

From Relief of Visits to Embedding Good Governance: Mechanism Construction and Practical Reflection on the Intervention Work of Border Social Workers in Letters and Visits

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Abstract

The report delivered at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China underscored the dual priorities of safeguarding national security and maintaining social stability, particularly through the advancement of prosperity and development in border regions. This study presents field research on the implementation and outcomes of the Livelihood Security Project in Jingxi City and Longzhou County, Guangxi. It highlights key successes in infrastructure development, the enhancement of public service systems, economic growth, and innovations in social governance. The findings demonstrate that the project has significantly contributed to improving living standards and fostering regional stability. However, the research also identifies several persistent challenges, including imbalanced resource distribution and policy prioritization, limited capacity in grassroots governance, deficiencies in the social security framework, and shortcomings in policy execution and oversight mechanisms. In response, this paper proposes targeted recommendations to maximize the impact of the Livelihood Security and Border Stabilization Project. These include recalibrating resource and policy allocations, optimizing public service delivery, strengthening governance capacity at the local level, and reinforcing accountability in policy implementation. The study concludes by synthesizing the practical experiences of Jingxi and Longzhou, offering insights for sustained stability in border regions, and suggesting pathways for the future evolution of the Livelihood Security Project in Guangxi's frontier areas.

Keywords: borderland governance; petition social workers; petition system; emotional support; collaborative governance

Evidence for Practice

- **Localized social workers are vital mediators in emotionally charged frontier petitions**, effectively transforming grievances from confrontational expressions into rational, negotiable demands through culturally sensitive communication.
- **Embedding social work into petition governance strengthens grassroots trust in institutions**, especially where ethnic identity, historical grievances, and marginalization create systemic tension and institutional distrust.
- **Group work and community-based interventions help prevent escalation of individual petitions into collective incidents**, by fostering mutual support and promoting early-stage issue resolution.
- **Cross-sectoral collaboration, coordinated by social workers, enhances governance responsiveness**, facilitating interdepartmental dialogue and reducing bureaucratic inefficiency in addressing public concerns.
- **The frontier experience demonstrates a replicable model of emotionally intelligent, structurally embedded governance**, applicable to other ethnically diverse or governance-challenged regions both within and beyond China.

Frontier security is integral to national sovereignty, social stability, and regional development, constituting a vital pillar of China's national governance system. As the only Chinese province bordering both land and sea, Guangxi shares over a thousand kilometers of border with Vietnam, rendering it a strategically significant yet governance-challenged region. For decades, Guangxi's frontier areas have grappled with socio-economic underdevelopment and fragile foundations in social governance. These challenges have been further compounded by shifting global geopolitics and heightened cross-border mobility, demanding greater capacity to simultaneously address external security risks and internal development pressures.

In response to this evolving strategic context, Guangxi has actively advanced the "Livelihood-Based Border Security Initiative" in recent years. Through infrastructure upgrades, public service enhancements, improvements in the social security system, and industrial development, this initiative operates under the logic of "promoting stability through improving livelihoods." The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China reaffirmed this strategic trajectory by emphasizing the need to coordinate development and security, particularly in border regions. Field evidence from Jingxi City and Longzhou County suggests that this approach has yielded promising results in education, healthcare, transportation, and social governance, contributing to rising living standards and stronger social cohesion.

However, challenges persist. These include uneven resource allocation and policy execution across regions, limited grassroots governance capacity, inadequacies in employment and welfare services, and insufficient oversight in project implementation—issues that risk undermining the project’s long-term effectiveness. This study is therefore guided by the central research question: how does Guangxi’s Livelihood and Border Security Project balance the dual imperatives of development and security in practice? By examining the experiences of Jingxi and Longzhou, this paper seeks to identify not only the achievements but also the structural constraints of the project and explores how resource optimization, capacity enhancement, and institutional accountability can further consolidate its strategic role.

Importantly, this paper argues that the “Livelihood and Border Security Project” should not be viewed merely as a development policy or infrastructure plan. It is better understood as a core component of China’s broader national security strategy—an approach that emphasizes social stabilization through livelihood improvement. Border security, as conceptualized here, extends beyond geopolitical risk prevention to encompass social cohesion, ethnic unity, and equitable public service provision. Understanding this multidimensional framework provides critical insights into both the operational logic and policy potential of the initiative.

A key innovation of this study is its focus on petition-related social work in frontier governance—a relatively underexplored yet crucial domain. In China, the petitioning system (信访制度) remains a vital channel for articulating grievances and maintaining political legitimacy, especially in socially and ethnically complex border areas. As social conflicts diversify, scholars have increasingly explored the role of professional social work in petitioning.

Existing domestic research identifies three key functions of social work in this context: emotional regulation, structural mediation, and localized governance facilitation. First, social workers offer psychological counseling and emotional support, especially in high-tension petition cases where administrative or legal measures alone are insufficient. Second, they act as institutional intermediaries, transforming personal grievances into structured governance issues through resource linkage and policy embedding. Third, in frontier regions where ethnic, land, and mobility-related complexities abound, social workers with local affiliations function as “relationship restorers,” rebuilding trust between citizens and state institutions.

However, much of the domestic literature remains empirical, lacking theoretical systematization—particularly regarding how social workers can be institutionally embedded within governance systems in sensitive regions. This study thus contributes to bridging this gap by situating frontier petition social work within the “wider social work” framework, highlighting its institutional and strategic significance beyond case-based service delivery.

Internationally, although there is no direct equivalent to China’s petitioning system, studies on grievance mechanisms, ombudsman models, and social work interventions in the global North offer valuable comparative insights. In Nordic countries, social workers have been integrated into ombudsman structures to enhance emotional and psychological

support for vulnerable groups. Similarly, culturally sensitive grievance handling in indigenous communities in Australia and Canada demonstrates the importance of language, identity, and trust-building—parallels that resonate with frontier social work practices in China. Furthermore, institutions such as the World Bank have increasingly emphasized “psychosocial first” approaches in project grievance redressal systems.

Yet, most international literature focuses on stable, rule-of-law societies and rarely addresses the complex political, ethnic, and developmental dynamics of frontier governance. This study, therefore, draws upon both domestic and international literatures to construct a more comprehensive analytical framework.

This paper’s contribution is threefold: it explores frontier petitioning as a distinct governance arena requiring both emotional and institutional intervention; it reveals how social work, under the “broader governance” framework, contributes to emotional relief, relationship repair, and institutional embedding in border governance; and it offers empirically grounded insights from China that enrich global debates on social work’s evolving role in state governance. By analyzing the implementation of the Livelihood and Border Security Project in Jingxi and Longzhou, this study provides policy recommendations for strengthening institutional design, capacity-building, and accountability in frontier development and security governance. It also contributes new case-based and theoretical resources for both domestic and international scholarship in public administration, social work, and political economy.

Research Design and Theoretical Framework

Research Methodology

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the practical experiences and real-world challenges associated with the implementation of the Livelihood and Border Security Project in Guangxi’s frontier areas, the research team conducted a nine-day field investigation in Jingxi City and Longzhou County in January 2025. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study integrated both qualitative and quantitative techniques, focusing on peri-urban areas and critical border zones to ensure broad representation and the collection of substantial first-hand data within a constrained timeframe.

The fieldwork covered a diverse range of locations, including Guobu Village (Anning Township), Ronglao Health Centre (Ludong Town), Yaoe Village, Hulong Village and Damo Village (Longbang Town), Renzhuang and Tunpan Townships, as well as Shuikou Town People’s Government, Chengnan Community, Fulun Village (Xiadong Town), and Shanglong Village (Shanglong Township) in Longzhou County. The research methods included village visits, household interviews, facility inspections, and systematic field documentation.

A structured questionnaire was designed to assess residents' awareness of, participation in, and satisfaction with the Livelihood and Border Security Project, as well as to collect their feedback on implementation outcomes. A total of 136 questionnaires were distributed, with 119 returned and 106 deemed valid. The sample comprised 65 percent ordinary villagers, 20 percent urban community residents, and 15 percent grassroots workers, thereby covering both rural-urban fringe communities and sensitive border regions. These data formed the empirical foundation for quantitative analysis from a resident-centered perspective.

To address the limitations of survey data in capturing complex contextual and governance dynamics, the team also conducted 27 semi-structured interviews. Interviewees included 11 township cadres, village Party and committee members, and township health center staff; 9 border residents and returning youth; 3 representatives of local enterprises; and 4 members of social organizations. These interviews focused on implementation experiences, practical challenges, and the expressed needs of local residents. The qualitative insights provided crucial depth for understanding governance logics and institutional dilemmas within the project's implementation process.

Theoretical Analytical Framework

This study adopts the theoretical lens of social embeddedness, as articulated by Granovetter (1985), which posits that economic and social behaviors are not autonomous actions but are deeply situated within relational networks, cultural contexts, and institutional structures. The theory emphasizes that governance outcomes are shaped by the degree to which policy arrangements are integrated within the social fabric of the communities they aim to serve.

At the institutional level, the Livelihood and Border Security Project reflects the strategic embedding of national governance objectives into frontier policy structures. Infrastructure development, the expansion of public services, and the strengthening of social protection mechanisms serve not only technical functions but also embed state priorities into localized governance systems. This embedding process entails the articulation and coordination of institutional rules between central authorities and local governments, enabling the downward transmission of policy intentions in ways that resonate with local administrative and organizational realities.

At the level of social relations, effective policy implementation depends on leveraging dense local networks such as kinship ties, village associations, and cross-border interpersonal connections. In Guangxi's frontier areas, where social familiarity remains strong, policy success is heavily reliant on collaboration between village cadres, community groups, and grassroots social organizations. Social embeddedness reminds us that governance cannot be accomplished solely through top-down mandates; rather, effective implementation requires the activation of relational resources to generate a synergistic mechanism linking institutions, social relations, and practical actions.

Cultural embeddedness is particularly salient in Guangxi's ethnically diverse frontier regions. Livelihood and security projects that neglect local cultural norms, languages, and identity frameworks risk encountering resistance or indifference. Conversely, projects that incorporate minority languages, traditional customs, and culturally appropriate practices tend to gain broader public acceptance and legitimacy. Recognizing and integrating cultural factors thus becomes essential for enhancing project effectiveness and social resonance.

Finally, from a governance logic perspective, the Livelihood and Border Security Project functions not only as a policy for livelihood enhancement but also as a testing ground for frontier governance innovation. Under the logic of embedded governance, policy effectiveness stems from the dynamic interaction between state power, local society, and border communities. Analyzing the multidimensional embedding process allows us to trace the evolution of the project from resource input to social recognition and ultimately to coordinated governance outcomes. This analytical framework provides a theoretical basis for understanding how livelihood improvement can be coupled with security stabilization in frontier regions.

“Relief from Visits”: The Individual Adjustment Mechanism in Social Work Interventions for Border Petitioners

Emotional Entanglement and Rational Complexity: The Multidimensional Nature of Border Petitions

Petitioning behavior in border regions is rarely the result of a single administrative dispute or legal conflict. Rather, it emerges from a complex layering of historical grievances, policy mismatches, ethnic and religious identities, and persistent socio-economic disparities. Compared to inland areas, border petitions often carry stronger emotional overtones, blurring the lines between rational rights advocacy and emotional release. This emotional-rational entanglement contributes to the uncertainty and sensitivity that characterizes governance in frontier regions.

First, the compounded disjunction between historical legacies and current realities fuels a buildup of emotional grievances. Border regions, often serving as strategic buffers and ethnic minority settlements, have long suffered from underdevelopment, inadequate infrastructure, limited public services, and restricted employment opportunities. Such marginalization generates a deep sense of perceived neglect and distributive injustice. When evolving policies fail to address grassroots needs or respond effectively to local transformations, frustrations accumulate and manifest as institutional distrust. Individuals may come to believe that their legitimate claims are ignored or diluted during implementation, thereby intensifying motivation for repeated petitioning.

Second, the intersection of ethnicity and religious affiliation amplifies the emotional content of petitions. In many border communities, identity and belief are intimately tied to social and cultural life. When policy interventions clash with customary practices or religious observances, they are often interpreted as infringements on ethnic rights, provoking

collective empathy and even group mobilization. Individual concerns may quickly escalate into identity-based grievances, turning isolated appeals into broader movements. This collective emotional expression reflects not only dissatisfaction with specific policies but also a deeper tension between identity recognition and institutional legitimacy.

Third, the inadequacies of institutional responses further intensify emotional tendencies in petition behavior. Existing petition systems in border regions often suffer from outdated regulations, weak enforcement, and procedural opacity. When legitimate concerns go unanswered for extended periods, frustration can turn into resentment and, in some cases, be compounded by nationalistic or ethnic sentiments. Petitioning thus becomes more than an administrative matter—it becomes an outlet for accumulated emotional and social discontent. Repeated, cross-level, or escalated petitions often emerge as desperate attempts to regain visibility or acknowledgment.

Importantly, border petitioning involves a complex interweaving of rational demands and emotional expression. On one hand, grievances—such as land disputes, inadequate social protection, or inconsistent compensation—are substantively rational. On the other, these demands are often wrapped in intense emotional language or behavior, such as confrontational speech or mass gatherings. This emotional veneer may lead officials to dismiss such appeals as irrational or excessive, overlooking their legitimate core. The misrecognition of emotionalized rational claims intensifies antagonism between citizens and institutions, making resolution through formal channels increasingly difficult.

Methodological Embeddedness and Relational Adjustment: The Professional Logic of Social Work

In this emotionally and institutionally complex landscape, social workers in border areas employ a distinct professional logic that emphasizes relational repair, emotional relief, and contextual adaptability. Rather than entering the petition process through administrative mandates such as persuasion or coercion, social workers use case-based intervention strategies to help individuals process emotional trauma and regain cognitive clarity.

In City C, for example, social workers utilize tools such as rational-emotive therapy and narrative therapy to guide petitioners in articulating suppressed frustrations and reinterpreting their own experiences. Many long-term petitioners construct their grievances through a “victimhood narrative,” which reinforces passivity and antagonism. By reconstructing personal narratives, social workers help clients shift from victimization to agency, promoting a more constructive engagement with institutions. Most social workers in Region G are locally trained and fluent in dialects and cultural norms, enabling them to quickly build rapport and dismantle the alienation that petitioners often feel toward official channels. This cultural and linguistic proximity fosters a trust-based environment in which professional methods can be more effectively applied.

These localized approaches align with international practices. In Canada's indigenous communities, social workers emphasize culturally sensitive communication and use of native languages to build trust in grievance mediation. In Nordic ombudsman systems, social work-based psychological support is viewed as a mechanism to reduce adversarial dynamics. The World Bank has similarly incorporated the principle of "psychological support first" into its grievance redress frameworks to prevent emotional escalation among vulnerable populations.

Beyond individualized support, social workers in City C also employ group work to harness shared emotional experiences. While individual grievances may differ, the underlying frustrations with systemic inefficacy often overlap. By organizing culturally familiar gatherings—such as tea parties or folk events—social workers create informal yet empathetic spaces for petitioners to share experiences and co-develop coping strategies. These group settings facilitate emotional catharsis, reduce isolation, and foster mutual understanding, thus laying the groundwork for more rationalized engagement with institutions.

Community-based work further extends the reach of social work into long-term relational reconstruction. Border petitioners often face broader difficulties, such as family breakdown, unemployment, or legal illiteracy. Social work stations draw on their embeddedness in the community to activate local resources and support networks. Village elders, religious leaders, and community cadres are engaged to provide moral persuasion and restore a sense of belonging. Legal aid offices and judicial institutions are also mobilized to channel disputes into formal resolution processes. This multipronged approach helps reframe petitions not as isolated personal grievances, but as challenges embedded in broader socio-institutional ecosystems.

Most critically, it is the relational credibility of social workers—their status as members of the local community—that distinguishes their interventions. Unlike external officials, they are seen as "insiders" who understand local contexts, speak the same dialect, and share cultural affiliations. This familiarity allows them to act not only as mediators but as relationship repairers, gradually rebuilding trust between individuals, communities, and governing institutions through culturally resonant and emotionally sensitive interactions.

Claim Transformation and Trust Reconstruction: Outcomes of Individual-Level Adjustment

The first observable outcome of social work interventions in petition cases is emotional defusion. By enabling petitioners to express long-held frustrations through one-on-one counseling and peer group support, social workers help shift the emotional intensity surrounding grievances. In one case from City C, a petitioner involved in a protracted land dispute frequently displayed aggressive behavior. Through ongoing emotional engagement, the social worker helped him move from anger to acceptance, eventually allowing the individual to articulate the core issue in more measured terms. This emotional transformation opened space for rational discourse and institutional response.

Second, demands are reframed in institutional terms. Rather than solving problems on behalf of the state, social workers act as “interpretive agents,” translating emotionally charged complaints into policy-relevant issues. For instance, accusations of “official inaction” were reframed as delayed subsidy disbursements, and expressions of social marginalization were articulated as unmet needs for employment and vocational training. This translation facilitates clearer communication with the state and enhances the system’s responsiveness. It also helps de-escalate potential group mobilizations by channeling dissent into structured institutional processes.

Third, social workers play a vital role in rebuilding trust between petitioners and their communities. Long-term petitioners are often stigmatized as troublemakers and socially isolated. In City C, social workers drew on local relational networks—such as community elders and women’s groups—to reintegrate marginalized individuals into community life. In one case, a woman involved in repeated family-related petitions received legal support and was encouraged to join a local women's cooperative. Over time, she regained social standing and transitioned from a position of alienation to one of active participation in community affairs. Such reintegration not only restored her sense of dignity but also reaffirmed her trust in both society and the state.

Finally, these individual-level adjustments produce feedback effects for broader governance. As social workers accumulate knowledge from cases, they summarize common concerns and relay them to local governments. In City C, insights gathered from repeated petitions led to policy adjustments, such as the creation of “village liaison offices” and public information boards to clarify subsidy procedures. These structural improvements enhance institutional transparency and responsiveness, thereby reinforcing systemic legitimacy and public trust.

"Embedded in Good Governance": The Structural Mechanism of Social Workers in Border Petition Governance

Institutional Tensions and Trust Deficits: Social Workers as Mediators of Systemic Dilemmas

In the governance of petitions in border regions, the institutional framework is intended to serve as a key mechanism for conflict resolution and interest reconciliation. However, a structural tension persists: while the petition system emphasizes administrative control and social stability, the public—particularly in border areas—expects the system to be both responsive and emotionally attuned, recognizing not only their material needs but also their cultural and identity-based concerns. This misalignment has created a governance dilemma marked by mutual distrust: citizens perceive the system as unresponsive, while the system struggles to engage a skeptical and often alienated public.

At the core of this institutional tension lies a fundamental contradiction between "control" and "response." In frontier regions, petition systems are often mobilized more as instruments of political containment than as platforms for problem-solving. The dominant administrative response—characterized by suppression, persuasion, and passive

mediation—may quell dissent temporarily but ultimately deepens public frustration. In City C, many petitioners reported feeling ignored or “passed around” by government departments, which reinforced their perception that the system was ineffective or indifferent. This sense of procedural injustice gradually transforms isolated dissatisfaction into systemic disillusionment, undermining institutional legitimacy.

The trust deficit is also exacerbated by socio-cultural alienation. Language barriers, legal illiteracy, and cultural misunderstandings often prevent ethnic minority petitioners from fully engaging with institutional processes. One petitioner from an ethnic group in City C, for example, repeatedly appealed over land expropriation not solely for compensation but for recognition of dignity and fairness. However, such emotional and cultural appeals are often overlooked in bureaucratic discourse, reinforcing feelings of marginalization. In this context, social workers—by virtue of their cultural familiarity and relational credibility—can function as trust-builders, bridging the gap between state logic and local sentiment.

Operating as a “third party” between the public and the administration, social workers in City C do not merely facilitate communication but reinterpret and reframe grievances in mutually intelligible terms. In a case concerning unsafe housing reconstruction, for instance, social workers helped emotionally distressed residents articulate their concerns as a request for subsidy adjustment rather than a denunciation of government indifference. This reframing allowed for constructive engagement with authorities, ultimately leading to policy revisions. In doing so, social workers alleviated both emotional volatility and institutional rigidity, demonstrating how mediators embedded in local contexts can play a vital role in rebuilding public trust.

Localized Adaptation and Flexible Embedding: Innovative Governance Practices

Compared to inland regions, petitioning behavior in border areas often carries more intense emotional and collective dimensions, shaped by intersecting factors such as ethnic identity, religious beliefs, historical memory, and traditional lifestyles. In this setting, rigid administrative responses—especially those grounded solely in legal or procedural logic—are frequently inadequate and may inadvertently provoke wider resistance.

Local characteristics shape divergent governance needs. City C, a multi-ethnic area with a high proportion of minority populations, frequently experiences petition cases entangled with identity-based claims. On issues such as land disputes, housing reconstruction, or educational equity, petitioners are not merely defending material interests but also asserting values of dignity, equality, and cultural respect. Conventional administrative responses often fail to resonate with these deeper concerns and risk reinforcing perceptions of bureaucratic insensitivity. By contrast, locally rooted social workers—fluent in dialects, versed in local customs, and embedded in community networks—can effectively translate institutional discourse into culturally resonant terms, thereby enhancing both clarity and legitimacy.

Flexible embedding also manifests in cross-sectoral integration. In a group petition triggered by land occupation for a water conservancy project, social workers first organized a culturally appropriate roundtable dialogue to help residents clarify their demands. As attention shifted from generalized anger to specific concerns about compensation and resettlement, the social worker facilitated engagement with departments of water resources, civil affairs, and petition management. This multilateral negotiation platform allowed all parties to operate within a shared rational framework. Social workers thereby served as catalysts of procedural rationality and emotional moderation, enabling institutions to incorporate humane considerations and enhancing the system's responsiveness.

Equally important is the role of community-level governance innovation. Recognizing that petitions often reflect long-accumulated structural tensions, social workers in City C adopt preventive strategies that address root causes. In response to repeated disputes over housing reconstruction, for example, social workers collaborated with village committees to establish "policy bulletin boards" and organized community lectures to clarify procedures and expectations. At the same time, they formed inter-ethnic mutual aid groups to promote social cohesion and foster early-stage problem detection. This shift from reactive handling to proactive governance reflects the emergence of a daily, embedded, and flexible mode of petition management that seeks to prevent escalation before conflict arises.

Structural Transformation and Collaborative Governance: Enhancing Systemic Effectiveness

Moving beyond traditional governance approaches centered on administrative commands or judicial remedies, the work of social workers in City C demonstrates how petition resolution can evolve from episodic conflict management into a process of systemic learning and structural transformation. Social work interventions enable the embedding of individual demands into broader governance frameworks, gradually shifting the logic of intervention from emergency response to collaborative governance.

First, social workers contribute to governance by transforming emotional grievances into structural insights. In multiple petition cases related to education resource distribution, social workers recognized that the conflicts reflected not just individual dissatisfaction but long-standing inequalities in resource allocation—particularly between urban and rural schools and among ethnic minority institutions. Through systematic documentation and analysis, social workers synthesized case data into a "public opinion report," which was submitted to the local education bureau and petition office. This process converted localized complaints into actionable policy inputs, transforming petition work from episodic relief to structural adjustment.

Second, social workers foster interdepartmental collaboration, breaking down the silos that often paralyze policy implementation. In a petition case involving unsafe housing, social workers coordinated a joint taskforce involving housing, civil affairs, community management, and petition departments. Through integrated dialogue and shared

decision-making, government actors were able to deliver a coherent response, while residents gained confidence that their concerns were being substantively addressed. This shift from departmental isolation to policy synergy not only improved response efficiency but also strengthened the public's sense of procedural justice and institutional accountability.

Finally, social workers promote a forward-looking orientation in governance. Traditional petition systems are often reactive, mobilized only after tensions escalate. In contrast, the daily embeddedness of social work enables early detection and preemptive intervention. Social workers in City C regularly conduct "policy dialogues" in ethnic minority communities, translating complex regulatory language into accessible narratives. They maintain "social sentiment diaries" that track everyday disputes and informal complaints, providing early warnings to relevant authorities. This preventive infrastructure significantly reduces the risk of mass petitions or spontaneous unrest, effectively shifting petition management from "crisis mitigation" to "conflict prevention."

Transformation and Implications of Border Petition Social Work

Conceptual Shift and Professional Commitment: From "Emotional Appeasement" to "Structural Governance"

For a long time, social work intervention in petition affairs has been primarily framed as a tool for emotional appeasement—through individual counseling, psychological support, and conflict mediation, social workers help petitioners release dissatisfaction and reduce confrontational behaviors. While such interventions have demonstrated practical effectiveness, they reveal critical limitations. First, they rely heavily on case-based work without addressing the institutional or structural roots of grievances. Second, they risk being co-opted by the administrative logic of "stability maintenance," diluting the professional autonomy and value commitments of social work.

These limitations are particularly salient in border regions, where petition cases often intersect with deep-seated issues such as national identity, uneven policy implementation, and regional development disparities. In such contexts, managing individual emotions alone cannot resolve systemic dysfunctions or address the structural sources of discontent.

Therefore, frontier social work must undergo a fundamental conceptual transformation: shifting from a model centered on "emotional appeasement" to one grounded in "structural governance." This shift does not reject the importance of micro-level interventions such as casework and group work. Rather, it emphasizes that such practices must be embedded within a broader governance vision that links individual grievances to institutional mechanisms and community development.

Professionally guided social workers should be capable of identifying policy gaps and systemic deficiencies during routine service delivery and psychological support. Simultaneously, they must actively integrate their work into

grassroots governance frameworks, connecting individual struggles to issues such as community equity, public service provision, and interethnic cohesion. This transition—from “addressing immediate problems” to “treating root causes”—reflects a deeper understanding of social work's potential within public administration.

In the practice of City C, Region G, social work stations have begun to bridge “emotional adjustment” with “structural intervention” through locally rooted and sustained engagement. For instance, when supporting residents engaged in long-term petitioning over unequal land compensation, social workers not only provided emotional relief through dialect-based communication and psychological support but also initiated a regular coordination mechanism with community leaders and petition departments. This mechanism encouraged the government to improve transparency and fairness in compensation policies. Such efforts illustrate how conceptual transformation enables social work to move beyond its auxiliary role and become an integral force in grassroots governance.

Mechanism Development and Systemic Linkage: From “Isolated Response” to “Collaborative Governance”

The complexity of petition issues in border regions necessitates solutions that go beyond isolated or departmental responses. Traditionally, petition work has been handled exclusively by government departments, with an emphasis on administrative control and a goal of “stopping visits” rather than solving root problems. This “single-response” model often leads to prolonged delays, deepening public mistrust, and, in some cases, escalates into mass incidents.

Social work offers an alternative governance pathway centered on *mechanism building* and *systemic linkage*. Its value lies not in substituting for the government, but in introducing flexibility, inclusivity, and responsiveness into the structure of grassroots governance.

At the institutional level, social workers—operating as third-party actors—can bridge the gap between bureaucratic responses and public emotions. Their non-administrative status allows them to reduce the antagonism often felt by petitioners toward state institutions. In City C, a “triangular linkage model” has emerged, integrating social work stations with petition departments and community governance bodies. Social workers translate fragmented individual concerns into policy-relevant claims and relay them to functional departments. Simultaneously, they embed legal assistance, psychological counseling, and community support into the resolution pathways, ensuring that emotional relief and structural remediation are treated as equally important components.

Cross-sectoral collaboration has further enhanced the efficacy of this approach. Border social workers in City C have established regular cooperation not only with petition offices but also with justice bureaus, civil affairs departments, and ethnic affairs commissions. In cases involving collective grievances from ethnic minority villages, social workers proactively organize multi-stakeholder consultations, bringing together third-party mediators, community elders, and

legal advisors. These collaborative mechanisms shift the logic of governance from one-way administrative imposition to participatory and responsive governance.

This system of cross-departmental linkage and shared decision-making not only improves procedural transparency and accountability but also nurtures a culture of collaborative good governance. It marks a significant evolution in the role of social work within China's frontier governance architecture—moving from reactive conflict management to proactive, systemic intervention aligned with long-term institutional reform.

Local Roots and Forward-Looking Innovation: From Regional Experience to Universal Insight

One of the most distinctive features of social work in petition governance within border regions is its high degree of localization. Unlike urban petition cases, which tend to focus on administrative procedures or legal rights, petitions in border areas are deeply entangled with ethnicity, religion, geography, and interpersonal relationships. In such contexts, non-local social workers often struggle to build rapport due to language barriers and cultural dissonance. By contrast, locally rooted social workers—familiar with dialects, cultural customs, and embedded in community networks—are far more likely to earn the trust of residents through shared identity and social credibility.

In City C of Region G, most social workers are young professionals who were raised locally. They possess both formal training in social work and a deep understanding of the rhythms and logics of local life. This “dual identity” enables them to integrate professional methodologies with the lived realities of local communities. In one case involving tensions between religious customs and public administrative procedures, a local social worker resolved resistance among residents by engaging them in their native dialect and addressing cultural sensitivities. The social worker also invited respected religious leaders and community elders to participate in mediation efforts, leveraging community ties to reach a flexible and culturally appropriate resolution. This example illustrates that the effectiveness of social workers in border petition governance is closely tied to their local embeddedness.

However, localization does not imply parochialism. The experiences derived from social work practices in border regions hold broader relevance for governance innovation across China. On the one hand, the model of “emotional relief plus embedded governance” developed in these areas provides a replicable framework for addressing complex petition issues elsewhere, particularly in rural or ethnically diverse settings. The dual-track mechanism of emotional regulation and institutional feedback offers a practical pathway for transforming social grievances into constructive policy responses. On the other hand, the practices of border social workers in cross-sectoral coordination, community network reconstruction, and the maintenance of national unity contribute valuable insights into the modernization of grassroots governance under China's broader national strategy.

The future of frontier social work should adhere to a dual principle: rooted in local communities, yet oriented toward national relevance. On one hand, efforts should continue to cultivate a new generation of social workers who are linguistically and culturally competent, and capable of building trust in complex environments. On the other hand, these localized practices should be systematized and refined into transferable models, contributing to the institutionalization of social work within the broader framework of national governance modernization. Only by transforming frontier experiences into generalizable insights can border petition social work play a lasting role in shaping the evolution of grassroots governance across China.

Concluding Remarks

This study underscores the pivotal role of infrastructure development, public service optimization, social security enhancement, and governance capacity-building in safeguarding stability in China's frontier regions. Three key patterns emerge from the findings. First, improving people's livelihoods forms the social foundation of frontier security. Investments in education, healthcare, employment, and social protection have effectively mitigated vulnerabilities in border communities. Second, the effectiveness of border governance hinges on balanced policy implementation and strengthened grassroots capacity. Resource imbalances and weak oversight mechanisms continue to undermine policy efficacy. Third, the sustained engagement of social forces is essential to the long-term viability of livelihood-based border security initiatives. In this light, such projects are not merely instruments of material provision, but represent processes of social construction that stabilize the frontier through embedded and participatory governance.

International experiences offer valuable comparative insights. In Indigenous communities in Canada, social workers promote culturally sensitive communication by using Indigenous languages and cultural symbols, thereby building trust and reducing adversarial conflict. This highlights that governance effectiveness depends not only on resource allocation but also on the alignment between governance discourse and cultural context. Similarly, the ombudsman systems in Nordic countries—where social workers provide psychological counseling and support—facilitate emotional resolution before grievances escalate into systemic tensions. These cases demonstrate that for livelihood projects in border regions to achieve genuine effectiveness, material investments must be complemented by emotional regulation and cultural embedding. In short, “hardware construction” and “socio-psychological support” must progress in tandem.

This study, however, has several limitations. First, the spatial scope of the research is limited. While Jingxi and Longzhou offer representative cases, they cannot fully capture the diversity of Guangxi's border regions, let alone reflect national-level variation. Second, the sample size for the questionnaire survey remains relatively small, and the statistical robustness of the findings could be strengthened. Third, the study does not sufficiently explore the operational mechanisms of social force embedding, particularly the role of grassroots organizations and civil society networks in

the Livelihood Security and Border Stabilisation Project. These limitations suggest future research directions: expanding the empirical scope, conducting cross-regional comparative studies, and incorporating longitudinal data would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the project's adaptive dynamics across varying frontier contexts.

Looking forward, governance in Guangxi—and across China's broader borderlands—should place greater emphasis on “soft governance” alongside “hard infrastructure.” This means not only improving public services and institutional capacity, but also enhancing grassroots governance, integrating social organizations, and embedding culturally sensitive and psychologically supportive interventions. As the Canadian and Nordic cases suggest, only when social work is integrated into the policy implementation process can governance systems achieve long-term resilience, inclusiveness, and effectiveness in frontier settings.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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