

# From the Mass Line to "Joint Creation": Theoretical Development and Practical Exploration of Grassroots Governance in China

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## ABSTRACT

The proposal and implementation of the concept of "jointly creating a beautiful environment and a happy life" represent a significant and profound transformation in China's grassroots governance model. This paper seeks to establish an interpretive framework spanning history, theory, and practice, elucidating how "joint creation" constitutes a creative inheritance and institutional development of the Party's "mass line" within the governance context of the new era. The article first traces back to Comrade Mao Zedong's On Practice and On Contradiction, outlining the core epistemological and methodological essence of the Mass Line. It then discusses how "Co-Creation" transforms traditional political philosophy into concrete, actionable governance techniques through the "Five Shared" operational system: shared decision-making, shared development, shared management, shared evaluation, and shared benefits. Building on this foundation, the article further indicates that "co-creation" has progressively formed a four-dimensional operational model in practice: "Party leadership-process reengineering-institutional adaptation-technological empowerment." This model helps resolve long-standing challenges such as the fragmentation of bureaucratic systems, the dispersion of governance resources, and insufficient social participation, thereby reshaping the interactive relationship between the state and society in grassroots governance. Finally, the article briefly reflects on tensions and difficulties encountered in practice, explores its contributions to the theory of socialist governance with Chinese characteristics, and discusses its implications for modernizing the national governance system and governance capabilities.

## KEYWORDS

Joint Creation; Mass Line; Grassroots Governance; Party Building Leadership; Governance Modernization; State-Society Relations.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THEORETICAL PURSUITS IN CHINA'S GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE INNOVATION

Grassroots governance serves as the bedrock of national governance, with its effectiveness directly impacting regime stability and sustained social development. As China's primary social contradiction has shifted to the gap between the people's ever-growing needs for a better life and unbalanced and inadequate development, the traditional single-track governance model dominated by administrative directives has increasingly struggled to address the complex and diversified public demands emerging at the grassroots level. Against this backdrop, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development launched the "Joint Creation of Beautiful Environments and Happy Lives" initiative in 2019. This

initiative has evolved from its initial focus on environmental remediation into a new grassroots governance pathway with broad reference value.

Existing research on "co-creation" primarily focuses on policy evolution, local implementation outcomes, and operational mechanisms [1-5]. However, a fundamental theoretical question remains inadequately addressed: What theoretical traditions and political logic underpin this dynamic governance innovation? Reducing it to merely a technical management tool or temporary policy adjustment fails to capture its unique significance and enduring vitality within China's governance context.

This paper argues that the core of "co-creation" lies in the contemporary revitalization and innovative application of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) valuable tradition of the "mass line." As a crucial component of Mao Zedong Thought and a key achievement in the Sinicization of Marxism, the mass line's classic tenet—"Everything for the people, everything relying on the people; from the people, to the people"—provides the deepest theoretical nourishment for "co-creation." This study attempts to connect the theoretical threads spanning the revolutionary and governance eras, systematically elucidating how "co-creation" inherits and develops the philosophical core of the mass line while transforming it into a modern governance framework that is operational, scalable, and verifiable. This not only helps theoretically clarify the "Chinese essence" of "co-creation" but also offers practical insights for advancing grassroots governance modernization.

## **2. THEORETICAL CONTINUITY: THE TRANSFORMATION FROM WORKING METHOD TO GOVERNANCE MODEL**

### **2.1. The Philosophical Foundation of the Mass Line and Its Implications for Governance**

The theoretical foundation of the mass line originates from Marxist historical materialism, which holds that "the masses are the creators of history." Comrade Mao Zedong's *On Practice* and *On Contradiction* laid a solid epistemological and methodological foundation for this principle.

The Epistemology and Policy Origins of "From the Masses" "From the Masses" embodies this principle in political practice: transforming the dispersed, intuitive opinions of the masses into systematic, rational policy proposals through concentration and research. This signifies that governance decisions must be rooted in grassroots realities, not detached from reality through abstract design.

The practice theory of "going among the masses" and policy implementation. The rational understanding (policy) that emerges must be tested in the practice of the masses and continuously refined and developed through practice. This emphasizes that policy execution is not a one-way imposition but an ongoing process of interaction with the masses, enabling their understanding, acceptance, and collective action.

The Dialectics of "On Contradiction" and Resource Allocation in Governance. The method of contradiction analysis requires identifying the principal contradiction. In grassroots governance, this means accurately pinpointing the most urgent and critical public needs from the complex array of people's demands, thereby enhancing the efficiency and precision of limited governance resources.

Thus, the Mass Line not only embodies the value stance of "serving the people" but also constitutes a set of working methods and leadership artistry imbued with profound philosophical wisdom, inherently rich in governance implications.

## **2.2. "Joint Creation": The Concretization and Institutionalization of the Mass Line in Governance Practice**

The significant contribution of "Co-Creation" lies in its systematic "transformation" of the philosophical principles of the Mass Line into an institutionalized, operational governance implementation system, achieving an evolution from a "political work method" to a "modern governance model" [3,6].

The "co-planning" mechanism provides procedural norms for "originating from the masses." By establishing institutional platforms such as village deliberative councils and community consultation forums, it ensures that policy proposals, discussions, and decisions follow established procedures, guaranteeing that governance needs originate from the people and governance solutions incorporate collective wisdom.

The "co-construction-co-management" mechanism operationalizes the principle of "going among the masses." "Co-construction" mobilizes diverse forces to translate blueprints into reality, while "co-management" establishes long-term maintenance mechanisms through village regulations and community covenants. Together, they form a complete closed-loop integrating policy implementation with public participation, transforming governance into collective action where citizens actively engage and continuously adapt [7].

The "co-evaluation-co-sharing" mechanism serves as a democratic test of governance outcomes and a feedback loop for results. "Co-evaluation" involves diverse stakeholders in assessments, effectively returning partial judgment authority over practical outcomes to the people, thereby generating momentum for feedback and improvement. "Co-sharing" ensures governance benefits equitably reach all participants, embodying the ultimate value of "everything for the people" while providing the fundamental guarantee for governance to gain support and sustain itself [2].

This transformation theoretically bridges the gap between revolutionary-era political discourse and modern governance theory, enabling the Party's traditional political strengths to be more stably and systematically translated into governance effectiveness.

## **3. PRACTICAL MECHANISM: THE FOUR-DIMENSIONAL SYNERGY AND OPERATIONAL LOGIC OF "JOINT CREATION"**

The effective implementation of "co-creation" relies on an operational system driven by the coordinated interaction of four key dimensions.

### **3.1. Value Guidance Dimension: Party Building Leadership and the "One Core, Multiple Entities" Collaborative Framework**

Grassroots Party organizations serve as the political core and driving force of "co-creation." Their role transcends conventional "leadership," manifesting as political integration and organizational mobilization [4].

**Vertically Integrated "Transmission System":** By establishing a Party organization network spanning "county-town-village-group (building)", political guidance and administrative resources are extended to the grassroots level, alleviating the "last mile" challenge and facilitating effective alignment between national policy and grassroots needs.

**Horizontal Coverage of the "Organizational Network":** Party organizations leverage their "diverse cohesion" function by cultivating and linking various economic entities, local elders' councils, volunteer groups, and other social forces. This builds a "one-core, multi-stakeholder" collaborative governance framework, integrating dispersed social resources to overcome collective action dilemmas [8].

### **3.2. Process Innovation Dimension: The "Five Shared" Processes' Reinvention of Governance**

The "Five Shared" approach represents a profound transformation of traditional administrative processes, redefining the roles and relationships among government, society, and residents throughout the governance cycle [9].

From Administrative Directive to Collaborative Deliberation: Employing participatory planning, open forums, and other methods to advance public deliberation on governance issues.

From Government Monopoly to Shared Responsibility: Building resource integration platforms and clarifying responsibility divisions to stimulate the active role and resource contributions of market and social forces [10].

From passive management to active co-governance: Transforming management responsibilities into residents' voluntary behavioral habits through contractual and charter-based institutional designs.

From top-down evaluation to multidimensional co-assessment: Establishing a comprehensive evaluation system combining subjective and objective measures by incorporating public satisfaction surveys and third-party assessments.

From Single-Sided Provision to Shared Outcomes: Emphasizing simultaneous improvements in physical environments and social relationship cultivation to achieve sustainable sharing of development benefits [1].

### **3.3. Institutional Safeguards Dimension: Rule-Based Autonomy and Institutional Integration Mechanisms**

The sustainability of "co-creation" depends on its effective integration with and innovation of existing systems.

Institutional Integration: This does not entail establishing an entirely separate system but rather clarifying the boundaries of authority and responsibility between government and society within existing frameworks of village self-governance and community management. This is achieved through measures such as defining "lists of powers" and "lists of responsibilities," enabling organic integration [6].

Rule-Based Development: This drives grassroots autonomy to evolve from traditional models heavily reliant on personal connections toward a "rule-procedural autonomy" that emphasizes charters and procedures, enhancing the standardization and stability of grassroots governance.

### **3.4. Technological Empowerment Dimension: The Assistance and Limitations of Digital Tools**

Digital technology provides crucial support for "co-creation" while also presenting new challenges.

Empowering Role: Big data facilitates precise identification of needs, online platforms broaden participation channels, and technologies like blockchain enhance process transparency and credibility.

Potential Issues: Vigilance is needed against the erosion of "governance warmth" by "technological rationality," where excessive pursuit of quantification and clarity may compromise essential flexibility and humanistic care in governance [11]. Successful co-creation practices require balancing technological efficiency with humanistic concern.

## **4. THEORETICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS**

### **4.1. Deepening Marxist Theory on State-Society Relations**

Through empowerment and mobilization guided by Party building, "co-creation" has shaped an "interactive co-construction" model of state-society relations in practice [5]. The state (through the Party) is no longer a unilateral manager, nor is society a passive recipient. Both sides mutually shape and complement each other on the "co-creation" platform: the state guides and activates society, while society participates in and enriches state governance. This provides new practical observations for understanding state-society relations under socialism.

### **4.2. Dialogue with and Transcendence of Western Participatory Democracy Theory**

"Co-creation" transcends, to a certain extent, the "procedure versus effectiveness" dilemma often encountered in Western participatory democracy. Through robust political integration (Party-building leadership) and meticulous process design (the Five-Common Mechanism), it ensures both the breadth and authenticity of participation while maintaining order and efficiency. This achieves synergy between effective participation and substantive outcomes, showcasing certain characteristics of China's governance model [4].

### **4.3. Implications for Advancing the Modernization of National Governance**

The practice of "joint creation" indicates that advancing the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity requires attention to the following points:

**Inheriting Indigenous Political Wisdom:** Skillfully drawing nourishment from the Party's fine traditions and theoretical resources while facilitating their modern transformation [6].

**Upholding the People's Central Role:** Effectively translate the "people-centered" development philosophy into institutional design and action logic [7].

**Emphasizing Systemic Integration Reform:** Governance innovation should be a systematic endeavor that synergistically advances value concepts, participating entities, operational processes, technological tools, and institutional safeguards [9].

## **5. CONCLUDING REMARKS: CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS**

Although "joint creation" has achieved significant results, its deepening and promotion still face several challenges: some regions and groups exhibit "participation fatigue" or formalistic engagement; the leadership capacity and governance level of grassroots Party organizations require further enhancement; the boundaries of rights, responsibilities, and interests among diverse stakeholders need greater clarity; and how to better bridge campaign-style promotion with the establishment of long-term mechanisms remains to be explored.

In the future, efforts should be made to advance the "co-creation" initiative from a policy innovation into a normalized governance system. This requires further strengthening the organizational development and governance capabilities of grassroots Party organizations, improving relevant legal safeguards, cultivating a healthy system of social organizations, and prudently utilizing technological tools. Ultimately, this will establish a grassroots governance system under the leadership of Party organizations that integrates self-governance, rule of law, and moral governance.

The practice of "co-creation" vividly demonstrates that the Party's mass line is not only relevant in today's era of governance modernization but has also been imbued with new contemporary

significance. It embodies the theoretical confidence of China's socialist governance model and offers practical insights from China for addressing global governance challenges.

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