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Embedding “Society” into the Chinese Communist Party’s Rule of Law

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Abstract

This paper examines how the Chinese Communist Party envisages building a particular type of society based on the precepts of law, which the Party calls “rule of law-based society”. To Party legal theorists, building a “rule of law-based society” is an integral part of Xi Jinping Thought on the Rule of Law. Drawing on the Party’s 2020 “Implementation Outline for the Construction of a Rule of Law-based Society (2020–2025)”, this paper argues that the Party’s “rule of law-based society” vision seeks to bring cohesion to the expansive social governance system to produce both social cohesion and social and political stability. In doing so, social services and stability maintenance mechanisms are brought together under the auspices of a plan to legally institutionalize social governance. Placing the concept of “rule of law-based society” in a broader political context of social governance, this paper analyses how this important element of Xi Jinping Thought on the Rule of Law seeks to make Party-led social governance cohere through ideology, policy and law.

Keywords China · Law-based governance · Social governance · Xi Jinping Thought on the Rule of Law · Grassroots governance · Ideology

1 Introduction

This paper examines how the Chinese Communist Party is orchestrating a comprehensive cohesion-building strategy through its vision for a particular type of society that is to be basically realised by 2035, which it calls a “rule of law-based society”. At its core, the Party seeks to forge an integrated social governance system capable

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of generating both sustained social cohesion and social and political stability, to produce a particular form of socialist legal culture where community actors take part in co-governing society under the leadership of the Party (Huang and Li 2021; Chen 2021b). The current social governance architecture, while extensive, operates across domains that the Party says require greater “refinement” and “integration” for this comprehensive vision to be realized (Chen 2021b).

China’s social governance system is expansive, covering two broad domains. The first domain seeks to foster social cohesion through service provision and by regulating social and moral norms through community-based mechanisms. It aims to uphold people’s civil rights by making legal consultant services and petitioning services (i.e. public complaints) more accessible and fairer; by pre-empting the escalation of social conflicts; by offering more diversified types of mediation; and by involving community actors more effectively in regulating social and moral norms. These cohesion-enhancing services are reinforced through state-based legal frameworks. The second domain involves stability and social order maintenance. It comprises legally coercive mechanisms involving police, courts, procuratorates and judicial offices. Despite their shared stability-building objectives, top Party leaders see many aspects of the two domains of governance lacking sufficient “functional integration”¹; they have yet to fully cohere into a unified governance framework across all grassroots areas to a point where they are fully systematized and synergized.

In this paper, we argue that to bridge these fragmented elements, the Party has deployed multiple cohesion-generating strategies through the concept of “rule of law-based society”. Our analysis identifies three critical cohesive elements—ideology, policy architecture and law—that function as binding agents in this system. We examine Party ideology, Party policy (in the form of the Party’s 2020 “Implementation Outline for the Construction of a Rule of Law-based Society (2020–2025)” (CPC 2020) (hereafter “Society Outline”)² and the process of legal institutionalization of social governance, known in Chinese as *shehui zhili fazhihua*. In doing so, we demonstrate how the rule of law-based society vision seeks to serve as a master framework for building a more cohesive and orderly society.

In what follows, we first provide a broad political context to the idea of a rule of law-based society. Second, we turn to ideology that undergirds the vision, observing its cohesion-building qualities. Following that, we outline the policy layout of the vision, in the form of the Society Outline, observing the ways in which its description functions as a means of making social governance’s discrete functions, tasks and actors more cohesive. Next, we outline the significance of law, or more precisely, legal institutionalization of social governance, as a cohesion-building instrument. This involves, for instance, revising social and moral norms in village rules and civic covenants devised by village and urban resident self-governance committees³ to become a force for greater social unity and improving legal regulation of

¹ In late 2022 then Secretary-General of the Party’s Political-Legal Commission which runs the social governance system in China called for greater “functional systems integration” 功能系统集成 (Chen 2021b).

² The Chinese term is 法治社会建设实施纲要 (2020–2025).

³ Village rules are 村规民约. Civic covenants are 居民公约.

the mechanisms of social governance that oversee and implement the regulation of social relations.

2 Rule of Law-Based Society in the Broader Political Context

The Party governs grassroots society through top-level overall design plans which grassroots levels of the Party and government are expected to implement. Since Xi Jinping’s first year in power in 2013, authorities have regularly issued “implementation outlines”⁴ that seek to realize in various ways the Party’s overall goal of modernizing the national governance system and governance capacity. In 2017, the 19th Party Congress called for plans to construct a rule of law-based society by 2035 (CPC 2020). In December 2020, the Party set out in an implementation outline, its ambition by the deadline of 2035 to bring into basic realization a society that functions under the precepts of “law-based governance”, otherwise translated into English by Party theorists as “rule of law”.⁵ The Society Outline goals are connected to the bigger picture of the Party’s overall law-based governance ambitions for the country as a whole, known as the Plan for Constructing a Rule of Law in China (2020–2025).⁶

Since the 19th Party Congress in 2017 and even more so since the 20th Party Congress in 2022, Party authorities have turned their sights to refining the grassroots governance system, particularly social governance. According to Xi Jinping, “the foundation of the rule of law lies at the grassroots” (cited in Zhang Q 2022, p.14). The Party intends for its grassroots social governance activities to be more dynamic in nature, seeking to move away from a predominantly top-down approach to “managing” society (i.e. social management) to promote instead, a combined a top-down and bottom-up “people-centered” approach to governance, which from 2013, has been called “social governance”.⁷ This approach is achieved by bringing together people who work in discrete sectors; those in Party, government and society including police, courts, procuratorates, local government departments, grid management workers, social organizations and volunteers, to participate in regulating social behavior under the direct leadership of Party committees at various levels (Fang 2017; Chen 2021a, 2021b; Yao 2024; Yuan 2024).

According to Party leaders, a “society governed by the precepts of law”, alternatively translated as a “rule of law-based society” is one half of the overall plan to build a “rule of law in China”. The other half is to build a “rule of law-based government” (Yuan 2020; Huang and Li 2021; Huang 2023a).⁸ The 2021 Government Outline details how the Party intends to develop and refine laws to ensure that government actions adhere to the law. The 2020 Society Outline, on the other hand, is not primarily focused on

⁴ The Chinese term is 实施纲要 or 实施方案 or 实施细则.

⁵ The Chinese term is 法治.

⁶ The Chinese term is 法治中国建设规划 (2020-2025年).

⁷ The Chinese term is 社会治理.

⁸ The Chinese term is 法治政府建设实施纲要 (2021–2025).

building accountable government institutions. Rather, it is focused on building legally institutionalized social governance mechanisms and moral and social norms across grassroots society which are capable of comprehensively supervising, disciplining and moulding the behavior and beliefs of the populace at grassroots level. It intends for these activities and the moral and social norms they regulate, to foster a dynamic socialist legal culture in which the involvement of self-governance community actors in law-based governance creates an enduring “social vitality” that propels its sustainability.⁹

Given the context above, the rule of law-based society vision could be described as the “bottom half” of the overall rule of law-based vision for China (or in Xi Jinping’s words, the “foundation”) since its focus is mainly the grassroots of society (Xinhua 2020) from county level to towns, urban subdistricts, villages, communities and grids. Compared with the overall rule of law in China and the rule of law-based government, the rule of law-based society idea is a relative late-comer to the repertoire of rule of law ideology in China (Zhuo 2020). While the first Government Outline was produced in 2015 to cover the years 2015 to 2020, the Society Outline was not issued until late December 2020. In other words, the Society Outline is the first document to put flesh on to the bones of the idea of a rule of law-based society. According to the Central Party Committee (CPC), it defines, for the first time, that the vision is to “build a socialist society governed by the rule of law that believes in the rule of law, is fair and just, safeguards rights, is law-abiding and honest, and is vibrant, harmony-creating and orderly” (Wang 2020).

Two main normative systems govern the work of creating a rule of law-based society, both requiring standardization under the social governance system (Huang and Li 2021). They are government-related regulatory systems and community-based normative systems. The latter include civic covenants formulated by self-governance residents’ committees in urban areas, village rules formulated by self-governance village committees, industry regulations, group charters and so on.

By standardizing and legally institutionalizing normative frameworks and operational mechanisms, the Society Outline establishes authoritative parameters for integrating legal principles into grassroots governance to create its desired socialist legal culture. This Society Outline blueprint thus represents both a practical governance roadmap and a theoretical exposition of how the Party conceptualizes the relationship between itself, government and grassroots society, making it indispensable for analyzing the Xi leadership’s distinctive approach to both legal development and social governance in the current era.

Recent legal elements of Xi era socialist rule of law ideology in general, particularly those focusing on Party leadership in this process, are already well articulated in English scholarship on Chinese rule of law discourse (cf. Smith 2020; Seppänen 2023; Peerenboom 2025). However, to date, there have been no English-language publications that critically interrogate the Party’s rule of law-based society ambitions. Developing a rule of law-based society is now regarded as an integral part of Xi Jinping Thought on the Rule of Law (Huang 2021; Yuan 2024). And given that after the 19th Party Congress in 2017, and even more so after the 20th Party Congress in 2022, the Xi leadership turned to grassroots society as a governing priority,

⁹ The Chinese term is 社会活力.

it is timely to study in detail, this shift to embed society into the Xi-era rule of law framework.

According to Xi Jinping, China's comprehensive law-based governance system "is a systematic project", so it is necessary to "plan it as a whole, and pay more attention to its systematicity, its holistic nature and its synergistic nature" (Xi Jinping cited in Huang 2021, p. 17). While outside China, scholars have yet to examine the concept of rule of law-based society, legal theorists within China have recently done so and are in broad agreement that the mechanisms applying to systematizing the rule of law-based society relate predominantly to "social governance". Party legal theorists, political-legal officials and scholars in China have in recent years rationalized a rule of law-based society ideal by placing social governance mechanisms at the forefront of discussion (c.f. Fang 2017; Wang 2020; Huang and Li 2021; Zhang Q 2022; Xu 2024; Deng and Nian 2024).

Social governance is a Xi-era umbrella term for a number of grassroots governance functions that regulate social relations and social behavior (Jiang 2014). It was first established at the Third Plenum of the 18th Party Congress in 2013 to replace the Hu Jintao-era system of social management (Steinhardt and Zhao 2014). Xi Jinping intends for social governance to create both social order and social vitality:

Social governance is a science. If it is too rigid, it will be stagnant; if it is too loose, it will bring turbulence... We cannot simply rely on suppression and control and rigid stability maintenance. We must also pay attention to guidance and dispute resolution and flexible stability maintenance, focussing on mobilizing and organizing social forces to participate and mobilize the whole of society to work together to maintain social stability (Xi Jinping, cited in Huang and Li 2021, p. 20).

The idea here is to "properly handle the relationship between social vitality and social order", by coordinating "social forces" (community actors) to "regulate social relations and standardize social behavior" (Xi Jinping, cited in Huang 2021, p. 20). Under the umbrella of social governance, the Party seeks to integrate the work of multiple governmental, judicial and community actors by promoting a more diverse array of conflict resolution practices (Guo 2019; Chen 2023). In addition, the Party intends for this to be achieved by better coordinating information and tasks flowing through the social governance system including the grid management system, people's mediation, administrative mediation and judicial mediation, grassroots psychological counselling services, petitioning offices, moral governance education and shaming activities, policing, emergency management, digital surveillance and other forms of social monitoring and stability maintenance (Chen 2021b; Chen 2023; Xinhua 2024).

Social vitality is to be produced, in part, through the involvement of community actors in governing their peers through conflict resolution, public shaming and monitoring of compliance with social and moral rules. But it is the political-legal system that is "the main driving force in the construction of a rule of law China", according to Huang Wenyi (2023b, p. 30). At the grassroots level, the Political-legal Commission has orchestrated a comprehensive cohesion-building strategy by methodically integrating previously fragmented social governance tasks and functions into unified operational hubs. This institutional fusion manifests physically in "comprehensive

management of public order centres”¹⁰ sometimes also called “social governance centres” which serve as architectural embodiments of the cohesion imperative. It is also manifest in its digital expansion through “Safe China clouds” and “social governance clouds” located in these county, municipal and provincial centers that hoover up data collected through the grassroots governance mechanisms listed above. These centers, expanded across China over the space of a decade or more, now number over 583,000 (Chen 2023). They bring together representatives from previously physically disconnected entities including paid and volunteer grid management workers, police, procuratorates, courts, petitioning offices and judicial organs and so on, under a single cohesive organizational framework. This “integration of functional systems” as the Central Political-Legal Commission puts it (Chen 2021b), involves bringing together complaints services, conflict and dispute mediation centers, integrating the work of political-legal organs such as courts with industry representatives to resolve conflicts, providing legal service consultations and assistance with counselling, all under the same roof as policing to enable “linkage of affairs, information exchange and to provide the masses with all-round dispute resolution services” (Chen 2021b).

This integrated data ecosystem enables political-legal authorities to identify stability risks through unified data assessment frameworks, creating cohesion between information collection and strategic intervention. These platforms transcend traditional reactive approaches by generating predictive warnings about emerging incidents, allowing grid management workers, court tribunal workers or police, for instance, to intervene pre-emptively, thus creating temporal cohesion between present monitoring and future risk mitigation. As an example, courts are currently being encouraged to place representatives in centers, to “extend their tentacles” (Hubei Chang’anwang 2024) into the grassroots, leading diversified dispute resolution and online litigation in these centers (Hubei Chang’anwang 2024; Wang and Shan 2024; Wu 2025; Cai 2025). Courts partner with “social forces” to create mechanisms for dispute resolution that focus on mediation, to avoid costly litigation, by creating, for example, “court + trade union dispute resolution models” to “promote construction of harmonious labor relations” (Hubei Chang’anwang 2024). By presenting the work of courts in these centers as one-stop public services (Wu 2025), courts integrate their public service responsibilities with their responsibilities to the overall political-legal system to supply intelligence on social relations to command facilities within the center. In late 2024, the Party called for total nationwide standardization of these centers across all grassroots areas by 2026, making them the future hub of collective grassroots social governance activity in China (Xinhua 2025).

Noting that building a socialist legal culture to create an idealized social environment requires the participation of the whole of society, the Society Outline refers to the imminent release of the “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of Socialist Legal Culture” as a blueprint for this plan. The subsequently released 2021 Opinions (CPC and State Council 2021) sets out tasks that the Party sees as local legal culture-building, tasks that embed socialist legal culture into the culture of traditional governance practices. Improving comprehensive mechanisms for

¹⁰ The Chinese term is 社会治安综合治理中心 or 综治中心.

multi-dimensional conflict prevention, mediation and resolution of social contradictions and disputes at the local level is a task that the Party sees as both local legal culture-building and social stability-inducing since it involves encouraging people not to litigate in the first instance. That is to say, it involves persuading disaffected parties not to escalate matters up to town, county or city level through litigation, petitioning or protest, but to resolve issues at the first instance through mediation. This is the essence of the Party calls the “Fengqiao Experience” (Wang and Shan 2024).

The intention is for these arrangements to provide a stable base from which a sustainable and enduring socialist legal culture can be fostered through the Party’s leadership over all aspects of social governance. But for such a legal culture to be sustainable, the Party recognizes that it requires not only top-down political-legal mechanisms of social control but also the bottom-up involvement of community actors to inject “social vitality” into the social governance system. As we find below, to rationalize and frame the reasons why it is necessary to involve community actors in the governance of their peers while maintaining control over their activities, the Party has created an ideological framework for grassroots social governance that entails the interaction of three different modes of governance; law-based governance, moral governance and self-governance. When “shared” with community actors, social governance produces sustained social vitality, according to the political logic of the Party (Guo 2019; Huang and Li 2021). This is the essence of the Party’s vision for grassroots social governance.

Reflecting this vision, grassroots social governance is based on two main ideological principles that were developed progressively from 2014 to 2017. Both of the principles have since made appearances in most if not all major Party policy documents relating to social governance in general and grassroots governance in particular. The two ideological principles are, first, the idea of “integrating” or “fusing” together three discrete modes of grassroots governance: law-based governance, moral governance and self-governance¹¹; and second, the idea of “co-construction, co-governance and sharing”.¹² We turn now to an examination of the two ideological concepts since they are the bedrock of social governance according to leading legal theorists such as Zhang Wenxian and colleagues (Zhang et al. 2023) and are the main organizing principles of the Society Outline.

3 Making Social Governance Cohere through Ideology

Both social governance broadly and the Society Outline specifically frame grassroots governance in China today as a multifaceted tapestry of interconnected functions, tasks and practices. As noted above, this complex ecosystem encompasses community conflict resolution, welfare service delivery, moral guidance, petitioning mechanisms, psychological counselling, public order maintenance, emergency response operations and surveillance operations. Vast in scope, these

¹¹ The Chinese term is 融合法治德治自治.

¹² The Chinese term is 共建共治共享.

elements might naturally resist cohesion since they operate with divergent focuses and methodologies. Some elements prioritize social service provision, others cultivate community participation in conflict resolution, while still others monitor, discipline and, when necessary, sanction citizens who transgress established social and moral boundaries. The erection of physical comprehensive management centers that collectivise activities such as those described in the previous section, enable collaboration and coordination across departmental boundaries. Similarly, as we find below, the “collectivizing” and “integration” of discrete ideological concepts also play a role in making social governance more cohesive.

Ideology serves as the essential binding agent that weaves these disparate governance threads into a coherent whole. By distilling complex relationships into ideological concepts rooted in socialist legal and political traditions, the Party is able to create a unifying framework that seeks to resonate with both governance functionaries and society at large. This ideological scaffolding transforms seemingly disconnected governance mechanisms into a cohesive system with shared purpose and direction. Through this process of ideological integration, the Party crafts a narrative that renders the diverse elements of social governance mutually reinforcing rather than fragmentary, establishing conceptual bridges that make the entire governance architecture politically intelligible through its historical continuity with socialist principles.

In China, ideological slogans sometimes referred to as “tifa” contain combinations of words that are viewed as the correct way of referring to a concept, usually political (Brady 2009). They have “an intrinsic power” ... “when they cut off alternative ways of thinking and limit the conceptual horizons of the people who adopt them” (Link 2013, p.176). They have a “framing effect” (Brady 2009, p.445) since they are framing devices that organize and structure policy implementation. Rather than viewing their inclusion in policy documents such as the Society Outline as empty propaganda, a more accurate understanding recognizes their instrumental role in both policy formulation and execution. In other words, rather than functioning primarily as persuasive discourse aimed at generating popular belief, these banner terms serve as an organizational tool that establishes parameters for governance and structures policy implementation. Scholars of Chinese political discourse have long asserted that the Party has historically employed ideology not simply to indoctrinate but to organize political action (c.f Link 2013). This organizational function has intensified under the Xi leadership that has elevated ideology to a central position in governance through initiatives, including social governance.

Ideological discourse has framing power that not only defines, but can also extend, the boundaries of Party power by inserting Party power into governance modes such as law-based governance, moral governance and self-governance. Over the last decade, the Party has developed and refined a set of discrete social governance principles underpinning its core leadership. Section 1 of the Society Outline, titled Overall Requirements, strategically brings together a set of key governance concepts to explain the desired relationships between Party, local governments and societal actors that are to be systematized through law. These principles work together to inform, mobilize and manage Party, governmental and societal actors within a Party-led system of social governance. When strategically

placed alongside each other, these principles provide the overall vision that sets out the ideological parameters of an expansive comprehensive social governance system. The Society Outline’s General Principles section describes the principles of governing society through law as follows:

Uphold the centralized and unified leadership of the Party; adhere to the guidance of the socialist rule of law theory with Chinese characteristics; adhere to the people-centered approach; adhere to respect for and safeguarding of the legal authority of the Constitution; adhere to the equality of everyone before the law; adhere to the unity of rights and obligations; adhere to the integration of law-based governance, moral governance and self-governance; persist in co-construction, co-governance and sharing of social governance.

As is evident from the above excerpt, the Society Outline delineates several guiding principles, not all of which bear equal significance for understanding the Party’s social governance ambitions. Below we focus on two principles that possess particular political relevance to the document, to Xi Jinping-era social governance and to socialist legal culture-building more broadly. These principles merit primary attention because they constitute the ideological architecture of Xi-era social governance (Guo 2019; Huang 2021; Huang 2023a; Zhang W et al. 2023; Deng and Nian 2024) and represent distinctive governance innovations that differentiate the current approach from previous administrations in the late 1990s and 2000s.

The first is the “integration” or “fusion”¹³ of law-based governance, moral governance and self-governance which represents a distinctive Xi-era ideological innovation called the “Three Governances Fusion”.¹⁴ The second is the principle of “co-construction, co-governance and sharing” that too represents a signature Xi-era governance concept that has gained prominence in political discourse since 2013 (Guo 2019; Wu and Peng 2019; Zhang Q 2022; Chen and Yang 2024). Both principles strategically reframe the relationship between the Party, government and society, positioning social governance as a collaborative endeavor while maintaining Party dominance (Wu and Wan 2019). Their ubiquitous citation in major policy documents, including the 20th Party Congress report, underscores their pivotal role in legitimating the expanded Party’s control of how “society” gets to participate in its own regulation.

In short, these two principles represent the most frequently cited and politically significant concepts across the broader landscape of social governance policy documents and scholarly analysis in the Xi era. They constitute the foundational ideological architecture through which the Party articulates its vision for comprehensive social governance of society through law. Other general principles mentioned in the Society Outline, such as “adhering to respect for and safeguarding the legal authority of the Constitution”, “adhering to the equality of everyone before the law” and “adhering to the unity of rights and obligations” while present within China’s broader legal discourse, lack the same degree of distinctiveness as Xi-era social

¹³ The terms fusion (融合) and integration (结合) are used interchangeably when referring to the Three Governances.

¹⁴ The Chinese term is 三治融合.

governance innovations and do not carry the same weight in defining the political relationships that constitute social governance and upon which the mechanisms of social governance in the Society Outline and more broadly in Xi Jinping Thought on the Rule of Law are articulated. While they contribute to this broader vision, they do not play the same constitutive role in defining the political architecture of social governance through law in the Xi era.

3.1 Integrating Law-Based Governance, Moral Governance and Self-Governance

The “fusion” or “integration” of three grassroots governance modes, law-based governance, moral governance and self-governance, represents a theoretical synthesis that dissolves potential tensions between seemingly distinct approaches. The strategy to “fuse” these three governance elements into a unified whole employs long-employed dialectical reasoning (Trevaskes 2018) to harmonize seemingly contradictory concepts such as “rule of law” and “rule by moral virtue”. By positioning these as complementary rather than conflicting, Party theorists establish conceptual bridges that “organically unify” potentially dissonant ideas (Trevaskes 2018, p. 358). This dialectical synthesis creates a coherent ideological framework where apparent contradictions are transformed into reinforcing components of a single governance philosophy.

While these three governance methodologies had existed as discrete elements in China’s political system for decades, and while the idea of fusing law and morality has been a mainstay of Party discourse since the Jiang Zemin era, the tripartite fusion only emerged as a distinctive move in the mid-2010s (Zhang W et al 2023). There is a political intent behind their tripartite fusion. It is to embed the Party’s leadership into all three, thus making Party leadership a dynamic force in the expansion of social governance and in the development of a grassroots socialist legal culture.

Each of these three modes of grassroots governance have experienced a systematic makeover in the Xi era that has “the Party’s leadership” embedded into their operation. “Law-based governance” or rule of law is the most authoritative mechanism of the Party’s efforts to lead over all aspects of governance (Huang 2021). In what is the most politically significant law-based Party Congress to date in China, the 2014 Fourth Plenum of the 18th Party Congress Decision declared a new strategic realignment that would fundamentally reshape the conception of law-based governance under Xi Jinping. First, the Fourth Plenum Report explicitly stated that “rule of law” and “the Party’s leadership” are entirely “compatible”. Second, the Report stated that “the Party’s leadership must be implemented across *all processes* of governing the country in accordance with the law” (our emphasis) (Trevaskes 2018). These statements were followed in 2018 with the declaration that “the Party leads over everything” (presumably including law at the grassroots), thus signalling a series of substantial changes in 2018 with the amalgam of a number of Party and state bodies “through law” including institutions like the newly established National Supervision Commission. This repositioning of the Party into all aspects of the law has extended beyond high-level positioning of the Party-law relationship,

to emphasize grassroots law-based social regulation (Huang 2021, 2023a, 2023b). Here we find that this ideological reconceptualization operates as an *expander* of the Party's governance reach into grassroots society. This embedding of Party leadership is similar for moral governance and self-governance, as we discuss below.

Moral governance similarly underwent an ideological recalibration under the Xi leadership. Moral governance discourse has been a component of the Party's governance narrative since the Mao era. However, the post-2013 Party leadership developed a more comprehensive moral governance system that embedded moral governance within social governance activities (Trevaskes 2024). This expanded framework encompasses initiatives such as Fengqiao-style people's tribunals that involve community elites working with tribunal judges to resolve disputes (Wang and Shan 2024); the revising of village rules and civic covenants to incorporate socialist core values, the formulation of civilized behavior regulations; morality-based incentive systems including "red and blacklists" and "civilization points" and novel institutions like "morality banks" and "morality clinics" to name a few (Trevaskes 2024). These practices serve dual functions: regulating individual behavior within prescribed socialist and Confucian moral parameters while simultaneously constructing a "socially vibrant" grassroots legal culture driven by community elites and aligned with Party governance objectives (Huang 2021, 2023a, 2023b).

The Party's strategy emphasizes strengthening "social vitality" through the activities of selected virtuous elites at the community level who have close connections to grassroots Party committees. Community elites, positioned within both self-governance organizations and Party cells (Cai, Jiang and Liu 2022; Wang 2023), embody a moral imperative of "virtuous leadership", functioning as behavioral exemplars who guide ordinary citizens toward Party-acceptable social and moral conduct. This approach encourages behavioral modification through moral influence, community-based modelling and social pressure rather than solely through legal mandates. It also fosters the growth of a legal culture that embodies traditional Confucian values, thus helping to cement the idea that grassroots governance is an organic and endogenous activity not merely a mode imposed on people from on high (Lin and Trevaskes 2020).

Self-governance, the third component of the trinity, refers primarily to grassroots mass organizations comprising residents' committees in urban areas and villagers' committees in rural areas. These entities function as intermediaries between township government authorities and local residents, with operational responsibilities encompassing dispute mediation, public order maintenance, social stability preservation, public service development and community representation (Chen and Yang 2024; Yang 2024). When the term self-governance is used more broadly, it also refers to all grassroots social organizations that perform community services. While self-governance aims to give limited agency to communities to actively manage public affairs, it simultaneously serves as a vehicle for advancing Party-building objectives. The integration of the Party within self-governance entities is reinforced by the joint administration of local affairs by self-governance committees and Party committees, a longstanding arrangement known as the "two committees" (Cai, Jiang and Liu 2022).

Embedding Party committee members into community organizations positions the Party as the “absolute core of community governance” (Cai, Jiang and Liu 2022, p. 57). In the language of Party discourse, to facilitate the Party committee’s leadership role in these organizations is to function as the coordinator of “co-governance”, thus granting the Party member leading authority in decision-making, personnel arrangements, and supervision. Wu et al. (2024) explain this overall grassroots trend as a “recentralization” process that has been underway over the last decade. They call this approach “Party corporatism” (Wu et al. 2024, p. 9), a governance model whereby the Party recentralizes its authority through embeddedness in grassroots governance and social organizations.

3.2 Co-Construction, Co-Governance and Sharing

The Fourth Plenum of the 19th Party Congress in 2019 formally articulated the framework of “co-construction, co-governance and sharing” as means of accelerating the modernization of social governance (Guo 2019). After the Fourth Plenum, the head of the Party’s powerful Political-legal Commission, Guo Shengkun, wrote a detailed account of the role of co-construction, co-governance and sharing in social governance, asserting that it is a means of promoting law-based governance, moral governance and self-governance. In relation to law, Guo noted that “law-based governance is the optimal model for social governance and an important symbol of social governance modernization. We should be good at promoting social governance using legal thinking, solving social governance problems using legal methods, guiding social members to develop the habit of asserting rights and resolving disputes in alignment with law-based governance, and strive to make following the law a conscious action of all citizens. We must accelerate the formulation of laws and regulations urgently needed in the social field” (Guo 2019).

The concept of co-construction, co-governance and sharing, listed as a guiding principle of the Society Outline, is closely connected to the Three Governances Fusion. It underscores what the Party presents as a collaborative arrangement of governance, whereby the Party, government and society share responsibility for social governance including for community services and maintaining social order (Wu and Wan 2019; Chen 2021a; Chen 2021b; Zhang Q 2022; Chen 2023; Yuan 2024; Chen and Yang 2024). Co-construction refers to the required joint effort of the Party-state and societal actors to build a stable and harmonious society. This concept implies that governance extends beyond state responsibility to encompass active participation from social organizations, volunteers and community actors (Guo 2019; Wu and Wan 2019; Zhang Q 2022; Chen 2023; Chen and Yang 2024). Co-governance, in theory, entails a shared responsibility for managing public services and maintaining order within communities. Sharing refers to the collective interests and responsibilities (with society) in working to bring about social cohesion and social stability.

In short, by placing these principles at the forefront in Sect. 1 of the Society Outline, the Party signals to grassroots functionaries who are charged with adopting

these actions in their jurisdiction, how seemingly diverse elements—from legal institutionalization to moral education, from community self-governance to policing—are required to form a coherent and “comprehensive” whole for the mature development of a social governance system that will support the sustainability of socialist legal culture. This coherence is both descriptive and prescriptive; it explains the relationships between existing governance elements while directing the development of new innovations that extend this integrated approach. As we discuss below, the principles thus reflect the animating ethos of the Society Outline itself, that is, to create a governance framework in which diverse elements cohere under unified Party leadership, creating a legal order that is more orderly, more predictable and ultimately one that is more amenable to centralized Party control.

4 Making Social Governance Cohere in Policy: The Society Outline

In a similar way to the role of ideology as a cohesion-building agent, the Society Outline itself, as a policy blueprint for constructing the vision of a rule of law-based society by 2035, operates to generate cohesion, though this function remains implicit rather than explicitly stated. This meta-cohesive role is illuminated by Huang Wenyi, Dean of Law at People’s University and one of China’s preeminent legal theorists, who suggests that properly interpreting the Society Outline’s diverse components requires understanding them as synchronized elements of a comprehensive social governance strategy; a strategy, we argue, where the document itself serves as both blueprint and embodiment of the cohesion-building principle. Huang states in relation to the Society Outline (and he is paraphrasing Party terminology from the 20th Party Congress in 2022):

The construction of a rule of law-based society belongs to the category of social governance and the governance system of a society under the rule of law relies on the social governance system. The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China clearly states in the section on refining the social governance system that we shall improve the social governance system of co-construction, co-governance and sharing, and improve the efficiency of social governance; develop and strengthen the power of mass prevention and mass governance, create an atmosphere of courage and bravery to serve society, and build a society where everyone is responsible and accountable, that is, social governance communities where everyone fulfills their responsibilities and everyone enjoys the benefits (Huang 2023a).

Binding discrete functions, tasks and actors together under the auspices of the Society Outline’s guiding principles helps governmental actors in grassroots areas of governance that are interpreting this document to better understand how the Party intends to define relationships between Party, government and society at the grassroots. It helps those who are tasked with implementing the vision in their local area understand how the Party intends for its social service elements to be reconciled with the social control aspects of the Society Outline. The policy document does so by creating a sense of cohesion and unity within and across all the four aspects of a rule of law-based society listed below, pulling together the whole governance picture of who/what/how/why:

1. Who (of whom): all members of society in all their capacities.
2. What (by what): by employing the above-discussed ideological principles
3. How: by making people more aware of their rights and their responsibilities to society to regulate their own behavior; by legislating a wide range of social and moral norms; by institutionalizing through law, a variety of social governance mechanisms; by distributing responsibilities for social governance tasks and oversight of these tasks;
4. Why: for the Party's leadership to be coherently and cohesively embedded and institutionalized throughout society by law for the purposes of creating long-term stability by making communities more socially cohesive.

The Society Outline is an effort to bring together various hitherto scattered elements of social governance-related laws and practices, ranging from regulating and guiding social and moral norms to defining the Party's expectations of government entities and social organizations that work in areas of social governance and that therefore can help foster a sustainable socialist legal culture. The Society Outline is structured around the following seven sections:

Section 1. Overall requirements

Section 2. Promote the strengthening of the concept of rule of law throughout the whole of society;

Section 3. Refine institutional norms in all fields of society;

Section 4. Strengthen rights protection;

Section 5. Promote the legal institutionalization of social governance;

Section 6. Govern cyberspace in accordance with the law;

Section 7. Strengthen organizational safeguards.

These sections cover one or more of the following aims, to enhance:

- awareness, i.e. to cultivate desirable social relations between and among members of society by making people more aware of benefits of law (including their rights) and quasi-legal regulations and of the importance of law-abiding behavior for society as a whole;
- accountability, i.e. to improve methods of Party and governmental safeguards in relation to social governance activities;
- refinement of laws, i.e. refine laws relating to social and moral norms and to refine mechanisms of social governance through legal institutionalization.

The awareness aim is covered in several parts of the document but primarily in Sect. 2 and includes various provisions aimed at improving the ability of members of society to not only recognize their rights and responsibilities but also to be aware of the Party's expectations of them in terms of their social behavior. This is to be achieved by enabling members of society to gain a deeper awareness of the law and by developing a socialist legal culture that embeds Xi-era socialist core values into traditional grassroots practices. This can be supported by embedding socialist legal principles into existing cultural practices; strengthening grassroots governance through civic covenants and village rules; implementing morality points systems; and developing a legal culture that reflects "Fengqiao Experience" practices,

which involve community actors in helping to resolve disputes under the direction of political-legal actors (Wang and Shan 2024). These initiatives seek to integrate new cultural expectations about legally-oriented conflict resolution into established grassroots life.

The accountability aim encompasses a call for the development, coordination and codification of safeguards in the areas of social governance relating oversight and leadership including performance management systems. This is covered mainly in Sect. 7. In particular, it relates to the importance of the Party committee leadership role in supervising and monitoring all activity across all grassroots governance organizations. The refinement aim is concentrated in Sects. 3 and 5 (and will be explored in more detail below). These two sections relate first to the development and refinement of laws and regulations that foster desirable social relations and second the development and refinement of laws and regulations covering the mechanisms that regulate social relations.

The information in the Society Outline is organized in such a way as to promote the public service and social control elements of social governance as a coherent whole. It brings together functions, tasks and people to provide mainly social service-related aspects, using self-governance actors to promote and monitor the implementation of legal norms with moral standards and to advocate for virtuous behaviors. The document specifies the need to clarify the rights and responsibilities of governance entities and to improve urban civic covenants and village-level rules while at the same time, encouraging volunteer service organizations to participate in governance. The document emphasizes conflict resolution through the "Fengqiao Experience" involving community actors, which aims to resolve disputes at the local level, nipping them in the bud before they escalate to fully blown social unrest. This is to be achieved through coordinated approaches including people's mediation, administrative mediation and judicial mediation. The Society Outline encourages establishing "one-stop" dispute resolution mechanisms in areas prone to conflicts and strengthening various specialized mediation processes for rural land and labor disputes under the direction of courts. At the same time, the document calls for better coordination mechanisms to develop the security monolith called "Safe China", including plans for cyberspace social governance and "Internet+ Public Security" and the regularization of anti-crime campaigns.

By describing these myriad activities in a seamless flow between public service and social control, the Society Outline itself embodies the very cohesive properties that it seeks to systematically integrate into a unified whole. In this way, it serves as both architectural blueprint and binding mechanism, articulating how the Party intends to maximize its governance efficacy through strategic unification of what might otherwise be perceived as fragmented elements. This cohesion-generating function operates at multiple levels within the document's structure, through the legal systematization it proposes, and ultimately within society itself. To achieve this multi-layered cohesion, the document maps the societal landscape at the grassroots level, delineating roles, responsibilities and capacities throughout its sections. This cohesion-building strategy manifests prominently in Sect. 3, which addresses the integration of diverse social and moral norms through law and Sect. 5, which

outlines institutionalization of governance mechanisms through law, as we discuss further below.

5 Making Social Governance Cohere through Law

Having examined above how ideology and policy architecture serve as binding agents, we now turn to the third cohesive element: legal systematization, known in Chinese as *fazhihua*. The Party envisions a transformation of the legal culture through social governance by strategically deploying law as a cohesion-building instrument. Law here is conceived in very broad terms to include legal institutionalization for instance, of civilized behavior regulations, revision of village rules, civic covenants and more. And since the Party itself declares that it implements its leadership over all processes of the law, we can safely assume that the intention here to legally institutionalize these rules and regulations is also to institutionalize Party leadership within the boundaries of their use.

Section 3 of the Society Outline establishes a number of domains where law is to function as a cohesion-building instrument to institutionalize social and moral norms into law-based frameworks and to “standardize” the inclusion of socialist core values into rules and regulations as integral to correct social and moral behavior. The Section emphasizes enhancing legal frameworks in areas as diverse as public service provision, corporate responsibility and industry self-discipline into a coherent fabric of accountability. It also foregrounds the integration of core socialist values into the legal and policy systems, legislation of moral principles such as bravery and righteousness, respect for heroes, volunteerism and filial piety, binding ideological principles to everyday social behaviors through expansive legal systems to develop the desired socialist legal culture. Village rules and civic covenants are a prime example of this standardization requirement. These are longstanding grassroots regulations formulated and enforced by residential committees and village committees respectively.¹⁵ They are established through what the Party calls consultative mechanisms that engage residents in both formulation and oversight, employing vernacular language and local idioms to regulate behavioral norms ranging from explicit inclusion of socialist core values, prohibitions against indiscriminate tree logging, the preservation of cultural relics and historic sites, to sanctions against overindulging at wedding banquets and funerals. In recent years, Party authorities have required local officials to reformulate these traditional regulatory instruments to synthesize Confucian customs with socialist core values. This process extends not only to village rules and civic covenants but also industry standards and organizational charters, creating vertical coherence across governance levels and horizontal coherence across regulatory domains. By explicitly advocating for the integration of law with Confucian and socialist morality, the Outline establishes conceptual bridges between normative systems traditionally treated as separate. Mechanisms rewarding virtuous

¹⁵ See Tianjin Notice (2019) for an example of how the Party seeks to “standardize” (规范化) the embedding of socialist core values in civic covenants. See Ganzhou (2022) for an example of the content of village rules.

behavior reinforce these bridges, while legal sanctions for norm violations ensure that the coherence is maintained through both positive and negative reinforcement through “points systems” similar to the social credit system.

The document’s cohesion-building strategy extends beyond normative content to the very mechanisms through which social governance operates. Section 5 advances the legal institutionalization of governance mechanisms under unified guiding principles, creating procedural coherence that complements the substantive coherence outlined in Sect. 3. This systematization process represents the legal institutionalization of social governance itself, establishing comprehensive frameworks that foster public order and conflict resolution through standardized legal channels.

Section 5 further enhances systemic cohesion by articulating a governance model that integrates multiple actors including Party committees providing leadership, government assuming responsibility and democratic consultation providing social collaboration, ensuring implementation into a synchronized whole. To facilitate cohesion among these complex interrelationships, the document calls for legislation that clearly delineates rights and responsibilities across governance levels. It calls for improvements to be made at grassroots levels in relation to people’s rights to access justice and in addition, it advocates for unified conflict resolution systems that incorporate mediation, arbitration and multi-channel approaches under a coherent framework, ensuring that even conflict management mechanisms themselves operate as elements of a cohesive whole.

Here we find that law functions in the document as a powerful cohesion-builder. First, legal institutionalization provides legitimation by recasting what might otherwise be construed as socially intrusive social control mechanisms within the unifying language of law. Through systematic codification in laws and regulations, the Party reframes what might otherwise appear as politicized interventions into standardized, predictable legal procedures. This transformation is particularly evident in the legalization of social governance mechanisms, where comprehensive societal oversight is presented not as unfettered political dominance but as coherent legal administration. This process simultaneously invokes rule of law discourse while redefining it to harmonize with, rather than constrain, Party authority, creating conceptual cohesion between what would otherwise be assumed to be competing power between “the law” and “the Party”.

Second, legal institutionalization serves as a stabilizing and routinizing force, bringing coherence to the Party’s grassroots governance methods across diverse contexts. Through legal systematization, previously less formal governance practices are standardized, enabling their uniform implementation across varied geographic and administrative landscapes. This standardization enhances governance cohesion at scale, transforming localized innovations into nationally applicable frameworks. The recent rollout of provincial and municipal “Safe China” legislation exemplifies this cohesion-building function (Trevaskes and Lin 2024). These security-based regulations call for greater interconnections between domestic security domains including grassroots governance, risk prevention, dispute resolution and digital security with the grid management system, mediation services, data-driven prevention, surveillance infrastructure, moral education and emergency response mechanisms are

now said operate as synchronized components of a comprehensive system (Huang 2023a; Trevaskes and Lin 2024).

Third, legal institutionalization functions as a mechanism for ideological dissemination that creates cohesion between Party values and social behavior, under the function of creating a socialist legal culture stated in the Society Outline. By standardizing specific moral and social norms into civic covenants and village rules, the Party establishes parameters that bind individual conduct to collective expectations thus creating its desired socialist legal culture (Huang 2021, 2023a; Yang 2024). This legal embodiment of social and moral standards, for instance, recently legislated “regulations promoting civilized behaviour”¹⁶ transforms the ideological vision into enforceable social and moral norms. The process extends Party influence beyond formal institutions into everyday interactions, using law as the binding agent that aligns social relations with ideological principles, creating vertical cohesion between high-level Party theory and ground-level social practice.

Fourth, legal institutionalization standardizes the responsibility system and oversight mechanisms that maintain system cohesion through disciplinary boundaries. The oversight section in the Society Outline establishes clear expectations for both state and societal actors, ensuring alignment with Party priorities within a governance framework in which the Party is the key overseer of political-legal operations. In grassroots settings, legal institutionalization binds community participation to political parameters, serving the dual function of enhancing Party control while accommodating limited social agency to anchor Party leadership into the fabric of socialist legal culture at the grassroots.

In sum, the Party’s legal institutionalization of social governance represents a cohesion-building strategy for a sustainable socialist legal culture that simultaneously advances multiple objectives. It transforms Party leadership over grassroots society from a purely political concept into a legal principle, standardizes practices across diverse contexts, disciplines multiple actors within unified parameters, extends ideological influence into everyday interactions and accommodates limited agency within a framework of ultimate Party control.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the Party’s vision for constructing a rule of law-based society as a comprehensive cohesion-building project. This discussion has revealed how the Party seeks to forge an integrated social governance system capable of generating sustained social cohesion and stability across China’s complex social landscape to create a sustainable Party-led socialist legal culture at the grassroots.

In the paper, we have not attempted to evaluate the ultimate achievability of this ambitious vision by the date of 2035. Nevertheless, it is worth reflecting that certain

¹⁶ Known in Chinese as 文明行为促进条例. For an outline of these regulations see Peng 2019 and Zhang J 2022.

aspects of this cohesion-building vision appear more attainable than others, particularly those directly under Party control through existing resources and implementation mechanisms. For instance, the requirement for the nationwide establishment of comprehensive management centers across multiple levels of government by 2026 (Wu 2025) represents tangible progress toward integrating previously fragmented political-legal functions under unified grassroots structures creating physical manifestations of the cohesion-building objective.

However, the cohesion-building project faces significant challenges in domains that extend beyond direct Party control. Social organizations incorporated into this framework must navigate a fundamental tension between their designated role as cohesion-facilitating governance partners and their subordination to Party oversight. This inherent tension raises questions about their capacity to maintain legitimacy with constituent populations while simultaneously functioning as extensions of the Party's cohesion-building apparatus. Unlike Western civil society organizations that derive legitimacy mainly from their independence and advocacy roles, self-governance committees and social organizations in China today are explicitly positioned within a governance framework where they complement rather than challenge Party-state functions, with their autonomy deliberately circumscribed to maintain Party control.

The sustained participation of citizens in this cohesion-building governance framework as intended remains an open question. The Society Outline's emphasis on self-governance involvement in social governance and co-construction, co-governance and sharing presupposes citizen buy-in to a model where participation occurs within cohesion-maintaining parameters defined by the Party rather than emerging organically from society. Resistance to the cohesion imperative, where it emerges, is likely to manifest in subtle forms passive non-compliance, selective engagement or localized reinterpretation of directives, rather than overt opposition that would directly challenge the cohesion-building project. Similarly, local officials may implement central cohesion directives selectively, emphasizing aspects that align with local priorities while minimizing others, creating micro-zones of limited autonomy within the broader framework of compliance.

Regardless of the extent to which this comprehensive vision of cohesive social governance will ultimately be embraced at the grassroots level, the Society Outline nevertheless fulfills one of its primary functions, that is, it establishes a cohesion-generating vision for society and a socialist legal culture that integrates diverse governance tasks, functions and actors (in theory at least if not yet in reality) into a unified system. This approach epitomizes the centralized political cohesion-producing arrangement whereby the Party has leadership "over everything" while mobilizing social participation within carefully prescribed parameters that aim to preserve overall system integration. Therefore, the Society Outline represents a significant milestone in the Party's systematic efforts to achieve cohesion through its direct leadership over social governance through legal institutionalization and by expanding the reach of Party influence into grassroots society, all

while presenting this expansion as a natural evolution toward modernized co-governance within a harmoniously integrated socialist legal culture.

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Declarations

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