lose political sensitivity to the needs of the people, resulting in a disconnection between political commitment and expertise. In this context, enhancing the “people-centered” value orientation among the government staff is a crucial aspect of improving the operational efficiency of the bureaucratic system. The issues addressed by the “Theme of the Month” are urgent appeals made by the citizens, without any filtering or processing by intermediate government levels. They directly reflect the “people-centered” political ideology and embody a vivid sense of concern for the people.

Moreover, the enhancement of political incentives increases the governance pressure on municipal departments, compelling them to place greater emphasis on the “Theme of the Month” governance tasks and to concentrate their resources and wisdom on tackling these challenging issues. To better accomplish governance tasks, departments at all levels must closely align their governance efforts with citizen demands. One municipal department official noted, “Citizen demands are not something you can control. You can make grand statements, but if the problems are not solved, citizens will keep calling.” To achieve citizen satisfaction, municipal departments must develop scientifically sound and effective policy measures based on a close connection with the people. For instance, a detailed analysis of citizen demands is first required when formulating governance plans and introducing relevant policies. Additionally, to better understand the underlying issues behind these demands, field research is frequently conducted at the primary level to understand the practical conditions, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of problem-solving.

The “Theme of the Month” clearly embodies the “people-centered” value orientation. The “Theme of the Month” governance can be understood as a contextual value education. Integrating value orientation into the problem-solving process enables the officials to gain a more contextualized understanding and appreciation of the abstract value. This helps to ingrain the value orientation into their consciousness, thereby strengthening the value orientation of the bureaucratic operations. In field research, several municipal departments reported that, at the initial stages of being included in the “Theme of the Month,” they felt significant pressure due to the frequent scheduling of the city, and they had some resistance to the initiative. However, as the mechanism continued, they began to see the effectiveness of focusing governance efforts closely on the citizens’ demands. Consequently, their governance philosophy also changed, and close engagement with the community became routine. They began to proactively anticipate potential citizen demands and implement policies in advance to prevent issues, effectively achieving proactive governance by addressing problems even before complaints were filed.

Secondly, there is an adjustment of the structure of bureaucratic organizations. Bureaucracy is a rationally designed organization that aims to maximize overall governance efficiency through the division of responsibility and mutual cooperation. However, as previously mentioned, due to the limitations of human cognitive capacity, the division of work within bureaucracy cannot fully align with the complexities of society. Therefore, the structure of bureaucracy should be adaptively adjusted according to the needs of governance. An important innovation in the “Theme of the Month” governance is clarifying the responsibilities of the bureaucratic organization based on the context of problem solving and formalizing these responsibilities into the routine duties of the bureaucratic organization. The main responsible municipal department delineates the responsibilities of municipal, district, and subdistrict/township departments involved in the problem-solving process across different scenarios. Then, the Office

of Organizational Setup Committee of the Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China and the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” Special Task Force Office jointly issue the “Swift Response to Public Complaints ‘Theme of the Month’ Special Task List,” which clearly defines the responsibilities of each department in the problem-solving process. By the end of September 2024, four batches of special task lists have been issued, covering over 50 issues and more than 700 responsibilities of municipal and district-level departments, as well as subdistricts, towns, and townships. The special task list emphasizes precise governance, with each issue further divided according to different types of issues or work processes, forming a collaborative governance framework at the city, district, and subdistrict levels based on a clear division of responsibility.

4.2 Top-Down Political Drive, Two-Pronged Mobilization, and Accelerated Formation of Fundamental Solutions

The top-down political drive of the “Theme of the Month” enables the high-ranking leadership to conduct two-pronged bureaucratic organization mobilization, including pressure-driven and support-driven mobilization. First, pressure-driven mobilization involves the assessment mechanism and leadership’s attention associated with the “Theme of the Month” places significant pressure on the municipal departments. Although the “Theme of the Month” mechanism focuses on 1-2 issues each month, all issues must be deployed and advanced simultaneously. The main responsible municipal departments must submit work progress reports to the Special Task Force Office each month, and the senior leaders, as well as leaders in charge conduct frequent regular and irregular inspections. This leadership attention creates substantial pressure on the municipal departments. Second, support-driven mobilization means that the “Theme of the Month” is a top-down pressure transmission and a bottom-up process of reporting problems and seeking leadership support. It serves as a platform for problem-solving. With high-ranking leaders’ coordination, the efforts of different departments can be concentrated and help the main responsible municipal departments overcome practical difficulties.

Under two-pronged mobilization, the governance initiative of municipal departments has significantly improved. They are prompted to confront challenges head-on, take proactive responsibilities, and break through conventional practices with innovative measures. This external push enables important breakthroughs in problem-solving, bringing about more effective formation of fundamental solutions. For example, in resolving the issue of “elevator installation in old buildings,” a key innovation in Beijing was the introduction of the first “elevator installation map” in the country. Through comprehensive surveys, the city detailed the technical conditions for installing elevators in all old residential communities, marking whether each location is suitable for elevator installation on the map.

Moreover, residents can apply online for elevator installation with a single click. Residential units that meet the installation criteria and have over two-thirds of residents’ agreement, as indicated on the “elevator installation map,” are given priority in the installation plan. Since the creation of the “elevator installation map” requires a comprehensive survey of all residential units across the city to assess the conditions for elevator installation, it is a task involving a substantial amount of work. Under typical circumstances, municipal departments would find it challenging to mobilize primary-level communities to complete this task solely with their own departmental resources. However, within the framework of the “Theme of the Month” mechanism, with the support of municipal leadership, this initiative received strong backing from the primary level and was successfully carried out. This effort laid the informational groundwork for subsequent elevator installation projects and created conditions for the government to channel the residents’ expectations regarding elevator installations. In resolving the issue of “post-conversion management of coal-to-clean energy,” the municipal leaders conducted several special investigations to address the situation where the replacement funds for coal-to-gas heating

equipment were high, and the income of rural residents was relatively low. They coordinated with financial institutions to provide interest-free loans to villagers, thereby addressing a major challenge when replacing clean heating equipment.

4.3 Accelerated Formation of Fundamental Solutions and Its Progressive Transition

With the "Theme of the Month" mechanism and the mobilization of the top-down political leadership, the bureaucratic organization in which the departments operate has been reshaped in both value orientation and structure, creating organizational conditions for rational decision-making. At the same time, more considerable governance pressure provides external motivation for rational decision-making. These two factors work together to improve the decision-making efficiency in the departments and accelerate the formation of fundamental solutions. As a result, significant progress has been made in addressing various issues, and a set of governance measures to address the root causes of problems has been established.

First, reform and innovative measures were introduced to address complex issues. For instance, to tackle the problem of difficulties in obtaining property certificates, the Municipal Commission of Planning and Natural Resources proposed the governance principles of "respect history, prioritize no-fault appliers, and hold violators accountable," thus establishing a sound working mechanism and forming a "1+10+N" policy framework, which provided strong policy support for resolving historical real estate registration issues. Second, enhanced service regulation was implemented for new industries and new fields. For example, in response to disputes related to online consumption, the Municipal Administration for Market Regulation formulated and refined the "Responsibility List for E-Commerce Operators," strengthening guidance and regulation for platform enterprises. Third, proactive measures were promoted to address seasonal, cyclical, and regular issues through preventive measures. For instance, to solve the problem of insufficient centralized heating, the Municipal Commission of Urban Management conducted in-depth research on the "case bank" for the heating season. It developed a "prescription list" for governance work, identifying over 600 projects for "off-season treatment for winter problems." To address the issue of road waterlogging, the Municipal Water Authority compiled emergency drainage plans for key locations such as sunken bridge areas and waterlogging patches and released a city flood risk map. Fourth, for matters concerning "community interests," the government promoted a model of joint development and governance led by the government. For instance, to tackle the problem of blocked sewage pipes in residential buildings, the Municipal Housing and Urban-Rural Development Commission established a repair mechanism under the leadership of community-based Party organizations, where homeowners take primary responsibility, users, managers, and professional service units each fulfill their duties, neighbors engage in friendly consultations, and social forces collaborate. Fifth, data and technological empowerment have been strengthened. The Municipal Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Affairs developed the "Winter Clean Heating Assistant" app, which operates 24/7 to relay farmers' heating requests collected through the 12345 hotline, ensuring that average heating repair requests are completed within four hours. The Municipal Bureau of Coordinated Administrative Law Enforcement for Urban Management implemented remote, non-site video inspections to enhance the efficiency of law enforcement against street vendors. The Municipal Traffic Management Bureau promoted multi-scenario applications of intelligent signal networks and optimized traffic signal timing to improve traffic flow efficiency. The Municipal Bureau of Sports enhanced its regulatory functions by innovatively launching "one-click repair" and inspection services, effectively resolving issues related to the inefficient reporting and untimely repair of outdoor fitness facilities.

It is important to note that forming fundamental solutions is a gradual and continuous process; however, this process is not uniform in speed. Rather, it is accelerated due to the campaign-style governance efforts, which indicates that the incremental decision-making model operates at a non-uniform pace. First, during the routine governance phase preceding the "Theme of the Month" campaign-

style governance, even though the government decisions lagged behind citizen demands, it does not mean that the departments were completely inactive. Although many policies introduced during this phase did not fundamentally resolve the issues, they still had certain effects. It was also a process of problem identification and policy experimentation, thereby laying the groundwork for finding fundamental solutions. Second, during the “Theme of the Month” campaign-style governance phase, the limitations of bureaucratic governance were overcome under top-down political leadership, accelerating the formation of fundamental solutions and achieving significant breakthroughs in problem-solving. However, campaign-style governance under “Theme of the Month” cannot resolve all issues; many problems can only be resolved with further maturity of the conditions. Moreover, the issues themselves evolve, meaning that fundamental solutions must dynamically develop as well. This suggests that while campaign-style governance can accelerate the formation of fundamental solutions, it cannot conclude this process. After campaign-style governance ends, problem-solving reverts to bureaucratic governance, where departments must continue to dynamically explore fundamental solutions.

Finally, even after the issues cease to be “Theme of the Month,” a long-lasting foundation for the continued formation of fundamental solutions has been established since the bureaucracy has been reshaped under campaign-style governance and has its incompatibility corrected. Even after the “Theme of the Month” concludes, municipal departments continue to prioritize these issues, closely monitoring developments and adapting governance measures accordingly. This demonstrates that campaign-style governance is not a process that disrupts bureaucratic operations but rather one that corrects and accelerates them. The relationship between campaign-style and bureaucratic governance is not necessarily cyclical; rather, they are interconnected in a continuous governance process, reflected in the ongoing pursuit of fundamental solutions.

5. Conclusions

This paper uses Beijing’s “Theme of the Month” mechanism as a case study to explore how campaign-style governance promotes the formation of fundamental solutions. In this context, fundamental solutions refer to the effective governance plans proposed by bureaucratic organizations to address specific problems, essentially the construction of long-term mechanisms. Bureaucratic governance, due to its inherent limitations, delays the formation of fundamental solutions, making it difficult to effectively respond to citizens’ demands and resulting in high-frequency common challenges at the municipal level. Specifically, the limitations of bureaucratic governance in government decision-making are reflected in three areas: the tension between rule-oriented procedures and livelihood-centered issues, the ambiguity in the division of labor and the complexity of problems, and the tension between resource scarcity and the urgency of issues. The “Theme of the Month” campaign-style governance is characterized by a top-down political drive. In terms of political input, it enables a precise demand-driven governance model. In terms of political incentives, it creates moderate pressure escalation, and in terms of political integration, it leads to holistic organizational restructuring. These features effectively overcome the limitations of bureaucratic governance and accelerate the formation of fundamental solutions. First, the reshaping of bureaucracy accelerates the formation of fundamental solutions, which include strengthening the “people-centered” value orientation and refining and consolidating the division of responsibilities to better align bureaucracy with governance problems. Second, two-pronged mobilization—both pressure and support-driven—further accelerates the formation of fundamental solutions.

Forming fundamental solutions is a gradual process, with each stage building on the previous one. During the bureaucratic governance phase preceding the "Theme of the Month" campaign-style governance, the formation of fundamental solutions progressed. Still, it laid the groundwork for the campaign-style governance phase. During the "Theme of the Month" phase, the formation of fundamental solutions was accelerated, and after the campaign-style governance period ended, the process returned to bureaucratic governance. However, the bureaucratic restructuring that occurred during the campaign-style governance phase facilitated the continued formation of fundamental solutions in the new bureaucratic structure. This shows that incremental decision-making is not a uniform process of gradual accumulation but a non-uniform process in which bureaucratic governance and campaign-style governance alternate, with phases of steady progress interspersed with periods of acceleration.

The innovation of this paper lies in two key aspects. First, it analyzes the role of campaign-style governance in promoting the formation of fundamental solutions, demonstrating that campaign-style governance has long-term effects. Although campaign-style governance is short-term in nature, it takes the long view and takes advantage of the immediate challenges to push for the formation of fundamental solutions. These solutions themselves have long-term effects as they consist of routine policy measures that continue after the campaign-style governance period ends, thus giving campaign-style governance a lasting impact. Second, the paper emphasizes the influence of power operation mechanisms on bureaucratic decision-making behavior, highlighting the non-uniform nature of the incremental decision-making model. Due to the complexity of governance issues, forming fundamental solutions is a long-term incremental process, but this process is not uniform. It proceeds steadily during bureaucratic governance but accelerates during campaign-style governance, demonstrating that campaign-style governance does not disrupt the formation of fundamental solutions but rather speeds up the process.

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A Grounded Theory Research on the Agile Governance System of “Swift Response to Public Complaints” at the Grassroots Level—A Practical Model of the Process of Issues Submitted to Higher-level Government Departments and Assessed by the Public in Pinggu District of Beijing

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ABSTRACT: The grassroots governance reform of “Swift Response to Public Complaints” in Beijing has achieved remarkable results in practice, reflecting the characteristics and innovation of China’s grassroots governance. It is urgent for the academic community to extract basic laws from the successful experience of this reform and construct a corresponding theoretical framework, with the aim of guiding the practice of grassroots governance in other regions. Based on the perspective of Western Agile Governance Theory, this study adopts the grounded theory research method to construct the theoretical framework of China’s grassroots agile governance system by analyzing the case concerning the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public in Pinggu District, aiming to build a theoretical framework for China’s grassroots agile governance system. The theoretical

¹ This paper is the phased research outcomes of the Beijing Social Science Foundation planning project “Research on the Paths of Party Building Leading the whole process of People’s Democracy Realization of Swift Response to Public Complaints Reform” (No: 23GLA001). Project principal: Chen Zhenjiao, Professor (Ph.D supervisor), School of Information Technology & Management, University of International Business and Economics. Core team members of the project: Chen Donghua, Associate Professor, School of Information Technology & Management, University of International Business and Economics; Yuan Shi, Assistant Professor, School of Information Technology & Management, University of International Business and Economics; Kong Xiangwen, Associate Professor, School of Law, University of International Business and Economics; Hou Xiaoying is a postgraduate student at the School of Information Technology & Management, University of International Business and Economics.

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framework presents the constituent elements, the interrelationship between the elements and institutional causes behind the agile grassroots governance system of “Swift Response to Public Complaints.” It also describes the reform’s localized experience in realizing people’s democracy in the whole process of grassroots governance guided by Party building. This study aims to provide useful references for other countries and regions in the mutual learning of global grassroots governance reform experience, and enrich the theory of grassroots governance in the field of international public administration.

KEYWORDS: “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform; grassroots agile governance; grounded theory; value agility; process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public

1. Introduction

The *Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives through the Year 2035*, formulated by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), explicitly put forward the goal of “significantly improving social governance, especially at the grassroots level.” Furthermore, it emphasized the necessity of shifting the focus of social governance down to the grassroots level. Subsequently, the 20th CPC National Congress further emphasized the necessity of enhancing the social governance system based on collaboration, participation and shared benefits, with the objective of enhancing the efficacy of social governance. In this context, the modernization of grassroots governance has become a pivotal issue in national and social governance.

The reform of “Swift Response to Public Complaints” in Beijing reflects the characteristics of grassroots governance in China. The primary objective is to establish a prompt response mechanism to address the public’s concerns through the 12345 hotline. By directing the masses’ demands directly to the streets and towns, and utilizing the response rate, resolution rate, and satisfaction rate as assessment indicators, Party committees and governments at all levels have been encouraged to respond promptly, address issues expeditiously, and provide prompt feedback to the masses’ demands. This reform demonstrated that social governance should be guided by the needs and expectations of the general public. The people raise governance issues, participate in the governance process, supervise the governance situation, and judge the effectiveness of governance. This reflects the logic of the whole process of people’s democracy. Despite notable successes, the program continues to encounter novel challenges. A review of statistical data indicates that, one year after the implementation of the *Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints*, the 12345 hotline experienced a significant increase in the volume of complaints from the general public, resulting in an overload of the system.

This illustrates the discrepancy between the hotline’s capacity to receive complaints and the public’s demand for such a service. Furthermore, the utilization of the 12345 hotline has led to an increase in the governance of the grassroots (township and town) area by the higher-level (city and district) government. However, this approach has occasionally resulted in higher-level governments assuming the role of the original active governance of the grassroots government, which has subsequently impacted the overall efficiency of grassroots governance. Consequently, the key challenge is to facilitate the transition from a reactive to a proactive approach to public complaints in Beijing. This entails moving beyond a reliance on public complaints to initiate action, towards a proactive stance that addresses issues before they arise. This represents a pivotal aspect of the ongoing reform of Beijing’s grassroots governance (Chen, 2023).

In 2021, the Beijing government released the *Guiding Opinions on Taking Proactive Measures to Address Complaints Before They Are Raised*. At present, Beijing is in the transition phase from “Swift

Response to Public Complaints” to proactive governance, forming a new governance system. This system is defined by the leadership of the CPC, with proactive governance as its core principle, the rule of law as a foundational guarantee, collaborative governance as its pathway, and science and technology serving as the essential support (Wang & Zhang, 2022). In the process of transformation, relying on the support of big data technology, grassroots government leaders can change from passive response to public complaints to active discovery of problems. The “Swift Response to Public Complaints” practice has amassed a wealth of big data on public complaints and regional issues, so that proactive governance can predict problems in advance by analyzing these data and information.

Nevertheless, it is insufficient to enhance the efficacy of grassroots governance by solely relying on government departments. The complexity and diversity of social governance require broad participation and collaborative efforts from the public and various social forces. Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee, has stressed the concept of “collaboration, participation and shared benefits,” highlighting the importance of fostering positive interactions among the government, society and the masses to jointly build a community of social governance (Li & Sun, 2022). This approach has effectively solved the problems of decentralization and flatness in the past grassroots social governance. Currently, in the reform of Beijing’s “Swift Response to Public Complaints” grassroots governance, local governments are actively exploring and practicing a multi-actor co-governance approach. This approach embodies the principle of whole-process people’s democracy and reflects the ideals of collaboration, participation and shared benefits in grassroots governance. Furthermore, it effectively stimulates social vitality and enhances the capacity for self-governance among residents (Li, 2023).

In the three years from 2019 to 2021, the number of public complaints in Pinggu District of Beijing continued to grow rapidly. Pinggu District is known as the birthplace of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform. A number of issues have been identified, including historical disputes that have resulted in numerous complaints and concerns about the openness and credibility of village management. In order to address these problems and challenges, Pinggu District has innovatively adopted the working approach concerning the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public since 2021. This approach emphasizes the joint participation of citizens and other stakeholders in grassroots governance under the leadership of the CPC. It has formed a working method of “civil affairs handled by the people, civil affairs mediated by the people, civil affairs reflected by the people, and civil affairs evaluated by the people.” One year later, 84% (269) of the villages in Pinggu district adopted this approach. The process of issues forwarded to higher-level government departments and evaluated by the public successfully reduced the proportion of complaints per 10, 000 people. Specifically, there was a nearly 10% decrease. For instance, the monthly average dropped from 224.24 cases per 10, 000 people between January and July 2021 to 199.85 cases per 10, 000 people from August 2021 to September 2022 (Chen, 2024).

This representative case deserves further study. This research conducted an empirical investigation of this case through semi-structured interviews and relevant secondary data collected. Based on the agile governance perspective and the grounded theory method, the survey data were analyzed. Moreover, the concept, process, organizational structure, mode and operation mechanism of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” grassroots governance reform in this case were refined. On this basis, the theoretical framework of the grassroots agile governance system was constructed. The theoretical framework clarified the constituent elements of the governance system, the relationship between the elements, and the innovation of the governance system. It also discussed the impact of Chinese indigenous institutions and cultures on the construction and operation of the grassroots agile governance system.

2. Literature review and theoretical background

The initiative of “Swift Response to Public Complaints” refers to the grassroots governance reform led by the CPC. It mainly builds the rapid response mechanism to meet the masses’ demands through the 12345 hotline. By sending the masses’ demands directly to the streets and towns, and taking the response rate, resolution rate and satisfaction rate as evaluation indicators, Party committees and governments at all levels have been encouraged to respond quickly, handle quickly, and give quick feedback to the masses’ demands. This reform has emphasized that social governance should be driven by the demands of the masses. The people raise governance issues, participate in the governance process, monitor the governance situation, and judge the effectiveness of governance, thus reflecting the logic of the whole process of people’s democracy (Chinese academy of social sciences research group, 2023).

From “Quick Response to Community Calls” to “Swift Response to Public Complaints” and then to “proactive governance,” the reform of “Swift Response to Public Complaints” has gone through three stages. Many scholars have conducted theoretical and empirical research on the reform of “Swift Response to Public Complaints” in Beijing.

First, some scholars explore the theoretical basis of “Swift Response to Public Complaints.” For example, Li (2021) summarized seven theories that can be used as the theoretical basis of “Swift Response to Public Complaints,” including cooperative production theory, cooperative governance theory, public value theory, discourse institutionalism theory, policy analysis theory and holistic government theory. A related study also explores the design principle of “Swift Response to Public Complaints” from the perspective of governance experiments (Li, 2021). Second, some scholars examine the innovation of the grassroots governance model, mainly focusing on multiple participation mechanisms. For example, some scholars think that an important reason for the predicament of grassroots governance is the lack of public participation, and multiple subjects such as the masses should be guided to participate in governance (Ma, Jin, & Meng, 2020). Some scholars believe that “government crowdsourcing” is also a way to guide the masses to participate in co-governance. Using digital platforms to empower public wisdom can build a friendly interaction between the government and the people (Liu & Lai, 2022). Some scholars propose that it is necessary to continuously encourage the cooperation of multiple subjects, form joint forces through the complementary advantages of resources, and promote the effectiveness of social governance (Li & Sun, 2022). Some scholars believe that the “market + government” governance model may crowd out social preferences, and suggest community governance to compensate (Wang, 2020). Third, there are some empirical studies to test the effect of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform. For example, the empirical study of Zhao (2021) found that the reform of “Swift Response to Public Complaints” significantly improved government responsiveness. The empirical research of Wang and Ma (2020) found that performance feedback could promote government employees to improve their service efficiency in the reform of “Swift Response to Public Complaints” in Beijing.

In conclusion, in the relevant studies on the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform, scholars have paid attention to the first two stages of the reform (“Quick Response to Community Calls” and “Swift Response to Public Complaints”), and urban governance in two stages. Previous studies made positive contributions in the aspects of the masses and other multi-subject participation in governance, the multi-subject cooperation mechanism and the effectiveness of the reform. However, there are still gaps. First, in terms of the scope of governance, there are more studies on urban governance in the reform, and relatively few studies on grassroots governance. In terms of the governance stage, there are few

studies focusing on the third stage of the reform, that is, proactive governance. The *Guiding Opinions on Taking Proactive Measures to Address Complaints Before They Are Raised*, published in Beijing in 2021, elucidates that proactive governance represents the innovative phase and pivotal objective of the reform. Furthermore, it indicates that proactive governance has been extensively implemented in recent years. Relevant practical experience needs to be summarized. With regard to the governance system, there is little empirical research on the existing co-governance model and mechanism. Moreover, empirical research on the approach of grassroots participation in proactive governance should be strengthened. Finally, there is little research on constructing the theoretical framework of the grassroots governance system of the reform, so as to demonstrate the constituent elements of the grassroots governance system, and elaborate how the system reflects the characteristics of Chinese grassroots governance and the institutional basis of the system. Therefore, the reform of “Swift Response to Public Complaints” grassroots governance has not been summarized at the academic level to provide a replicable experience for other districts.

The agile governance theory was introduced to the public administration field, providing a new governance perspective to respond to the rapidly changing social environment. This paper aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform in Beijing through the perspective of agile governance. This study identifies the alignment between this reform and the value pursuit, core elements, and theoretical principles of agile governance. Additionally, it provides directions for the future development of the reform.

In the 1990s, agile governance emerged from the concept of “agile methodology” in the field of software engineering, aiming to address difficulties posed by the traditional waterfall development model in meeting the evolving and complex demands of customers (Yu & Liu, 2023). The fundamental tenets of the agile methodology place an emphasis on the enhancement of communication and collaboration among team members, the promotion of rapid iterative learning, and the fostering of innovative experimentation. These principles enable teams to adopt flexible working methods that can adapt to dynamic environmental changes and complex user needs, thereby facilitating the delivery of usable software.

In 2018, the World Economic Forum defined agile governance as “a customer-centered set of actions or methods characterized by flexibility, fluidity, adaptability or responsiveness, representing a self-adaptive, human-centered, inclusive, and sustainable decision-making process.” Subsequently, the concept of “agile governance” was introduced into the field of public administration (Mergel, Gong, & Bertor, 2018; Xue & Zhao, 2019). In 2021, Mergel (2018) adopted agile governance to explore government management issues, and highlighted that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus of agile governance was on the flexibility and coherence of projects and processes. In practice, agile governance has been widely applied across various domains, including public sector governance, e-government, meticulous management in mega-cities, grassroots social governance, and the regulation of emerging industries (Yu & Liu, 2023).

In the context of the German refugee crisis management, Eckhard et al. (2021) demonstrated that dynamic and mixed administrative practices could foster more flexible and participatory agile actions. Based on South Korea’s governance experiences, Moon (2020) and Kim (2021) highlighted that agile adaptive approaches were effective in responding to pandemics. Agile initiatives have also become integral to government functions. For example, the Danish government introduced five agile regulatory principles that required an assessment of whether new legislation involved relevant digital preparations prior to its enactment¹.

1 Ministry of Industry, Business and Financial Affairs, Denmark (2018) Strategy for Denmark’s digital growth. Available at: https://eng.em.dk/media/10566/digital-growth-strategy-report_uk_web-2.pdf (accessed 7 June 2022).

The Reserve Bank of India launched a regulatory sandbox, with the objective of facilitating agile regulation, thereby enabling fintech companies to test innovative products and services¹. Li et al. (2023) investigated the potential of artificial intelligence to facilitate grassroots agile governance in China. Their case studies, which draw upon digital transformation and the public value theory, have identified four dimensions—data integration, policy innovation, intelligent applications, and collaboration—that can empower grassroots governance practitioners towards agile governance.

Chatfield et al. (2017) used the example of the Houston 311 citizen hotline to construct a data-driven framework for urban agile governance. This framework illustrated how factors, such as systematic data analysis, strategic coordination at the process level, and digital infrastructure, could positively affect governance agility through the effective absorption of big data technologies. Xue (2019) introduced the concept of “agility” into the Chinese academic field of public administration. In practice, agile governance has been widely applied across various domains, including public sector governance, e-government development, meticulous management of mega-cities, grassroots social governance, and the regulation of emerging industries. To gain insight into the defining features of agile governance, it is essential to contrast it with traditional governance. Firstly, in terms of values and priorities, agile governance is guided by a “humanistic” value orientation that places significant emphasis on sustainability. Secondly, with regard to the governance process, agile governance encourages agile organizations to proactively adapt to evolving external environments, whereas traditional governance tends to be passively reactive to environmental changes. Thirdly, concerning the structure of governance, agile governance promotes a co-governance model with broad participation from diverse stakeholders, where roles are clearly defined and governance methods are relatively flexible. In contrast, traditional governance, with its accountability mechanisms and process orientation, typically involves a single governance entity. Fourthly, in terms of governance mechanisms, agile governance emphasizes an integration-oriented approach that relies on digital tools. It incorporates big data analytics into key processes and uses iterative information technology to integrate different mechanisms within the governance framework. Traditional governance, on the other hand, relies on human resource tools for management, driven by leadership to deliver projects while emphasizing a functional orientation. Finally, in terms of governance models, agile governance emphasizes flexible practices aimed at sustainable development and long-term value objectives. This paper builds on previous researches and explores the agile governance system of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” grassroots governance reform in Beijing, based on the connotations of agile governance (Gu & Song, 2023).

Table 1. Differences between agile governance and traditional governance

	Characteristics of Agile Governance	Characteristics of Traditional Governance
Governance Model	Flexible Practice	Linear Process
Governance Organization	Co-Governance	Single Governance Entity
Governance Process	Proactive Process	Passive Process
Governance Mechanism	Integration-Oriented	Function-Oriented
Governance Tools	Digital Information Tools	Human Resources Tools

The core competencies of agile governance include sensitive perception, rapid response and continuous processing. To address complex governance issues at the grassroots level, rapid perception

¹ Reserve Bank of India (2018) Report of the inter-regulatory working group on fintech and digital banking. Available at: https://www.rbi.org.in/Scripts/BS_PressReleaseDisplay.aspx?prid=43097 (accessed 21 February 2022).

refers to the emphasis on early detection and timely awareness, guiding decision-makers to focus on the opportune moments for governance. Flexible responsiveness involves adapting to changes in the governance environment by responding quickly, increasing the sensitivity of policy-making processes, and continuously learning and improving governance practices. In addition, agile governance treats all entities involved in the governance process as equals. Continuous coordination refers to the two-way interaction and dynamic assessment between governing entities and those being governed, facilitating policy adjustments and improvements while moving closer to governance goals (Du & Zhan, 2024).

At the end of 2019, the CPC Beijing Municipal Committee and the People’s Government of Beijing Municipality initiated the **“Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform**. The reform is primarily based on the 12345 hotline and aims to guarantee that public concerns are addressed in a prompt and effective manner through the integration of resources, optimization of processes, and implementation of innovative measures. The success of “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform is evidenced by its surpassing previous government hotlines. This success can be attributed to the program’s comprehensive embodiment of the core principles of agile governance, including a people-centered and change-ready approach, an agile organizational structure, complexity decomposition, and technology empowerment¹⁵.

In particular, the value orientation and focus areas of “Swift Response to Public Complaints” are centered on the core principle of “people centeredness,” highlighting the value orientation of “humanism” as advocated in agile governance. The governance process of the reform emphasizes proactive adaptation and rapid iteration. This transition from passive waiting to active service aligns closely with the core principle of agile governance, which is to adapt proactively to environmental changes. Moreover, the reform has promoted the establishment of a multi-stakeholder governance structure that includes the public, civil society, and government entities. This reflects the principle of broad participation and shared governance advocated by agile governance. Finally, the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform leverages digital tools to integrate a tiered and categorized handling mechanism, thereby collaboratively addressing grassroots governance challenges. This approach fosters innovation and optimization within governance mechanisms, consistent with agile governance’s emphasis on integrating information technology into governance mechanisms.

Therefore, on the basis of previous studies, this paper brings the perspective of agile governance theory to explore and construct the theoretical framework of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” grassroots agile governance system.

3. Methodology and research design

3.1 Case study

To identify the various concepts involved in the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public in Pinggu District, as well as to clarify the relationships among these concepts, this study employs a case study methodology. Furthermore, this study focuses on the practice concerning the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public in Pinggu District, Beijing (Chen, 2024).

The reason for selecting this case is twofold: First, in terms of the representativeness of the case, Pinggu District is recognized as the origin of Beijing’s “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform, and the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public is regarded as an innovation of grassroots governance in the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform,

which has received wide recognition from both the society and the academic field. As such, it can be regarded as a typical example of grassroots agile governance in China. Second, in terms of the availability of case materials, the author visited Pinggu District and conducted empirical researches, including in-depth interviews with various stakeholders, thus yielding a wealth of primary data. Additionally, the rich secondary data collected through official channels effectively fill potential gaps in the primary data collected.

Among many governance cases of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform in Beijing, the approach concerning the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public in Pinggu District exemplifies the participation of multiple stakeholders in grassroots governance under the leadership of the CPC. This approach effectively empowers the masses to take a leading role in local governance. Under the handling method of issues submitted to higher-level government departments, the masses’ demands that are popular and difficult for streets and townships to solve independently are forwarded to the district level. The handling method of issues submitted to higher-level government departments is used to address common and difficult issues that arise frequently. A notable example was the failure to implement earthquake-resistant measures for rural housing between 2015 and 2017, which affected approximately 32, 000 rural households in the district. This issue involved significant financial resources and impacted approximately 32, 000 rural households across the district. Statistics indicated that from 2019 to 2021, nearly 7, 000 relevant complaints were recorded on the 12345 hotline platform, highlighting a substantial volume of grievances. As a result, this matter was identified as a prevalent concern within the region, directly affecting residents’ livelihoods. In response to this situation, the eighteen townships and streets in the district implemented the handling method of issues submitted to higher-level government departments. The leaders of both the Party committee and government in Pinggu District conducted a thorough analysis of the issue and allocated 210 million yuan for subsidy distribution to address these concerns effectively. This initiative led to a notable reduction in public complaints, achieving an approximate 82% decrease in the volume of monthly complaints. Since adopting the handling method of issues submitted to higher-level government departments, considerable progress has been made in managing various common issues such as subsidy distribution for earthquake resistance, homestead application approvals, and reconstruction permits for old houses on the state-owned land. Consequently, there has been an overall reduction of about 70% in monthly complaint volume.

The approach concerning the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public represents a governance model that encourages the public’s participation in addressing grassroots issues. This approach capitalizes on the collective wisdom of crowds, facilitating constructive dialogues to resolve conflicts and guiding individuals to articulate their needs in a rational manner. The fundamental objective of this approach is to promote the democratization and modernization of grassroots governance, thereby enhancing its effectiveness. The process primarily involves the application and formulation of proposals, and approval. When residents at the grassroots level put forward personalized demands, relevant authorities will apply for a mass evaluation. Subsequently, they organize discussions among relevant stakeholders, such as village Party committees and members of industry associations, with the objective of developing a solution (Chen, 2024).

It is imperative that a dedicated “evaluation” team be constituted, thereby establishing a pool of deliberation members comprising grassroots citizens, grid workers, representatives from village or neighborhood committees, grassroots Party committees, and representatives from enterprises and industry associations. This heterogeneous group constitutes the participating body of the mass evaluation, working in a collaborative manner to address challenges pertaining to grassroots governance. To illustrate, in Donggao Village, Pinggu District, when villagers encounter family disputes or neighborhood conflicts, the grid workers are the first to identify the issues and subsequently report them to the village committee. Following

deliberations between the village Party committee and the village committee, decisions are made regarding the commencement of the mass evaluation. In the event that this is deemed necessary, a deliberation team is constituted, comprising Party representatives, local elders, village representatives, lawyers, police officers, and other relevant individuals, with the objective of negotiating resolutions (Chen, 2024).

In the course of the collective evaluation, the claims and opinions of the general public are aggregated. Through discussions and decision-making by members of the deliberative assembly, specific governance measures are established. Furthermore, technological tools such as the grid-based comprehensive service management platform, integrated law enforcement platform and WeChat groups are employed to facilitate the tight connection of various participants and processes in grassroots governance⁵.

In this context, the deliberation team functions in a manner analogous to the combined organizations described by Koppell (2006), embracing a flexible and inclusive collaborative model. By integrating a diverse array of resources from the member pool, it establishes a governance platform characterized by multi-stakeholder participation. This platform facilitates connections between various governance entities at the village and street administrative levels, while also establishing links with external ecological partners, enterprises and scholars. Governance tasks are divided into specific assignments or projects, and through the coordination of this organization, resources are optimized and efficiently utilized, collectively advancing village governance. This model diverges from traditional bureaucratic operations in grassroots governance, achieving a high degree of integration between technology and organization, and thereby enhancing the sense of participation and accomplishment among the masses.

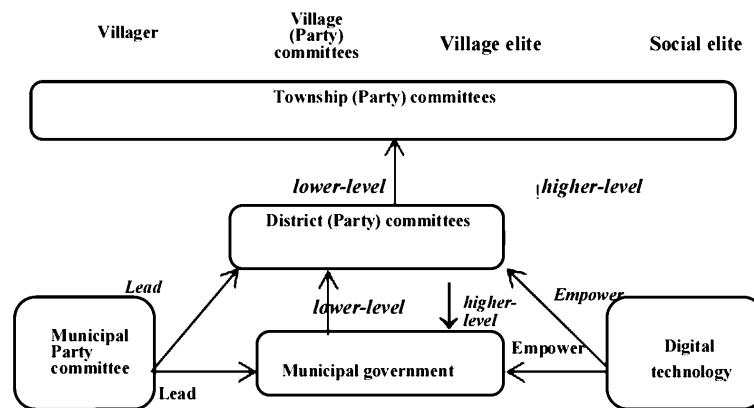


Figure 1. Subjects of grassroots co-governance in “Swift Response to Public Complaints”

3.2 Data collection

This study employed a bidirectional validation process, utilizing two distinct data sources to establish a strong theoretical foundation. The initial source of data is semi-structured interviews. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of the practice of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public in Pinggu District, Beijing, seven townships and sub-districts were selected for investigation. The selected locations were Donggao Village Township, Jinhaihu Township, Xiong'erzhai Township, Daxingzhuang Township, Liujiayuan Township, Pinggu Town, and Binhai Street. Furthermore, the study included six villages and one community. The following villages and community were selected as representative sites: Nanzhai Zhuanghu Village, Zhou Village, Xiong'erzhai Village, Beitai Tou Village, Huzhuang Village, Songpeng Village, and Jianxi Community.

A total of 55 stakeholders were interviewed in the semi-structured interviews, comprising leaders from township governments, members of village Party committees, deliberation members and village

representatives. The interview yielded approximately 200, 000 words of primary source materials from the interview records. Furthermore, to ensure the rigor of the research, a range of secondary materials were gathered. These included official announcements from government websites regarding the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public from 2017 to 2024. Additionally, professional reports by experts and scholars, relevant media coverage, and internal policy documents were included. These secondary sources supplemented the primary interview data, forming a comprehensive and systematic research database. This database provided abundant empirical materials for the application of grounded theory research methods, facilitating a comprehensive investigation of the practice, efficacy, challenges, and future directions of the mode concerning the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public in Pinggu District. Ultimately, the study aimed to provide a scientific basis and reference for decision-making and policy formulation in related fields.

Table 2. Overview of empirical data

Type	Source	Collection method	Number		
Primary materials	Leaders of district (Party) committees	Interview	7 towns and streets 7 villages and community	55 people	About 200, 000 words
	Leaders of township/town (Party) committees	Interview			
	Leaders of village (Party) committees	Interview			
	Members of the deliberation panel (village elites, Party members, grid members, etc.)	Interview			
	Ordinary villagers	Interview			
Secondary data	Policy documents	Policies published on government portals and official websites, internal policy documents	<i>Guiding Opinions on Taking Proactive Measures to Address Complaints Before They Are Raised,</i> <i>Guidelines for the Work Concerning the Process of Issues Assessed by the Public in Swift Response to Public Complaints in Pinggu District (Trial),</i> <i>Guiding Opinions on Further Deepening the Work Concerning the Process of Issues Assessed by the Public in Swift Response to Public Complaints in Pinggu District,</i> <i>Assessment Methods for the Work Concerning the Process of Issues Assessed by the Public in Swift Response to Public Complaints in Pinggu District,</i> <i>Guiding Opinions on Standardizing and Improving the Mediation Work Concerning the Process of Issues Assessed by the Public in Swift Response to Public Complaints,</i> <i>Reform Summary Case: Rural Reform Dynamics, Issue No. 27, 2022 - Implementation of the Work Method Concerning Process of Issues Submitted to Higher-level Government Departments and Assessed by the Public in Pinggu District to Deepen Grassroots Governance Reform,</i> <i>Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints</i>		

Type	Source	Collection method	Number
Secondary data	Official reports	Authoritative media newspapers (e.g., Xinhua News Agency, People’s Daily)	About 80, 000 words
	Case	Internal documents	<i>Report on the Promotion of Typical Cases for Exploring the Work Method Concerning Process of Issues Submitted to Higher-level Government Departments and Assessed by the Public to Deepen Grassroots Governance Reform in Pinggu District,</i> <i>The Process of Issues Submitted to Higher-level Government Departments and Assessed by the Public Empowered Community Satisfaction in Shandongzhuang Town, Pinggu District,</i> <i>People’s Mechanism Solved People’s Concerns in Shandongzhuang Town, Pinggu District,</i> <i>The Process of Issues Assessed by the Public Gathered Strength in Huangsongyu Township, Pinggu District, Utilizing Wisdom of Crowds to Solve People’s Problems.</i>

3.3 Grounded theory

The qualitative research approach known as grounded theory, which was developed jointly by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (2017), is designed to develop theoretical models that are firmly rooted in rich empirical data. Over time, this methodology has led to the development of several research paradigms, including classic grounded theory, procedural grounded theory, constructivist grounded theory, and so forth. In the present study, the author employed the procedural grounded theory paradigm, adhering meticulously to the sequential processes of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to systematically synthesize and analyze the collected interview text data.

In order to conduct the analysis, the author randomly selected two-thirds (36 interviewees) of the interview texts as the sample for the initial data analysis. By engaging in the three steps of coding, the author was able to thoroughly conceptualize the data. This methodological process facilitated the extraction of critical categories, which ultimately contributed to the construction of core constructs and the theoretical framework presented in this paper.

4. Category extraction and theoretical model construction

4.1 Open coding

In the process of open coding, the interview texts were first coded according to the format Ai, Bi, and Ci, where “A”, “B” and “C” represent different interview subjects, and “i” indicates the serial number of the interview. Subsequently, two-thirds of the interview texts were selected for sentence-by-sentence conceptualization and open coding. This process entailed the extraction of concepts from original statements, which were then inductively merged based on their meanings and the phenomena they represented. Synonymous concepts and those with low frequencies were eliminated. Through an iterative review, a total of 16 initial categories were identified. Due to the length limitations of this paper, only the

first three original statements were included as coding examples for each initial category.

4.2 Axial coding

The open coding process yielded 16 initial categories, which were then uniformly coded using the label “Yi.” To investigate the interconnections between the constituent elements of the grassroots agile governance system of “Swift Response to Public Complaints,” axial coding was undertaken. Following multiple rounds of discussion, revision, and expert consultation, the relationships among the initial categories were organized, leading to the identification of five primary categories.

4.3 Selective coding and model construction

Based on the aforementioned axial coding results, selective coding was undertaken to further refine core concepts. This involved exploring and validating the relationships among primary categories. A “storyline” method was used to map and discover the relationships between primary categories and underlying institutional causes, and in particular, find out how the characteristics of Chinese institutions and cultures enabled the formation and operation of the grassroots agile governance system for the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform. On this basis, a theoretical framework for the grassroots agile governance of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform was constructed.

4.4 Theoretical saturation testing

Following the establishment of the preliminary model, a further examination of its theoretical saturation was conducted. This entailed the utilization of the remaining one-third of the interview texts and secondary data for the assessment of theoretical saturation.

Table 3. Three-level Coding and Main Categories of Grounded Theory

Main Category	Initial Category	Definition	Agile Governance Characteristics (vs. Traditional Governance Characteristics)
Y1 Value Agility	K1 Value Leading (people-centered)	The grassroots governance system of “Swift Response to Public Complaints” takes “people-centeredness” as the fundamental value orientation, aiming to achieve the governance goal of “whole-process people’s democracy.”	Focus: Flexible Practice (vs. Linear Procedures)
	K2 Learning by Doing	By adopting a learning-by-doing approach, continuous learning is maintained in practice, ensuring that governance practices remain aligned with value objectives and move progressively towards governance goals.	
	K3 Flexible Adjustment	Through learning, real-time adjustments are made to governance models, mechanisms, structures, processes and work, employing flexible practices through rapid iterations to respond to increasingly complex public demands and realize the governance value of people-centeredness.	
Y2 Process Agility	K4 Swift Response to Public Complaints	The “Swift Response to Public Complaints” mechanism utilizes the 12345 hotline as the primary channel, promoting grassroots Party committee and government entities to react promptly to public complaints, achieving quick responses, handling, and feedback.	Governance Process: Proactive Process (vs. Reactive Process)

Main Category	Initial Category	Definition	Agile Governance Characteristics (vs. Traditional Governance Characteristics)
Y2 Process Agility	K5 Proactive governance	By analyzing big data through the 12345 hotline platform, identify common high-frequency issues in rural areas. Proactively manage regions with concentrated appeals by analyzing, predicting, and intervening to discover problems before the masses raise complaints, thereby establishing a mechanism to resolve issues prior to public complaints.	Governance Process: Proactive Process (vs. Reactive Process)
Y3 Mechanism Agility	K6 Handling process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments	After the review of local Party committees, issues that exceed their governmental authority, historical challenges issues, or periodic common problems are escalated to higher-level government departments for processing.	Governance Mechanism: Integration-Oriented (vs. Functional-Oriented)
	K7 Local-level Processing	Local (township, street, village) government departments fulfill their responsibilities to process local mass complaints.	
	K8 Process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public	After the review of higher-level (city, district, township) Party committees, personalized public demands are organized for the mass evaluation by villagers through village Party committees, forming a “people’s self-governance” approach in handling local issues.	
Y4 Structural Agility	K9 Embedded Party governance	Multi-entity co-governance organizational structures embed Party organizations at all levels to guide grassroots governance.	Governance Structure: Multi-Entity Co-Governance (vs. Single Entity)
	K10 Administrative inclusion	Grassroots governments invite social forces to participate into grassroots governance.	
	K11 Mass-centered governance	Unlike administration led by the government in rural governance, the evaluation subject is the villagers themselves, solving problems encountered through self-governance.	
	K12 Multi-entity co-governance	Cooperative governance is conducted involving the masses, government entities, social organizations, professionals, enterprises, and various social entities at the grassroots level.	

Main Category	Initial Category	Definition	Agile Governance Characteristics (vs. Traditional Governance Characteristics)
Y5 Model Agility	K13 Administrative linkage	Targeting issues requiring city-level reform measures or that involve cross-level and cross-department responsibilities, clarifying one issue is managed by a designated city leader, with one city department taking the lead and cooperating with relevant units and districts to form a “Theme of the Month” work pattern of linkage at the city, district, street and township-level governments to solve the high-frequency common problems of grassroots governance.	Governance Model: Digital + Human Model (vs. Human Model) Multi-Model (vs. Single Model)
	K14 Mass Evaluation	Various governance entities, such as lawyers, village leaders, and neighborhood committee staff, form a “mass evaluation” team, establishing deliberation panels like “old people mediation teams, ” “support mediation teams, ” and Party-mass discussion councils for collective decision-making.	
	K15 Grid management	By finely dividing governance areas into grid units, all affairs of rural (community) governance are incorporated into grid management, with each grid covering several households and assigning a grid worker for daily visits to understand residents’ demands and coordinate solutions with community leaders.	
	K16 Market linkage	Through government-enterprise cooperation, parts of grassroots governance tasks are outsourced to enterprises for special projects.	

5. Model explanation

5.1 Components of the agile governance system of “Swift Response to Public Complaints”

5.1.1 Value agility

Value Leading. The grassroots agile governance, exemplified by the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” approach, is founded on the value orientation of “people-centeredness, ” which guides innovative reforms in grassroots governance. In the digital age, the mindset of big data governance may prompt decision-makers to rely exclusively on data analysis results or the opinions of a select few elite individuals (such as policy experts), rather than engaging the public in discussions or formally conveying their demands. This could potentially lead to a democratic deficit. The design idea behind agile governance treats stakeholders, particularly those who have lodged a complaint, as users. By adhering to humanistic principles, it emphasizes active listening to users’ voices, understanding their differentiated needs, and enhancing service quality. This approach ultimately achieves the value goal of whole-process people’s democracy, which can be defined as omnipresent, omnidirectional, and omnichain people’s democracy.

In an interview, a leader from Jinhaihu Town articulated that the original objective of the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" grassroots governance initiative was to enhance the fairness, credibility, and standardization of grassroots governments in serving the public in the "last mile," thereby promoting righteousness. The Party fulfills two primary functions. Initially, it determines whether a particular issue merits public deliberation. Subsequently, it mobilizes the general public to engage in this process. Ultimately, the resolution of complaints and the justification of proposed solutions are determined by the people.

The concepts of "learning by doing" and "flexible adjustment" represent the fundamental tenets of value agility. The recognition that any governance scheme may be incomplete is a fundamental tenet of agile methods, which consequently adopt comprehensive error-correction processes. The "Swift Response to Public Complaints" reform in grassroots governance places an emphasis on continuous learning, training, and adaptation in practice. This approach is designed to avoid excessive path dependence on existing systems and foster ongoing renewal. Furthermore, in light of the growing complexity of citizen demands in the context of current township and village governance, it is imperative that the existing governance framework be responsive to environmental changes. Guided by the principle of "people-centeredness," it is crucial to bolster the competencies, processes, and frameworks of grassroots governance through the "learning by doing" and "flexible adjustment" approaches, thereby establishing a sustainable mechanism to achieve the objective of whole-process people's democracy.

In the course of interviews, leaders from Jinhaihu Town observed that when Pinggu District proposed the governance mode concerning the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public, they made reference to the Opinions on Strengthening Modernization of Grassroots Governance Systems and Governance Capabilities, issued by the State Council, as well as a series of legal documents, including the Organic Law of the Villagers' Committees. Subsequently, district-level guidelines for the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public were formulated, wherein the scope, entities were involved and procedures were clarified. In essence, the approach concerning the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public can be understood as a means of enabling governments to learn and enhance their governance systems and capabilities through mass engagement. Furthermore, it was noted that when common issues were raised by citizens, if villagers contested the procedures, efforts should be made to collaborate with higher-level district governmental departments to explore ways to simplify these procedures for the convenience of the masses. Additionally, leaders from other towns indicated that they conducted monthly training sessions for grid workers to summarize experiences and improve grid workers' ability to serve the masses.

In conclusion, the essence of value agility can be defined as a leadership approach that is guided by core values. When there is a discrepancy between the values and actions of an organization, value agility prompts a responsive awareness and rapid corrective adjustments through learning. Furthermore, value agility consistently prioritizes the principle of "people-centeredness" as its fundamental value orientation.

5.1.2 Process agility

The reform process of the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" initiative is primarily divided into three stages: whistle reporting, "Swift Response to Public Complaints," and proactive governance. The current transition from the second to the third stage exemplifies the agility of the reform process. In contrast to the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" phase, proactive governance not only reflects a more active process of agile governance but also requires a higher level of agile governance capability. The primary objective is to enhance sensitivity and awareness, thereby facilitating the proactive identification of issues. This necessitates the innovation of common issue identification mechanisms and

early warning systems in grassroots governance. Furthermore, enhancing the capacity for rapid response is of paramount importance. The crux of this undertaking is to facilitate decentralization of governance, encourage market participation, and permit limited self-governance among the populace, thereby integrating a heterogeneous group of stakeholders into a collaborative governance structure. By fostering collaboration among various governance entities, it becomes possible to leverage the strengths of each entity for joint governance and rapid response. Finally, it is essential to enhance the capacity for sustained handling. This can be accomplished through the continual examination of recurring issues, thereby enabling prospective governance (Du & Zhan, 2024; Koppell, 2006).

At the grassroots level of Beijing, proactive governance reform is primarily achieved through the integration of the “12345 Hotline + Grid” mode. In the initial stages of utilizing big data analytics from the 12345 hotline platform, proactive governance efforts are primarily concentrated in townships and streets, where demands are the most prevalent and grassroots governance is the weakest. Thematic issues that are frequently reported by the public are incorporated into a “Theme of the Month” mechanism. This process begins at the beginning of the year and continues throughout the year, with all issues comprehensively initiated and monitored. On average, two issues are selected for focused attention each month. This signifies a profound transition from “complaint handling” to “proactive governance.”

An illustrative case of the “Theme of the Month” approach to proactive addressing of common issues can be witnessed in Xiong'erzhai Township of Pinggu district, where local leaders conducted a thorough investigation into the long-neglected rural road conditions reported by residents. They verified that potholes were ubiquitous across all seven administrative villages, significantly affecting people's travel. Given the complex terrain and frequent extreme weather events, the township government conducted an assessment of the damage. Subsequently, through the “Theme of the Month” approach, the township Party committee enhanced analytical evaluations and allocated self-raised funds to commence repair works. Last year, nearly 20,000 meters of roadway were successfully restored, enhancing accessibility for villagers and earning widespread approval from the community.

Additionally, the district has meticulously delineated 3,170 micro-grids, each comprising several households managed by a designated grid worker. This structure requires that grid workers actively undertake visits, solicit requirements, and offer services. Within each grid, representatives from various sectors, such as police officers and family doctors, engage in collaborative governance. This ensures that minor issues are resolved at the local level, while more significant challenges prompt grid workers to submit issues to the relevant government officers as needed. This social governance mechanism effectively activates a “new engine” for proactive governance. Grid workers conduct daily visits to collect feedback from residents, facilitating continuous communication and timely resolution of emerging issues.

In an interview, a district leader observed that grid workers interact with members of the public on a daily basis, discussing with them any issues that have been raised. These discussions are held in the community conference room, with the aim of identifying concerns at an early stage. The grid workers are able to address a number of issues related to the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” initiative directly within their designated areas. These include matters pertaining to living conditions, safety concerns and elder care, thereby negating the necessity to contact the 12345 hotline. It is the preference of residents to communicate directly with grid workers, frequently utilizing the grid's WeChat group for this purpose. This approach is demonstrably more efficient than utilizing the hotline.

5.1.3 Mechanism agility

The agility of mechanisms in the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” grassroots governance reform is primarily reflected in the classification of complaints based on their features, thereby allowing for the flexible establishment of different processing mechanisms tailored to various types (Chinese

academy of social sciences research group, 2023) of complaints. In the event of a reasonable complaint from a resident that can be addressed within the scope of power and responsibilities of the local government department in question, it is recommended that the matter be resolved as soon as possible. In cases where the issues raised by residents are common in nature—that is to say, systemic, holistic, and policy-related demands that exceed the responsibilities of the local governmental department—these issues are forwarded through the established working mechanisms to higher-level government departments. Personalized complaints will be forwarded to residents in the streets and villages, and will be evaluated and discussed by the residents or villagers (Chinese academy of social sciences research group, 2023).

The handling of issues submitted to higher-level government departments was based on a formal institution comprising a set of standardized and procedural regulations. These were designed to ensure the effective addressing of specific types of problems. By adhering to the norms of a hierarchical system, this mechanism enhances operational efficiency and provides higher quality and more convenient services to the public. The “Theme of the Month” mode, which encompasses the “one proposal, three lists” framework and the scenario governance method featuring “one form, one chart, one FAQ,” can be classified as process management. Furthermore, the mechanism facilitates internal process re-engineering or optimization within the government through big data analysis of the 12345 hotline platform, thereby reducing processing times and enhancing the responsiveness and quality of services to public demands (Chinese academy of social sciences research group, 2023).

The mechanism of disseminating information to the public for evaluation can be broadly classified into two categories. The initial stage involves townships (or streets) assuming the responsibility for addressing complaints and subsequently transferring issues for collective assessment. In the event that a complaint is deemed unsuitable for submission to higher-level government departments and marked as “unsolved,” it is subjected to an analysis by the Party committee. Thereafter, it is delegated to grassroots Party organizations, which facilitate collective evaluations among local villagers or residents. The second form entails municipal and district governments assuming the role of complaint managers, subsequently delegating them for mass evaluation. After assessment by the Party committee, they can be passed down to Party organizations at both the township and village (or community) levels. The mechanism concerning the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public serves an informal institutional role, such as local rules and regulations, which empowers the masses to become leaders and decision-makers in grassroots governance and helps resolve internal conflicts. This informal institutional control often offers greater flexibility and enhances the adaptability and responsiveness of formal institutions (Chen, 2024).

In response to the inquiry, the residents of Pinggu Town, Xiong'erzhai Town, and Donggao Village Town provided the following reports: Upon receipt of a complaint, the leadership team initiates an analysis of the situation. If a resolution can be reached, it is addressed without delay. In the event of common issues that exceed the authority of this organization and require the involvement of higher-level government departments, we engage in communication with the relevant departments. In the case of issues that are distinctive in nature, the matter is referred to the wider group for collective deliberation.

Common problems that have arisen from policy or historical reasons and high-frequency issues that affect the entire township are typically beyond the scope of the township's capacity to resolve. For instance, matters pertaining to water or electricity adjustments are typically referred to district-level functional departments, such as the urban management committee or the water and electricity authorities. These departments are typically responsible for addressing such issues at the district level. Disputes pertaining to construction projects undertaken by neighboring residents, such as the height of buildings and the delineation of drainage boundaries, are classified as exceptional cases and subjected to a

comprehensive assessment.

The concept of “categorization” is regarded as a pivotal exemplification of the tenets espoused by the agile methodology. By classifying governance issues, the governance mechanism can be differentiated. A flexible approach is adopted with regard to the processing of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public. These are combined with a resolution strategy that encompasses both formal and informal methods for addressing grassroots problems. This system unifies disparate governance mechanisms through an integration-oriented approach, as opposed to a function-oriented one. This reflects the agility inherent in the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” working mechanism at the grassroots governance level (Moon, 2020).

5.1.4 Structure agility

The “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform has established a governance structure characterized by the co-governance of multiple stakeholders. This structure reflects a tripartite interactive paradigm of the Party, government and society. The report of the 20th CPC National Congress emphasizes the importance of establishing a social governance community in which all members have a responsibility to fulfill their duties and share the benefits, thus enhancing the effectiveness of governance. Additionally, “the breadth of participation” is a key feature of agile governance (Xue & Zhao, 2019).

The “Swift Response to Public Complaints” grassroots governance reform facilitates the formation of a collaborative and interactive governance structure involving a diverse range of stakeholders, including the public, businesses, social organizations, and government agencies. The agility of this governance structure is primarily manifested in its ability to flexibly reconfigure and allocate responsibilities among various governance actors, thereby leveraging their respective advantages in different governance contexts. This dynamic integration fosters the innovation of diverse governance models, enabling a swift response to the continually evolving and complex demands of society. The critical components of this agile structure include masses-centered, multi-stakeholder co-governance, administrative absorption, and party integration (Zhang, 2024).

First and foremost, the masses represent the primary driving force behind grassroots self-governance. The reform has established platforms for direct communication and deliberation, such as consultation groups, facilitating engagement between the public and a broader range of social stakeholders. This approach results in a governance pattern that is centered on the masses and based on social collaboration, thereby exemplifying a comprehensive implementation of people’s democracy in governance. In this context, government departments play a pivotal role in the administrative incorporation of the participation of businesses, social organizations and the public, thereby facilitating their involvement in grassroots governance and avoiding the deficiency of a single governance actor. Nevertheless, there is a necessity to elevate the general public’s awareness of self-governance and harmonize the disparate interests of various governance actors. Collaborative governance cannot fully capitalize on its collaborative benefits without the effective aggregation of different actors. Therefore, reinforcing Party building is essential, as it can exemplify and lead the way while promoting multiple governance actors to participate in grassroots governance (Zhan, 2024).

For example, the Binhe Street Jianxi Community has innovatively explored a “six-party co-construction mode,” which involves the government, street administration, enterprises, communities, residents, and property management in its grassroots governance efforts. This model encourages the active involvement of a diverse range of social stakeholders in community affairs. In instances where financial resources are inadequate, the six stakeholders collectively mobilize resources and engage in joint deliberations and assessments, ultimately facilitating the construction of parking facilities that alleviate residents’ parking challenges.

The embedding of political parties in co-governance structures demonstrates the significance of political parties in grassroots governance within the Chinese context. Scholars argue that this integration represents a novel development in China's political ecosystem with regard to grassroots governance. The crux of this innovation lies in the adherence to and enhancement of the Party's embedded role in the co-governance of rural areas through various collaborative forms, including "Internet + Party building," "Party building + villager autonomy," and "Party building + self-governance." These integrated approaches facilitate the establishment of a synergistic relationship between the grassroots Party and government entities.

5.1.5 Model agility

Governance models refer to the methods, approaches, and tools used in governance processes. In the context of the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" grassroots governance reform, the different local customs, cultural backgrounds, resource endowments, and levels of development in different regions require the formulation of tailored governance schemes and the selection of diverse governance tools to address the increasingly complex and personalized public demands.

In Beijing, the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" grassroots governance reform has introduced a series of innovative and diversified models to respond to public concerns. These include a government-led administrative linkage model, a community self-governance-driven evaluation and deliberation model, and a public-private partnership approach focused on market-linkage governance. Collectively, these models achieve the integration of five key governance elements: political governance, legal governance, moral governance, self-governance, and intelligent governance.

Specific implementations encompass various formats, including consultation groups, grid-based governance, the 12345 hotline, Theme of the Month, and public-private project management. By leveraging these diverse models, local governments have enhanced their responsiveness to community needs and facilitated more appropriate governance approaches that are adaptable to local conditions⁵.

In August 2021, the personnel at the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" center in Shandong Zhuang Town of Pinggu District received a request from a villager via the 12345 hotline. The request stated, "I wish to rebuild my house, but my neighbor is impeding my efforts. What should I do?" To address this matter, Xili Jin Village convened a mediation team comprising representatives from the village Party committee and villagers. A visit was conducted to the residence of the villager in question, with the objective of facilitating communication, engaging in a constructive dialogue, and fostering a harmonious relationship with the neighbor in question. In the event that the mediation proves unsuccessful, a civil deliberation process will be initiated, which involves the organization of a villagers' congress (a deliberative group). This panel included the complainant, the respondent, members of the mediation team, and personnel from relevant township departments. Once all parties present their opinions, the deliberative group will proceed to hold a vote, with a two-thirds majority required for a valid outcome. Following the vote, the content of the relevant matters, the process of evaluation, and the results of the evaluation will be made public and accepted by the masses. This reflected the whole process of people's democracy, from the initial appeal, through mediation and the formulation of resolutions, to the subsequent publicity.

Following the public announcement of the results from the collective evaluation of the issues raised, feedback from villagers led to the implementation of a comprehensive follow-up visit procedure in certain townships. This procedure relied on a grid management model. The grid workers played an indispensable role in conducting timely follow-ups and regular home visits, which were complemented by one-on-one counseling services. Furthermore, the provision of one-to-one conversation counseling services should be expanded in order to gain a deeper understanding of the follow-up demands of the general public and to

facilitate the coordination of solutions to address these issues.

The aforementioned cases illustrate the efficacy of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform, which employs a multifaceted approach, encompassing models such as the deliberative team, the 12345 hotline, and group and grid governance, to address the public’s demands. This integrated approach incorporates big data governance techniques, unit grid technologies, and human resource management skills, thereby demonstrating a profound convergence of intelligent governance, moral governance and self-governance. The approach proved effective in resolving the individualized issues faced by villagers in grassroots governance, thereby demonstrating the agility of the employed governance methods and tools.

In addition, the administrative linkage governance model is utilized to address common and recurrent challenges resulting from policy or historical factors at the township level. Examples of such challenges include those pertaining to resettlement housing and subsidies for earthquake-resistant energy efficiency. In this model, the township government serves as the initial point of contact for grassroots demands, which are then escalated to the district and municipal levels. By means of the coordinated administrative efforts at the three levels of government, solutions are developed collectively.

In contrast, the market linkage model is commonly utilized to address concerns pertaining to emergency management and economic development at the community level. This entails leveraging market mechanisms to outsource project management or collaborate with enterprises for solutions (Li, 2020). For example, partnerships with state-owned enterprises may be established with the objective of establishing rural live-streaming bases, or collaborations with property management companies may be initiated with the objective of addressing emergency management issues at the community level.

This shift signifies a transition from an exclusive reliance on administrative measures to a diversified approach that incorporates regulations, market forces, technology, and voluntary cooperation. Such differentiated governance models effectively leverage the combined roles of the market and society. These governance models ensure accountability upwards in order to meet governance objectives while simultaneously addressing the needs and concerns of the community. This reflects the agile characteristics of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” grassroots governance reform.

5.2 Relationships among agile governance elements

In the context of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” initiative, the core construct is value agility, particularly value leading, within the framework of grassroots agile governance. Values function as the principles and standards that regulate governance behaviors. The “people-centeredness” value serves not only as the impetus for reforming grassroots agile governance but also as the standard for evaluating the success of governance system reforms. In numerous interviews, respondents underscored that the objective of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform, exemplified by the approach concerning the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public, is to promote a virtuous spirit. The term “virtuous spirit” refers to the atmosphere and culture formed by governance behaviors guided by virtuous values, which effectively leads to the optimization and transformation of grassroots governance. Therefore, value agility is a prerequisite and necessary condition for the other four agile governance elements in the reform of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” grassroots governance system.

Guided by the “people-centeredness” principle, the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform does not impose constraints on citizens with regard to the submission of personalized requests. Instead, by accurately classifying these requests, it investigates innovative approaches to grassroots governance reform in terms of stages, mechanisms, structures, and models. For instance, the implementation of personalized demands has facilitated innovations in mechanisms concerning the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public. Meanwhile, the

incorporation of common and reasonable demands has stimulated innovations in the proactive governance phase, which is referred to as the “monthly topic” and grid management⁶.

5.2.1. Value agility and process agility

To better achieve this objective, the government has transitioned from a stance of “passive waiting” to one of “active governance.” Rather than merely reacting to public complaints, it has taken the initiative to engage with grassroots communities, listen attentively to public opinions, and proactively identify and address potential issues. This ensures that citizens experience governmental care and intervention before problems become apparent.

The “Swift Response to Public Complaints” grassroots governance reform has advanced to the stage of “proactive governance,” primarily driven by a value-oriented approach that prioritizes a “people-centered” perspective¹. This orientation underscores the necessity for government work to consistently prioritize the needs and interests of the populace, and actively respond to and address citizens’ concerns. To better achieve this objective, the government has transitioned from a stance of “passive waiting” to one of “active governance.” In lieu of merely reacting to public grievances, the government has taken the initiative to engage with the public at the grassroots level, solicit input from citizens, and proactively identify and address potential issues. This approach ensures that citizens perceive the government’s care and intervention before problems become apparent.

Proposition 1: Value agility is a prerequisite for process agility.

5.2.2. Value agility and mechanism agility

Following the implementation of the Beijing Municipal Regulations on Swift Response to Public Complaints in 2021, the number of complaints received increased significantly. These complaints encompassed a wide range of diverse and personalized demands. In formulating the regulations, considerations were made to restrict the number of complaint calls by introducing measures designed to assess the credibility of individuals making such calls. In the final analysis, however, the overarching principle of putting people first took precedence. This resulted in an acknowledgment of the territorial and individual diversity of grassroots governance targets, respecting the differentiated needs of individuals, and ensuring that public demands are heard. The content of complaints is not subject to any restrictions. By adopting a flexible and innovative mechanism for addressing demands, the government sought to respond to personalized requests, which resulted in the establishment of the mechanism concerning the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public. This approach, which employs a classification system to address issues according to their respective categories, serves to illustrate the flexibility and responsiveness of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” working mechanism.

Proposition 2: Value agility is a prerequisite for mechanism agility.

5.2.3. Value agility and structural agility

The “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform establishes a governance structure for multi-stakeholder co-governance that is oriented toward the value of prioritizing the people. This approach is people-centered, with a focus on meeting the needs and interests of the general public and driving the comprehensive advancement of governance initiatives. To achieve this objective, the reform addresses the previous issue of “excessive administration” in grassroots governance by empowering the government and actively engaging various stakeholders including residents to participate (Zhan, 2024). This approach fosters a collaborative governance framework. Furthermore, guided by humanistic values, the reform underscores democratic consultation and equal cooperation among diverse governance entities, suggesting that stakeholders engage in collaborative relationships based on equality. This transition from hierarchical management to equal interaction increases the flexibility of various participants to reorganize and act

collectively as needed across different contexts, thereby enhancing the agility of the governance structure.

Proposition 3: Value agility is a prerequisite for structural agility.

5.2.4. Value agility and model agility

In the reform of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” grassroots agile governance system, the “people-centeredness” value guides the innovation of governance methods and the selection of tools, thereby promoting the agility of governance models. Firstly, this value orientation facilitates innovations in grassroots governance models, as evidenced by the approach concerning the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public. This method is implemented by a deliberation panel, led by local customs and regulations, to address issues through communication and persuasion, primarily utilizing moral standards to resolve conflicts. Interviews reveal that many legal mechanisms are inappropriate for resolving certain complaints. For instance, when one party in a village dispute fails to comply with a court ruling, it will result in repeated hotline complaints from the other party. In such cases, mediation through the deliberation panel model has proven effective. Local leaders explained the rationale behind this approach:

“In addressing issues, it may be more effective to engage respected and familiar elderly villagers in discussions than to rely on village committees. Given the level of education among residents, many may lack an understanding of legal policies. However, they tend to endorse local customs and regulations. An evaluation and discussion approach aligns with people’s preferences, using local customs to address personalized problems more effectively.”

The respect accorded to villagers’ preference for local customs represents a typical manifestation of humanistic values. In accordance with this value orientation, the governance model of the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public has been developed in an innovative manner, thereby demonstrating the flexibility and adaptability of governance models. Furthermore, the emphasis on the value of the individual has also resulted in innovations in the governance of the grid and the methods employed by grid workers. For example, some villages have implemented a measure using paper cards listing the names and contact numbers of grid workers, informing villagers of whom to approach for assistance when they need help. Online notification was initially considered, but later deemed impractical, as many elderly villagers do not use smartphones. Consequently, paper cards and in-person visits by grid workers were found to be more effective.

The governance method of employing grid workers demonstrates a commitment to addressing the digital gap faced by vulnerable groups, reflecting a governance practice that is inclusive and humanizing. In the new era, in which big data technology is pervasively utilized in the context of grassroots governance, the concepts of humanity and technology coexist. While technology itself is neutral, grassroots governance entities refrain from placing undue emphasis on the utilization of digital technology. Conversely, they appeal to humanistic principles to stimulate the “moral compass” within governance actors, thereby infusing the governance model with a human-centered dimension that serves to counterbalance tool-oriented ideologies. The concept of agile governance acknowledges the instrumental value of technology while placing the needs and cognitive preferences of the public at the forefront of decision-making processes. Consequently, the innovative selection and application of governance methods and tools within the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform are fundamentally guided by the value of “putting people first,” which underscores the agile characteristics of the governance model.

Proposition 4: Value agility is a prerequisite for model agility.

5.3 The relationship of Chinese culture and institutions with the characteristics of “Swift Response to Public Complaints” grassroots agile governance system

It is of paramount importance to comprehend the interrelationship between institutions, culture, and grassroots governance innovation, in order to gain insight into the distinctive features of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” grassroots agile governance system. China’s grassroots governance system combines traditional country-level governance practices with tools and experiences from industrialized Western nations. This unique approach has led to the development of innovative solutions such as the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” agile governance system. These solutions are rooted in China’s national institutions and cultural characteristics, providing a solid foundation for effective and responsive governance.

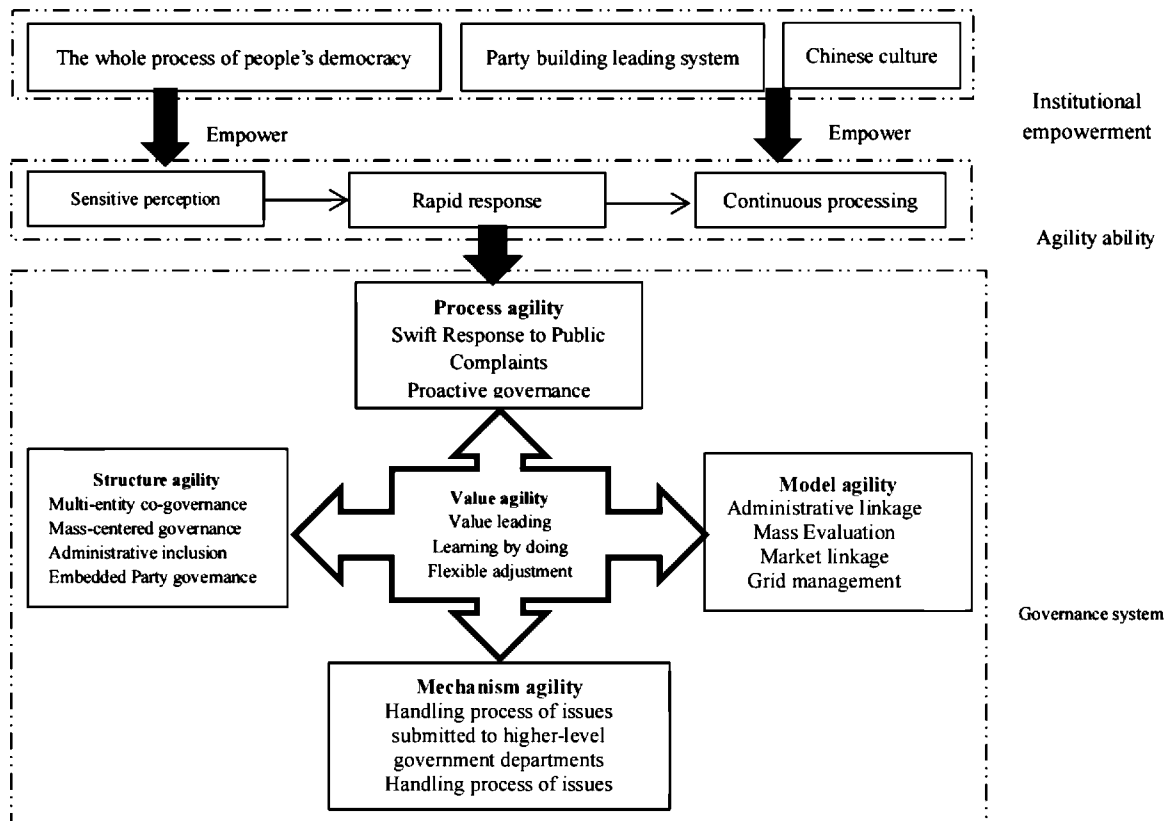


Figure 2. Research framework of grassroots agile governance system

In the new era, the logic of Chinese modernization in grassroots governance is based on three fundamental principles: putting people first, the leadership of the Party, and theoretical innovation. The report from the 20th CPC National Congress introduced the concept of developing a system of whole-process people’s democracy, which empowers reforms in the grassroots governance system. However, the effective implementation of the system and the construction of a scientific governance framework are contingent upon the organization and leadership of the CPC. Furthermore, the operation of the governance system must align with the cultural atmosphere of the governing region.

The empowerment of these institutions and cultural elements has facilitated the formation of a governance system in China that combines ancient and modern elements and exhibits indigenous characteristics.

Agile Governance Elements		Characteristics of “Swift Response to Public Complaints” Grassroots Governance	Relationships with Chinese institutions and cultures
Value Agility	Value leading	√	Whole-process people's democracy
	Learning by doing		
	Flexible adjustment		
Process Agility	“Swift Response to Public Complaints”		
	Proactive governance	√	
Mechanism Agility	Local-level Processing		Party building leading Chinese indigenous culture and institutions
	Process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments	√	
	Process of issues assessed by the public	√	
Structure Agility	Embedded Party governance	√	
	Administrative inclusion		
	Mass-centered governance		
	Multi-entity co-governance		
Model Agility	Administrative linkage	√	
	Market linkage		
	Mass evaluation	√	
	Grid management	√	

5.3.1 The system of whole-process people's democracy and the value of people-centered governance

The Third Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee underscored the pivotal role of whole-process people's democracy in advancing Chinese-style modernization. In terms of value agility, the reform of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” governance system aims to establish a perspective of “people-centeredness.” This perspective highlights that governance subjects center their efforts on the people, for the people, and rely on the people. Furthermore, it aligns with the emerging expectations of the populace for a better quality of life. In this way, the people's aspirations for a better life are positioned as the ultimate goal for the Party and the government.

The 2021 Central People's Congress Work Conference called for a more profound comprehension of the legal framework regulating the advancement of democratic politics and introduced the notion of whole-process people's democracy. The concept of whole-process people's democracy encompasses both procedural and substantive democracy, as well as direct and indirect forms of democracy, while also integrating the will of the state with that of the people. This model not only safeguards the electoral rights of citizens but also underscores the importance of active participation in daily social governance following elections. It effectively ensures that individuals can engage extensively in all facets and dimensions of national and social governance.

The whole process of people's democracy represents a political institutional manifestation of the “people-centeredness” value, which prioritizes the interests of people and places them at the center of decision-making. The “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform is an exemplification of the logic of whole-process people's democracy. At the grassroots level, the reform philosophy is centered on transforming the governance system and enhancing governance capability, driven by public demands.

It promotes an increase in the openness and participatory nature of governance by allowing citizens to voice their demands and by responding to those demands. This approach gradually shifts from a passive response to a proactive engagement with public concerns, thereby enhancing the democratic quality of governance. Moreover, the reform of the grassroots governance system aims to practice the view of achievements for the benefit of the people, positioning the practice of whole-process people's democracy as the ultimate criterion for evaluating the success of the reform.

5.3.2 The whole-process people's democracy and the phase of proactive governance

The concept of "proactive governance" represents an innovative approach within the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" grassroots governance system. The fundamental objective is to address issues before citizens even express their concerns, thereby effectively preventing the escalation of conflicts and the emergence of complaints. This contrasts with the passive response mode that is typical in the context of grassroots governance in other countries, which is characterized by a focus on addressing citizen complaints and reactive responses. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to develop a number of different mechanisms. These include frameworks for the detection of problems, early warning systems, mechanisms for identifying common issues, and information-gathering practices that facilitate early problem resolution. This represents a shift in the Chinese government's approach to grassroots governance.

The complexity, refinement, and precision of proactive governance mechanisms necessitate extensive participation from the populace. This is facilitated by the framework of whole-process people's democracy. Within this framework, citizens are afforded direct opportunities to engage in national and social governance, enabling their desires and needs to be articulated and addressed in a timely manner. Such direct democratic participation cultivates a sense of responsibility and mission among the populace, thereby stimulating their initiative and creativity. Consequently, this fosters the proactive and refined development of grassroots governance within our country.

5.3.3 The leading of Party building and a multi-entity collaborative governance structure

The term "governance structure" is used to describe the organizational framework that is involved in the implementation of governance reforms. The "Swift Response to Public Complaints" grassroots governance structure is distinguished by its establishment of a multi-entity collaborative governance framework, notably the integrative capacity of the political party within this structure. Governance structure refers to the organizational framework involved in implementing governance reforms. The characteristics of the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" grassroots governance structure lie in the establishment of a multi-entity collaborative governance framework, particularly the integrative ability of the political party within this structure. This triple organizational framework, comprising the Party, state, and community, represents a distinctive feature of grassroots governance in China. This differs from the approach taken in many other countries, where community autonomy is the primary focus of grassroots governance, and political party involvement is absent.

The guidance provided by the Party in the context of governance offers a robust political foundation for the formation of a multi-entity collaborative governance structure. Since the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee, the Party's role in governance has provided a robust political foundation for the formation of a multi-entity collaborative governance structure. This has been achieved primarily through the integrative capability of the CPC, which serves to engage and organize various stakeholders in governance to take collective actions and respond swiftly and effectively to governance challenges.

Historically, the grassroots governance structure was led by government departments, which exhibited administrative characteristics. The social governance system requires improvement, as does

the awareness of participation of the general public and social forces. The social governance framework has been identified as requiring enhancement, and there has been a need to elevate public awareness and participation among the community and social organizations. The Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee introduced the concept of “innovating the social governance system.” Although subsequent grassroots governance reforms have made significant improvements in addressing these issues, there remains room for optimization.

The “Swift Response to Public Complaints” grassroots governance reform addresses these challenges by leveraging the Party’s role in publicity and its connection with the masses to enhance the willingness and awareness of the masses, enterprises, and other social forces to participate in grassroots self-governance. For example, local government leaders from interviewed townships have illustrated the role of grassroots Party committees in promoting work methods concerning the process of issues assessed by the public within this collaborative governance structure. Initially, villagers were unfamiliar with the methodology and mechanisms of this evaluation process. To improve their willingness to engage and enhance their consciousness of self-governance, village Party committees organized a demonstration of the process of issues assessed by the public, providing the community with a foundational understanding of this autonomous governance method. Recognizing the positive impact of the process of issues assessed by the public, many villagers have expressed a willingness to participate in this form of grassroots governance, using it to address individualized issues within their villages.

The administrative integration of various local entities in rural areas is constrained by the expansion and scope of Party organization membership. At present, the CPC has over 5 million grassroots organizations, which are distributed across a wide range of sectors and entities. When the government undertakes administrative integration, it is essential for Party organizations to implement guiding principles at the grassroots level and translate these into the national will for effective execution. A distinctive feature of grassroots governance in China is the emphasis on strengthening the Party’s own development and using it as a model to lead the people.

Party committees at the grassroots level require Party members to assume leading and exemplary roles. In particular, the involvement of veteran Party members in mass evaluation processes has been demonstrated to have a significant impact. These experienced Party members often have established familiarity with many village residents and are able to connect with the local populace directly. Through regular interactions, they are well-positioned to convey relevant information and ideological principles. Thus, the ability of the political party to mobilize and organize is of great importance.

Furthermore, the different positions and interest demands of various governance entities can impede the capacity to promptly undertake joint actions. It is therefore imperative to capitalize on the cohesion of the Party in order to address the conflicts that exist between these governance entities. This necessitates the implementation of the Party’s scientific and democratic decision-making capabilities, the promotion of democratic centralism and collaborative deliberation, and the elimination of contradictions and fostering of effective cooperation among multiple entities of governance.

In conclusion, the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform of the agile grassroots governance system has been spearheaded by the CPC through the reinforcement of the Party’s internal development and its integration into the governance structure. This approach facilitates the construction and operation of a collaborative governance framework. It requires that Party organizations and members assume a leading and exemplary role in all areas, ensuring the implementation of the Party’s lines, principles, and policies. The ultimate goal is to enhance the cohesion of Party organizations, thereby providing political and organizational support for improving the agility of grassroots governance structures.

5.3.4 Integrated governance mechanism empowered by Party-building leadership system

The "Swift Response to Public Complaints" grassroots governance reform represents a novel approach to integrating governance mechanisms at various levels. In some countries, the principles of grassroots governance are characterized by a "weak administration-oriented" and "community-centered" approach, with a particular emphasis on the adoption of community self-governance mechanisms. This has been a notable shortcoming in the practice of grassroots governance in certain regions of China, prompting some scholars (Pan & Wang, 2020) to advocate for strategies to address these deficiencies.

It is imperative that we enhance the social governance system, which is characterized by the principles of "collaboration, participation, and shared benefits." This endeavor entails fostering a constructive and mutually beneficial interaction between governmental governance, social regulation and resident autonomy. The distinctive feature of the governance mechanism in the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" reform is the integration of self-governance and administrative mechanisms. This integration allows the government to flexibly transform administrative advantages into social governance effectiveness, establishing a desirable governance mechanism of "vertical linkage" in the governance system.

Firstly, in response to the issues raised in the complaints, the reform introduced an innovative approach to the mechanism concerning the process of issues assessed by the public. By drawing on the experiences of "community-centered principle" in grassroots governance from other countries, this approach aims to address previous shortcomings. Secondly, the 12345 hotline platform has been used to integrate the mechanisms for handling submissions at various levels including upper and local processing. This would establish a coordinated administrative governance framework that connects municipal, district, township (street), and village levels, facilitating the vertical integration of administrative resources across the three tiers of government. This structure is beneficial for addressing common issues and policy-related issues in grassroots governance in a collaborative manner. This approach facilitates coordinated management and avoids the evasion of responsibilities often associated with local management. This approach ultimately improves the agility of governance at the grassroots level.

This vertically integrated governance mechanism effectively connects urban governance with grassroots governance, facilitating a unified approach to governance at the city level. This approach diverges from the practices observed in other countries, where urban governance and grassroots governance are frequently separated. In these countries, citizen hotlines are often utilized exclusively for urban governance, relying on administrative frameworks, while grassroots governance is dependent on resident autonomy. The Third Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee underscored the necessity of integrated urban and rural development as a prerequisite for modernization with Chinese characteristics. The "Swift Response to Public Complaints" reform in Beijing serves as "a foundation for leveraging a citizen hotline for urban governance to stimulate grassroots governance."

Such a vertically integrated governance mechanism requires the CPC to provide leadership, as it plays a pivotal role in fostering grassroots organizations. By effectively connecting grassroots self-organizations with government structures at various levels, this mode facilitates a seamless integration of urban governance, district and county governance, township governance, and community autonomy. This comprehensive governance framework strengthens the social foundation of governance and enhances the sense of gain, happiness, and security among the populace.

5.3.5. Party building leading, Chinese culture and governance model innovation

The innovative grassroots governance reform model in Beijing, which is based on the assessment by the public (community evaluation and community discussion) approach, is rooted in moral governance. The "Swift Response to Public Complaints" reform has achieved a fusion of five governance dimensions

by building upon the four types of governance commonly adopted in other countries: the rule of law, political governance, intelligent governance, and self-governance.

The assessment by the public model in grassroots governance effectively leverages the role of moral education. The democratic assessment process allows the community to evaluate the legitimacy of personalized demands based on moral standards, local conventions, policies, and legal standards. Rational matters are collectively deliberated to seek solutions, thereby upholding fairness and justice within the region and promoting governance supported by moral principles.

The assessment by the public model has been instrumental in driving innovative practices in social governance in China. It has effectively integrated various governance elements to create a distinctive governance framework. It facilitates interactions within communities based on familiar relationships, enhancing the accessibility and resonance of the governance process with the populace. In this context, local norms are embedded in governance rules, reflecting a public interest orientation. More significantly, the assessment by the public model signifies a transition from a passive response to a proactive approach to prevention, and ultimately to active community participation in governance. This approach not only addresses immediate concerns but also fosters the intrinsic vitality and self-management capabilities of communities, establishing a novel paradigm that integrates “moral governance, legal governance, and self-governance” at its core.

This innovative model has established a new direction for the modernization of social governance with Chinese characteristics. The emergence and popularity of the moral governance model are largely attributed to its alignment with Chinese cultural characteristics. Scholars (Yang, 2024) have observed that, in comparison to other countries, the distinctive feature of governance tools employed in China is a greater emphasis on persuasion, utilizing knowledge, values, and emotional information to guide the populace. This approach is closely associated with the theoretical characteristics of the CPC and traditional Chinese culture. China's acquaintance society prevails in the culture of face and favor and that of following authority. In grassroots rural communities, the presence of familiar social networks is prevalent. Members of deliberation panels concerning the assessment by the public—such as veteran Party members and respected local figures—typically hold advantages of social familiarity and clan authority. When they mediate disputes, complainants are often influenced by traditional cultural values, leading them to “give face” and “follow authority,” thereby accepting the recommendations of the deliberation panel.

In many rural contexts, local culture plays a significant role in governance practices, often proving more effective than legal policies. These traditional cultural characteristics have shaped a distinctive approach to grassroots governance in China, combining moral governance and the rule of law. This approach alternates between proactive intervention and natural non-interference, as seen in the practice of assessment by the public. This practice exemplifies the potential and scope for innovation in social governance in China and showcases the wisdom of crowds in participating in this innovative process.

Furthermore, the innovation of governance models is also facilitated by Party-building leadership. The Party's guidance is reflected in the advancement of traditional spiritual and cultural values, which facilitates the effective implementation of the moral governance model. However, as the Party itself is an organizational system, effective internal governance within the Party is equally essential. It is therefore essential to strengthen the Party's own development, establish exemplary models, and provide vivid examples that resonate with the populace. This, in turn, encourages and motivates the populace to align with community norms recognized by themselves and the behavioral standards advocated by the government. This alignment fosters grassroots moral governance and self-governance, becoming a significant characteristic of the Party's leadership in China's grassroots governance.

6. Theoretical contributions and practical implications

This study makes a number of significant contributions to the existing literature on the subject. First, it applies the theory of agile governance to the field of grassroots governance, using the case concerning the process of issues submitted to higher-level government departments and assessed by the public in the Pinggu District of Beijing’s “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform. The study analyzes and constructs a theoretical framework for the grassroots agile governance system, which incorporates five new core constructs: value agility, process agility, mechanism agility, structure agility, and model agility. Furthermore, the interrelationships among these five constructs are analyzed, with value agility identified as a prerequisite for the other four factors. This represents a significant theoretical contribution to the field of grassroots governance, offering a new perspective that builds upon existing theories. Previous research has predominantly concentrated on urban governance issues from an agile perspective, with relatively limited attention directed towards the domain of grassroots governance. In studies utilizing the agile framework in government governance research, scholars have either examined the impact of antecedents such as artificial intelligence and digital technologies on government agility (Chatfield & Reddick, 2017) or focused on agile working methods, processes, and specific cases that embody the core principles of agile governance at the grassroots level (Li, Fan, & Nie, 2023). There is a paucity of studies that have distilled a complete theoretical framework from the practice of grassroots governance of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform, based on the perspective of agile governance.

Additionally, this research examines the institutional and cultural factors that have shaped the development of the fundamental principles of agile governance within the context of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform. Furthermore, it elucidates why the grassroots governance reform (“Swift Response to Public Complaints”) epitomizes the attributes of the Chinese governance model. A comparative analysis of the proposed Chinese grassroots agile governance framework in this study with similar theories from other countries should facilitate the dissection of the institutional pathways for optimizing agile governance in the future. This will contribute to theoretical innovation in the field of international public management.

The theoretical framework of the grassroots agile governance system proposed by this study offers valuable insights and experiences for grassroots governance in other regions of China and provides practical support for the enhancement of agile governance systems in relevant areas. This facilitates the presentation of the “China story” of grassroots agile governance in the digital transformation period, encourages the efficient integration of the agile governance paradigm in the digital era with grassroots governance practices, and enhances the applicability of the agile governance paradigm in the Chinese context. Some scholars have proposed agile governance as a novel perspective and practice to characterize the innovative methods by which governments operate. This approach emphasizes the importance of effectively responding to the evolving and increasingly complex needs of residents, while gradually moving away from the traditional “waterfall” bureaucratic model (Mergel et al., 2021).

In light of the aforementioned studies, this research undertakes an empirical investigation aimed at constructing a comprehensive model of grassroots agile governance systems. This model not only reflects the characteristics inherent in the governance of China, but also delineates more specific pathways for grassroots agile governance that can serve as references. Specifically, it posits that grassroots governments should not only swiftly address the demands of local residents and provide necessary services but also design governance processes tailored to these needs. Furthermore, it advocates for establishing a pluralistic co-governance structure involving grassroots residents and continuously empowering innovations in governance mechanisms and models to enhance both the efficiency and effectiveness of grassroots governance.

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Beijing's Application and Development of the Fengqiao Model in the New Era: Promoting the Building of a Social Governance Community Through the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" Mechanism

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ABSTRACT: In applying and developing the Fengqiao model in the new era, Beijing has reformed the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" mechanism. It has endeavored to respond to and resolve public complaints, thereby consolidating the public, organizational and resource foundations for the formation of a social governance community. From the perspective of building a social governance community and based on an understanding of the typical value of the Fengqiao model in the new era, this paper analyzes the Fengqiao model's influence reflected by three typical cases in the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" reform, introduces three paths for the reform to promote the building of a social governance community, and further summarizes the inheritance and innovation of the Fengqiao model in the reform.

KEYWORDS: Fengqiao model in the new era; social governance community; Swift Response to Public Complaints; primary-level governance

When primary-level governance is strong and secure, so is the country. As stressed by the Resolution of the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), "We

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will apply and further develop the Fengqiao model for promoting community-level governance in the new era, enhance the Party organization-led urban and rural community governance system based on self-governance, the rule of law, and the rule of virtue, and improve the social governance system based on collaboration, participation, and benefit sharing.” The Fengqiao model represents a method of mobilizing and relying on the people to resolve disputes at the community level under the leadership of the Party. This approach has demonstrated notable vitality by adapting to the changing nature of disputes across different periods. Since the 18th CPC National Congress, various regions have earnestly implemented General Secretary Xi Jinping’s major instructions on applying and developing the Fengqiao model in the new era. Through practical exploration relying on the people, the Fengqiao model has been continuously enriched and developed in the new era, contributing to a safe and stable social environment for realizing Chinese modernization.

With citizens’ demands as the focus of its “Swift Response to Public Complaints” mechanism, Beijing has made a series of institutional innovations, thereby encouraging the involvement of multiple stakeholders in addressing and resolving citizens’ concerns. It has thus created experience for resolving difficulties in cooperation, responsibility partition, interests coordination, and other aspects in the building of a social governance community, and has become a model for super-large cities to establish and develop a new system of smart and efficient governance. Starting with the coupling relationship between the Fengqiao model in the new era, the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” mechanism, and the attributes of social governance communities, and based on Beijing’s experience in making swift response to public complaints, this paper explores the application and development of the Fengqiao model through this mechanism in the new era, as well as paths to promote the building of a social governance community. It is expected to provide reference for building social governance communities and explaining urban practices of the Fengqiao model in the new era.

1. Review of Existing Research Outcomes and Features of This Study

A community is a social group of individuals having common historical traditions and cultural backgrounds, or common beliefs, value goals, and normative systems, with stable and enduring relationships (Wu, 2009). The concept of “community” can be traced back to Aristotle’s “political community,” that is, “a relationship and group formed for the purpose of achieving some common good.” Marx once stated, “Human nature is the true community of men,” (*Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, 2022) and further pointed out that individuals can achieve all-round development and freedom only within the community. German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies endowed “community,” an originally general concept, with academic connotations, stating that a community is an exclusive social connection or common way of life based on natural emotions and close bonds, and that this social connection or common way of life gives rise to a living community characterized by intimate relationships, mutual assistance, and human warmth. (Zhang et al., 2010) Tönnies’ definition of “community” is founded on his understanding of the characteristics of traditional society. “The emergence of such a community is more related to blood or geographical ties, religions, customs, or regional features, and is determined by the natural order of society. In real society, it is often manifested as families, clans, friendships, village communities, and neighborhoods.” (Cao, 2017) In such a community, the community and individuals share weal and woe, and individuals are highly dependent on the community.

Social governance, essentially, is to respond to issues that arise during the process of social structural

changes, such as social tensions. “The large-scale socialized production characterized by concentration, openness, and mobility has driven the decline of the pre-modern communities characterized by smallness, closedness, and intimate relationships, and has also weakened the role of geographical and blood ties in communities.” (Cao, 2017) Then, social governance communities, nurtured in modern society and generated on the basis of civilized rationality, public spirit, democratic consultation, and shared responsibility, come to the stage. In the field of social governance, community-related research mainly focuses on four key concepts: community, common good, social responsibility and obligation, and collective identity, emphasizing that community members are both rights holders and duty bearers, and that interdependent relationship prompts community members to develop a profound sense of belonging and identity while fulfilling their social responsibilities (serving the entire community rather than individuals). The community theory aligns with the combination of primary-level self-governance, the rule of law, and the rule of virtue, which provides a basis and path for interpreting how the Fengqiao model in the new era and the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform enhance the effectiveness of social governance (Cao, 2022; Chen, 2023; Zheng & Ren, 2024).

In the early 1960s, a practice relying on the people to resolve disputes at the community level was developed in Fengqiao Town of Zhejiang Province, hence the Fengqiao model. The main approach was to resolve the disputes locally through mobilizing and relying on the people, rather than passing on the disputes to higher authorities. This model exemplifies the CPC’s approach of relying on primary-level organisations to resolve disputes among the people, thereby facilitating orderly participation under the Party’s leadership. It has thus become a typical example for the building of primary-level social governance communities. Upholding the spirit of the Fengqiao model, the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” mechanism facilitates the governance of a super-large city in accordance with the citizens’ complaints and demands, and promotes the building of a social governance community in the super-large city through resolving the public complaints with innovative methods. When exploring how the Fengqiao model in the new era and the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform promote the building of a social governance community, some scholars illustrate the connotations and structure of primary-level governance communities from the dimensions of value and system (Zheng, 2024); some scholars discuss the paths to building primary-level social governance communities and point out that organizational synergy, value guidance, institutional arrangements, interests coordination, and technological empowerment should be used as tools to build cooperative communities with Chinese characteristics on the basis of consolidated common interests and common consciousness (Fu & Yao, 2023; Wang, 2023; Chen, 2021); some scholars stress that the government, the market, and social organizations should jointly act as the subjects in primary-level social governance during the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform, so as to promote the building of a community through multi-subject participation (Chen, 2023).

The academic circle has achieved some inspiring research outcomes regarding the Fengqiao model in the new era, the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform, and the building of social governance communities. But studies analyzing how the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” mechanism carries forward the Fengqiao model and makes further innovations, particularly case studies, remain scarce. The directions and paths of building primary-level social governance communities vary significantly in different eras and regions. This article connects the Fengqiao model in the new era, the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform, and the building of social governance communities from the dimensions of the leading role of Party building, the principal role of the people, and the role of innovative mechanisms. Furthermore, the article presents case studies that demonstrate the evolution of the Fengqiao model, shifting its focus from dispute resolution to active participation. It emphasises the importance of fostering relationships between key stakeholders in social governance communities and the mechanisms for their

collaboration. These elements collectively define the distinctive features of this article. Firstly, the Party's leadership mechanism facilitates two-way interaction between the Party and the people. The "Swift Response to Public Complaints" mechanism integrates Party organizations into primary-level units of society, gives full play to the Party's role of integrating and leading different social forces, and straightens out the relationships in primary-level social governance. It has thereby established a governance order characterized by social participation under the leading role of Party building and the guidance of the government. Secondly, it gives play to the principal role of the people. It is necessary to establish mechanisms of consultation, joint discussion, evaluation and feedback, and expand the scope and extent of social participation, so as to stimulate the people's initiative in participating in social governance. Thirdly, it mobilizes and integrates various resources for governance with technological support, to address the problems of insufficient and dispersed social governance resources and activate the vitality of primary-level social governance.

2. Fengqiao Model in the New Era: an Exemplar for the Building of Primary-Level Social Governance Communities

The Fengqiao model is evolving with the times in the new era. In the face of new situations and new tasks in primary-level social governance, it has been endowed with new connotations during the continuous exploration of methods and paths for resolving disputes in this regard. The prominent role of Party building represents a significant characteristic and advantage of the Fengqiao model in the new era, with its primary objective centered on resolving disputes at the primary level. With the ongoing reform and development, China has entered a period of frequent social disputes. The most prominent feature of the Fengqiao model in the new era lies in strengthening the Party's leadership and reinforcing the organizational foundation, to prevent and resolve disputes and risks at the primary level as far as possible. In the new era, it is necessary to develop the Fengqiao model in light of new situations, continuously sum up fresh experience, and accelerate the formation of a new pattern of modern primary-level social governance based on collaboration, participation, and benefit sharing. With its value going beyond the category of experience in comprehensive social governance, the Fengqiao model has become a normative exemplar for building primary-level social governance communities.

2.1 Upholding the Party's leadership and strengthening the functions of primary-level organizations, to explore effective paths to resolving disputes at the primary level under the new circumstances

The primary-level units of society (such as communities and villages) are the actual space where different interest groups interact, and also the areas where social disputes and problems frequently occur. Only by leveraging the robust capabilities of the primary-level Party organizations to unite the people can diverse interest groups be united under common goals. Furthermore, various resources can be efficiently integrated through cross-organizational and inter-departmental resource allocation and coordinated efforts, thereby addressing social disputes in their initial stages. Over six decades have elapsed since its inception in a small town during the 1960s, and the Fengqiao model has since been promoted nationwide. It has presented different features in different historical periods, but its core feature – upholding the Party's leadership and strengthening the functions of primary-level organizations – remains unchanged.

In the new era, the Fengqiao model keeps evolving with the needs of the times. It is being endowed with new connotations in the continuous exploration of methods and paths for resolving disputes in

primary-level social governance which is faced with new situations and tasks. The leading role of Party building is an important feature and advantage of the Fengqiao model in the new era, with resolving social disputes at the primary level as its core objective. With the ongoing reform and development, China has entered a period of frequent social disputes. The most prominent feature of the Fengqiao model in the new era lies in strengthening the Party's leadership and reinforcing the organizational foundation, to prevent and resolve disputes and risks at the primary level as far as possible. General Secretary Xi Jinping has put forward new requirements for applying and developing the Fengqiao model, enabling it to play a greater role in consolidating primary-level social governance and resolving disputes. As Xi stressed, relying on the people to prevent and resolve disputes and adhering to the principle of "solving small matters within the village and big matters within the town, without passing on the disputes to higher authorities" are the experience created by Fengqiao Town for primary-level social governance. He also emphasized the necessity of carrying forward the Fengqiao model in light of new situations and continuously summing up fresh experience, to accelerate the formation of a new pattern of modern primary-level social governance based on collaboration, participation, and benefit sharing. With its value transcending the category of experience in comprehensive social governance, the Fengqiao model has become a normative exemplar for building primary-level social governance communities.

2.2 Adhering to the mass line and consolidating the people-centered values, to build social governance communities in which everyone assumes and fulfills responsibilities and enjoys benefits

The mass line is the lifeline of the CPC and the fundamental guide to its work, and it is also a basic principle that must be followed for strengthening social governance and developing innovative approaches in this regard. The Fengqiao model takes the mass line as the guideline, and upholds people-centered values. On September 20, 2023, when visiting an exhibition hall featuring the Fengqiao model, General Secretary Xi Jinping stressed the requirements of applying and developing the Fengqiao model in the new era, upholding the Party's mass line, appropriately handling disputes among the people, and resolving the disputes at the primary level and in their initial stages by relying on the people.

The Fengqiao model is a practical creation of the Party's mass line in primary-level governance. The disputes and problems that arise in primary-level governance must be resolved with the wisdom of the public. Comrade Mao Zedong repeatedly emphasized that problems should be resolved by following the mass line according to actual conditions. He pointed out: "Correctly handling the contradictions among the people means following the mass line, which is consistently stressed by our Party. Party members should be good at consulting the masses in their work and in no circumstances should they alienate themselves from the masses." In the new period of reform, opening up, and socialist modernization, as new trends and circumstances emerged in the disputes in primary-level governance, changes took place in the situations and tasks facing the Party's mass work, but the spirit embodied in the Fengqiao model – relying on the people's wisdom to solve their problems – remained unchanged.

Since the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012, General Secretary Xi Jinping has expounded on the importance of strengthening mass work in social governance, emphasizing that in all activities related to governance, it is necessary to respect the people's principal position in the country, respect their creativity, and look to them as teachers. The general public is a valuable source of insight and strength. This is why it is essential to adhere to the principle of "from the people, to the people". As Xi has pointed out, the Fengqiao model contains the Party's strategy for handling problems and resolving disputes, that is, following the mass line and relying on the people to solve problems at the primary level and in their initial stages.

In the new era, the Fengqiao model has risen from local experience to a basic strategy for national

governance. It is essentially because this model always adheres to the people-centered approach, taking it as the fundamental value underlying primary-level social governance, and making it an important guarantee for building social governance communities. Giving full play to the principal role of the people is an important path and method to build social governance communities in which everyone has and fulfills responsibilities and enjoys benefits.

2.3 Making innovations in institutions and mechanisms and improving the social governance system, to form a sound social governance system based on collaboration, participation, and benefit sharing

The Fengqiao model has played a role in different historical periods, and a very important reason is that the primary-level officials and the people sum up their experience and practices in a timely manner and elevate them to institutions, endowing this practical exploration of correctly handling contradictions among the people with significance of institutional innovation. A remarkable feature of the Fengqiao model in the new era is that it always upholds fundamental principles and breaks new ground, and improves the social governance system in line with the requirements of "systematic, law-based, and comprehensive governance at the source", thereby laying the foundation for forming a sound social governance system based on collaboration, participation, and benefit sharing.

The scope of the Fengqiao model in the new era has undergone a significant expansion. While its original function was to resolve conflicts and disputes and maintain social stability, it has now evolved to encompass the prevention and resolution of a multitude of social risks, as well as the safeguarding of national security. It has already become an important component of the primary-level social governance system of socialism with Chinese characteristics and a major aspect of promoting the modernization of the system and capacity for social governance. Under the Fengqiao model in the new era, innovative institutions and mechanisms have been continuously developed, constituting a multi-level, socialized system for conflict and dispute mediation. Zhuji City in Zhejiang Province has established 13 professional mediation committees for disputes in such areas as environmental pollution, property, medical treatment, and traffic accidents, as well as a batch of recognized mediation institutions such as "Old Yang Mediation Studio," "Sister Jiang Mediation Room," and "Juanzi Studio." They have developed "Seven Mediation Methods" for different objects, and resolved various problems and disputes in the bud at the first scene, thereby effectively preventing further expansion and spread of disputes and exacerbation of small matters. A batch of "zero-petition towns and villages" and "litigation-free villages" have thus been established in the city.¹ Upholding the people's principal position, the Fengqiao model in the new era activates the vitality of public participation in social governance; persisting in developing innovative methods for dispute mediation under the rule of law, it facilitates the general public's respect, study, adherence to, and utilisation of the law, while simultaneously reinforcing legal constraints; combining national macro policies with regional social realities, and traditional culture with the spirit of the times, it contributes to the culture of rule by virtue; utilizing innovative digital carriers, it extends governance space from offline places to online platforms, and develops new digital governance technologies. The Fengqiao model in the new era has formed a social governance system that combines self-governance, the rule of law, the rule of virtue, and smart governance, and become an exemplar for building a social governance pattern based on collaboration, participation, and benefit sharing.

1 China Leadership Science Research Group, "Decoding the Fengqiao Model in the New Era," *China Leadership Science*, Issue No. 6, 2019.

3. Swift Response to Public Complaints: The Capital's Practice of the Fengqiao Model in the New Era

As an exemplar for primary-level social governance, the Fengqiao model has promoted theoretical, institutional and methodological innovation in this respect. Following the spirit of the Fengqiao model in the new era, the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" mechanism has creatively applied this model in Beijing, the capital city of China. Epitomizing the efforts made by super-large cities to carry forward the Fengqiao model, it is a vivid practice for promoting the building of urban social governance communities in the new era.

Over the past five years, Beijing has innovatively carried out the reform of strengthening the leading role of Party building in making swift response to public complaints. Based on the citizen service hotline, it has introduced innovative institutions and mechanisms, and developed the experience of governing a super-large city in light of the citizens' demands. The municipal Party secretary convenes monthly special meetings of the municipal Party committee and monthly performance review meetings of heads of Party committees and leadership groups of the districts and municipal departments; the district Party secretaries convene monthly performance review meetings of sub-district and township Party secretaries; and the sub-district and township Party secretaries directly coordinate the work of heads of Party organizations of villages and communities. Party members and officials go to the primary-level units, accomplish work orders, go through procedures, and stay at particular units in need of assistance, in an effort to resolve problems in the front line for the public. Nowadays, as long as the citizens dial the hotline "12345" to report any problems, there will be immediate response and acceptance, and the problems will be handled quickly and effectively. Under the Party's leadership and the government's vigorous efforts, and with the active participation of the public, Beijing, with a focus on the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" reform, has brought about many meaningful cases at the primary-level units of society, and it has thus become a vivid example of promoting the building of a social governance community.

3.1 The "Discussion for Solutions" mechanism: forming a synergy for governance under the leading role of Party building

Mobilizing the people to participate in the effective governance of their primary-level organizations is not only an essential approach for the Fengqiao model in the new era to exert its role, but also a crucial link in the building of primary-level social governance communities. With the establishment of the market economic system, social interests have undergone a significant differentiation, and the people have increasingly strong awareness of rights and independent consciousness. In the new era, primary-level governance is confronted with new situations and exhibits new characteristics. Particularly in the governance of super-large cities, there are prominent problems such as the disparity between the rich and the poor, differences in opinions, contradictions between urban and rural areas, and a weakening sense of identity. How to build primary-level governance communities in urban areas poses a major challenge to governance in the new era. Beijing's Haidian District has implemented the "Discussion for Solutions" mechanism, and thus extensively mobilized the people's participation in the affairs of community upgrading and renovation. Things to do and person(s) in charge are proposed by the people, who will also discuss how to do these things and evaluate the effects. In this way, the people's concerns can be addressed in a targeted, pragmatic and effective manner. The "Discussion for Solutions" mechanism has established smooth channels for the expression and reflection of public opinions, and enabled the people to participate in making decisions on the public affairs in their communities, thereby creating experience for promoting the building of social governance communities.

In 2023, Haidian District started implementing this mechanism under the leading role of Party building, transforming the concept of consultative democracy into an institutional practice and improving the effectiveness of primary-level governance. Following the principle of "market affairs handled by the market, government affairs handled by the government, and people's affairs handled by everyone", the district has optimized the attribution of public service resources in line with the people's needs, established 651 zero- and low-complaint communities, and facilitated a shift from passive complaint handling to proactive response and from *ad hoc* case handling to regular governance. Through the "Discussion for Solutions" mechanism, the Party organizations at all levels have fully stimulated the people's enthusiasm for participating in public affairs, and established platforms for legal affairs, public welfare, relief, and consultation, so that stakeholders can discuss and decide on the issues together. By facilitating comprehensive deliberation and consultation among all pertinent stakeholders and fostering a sense of collective responsibility and awareness of the broader context, this mechanism has contributed to the formation of a unified approach to governance.

3.2 The "Tuesday Appointments" mechanism: building a co-governance pattern through social collaboration

In order to achieve effective primary-level governance, it is essential to ensure that all sectors of society are able to fulfil their roles, to encourage the vitality of society as a whole, to facilitate greater public consultation on matters that affect them, and to facilitate public participation in collective affairs. Paying attention to social participation is a distinct feature of the Fengqiao model in the new era. Beijing's reform of the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" mechanism adheres to the principle of promoting multi-subject co-governance under the leading role of Party building, and pays particular attention to giving play to the exemplary role of Party members. In-service Party members are encouraged to report for duty at the Party branches of grids and take the lead in participating in neighborhood governance and providing volunteer services. Additionally, attention is also given to mobilizing the synergy among various social groups and leveraging the role of specialized social organizations, to seek professional solutions to disputes and complaints in primary-level social governance and promote the formation of a social governance pattern based on collaboration, participation, and benefit sharing.

Andingmen, a sub-district of Beijing's Dongcheng District, has innovated its working concept, mobilized the forces of different sectors of society, and implemented a working mechanism for making swift response to knotty complaints. Every Tuesday, division-level officials in charge of specific cases organize forces from eight fields to jointly look into the actual demands of residents in the jurisdiction and solve problems facing governance. Under this mechanism, services are provided to residents in the jurisdiction, with the purpose of effectively resolving their complaints just at their doorsteps.

Firstly, give full play to the role of Party members and officials and establish a case-handling mechanism in the charge of division-level officials. Division-level officials must go deep into communities every Tuesday, and in response to the campaign of "doing practical things for the people", they should strengthen guidance on and coordination of the work targeted at the knotty problems and difficult issues intensively reflected by the people. Secondly, cultivate social organizations and resolve "annoying problems" through the project of strengthening psychological security. To handle knotty complaints swiftly, Andingmen Sub-district promotes professional resolution of problems at the source. Thirdly, establish self-governance teams to solve problems through joint efforts. Senior Party members, volunteers, and community assistants may act as community governance supervisors and thus actively participate in primary-level governance and services. In the meantime, this approach also enables residents in the jurisdiction to find "the organization" promptly when they discover problems, and their demands can be responded to and addressed in a timely manner. In this way, proactive governance and

pre-complaint resolutions can be achieved, improving the efficiency of resolution while reducing the incidence of complaints. Therefore, in addition to enhancing the efficiency of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” mechanism, Andingmen Sub-district has also promoted the mechanism building for public participation in social governance.

3.3 “Digital and Intelligent Shuangjing”: improving efficiency of primary-level governance based on technological empowerment

One of the distinct features of the Fengqiao model in the new era is that it is good at combining the Party’s fine traditions with new technologies, and implementing innovative mechanisms to seek benefits, handle affairs, and solve problems for the people. In the process of applying and developing the Fengqiao model in the new era, Beijing has fully utilized such technologies as big data and cloud computing, to develop innovative methods and approaches for primary-level governance. It has endeavored to build a primary-level governance platform featuring sound grid-based management, refined services, and information technology support, to make governance more intelligent and efficient. Based on technological empowerment, Beijing’s “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform collects citizens’ demands through the 12345 platform, grasps the laws of governance through demand analysis, and uses data mining, to provide support for decision-making. On the basis of regional characteristics such as the features of residents and the conditions for regional economic and social development, Shuangjing Sub-district of Chaoyang District precisely finds the starting point for the combination of human resources and technology, and introduces innovative mechanisms and systems, thus establishing a model for resolving disputes in primary-level social governance and improving the efficiency of governance.

As Beijing’s first digital economy demonstration sub-district, Shuangjing has been continuously strengthening digital and intelligent empowerment as well as factor and resource sharing. With “smart construction, smart governance, and smart sharing” as the core concept, it explores a new model of regional coordinated development. Relying on its “Urban Brain” (the Shuangjing Urban Smart Brain Operation Center), Shuangjing integrates resources in line with categories and levels, and strengthens digital and intelligent empowerment in such aspects as urban operation, safe communities, property management, and home-based elderly care, thus achieving “overall planning through one network and overall observation on one screen.” Through the “Urban Brain,” all situations within the sub-district, from the real-time passenger flows of shopping malls and the office buildings’ leasing situation, to the excessive smoke emissions from restaurants and the accumulation of shared bikes, can be clearly observed.

Firstly, the “Urban Brain” helps make swift response to public complaints. The urban smart brain built by the sub-district, based on the data hub, realizes precise mastery of various data in the jurisdiction. After receiving a complaint in need of swift response, the sub-district can quickly get to know the cause and effect of the problem through the smart brain, make accurate judgments, and promptly find the best solution. Secondly, the “Urban Brain” helps achieve pre-complaint resolution. For example, on the basis of its in-depth analyses of the complaints to the 12345 platform over the past few years, Shuangjing’s “Urban Brain” predicted the approximate locations of pipeline blockages during the flood season. The sub-district promptly contacted relevant departments to send “underground robots,” which probed the internal conditions of pipelines without large-scale ground excavation. Thirdly, digitalization gives rise to an ecological community based on digital economy. In the process of developing digital economy, Shuangjing Sub-district adopts a government-enterprise collaboration model in which the government sets up the platform and enterprises participate in the construction. It has guided the three major commercial areas within its jurisdiction to accelerate digitalized development, and achieved full coverage of 5G facilities and digital smart management. Shuangjing has issued the city’s first sub-district-level work plan

for developing digital economy, and it has also arranged social workers specialized in digital economy, further expanding basic services to new fields. It has created the city's first digital economy-themed park, promoting the organic integration of ecological space and urban space.

4. Paths for Promoting the Building of a Social Governance Community Through the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" Mechanism

In the exploration of building a primary-level governance community, Beijing's experience and actions in implementing the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" mechanism have achieved a positive interaction among ideas, systems, and practices. Through such means as strengthening the leading role of Party building, encouraging the people's participation in discussion and consultation, excavating and fostering the strength of professional social organizations, and utilizing digital empowerment, the city has given play to the role of Party building in organizing and integrating different forces, consolidated the people-centered value foundation, and integrated scattered social and technological resources.

4.1 Giving play to the role of Party building in organizing and integrating different forces

In light of the growing complexities and uncertainties inherent in primary-level governance in super-large cities, it is evident that the formation of a harmonious and orderly governance community cannot be achieved in a spontaneous manner. Rather, it necessitates a concerted effort, guided by the leadership and direction of political forces, to construct or reconstruct such a community. Giving play to the Party's advantages in organizing and integrating different forces, the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" reform has provided organizational and institutional guarantees for the building of a social governance community.

In response to the complicated relationships among different stakeholders, the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" reform lays emphasis on the core political principle of upholding the Party's leadership, thus providing institutional guidance and momentum for achieving proactive governance and pre-complaint resolution at the primary-level units of society. For instance, under the "Discussion for Solutions" mechanism, primary-level Party branches fully play the leading role in connecting different links, and make all organizations and forces within the jurisdiction closely united around the Party, to maximize organizational advantages, service resources, and service functions. Haidian District has divided the sub-districts and communities (villages) into multiple primary-level grids, and set up functional Party branches or groups for the grids in combination with Party building in the Party and government organizations, enterprises, neighborhoods, social organizations, and communities, with resident Party members serving as the heads of these Party branches or groups. Thus, all primary-level units within the district are under the leadership of Party organizations, and resources and service forces are gathered for communities in grids. In response to the people's concerns such as property management and parking, the Party organizations of the grids take the lead in handling matters. They convene meetings of representatives of Party members, property management, and residents to conduct democratic consultations and deliberations on determined topics, provide guidance, and coordinate implementation of the consensus. With the advancement and implementation of democratic consultation, a powerful force for co-governance has taken shape effectively. Party organizations' integration into primary-level social governance, and their role of absorbing individuals and groups and leading the people in upholding correct values play an important part in promoting the modernization of primary-level

social governance.

4.2 Activating the principal role of the people

A flexible, adaptable governance structure of diverse elements demands a core founded on common values and collective bonds. Adhering to the people-centered approach and the mass line, the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform has consolidated the internal foundation for the formation of a social governance community through activating the principal role of the people and embedding consensus.

In terms of activating the principal role of the people, the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform has successfully stimulated the internal motivation of various subjects for governance through proactively adapting to the people’s needs and improving the response mechanism. The working approach based on consultation and deliberation not only contributes to enhancing the residents’ awareness of self-governance and law-based governance as well as their capacity, but also facilitates interaction between individuals and the community as well as their development during the problem-solving process.

In terms of embedding consensus, establishing sound mechanisms for expressing, gathering, and analyzing public opinions is a crucial approach to addressing problems at the source and resolving disputes and conflicts. Through listening to opinions, reflecting demands, forging consensus, enhancing unity, and pooling strength, the “Discussion for Solutions” mechanism has created experience in primary-level governance in which “what to do, how to do it, and how well it is done” are all determined by the people. In practice, based on the principles of seeking common ground while reserving differences and maximizing public interests, the mechanism safeguards the interests of the majority. As for the content of consultation, it focuses on public affairs concerning the people’s vital interests. Following the principle of starting with easy matters and progressing to difficult ones, discussions commence with small and straightforward issues, and problems are thus addressed step by step. This mechanism establishes an open platform that organizes and guides relevant stakeholders in the consultation process. It mobilizes collective wisdom, encourages proactive participation from all parties, and directs the public to adhere to established rules. Furthermore, it promotes rational expression of demands in accordance with the law and facilitates equitable dialogue among participants. It is thus a long-term approach in primary-level governance, which can continuously contribute to resolving differences and forming consensus.

4.3 Improving efficiency through innovation

While the specific tasks and practical forms may vary across different historical periods, the core objective of the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform has remained consistent: to proactively address and resolve the urgent, complex, and concerning issues raised by the public. In the context of increasingly complicated scenarios of governance, the principle of systematic, law-based, and comprehensive governance at the source has set the direction for the building of a social governance community, with various resources and forces integrated into the process of achieving the goal.

In terms of absorbing social resources, Andingmen Sub-district has fully mobilized the forces of different sectors of society to promote swift resolution of knotty complaints. Its distinct feature is to leverage the synergy of social governance and establish a professional psychological service team, to address challenges with professional expertise. The cases of resolving disputes with professional thinking and legal thinking serve as a model for promoting the building of social governance communities. In terms of integrating technological forces, Shuangjing Sub-district has enhanced its technological capabilities to establish an eco-system of digital economy based on smart living, smart business, smart commerce, smart learning, and smart travel. This has facilitated the exploration of new models of regional coordinated development and the implementation of a new governance pattern featuring the Party’s leadership, digital intelligence empowerment, technological support, and professional strength.

By leveraging technology to enhance primary-level governance, it has effectively transformed its digital advantage into tangible governance effectiveness, continuously refining and modernizing its governance system and capacity.

5. Applying and Innovating the Fengqiao Model in the New Era by the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" Reform

As stressed by the Third Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee, it is necessary to apply and further develop the Fengqiao model for promoting community-level governance in the new era, enhance the Party organization-led urban and rural community governance system based on self-governance, the rule of law, and the rule of virtue, and improve the social governance system based on collaboration, participation, and benefit sharing. In order to respond to public demands, resolve the contradictions in primary-level governance, and satisfy the people's growing needs for a better life, the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" reform has embodied the capital's exemplary efforts of practicing the Fengqiao model in the new era to improve the social governance system based on collaboration, participation, and benefit sharing. The reform has been oriented towards the resolution of citizens' complaints and has effectively promoted the formation of a new system of smart and efficient urban governance.

5.1 Learning and applying the Fengqiao model in the new era, the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" reform keeps strengthening the leading role of Party building, upholds the Party's leadership throughout the entire process, transforms the advantages of the Party's leadership into the dynamic performance and effectiveness of social governance, and continuously advances the modernization of the national governance system and capacity.

Inheriting and carrying forward the core gene of the Fengqiao model, the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" reform adheres to the leading role of Party building and exerts the advantages of the CPC as a well-organized political party. It gives play to the leading role of Party committees and the model role of Party members, and straightens out organizational relationships and clarifies the boundaries of powers and responsibilities under the Party's leadership, laying a solid organizational foundation for the building of social governance communities. The "Swift Response to Public Complaints" mechanism emphasizes collaborative governance, but the interaction and penetration among multiple subjects in governance lead to blurred responsibility boundaries as well as evasion or shifting of responsibilities, resulting in the difficulty of identifying subjects of responsibility. Through political guidance, high cohesion is achieved in each governance unit to promote steady development of the reform. In addition, the reform has also vigorously mobilized the resources of units in different districts, and established the mechanism requiring Party members to report for duty to two Party organizations. Moreover, Party and government officials should go deep into the primary-level units of society. It has thereby promoted functional departments, Party and government officials, and in-service Party members to report to communities for service, integrated and leveraged the forces of various volunteer services, and explored new paths for the building of social governance communities. The "Swift Response to Public Complaints" mechanism combines Party building's leading role with its advantage in mobilizing and organizing different social forces, promotes officials to shoulder responsibility and take actions, and gives play to the key role of primary-level Party organizations, thereby fully transforming Party building's "political advantages" and

“organizational advantages” into motivation for serving the people.

5.2 Learning and applying the Fengqiao model in the new era, the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform adheres to the people-centered values, focuses on the people’s concerns, and puts the people-centered philosophy into practice through institutional mechanisms and process reengineering.

As the fundamental value serves as the foundation for all aspects of social governance, the people-centred philosophy plays a pivotal role in not only establishing social governance communities but also in providing the underlying rationale for the evolution of the Fengqiao model from a local initiative to a comprehensive national strategy for governance in the new era. The “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform always puts the people first, aims to meet the people’s needs, and highlights the principal position of the people in primary-level social governance, thereby realizing an organic connection between the national logic and the primary-level logic in building social governance communities. For a long time, due to cognitive, structural, and functional inadequacies in the primary-level governance system, there were various problems. For example, there was a misunderstanding that “primary-level authorities serve higher authorities”, leading to the neglect of the needs of the people in primary-level units of society. Structurally, there were issues of mismatched duties, powers, and interests, leading to a predicament where “those who notice the problems have no powers to deal with the problems while those who have powers cannot notice the problems”. Functionally, there was the embarrassment of “a small horse pulling a big cart” caused by inaccurate assignment of duties. The “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform, upholding the principle of putting the people first, encourages the people to “blow the whistle” on problems. Aiming to swiftly respond to and efficiently handle the people’s complaints, this reform has coordinated and integrated the forces within and beyond the government, to respond to public demands with the synergy. It has thus effectively solved problems such as the “fragmentation” of the administrative organization system and the asymmetry between administrative resources and public demands, established an overall image of the governments with a unified service hotline, and improved the efficiency and capacity of urban governments to resolve the people’s complaints in a coordinated manner.

5.3 Learning and applying the Fengqiao model in the new era, the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform promotes multi-subject co-governance under the leading role of Party building, and continuously improves the social governance system based on collaboration, participation, and benefit sharing, to promote the building of social governance communities in the new era.

Laying emphasis on diversifying the subjects in social governance, mobilizing the people’s enthusiasm for participating in social governance, and giving play to the principal role of the people in resolving social contradictions are important features of the Fengqiao model in the new era. In advancing the “Swift Response to Public Complaints” reform, Beijing always promotes multi-subject co-governance under the leading role of Party building, and enables as many residents as possible to have the right to direct participation in social governance through mobilizing people’s enthusiasm and smoothing channels for the people to reflect social conditions and express opinions. For major matters such as the construction of community public service facilities, full discussion and decision-making must be conducted with the residents’ self-determined and voluntary participation under the guidance of community Party committees. Through full democratic consultation, more residents participate in decision-making, and therefore, problems caused by insufficient consultation, such as the Not-in-My-Back-Yard conflicts and the needs of bidirectional communication, are reduced or resolved. During the reform, a large number of primary-level innovative practices and approaches have emerged, as represented by the “Discussion for Solutions” mechanism and the “Tuesday Appointments” mechanism. These practices, following the concept of multi-subject co-governance based on collaboration, participation, and benefit sharing,

aim to resolve the people's complaints through methods developed in line with local conditions, times, and individual needs, so as to promote the formation of self-governance communities with shared responsibilities and interests. They have thus laid the foundation for promoting the building of primary-level social governance communities.

5.4 Learning and applying the Fengqiao model in the new era, the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" reform fully utilizes the data on the 12345 platform, improves data-supported decision-making systems and dispute resolution mechanisms, and creates experience of pre-complaint resolution and systematic governance, striving to achieve the transformation from "not passing on disputes to higher authorities" to "reducing and preventing occurrence of disputes."

Throughout the innovative development of the Fengqiao model, innovations have been made constantly in the methods and means used in different periods for primary-level governance and dispute resolution. In the new era, using information technologies to develop innovative governance methods, or "smart governance," is also a prominent feature of the Fengqiao model. Data support is taken as an important means and method in advancing Beijing's "Swift Response to Public Complaints" reform. To make swift response to public complaints, the city has made full use of internet, big data, cloud computing and other information technologies, and achieved remarkable outcomes in resource sharing, information connectivity, coordinated work, and comprehensive and systematic governance. It has created experience in promoting the formation of a new system of smart governance in a super-large city. On the one hand, it focuses on the urgent concerns of the people, and integrates the whole-process people's democracy of the new era into the "Swift Response to Public Complaints" reform with technological support. With the support of new media and new technologies, the information about the demand for resolving conflicts and disputes is incorporated into the government's public decision-making in a timely manner. On the other hand, the reform has built an intelligent collaborative platform based on big data, developed mobile apps and such functions as "snap and upload," encouraged the people to report risks in public security and demands for livelihood in real time, promoted decision-making communication and collaborative interaction among various functional departments, and built a smart analysis and judgment mechanism for primary-level social governance. It has effectively prevented, resolved, or punished various factors leading to social contradictions and instability. Effectively resolving social contradictions on the basis of the combination of self-governance, the rule of virtue, the rule of law, and smart governance, the reform will promote the formation of a new system of urban smart governance.

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