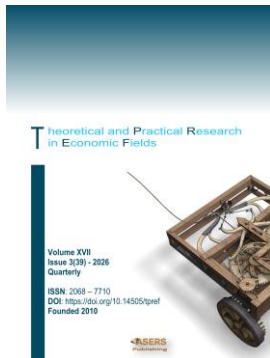


Multiple Actors in China's Community and Neighborhood Governance: A Systematic Critical Review of Roles, Strategies, and Governance Tensions



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Abstract: China's community and neighborhood governance has become increasingly multi-actor, yet the literature remains fragmented across residents' committees, homeowner self-governance, social organizations, crisis response, and participatory regeneration. This systematic critical review synthesizes 62 English-language studies published from 2018 to 2025. The final evidence base comprised 38 original studies and 24 supplementary additions and was tiered into 45 core studies for prevalence analysis, 15 supplementary studies for mechanism enrichment, and two background studies. A deductive–inductive protocol linked actors, functions, strategies, and governance tensions, while evidence anchors, two-pass coding, relevance appraisal, and claim weighting constrained interpretation. Participation and mobilization appeared in 38 of 45 core studies, coordination and brokerage in 34, and representation and self-governance in 22. Cross-study comparison shows convergence around continuing state infrastructural power and the importance of brokerage, but divergence over whether Party-state steering, NGO delivery, homeowner organization, and project-based participation expand autonomy or reproduce control. Five strategy clusters and five recurring tensions are synthesized in an Actor–Function–Strategy–Tension (AFST) framework. The framework explains why actor pluralization can generate service capacity, coordinated action, and resident influence in some settings while producing dependency, tokenism, politicization, commercialization, or unequal representation in others. The review contributes a relational explanation of state-structured pluralism and identifies implications for evaluating decision rights, representation, resource control, accountability, and the durability of participation.

Keywords: community governance; neighborhood governance; multiple actors; participatory governance; systematic critical review; China.

JEL Classification: H11; H77; D71; R58; Z18.

Introduction

Community and neighborhood governance has become a central arena in which contemporary Chinese cities organize public services, maintain social order, negotiate property relations, respond to emergencies, and implement small-scale urban renewal. The decline of the work-unit system, housing privatization, population mobility, the growth of social-service organizations, and the increasing use of neighborhood-level projects have produced governance arrangements that involve far more than a single administrative authority. Residents' committees, subdistrict offices, Party organizations, homeowners' associations (HOAs), property management companies, social workers, planners, volunteers, developers, and residents now interact in overlapping governance networks (Wang & Clarke, 2021; Wu *et al.* 2018).

This proliferation of actors, however, should not be read automatically as decentralization or equal partnership. The local Party-state retains decisive influence over rule setting, funding, personnel, access to organizational platforms, and the acceptable boundaries of participation. At the same time, it increasingly relies on non-state and quasi-state actors for service delivery, resident mobilization, dispute mediation, professional expertise, and project implementation. Studies of Party-building and social organizations, for example, show how service collaboration can extend governance capacity while simultaneously narrowing organizational autonomy (Kan & Ku, 2021; Li & Ergenc, 2024). Research on HOAs and condominium self-governance likewise shows that resident organizations may gain decision-making capacity but remain embedded in relations with subdistrict governments, residents' committees, and property management agents (Guan & Liu, 2021; Yip & Zheng, 2024).

The empirical literature has expanded rapidly but remains divided into relatively separate conversations. One stream examines residents' committees, grid governance, and street-level implementation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Liu *et al.* 2021; Zhu *et al.* 2021). Evidence from lockdown governance further shows how residents' committees mediated access, mobilization, and administrative pressure (Nie *et al.* 2024). A second stream studies resident participation, HOAs, property rights, and community attachment (Cai *et al.* 2021; Cheng *et al.* 2021). A third focuses on social work, community organizations, and Party-led service provision (Hou *et al.* 2025; Kan & Ku, 2021). A fourth analyzes participatory planning and micro-regeneration as project-based governance (M. Wang *et al.* 2024; Zhu, 2023). Related work examines public space, community gardens, and heritage-area renewal through similar governance lenses (Mai *et al.* 2023; Zhu, 2025). Because these streams use different actor labels, conceptual vocabularies, and outcome measures, the field still lacks an integrated explanation of how actor configurations are connected to governance functions, action strategies, and distributive or political tensions.

To address this fragmentation, the present study combines systematic corpus construction with critical thematic synthesis. The full-text evidence base was assembled and re-screened in two phases, then tiered into core, supplementary, and background studies according to analytical role. Rather than treating PRISMA reporting or actor frequency as outcomes in themselves, the review links actor configurations to governance functions, strategies, and recurrent tensions. This design strengthens traceability while preserving the interpretive depth needed to examine authority, participation, resource control, and implementation conditions.

The review addresses four research questions. RQ1 asks: How are official, autonomous participatory, and social collaborative actors configured in China's community and neighborhood governance? RQ2 asks: What functions and strategy clusters are most prevalent across the core evidence base? RQ3 asks: What governance tensions and boundary conditions shape the consequences of multi-actor arrangements? RQ4 asks: What methodological and theoretical limitations characterize the existing literature, and what research agenda follows from them?

The article makes three contributions. First, it replaces an actor inventory with a relational account of state-structured pluralism: multiple actors are present, but authority and resources remain asymmetrically distributed. Second, it develops an Actor–Function–Strategy–Tension (AFST) framework that separates who participates, what functions are performed, how action is organized, and what tensions follow. Third, it integrates positive and critical evidence, showing that participation may produce service responsiveness, attachment, trust, and conflict resolution, but may also become mobilized compliance, organizational co-optation, tokenistic consultation, commercialization, or exclusion. By connecting these findings to international collaborative governance, network governance, co-production, and participation-quality scholarship, the review clarifies which mechanisms travel beyond China and which remain conditioned by its institutional context.

1. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

1.1 Community and Neighborhood Governance as a Relational Field

In this review, community governance refers to the organization of collective affairs, services, participation, regulation, and spatial improvement at the community or neighborhood scale. The term “neighborhood governance” is used when studies focus more specifically on residential estates, HOAs, property management, gated communities, or neighborhood-level interactions. The two terms overlap but are not identical. Community governance often emphasizes administrative and service platforms, whereas neighborhood governance more often foregrounds property relations, resident organizations, and localized social ties. Treating them together is analytically useful because residents' committees, subdistrict offices, HOAs, property management companies, and residents routinely operate across both domains (Wang & Clarke, 2021). These overlapping decision centres

resemble a polycentric field, although their autonomy and citizenship implications remain conditioned by the broader state-entrepreneurial urban regime (Ostrom, 2010; Zhang, 2025).

A relational perspective avoids assigning a fixed function to each actor. Residents' committees may serve as administrative extensions, welfare providers, brokers, regulatory intermediaries, mobilizers, or dispute mediators, depending on the issue and local context. HOAs may represent homeowners, supervise property managers, mobilize collective action, or enter conflict with state and market actors. Social organizations may deliver services, build capacity, or provide channels of participation, but they may also become fiscally and politically dependent on Party-state sponsorship. Planners and social workers can facilitate communication and translate technical knowledge, yet their influence depends on institutional access and the willingness of authorities to share decision rights (Kan & Ku, 2021; Liao *et al.* 2019).

This relational view is supported by the four-mode framework developed from Nanjing, which distinguishes governance arrangements by the dominant relationships among HOAs, property management companies, homeowners, residents' committees, and local government rather than by a single dominant actor (Wang & Clarke, 2021). It is also consistent with evidence from Wuhan and Guangzhou showing that apparently plural governance structures emerge through different combinations of administrative authority, market provision, and social participation (Wu *et al.* 2018). Accordingly, the unit of explanation in the present review is not simply the actor but the actor–function–strategy configuration.

International collaborative-governance research provides a useful benchmark by emphasizing institutional design, facilitative leadership, shared motivation, joint capacity, and the governance structure of interorganizational networks (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson *et al.* 2012; Provan & Kenis, 2008). These frameworks are valuable, but they often begin from more symmetrical entry conditions and more autonomous decision centers than those observed in China's neighborhood field. The present review therefore treats collaboration and polycentricity as empirical questions about decision rights, resource control, and accountability rather than as labels inferred from the mere presence of multiple actors.

1.2 State-Structured Pluralism and Differentiated Participation

Multi-actor governance in urban China is structured by the coexistence of administrative hierarchy and selective participation. Party-building can connect organizations and resources, create service platforms, and mobilize volunteers, but it can also incorporate social organizations into governance agendas defined from above (Cai *et al.* 2023; Kan & Ku, 2021). The Shenzhen evidence further shows that Party–government disaggregation, elite absorption, cross-appointment, and service-led Party–mass legitimation can recentralize organizational authority even while plural actors remain formally present (Cai *et al.* 2023). Five-society linkage frameworks likewise propose the coordinated use of community, social-work, volunteer, charitable, and social-organization resources under institutional leadership (Qing, 2024). Residents' committees can elicit participation through close social networks and local knowledge, yet the same intermediary position enables them to combine persuasion, monitoring, symbolic coercion, and mobilization (Qin & Owen, 2021). Grid governance similarly expands information-gathering and coordination capacity while embedding performance pressure, surveillance, and stability-maintenance logics (Xu & He, 2022; Zhu *et al.* 2021).

Participation therefore varies in quality, not merely in quantity. Deliberative forums can mediate conflicts and bring residents, HOAs, property managers, experts, and local officials into problem-solving processes (Tang, 2018). Participatory budgeting and community proposal mechanisms can create visible channels for citizen input, but they often remain institutionally bounded by Party leadership and prescribed agendas (Y. Li *et al.* 2023; Wang & Li, 2023). At the other end of the continuum, participation may be reduced to informing, attendance, consultation without decision power, or financial contribution to predetermined projects (J. Li *et al.* 2020; Wei, 2022). A critical review must therefore ask who sets the agenda, whose interests are represented, what decisions participants can change, and who controls resources and implementation.

Participation also needs to be distinguished from inclusion and co-production. Participation can aggregate public input without changing who defines the problem, whereas inclusion concerns the continuing incorporation of diverse actors into problem definition and collective action (Quick & Feldman, 2011). Co-production further varies by who participates and whether involvement occurs in commissioning, design, delivery, or assessment (Nabatchi *et al.* 2017). Together with Fung's (2006) focus on participant selection, communication, and authority, these distinctions provide international benchmarks for evaluating participation quality rather than merely counting participatory events.

1.3 From Actor Mapping to the AFST Framework

The literature suggests four analytical components that should not be collapsed. Actors identify the organizational or social entities involved. Functions describe the governance work performed, such as coordination, representation, service delivery, regulation, or capacity building. Strategies identify the institutional or practical instruments through which functions are pursued, such as Party-building, deliberation, collaborative workshops, grid management, HOA self-governance, micro-regeneration, or public-private arrangements. Tensions capture the unequal, contradictory, or context-dependent consequences of these arrangements.

The AFST framework developed here treats these components as sequentially connected but analytically distinct. Actor diversity can broaden knowledge, resources, and channels of action, but it does not itself guarantee coordination or empowerment. Functions depend on relationships and institutional position; strategies configure decision rights and implementation processes; and outcomes are shaped by tensions between effectiveness and autonomy, participation and control, collaboration and co-optation, renewal and displacement, and legitimacy and unequal representation. This framework guides the extraction, coding, and interpretation reported below.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Review Design and Methodological Repositioning

The study adopts a systematic critical review with thematic synthesis. Systematic procedures were used to delimit the review, construct the evidence base, document eligibility decisions, and maintain a traceability record. Critical synthesis was then used to compare mechanisms, contradictions, and boundary conditions across heterogeneous qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method, conceptual, and policy-oriented studies. This design responds to the distinction between merely cataloguing a field and producing a knowledge-advancing review (Paul & Criado, 2020). The review protocol also draws on the interrogative logic of SPAR-4-SLR, which requires explicit justification of what, why, where, when, who, and how a review is conducted (Paul *et al.* 2021).

PRISMA principles were used as a reporting aid for corpus construction rather than as a substitute for analysis (Page *et al.* 2021). Because the review does not undertake effect-size aggregation or citation-network mapping, it does not claim to be a meta-analysis or a bibliometric study. Descriptive profiling was limited to publication year, study design, corpus role, quality/relevance, and study-level code prevalence; bibliometric performance indicators were not used (Donthu *et al.* 2021). The method also incorporates the transparency principles of the original PRISMA statement and PRISMA-P, particularly the need to distinguish planned review decisions from analytical interpretation (Moher *et al.* 2009, 2015).

2.2 Search Logic, Eligibility, and Corpus Construction

Search activities were conducted in two phases. The first-phase database search was run across Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar from 15 to 23 September 2025. Search strings combined terms for community, neighborhood, and grassroots governance with China-related location terms and actor- or mechanism-specific terms, including residents' committees, homeowners' associations (HOAs), social organizations, social work, grid governance, collaborative governance, and community renewal. The second phase was conducted from 3 to 12 February 2026 and used targeted thematic searches plus backward and forward citation checking to improve coverage of under-represented mechanisms, including Party-building, homeowner self-governance, participatory planning, micro-regeneration, public-space governance, and urban-heritage participation. Exact source-specific strings, dates, counts, and final corpus accounting are reported in Supplementary File S1.

Search documentation was organized at source and corpus levels. The source-level log reports the search source, exact search date, field searched, search string, year range, language restriction, initial records, records remaining after cross-source duplicate removal, full-text records assessed, and records included. Google Scholar was treated as a targeted phrase-search source rather than as a stable bibliometric universe because its rankings and displayed counts are dynamic. Its records were therefore retained only after relevance screening, full-text availability checking, and confirmation of extractable governance evidence.

Eligibility was determined by time, language, geography, topic, evidence content, source type, and full-text availability. The search window covered English-language studies published from 2017 to 2025, while the final included corpus covered 2018 to 2025 because no eligible 2017 record met the final inclusion criteria. Studies had to concern mainland China and provide extractable evidence on community- or neighborhood-level actors, functions, strategies, governance mechanisms, or participation tensions. Studies of urban regeneration, heritage management, public space, urban villages, and community gardens were retained only when they explicitly examined community participation, multi-stakeholder relations, neighborhood-level action, or governance

mechanisms. Purely macroeconomic, architectural, or technical studies without extractable governance evidence were excluded. Peer-reviewed journal articles were prioritized; selected conference papers were retained only when they were directly relevant and their full texts were available.

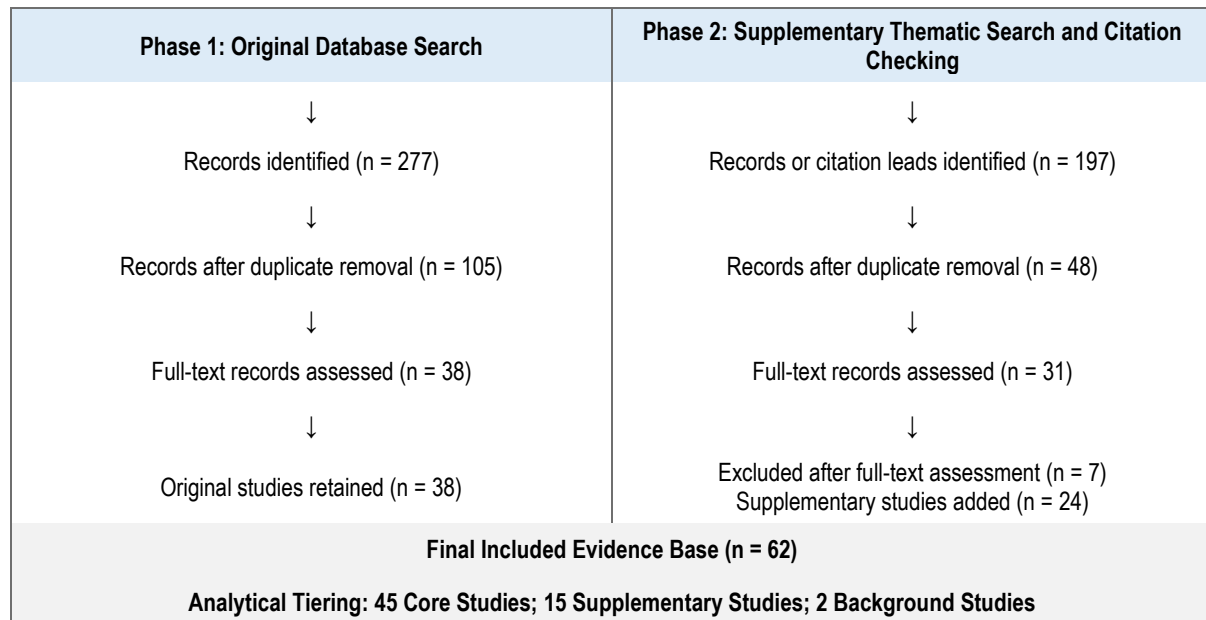
Across the first phase, 277 records were identified and 105 remained after cross-source duplicate removal. Thirty-eight full-text records were assessed under the final eligibility criteria, and all 38 were retained after full-text reconciliation and completion of the evidence-extraction record. The supplementary phase identified 197 records or citation leads; 48 remained after duplicate removal, 31 full texts were assessed, and 24 were added. Seven supplementary full texts were not retained. The final included corpus therefore comprised 62 studies: 38 original studies and 24 supplementary additions.

The screening record distinguishes database-level retrieval from combined screening decisions. Non-retained records were classified by full-text unavailability, weak fit with China community or neighborhood governance, insufficient extractable actor-function-strategy evidence, duplicate or substantively overlapping status, unsuitable source status, boundary mismatch after re-checking, or conceptual commentary without study-level evidence.

After full-text inclusion, studies were tiered by analytical role: 45 core studies provided direct empirical or clearly articulated evidence about actors, functions, strategies, or governance tensions; 15 supplementary studies deepened adjacent mechanisms or provided lower-strength contextual evidence; and two background studies were used for conceptual framing. Frequency summaries and cross-study matrices were calculated from the 45 core studies unless otherwise stated.

Corpus role was assigned after full-text eligibility assessment rather than during the initial search. Core studies were required to provide direct empirical or clearly articulated evidence for actor, function, strategy, or governance-tension coding and were the only studies used in prevalence denominators. Supplementary studies contextualized adjacent mechanisms or lower-strength evidence, while background studies informed conceptual framing only. This separation prevents prevalence claims from being inflated by sources that are useful for context but weaker for direct synthesis. The final analytical tiers were 45 core, 15 supplementary, and two background studies.

Figure 1. Two-phase search, screening, and corpus construction



Source: Authors' construction based on the documented two-phase review protocol.

The workflow documents how corpus reconciliation and supplementary retrieval were combined: 38 original studies and 24 studies from the supplementary phase formed the 62-study evidence base. Analytical tiering was applied only after full-text eligibility assessment.

Table 1 consolidates the review scope, search blocks, inclusion and exclusion rules, and evidentiary roles used in the final analysis.

Table 1. Review scope, search logic, and eligibility rules

Element	Specification	Purpose / Boundary
Review period and language	Search window: English-language studies published from 2017 to 2025. Final included corpus: 2018 to 2025 because no eligible 2017 record met the final inclusion criteria.	Defines the temporal and linguistic boundary of the review.
Sources	Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar (15–23 September 2025); targeted thematic searches and backward/forward citation checking (3–12 February 2026).	Combines broad field retrieval with focused recovery of under-represented governance mechanisms.
Core governance block	("community governance" OR "neighbourhood governance" OR "neighborhood governance" OR "grassroots governance" OR "community co-governance") AND (China OR Chinese OR "urban China")	Identifies the substantive field and geographical context.
Actor block	actor* OR stakeholder* OR resident* OR "residents' committee*" OR "homeowner association*" OR HOA OR "social organization*" OR "social work*" OR "Party building" OR "grid governance"	Captures both generic and China-specific actor labels.
Mechanism block	"participatory governance" OR "participatory planning" OR "collaborative workshop" OR "micro-regeneration" OR "micro-rehabilitation" OR "service delivery" OR "conflict resolution"	Recovers adjacent studies only when they contain community-level governance evidence.
Inclusion	Mainland China; full text available; extractable actor, function, strategy, method, theory, or governance-tension evidence; peer-reviewed journals and selected directly relevant conference papers.	Ensures traceability to the research questions.
Exclusion	Non-China cases; purely technical, architectural, or macroeconomic studies; no community/neighborhood mechanism; duplicate record; inaccessible or unusable full text.	Prevents scope drift and unsupported coding.
Corpus roles	Core: direct evidence and prevalence analysis (n = 45); supplementary: mechanism enrichment (n = 15); background: macro framing only (n = 2).	Separates evidentiary weight from mere inclusion.

Source: Authors' construction based on the documented review protocol.

Note: Google Scholar result totals are treated as approximate because its rankings and displayed counts are dynamic.

These eligibility rules ensure that regeneration, heritage, and public-space studies contribute only when they provide community-level evidence on participation, actor relations, or governance mechanisms.

2.3 Data Extraction and Coding

A structured extraction matrix recorded bibliographic information, location and case context, research design, data source, theory or concept, actors, functions, strategies, key findings, evidence anchors, corpus role, quality/relevance, and claim boundaries for all 62 studies. Study-level anchors linked each code to the relevant abstract, method, findings, discussion, or conclusion pages. The complete study list, extraction matrix, evidence anchors, coding traceability record, code definitions, quality appraisal, and claim-boundary notes are provided in Supplementary File S1.

The evidence-chain map connects major article claims to the search log, corpus decision log, extraction fields, coding matrices, and quality appraisal. This allows the central synthesis claims to be traced from reported findings back to the screened and weighted corpus.

NVivo 15 was used as the qualitative data-management environment for organizing full-text excerpts, assigning provisional codes, retrieving coded segments, and checking study-level evidence anchors. The software did not generate themes automatically; analytical decisions were governed by the codebook, the study-by-actor, study-by-function, and study-by-strategy matrices, and the claim-weighting rules documented in Supplementary File S1. This distinction makes clear that the reliability safeguard rests on transparent coding decisions and traceable source anchors rather than on software output itself.

Coding combined deductive and inductive logic. The deductive stage began with three broad actor domains: official governance actors, autonomous participatory actors, and social collaborative actors. The inductive stage refined these domains into specific codes, including local government, Party organizations, subdistrict offices, residents' committees, grid workers, residents, homeowners, HOAs, volunteers, social organizations, NGOs, social workers, planners, property management companies, developers, businesses, and academic institutions. Function codes captured what actors did; strategy codes captured how they organized action; and tension codes captured recurrent contradictions or boundary conditions. Each study was coded in two phases: initial extraction followed by codebook-based standardization and cross-checking.

Coding was conducted in two phases. The first phase assigned actor, function, and strategy codes to each study. The second phase checked the labels against the codebook, re-read evidence anchors, merged synonymous labels, and separated conceptually different mechanisms. Study-by-actor, study-by-function, and study-by-strategy matrices were then generated. Frequency values represent the number of core studies in which a code appeared at least once; they are not counts of textual mentions, effect sizes, or evidence that every actor in a study performed every co-occurring function.

Because the review was not designed as an independent double-coding study, no intercoder-reliability coefficient is reported. Rather than retroactively implying statistical reliability, the review uses a transparent procedural audit. Every code had to be linked to a study-level evidence anchor; ambiguous cases were returned to the full text; labels were checked against the codebook; synonymous labels were merged only after conceptual comparison; actor, function, strategy, and tension codes were kept separate; and lower-transparency studies were prevented from carrying central claims through corpus tiering and claim weighting. This process reduces unsupported categorization but does not substitute for independent replication, which is acknowledged as a limitation.

2.4 Quality and Relevance Appraisal

A review-specific appraisal rubric assessed six dimensions on a three-point scale: topical relevance, empirical basis, method transparency, theoretical or conceptual contribution, evidence richness, and usefulness for synthesis. The appraisal was used to weight claims and assign corpus roles rather than to exclude studies automatically. Conceptual and lower-transparency studies could provide supplementary context, but they were not allowed to carry central empirical claims. Of the 45 core studies, 41 were rated high and four were rated medium to medium-high in overall usefulness and evidentiary strength.

Source quality was used to determine evidentiary weight rather than automatic inclusion or exclusion. Peer-reviewed empirical studies with high relevance and transparent methods could support central cross-study claims. Lower-transparency, conceptual, policy-oriented, conference, or weaker-source studies were restricted to supplementary roles unless a narrow claim was directly anchored in their text. No prevalence claim was calculated from supplementary or background studies.

This weighting strategy was important because the corpus includes diverse designs, from large multi-city surveys and mixed-method network studies to ethnography, case studies, policy analysis, and conceptual reviews. Strong claims in the Results and Discussion sections are therefore supported by convergent evidence from multiple core studies, while isolated or lower-strength findings are presented as examples or boundary conditions rather than generalized conclusions.

2.5 Synthesis Procedure and Claim Boundaries

The synthesis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive profiling established the temporal, methodological, and quality composition of the corpus. Second, code prevalence and cross-study comparison identified dominant actor configurations, functions, and strategy clusters. Third, a critical interpretive synthesis compared positive, mixed, and negative consequences to identify recurring governance tensions. The AFST framework was developed from this third stage and was checked against studies representing crisis governance, HOA self-governance, social-service provision, participatory planning, and urban regeneration.

The evidence chain moved from search record to corpus decision, from corpus decision to extraction field, from extraction field to code assignment, and from code assignment to descriptive or interpretive claim. Supplementary File S1 documents these links through the Search_Log, Corpus_Decision_Log, Evidence_Extraction, coding matrices, Quality_Appraisal, Evidence_Chain_Map, Coding_Verification, and Claim_Weighting_Rules sheets. These sheets document the derivation of the synthesis; they do not introduce additional empirical findings beyond the screened corpus.

The review makes descriptive and interpretive claims, not causal estimates. A strategy's appearance in several studies indicates research prevalence and cross-context recurrence, not its average effectiveness. Likewise, actor–function co-occurrence indicates that a study connects those elements, not that one actor caused an outcome. Causal language is reserved for studies whose design supports it, and the review otherwise uses terms such as associated with, enabled, constrained, or was interpreted as.

3. Research Results

3.1 Corpus Profile

The 62-study evidence base covers publications from 2018 to 2025, with the greatest concentration in 2023–2025. The annual distribution was four studies in 2018, five in 2019, five in 2020, ten in 2021, eight in 2022, eleven in 2023, twelve in 2024, and seven in 2025. This pattern reflects the growing prominence of pandemic governance, homeowner organization, participatory renewal, neighborhood-level state–society relations, Party-centered governance restructuring, and street-level policy innovation.

The corpus was methodologically diverse but strongly qualitative. Across all 62 studies, 43 used qualitative designs, six were quantitative, five used mixed methods, and eight were conceptual, policy-oriented, or review papers. Among the 45 core studies, 34 were qualitative, five quantitative, five mixed methods, and one conceptual study. The qualitative concentration provides rich evidence on processes and relationships, but it also limits comparative measurement and causal inference. The core corpus was methodologically stronger than the supplementary layer: 41 core studies received a high appraisal and four were rated medium to medium-high.

Table 2 summarizes the composition of the 62-study evidence base. The tiered design prevents conceptually useful but empirically thin studies from inflating actor or strategy prevalence. It also allows adjacent work on heritage, public space, rural governance, Party-centered restructuring, and urban regeneration to inform governance mechanisms without being treated as interchangeable with direct studies of community administration.

Table 2. Profile of the final evidence base

Dimension	Category	Count / interpretation
Corpus role	Core	45; used in study-level prevalence calculations and central thematic claims.
	Supplementary	15; used to enrich mechanisms, context, and lower-strength evidence.
	Background	2; used only for macro-level framing.
Publication period	2018–2022	32 studies.
	2023–2025	30 studies.
Method, all studies	Qualitative	43 of 62.
	Quantitative	6 of 62.
	Mixed methods	5 of 62.
	Conceptual/policy/review	8 of 62.
Method, core studies	Qualitative	34 of 45.
	Quantitative	5 of 45.
	Mixed methods	5 of 45.
	Conceptual	1 of 45.
Core appraisal	High	41 of 45.
	Medium to medium-high	4 of 45.

Source: Authors' synthesis of the final 62-study evidence base.

The profile indicates that the evidence base is recent and empirically rich but still relies heavily on qualitative case studies. Quantitative studies of youth satisfaction and pandemic-era neighborhood governance add comparative outcome evidence, while the incorporated mixed-method, comparative, and revelatory case studies strengthen analysis of social capital, institutional variation, Party–government–society relations, and participation quality (Cai *et al.* 2023; Qian *et al.* 2019; Sun, 2019). Their designs still require cautious interpretation, which informs the claim boundaries used below.

3.2 Actor Architecture: Pluralization Without State Displacement

Among the 45 core studies, 44 included at least one official governance actor, 44 included an autonomous participatory actor, and 39 included a social collaborative actor. The near-universal co-presence of official and participatory actors indicates that the field is not organized around a simple choice between state-led and community-led governance. Instead, most studies examine relational arrangements in which administrative authority, resident participation, and professional, civic, or market resources are combined.

At the specific-code level, government agencies or the local state appeared in 32 core studies, residents or general citizens in 32, and residents' committees in 32. These were followed by planners or other professional intermediaries (15), HOAs or autonomous resident organizations (14), property management companies (13), social or community organizations (13), subdistrict offices (13), Party organizations (9), volunteers (9), developers (8), homeowners as a distinct category (8), and businesses, NGOs, and social workers (six each). The pattern confirms residents' committees as a persistent interface between state administration and everyday neighborhood life, while Party committees, HOAs, property managers, and developers become especially important in Party-centered, privatized-housing, and regeneration contexts.

Official actors perform more than direct command. Residents' committees broker interests, implement policy, organize volunteers, deliver welfare, monitor compliance, and translate administrative demands into neighborhood action. During Shanghai's waste-sorting reform, for example, residents' committees combined persuasion, social-network mobilization, and monitoring (Qin & Owen, 2021). During COVID-19, they coordinated information, access, supplies, volunteers, and relations with property managers (Liu *et al.* 2021; Nie *et al.* 2024). Street-level policy entrepreneurship research further shows that community workers can use political-elite coalitions and regional Party-building platforms to communicate implementation problems, secure resources, and legitimize flexible local action (Zhang *et al.* 2021). The Shenzhen case extends this account by showing how Party organizations can redesign the institutional field itself through Party–government disaggregation, centralized service platforms, cross-appointment, and elite absorption (Cai *et al.* 2023).

Table 3. Actor architecture in the 45 core studies

Higher-order domain	Study-level presence	Most prevalent specific actors	Interpretive role
Official governance actors	44/45 (97.8%)	Local government (32); residents' committees (32); subdistrict offices (13); Party organizations (9).	Rule setting, coordination, policy implementation, resource allocation, service organization, regulation, and brokerage.
Autonomous participatory actors	44/45 (97.8%)	Residents/citizens (32); HOAs or autonomous resident organizations (14); homeowners (8); migrant or tenant groups in a smaller subset.	Participation, representation, self-governance, volunteering, collective claims, and monitoring.
Social collaborative actors	39/45 (86.7%)	Planners/professionals (15); social/community organizations (13); property management companies (13); volunteers (9); developers (8); NGOs (6); social workers (6); businesses (6).	Professional facilitation, service provision, project delivery, resource mobilization, market management, and technical translation.

Source: Authors' synthesis of the 45 core studies.

Autonomous actors are also differentiated. Residents participate as service users, volunteers, deliberative participants, voters, homeowners, activists, tenants, migrants, or vulnerable groups. Qian *et al.* (2019) show that volunteering can be sustained by trust, reciprocity, belonging, and community networks, while Sun's (2019) Shanghai - Taipei comparison demonstrates that formally similar neighborhood institutions can exercise markedly different levels of authority. HOAs can provide representation and collective decision-making, but their influence

depends on legal rules, participation rates, relations with residents' committees, and access to property-management information (Cai *et al.* 2021; Yip & Zheng, 2024). Cai *et al.* (2023) add a contrasting mechanism: plural organizations may remain visible while their personnel, decision rights, and service agendas are repositioned within a Party-centered core-periphery structure. Social collaborative actors are equally heterogeneous. Chang *et al.* (2019) show that university, local-state, and NGO facilitation can produce different participation outcomes, while Chen and Zhang (2020) identify the resource dependence and professional-support needs of community social organizations.

The table reinforces the relational interpretation: actor domains overlap extensively, while the most common specific actors occupy different positions in rule setting, representation, service provision, and project delivery.

3.3 Functional Pattern: Participation and Coordination Dominate

Participation and mobilization were the most prevalent functions, appearing in 38 of 45 core studies (84.4%). Coordination and brokerage appeared in 34 studies (75.6%). The next most frequent functions were representation and self-governance (22; 48.9%), regulation, compliance, and control (20; 44.4%), service delivery and welfare support (18; 40.0%), capacity building and empowerment (17; 37.8%), and spatial renewal or planning support (16; 35.6%). Resource integration appeared in ten studies (22.2%), emergency or resilience governance in seven (15.6%), information collection or reporting in six (13.3%), and explicit participation-risk or social-justice analysis in five (11.1%).

Table 4. Functions identified in the 45 core studies

Function	Core studies	Share	Interpretation
Participation and mobilization	38	84.4%	Recruitment, volunteering, consultation, deliberation, resident involvement, and collective action.
Coordination and brokerage	34	75.6%	Connecting actors, mediating disputes, aligning interests, and translating between administrative and resident domains.
Representation and self-governance	22	48.9%	HOA representation, collective decision-making, voting, resident autonomy, and rights defense.
Regulation, compliance and control	20	44.4%	Compliance, surveillance, rule enforcement, stability maintenance, and behavioral guidance.
Capacity building and empowerment	17	37.8%	Training, participation education, organizational development, professional support, and civic learning.
Service delivery and welfare support	18	40.0%	Community services, care, professional social work, property services, and livelihood support.
Spatial renewal and planning support	16	35.6%	Micro-regeneration, community planning, public-space improvement, heritage renewal, and technical design.
Resource integration	10	22.2%	Funds, social-service procurement, charitable resources, facilities, and cross-sector resource linkage.
Emergency and resilience governance	7	15.6%	Pandemic control, emergency mobilization, supply coordination, and community resilience.
Information collection and reporting	6	13.3%	Grid reporting, resident feedback, needs assessment, and administrative information flows.
Participation risk and social justice	5	11.1%	Tokenism, tyranny of participation, maldistribution, misrecognition, and exclusion.

Source: Authors' synthesis of the 45 core studies.

The joint dominance of participation and coordination is analytically important. Participation in this literature is rarely self-sustaining outside institutional structures. It is commonly initiated, organized, channeled, or mediated by residents' committees, Party organizations, subdistrict offices, planners, social workers, community leaders, or project platforms. Qian *et al.* (2019) show how community networks can convert trust and belonging into voluntary service motivation, while Chang *et al.* (2019) demonstrate that facilitator design and supervision shape whether participation reaches collective planning and implementation or remains limited to opinion expression. Cai *et al.*

(2023) show a further boundary condition: participation and service delivery can expand while agenda control, organizational appointment, and resource authority become more centralized.

Representation and self-governance were less common than participation, indicating that opportunities to attend, volunteer, consult, or deliberate do not necessarily transfer decision authority. HOA studies provide the strongest evidence of formal resident representation and collective decision-making, but Sun (2019) shows that governance values and growth coalitions can alter the actual power of ostensibly similar resident institutions. Heritage and regeneration studies likewise report participation concentrated in consultation or implementation after core decisions have already been made (J. Li *et al.* 2020; Wei, 2022).

Spatial renewal and planning support emerged as a major function because the final corpus includes project-based governance. Micro-regeneration, community gardens, public-space improvement, urban-village upgrading, and collaborative workshops create temporary or durable arenas in which actors negotiate space, heritage, services, and community identity. Empirical studies of participatory community planning and micro-regeneration illustrate both collaborative learning and limited decision influence (Liu *et al.* 2020; M. Wang *et al.* 2024). These projects can make governance visible and tangible, but they may also prioritize design, tourism, or place branding over residents' decision rights.

Participation is therefore the field's most visible function, but coordination, representation, regulation, and resource control determine what that participation can accomplish.

3.4 Five Strategy Clusters

The 45 core studies generated a broad repertoire of strategies, but five clusters capture the main patterns. The first is institutional steering. It includes residents' committee coordination (11 studies), Party-building guidance (six), emergency mobilization (five), grid governance (two), regulatory intermediation (two), street-level policy entrepreneurship, Party-government disaggregation, elite absorption and election control, and service-led Party-mass legitimation. These strategies connect vertical authority to neighborhood networks and can create institutional opportunities for flexible local implementation, but they may also reorganize personnel, service platforms, and participation around centralized political priorities (Cai *et al.* 2023; Qin & Owen, 2021; Xu & He, 2022; Zhang *et al.* 2021).

The second cluster is participatory representation and deliberation. Negotiation or deliberation was the most common specific strategy (15 studies). Related strategies included grassroots self-governance (seven), HOA governance (six), community proposals, participatory budgeting, livelihood-project voting, rights-consciousness mobilization, and digital communication. These strategies are strongest when participants influence agendas, budgets, and implementation. Chang *et al.* (2019), however, show that the same nominally participatory format can produce high or low empowerment depending on participant selection, facilitation quality, and who controls project resources.

The third cluster is professional and social-service facilitation. It includes volunteer mobilization (seven studies), participation education (five), social-organization participation (five), planner or professional facilitation (three), social-work professionalization (two), and third-party facilitation (two). Professional actors frequently translate between administrative requirements and resident needs. Yet professionalization alone does not ensure influence. Contract design, supervision, organizational capacity, funding dependence, and politicized service requirements shape whether NGOs and social organizations expand resident capability or become project-delivery agents with limited agenda-setting autonomy (Cai *et al.* 2023; Chang *et al.* 2019; Chen & Zhang, 2020; Kan & Ku, 2021).

The fourth cluster is spatial and project-based governance. Community renewal or micro-regeneration appeared in 12 core studies, participatory planning in seven, and heritage-oriented regeneration in five. Collaborative workshops, community gardens, public-space design, and situated planning experiments use projects as governance devices: they assemble actors, create issue-specific forums, and materialize participation. These projects can support collaborative learning, but they may also narrow participation to design consultation or become entangled with commercialization and selective upgrading (Liu *et al.* 2020; M. Wang *et al.* 2024; Teo, 2023).

The fifth cluster is market and resource collaboration. Property-management collaboration appeared in eight studies, accompanied by public-private or build-operate-transfer arrangements, community funds, procurement of social services, and developer participation. Market actors can supply finance, management, and technical capacity, but their incentives do not necessarily align with resident welfare. Sun (2019) shows how growth coalitions influence property-governance relations, while the Yongqingfang case illustrates how rehabilitation can preserve physical form while shifting residential space toward commercial and tourism uses (Wang *et al.* 2022).

Table 5. Strategy clusters, mechanisms, and risks

Strategy cluster	Prevalent mechanisms	Representative evidence	Principal risk
Institutional steering	Residents' committee coordination (11); Party-building guidance (6); emergency mobilization (5); grid governance; regulatory intermediation; street-level policy entrepreneurship; Party–government disaggregation; elite absorption; service-led Party–mass legitimation.	Cai <i>et al.</i> (2023); Qin and Owen (2021); Xu and He (2022); Zhang <i>et al.</i> (2021).	Participation and service expansion may be tied to performance pressure, centralized appointment, politicization, or control.
Participatory representation and deliberation	Negotiation/deliberation (15); grassroots self-governance (7); HOA governance (6); community proposals; participatory budgeting; livelihood voting.	Chang <i>et al.</i> (2019); Tang (2018); Guan and Liu (2021); Zhong (2024).	Consultation may occur without agenda-setting, budget, or implementation authority.
Professional and social-service facilitation	Volunteer mobilization (7); participation education (5); social-organization participation (5); planner facilitation (3); social work and third-party facilitation.	Cai <i>et al.</i> (2023); Chang <i>et al.</i> (2019); Chen and Zhang (2020); Liao <i>et al.</i> (2019); Kan and Ku (2021).	Professional actors may lack institutional leverage or become dependent on state funding and contracts.
Spatial and project-based governance	Community renewal/micro-regeneration (12); participatory planning (7); heritage-oriented regeneration (5); workshops; gardens; public-space projects.	Li <i>et al.</i> (2020); Mai <i>et al.</i> (2023); Wang <i>et al.</i> (2024); Zhu (2023).	Visible physical improvement can coexist with commercialization, displacement, or short-lived participation.
Market and resource collaboration	Property-management collaboration (8); public–private/BOT arrangements; community funds; procurement; developer participation.	Sun (2019); Wang and Clarke (2021); Wang <i>et al.</i> (2022); Yip and Zheng (2024).	Market capacity may be gained at the cost of resident control, affordability, or distributive equity.

Source: Authors' synthesis of the reviewed strategy mechanisms and risks.

The five clusters are not mutually exclusive. Most governance arrangements combine institutional steering with one or more participatory, professional, spatial, or market instruments.

3.5 Governance Tensions and Boundary Conditions

Five recurring tensions explain why similar actor labels or strategies produce different results. First, service effectiveness can conflict with autonomy. Party-led platforms and government procurement may improve service reach and coordination while making social organizations fiscally, organizationally, or politically dependent (Cai *et al.* 2023; Chen & Zhang, 2020; Kan & Ku, 2021). The Shenzhen evidence shows that service platforms can expand organizational reach while professional service bodies lose independent appointment, content, and procurement authority (Cai *et al.* 2023). Chang *et al.* (2019) add an important qualification: locally supervised facilitation can deepen participation, whereas contracted NGO delivery may reduce resident control when budget and implementation decisions are professionalized away from participants. Second, participation can coexist with control. Qian *et al.* (2019) link volunteer action to trust and belonging while also documenting the role of superior-level pressure in mobilization; residents' committees, Party-centered service systems, and grid systems similarly combine participation with monitoring, agenda control, and administrative guidance (Cai *et al.* 2023; Qin & Owen, 2021; Xu & He, 2022).

Third, collaboration can become co-optation. Social organizations, professionals, volunteers, and market-linked community bodies may gain access to resources and policy platforms but lose independent agenda-setting power. Cai *et al.* (2023) show how plural organizations were incorporated into a Party-centered organizational system through cross-appointment, registration, service conditions, and elite absorption. Fourth, renewal can produce displacement or commercialization. Micro-regeneration and heritage-led projects often avoid wholesale

demolition, yet resident influence may remain limited and the social use of space may be subordinated to tourism, branding, or property interests (M. Wang *et al.* 2024; Xian & Gu, 2020). Fifth, legitimacy gains can coexist with representational inequality. Service-led legitimation, HOA institutions, and open participation do not guarantee equivalent decision authority or representative inclusion (Cai *et al.* 2023; Sun, 2019). Chang *et al.* (2019) demonstrate how open participation can still reproduce self-selection and uneven voice, while rural evidence indicates that low administrative capacity and service scarcity can constrain participation even where village-level forums exist (Mao & Xie, 2022).

These tensions are not exceptional failures outside the governance model; they are constitutive boundary conditions of multi-actor governance. Their intensity depends on agenda-setting rules, representational breadth, resource ownership, implementation authority, accountability mechanisms, and whether participation persists beyond a single project or campaign. Table 6 summarizes the evidence and implications.

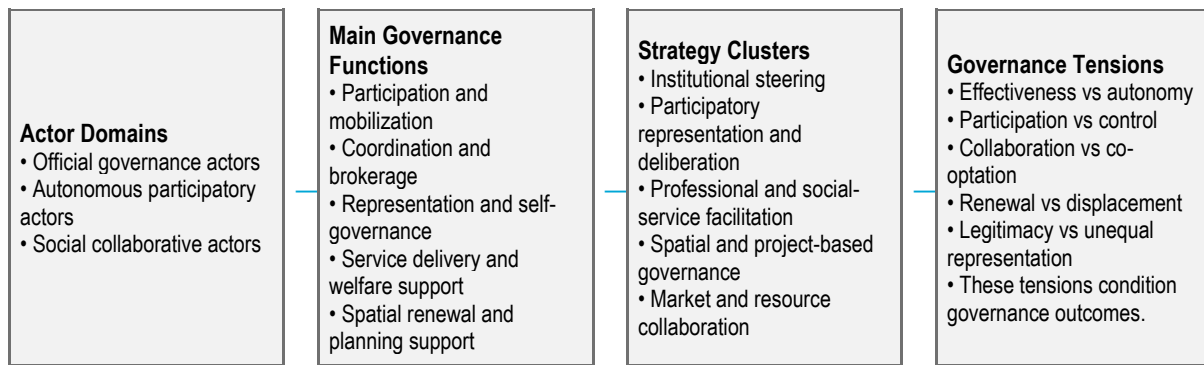
Table 6. Governance tensions and boundary conditions

Tension	Evidence pattern	Boundary conditions	Implication
Service effectiveness ↔ autonomy	Party-led and government-funded platforms expand service reach but can reshape organizational priorities, personnel authority, and professional autonomy.	Funding dependence; personnel control; contract design; alternative resource access.	Assess service gains and organizational autonomy separately.
Participation ↔ control	Mobilization, deliberation, volunteering, and service participation coexist with monitoring, agenda control, elite selection, and stability maintenance.	Agenda-setting rights; information access; acceptable issue boundaries; sanctioning power.	Count decision influence, not only participation events.
Collaboration ↔ co-optation	Social organizations and professionals gain access to platforms and resources but may lose independent agenda-setting, appointment, or service-design capacity.	Fiscal dependence; evaluation rules; ability to refuse tasks; resident accountability.	Design transparent contracts and plural accountability channels.
Renewal ↔ displacement/commercialization	Micro-regeneration reduces wholesale demolition but can transform residential and social functions toward tourism and consumption.	Tenure protection; affordability; business mix; anti-displacement safeguards; long-term management.	Evaluate spatial, social, and distributive outcomes together.
Legitimacy ↔ representational inequality	HOAs, participatory institutions, and service-led legitimacy strategies can increase trust or visibility while underrepresenting tenants, migrants, non-activists, or independently selected voices.	Membership rules; selection of representatives; participation costs; grievance channels.	Assess who is represented, whose preferences change decisions, and who remains outside.

Source: Authors' synthesis of the reviewed governance tensions and boundary conditions.

Figure 2 integrates the actor, function, strategy, and tension layers. It shifts the analytical focus from the number of participating actors to the institutional conditions under which their relationships produce capacity, control, inclusion, or exclusion.

Figure 2. Actor–Function–Strategy–Tension (AFST) synthesis framework



Source: Authors' synthesis of the Actor–Function–Strategy–Tension framework.

The framework makes explicit that the same actor or strategy can perform different functions across settings and that governance effects remain contingent on decision rights, resource control, accountability, and implementation conditions.

3.6 Methodological and Theoretical Profile

The literature's methodological strength lies in process-rich case evidence. Ethnography, interviews, participant observation, document analysis, and comparative case studies reveal how actors negotiate, mobilize, resist, and implement policy. Mixed-method studies add survey, social-network, and structural-model evidence, while cross-city and revelatory case studies illuminate institutional variation and organizational restructuring. Nevertheless, 43 of the 62 studies are qualitative, and 34 of the 45 core studies use qualitative designs. The field therefore remains dominated by single-city or single-project evidence, with limited longitudinal comparison, causal identification, and standardized measurement of participation quality.

Theoretical approaches are similarly diverse. Recurring lenses include social capital, collaborative governance, street-level bureaucracy, governmentality, regulatory intermediation, strategic action fields, political trust, publicness, and social justice. This diversity is productive, but theories often remain attached to specific empirical subfields rather than being integrated across community administration, property governance, social services, crisis response, and urban renewal. The AFST framework addresses this fragmentation by providing a common analytical grammar without claiming that one theory can explain all settings.

4. Discussions

4.1 Convergent, Divergent, and Context-Dependent Findings

Across otherwise heterogeneous studies, four findings converge. Official institutions remain the main providers of legal recognition, funding, platforms, and vertical coordination; actor diversity requires brokerage; participation quality depends on decision rights rather than attendance; and professional or market involvement creates public value only when accountability and resident influence are preserved. These patterns recur across crisis governance, HOA self-governance, social-service delivery, Party-centered restructuring, participatory planning, and renewal.

The evidence diverges on how these mechanisms operate. Party-state steering is described as both an enabling infrastructure and a source of agenda control. Cai *et al.* (2023) show that Party–government disaggregation and Party–mass service platforms can expand coordination and service visibility while centralizing appointment, resource, and agenda authority. Chang *et al.* (2019) found that actively supervised, locally led facilitation supported deeper participation than contracted NGO delivery, whereas studies of Party-linked social organizations show that resource access can narrow organizational autonomy (Kan & Ku, 2021). Qian *et al.* (2019) linked volunteering to trust and belonging while also documenting administrative pressure behind mobilization. Sun (2019) showed that formally similar neighborhood institutions produced different power relations in Shanghai and Taipei. These are not simple contradictions; they reveal that the effects of multi-actor arrangements are conditional.

The main boundary conditions are the distribution of agenda-setting, appointment, and budget authority; participant-selection rules; facilitator capability; contractual and funding dependence; property and land regimes; urban–rural context; crisis versus routine governance; and the durability of participation after a project. Method also matters: process-rich qualitative studies reveal mechanisms and power asymmetries, whereas cross-sectional

surveys provide broader associations but weaker causal identification. Table 7 makes the convergence–divergence–context chain explicit.

Table 7. Convergent, divergent, and context-dependent findings

Analytical issue	Convergent evidence	Divergent evidence	Contextual explanation
State/Party role	Official actors supply recognition, resources, platforms, vertical coordination, and—in some settings—organizational restructuring capacity.	Steering may enable service and participation or centralize appointments, agendas, and organizational autonomy.	Party–government division of labor; funding and personnel control; crisis context; local leadership; acceptable issue boundaries.
Resident participation	Participation and mobilization recur across most core studies.	Trust-based volunteering, co-decision, mobilized compliance, consultation, and tokenism coexist.	Participant selection; agenda and budget authority; information access; durability.
Professional/NGO facilitation	Professional actors add expertise, translation, and implementation capacity.	Facilitation can broaden capability or projectize participation and displace resident control.	Contract design; supervision; resource dependence; facilitator competence.
HOA/property governance	Resident organizations can represent homeowners and coordinate property decisions.	Formal self-governance varies from substantial authority to constrained or state-centered arrangements.	Property regime; membership rules; local growth coalition; information and enforcement access.
Spatial/project governance	Projects convene actors and produce visible improvements.	Public value and learning may coexist with commercialization, displacement, or short-lived participation.	Tenure protection; business mix; anti-displacement safeguards; post-project institutions.

Source: Authors' synthesis of convergent, divergent, and context-dependent findings.

The comparison shows that divergence is systematically associated with institutional conditions rather than random inconsistency. The same actor or strategy can therefore generate different outcomes when decision rights, resources, representation, and accountability are configured differently.

4.2 State-Structured Pluralism

The first major conclusion is that China's community and neighborhood governance is pluralized but not de-centered. Official actors no longer monopolize every service or interaction, yet they remain the infrastructural condition through which many non-state actors obtain recognition, funding, venues, information, and access to residents. The Shenzhen evidence sharpens this argument by separating Party authority from government administration: the government can retreat from selected community functions while Party organizations expand their control over service platforms, personnel, organizational registration, and elite recruitment (Cai *et al.* 2023). The resulting arrangement is best described as state-structured pluralism: multiple actors participate, but authoritative institutions shape the field, allocate key resources, and define the political limits of acceptable action.

This finding refines both state-centered and polycentric interpretations. A purely state-centered account underestimates the practical agency of HOAs, residents, social organizations, volunteers, professionals, and market actors. A straightforward polycentric account may overstate the independence and symmetry of decision centers. Compared with collaborative-governance models that emphasize shared institutional design and collaborative dynamics (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson *et al.* 2012), the reviewed evidence shows nested and unequal centers of action. Cai *et al.* (2023) make this asymmetry especially visible: organizational plurality can coexist with a Party-centered core–periphery structure and controlled personnel selection. Resident organizations may exercise meaningful authority over property management or local projects, but their autonomy is conditional on legal recognition, administrative tolerance, political incorporation, organizational capacity, and resource access (Cai *et al.* 2021; Sun, 2019; Yip & Zheng, 2024).

4.3 Brokerage Rather Than Actor Substitution

The second conclusion is that governance capacity depends more on brokerage than on replacing one actor with another. Residents' committees, planners, social workers, community leaders, and sometimes HOA representatives function as boundary spanners. They translate policy into local practice, connect residents to institutions, mediate technical and social knowledge, and coordinate organizations with different incentives. Street-level policy entrepreneurs additionally use political coalitions and Party-building platforms to bridge local implementation problems and higher-level decision systems (Zhang *et al.* 2021). This supports network-governance scholarship's emphasis on governance form and brokerage while showing that the broker's accountability and institutional position are central in hierarchical settings (Provan & Kenis, 2008).

Brokerage quality varies. A broker can widen participation, clarify options, reduce information asymmetry, and sustain implementation. It can also filter demands, privilege cooperative participants, or convert open disagreement into managed consultation. The same organizational actor may therefore enable and constrain participation simultaneously. This helps explain why residents' committees appear in both positive accounts of service coordination and critical accounts of surveillance or administrative control. Actor categories alone cannot predict outcomes; the distribution of decision rights and accountability within relationships is decisive.

4.4 Participation as a Quality Continuum

The third conclusion is that participation should be evaluated as a continuum of influence rather than a binary variable. The corpus ranges from information provision and mobilized compliance, through consultation and deliberation, to co-design, co-decision, and resident self-governance. Attendance at a meeting, volunteering in a campaign, or contributing labor to a project does not necessarily indicate empowerment. Participation, inclusion, and co-production must therefore be distinguished by who enters, when they enter, what they can decide, and whether their involvement changes the service or project cycle (Fung, 2006; Nabatchi *et al.* 2017; Quick & Feldman, 2011).

Future evaluation should therefore assess at least six dimensions: agenda-setting power, representational breadth, access to information, decision influence, resource control, and accountability for implementation. A seventh dimension – durability – is needed for project-based participation: whether institutions and relationships persist after a campaign, workshop, or renewal project ends. This framework can distinguish “orderly participation” that improves implementation from participation that redistributes authority, without assuming that either is inherently sufficient in every context.

4.5 Spatial Projects as Governance Technologies

The fourth conclusion is that community governance is increasingly enacted through spatial projects. Micro-regeneration, gardens, public-space design, heritage rehabilitation, and urban-village upgrading do more than alter the built environment. They define problems, select participants, create temporary forums, distribute budgets, and establish narratives about community needs. In this sense, spatial projects are governance technologies.

Their effects are ambivalent. Small-scale projects can reduce demolition, create visible improvements, foster interaction, and lower barriers to participation. Collaborative workshops can make technical knowledge accessible and connect residents, planners, and local government (X. Li *et al.* 2020). Community gardens can open underused space and organize collective activity (Mai *et al.* 2023). Yet projects can also eventize participation, prioritize symbolic consensus, and produce tourism or commercial value without transferring long-term control to residents (M. Wang *et al.* 2024; Zhu, 2025). Spatial quality and governance quality should therefore be assessed separately.

4.6 Theoretical Contribution of the AFST Framework

The AFST framework contributes by preventing four common analytical conflation. First, actor presence is not equivalent to actor power. Second, a formal function is not evidence of effective performance. Third, a participatory strategy is not necessarily empowering. Fourth, collaboration is not automatically a beneficial outcome. Classical collaborative-governance frameworks specify starting conditions, institutional design, collaborative dynamics, and network structure (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson *et al.* 2012; Provan & Kenis, 2008). AFST extends this logic for asymmetric neighborhood governance by making tensions and boundary conditions an explicit analytical layer between strategy and consequence. The Party–government–society evidence further demonstrates why official authority should not be treated as a single undifferentiated actor category: government withdrawal can coincide

with Party expansion, and plural organizational presence can coexist with centralized appointment, resource, and agenda control (Cai *et al.* 2023).

Four review-derived propositions follow. Proposition 1: official infrastructural support remains a necessary but not sufficient condition for most multi-actor arrangements in urban China. Proposition 2: brokerage quality mediates whether actor diversity becomes coordinated capacity or fragmented responsibility. Proposition 3: participation outcomes depend more on decision rights and representational breadth than on the number of participatory events. Proposition 4: spatially embedded projects can build civic capacity and public value, but their benefits are conditional on anti-displacement safeguards, transparent resource allocation, and durable resident influence. These propositions are interpretive syntheses to be tested in future comparative research, not causal claims established by the review.

4.7 Practical Implications

For local governments and residents' committees, the findings suggest that actor mapping should be accompanied by a decision-rights map. Governance plans should specify who can define problems, approve budgets, select providers, monitor implementation, and revise decisions. This would make the difference between participation and consultation visible and reduce the risk that responsibility is devolved without authority.

For HOAs, social organizations, and professional intermediaries, institutional access should be paired with safeguards for autonomy and representation. Procurement contracts and Party-building partnerships should disclose objectives, funding conditions, evaluation criteria, and channels for resident feedback. Planners and social workers should be supported not only as service providers but also as facilitators capable of translating technical information and amplifying less organized groups.

For renewal and public-space projects, evaluation should extend beyond physical completion. It should examine who benefited, who was displaced or excluded, whether everyday services remained accessible, whether residents influenced key decisions, and whether maintenance institutions survived after project delivery. Project success should therefore combine spatial quality, procedural publicness, distributive equity, and long-term governance capacity.

4.8 Limitations and Future Research

This review has six limitations. Table 8 translates these limitations into a prioritized research agenda and identifies designs capable of testing the review-derived propositions.

Table 8. Priority agenda for future research

Research gap	Recommended design	Key measures	Expected contribution
English-language and coastal-city bias	Bilingual systematic review and comparative sampling across city tiers and regions.	Policy context, neighborhood type, region, migration profile.	Tests the scope conditions of state-structured pluralism.
Participation treated as a single variable	Longitudinal and mixed-method studies of participation pathways.	Agenda power, representation, information, decision influence, resource control, accountability, durability.	Distinguishes mobilization, consultation, co-decision, and self-governance.
Brokerage mechanisms under-specified	Relational event analysis, social-network analysis, and comparative process tracing.	Broker position, translation practices, trust, conflict resolution, filtering of demands.	Explains when brokerage produces coordination or exclusion.
Project outcomes assessed mainly through design completion	Post-occupancy and longitudinal evaluation of renewal projects.	Displacement, affordability, everyday use, maintenance, social ties, resident control.	Separates spatial quality from governance quality.
Limited causal evidence	Quasi-experiments, panel surveys, natural experiments, and matched comparisons where feasible.	Service outcomes, trust, satisfaction, conflict, participation, equity.	Tests AFST propositions without overclaiming from single cases.

Source: Authors' proposed future-research agenda based on review limitations.

First, it includes only English-language publications and therefore underrepresents the larger Chinese-language literature and policy debate. Second, the corpus remains strongly urban and coastal, although the addition of rural evidence provides a limited boundary comparison (Mao & Xie, 2022). Third, qualitative case studies dominate, supporting mechanism interpretation but constraining generalization and causal inference. Fourth, actor and strategy frequencies measure study prevalence rather than effectiveness or population prevalence. Fifth, the two-stage search combined database retrieval with targeted thematic and citation-informed refinement, which may favor studies with stronger English-language indexing and citation visibility; Google Scholar result counts are therefore treated as search-log records rather than as a stable bibliometric universe. Sixth, the coding process used a documented two-pass audit and evidence anchors but was not designed for independent double coding; no intercoder-reliability coefficient is therefore claimed. These limitations define the evidentiary boundary of the synthesis and indicate priorities for future updates.

Future research should combine Chinese and English-language evidence, compare cities and neighborhood types, and use longitudinal, network, and quasi-experimental designs where appropriate. It should measure participation quality directly, distinguish residents by tenure, migration status, socioeconomic position, and organizational membership, and examine when brokers amplify or filter citizen demands. Comparative research should also test whether the AFST propositions travel beyond China and how different political and property regimes alter the relationship between actor diversity and governance outcomes. The agenda prioritizes comparative and longitudinal evidence because the next advance in the field depends less on adding isolated case descriptions than on explaining variation across institutional and neighborhood contexts.

Conclusions and Further Research

This review revises the understanding of multiple actors in China's community and neighborhood governance. Across 62 studies, the evidence shows neither a simple transition from government to society nor a uniform collaborative model. Official, autonomous participatory, and social collaborative actors are widely co-present, but their authority, resources, and access to decision-making remain unequal. In the 45 core studies, participation and mobilization appeared in 38, coordination and brokerage in 34, and representation and self-governance in 22.

Five strategy clusters organize this field: institutional steering; participatory representation and deliberation; professional and social-service facilitation; spatial and project-based governance; and market and resource collaboration. Their consequences are shaped by recurring tensions between service effectiveness and autonomy, participation and control, collaboration and co-optation, renewal and displacement, and legitimacy and unequal representation. These tensions explain why the presence of multiple actors may improve responsiveness and collective capacity in one context but produce tokenism, dependency, or exclusion in another.

The AFST framework is the article's main contribution. It links actor configurations to governance work, practical instruments, and boundary conditions while preserving the distinction between participation and power. For research, it provides a common structure for comparing fragmented subfields. For practice, it directs attention from the number of actors or activities toward decision rights, representation, resource control, accountability, and durability. China's experience therefore contributes not a single model of collaborative governance, but a set of relational mechanisms whose effects depend on how plural participation is institutionally structured.

Declarations

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Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

Jiamei Ye: contributed to the conceptualization of the review, literature search, corpus construction, eligibility screening, data extraction, coding, thematic synthesis, interpretation of findings, development of the Actor – Function – Strategy – Tension framework, and preparation of the original manuscript draft.

Fatimah Zailly Ahmad Ramli: contributed to supervision, conceptual guidance, methodological review, interpretation of findings, critical revision, and manuscript refinement.

Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid: contributed to supervision, theoretical guidance, methodological review, critical revision, and manuscript refinement.

All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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