

Source Governance: The Chinese Approach to Resolving Grassroots Conflicts

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Abstract: In the current complex international environment, conflicts between nations are becoming increasingly frequent, and traditional litigation models struggle to manage the growing volume of cases. In response, China has innovatively advanced the “Fengqiao Model” in the new era, emphasizing the prevention of disputes at their source, resolving conflicts proactively, and controlling critical points to prevent escalation. In G Prefecture, a remote ethnic region, the surge in case numbers has led to the adoption of non-litigation dispute resolution mechanisms. By prioritizing these mechanisms, the region has developed a regulatory framework based on administration responsibility and collaborative decision-making, involving multiple stakeholders. This initiative has established a comprehensive dispute prevention and resolution system, including both online and offline platforms, and has achieved significant success in governance, offering a real-world example of effective grassroots governance under the “Chinese Approach”.

Keywords: Source Governance; Grassroots Conflicts; Collaborative Governance; Digital Technology; Chinese Approach

1. Introduction

The dilemma of “more cases, fewer judges” and the ensuing judicial capacity crisis is a common challenge faced by courts worldwide. [1] In the current and forthcoming period, China is experiencing a phase of heightened contradictions and risks, with a significant increase in both foreseeable and unforeseen risk factors. Resolving the issue of “more cases, fewer judges” has thus become a shared challenge for China and other countries globally. Through exploration and by drawing on prior experiences in social governance, China has introduced the concept of “source

governance”—a term that has been described as “phenomenal” in the political and reform lexicon [2]. This concept has gradually extended beyond the judicial sector into various fields across the country, emerging as a critical strategy and institutional arrangement in China’s new era. It serves to prevent potential disputes, resolve existing conflicts, reduce the growth of litigation cases, foster social harmony, and promote the modernization of grassroots social governance. This paper focuses on G Prefecture, an autonomous ethnic region, as the primary case study to examine this issue.

2. Mechanisms of Source Governance

Throughout history, China has placed great emphasis on the prevention and resolution of conflicts and disputes, echoing the ancient adage of “preparing in advance for all matters; negligence leads to failure”. Following the reforms and opening-up policy, as China embraced the development of a market economy, the country continuously distilled its experiences in legal and administrative work, introducing concepts such as “comprehensive governance”, “source governance”, and “diverse dispute resolution mechanisms” to address social disputes and conflicts. These ideas laid a robust theoretical and practical foundation for the emergence of source governance.

Reports from the Supreme People’s Court indicate a rapid increase in the total number of cases in Chinese courts since 2013, with an annual growth rate of 13%, leading to a 2.4-fold increase over a decade. The average number of cases handled per judge surged from 187 in 2017 to 357 in 2023, highlighting the escalating challenges faced by judicial personnel. [3] While the average number of cases filed and closed per judge in China does not notably exceed that of countries like Japan, the United States, Italy, Spain, and Portugal [4], the considerable non-judicial responsibilities borne by Chinese judges underscore the persistent issue of “more cases, fewer judges”. It is imperative to exert

significant efforts in preemptive management of social disputes to prevent China from transforming into a nation dominated by litigation.

"In 2021, recognizing these systemic governance challenges, China's central policy-making body convened its 18th high-level forum to initiate dedicated research on source governance mechanisms." Subsequently, they deliberated and adopted the *Opinions on Strengthening Source Governance to Promote the Resolution of Conflicts and Disputes at the Source*. With this step, source governance transitioned from being solely within the realm of the judiciary to being gradually integrated into the broader landscape of social governance. Source governance is no longer exclusively the primary responsibility of the courts; it is progressively becoming a shared task among various local government agencies and public institutions.

Regarding the essence of source governance, both academia and the judicial practice community have conducted extensive research. Guo Yan, the President of the Chengdu Intermediate People's Court, who was one of the earliest to propose and apply this concept in practice, pointed out in 2016 that "source governance" refers to the various measures, methods, and approaches adopted by individuals and institutions to prevent and resolve disputes, aiming to reconcile the relevant interests and conflicts of the parties involved in potential or existing disputes, through sustained joint actions. [5] Li Zhangguo, President of the Zhejiang Provincial High People's Court and a Senior Judge, believes that source governance should prioritize non-litigation dispute resolution mechanisms, strengthen the prevention, front-end resolution, and control of conflicts and disputes at their origin, improve preventive legal systems, and aim to avoid the escalation of disputes to the level of litigation, thus reducing the increase of lawsuits from the source. [6] Although these interpretations vary in expression, they fundamentally emphasize the importance of focusing on dispute prevention and leveraging non-litigation mechanisms in the resolution of conflicts. The *Opinions on Strengthening Source Governance to Promote the Resolution of Conflicts and Disputes at the Source*, passed in 2021, emphasized that "the construction of the rule of law must not only focus on the end, treating existing issues, but also on the beginning, preventing potential problems. It is

necessary to adhere to and develop the 'Fengqiao Model' of the new era, prioritize non-litigation dispute resolution mechanisms, push more legal forces toward guidance and mediation, strengthen prevention, front-end resolution, and control of conflicts and disputes at their source, and improve preventive legal systems to reduce the increase in lawsuits from the root." This description can be considered an official statement of the essence of source governance.

Although the term "source governance" has been used less frequently in reports from the Supreme People's Court and local courts since the second half of 2024, the concept of "diverse dispute resolution" has gained more prominence. For instance, in the 2025 work report of the Supreme People's Court, the term "source governance" was used only twice, in contrast to six mentions in the 2024 report, while "diverse dispute resolution" was emphasized. Even though the *Sixth Five-Year Reform Outline of the People's Courts (2024–2028)* no longer explicitly mentions "source governance", it continues to reference related concepts such as "source prevention", "diverse dispute resolution", and "diversified resolution" multiple times. Regardless of how the concept evolves, its fundamental goal—addressing conflicts and disputes from their source and utilizing diverse means to resolve them—remains unchanged. Thus, researching how to achieve source governance still holds significant theoretical and practical value.

3. Practical Exploration of Source Governance in G Prefecture

To understand the current state of source governance in China, we selected G Prefecture, an ethnic autonomous region in the western part of Sichuan Province, as a case study. G Prefecture is a typical underdeveloped area and is a key focus for national social governance. Its source governance practices serve as a representative example of China's broader social governance efforts. To investigate the status of source governance in G Prefecture, we conducted a comprehensive study between August 2024 and March 2025. Our research methods included on-site visits, reviewing relevant literature, and engaging in discussions with local officials and professionals. Additionally, we utilized an anonymous online survey distributed via the "SoJump" platform.

This survey targeted a range of stakeholders, including employees from the public security, courts, procuratorates, law firms, as well as local residents. The survey covered 18 counties and cities, along with the prefectural-level authorities, and received a total of 270 responses. (Unless otherwise specified, all data referenced in the following text is derived from this survey.) The results of the survey revealed that G Prefecture has made significant progress in implementing source governance initiatives.

3.1 Constructing a Diverse Governance Framework for Source Governance

The significant importance of source governance lies in directing more legal forces and governance resources towards guiding and alleviating tensions at the root.[7] G Prefecture, as a typical ethnic region influenced by various factors such as history, religion, and borders, has always been a focal point for social governance. Therefore, the region has long attached great importance to the resolution of conflicts and disputes, leveraging diverse stakeholders to strengthen governance at the source. This can be described as an early form of source governance or multidimensional conflict resolution, thereby accumulating valuable experience. When the central government formally introduced source governance in 2019 and incorporated it into the Fifth Five-Year Reform Outline of the People's Court (2019-2023), the Intermediate People's Court of G Prefecture, building upon previous experiences, took the lead in collaborating with relevant departments to develop a series of mechanisms and documents. These included the *Mechanism for Diversified Resolution of Conflicts by People's Courts*, the *Implementation Opinions on the Comprehensive Promotion of Substantive Operation of Source Governance in the Entire Prefecture (Trial)*, the *Notice on Conducting Mediation Work by Lawyers*, and the *"Pomegranate Seed" Mediation System*. Each county also established protocols such as the *Opinions on Multi-party Collaboration in Resolving Labor Disputes* and the *Implementation Opinions on Establishing a Mediation Coordination Mechanism for Resolving Conflicts*. From the provincial to grassroots levels, a social governance system has been established that involves government responsibility, democratic consultation, social coordination, public participation, legal guarantees, and technological support. In

accordance with these institutional arrangements, the Intermediate People's Court and the county courts in the prefecture formed leadership teams for source governance, with the court president serving as the team leader and other court leaders as deputy team leaders. The heads of various court departments were appointed as members of the leadership team, which also established an office involving select personnel to drive source governance initiatives. Regular advancement meetings for source governance were convened, fostering a leadership structure where the top leader holds overall responsibility, deputy officials oversee implementation, and core staff handle specific tasks. Furthermore, innovative adaptations of the "Fengqiao Model" for contemporary advancement have been actively pursued. During specific periods, such as the Cordyceps season, a collaborative effort involving tri-level secretaries and unified action throughout the prefecture has been implemented, leading to a holistic and coordinated governance approach. ("Fengqiao Model" blossoms and bears fruit in the vast land of Ganzi. Source: (<https://www.sichuanpeace.gov.cn/zt2023fqjygz/20231102/2803349.html>))

According to our survey, the government and communities in G Prefecture have essentially recognized their respective responsibilities in source governance, forming a joint force for governance at all levels. In this process, due to the deep integration of various efforts, G Prefecture has achieved remarkable success in source governance. For example, the "Sun Tribe · Cloud-Based Legal Five-Step Work Method", pioneered by the People's Court of S County, has been instrumental. Since its implementation, over 90% of the conflicts and disputes in the county have been resolved at the front end, receiving significant media coverage from provincial and central outlets and earning widespread recognition from the local population (Good News! The "Sun Tribe · Cloud-Based Legal" Five-Step Work Method of Shiqu County People's Court has won an award! Source: (https://m.thepaper.cn/baijiahao_29972519)). The survey also revealed that, in addition to the public security, prosecution, and judiciary, government agencies, neighborhood committees, village-level self-governing organizations, and law firms have all participated in varying degrees in this initiative (see Figure 1). This data further indicates that a large-scale source

governance framework has essentially been established in ethnic regions.

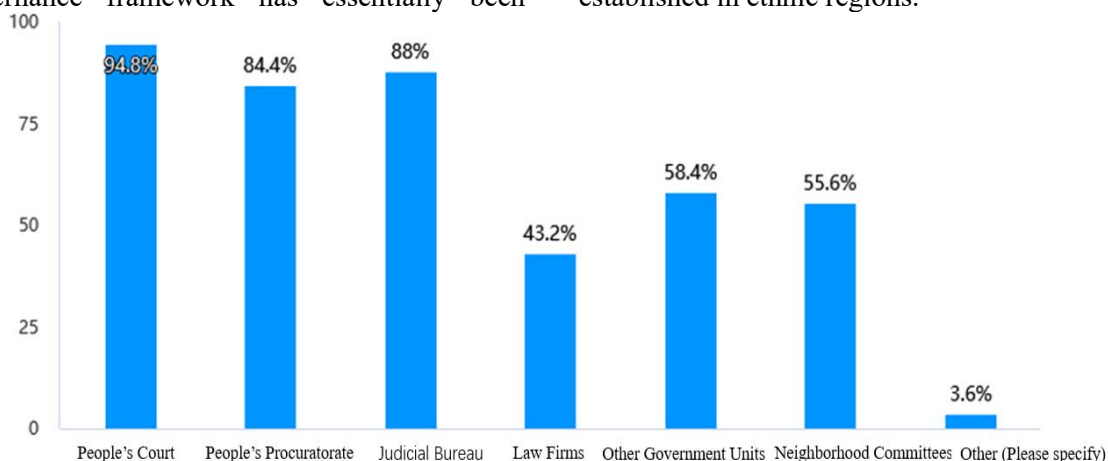


Figure 1. Which Entities Are Involved in Source Governance in Your Region?

3.2 Establishing a Robust Dispute Prevention and Resolution Mechanism across the Entire Chain

G Prefecture has actively developed the “Fengqiao Model” for the modern era, starting from the goal of locally resolving conflicts and continuously summarizing experiences. This effort has led to the establishment of their comprehensive chain-like mechanism for preventing and resolving disputes. Innovatively, they have constructed a governance model called “front-end prevention - middle-end resolution - end-end stability and control”. In terms of front-end prevention, G Prefecture has implemented the “tent joint defense” initiative to understand the demands of pastoralists, foster ethnic unity within households, establish mobile grid networks spanning three mountains, and promptly address the movements, challenges, and conflicts of nomadic populations. This approach has revitalized the social security landscape significantly. (Source: [“Completing the entire chain by focusing on the three stages to resolve conflicts and disputes”] (<http://sc.people.com.cn/BIG5/n2/2023/1104/c345167-40628197.html>). In the middle-end resolution phase, G Prefecture has adopted a flexible strategy of “on-demand mediation, doorstep mediation, and centralized mediation”. They have set up the “Pomegranate Seed” mediation room to address border disputes, integrating judicial, administrative, and community mediation forces. By collaborating across jurisdictions, they have facilitated combined resolutions of conflicts. (Source: [“Expanding the Circle of Friends! Tianquan County Court and Luding County Court jointly

sign a framework agreement for judicial cooperation.”]

(https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzI1MzUyNDMyNg%3D%3D&mid=2247541674&idx=1&sn=d1ad399a00470c95da67df08f75e0f2d&chksm=e89d43494e510449de3d293257e00aa219d203db81a82655c8f41a0073ed2fec97ecc84c2249&scene=27) Regarding end-end stability and control, G Prefecture has established a working mechanism marked by “comprehensive strategies, follow-up visits, and consistent stability and control”, ensuring that disputes do not resurface. For instance, in Tagong Town, the prefecture has maintained a 100% compliance rate for mediation agreements over five consecutive years. Furthermore, they have achieved a 100% harmony agreement rate with eight neighboring towns, significantly enhancing the security atmosphere in border regions. (Source: [“Innovative ‘comprehensive chain accompanying’ dispute resolution method effectively prevents and resolves resource disputes.”]

(http://www.legaldaily.com.cn/land_of_abundance/content/2023-10/27/content_8919649.html) The establishment of this comprehensive dispute resolution mechanism reflects a commitment to “preventance at the source, resolution at the front-end, and control at key junctures” in source governance. The positive perception of the effectiveness of source governance is evident, with over 91% of respondents considering mediation-based source governance as effective, including a significant 40.4% who found it to be highly effective. (See Figure 2). This underscores the efficacy of the entire chain dispute prevention and resolution mechanism.

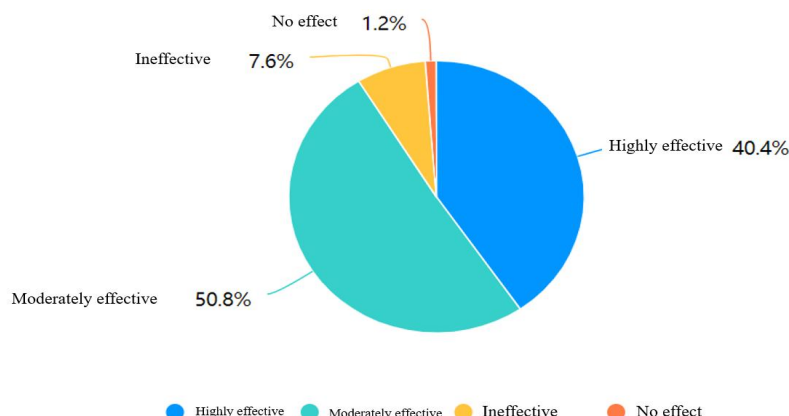


Figure 2. What Is Your Opinion on the Effectiveness of the Current Mediation-Based Source Governance Work?

3.3 Establishing Online and Offline Platforms to Support Dispute Resolution

Despite its distance from central cities, G Prefecture is far from lagging in the area of conflict resolution. Leveraging information technology, G Prefecture has constructed a multi-dimensional dispute resolution platform that integrates both online and offline systems, promoting the transformation of source governance into a more accessible and intelligent process. First, G Prefecture has consolidated resources through physical platforms, creating a “one-stop” service network. For instance, L County in G Prefecture has established a multi-faceted dispute resolution “one-stop” center, integrating mediation, arbitration, litigation, and other functions to streamline dispute diversion, guidance, and rapid resolution. (Source: [“Expanding the Circle of Friends! Tianquan County Court and Luding County Court jointly sign a framework agreement for judicial cooperation.”] (https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzI1MzUyNDMyNg%3D%3D&mid=2247541674&idx=1&sn=d1ad399a00470c95da67df08f75e0f2d&chksm=e89d43494e510449de3d293257e00aa219d203db81a82655c8f41a0073ed2fec97ecc84c2249&scene=27) Currently, G Prefecture has launched 45 “Pomegranate Seed” mediation studios, collaborating with 27 local people’s courts and “horseback judges”, “tent courts”, and “mobile courts” to establish a comprehensive mediation network with no blind spots. Adhering to the principle of “mediation first, combining mediation and judgment”, mediation is embedded throughout the entire litigation process, playing a fundamental role in dispute resolution. Second, G Prefecture has developed a “smart court” system. With

“integrated intelligent hearings” at its core and “Internet+” as the guiding principle, the prefecture aims to overcome the challenges of multi-cultural, cross-jurisdictional, cross-network, and cross-border litigation, as well as issues of insufficient judicial resources and high litigation costs. They have established a domestically integrated intelligent court, breaking down regional barriers to achieve an intelligent, digital, networked, standardized, and locally produced court process. This system provides robust technological support for the entire judicial workflow. (Source: [“Exploring New Directions for Domestic Smart Court Development: Integration, Intelligence, and Efficiency.”]

(https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzIxMTc3NTg2Mg%3D%3D&mid=2247499179&idx=1&sn=ddf400249f4a7497a8c31ba0cb673aee&chksm=975285b2a0250ca42e33751526cae86d7c57c5cc2a249a87a762b8963d26e521bccbd574754a&scene=27) During the pandemic, they also established a bilingual mobile micro-court, promoting “contactless” litigation services. This ensured that case filings remained open “24/7”, hearings were conducted “in the cloud”, and executions were handled “online”, fully utilizing the cloud-based smart court functions to maintain fairness and justice without interruption. (Source: [“Ten Snapshots: Capturing the 'Five-Year Report Card' of Ganzi Courts!”] (<https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20220108A09NMS00>) The establishment of online and offline platforms has greatly facilitated the resolution of disputes for the public, enhancing overall satisfaction. In an online survey on “How would you rate the source governance work across the prefecture?” the average score was 8.32 points, indicating that the effectiveness of G Prefecture’s source governance is relatively

significant (See Figure 3).

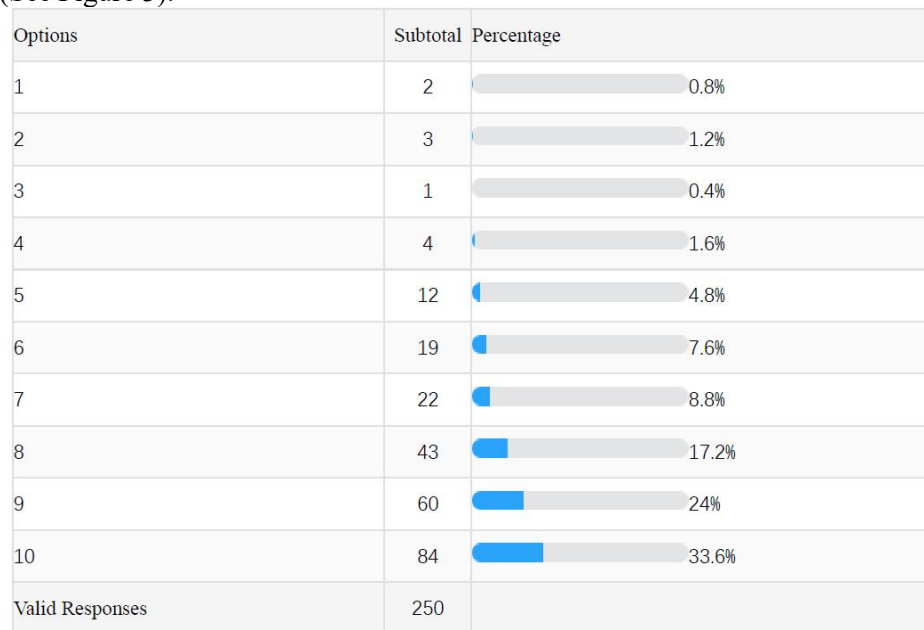


Figure 3. If 10 Points Is the Highest, How Would You Rate the Source Governance Work Across the Prefecture?

(Note: The number of survey participants was 270, with 250 providing valid responses)

4. Summarizing the Experience of Source Governance in Ethnic Regions

Represented by G Prefecture, ethnic regions have achieved significant results in source governance: a yearly decrease in criminal cases, social order stability, a gradual decline in civil case filings after years of growth, and improved livelihoods for the people. Summarizing the experience of source governance in ethnic regions, particularly exemplified by G Prefecture, major aspects stand out:

Firstly, integrating source governance into the broader context of social governance. Source governance is not merely about litigation management; fundamentally, it falls within the realm of social governance. Ensuring effective source governance is not solely the responsibility of the courts but requires a collective effort from local governments, enterprises, grassroots organizations, and beyond. Many social issues do not originate from the courts but arise within the dynamics of market and economic relationships, government-market interactions, and government-society relationships.[8] Thus, local governments should take the lead in resource allocation and protection, while various entities must enhance their sense of responsibility, innovate in line with the “Fengqiao Model” of the new era, actively engage in source governance within the

broader society, ensuring conflicts do not escalate, disputes are resolved at the grassroots level, and a collaborative network of diverse governance forms is established.

Secondly, designing dispute resolution pathways and measures based on the lifecycle of conflicts. Research indicates that conflicts also follow a lifecycle, with formation, evolution, and resolution corresponding to pre-event, event, and post-resolution stages. This aligns with the lifecycle theory, highlighting crucial “windows of opportunity” during each stage that, when seized, and acted upon promptly and effectively, can prevent situations from escalating. [9] G Prefecture's comprehensive dispute prevention and resolution mechanism aligns with this lifecycle approach, offering valuable insights for conflict resolution practices.

Thirdly, prioritizing the facilitation of the public in resolving disputes. Due to historical reasons, ethnic regions face unique challenges in dispute resolution. Therefore, it's essential to consider factors such as individuals in ethnic regions who may not speak the national language, as well as the spatial, temporal, and financial costs involved in dispute resolution. Establishing bilingual platforms, integrating online and offline dispute resolution methods, and implementing mobile solutions like “horseback judges”, “tent courts”, and “mobile courts” are crucial for enabling the timely and convenient

resolution of disputes for the people. Placing the convenience of the populace at the forefront underscores the imperative of a people-centric approach in source governance.

5. Conclusion

The practical exploration of source governance in G Prefecture provides a replicable and scalable model for grassroots social governance in ethnic regions of China and even the broader nation. Its core success lies in deeply integrating source governance into the larger framework of social governance. By establishing a collaborative mechanism for multi-party governance, G Prefecture has formed a comprehensive governance loop, consisting of proactive prevention, mid-stage resolution, and final-stage stabilization. From the perspective of facilitating the public, the region has built both online and offline dispute resolution platforms. G Prefecture's experience is, in essence, an innovative blend of the "Fengqiao Model" with local realities, combining the rule of law with ethnic culture. This approach respects the lifestyle habits of minority communities while effectively addressing the governance challenges posed by vast territories and frequent disputes. The success of this model demonstrates that embedding non-litigation dispute resolution mechanisms into the grassroots governance system is key to achieving the governance goal of "small issues stay within the village, larger issues stay within the township, and conflicts are not escalated". Looking forward, further efforts should be made to transition source governance from a movement-driven approach to institutionalized governance. This involves improving the long-term mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution within the rule of law framework, while maintaining a balance between digital empowerment and humanistic care. In doing so, fair and efficient dispute resolution services will benefit a larger population, contributing Chinese wisdom and solutions to global social governance.

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