THE CAUSES AND RESOLUTION OF GRASSROOTS BURDEN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FIELD THEORY——TAKING THE NEW ROUND OF TOWNSHIP INSTITUTIONAL REFORM IN L TOWN OF C CITY AS AN EXAMPLE

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Abstract: The modernization of grassroots governance is a key part of Chinese modernization. However, the heavy burden at the grassroots level restricts the improvement of governance efficiency. Although the party and the government continue to introduce measures to reduce the burden at the grassroots level, this stubborn disease is still difficult to eradicate, hindering the modernization process of grassroots governance. Taking L town of C city as an example, this study uses field theory to construct the analysis framework of "field-capital-habitus" and analyzes the realistic pattern of grassroots burden. At the field level, the pressure of superiors, unclear responsibilities, conflicts of interests and service capabilities aggravate the burden; At the capital level, economic deprivation, social capital reset, cultural mismatch and symbolic capital competition lead to low efficiency; At the level of habitus, path dependence, risk aversion and old and new conflicts solidified the burden. The research shows that it is necessary to reconstruct field rules, redistribute capital and reshape habitus and identity in order to eliminate the burden of grassroots. The reform of township institutions can be deepened from the aspects of legalization of rights, responsibilities and interests, accumulation of innovative capital, promotion of habitus transformation, balance technical governance and humanistic care, and explore new interactive models to achieve the dual goals of reducing burdens and increasing efficiency.
Keywords: Field theory; Grassroots burden; Causes and digestion; A new round of township institutional reform

1 INTRODUCTION

"Those who want to govern the room, first build its foundation". Promoting Chinese-style modernization is inseparable from the modernization of grassroots governance. As the first line of governance, township is not only the concrete implementer of national will and public policy, but also the "interface" of direct contact with society, which is called the "last kilometer" of policy implementation. "Over a thousand lines, below a needle", is the daily operation of the township government. The pressure is great and the task is heavy, which is a true portrayal of the current grassroots burden. The heavy burden makes the grass-roots struggling to cope, promotes the formalism of the grass-roots, leads to low administrative efficiency and waste of resources, and undermines the credibility of the government.

In order to solve this bad phenomenon in the process of grassroots governance, the party and the government have been trying to find a way to reduce the burden of grassroots. Since the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party, the party central committee attaches great importance to, plans and deploys to promote the rectification of formalism to reduce the burden on the grassroots. In 2018, focusing on a large number of meetings and materials, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued a notice on coordinating and standardizing the work of supervision, inspection and assessment[1]. In 2019, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued the "Notice on Solving the Prominent Problems of Formalism to Reduce the Burden at the Grass-roots Level", and identified 2019 as the "Year of Reducing the Burden at the Grass-roots Level", which opened the prelude to reducing the burden for the grass-roots level[2]. In 2020, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued a notice on "continuously solving the problem of formalism that plagues the grass-roots level to provide a strong style guarantee for a decisive victory in building a well-off society in an all-round way", and put forward practical measures to solve formalism in the process of epidemic prevention and control[3]. In 2021, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued "the main measures and division of labor plan for further solving the problem of formalism to reduce the burden of grassroots work in 2021",summarizing the old problems and new manifestations, and proposing solutions one by one[4]. In 2022, the China Office and the State Office issued the "Opinions on Regulating the Work Affairs, Mechanism Brands and Certification Matters of Village-level Organizations", which further refined the burden reduction rules[5]. In 2023, at the meeting of the special working mechanism for rectifying formalism at the central level to reduce the burden on the grass-roots level in Beijing, it was emphasized that the rectification and abstinence of formalism and bureaucracy should be placed in a more prominent position, and the party's work style, political style and social atmosphere should be continuously promoted. Upward, consolidate and streamline the work results of document meetings, coordinate and standardize supervision, inspection and assessment, and ensure that there is no resurgence[6]. On July 15,2024, the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China made a deployment for continuously deepening and expanding formalism to reduce the burden at the grass-roots level, and clearly proposed to

improve the long-term mechanism for reducing the burden at the grass-roots level[7]. In order to implement the spirit of the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the important guiding spirit of rectification formalism for grassroots burden reduction, in August 2024, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued a number of provisions on rectification formalism for grassroots burden reduction, which provided important guidance for grassroots burden reduction[8]. The No.1 Central Document in 2025 requires continuous rectification of formalism to reduce the burden at the grassroots level[9]. On February 5,2025, the meeting of the special working mechanism of the central level to rectify formalism for reducing the burden at the grass-roots level emphasized that we should continue to deepen the rectification of formalism for reducing the burden at the grass-roots level, and promote the party organizations at all levels and the majority of party members and cadres to complete the goal and task of the 14th Five-Year Plan with good style and high quality[10]. Over the years, under the centralized and unified leadership of the Party Central Committee and the joint efforts of various departments in various regions, the burden at the grassroots level has been curbed to a certain extent, but there is still a gap between the overall goal of reducing the burden of government decrees. The current grass-roots burden reduction has not yet achieved sustainable, long-term and inclusive burden reduction, and the grass-roots burden reduction is still ongoing.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The research on "grass-roots burden reduction" started around the 1990s, and the research boom focused on the "grass-roots burden reduction year" in 2019.

Scholars have different emphases on the concept of negative "burden" at the grassroots level. Zhou Zhenchao (2021) divided the typical manifestations of grassroots burden into heavy burden[12], heavy pressure, heavy consideration and heavy worry. Zhang Jingfu (2023) defined a clear concept of grass-roots burden[13], and believed that grass-roots burden is a heavy experience of grass-roots government staff in the process of continuous interaction with people inside and outside the government in order to implement policies. Some scholars use a more comprehensive perspective to explain the grassroots burden. Yong Liu (2024) believes that the burden is the product of the combination of subjective and objective[14]. Under the same task load, there are differences in the burden cognition and coping of grassroots cadres. Zhu Guanglei and Huang Yazhuo (2024) pointed out that "excessive burden"[15], that is, unnecessary and unbearable burden, actually refers to those responsibilities that exceed the normal power of the performing subject, including both positive responsibility(responsibility) and negative responsibility (accountability).

In terms of the source of grassroots burden, the academic community has conducted research from multiple perspectives. The pressure-based system proposed by Professor Rong Jingben is the most representative and has always been the main explanatory theory of grassroots pressure sources[16]. However, the existing research has found that the pressure-based institutional theory has some limitations in exploring the root causes of grassroots burden. As a result, scholar Hu Xiaodong(2022) used the "grounded theory" for qualitative research[17], and found that the reasons for the grass-roots burden were far beyond the explanatory framework of the pressure-type system theory. The burden at the grass-roots level is affected by multiple variables such as superior power, subordinate power, responsibility norms and supervision mechanism in the organizational system mechanism. It is necessary to adopt multiple governance measures to reduce the burden at the grass-roots level. In addition, the performance evaluation has spawned red tape burdens[18], the pressure and burdens on grass-roots governments and staff caused by conflicts between bars and blocks the pressures and burdens on grassroots governments and their staff stem from conflicts between vertical (top-down) and horizontal (cross-departmental) governance relationships.[12], the "isomorphism of responsibilities" among governments[15], and the formalism at the fingertips brought about by the excessive digital transformation of public organizations[19], which have explained the root causes of grass-roots burdens at different levels. Some scholars also believe that the increase of grassroots burden is related to the transformation of governance. Some scholars have noted that the re-concentration of top-down control rights is closely related to the weakness of grassroots governance[20]; in addition, with the refinement process of grassroots governance and the development of supervision to the countryside, the pressure of " compliance" "of grassroots governance is increasing[21], and trace management is alienated[22]. Ye Min (2025) pointed out that the burden at the grassroots level is due to the comprehensive generation of a unified constructive state, social disability, and information technology environment[23].

On the object and goal of "reduction", domestic scholars focus on empirical analysis to study the object and goal of grass-roots burden reduction. Mai Peiqing (2020) pointed out that the specific objects of grassroots burden reduction include complex account cleaning and data filling[24], excessive meetings and evaluation work, small power and heavy responsibility, many superior and temporary affairs, and difficulties in community multi-governance. In the elimination of formalism to achieve grass-roots burden reduction, on the one hand, we can start with meetings, reduce the interference of grass-roots civil servants' work and innovation by reducing the number, compressing the duration, controlling the scale, innovating the form, and establishing the advance notice system, and at the same time improve the relevance and efficiency of meetings and work, so that meetings can return to the essence of "discussion". On the other hand, it is necessary to scientifically allocate power according to the principle of legal rights and responsibilities, so as to avoid the situation that formalism is difficult to find. Cao Zhili (2023) proposed the optimization path of "de-licensing" "Logo-Cleanup" to promote the reduction of burdens[25]. He believes that this is an adjustment of grassroots power operation from the perspective of organizational symbols. "De-licensing" "Logo-Cleanup" is not the abolition of the functional institutions of the higher authorities in the community, but the local adjustment of the power

operation relationship between the higher government departments and the lower communities in grassroots governance, including the suppression of code-adding actions, the reshaping of hierarchical relations and the return of meaning value. Zhang Guolei and Gong Rui (2024) proposed to optimize the organizational structure of the "block" department in the bureaucratic system[26], so that the burden reduction policy can be quickly conveyed to the grassroots level. Give grassroots discretion and enhance work autonomy. Xiao Jinming and Jiang Baoqing (2024) established a new perspective of "adaptation-docking" grass-roots burden reduction bottom-up optimization path[27]. When faced with unconventional tasks, grass-roots governments "dock" task requirements by "adapting" the existing work content or planned resource elements on the spindle. Gui Hua (2025) believes that the burden reduction at the grass-roots level should have a clear goal[28], adopt high-level promotion and grass-roots promotion, adopt "small incision" and catch negative typical methods, and implement the work requirements from the masses to the masses.

Burden reduction at the grass-roots level is a governance practice with Chinese characteristics that has occurred in China's grass-roots society under the specific historical and realistic background. The implementation of burden reduction at the grass-roots level has lasted for several years. The perspective describes the basic fact that the grass-roots government has "heavy burden", analyzes the specific sources of the burden of the grass-roots government, and also interprets the internal logic of the burden dilemma at the grass-roots level from different perspectives. The existing research strongly proves the importance of studying the burden of grassroots government, and also provides a useful reference for our further analysis. However, there are still many spaces to be discussed in the study of grassroots burden. First, although the related research on grassroots burden is gradually increasing, these studies are scattered in sociology, politics, psychology and economics, and only focus on a specific manifestation of burden, and have not formed a systematic theoretical research, nor have they discussed its rich theoretical and practical connotations. Second, the existing research mostly adopts a top-down research perspective, such as the pressure-type system, and less analyzes the impact of the social environment actually faced by the township grassroots on its burden, and does not clarify the specific process of burden generation. Therefore, from the perspective of field theory, this paper puts the research of grassroots burden into the field of the new round of township institutional reform in the near future, in order to study the realistic situation of grassroots burden with systematic theories and cases, deeply analyze the realistic pattern and root cause of grassroots burden in the reform field, alleviate the "pain" brought by institutional reform, provide the way to eliminate grassroots burden, consolidate the reform results and improve administrative efficiency.

3 THEORY ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

Field theory holds that "field" is composed of various objective historical relations attached to various positions of a certain power or capital form. Each field stipulates its own unique values and has its own unique control principles. These principles define a space for social construction, and actors operate according to their position in space in order to change or maintain their position. The concept of "capital" is different from the concept of capital used by economists. He regards capital as accumulated labor (including economic capital, cultural capital, social capital and symbolic capital, etc.), which can be occupied by actors or groups as social resources on an exclusive basis. "Habitus" is a persistent, transferable system of temperament, including personal knowledge and understanding of the world, which creates a "separation" from the real world[29]. "Field" "capital" and "habitus" are a set of dynamic and mutually constructed relationships. The field determines the distribution of capital and the shaping of habitus. The competition of capital reshapes the field pattern, and habitus will have a certain impact on the field[30]. This paper takes the new round of township institutional reform as the research field, constructs the analysis framework of "field-capital-habitus", and makes provides a comprehensive analysis of the grass-roots burden.

4 THE CONTENT OF TOWNSHIP INSTITUTIONAL REFORM IN L TOWN

4.1 Basic Situation of L Town

L town is under the jurisdiction of C city in Yunnan Province. It is located in the north of C city. It has an area of 193.4 km2 and a population of about approximately 28,000. L town has comprises 9 villager committees and 148 villager groups. L town was the main post station in western Yunnan in ancient times. There are several arterial highways and the 320 National Highway crossing the territory, with very convenient traffic. There are the two largest reservoirs in the autonomous prefecture, serving as the main sources of urban water supply in C city. The climate of L town is mild and humid. There is no severe cold in winter and no severe heat in summer. The soil in the town is mainly paddy soil and alluvial soil, followed by purple soil and red soil. The proven underground deposits in L town include coal, copper, sandstone, shale, clay, etc.

4.2 L Town Institutional Reform Content

In terms of institutional adjustment, L town has comprehensively established 8 working institutions, including the Party and Government Comprehensive Office, the Grassroots Party Building Office, the Economic Development Office, the Social Affairs Office(with the sign of Veterans Service Station), the Peace and Law Office, the Party and Masses Service Center(incorporating the sign of New Era Civilization Practice Station), the Comprehensive Administrative Law Enforcement Team(with the signs of full-time government fire brigade and fire station),and the Agricultural and Rural Development Service Center. To rationalize its working relationship with municipal departments, the town has

established a coordination mechanism and developed a "one-to-many" and "many-to-one" mechanism.

In terms of responsibility adjustments, the mandates of each agency are clearly defined. For example: The Party and Government Comprehensive Office manages daily operations, logistics support, and other administrative affairs of the organ; The Economic Development Office oversees economic development planning, industrial development, and project promotion; The Comprehensive Administrative Law Enforcement Team undertakes comprehensive administrative law enforcement and emergency rescue tasks. Additionally, the core responsibilities of the town Party committee and government are specified, including strengthening Party building, promoting economic development, enhancing public services, maintaining security and stability, and implementing comprehensive governance.

In terms of decentralization, "C" City has delegated a total of 112 project powers to "L" Town, including 2 administrative licensing items, 108 administrative penalty items, 1 administrative payment matter, and 1 other administrative power. Regarding service models and platform construction: The city provides business guidance and agency service support for enterprises and the public, establishes and improves the town-village government service system, ensures technical support for "Internet+government" "e-government services" services, promotes the application of the provincial government service platform, guides the construction of village-level convenient service stations, and relies on the Party-Mass Service Center to build an accessible service platform, thereby enhancing the convenience and efficiency of public services.

In terms of law enforcement authority and responsibilities, the comprehensive administrative law enforcement team exercises relevant administrative penalties, administrative enforcement measures, and supervision and inspection rights in accordance with the law, and is responsible for law enforcement in many fields within the jurisdiction, such as ecological environment, natural resources, agriculture and rural areas. At the same time, it should improve and implement the linkage mechanism of law enforcement cooperation, manage and coordinate the comprehensive administrative law enforcement command platform, and improve the synergy and effectiveness of law enforcement.

The overall staffing situation: The L town authorities approved 27 administrative staff, 11 leadership positions, 43 approved career positions, and 3 deputy section-level leadership positions. To implement the classification management of establishments, the town has optimized overall personnel allocation and adopted a post system for internal institutions. Responsibilities are assigned according to post requirements, and the principles of "one person taking multiple posts" and "one post shared by multiple people" have been implemented. This ensures a balanced match between staff strength and post tasks.

Personnel management and evaluation: The town strengthens supervision and evaluation of job performance, improves the job evaluation mechanism, and compacts job responsibilities, so as to enhance the efficiency and quality of personnel work. This ensures that employees are suited to their posts, make the best use of their abilities, and fulfill their duties effectively.

5 ANALYSIS OF THE GRASS-ROOTS BURDEN IN THE NEW ROUND OF TOWNSHIP INSTITUTIONAL REFORM IN L TOWN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FIELD THEORY

5.1 Field Change: Structural Characteristics and Reform Tension of L Town Field

Bourdieu's field theory holds that the field is a social space composed of specific rules, power relations, and competitive logic. In the context of township institutional reform, this field exhibits characteristics of complexity and dynamics. Through the institutional reform of L Town, its policy field has been reconstructed, and the organizational structure has been integrated and adjusted. Factors including vertical administrative pressure, horizontal departmental games interactions, and external social expectations have jointly shaped the operational field of township institutional reform.

In China's administrative system, townships serve as the grassroots link between the state and society, undertaking the "last mile" responsibility for policy implementation. However, during township institutional reforms, superior municipal governments often impose pressure through indirect means like performance evaluations and power delegation, which (virtually) increases grassroots burdens. Higher-level governments typically use quantitative metrics—such as "online processing rates for government services" and "comprehensive law enforcement case completion rates"—to assess township performance, linking results to financial allocations and cadre promotions. For instance, L Town's Comprehensive Administrative Law Enforcement Team must not only handle environmental protection, agriculture, and other enforcement tasks but also meet case completion rate targets; failure may result in criticism or funding cuts. This "digital management" model forces grassroots cadres to prioritize report-filing over actual problem-solving. Meanwhile, while reforms emphasize "decentralization, regulation, and service"—delegating approval and enforcement powers from cities to townships—corresponding staffing, funding, and technical support often do not follow. L Town's Party-Mass Service Center, for example, manages multiple administrative approval tasks but lacks professional staff, leading to situations where duties are "unable to be accepted or poorly managed". This mismatch of "responsibility (delegated downward) without resource allocation" traps townships in a dilemma of "unlimited responsibilities with limited capacity".

Township institutional reform emphasizes "super-ministry integration", with L Town consolidating originally decentralized functions into eight offices. However, this process has not eliminated interdepartmental interest games; instead, resource scarcity has intensified internal competition. Post-reform, the total number of administrative (27) and career staff (43) in the township is fixed, yet all offices—such as the Party and Government Office and Law

Enforcement Office—vie for more personnel to reduce workloads. The Economic Development Office, tasked with investment attraction and project promotion, may require additional staff, while the Peace and Rule of Law Office needs more hands due to stability maintenance pressures. This "zero-sum game" increases internal coordination costs. Although the reform aims to clarify institutional responsibilities, cross-cutting areas like environmental law enforcement—involving agriculture, natural resources, and other departments—still face buck-passing. For example, an enterprise's sewage discharge issue saw the law enforcement team claim it fell under the Environmental Protection Agency's jurisdiction, while the agency insisted on township-level territorial management, leading to prolonged delays. The reform mandates a "one-to-many coordination mechanism"—where a township agency interfaces with multiple superior departments or multiple agencies collaborate on tasks—but without mandatory mechanisms, interdepartmental information silos remain unbroken. The Party-Mass Service Center must connect with civil affairs, social security, and market supervision systems, but disjointed platforms force grassroots cadres to re-enter data, exacerbating administrative burdens.

One goal of township institutional reform is to enhance public service efficiency, yet the masses' increasingly diversified and refined needs contradict townships' limited service capabilities. While the reform promotes "Internet + government services", "e-government services", elderly and low-educated rural groups often face operational barriers. For example, L Town's online pension certification initiative leaves many seniors unable to use smartphones, forcing them to rely on village cadres for assistance and inadvertently increasing grassroots workloads. Every Sunday, villagers in L Town sell goods or homegrown agricultural products on designated streets, boosting household incomes, fostering regional exchanges, and elevating rural economic activity—but also creating significant traffic management challenges. Under this round of reform, the comprehensive administrative law enforcement team has gained administrative penalty powers. However, in township's typical "acquaintance society", strict enforcement may trigger public resistance. Fines for road-side vendors, for instance, are easily criticized as "inhumane". Law enforcement team members face a dilemma: the only street where stalls operate is aware of villagers' hardships in running small businesses, yet lax enforcement risks supervisory penalties. Law enforcement team members face a dilemma: they are aware of villagers' hardships in running small businesses on the only street where stalls operate, yet lax enforcement risks supervisory penalties.

Within the reform field of township institutions—a field shaped by the interplay of multiple forces—these factors collectively create a high-pressure, low-autonomy environment. Grassroots cadres are compelled to shoulder boundless responsibilities with limited resources, ultimately trapped in the pragmatic dilemma of overwhelming burdens.

5.2 Capital Imbalance: The Realistic Basis of Increasing Burden at the Grass-Roots Level

Under the framework of Bourdieu's field theory, capital is not only a resource for actors to compete, but also a key factor in shaping the power structure of the field. Although the institutional reform of L town has realized the integration of "super-ministry" in the organizational structure, it the reform presents an unbalanced state at the level of capital distribution, which directly leads to the aggravation of the burden at the grass-roots level.

5.2.1 Lack of economic capital and loss of administrative efficiency

In township governance, economic capital primarily reflects financial fund allocation and material resource distribution. During reform, L Town faces severe economic capital constraints. Despite having 27 administrative and 43 career staff approved, the gap between actual disposable funds and reform needs remains huge. Take the comprehensive administrative law enforcement team: responsible for ecological environment, natural resources, and agricultural law enforcement, the team theoretically requires equipment like law enforcement recorders, testing devices, and specialized vehicles. However, township finances struggle to cover these essential costs. Field surveys show the team currently has only two law enforcement recorders and lacks professional testing equipment, forcing reliance on non-standard methods like "visual inspection" and "empirical judgment".

Economic capital shortages also affect personnel welfare. L Town's average monthly staff salary is approximately 3,800 yuan, below the local institutional average. This low compensation creates two critical issues: first, difficulty attracting professionals, particularly in law and environmental protection; second, dampened morale among existing staff, leading some cadres to disengage or seek transfers out of grassroots via secondment. Without adequate economic capital, the reform's goals of "professional law enforcement" and "efficient service" remain hard to achieve.

5.2.2 Social capital reset and collaborative governance dilemma

Social capital refers to actors' relational networks and trust resources. L Town's reform has significantly impacted its original social capital networks. In vertical relations, the reform's "one-to-many" working mechanism aimed to streamline processes. However, urban-rural departmental information silos force townships to repeatedly interface with multiple superior agencies. For instance, when managing industrial support projects, the Agricultural and Rural Development Service Center must concurrently coordinate with the Agricultural Bureau, Finance Bureau, and Rural Revitalization Bureau. Disjointed departmental reporting systems require staff to re-enter similar data repeatedly.

In horizontal relations, institutional mergers have disrupted the original work tacit understanding. Prior to reform, station heads had formed a stable cooperation model; post-reform, newly established offices must rebuild trust. Investigations show the Peace and Rule of Law Office and Integrated Administrative Law Enforcement Team often shirk responsibilities during case transfers, primarily due to divergent interpretations of newly delineated responsibility boundaries. Additionally, social capital between village-level organizations and township governments is eroding. Rising assessment pressures have tightened township requirements for village cadres, but the absence of corresponding incentives has sparked resistance, leading to lukewarm policy implementation.

5.2.3 Mismatch of cultural capital and capacity crisis

Cultural capital manifests in cadres' knowledge structures, professional skills, and administrative literacy. A key issue in L Town's reform is the mismatch between the cadre team's cultural capital and reform requirements. Post-institutional merger, staff must assume broader responsibilities. For instance, Party-Mass Service Center personnel must not only be versed in traditional Party work but also master delegated administrative approval procedures and possess digital office capabilities. However, of the center's 12 staff, only 3 have received systematic professional training, with the rest "learning on the job".

The comprehensive administrative law enforcement team's case is more typical. The team handles law enforcement across multiple sectors—ecological environment, agriculture, and natural resources. Yet of its 15 members, only 2 have legal professional backgrounds; the rest were transferred from other posts. In an aquaculture pollution case, team members' unfamiliarity with environmental regulations led to flawed enforcement procedures and subsequent administrative disputes.

Cultural capital shortages not only undermine work quality but also heighten cadre anxiety. Multiple interviewed cadres reported feeling incompetent when faced with ever-updating policy requirements and professional technical knowledge.

5.2.4 Symbolic capital competition and formalism breeding

Symbolic capital encompasses intangible assets like reputation and prestige. In L Town's reform, the overemphasis on symbolic capital has become a key driver of grassroots burden. Superior governments allocate symbolic capital through "evaluation prioritization" and "assessment rankings". To gain recognition, townships invest substantial resources in creating "highlight model projects". For instance, during the "Internet+ government service" "e-government services" evaluation, L Town heavily funded a high-standard township service center, but outdated village service point equipment and poor network connectivity undermined its actual effectiveness.

The pursuit of symbolic capital also distorts work priorities. Surveys show each office handles an average of 32 assessment indicators, with approximately 60% being process-oriented (e.g., ledger reviews, system entries). To excel in these "visual" evaluations, cadres spend substantial time crafting elaborate reports and organizing inspection materials, at the expense of problem-solving. A Party and Government Office staffer candidly noted: "Most time now goes to paperwork, leaving minimal room for actual task execution."

5.3 Habitual Solidification: The Action Logic of Burden Continuation

In L Town's institutional reform, the persistence of grassroots administrative burdens stems not only from explicit factors like system design and resource allocation but also from grassroots cadres' ingrained thinking and behavioral patterns. Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" offers a crucial lens for understanding this phenomenon. Field research in L Town reveals a profound tension between the newly established institutional structure and existing work habits, which not only undermines some reform outcomes but also reinforces original grassroots burdens to some extent.

5.3.1 Administrative inertia under path dependence

Although L Town's institutional reform has significantly restructured original station setups, grassroots cadres' work mindsets remain deeply rooted in traditional administrative inertia. This path dependence manifests in the following ways.

The "assessment-centered" work orientation remains deeply ingrained. Surveys show that even after establishing comprehensive Party and Government Offices, staff still dedicate over half their energy to handling superior assessments. A long-serving Party and Government Office cadre admitted: "Although the office name has changed, assessment methods remain unchanged—we still have to prioritize assessment indicators." This habit has caused institutional operations to continue the old "assessments dictate actions" model.

"Line thinking" remains entrenched. Despite the "super-ministry system" integration in institutional design, cadres still default to working along original departmental hierarchies in practice. Staff at the Agricultural and Rural Development Service Center, for example, still subconsciously identify as "agricultural technology station cadres", resisting cross-center tasks. This identity lag in identity recognition seriously undermines organizational synergy.

The passive execution work model remains fundamentally unchanged. While the reform aims to enhance township autonomy, the long-standing "wait-and-rely" mentality has left grassroots cadres lacking initiative and proactive capabilities. During interviews, multiple cadres stated: "We dare not innovate without explicit instructions from superiors." This passivity has caused many reform measures to remain at the policy document level, hindering genuine implementation.

5.3.2 The strengthening of risk aversion behavior

After the institutional reform, cadres in L Town exhibit not less but more risk aversion, driven by changes in the power-responsibility dynamics.

This manifests in two ways: First, selective law enforcement. Despite gaining broader enforcement powers, comprehensive administrative law enforcement team members often employ a "selective enforcement" strategy to avoid triggering petitions or accountability. As one team member admitted: "We only penalize acts clearly illegal and uncontroversial; other cases are deferred for mediation." This "less is more" mentality undermines law enforcement efficacy. Second, excessive caution in administrative approval. The Party-Mass Service Center has assumed multiple delegated approval authorities, yet staff generally adopt practices like "rejecting incomplete applications" and "escalating difficult issues" due to approval error fears. In emergency management, even for clearly authorized matters, grassroots cadres tend to seek superior instructions. The Ping An Rule of Law Office head stated: "With strict

accountability, we'd rather be slow than make mistakes." Such overcaution severely impacts handling efficiency.

The ingrained work habits of L Town's grassroots cadres are far from accidental; they are deeply rooted in the current institutional environment. First, the assessment-accountability system creates perverse incentives. Overemphasizing a "no accidents" logic, the system discourages innovation by treating any initiative as a potential risk. As a town leader candidly noted: "The more you do, the higher the error risk—better to play it safe." This institutional bias reinforces conservatism. Township cadres also face limited promotion prospects, with most stuck in career "ceilings". Such stagnation dampens motivation to adapt to reform and fosters a "status quo" mindset. Second, the lack of a structured training system compounds the issue. Post-reform, there is no systematic capability-upgrading mechanism, leaving cadres to navigate new workflows through trial and error. A new civil servant remarked: "No one taught me the ropes—just told to follow senior colleagues." This informal knowledge transfer perpetuates old habits.

5.3.3 The Conflict and Adjustment of the Old and New Habitus

During the reform, L Town's cadres are caught in a transition between old and new work habits, triggering multiple adaptability issues—such as role conflicts from "one person, multiple posts". The reform's demand for "versatility" clashes with cadres' long-standing professional specialization habits. As an Agricultural and Rural Development Service Center cadre noted: "Yesterday I was promoting agricultural technology; today I'm handling water disputes. I know a little of everything but excel at nothing." This role confusion reduces work quality and fuels job burnout.

Additionally, digital office adaptation remains challenging. The "Internet + government services" initiative requires cadres to master new workflows, but some senior cadres struggle to adapt. Data from the Party and Mass Service Center shows that staff aged 45+ have a digital platform error rate over three times higher than their younger colleagues. This lag in technological habit adaptation has undermined overall service efficiency.

6   FIELD FACTOR ADJUSTMENT : THE ELIMINATION PATH OF GRASS-ROOTS BURDEN

6.1 Reconstruction of Field Rules : Breaking Structural Oppression

6.1.1 Rebalance of power and responsibility relationship : to build a scientific and reasonable division of responsibilities system

Establish a "negative list" system. The current overextension of "territorial management" in grassroots governance essentially involves higher-level governments shifting responsibilities to townships through administrative mandates. Take L Town: in environmental law enforcement, the township lacks professional testing equipment and law enforcement personnel, rendering it practically incapable of fulfilling related duties, yet it is still required to assume territorial management responsibilities. This phenomenon flagrantly violates the administrative principle of "power-responsibility equivalence".

To address this, a scientific "negative list" system should be established. First, led by municipal people's congresses or government legal departments, systematically compile township governments' statutory duty lists in accordance with laws such as the Organic Law of Local People's Congresses and Local People's Governments at All Levels. Second, highly specialized tasks requiring specific qualifications or equipment (e.g., environmental monitoring, food safety inspections) should be explicitly categorized as "negative list" items with "territorial management exemptions". Finally, implement a strict "duty access" mechanism: for tasks requiring township assistance, municipal departments must issue written authorization documents and provide synchronized support in professional personnel, funds, and equipment.

6.1.2 Dynamic programming adjustment mechanism

The "super-ministry" integration in township institutional reform often remains a mere "physical merger" without achieving a "chemical reaction". After L Town consolidated its original 15 stations into 8 offices, reduced institutional numbers were offset by increased workloads from delegated powers, straining resources. To resolve this dilemma, a resource-power dynamic matching mechanism is needed, with specific measures as follows: First, establish "authority-workload accounting standards". For example, if L Town's comprehensive administrative law enforcement team handles 200 cases annually, requiring 2 person-days per case (400 person-days total), staffing should be allocated based on approved workloads. Second, implement an "establishment turnover pool" system: the municipality should reserve 5%–10% of professional staffing as mobile quotas for dynamic allocation according to townships' delegated powers. Third, innovate a mixed "establishment + purchased services" model, allowing townships to procure social services for seasonal/temporary tasks (e.g., flood control and drought relief).

6.1.3 De-formalization of the assessment system : building an effectiveness-oriented evaluation mechanism

Implement "results-oriented" assessment reform. Grassroots assessment dilemmas stem from overemphasizing process management while neglecting actual outcomes. Surveys show L Town cadres handle an average of 32 assessment indicators, 19 of which involve process requirements like ledger reviews and system entries—seriously compromising public service time. To address this, rebuild the assessment index system. First, drastically reduce process indicators, cutting their original 60% assessment weight to below 20%. Second, establish an effectiveness evaluation system centered on "problem resolution rates" (e.g., petition case completion rates) and "public satisfaction" (random sampling survey results). Finally, introduce a "cross-validation" mechanism to curb data fraud—for example, having assessment teams randomly select 10% of resolved livelihood issues for on-site reviews or telephone follow-ups. Take L Town's Party and Mass Service Center: replacing process indicators like "work guideline update frequency" with outcome metrics like "public trip reduction rate" truly reflects the "streamline administration, delegate powers, and improve regulation and services" reform efficacy. This shift in assessment methods guides grassroots cadres to redirect efforts

from "paper trails" to "tangible results".

Implementing differentiated assessment design is essential given the significant regional disparities among China's townships, where current assessment systems often apply "one-size-fits-all" standards that overlook local peculiarities. Take L Town's weekly "street market", a tradition that preserves traditional market culture and serves as a vital income source for villagers, yet faces enforcement dilemmas due to rigid "no road occupation" assessment indicators. To address such conflicts, a differentiated assessment system must prioritize contextual adaptability: replacing simplistic "prohibition" mandates with metrics like "mobile vendor standardization rates" to focus on whether special operation zones are demarcated and health management protocols are enforced; allowing townships to adjust up to 20% of assessment criteria based on local realities to ensure rules align with on-the-ground needs; and establishing a fault-tolerant mechanism to mitigate deviations in indicator completion caused by regional particularities through systematic evaluation. For instance, designating L Town's "street market" area as a temporary operation demonstration zone with tailored assessment standards balances urban order and livelihood requirements, exemplifying how flexible assessment frameworks can respect the complexity of grassroots governance while fostering pragmatic solutions.

The "digital divide" confronting elderly populations has emerged as a critical challenge in digital government development, exemplified by L Town's experience with online pension certification, where approximately 35% of seniors relied on village cadres for in-person agency assistance due to smartphone inexperience, thereby exacerbating grassroots administrative burdens. Addressing this requires a holistic "online+offline" parallel service model that integrates technological accessibility with human-centered support: developing age-friendly digital interfaces featuring large fonts, simplified workflows, and voice guidance to lower online usage barriers; maintaining physical service windows in each administrative village staffed with "digital assistants" to provide hands-on support; and equipping villages with portable authentication terminals to enable on-site service delivery. In L Town, such a model could manifest through a "Silver Age Window" at the convenience service center, where full-time staff assist seniors with certification processes, while village cadres trained in "family proxy" functions use specialized equipment to offer home-based services for mobility-impaired elders. This approach not only aligns with the trajectory of informatization but also upholds the rights of vulnerable groups, transforming digital governance from a potential source of exclusion into a tool for empowerment—ensuring that technological advancement serves as a bridge rather than a barrier in grassroots governance.

6.2 Redistribution of Capital: Reconstructing the Basis of Competition

6.2.1 Economic capital supplement: building a sustainable financial security mechanism

A core contradiction in current township institutional reforms lies in the asynchronous synchronization of decentralized powers and financial security. A core contradiction in current township institutional reforms lies in the lack of synchronization between decentralized powers and financial security. For instance, L Town's comprehensive administrative law enforcement team handles 200 cases annually with a mere 50,000 yuan annual budget, which scarcely covers essentials like law enforcement recorder updates and detection equipment maintenance. Resolving this requires a scientific fiscal power matching mechanism integrating three key components: first, a standardized "workload × unit cost coefficient" accounting method, where county-level finance departments, in collaboration with functional agencies, classify and approve unit costs for different administrative tasks (e.g., 300 yuan per summary procedure case, 800 yuan per general procedure case, and 50 yuan per administrative approval item); second, a "fee-for-service" transfer payment system that dynamically adjusts funding based on actual township workloads (e.g., L Town would receive 102,000 yuan annually for its 200 cases, factoring in 30% general procedures); and third, a "project funding contract system" granting townships greater autonomy to reallocate funds across projects while maintaining total budgetary ceilings. This refined, dynamic financial security model effectively addresses the institutional paradox of "assigning tasks without allocating resources."

To expand funding sources, innovate a "capital transformation" incentive mechanism. L Town, despite its abundant resources, has annually raised approximately 500,000 yuan through rural sage associations in recent years, yet financial management constraints hinder converting these donations into public service investments. A "social donation matching reward" policy is proposed: for every 1 yuan of social capital raised by the township, county-level finance would provide a 0.5 yuan matching grant, allowing the total to count toward the project's self-financed portion.

6.2.2 Cultural capital upgrading : to build a compound cadre team

Township institutional reforms demand higher competency standards for cadres. A survey reveals that staff at L Town's Party and Mass Service Center must master over 120 administrative approval standards, yet existing training remains fragmented and perfunctory, failing to address practical needs. To tackle this, implement a systematic capability enhancement program: roll out a "1+X" competency certification plan, requiring each cadre to master at least two cross-domain skills (e.g., basic legal knowledge and e-government operations) alongside their core expertise (e.g., social assistance policy for civil affairs cadres). County-level human resources departments should administer certification exams, with passers receiving a monthly 300-yuan allowance and promotion-related bonuses. For instance, L Town's comprehensive law enforcement team members could be mandated to pass law enforcement qualification exams and master environmental and agricultural regulations within three years, shifting from "single-issue enforcement" to "comprehensive enforcement" capabilities.

To bridge the gap in law enforcement capabilities, a practical - oriented training system is imperative. Jointly establish an "Administrative Law Enforcement Training Base "with local courts and conduct" case workshop training. Select 20

typical law enforcement cases from L Town over the past three years, including road-occupying operations and aquaculture pollution disputes. A tutor team, composed of judges, lawyers, and industry experts, will guide trainees through full-process simulations, from case investigation to legal document drafting. The training features a credit system of "40 compulsory hours + 20 elective hours". Trainees who do not meet the requirements will have their law enforcement qualifications temporarily revoked. Moreover, the "tutor – stationed" system will be implemented. Each month, judges from the court's administrative tribunal will provide on-site case guidance in L Town, helping cadres enhance their legal acumen in real-world scenarios. This "theory - practice integrated" training model effectively remedies the lack of confidence in grassroots law enforcement.

6.2.3 Activation of social capital : building a multi-collaborative governance network

Traditional management mindsets that treat mobile vendors merely as rectification targets exacerbate governance conflicts. L Town can innovate by implementing a "Governance Partner" plan: democratically elect 5–7 "street chiefs" from merchants, empowering them with stall allocation and minor violation handling authority. A "credit scoring" system should be established to grant lease renewal priorities, tax breaks, and exemptions to vendors who comply with business orders and participate in environmental maintenance. Additionally, a monthly negotiation mechanism involving law enforcement teams, business representatives, and community residents can resolve operational order issues through collaborative governance.

To address data sharing challenges, dismantling "information silos" is urgent. The municipal government should spearhead the construction of a "government data platform", mandating all departments to open data interfaces. By integrating high-frequency data from civil affairs, social security, and market supervision, L Town's Party and Mass Service Center can achieve "one-time input, multi-system auto-population". Next, developing an "intelligent pre-screening" function will enable the system to automatically cross-check departmental databases and flag missing information when the public submits materials. In the third phase, establishing an "electronic certificate repository" will auto-collect certification documents from various departments, eliminating redundant requests.

6.3 Reshaping Habitus : Cultivating New Practical Logic

6.3.1 Breaking the path dependence : building an institutional environment to encourage innovation

The pervasive accountability avoidance in grassroots governance stems from asymmetric accountability mechanisms. L Town's empirical data shows 82% of cadres adopt "risk-averse decision-making", severely hampering reform efforts. A systematic fault-tolerant mechanism is crucial to address this. Led by the County-level Commission for Discipline Inspection, a rights-responsibility list system should be established. This includes a "Reform and Innovation Fault-Tolerance List" with 12 exemption categories, clarifying boundaries for lenient handling of first-time minor violations and reasonable emergency misjudgments. A case guidance system, releasing 3-5 quarterly exemplary fault-tolerant cases (e.g., effective but procedurally flawed epidemic controls), can set precedents. Additionally, an "error correction-accountability" mechanism should allow non-subjective negligence to be rectified instead of punished. In L Town's law enforcement, first-time road-occupation violations receive warnings, and repeated offenses do not retroactively penalize initial enforcers. This approach eliminates "dishwashing effect" concerns, enabling bolder governance. By defining exemptions, leveraging case guidance, and refining accountability, the mechanism resolves the "less action, fewer errors" dilemma.

Reconstructing power-responsibility dynamics, the "reverse assessment" mechanism offers significant institutional innovation potential. A two-way county-township evaluation system is proposed: townships should conduct semi-annual quantitative assessments of county-level departments' "resource support", focusing on 10 key indicators, including staffing allocation and authority delegation. These evaluations, accounting for 15% of departmental performance scores, would incentivize responsiveness. In L Town, the system could prioritize assessing support for administrative approvals; departments failing to deliver on promises regarding personnel and equipment decentralization would trigger corrective actions.

6.3.2 Reconstructing identity: cultivating the subject consciousness of modern governance

After the reform of township institutions, cadres' role cognition often lags significantly behind organizational changes. In L Town, after the agricultural technology and water conservancy stations merged into the Agricultural and Rural Service Center, some original staff still identified as agricultural technicians and declined to handle water - related tasks. To address this, an in - depth identity reconstruction project is needed. A general cadre qualification certification system should be established, consisting of three assessment modules: basic knowledge (40%), practical skills (40%), and public evaluation (20%). Cadres must complete cross-departmental rotation, like a three-month exchange between the Party - government office and law enforcement team, to obtain certification. Linking certification results directly to rank promotion encourages cadres to adopt the new identity of "township cadre" over "station-specific cadre".

Deeper identity reconstruction necessitates cultural innovation. L Town could implement a "governance narrative" remodeling project by organizing cadres and villagers to co-compile a rural community development history, documenting collaborative stories from key initiatives like poverty alleviation and environmental remediation through oral histories. During compilation, cadre household interviews would collect authentic cases—such as "cadres repairing my water pipes" and "joint river cleanups"—for dissemination via WeChat official accounts. This participatory storytelling enables grassroots cadres to emotionally transition from "managers" to "servers" through shared resonance.

6.3.3 Transformation of technical habitus : building a new model of smart work

Digital transformation presents significant challenges for aging cadres, as evidenced by L Town's case where 62% of

cadres are over 45 and 43% experience "digital anxiety". Addressing this requires a holistic digital adaptation strategy. A simplified OA system could streamline document approval into three core steps—"receive-process-submit"—while graphical operation guides with red arrows highlighting key steps and magnifying-glass visual aids would enhance usability. Establishing "digital counselor" roles for young cadres or volunteers to provide one-on-one support further bridges the gap. Equally critical is a staggered-peak training system that avoids busy farming periods, adopting a "1 hour daily" micro-training model to ensure consistent, low-pressure skill development. This integrated approach, combining technological simplification, visual guidance, personalized assistance, and flexible training, aims to alleviate digital anxiety and empower older cadres in the digital governance landscape.

7　CONCLUSION AND FORESIGHT

Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, this study systematically analyzes institutional reforms in L Town to reveal deep-seated contradictions in grassroots governance modernization. While L Town's reforms have achieved "physical integration" of organizational structures, three operational challenges persist: field-level power-responsibility imbalances, structural gaps in capital allocation, and administrative habitus path dependence. By constructing a three-dimensional "field-capital-habitus" analytical framework, the study offers a systematic lens for understanding grassroots governance burdens.

In the future, the reform of township institutions must be deepened across three key dimensions. First, to promote the legalization of "rights, responsibilities, and interests" allocation, it is advisable to formulate a "township government responsibility list" and establish a dynamic adjustment mechanism for powers and expenditure responsibilities. Second, innovative approaches to capital accumulation should be explored, such as the "village sage fund + financial support" financing model, along with the development of a "digital twin" training system to enhance cadre capabilities. Third, the institutionalization of habitus transformation should be advanced by incorporating a "fault-tolerant mechanism" into local legislation and developing a "mental model" assessment tool for grassroots governance.

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Against the backdrop of the digital economy, the ability to balance technological empowerment with humanistic care, particularly in maintaining services for the elderly, will be a crucial criterion for evaluating reform effectiveness. Additionally, as the rural revitalization strategy progresses, the evolving interaction models between township governments, market entities, and social organizations merit continuous attention. Ultimately, the dual objectives of reducing grassroots burdens and enhancing governance efficiency can only be achieved by coordinating the reconstruction of field rules, optimizing capital allocation, and facilitating the benign transformation of administrative habits[31-33].

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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