



The "Reverse embedding" of Government Procurement of Social Organization Services: A Theoretical Analysis Framework

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ABSTRACT

The government's procurement of services from social organizations represents a central strategy in advancing supply-side reforms of public services. "Reverse embedding" describes the government's active integration of administrative logic into the operations of social organizations through mechanisms such as financial oversight, administrative directives, and evaluation criteria. While this strategy seeks to enhance public service delivery, it has produced challenges, including administrative dependency and limited innovation, which have become significant barriers to improving public service quality.

This paper introduces the concept of "reverse embedding," systematically elucidates its underlying mechanisms, and situates it within the broader context of embedding theory. It examines the inherent tensions between administrative and professional logics and establishes a four-level analytical framework: institutional environment, interaction process, behavioral outcomes, and governance optimization. Drawing on theoretical models from new public administration, collaborative governance, and welfare pluralism, the study highlights the explanatory value of reverse embedding for understanding government-society collaborative governance in China.

The paper also outlines pathways for optimizing governance structures, emphasizing four key dimensions: contract governance, relational governance, multi-actor governance, and digital governance. It further underscores three foundational elements for fostering the autonomy of social organizations: diversified funding, professional capacity building, and industry self-regulation. The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the extension of embeddedness theory, providing new insights into organizational autonomy in non-Western contexts and offering a fresh analytical lens for exploring the enduring "control-autonomy" dynamic in government-society collaboration.

Keywords: Government Purchase; Social organizations; Reverse embedding; Embeddedness theory; Co-governance by government and society

1. Introduction

As China's aging population continues to deepen, elderly care services have become a core component of the "Healthy China" strategy and the people's livelihood security system. As an important practice of the "streamlining administration, delegating power, improving regulation and upgrading services" reform and the marketization of public services, the government's purchase of services from social organizations, with its advantages of efficiency and flexibility, has become a key path to make up for the insufficiency of government elderly care services (Wang Puqu, Hao Qiudi, 2016).¹ However, the problem of "reverse embedding" that has gradually emerged in practice the government embedding administrative logic into the internal operations of social organizations through means such as fund control, administrative instructions, and assessment orientation, resulting in the loss of service innovation and autonomy and turning them into "government extended arms" has seriously restricted the quality of elderly care supply and the sustainable development of social organizations (Zheng Gongcheng, 2020).²

Existing studies have mostly focused on the positive process of "social organizations being embedded in the government governance system", emphasizing the impact of resource dependence on the autonomy of social organizations (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), but have overlooked the reverse logic of "active government embedding in social organizations" in the cooperation between government and society.³ Single-paradigm research is difficult to explain the conflicting nature of administrative logic and professional logic, and lacks systematic theoretical exploration of the generation mechanism and governance path of reverse embedding in the Chinese context. Based on this, this paper raises the core research question: Why do some social organizations fall into "administrative attachment" (reverse embedding) in government-purchased public services and lose service innovation and autonomy? Which governance structure can effectively avoid this risk and achieve a balance between administrative logic and professional logic? This paper, through theoretical analysis and conceptual construction, builds a complete analytical framework of "institutional environment-interactive process - behavioral outcome-governance optimization", fills the theoretical gap in the study of the autonomy of social organizations in non-Western contexts, and provides a theoretical basis for solving the predicament of government-society cooperation and improving the quality of elderly care services.

The theoretical orientation of this paper has five core characteristics: First, it is different-oriented, focusing on the heterogeneous results of "administrative attachment" and "maintaining autonomy" of social organizations in the same context; Second, causal inquiry,

¹ 王浦劬,郝秋笛.政府向社会力量购买公共服务发展研究[M].北京大学出版社,2016:9-479.

² 郑功成.积极应对人口老龄化的国家战略[J].人民论坛,2020,(22):19-27.

³ Pfeffer, J., & Salancik, G. R. (1978). *The External Control of Organizations: A Resource Dependence Perspective*. New York: Harper & Row.



embedded with dual causal logic the reverse embedding generation mechanism of how administrative logic penetrates and squeezes professional logic, and the association mechanism between governance structure and risk aversion; Third, theoretical relevance, directly responding to core disputes such as the "tension between government control and social organization autonomy" in the theory of inter-governmental relations and the interaction between resource dependence and strategic choice in the theory of social organization autonomy; Fourth, practical relevance, focusing on the core contradictions of supply-side reform of public services in China, with a strong sense of urgency in reality; Fifth, interdisciplinary compatibility, operationalization of core concepts, and analytical framework with dual theoretical dialogue value of public administration and social security studies.

2. Theoretical Basis and Literature Review

2.1 Embedded Theoretical Context

Embedded theory was systematically proposed by Granovetter (1985), with the core proposition of "economic action embedded in social structure," emphasizing that economic behavior is constrained and empowered by social relationship networks and criticizing the assumption of atomizing actors in classical economics.⁴ Uzzi (1997) extended the concept of embeddedness to organizational studies by differentiating embeddedness resources (trust, information sharing, problem-solving together) from the risk of "over-embeddedness", providing a micro basis for understanding interorganizational relationships.

Existing research mainly focuses on the positive embedding process of "social organizations embedding into the government governance system", that is, social organizations actively adjust their structures and behaviors to adapt to the institutional environment in order to obtain legitimacy and resource support (Guan Bing, Xia Ying, 2016).⁵ This research context views embedding as a one-way process and ignores the possibility of the government as an active embedder in the cooperation between the government and society. This paper presents the concept of "reverse embedding", reversing the direction of embedding - from "society embedded in the state" to "the state embedded in society", expanding the application dimension of the embedding theory and filling a series of theories in the study of the "direction of embedding".

2.2 Research on the Relationship between Government and Society in Government-purchased Services

There is already a rich accumulation of research on the relationship between government and society in government-purchased services. The administrative management paradigm, based on intergovernmental relations and bureaucracy theory, focuses on how the pressure of assessment at the government level is transmitted to the grassroots executive departments (Chen et al., 2015), revealing the policy and executive roots of reverse embedding.⁶ The new public management paradigm, supported by principal-agent and transaction cost theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976), focuses on the impact of contract design and incentive mechanisms on the behavior of social organizations and explores how to reduce the risk of reverse embedding through market-based mechanisms.⁷

Most of the existing studies focus on the positive process of "social organizations being embedded in the government governance system", emphasizing the negative impact of resource dependence on the autonomy of social organizations, but ignoring the reverse logic of the government's active integration into social organizations in the cooperation between the government and society. This paper presents the concept of "reverse embedding", revealing the bidirectional tension of "control - autonomy" in government-society cooperation and expanding the application dimension of the embedding theory (Uzzi, 1997).⁸

2.3 Theory of Social Organization Autonomy

Western research, based on the context of "civil society", emphasizes "confrontational autonomy" (Salamon, 1987), that is, social organizations guarantee autonomy through institutionalized independent status.⁹ However, the autonomy of social organizations in China presents a more complex aspect. Huang and Ji Xin (2014) proposed the concept of "strategic autonomy", pointing out that under the dual pressure of resource dependence and institutional constraints, Chinese social organizations maintain limited autonomy through strategic actions rather than pursuing complete confrontational independence.¹⁰ The "reverse embedding" discussed in this paper is a structural process that further compresses "strategic autonomy" into "administrative attachment".

2.4 Literature Review

Based on the above theoretical context, the existing research has three shortcomings: First, it focuses on forward embeddings and neglects reverse embeddings. Existing studies view embedding as a one-way process and fail to explain the reverse logic of the government's active embedding into social organizations. Secondly, the single paradigm is difficult to explain the conflicting nature of administrative logic and professional logic. The administrative management paradigm emphasizes government control, while the social organization autonomy theory emphasizes professional autonomy. Both lack an integrated analytical framework. Thirdly, there is a lack of systematic theoretical analysis of the reverse embedding generation mechanism in the Chinese context. Western theories, based on the presupposition of civil society, have difficulty explaining the transformation mechanism of "strategic autonomy" and "administrative attachment" in China's relationship between politics and society. The theoretical framework constructed below in this article is precisely in response to the above three deficiencies.

3. Conceptual Construction and Analytical Framework of "reverse embedding."

⁴ Granovetter, M. (1985). Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness. *American Journal of Sociology*, 91(3), 481-510.

⁵ 管兵, 夏瑛. 政府购买服务的制度选择及治理效果: 项目制、单位制、混合制[J]. *管理世界*, 2016(08):58-72

⁶ 陈家建, 张译文, 胡命. 项目制与政府间权责关系演变: 机制及其影响[J]. *社会*, 2015, 35(05):1-24.

⁷ Jensen, M. C., & Meckling, W. H. (1976). Theory of the Firm: Managerial Behavior, Agency Costs and Ownership Structure. *Journal of Financial Economics*, 3(4), 305-360.

⁸ Uzzi, B. (1997). Social Structure and Competition in Interfirm Networks: The Paradox of Embeddedness. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 42(1), 35-67.

⁹ Salamon, L. M. (1987). Of Market Failure, Voluntary Failure, and Third-Party Government: Toward a Theory of Government-Nonprofit Relations in the Modern Welfare State. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 16(1-2), 29-49.

¹⁰ 黄研睿, 杨欣. 非协同治理与策略性应对——社会组织自主性研究的一个理论框架[J]. *社会学研究*, 2014, 29(06):98-123-244.



3.1 Definition and Dimension Division of "reverse embedding."

"Reverse embedding" refers to the structural phenomenon where the government, through means such as financial control, administrative instructions, and assessment orientation, actively empowers administrative logic into the internal operations of social organizations, resulting in the loss of professional autonomy and service innovation of social organizations. Unlike the classical theory of embeddedness, which focuses on "economic actions embedded in social structures", reverse embeddedness emphasizes the reversal of the direction of embeddedness from "society embedded in the state" to "the state embedded in society". Based on theoretical analysis and literature review, this paper divides it into three dimensions.

First, fund embedding. Funding embeddedness focuses on the extent to which social organizations rely on government-purchased funds. The higher the degree of funding dependence, the greater the likelihood of administrative embeddedness. When the proportion of government purchase funds to the total income of a social organization exceeds a certain threshold, the social organization's reliance on government funds will significantly weaken its negotiating power, allowing the government to embed administrative logic into the organization's internal operations through financial leverage.

Second, decision-making embeddedness. Decision embedding focuses on the extent to which the government intervenes in decisions such as the content of services, personnel arrangements, and internal governance of social organizations. The stronger the intervention, the lower the autonomy of social organizations. Decision embedding is not only manifested as direct instructions from the government, but is also achieved through soft means such as "suggestions" and "guidance", and has strong concealment and penetration.

Third, assessment embedding. Performance embedding focuses on the guiding role of government performance indicators in the behavior of social organizations. The higher the weight of administrative indicators, the more the service direction deviates from professional logic. Through the "baton" effect, performance embeddings make social organizations focus their main efforts on meeting administrative assessment requirements rather than improving the quality of professional services, which is the most typical manifestation of reverse embeddings.

3.2 The generation mechanism of reverse embedding: A theoretical model

The generation of reverse embeddings is the result of a two-way interaction between the government and social organizations. The hierarchical assessment pressure on the government side, the "control thinking" administrative culture, the simplification of executive capacity and regulatory approach, and other factors have driven the administrative logic to embed into social organizations; Resource dependence, lack of professional competence, survival pressure, and other factors on the social organization side make it passively accept administrative embedding. The combined force of these two directions forms a transmission chain of "assessment pressure-administrative intervention-social organization attachment."

Different types of institutional environments and organizational characteristics can lead to varying intensities and manifestations of embedding. By organizational background, public background social organizations have a higher degree of administrative embedding than grassroots social organizations. By service type, the intensity of administrative intervention in basic services (meal delivery, cleaning) is greater than that in specialized services (rehabilitation care, spiritual comfort). In terms of the duration of cooperation, long-term cooperative social organizations have a more pronounced tendency towards administrative attachment. This means that reverse embedding is not a homogeneous phenomenon but has significant typological characteristics that require differentiated governance strategies.

3.3 The mechanism by which reverse embeddings affect service performance

The mechanism by which reverse embeddings affect service performance is mainly transmitted through two paths. Autonomy squeeze path: Administrative embedding compresses professional autonomy space, resulting in service homogenization and fundamentalization, ignoring personalized and specialized demands. Innovation dissolution path: Administrative assessment orientation restrains the service model innovation and technology application of social organizations, making services merely formalistic and lacking in pertinence and effectiveness. The two paths reinforce each other, creating a vicious cycle of "administrative attachment-degradation of professional competence-further attachment" that ultimately undermines the quality of public service supply.

3.4 Cross-paradigm Integrated Analysis Framework

Based on the multi-paradigm integration of embeddedness theory, resource dependency theory, co-governance theory, and welfare pluralism, this paper constructs a four-tier analysis framework of institutional environment-interactive process- behavioral outcome governance optimization.

The institutional environment layer serves as the macro background for reverse embedding generation, including policy design (purchase policy terms, assessment indicators), institutional norms (industry self-regulatory rules, professional certification standards), and cultural traditions (government-led administrative culture, professional spirit of social organizations). The interaction process layer, as the meso mechanism of reverse embedding generation, includes the interaction between the government and social organizations (regulatory approach, resource support, communication mechanism), the interaction between social organizations and service recipients (demand feedback, service participation), and the interaction among social organizations (industry cooperation, experience sharing). The behavioral outcome layer, as a direct manifestation of reverse embedding, includes the behavioral choices of social organizations (administrative attachment, strategic autonomy, professional commitment), service outputs (service content, innovation, quality), and sustainable development capabilities (funding diversification, professional team building, industry influence). Based on the analysis of the



first three layers, the governance optimization layer proposes governance solutions for the risk of reverse embedding from three dimensions: institutional design, interaction mechanism, and capacity building of social organizations (North, 1990; Pierson, 2000).^{11,12}

4. Conflicts and Balancing Conditions between Administrative Logic and Professional Logic

4.1 The essential conflict of dual logic

Administrative logic is oriented towards the public interest, emphasizing compliance, uniformity, assessment orientation, and its core objective is to complete administrative tasks and meet the requirements of superiors; Professional logic is oriented towards the needs of service recipients, emphasizing professionalism, personalization, and result-oriented, with the core objective of improving service quality and meeting individualized demands. The conflict between the two logics focuses on four aspects: service content, decision-making mechanism, assessment criteria, and resource allocation.

Existing studies have mostly described the conflict at the phenomenal level. This paper, through theoretical analysis, clarifies that the essence of the conflict is the structural tension between the "control logic" led by the government and the "professional logic" led by social organizations in terms of resource allocation rights and professional judgment rights. The resource allocation authority determines "who pays", while the professional judgment authority determines "how". The essence of reverse embedding is that the government, through financial embedding, transforms resource allocation power into control over professional judgment power, thereby achieving deep embedding into the internal operations of social organizations.

4.2 Factors Influencing the intensity of conflict

There are significant differences in the intensity of conflict between the two logics in different institutional Settings and organizational contexts. The influencing factors can be classified into four categories. Policy design factors: The greater the flexibility of the contract, the higher the weight of professional effect indicators in the assessment indicators, and the lower the intensity of conflict. Government enforcement factors: The stronger the professional awareness of officials and the more flexible the regulatory approach (from "compliance regulation" to "effectiveness regulation"), the lower the intensity of conflict. Social organization factors: The more diverse the resource structure, the stronger the professional ability, and the higher the negotiating ability, the lower the conflict intensity. Service recipient factors: The higher the heterogeneity of demand and the higher the engagement of service recipients, the stronger the demand for professional logic, thereby offsetting the dominance of administrative logic.

4.3 The ideal form and implementation path of the two logical balances

The ideal form of two logical balances is "administrative logic as the bottom line and professional logic as the core" - social organizations, under the premise of abiding by laws and regulations and meeting basic administrative requirements, have full professional autonomy and can provide personalized and innovative services according to the needs of service recipients. This ideal form is not the "cancellation of administrative logic", but rather the placement of administrative logic in a "bottom-line guarantee" position to prevent its excessive expansion from squeezing professional logic.

The path to realization consists of three levels. Institutional level: Improve the flexible terms of contracts, establish a diversified assessment system (administrative indicators + professional performance indicators + service recipient satisfaction indicators), and define the boundaries of professional autonomy. Interactive: Build an equal consultation mechanism between the government and social organizations, introduce third-party professional institutions to participate in governance, and break the government-dominated relationship between the government and society. Capacity: Enhance the professional competence and negotiation skills of social organizations, cultivate the professional awareness and cooperative awareness of government officials, and achieve the transformation from "control thinking" to "cooperative thinking".

5. Governance structure optimization to avoid the risk of reverse embedding

5.1 Dimensions of Contract Governance

Contracts are the core governance tool purchased by the government. Based on the principal-agent theory, the optimization of contract governance should focus on four dimensions. Contract completeness: Clearly define service content, standards, assessment, payment methods, and liability for breach of contract, and reduce information asymmetry. Contract flexibility: Leave room for service adjustment and innovation, avoid a one-size-fits-all approach, and allow social organizations to make professional adjustments based on changes in the needs of service recipients. Incentive mechanism: Link payment to service performance, such as performance-based payment and stepwise payment, to encourage social organizations to improve the quality of professional services. Risk-sharing mechanism: Define the risk responsibilities of both the government and society to reduce the survival pressure on social organizations to bear risks unilaterally.

This paper holds that the lack of contractual flexibility is an important institutional root cause of reverse embedding in current government-purchased services in China -overly detailed contractual terms directly write administrative logic into the contract, compressing the professional autonomy space of social organizations. The core of optimizing contract governance lies in seeking a balance between contract completeness and contract flexibility, so that contracts guarantee basic administrative requirements while leaving room for the professional judgment of social organizations.

5.2 Dimensions of Relationship Governance

Relationship governance is an important addition to contract governance. It needs to focus on three aspects in its construction. Trust relationship: The government trusts the professional competence of social organizations, and social organizations trust the government's commitment to support, thereby reducing administrative control. Communication mechanism: Establish channels for regular consultation,

¹¹ North, D. C. (1990). *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹² Pierson, P. (2000). Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics. *American Political Science Review*, 94(2), 251-267.



demand feedback, and information sharing to resolve logical conflicts in a timely manner. Cooperative culture: Foster a culture of equal cooperation, mutual respect, and common development, replacing the administrative culture of "control-dependence". The core of relationship governance lies in transforming the relationship between the government and society from a "control-based administrative relationship" to a "trust-based cooperative relationship." Building a relationship of trust requires long-term interaction and repeated games, not one-off transactions. The problem of "emphasizing procurement over governance" in China's government procurement of services essentially neglects the crucial role of relationship governance in maintaining long-term trust.

5.3 Dimensions of Multi-Party Collaborative Governance

Introducing multiple entities, such as third-party institutions, service recipients, and industry associations, to build a collaborative governance network is an effective way to avoid the risk of reverse embedding. Third-party assessment agencies independently conduct service effect evaluations, providing a professional basis for government assessment and reducing the subjectivity of administrative assessment. Industry associations develop industry standards, conduct professional certifications, and provide training to enhance the professional capabilities and self-discipline of social organizations. Service recipients participate in service design, supervision, and evaluation, forming a "demand-oriented" governance mechanism.

The co-governance theory (Ansell & Gash, 2008) emphasizes the equal participation of multiple subjects, which is the core approach to breaking the logic of unilateral government control in reverse embedding.¹³ The essence of multi-subject collaborative governance is to break the government's monopoly of dominance over the relationship between government and society by introducing "third-party authorities" (third-party assessment agencies) and "demand-side constraints" (participation of service recipients), and to provide institutional guarantees for the professional autonomy of social organizations.

5.4 Dimensions of Digital Governance

Digital technologies can optimize governance structures and avoid the risk of reverse embedding. The smart supervision platform achieves transparent monitoring of the service process through means such as service check-in and effect feedback, reducing administrative intervention while ensuring compliance. The demand matching platform accurately identifies personalized demands and provides data support for professional services. Resource-sharing platforms integrate diverse resources and reduce social organizations' reliance on government funds. It should be noted, however, that digital technology itself has a "duality" it can either enhance transparency or intensify government surveillance (Dunleavy et al., 2006).¹⁴ The design of digital governance must be based on the premise of ensuring the professional autonomy of social organizations, avoiding the alienation of digital technology into an "all-weather administrative surveillance tool", otherwise it will exacerbate rather than mitigate the risk of reverse embedding.

6. Capacity Building for Social Organizations' Autonomy

6.1 Dimensions and Typology of Autonomy

Social organization autonomy includes three dimensions: decision-making autonomy, resource autonomy, and professional autonomy. Decision-making autonomy refers to the independent decision-making power of social organizations in terms of service content, internal governance, personnel arrangements, etc. Resource autonomy refers to the ability of social organizations to break away from reliance on a single source of funds; Professional autonomy refers to the right of a social organization to make judgments in the course of service based on professional standards rather than administrative instructions.

This paper constructs an autonomous typological analysis framework. High decision-making autonomy+high resource autonomy = substantial autonomy; High decision-making autonomy + low resource autonomy= strategic autonomy; Low decision-making autonomy+low resource autonomy= administrative attachment. In China's real situation, most social organizations are in a state of "strategic autonomy", and reverse embedding is a structural process that further compresses "strategic autonomy" into "administrative attachment". The fundamental solution to reverse embedding lies in elevating "strategic autonomy" to "substantive autonomy" through the optimization of external governance structures and the building of internal capabilities.

6.2 Diversification of funds

Financial dependence is the core incentive for reverse embedding, and financial diversification can effectively enhance autonomy. The diversified structure of funding sources includes government purchases, social donations, service charges, market investments, and public venture capital. Funding diversification provides support for professional services and innovation by reducing reliance on a single government fund and cutting administrative intervention chips.

But social organizations face real challenges, such as difficulty in obtaining social donations, ethical controversies over service charges, and market investment risks, which require policy-level support and industry-level collective action. The government should create institutional conditions for the diversification of funds for social organizations through tax incentives, the design of purchase service contracts (such as multi-year contracts), rather than confining them to a single reliance on government purchases.

6.3 Professional capacity building

Professional competence is the core capital for social organizations to resist reverse embedding, and its construction includes three key dimensions: professional team building, core technology research and development, and service brand building. Professional capacity building not only enhances the quality of services provided by social organizations, but also strengthens their bargaining power in the interaction between government and society the improvement of professional capacity leads to a relative increase in the government's reliance on the resources of social organizations (such as the government's need for the professional capabilities of social

¹³ Ansell, C., & Gash, A. (2008). Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 18(4), 543-571.

¹⁴ Dunleavy, P., Margetts, H., Bastow, S., & Tinkler, J. (2006). New Public Management Is Dead—Long Live Digital-Era Governance. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 16(3), 467-494.



organizations to achieve policy goals), thereby improving the bargaining position of social organizations. A positive cycle of "professional capacity-resource dependence reconstruction- autonomy enhancement" is formed.

6.4 Industry self-discipline

Industry self-discipline is an important guarantee for social organizations to develop properly and resist reverse embedding. Its core contents include formulating industry service standards, professional ethics norms, self-discipline conventions, and establishing disciplinary mechanisms. Industry self-discipline can regulate service behavior, avoid the decline in service quality caused by administrative dependence, enhance the overall credibility of the industry, and create a favorable environment for autonomous development.

This paper argues that industry associations should play a greater role in reverse embedding governance by establishing standards and certification systems to enhance the collective bargaining power of social organizations and form an industry barrier against excessive administrative embedding by the government. The essence of industry self-discipline is to counter the excessive expansion of external administrative control through collective action within the industry, which is a governance logic of "organization against organization".

7. Research Contributions and Prospects

7.1 Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical contributions of this article are mainly reflected in three aspects. First, the concept of "reverse embedding" is proposed, breaking through the theoretical limitations of one-way embedding. Existing studies have mostly focused on the positive embedding of social organizations into the government. This paper reveals the bidirectional tension of "control-autonomy" in government-society cooperation, expands the application dimension of the embedding theory, and fills the "embedding direction" research. Secondly, integrate multiple paradigms to construct a cross-paradigm analytical framework. Existing studies have mostly adopted either the theory of inter-governmental relations or the theory of social organization autonomy, failing to systematically explain the conflicting nature and balance path of the two logics. This paper integrates multiple paradigms, such as collaborative governance and welfare pluralism, to construct an integrated analysis framework of "logical conflict-mechanism generation-governance balance", providing a new perspective for explaining the core contradiction of government-society cooperation. Thirdly, enrich the study of social organizations in the Chinese context. Western studies emphasize adversarial autonomy in the context of "civil society", while the autonomy of Chinese social organizations is more "strategic autonomy". This paper reveals the generation mechanism of reverse embedding in the context of the characteristic political-social relationship in China (hierarchical assessment pressure transmission, administrative culture dominance, resource dependence solidification), filling the theoretical gap in the non-Western context.

7.2 Practical Implications

The practical significance of this study is closely tied to the core demands of the aging response and public service reform. First, to break the homogenization dilemma of elderly care services. "Reverse embedding" is the core cause of the lack of personalization and innovation in service content. The governance structure optimization plan proposed in this paper can provide theoretical guidance for improving the precision and quality of elderly care services and directly respond to the demands of the active aging strategy. Second, optimize the implementation effect of government purchase policies. At present, there are problems in government purchasing, such as "emphasizing procurement over governance" and "emphasizing form over effect" (Jing Yijia, 2014). Based on theoretical analysis, this paper clarifies key influencing factors such as policy design, government implementation, and the capacity of social organizations, and provides systematic suggestions for central and local governments to optimize purchasing policies.¹⁵ Third, cultivate the sustainable development capacity of social organizations. Reverse embedding leads social organizations into a vicious cycle of "administrative attachment-degradation of professional competence". The strategies proposed in this paper, such as diversified funding and guarantee of professional autonomy, can provide theoretical guidance for social organizations to break through development predicaments and enhance professional competence. Fourth, it provides cross-disciplinary references. The risk of reverse embedding is not unique to elderly care services; it is also widespread in areas such as education and healthcare. The analytical framework and governance logic of this paper can be transferred to other areas to help improve the overall quality of public services.

7.3 Research Limitations and Future Prospects

This paper, as a theoretical and constructive study, has the following limitations, which are also important directions for future research. First, the concept of "reverse embedding" and the four-tier analytical framework proposed in this paper have not been systematically empirically tested. Future research can verify and revise the framework through case studies or quantitative analysis.

Second, this paper focuses on the elderly care service scenario to propose an analytical framework, and future research can be extended to other public service areas such as education, healthcare, and community governance to test the external validity of the framework. Third, this paper mainly constructs the framework based on the bilateral relationship between the government and social organizations. Future research could further incorporate the subjectivity perspective of service recipients to explore how the participation of service users affects the degree of their reverse embedding and governance effect. Fourth, the "duality" impact of digital technology on reverse embedding is only a conceptual analysis in this paper, and future research can conduct more in-depth theoretical and empirical studies in combination with specific technology governance scenarios.

¹⁵ 敬义嘉.从购买服务到合作治理——政社合作的形态与发展[J].中国行政管理,2014,(07):54-59.



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