Power Balance, Institutionalization, and the Governance of Serendipitous Networks—Evidence from Neighborhood Governance in Beijing

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Abstract

Research on network governance has primarily focused on "goal-directed" networks, leaving the governance of serendipitous networks underexplored. Drawing on resource dependence theory and institutional theory, this paper proposes a new framework to explain the formation of different governance structures. It identifies the balance of power and the degree of institutionalization as key variables shaping organizational interactions, leading to distinct governance structures. Using evidence from neighborhood governance networks in Beijing, the study demonstrates how the interplay between power dynamics and institutionalization gives rise to four governance structures: shared governance, inertial governance, insurgent coalition domination, and lead organization governance. This research advances our understanding of serendipitous network governance and offers new insights into the reciprocal relationship between power and institutionalization.

Keywords: serendipitous networks, power balance, institutionalization, neighborhood governance

Equilibrio de poder, institucionalización y gobernanza de redes fortuitas: evidencia de la gobernanza vecinal en Beijing

Resumen

La investigación sobre gobernanza de redes se ha centrado principalmente en las redes orientadas a objetivos, dejando poco explorada la gobernanza de las redes fortuitas. Basándose en la teoría de la dependencia de recursos y la teoría institucional, este artículo propone un nuevo marco para explicar la formación de diferen-

tes estructuras de gobernanza. Identifica el equilibrio de poder y el grado de institucionalización como variables clave que configuran las interacciones organizacionales, dando lugar a distintas estructuras de gobernanza. Utilizando evidencia de las redes de gobernanza vecinal en Pekín, el estudio demuestra cómo la interacción entre la dinámica de poder y la institucionalización da lugar a cuatro estructuras de gobernanza: gobernanza compartida, gobernanza inercial, dominio de la coalición insurgente y gobernanza de la organización líder. Esta investigación profundiza en nuestra comprensión de la gobernanza de redes fortuitas y ofrece nuevas perspectivas sobre la relación recíproca entre poder e institucionalización.

Palabras clave: redes fortuitas, equilibrio de poder, institucionalización, gobernanza vecinal

权力平衡、制度化与"自发性网络"治理——来自北京社区治理的证据

摘要

网络治理研究主要聚焦于"目标导向"网络，而"自发性网络"（serendipitous networks）治理尚未得到充分探究。基于资源依赖理论和制度理论，本文提出一项新框架来解释不同治理结构的形成。本文将权力平衡和制度化程度确定为影响组织互动的关键变量，从而产生不同的治理结构。本研究利用北京社区治理网络的证据，展示了权力动态和制度化之间的相互作用如何产生四种治理结构：共享治理、惯性治理、叛乱联盟主导、以及领导组织治理。本研究加深了我们对"自发性网络"治理的理解，并为权力和制度化之间的相互关系提供了新的见解。

关键词：自发性网络，权力平衡，制度化，社区治理

Introduction

Interorganizational networks often involve organizations from the public, business, and nonprofit sectors.

In some networks, these organizations share goals and work together voluntarily, while in others, they may come into play with "different role positions and carry different weights" (Agranoff

& McGuire, 2001, p. 315). With different authorities and resources, organizations in networks may occupy different power positions. Powerful organizations may dominate networks and advance their agenda (Purdy, 2012). Klijn and Teisman (1997) conceptualized the complex interactions between all involved actors as "games" in which actors try to maximize their interests and influence. These games often result in different governance structures in these networks.

The internal governance structure of a network produces a significant effect on its functioning and effectiveness by shaping the allocation of resources and coordination of joint effort (Provan & Kenis, 2008; Raab et al., 2015). Governance structure, sometimes referred to as governance mode, encompasses "the use of institutions and structures of authority and collaboration to allocate resources and to coordinate and control joint action across the network as a whole" (Provan & Kenis, 2008, p. 231). It determines how decisions are made, how resources are allocated, and how conflicts are resolved in networks. Despite its critical importance, early network research often assumed that the structures of governance networks are uniform (Provan & Kenis, 2008). Since then, scholars have deepened our understanding of forms of governance structure and their relationships with network effectiveness. For example, Provan and Kenis (2008) identified three forms of governance structures: shared network governance, lead organization governance, and network administrative organization governance. Subsequent research

has largely focused on how governance structures, particularly network administrative organizations, affect network effectiveness (Saz-Carranza et al., 2016). However, existing literature has primarily focused on the governance structures of "goal-directed" or "purpose-oriented" networks, overlooking the vast number of less structured, serendipitous networks.

Goal-directed networks have relatively clear network-level goals identified and agreed on by network members (Nowell & Milward, 2022). However, in practice, network members often come together not around clear, specific goals but around a broader shared purpose, such as addressing homelessness in a metropolitan area or responding to natural disasters (Carboni et al., 2019). Network purpose is the "collective cognitive construct to close the gap between an observed and a desired condition or satisfy the unrealized needs" (Carboni et al., 2019, p. 212). Recognizing this distinction, scholars have started to use the term "purpose-oriented networks" to describe networks that are oriented towards a common purpose rather than explicit goals (Nowell & Milward, 2022). In contrast, a large number of networks, which are characterized as "serendipitous networks," do not have clear goals or even a common purpose to drive the process of interaction. In serendipitous networks, individual actors make important choices, such as who to connect with or what to transact, without the guidance from any central network agent. Network members "form ties or partnerships based on their own interests" (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003, p. 90).

The distinction between purpose-oriented networks and serendipitous networks has important implications for the governance structures. For example, serendipitous networks, driven by random variation, selection, and retention processes, usually do not have external administrative organizations or even a lead organization to govern these networks. As a result, the governance typologies proposed by Provan and Kenis (2008) may not adequately capture the governance structures of serendipitous networks. Despite their prevalence, little research has explored how such networks are governed. This gap in our understanding is particularly critical given the widespread presence of serendipitous networks in real-world settings.

This paper addresses this gap by proposing a new framework to explain how power dynamics and institutionalization influence the governance structures of serendipitous networks. Drawing on empirical data from neighborhood governance networks in Beijing, China, this study develops four ideal types of governance structures: shared governance, inertial governance, insurgent domination, and lead organization governance. By examining the governance of serendipitous networks, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of network governance beyond goal-directed and purpose-oriented networks.

Neighborhood Governance Networks in Beijing

The empirical context of this study is neighborhood governance networks in Beijing. China's urban neighborhoods used to be firmly controlled by the government in the planned economy era. Street Offices (SOs) were the lowest level of government. Residents' Committees (RCs) were the most basic unit of social organization and were controlled by the SOs. Housing was provided by state-owned enterprises or local governments. The public housing system could hardly keep up with people's increasingly higher standards of living and thus could not be sustained. Housing Reform, an important part of China's overall economic reform, was launched in the late 1990s, and a real estate market was created. Commercially developed neighborhoods have become the main type of neighborhoods in most cities. New types of neighborhood organizations, such as Homeowners' Associations, have become important stakeholders in neighborhood governance, significantly changing the governance of urban neighborhoods.

In China's rapidly growing housing market, urban residents purchase their own homes and have the legal right to form Homeowners' Associations (HOAs) to manage communal properties and protect their property rights. However, weak enforcement of the Property Rights Law allows developers and other entities to exploit communal spaces for financial gain. As a result, while HOAs are legally intended

to play a key role in decision-making regarding communal properties, homeowners often face significant obstacles in establishing them. Even when HOAs are successfully formed, their influence remains severely limited due to a lack of political and economic resources compared to local governments and business interests. China's political system offers citizens few opportunities to vote and provides limited institutional mechanisms for holding local officials accountable. Although homeowners can seek legal recourse to defend their rights, the legal system is often inaccessible to ordinary citizens and vulnerable to manipulation, as demonstrated in one of our cases. Additionally, HOAs typically have far fewer economic resources than developers or property management firms. While they may generate some revenue from property management fees or renting communal spaces, their financial capacity is usually insignificant in comparison. Beyond these structural challenges, limited political engagement opportunities contribute to a lack of democratic experience among homeowners. Many residents exhibit a passive "authoritarian personality," often hesitating to question government decisions or advocate for their collective interests (W. Wang et al., 2017). This further weakens the ability of HOAs to function effectively as representatives of homeowners' rights.

The RCs and the SOs, who used to be the dominant players in neighborhood governance, still have the public authority in these commercial-developed neighborhoods. The RCs, which are supposed to be "self-management, self-education and self-service mass organizations," are actually firmly controlled by Street Offices. They are responsible for a variety of administrative functions, such as family planning and neighborhood safety. Like many other levels of government in China, their primary goal is to maintain social stability. SOs are the lowest level of government in urban areas. Beijing Municipal Bureau of Statistics (2023) showed that, as of 2022, the City of Beijing had 165 SOs overseeing 3,431 RCs. Though SOs usually cover a larger area and may have dozens of neighborhoods, current laws and regulations give SOs a direct role in neighborhood governance. According to the regulation in Beijing, homeowners must form their HOAs under the direction of SOs. They must first establish a preparatory group and then submit a formal letter of application to SOs. SOs then designate the head of the preparatory group, who is usually the director of the RC in the neighborhood. Homeowners also have to submit all their application materials to SOs. Therefore, SOs and RCs have considerable influence over the process of establishing HOAs—they can affect how fast and smooth the entire process goes. Of course, the scope of their authority goes far beyond this—when homeowners have conflicts with developers or property management firms over properties, SOs work as mediators and even arbitrators according to Chinese laws. Therefore, SOs and RCs are very powerful players mainly because of their political authority.

Business organizations, including developers and property manage-

ment firms (PMFs), also play a crucial role in commercially developed neighborhoods. Developers construct properties and sell homes to buyers, and in theory, they should exit these neighborhoods once all units are sold. In practice, however, their interests remain deeply embedded. Weak enforcement of the Property Rights Law provides developers with numerous loopholes to exploit. To maximize profits, developers often exaggerate apartment sizes or leave unresolved construction quality issues. Many also hire their own subsidiary companies as property management firms, imposing high fees that do not match service quality. These PMFs frequently collaborate with developers to conceal construction defects.

Business organizations wield significant economic power. The booming real estate industry in China is highly profitable, enabling developers—both large industry giants and smaller firms—to mobilize substantial financial resources. This economic power can easily translate into political influence. As Lindblom (1977) noted, business interests possess both structural and instrumental power. Their structural power stems from their role as a primary tax base, with local governments in China heavily reliant on real estate development for revenue. Consequently, local governments often form informal pro-growth coalitions with developers (T. Zhang, 2002). Meanwhile, developers' instrumental power arises from bribery and the exchange of interests with local government officials, further entrenching their influence.

The previous governance structure has been changed greatly, with new players actively engaging in neighborhood affairs. Although there have been some laws and regulations on the legitimate roles of these players and their relations, these laws are either incomplete or not well enforced. In many cases, common understandings of roles and interorganizational relationships have not been reached. Government, business, and civic organizations have diverse institutional logics, interests, goals, and sources of legitimacy in neighborhood affairs, and they actively participate in these affairs in order to maximize their interests. Although these organizations operate within neighborhoods, they are driven by their own interests rather than a shared goal or purpose. They form ties primarily to advance their own influence, resulting in serendipitous networks. Neighborhood governance in China is highly spontaneous and loosely structured, making it an ideal setting to study how different governance structures emerge within such networks.

The transformation of neighborhood governance in China has drawn significant scholarly attention, particularly regarding the role of homeowners as a new and influential actor in neighborhood governance. Researchers have examined various aspects of homeowners' participation, from their impact on democratic engagement to their role in shaping power dynamics at the neighborhood level. Several studies highlight the role of homeowners' participation in governance. Wang, Li, and Cooper (2017) found that involve-

ment in neighborhood affairs helps homeowners develop democratic skills, increase awareness of property and political rights, and cultivate a stronger sense of community. From a coproduction perspective, Zhang and Li (2024) demonstrated that homeowners are more likely than nonowners to report public service complaints to the government, thereby contributing to improved neighborhood governance. This tendency is likely driven by homeowners' greater knowledge of government processes and their motivation to protect property values. Another stream of research explores the effectiveness of homeowners' associations (HOAs) in representing homeowners' interests. Studies suggest that factors such as the level of homeowner participation in neighborhood affairs significantly influence an HOA's ability to advocate for residents (Guan & Liu, 2021; F. Wang, 2014). Beyond individual homeowner participation, scholars have also examined the broader power shifts in neighborhood governance. Yip and Zheng (2024) analyzed how the emergence of HOAs reshapes power relations at the neighborhood level, revealing its political implications.

While these studies offer valuable insights into the role of homeowners, they largely adopt an actor-based perspective, focusing on individual or organizational agency. What remains missing is a network perspective—one that views governance as a dynamic system of interdependent actors, including government agencies, community organizations, private businesses, and citizens, who collaborate, negotiate, and compete to shape policies and manage local issues. Given the widespread application of the network perspective in urban governance research (Blanco, 2013; Da Cruz et al., 2019; Davidson et al., 2019), this gap is particularly striking and warrants further exploration.

Research Design and Data Collection

This paper employs the comparative case method as the major research design. Since the major objective was to study the governance structure in each neighborhood governance network, the unit of analysis is the network. The success of the comparative case method depends on obtaining cases that vary in governance structures so that meaningful comparisons can be conducted. The relative frequency distribution of each governance structure is not important (Ragin, 2009). King, Keohane, and Verba (1994) argued that random sampling might worsen the problem of selection bias in small-N studies. Therefore, this research adopted snowball sampling in order to get cases that varied in their governance structures. Through the director of a local nonprofit organization specializing in homeowners' rights protection in Beijing, I was able to connect with the first seven neighborhoods located in different parts of Beijing. I visited each of them and then asked them to recommend neighborhoods with similar or different governance structures. I stopped data collection after visiting 22 neighborhoods because I felt that I had reached the point of data sat-

uration (Small, 2009). Additional cases provided little new information on governance structures or power dynamics at that point. Different types of cases allowed me to compare the interorganizational power relations and degree of institutionalization and see how these differences give rise to different modes of governance structures.

My research methods are qualitative. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of inter-organizational power relations and institutionalization, I conducted interviews with homeowner activists, government officials from both RCs and SOs, and property management firm executives. Each interview lasted 90-120 minutes. In order to collect network data, I asked interviewees to nominate the organizations that they often collaborated with on neighborhood affairs. The nomination was then verified in subsequent interviews. If there were inconsistencies, I asked interviewees to clarify how they collaborated and determined whether it counted as a collaborative relationship. Since collaboration is mutual in nature, in the end, 22 symmetrical collaborative networks were constructed based on the network data. Network data analysis was conducted by using UCINET. I also used participant observation to collect data. I attended HOAs' meetings to collect information on their governance, their relationships with other players in neighborhood governance, and other issues to answer the above research questions.

Theoretical Framework

How can we understand the interactions of organizations in serendipitous networks, which may further affect the internal governance structures of these networks? Given the lack of a common purpose or a clear goal, organizations are driven by their interests (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003). Klijn and Teisman (1997) characterized the situation like this as "games" in which actors try to maximize their interests and influence. Whether or not organizations succeed in advancing their interests, however, is likely to be influenced by their power relative to other network members, and whether collaboration is institutionalized as the legitimate way of conducting business.

Power has long been recognized as an important variable in explaining inter-organizational interactions (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001; Choi & Robertson, 2014; Emerson, 1962; Gray & Hay, 1986). Benson (1975) argues that interactions between organizations must be explained ultimately at the level of resource acquisition. Emerson (1962) developed a novel idea of the source of power—he argued that power resides in the other's dependency: the power of A over B is equal to the dependence of B on A. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) further developed this exchange-based view of power into a theory of resource dependence in order to analyze inter-organizational power and organizations' management of their environments. This theory generally argues that organizations that have critical resources that are not available from

anywhere else will have more power over dependent organizations, and they thus may take advantage of their power when interacting with others. Hardy and Phillips (1998) developed a broader view of power and identified three sources of inter-organizational power—formal authority, control of critical resources, and discursive legitimacy. Formal authority refers to "the recognized, legitimate right to make a decision" (p. 219); for example, government agencies usually enjoy this form of power. The control of critical resources becomes one source of power due to the dependence of other organizations on these resources, which is consistent with resource dependence theory. Resources may include money, personnel, information, or technologies that can be used to influence other organizations. Organizations with discursive legitimacy have power because they are considered to have the expertise and legitimacy to speak about a specific issue. For example, Greenpeace is often considered to have discursive legitimacy in environmental issues. These different sources are not mutually exclusive, and one organization may possess authority, resources, and discursive legitimacy simultaneously. This broader view of power provides a more fine-grained framework to analyze power relations in organizational domains.

Agranoff and McGuire (2001) argued that power should be the center of any general network management theory because it has important implications for the patterns of interactions in networks. A balanced power distribution is favorable for interest repre-

sentation, deliberation, and achieving cooperative participation (Choi & Robertson, 2013; Hardy & Phillips, 1998). In contrast, imbalanced power distribution may lead to a number of negative outcomes. Powerful organizations with more authority, resources, or discursive legitimacy may use their power to exclude certain stakeholders, silence different voices, and advance their own interests. Organizations in weaker power positions may take different measures to mitigate power imbalances. Emerson (1962) maintained that organizations may reduce their dependence on a certain organization by exploring alternative sources of resources or by building coalitions with others to change the relative distribution of resources. Hardy and Phillips (1998) proposed four strategies that organizations can use in their engagement with other organizations: collaboration, compliance, contestation, and contention. For example, in the UK refugee system, the Refugee Legal Center became a separate organization because of government support and also received funding from the government, so it chose "compliance" as its strategy to interact with the government.

The use of power to advance interests in networks, however, is not unchecked. Network members' values, norms, beliefs, and taken-for-granted assumptions, particularly whether they accept collaboration as the appropriate or legitimate way of doing things, affect the use or effectiveness of power. Institutional theory recognizes that organizations are embedded in an "institutional" context that prescribes appropriate and

socially legitimate ways of doing things (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Greenwood et al., 2014). Institutions structure our behaviors, lead us to interpret the world in certain ways, and, more importantly, shape our understanding of what the "legitimate" ways of doing things are (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Phillips et al., 2000). The institutional context exerts profound influence over organizational forms and structures, the diffusion of innovation, and organizational survival (Kennedy & Fiss, 2009; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983; Westphal et al., 1997).

Institutional theory gives us a fresh perspective on collaborative governance as a new institution. The institutionalization of collaborative governance is defined as the wide acceptance of collaborations between governments, businesses, and nonprofit organizations as a legitimate way of governing complex modern societies. The past few decades have witnessed the gradual hollowing out of the state and the transformation from government to governance in response to a wide range of societal changes (Milward & Provan, 2000; Rhodes, 1997). Contextual change provides opportunities and incentives for organizations to question rather than replicate scripted patterns of behaviors (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). People may question the ineffective or inefficient government-centered approach of governing and start to regard cross-sector collaboration as the standard approach to tackle the so-called "wicked problems"—for example, we have reached the point where "it is difficult to imagine successfully addressing global problems, such as the AIDS pandemic or terrorism, and domestic concerns, such as the educational achievement gap between income classes and races, without some sort of cross-sector understanding, agreement, and collaboration" (Bryson et al., 2006).

In any specific cases of collaboration, the degree of institutionalization may vary. The reason is that collaboration happens in a context where various aspects of it need to be negotiated, including the definition of the problem, the appropriate roles and scope of an organization, and the legitimate responses to the problem (Benson, 1975; Phillips et al., 2000; Thomson & Perry, 2006). The negotiations may lead to institutionalization because they touch on fundamental and complex issues and thus may give rise to new rules, norms, and understandings (Lawrence et al., 2002). Although through repeated interactions, organizations may reach shared understandings of these critical aspects of collaboration and develop common rules regarding problem and role definitions, these practices and behavioral patterns are not equally institutionalized (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). The degree of institutionalization may depend on "how long an institution has been in place and on how widely and deeply it is accepted by members of a collective" (Barley & Tolbert, 1997, p. 96). Lawrence et al. (2002) argued that collaboration has institutional effects because it facilitates the structuration process described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983): The intensity of inter organizational interactions increases, coalitions can form, information can be

exchanged, and mutual awareness of involvement can develop.

Lowly institutionalized collaboration may have a high possibility of internal conflicts, especially when organizations come from different sectors. They may act on their own knowledge or scripts, which are deeply influenced by the institutional logic of their sectors in the process of institutionalization (Alexander, 1998; Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Phillips et al., 2000). Member organizations have not yet reached a common understanding of key aspects such as problem definitions, the appropriate roles and scope of an organization, coordination procedures, and interorganizational relationships. Without sufficient negotiations to reconcile these different institutional logics, conflicts may ensue. The lack of wide support and legitimacy in these key aspects of collaboration may cause a number of problems. For example, different problem definitions imply different solutions and stakeholders. Black and Rose (2002) studied the case of the mental health community and found that an organization attempted to redefine the mental health problem as a social problem rather than a "disease" as it is conventionally defined. This new definition clearly implied a new solution and needed to incorporate new stakeholders, greatly changing the existing distribution of resources and power in the domain. Even if there are clear definitions of the problem and who should be involved, consensus on the proper roles of each participant is also critical. Clear definitions of the role and position of an organization in a domain directly af-

fect its resources. Benson (1975) pointed out that "authority and money flow to an agency on the basis of its sphere of activities—services provided, clients served, and so forth" (p. 236). Conflicts will arise if an organization's sphere of activities is encroached upon by other organizations.

A Typology of Governance Structure

Based on my fieldwork and the theoretical framework outlined above, two dimensions, the balance of power and the degree of institutionalization, were identified as two critical factors that may affect interactions between organizations and governance structures. The degree of institutionalization describes the degree to which members of governance networks have reached common understandings of problem definition, the roles of each member, and the direction(s) to go. Based on DiMaggio and Powell (1983), three indicators were used to evaluate the degree of institutionalization of collaborative networks. The first indicator is role definition, which assesses whether organizations have been founded to take their legally defined roles in neighborhood governance. The second indicator is role acceptance, which evaluates the degree to which organizations respect role definitions and accept other organizations to fulfill their respective roles. The third indicator is the density of relationships, which measures how closely organizations share information and work together. We would expect that in high-institution-

alized neighborhoods, through repeated negotiations, governance structures, and inter-organizational relationships are clearly defined and widely accepted. The governance structures thus enjoy high legitimacy, and the possibility of inter-organizational conflicts is low. The balance of power describes the degree to which the distribution of power in a network is balanced. The analysis will consider three sources of power: authority, resources, and discursive legitimacy (Hardy & Phillips, 1998), as well as organizations' capabilities to use these sources of power to their advantage. We would generally expect that if power is balanced in a neighborhood network, organizations are more likely to compromise with one another in order to solve conflicts; in contrast, some organizations may dominate neighborhood governance if power is highly unbalanced. The interactions between the two dimensions thus give rise to a 2×2 typology of governance structures, as Figure 2.1 shows.
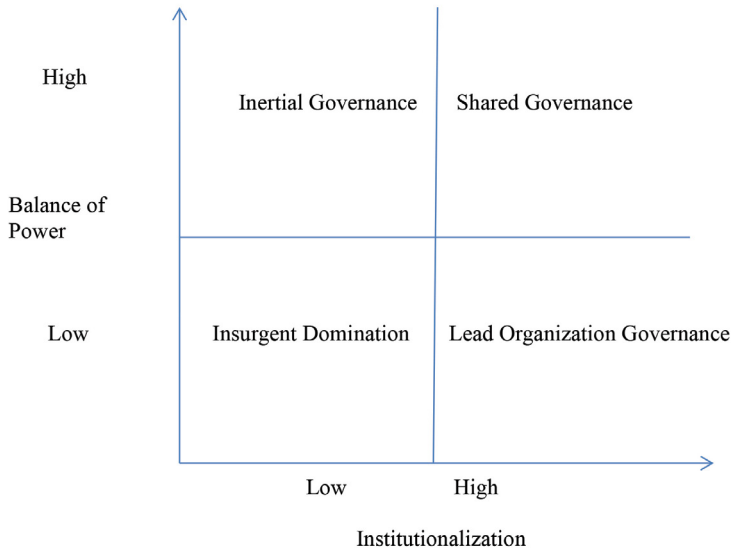

Figure 1. A Typology of Internal Governance Structures

Shared Governance (High power balance, high degree of institutionalization)

If power is relatively balanced in an interorganizational network, meaning that the distribution of authority, resources, and discursive legitimacy is roughly even, then it is hard to exclude any organizations in the governance of these networks, and each organization has the opportunity to participate. In the meantime, if these organizations also have a high degree of consensus on problem definition, the roles of each organization, and the future directions of collaboration, the possibility of conflicts may be low, and each organization will take on what they need to do. Under these conditions, a shared governance structure may emerge.

The Shang-Di neighborhood is a good case of shared governance. This neighborhood was developed soon after China's Housing Reform and was one of the first few commercially developed neighborhoods in Beijing. This project was just one of the many projects that the developer, a large state-owned real estate development firm, built. This project was not a major source of revenue, and the developer pulled out of the neighborhood soon after all units were sold. Therefore, the developer did not use its economic resources to gain influence or power in this neighborhood. All members of the RC were also property owners, so they were very supportive of establishing the HOA. The SO did not set too many obstacles either, so the political authority did not become a major barrier. Led by some visionary homeowners who were lawyers, scholars, and high-level managers in multinational companies, homeowners soon established one of the first few HOAs in Beijing. They also did several experiments, including establishing a monitoring committee to monitor the work of the HOA, to enhance the organizational capacity. The HOA firmly held the position as the legitimate representative of homeowners in the governance network. They used a bidding process to hire a property management firm to provide property management services. Public, business, and civic organizations had relatively equal power in this network, and no organization had the power to exclude or marginalize others.

In addition, organizations effectively negotiated their roles and responsibilities, developing a mutual under-standing and respect for each other's domains. For example, unlike some Residents' Committees who saw HOAs as a competitor and trouble, the director of their RC told me that:

> *"Some people hold a negative view of HOAs, thinking that they messed things up. Some say they are different from us (RC), (but) I don't think so. I think they are similar to us. HOAs are established because people need them. I think HOA members bring us some fresh air. For example, Mr. Guo (HOA director) is a professional manager, and he shares with me some good management experience… We want (all organizations) to use each other's strengths and work together to make things better."*

Similarly, Mr. Guo, the HOA director, stated that the HOA and RC had a good working relationship, although they did not agree on everything:

> *"The HOA and RC complement each other: sometimes the RC takes the initiative to do something that they are not supposed to do, (in this circumstance) I usually take a step back; of course, when they fail to do what is supposed to, I will take the lead."*

The property manager also had a very clear understanding of their role:

> *"Legally, we are the service provider, and the HOA is the service receiver. As the provider, we listen to their needs. As a property*

management firm, our responsibility is to serve the homeowners. Of course, we serve for fees. Sometimes, when problems arise and do not cost too much, I ask my boss if we should use our money and labor to solve the problems. My main objective is to do our job well."

As DiMaggio and Powell (1983) pointed out, another indicator of high institutionalization is the increase in the extent of interaction among organizations in the field. A network analysis was conducted, and the density score of the network was 1, suggesting that every organization cooperated with everyone else.

As the above discussion indicates, the relative balance of power in this network made it possible for all members to participate. A high degree of institutionalization led all organizations to focus on what they were supposed to do. As a result, a shared governance structure was formed, as Figure 2 indicates. The network had a high-density score of 1 and a low centralization score of 0, suggesting it was a completely decentralized network. In this neighborhood, organizations respected each other and collaborated effectively. For example, the HOA always invited leaders from the RC and the property management firm to attend their regular meetings in order to enhance mutual understanding.
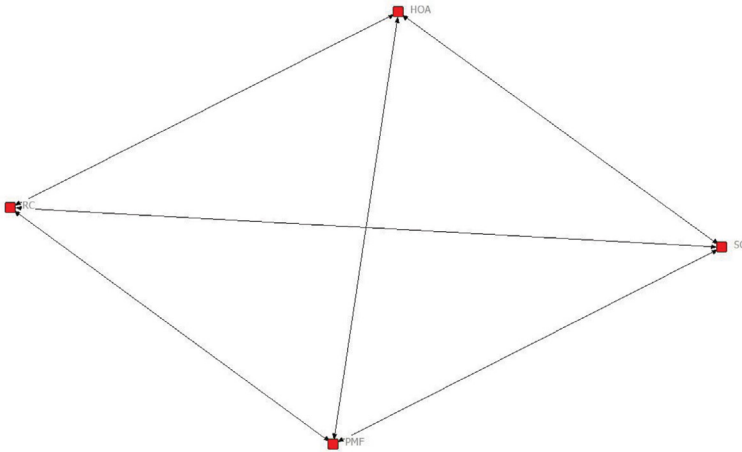

Figure 2. The Network of Shang-Di Neighborhood

Inertial governance (High power balance, low degree of institutionalization)

A second governance structure is inertial governance, which arises when power is balanced but the degree of institutionalization is low. Under this circumstance, the distribution of power, which may come from different sources, is relative even. All organizations have the opportunity to participate. However, the definitions of problems and the roles and scopes of

each organization are not well negotiated or accepted. The lack of common understanding means that the legitimacy of the governance structures is relatively low. Organizations may thus have conflicts with one another. However, the relatively even distribution of power makes it very difficult for any organization to impose its preferences on other organizations. As a result, organizations are often unable to act solely based on what they believe is right or necessary. This may lead to disengagement or minimal effort in collaboration.

Feng-Dan neighborhood was a case in point. It was a high-end neighborhood with both apartment buildings and single-home houses. The power distribution in the neighborhood was relatively balanced, and no organization had the capability to exclude others. Some homeowners who owned single-home houses were high-level government officials and had powerful political connections. Therefore, homeowners successfully established their HOAs in 2005 with minimal resistance from the RC or SO. The HOA became the legal representative of homeowners and successfully hired a property management firm through bidding. However, as time went by, many HOA members lost their commitments to their HOAs, and the HOA became weaker and weaker in terms of organizational capacity. Although the RC and SO did not obstruct homeowners from establishing their HOA, they later stepped in to fill the vacuum left by its weakness, gradually playing a more influential role in the neighborhood. The property management firm was hired by the HOA, but they had the expertise and economic resources to manage properties and even to evade the HOA's monitoring. The property management firm even challenged the weaker HOA frequently after being hired.

The degree of institutionalization was low in this network, especially regarding the roles of each organization. First, homeowners themselves were not clear about the role of the HOA, which, to some degree, weakened the organizational capacity of the HOA. The HOA failed to serve as the legal representative of homeowners. For example, as one HOA member said: *"Our HOA could not work because people have very different opinions. We could not hold any meetings because people keep quarreling (in these meetings)."* When asked why the property management firm dared to challenge the HOA, given that it was hired by the HOA, the interviewee explained, *"This has nothing to do with the fact that they were hired by us. Our HOA is too weak. We do not have a consensus; internally, homeowners have too many different opinions."* Second, even if the property management firm and the local government understood their roles, in many cases, they did not do what they were supposed to do, and sometimes they intentionally engaged in extra-role behaviors. For example, decision-making regarding property management and hiring property management firms should be the HOA's responsibility, and the RC and SO only had a vague legal role in facilitating this process. The SO, however, managed to manipulate the bidding process and hired a property management firm that was ranked

third or fourth by homeowners. Unlike the one in the Shang-Di neighborhood, the property management firm did not see itself merely as a service provider and, therefore, did not feel obligated to listen to homeowners' needs. One HOA member complained that the management firm charged high management fees but failed to fulfill their responsibilities:

> "We told them that homeowners were not satisfied with their work, but they simply did not listen to us. In their eyes, we (HOA) are just nothing…we are really pathetic. It is like we should kneel ourselves to beg them to work: please do your job, and you can charge as much money as you want."

Another indicator of the low degree of institutionalization was the low-density score of 0.583, which showed that only 58.3% of all possible collaborative relationships existed in this network. The organizations were not collaborating closely with one another, resulting in an inertial governance structure. Figure 2.3 shows the network structure.

In this neighborhood, although conflicts between organizations may arise due to the low degree of institutionalization, the relatively balanced power structure reduces the possibility or severity of conflicts. As much as some organizations wanted to impose their problem or role definitions on others, they did not have the power to do so. For example, even though the SO once manipulated the bidding process, it could not completely marginal-ize the HOA on neighborhood affairs. The relatively balanced power structure created a deadlock in this network. Organizations gradually lost interest in collaborating with one another. They exerted only minimal effort to fulfill their responsibilities or cooperate with one another, resulting in the so-called collaboration inertia (Huxham & Vangen, 2000). Benson (1975, p. 235) argued that this type of non-cooperative network is frequently encountered because "none can muster power sufficient to dictate terms to the others."

Insurgent Domination (low balance of power, low degree of institutionalization)

Imbalanced power distribution and low institutionalization can give rise to a third type of governance structure: insurgent domination. Research suggests that asymmetrical power relations within a network can lead to various issues, such as the exclusion of certain members and the marginalization of diverse perspectives (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001). In such networks, powerful organizations often dominate governance and may even form coalitions to consolidate their advantage (Cook, 1977). Low institutionalization exacerbates power struggles in these imbalanced networks, as organizations lack a shared understanding of the core issues and their respective roles. However, this lack of structure does not disadvantage everyone; some organizations exploit vague problem definitions and role ambiguity to engage in extra-role behaviors that serve their interests. One
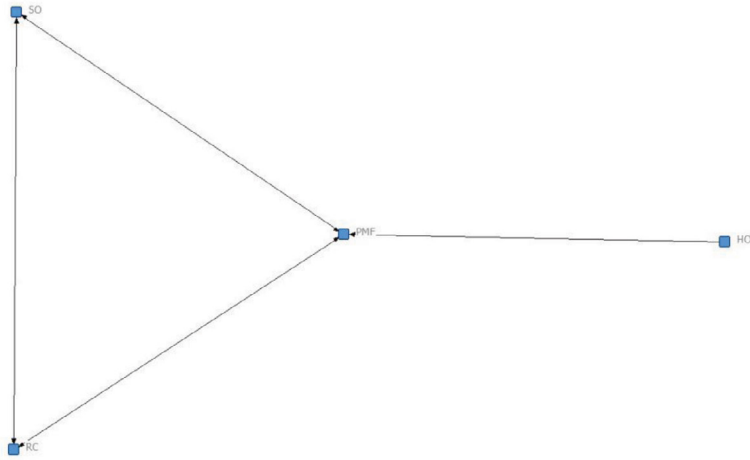
Figure 3. The Network of Feng-Dan Neighborhood

key strategy for these insurgent organizations is to form coalitions, securing their dominance and entrenching a governance structure that is difficult to dismantle. While powerful organizations can coerce weaker ones into accepting their terms, the major flaw of this governance model is its fundamental lack of legitimacy.

Rong-Feng exemplifies insurgent domination. In this case, the developer was a small firm with no established track record in real estate development. Consequently, it depended heavily on the revenues generated from this neighborhood, reinforcing its drive to maintain control. To maximize their revenue, the developer established a subsidiary company to take charge of property management in Rong-Feng. They charged high property management fees while providing inferior services. The developer also sold homeowners' communal properties for tens of millions without giving homeowners any compensation. To maintain the revenues, the developer used its econom-

ic resources and political connections to influence local governments' decision-making. The RC and SO had the political authority to at least help homeowners protect their communal properties, but they chose to work closely with the developer. The reasons were, first, the RC occupied 300 square meters of office space that was homeowners' communal property; second, the developer had powerful political connections in higher-level governments. Though homeowners were led by some experienced activists, they were much weaker and had almost no economic or political resources compared with business and government organizations.

To make things worse, the degree of institutionalization was very low in this neighborhood. The imbalanced power dynamics undermined any basis for negotiating roles and interorganizational relationships. The developer and property management firm apparently did not see themselves just as service providers because they seriously violated homeowners' property rights.

Homeowners wanted to establish their HOA in order to better represent their interests and protect their property rights. However, the RC and SO were not cooperative partly because of their fundamentally different problem definitions from homeowners'. They saw homeowners' organizing as a threat to social stability. For example, one official at the SO told me:

> "The HOA is a good thing, but it is not very compatible with the contemporary Chinese political system. People in high-end neighborhoods are better because they can accept this. In some other neighborhoods, it's OK if you don't tell these homeowners. Once you tell them that these (communal) properties are theirs, then they want these properties, but they did not know how to orderly claim and use these properties… Social stability is gone."

This government official clearly saw stability as a priority and worried that homeowners' organizing may cause instability. One interviewee at the Rong-Feng neighborhood told me that:

> "The government always held us up whenever we took one step forward. Once I went to the SO, the deputy director said, 'This homeowner from Rong-Feng came to create troubles again.' They could not care less about our interests."

The fundamental difference in problem definition became another source of conflicts between homeowners and local governments, making it even harder for homeowners to gain governments' support. Both the business interests and local governments benefited from violating homeowners' property rights. Therefore, neither of them had the incentive to clarify the roles of each organization or seek an agreement on problem and role definitions that all parties could accept. Instead, they formed a coalition in order to gain absolute power over homeowners. Homeowners, who were the legitimate property owners, were too weak to effectively challenge the coalition. They were thus excluded from the governance of their neighborhood. "Insurgent" organizations with little legitimacy dominated, resulting in this insurgent domination governance structure. As Figure 2.4 shows, there were clearly two cliques of organizations in the network. One was made up of the business interest and local governments, including the developer, property management firm, the RC, and the SO. The other clique comprised the HOA and its consultant firm. The network density score was only 0.47, which was much lower than the density scores of the previous two networks.

Lead Organization Governance (low balance of power, high degree of institution)

The last governance structure is lead organization governance, which is formed under the conditions of low balance of power and high degree of institutionalization. As the above discussion suggests, asymmetrical power relationships are like-
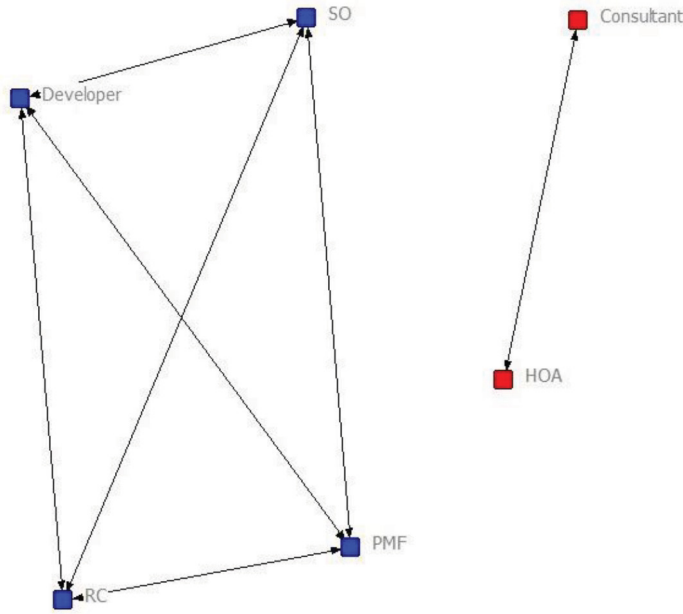
Figure 4. The Network of Rong-Feng Neighborhood

ly to cause powerful organizations to dominate network governance. However, a high degree of institutionalization and shared understanding of role and problem definitions may check the use of power and keep powerful organizations from infringing upon others' sphere of activities. Therefore, powerful organizations may have significant influence in a network, but they usually do not impose their problem and role definitions on weaker organizations. The governance structure has a high degree of legitimacy.

Chao-Yang Garden had this lead organization governance structure. Chao-Yang Garden was developed by a Hong Kong developer soon after China's housing reform in 1998. It was a high-end neighborhood that had been originally developed for foreigners in Beijing. The developer pulled out of the

neighborhood after all units were sold and maintained little influence in the neighborhood. The RC and SO had the political authority to monitor the HOA, but they could not benefit much from engaging in neighborhood affairs. They thus chose to be neutral. The HOA was established in 2001 and was one of the first few HOAs in Beijing. As the representative of homeowners, the HOA was led by some experienced activists and had been working well since it was founded. The HOA successfully hired property management firms on its terms through bidding processes and designed a good mechanism to share revenues with property management firms. The HOA had the upper hand in its relationship with the property management firm. With plenty of economic resources, the HOA hired a full-time secretary to take care of daily affairs. In this neighborhood, the HOA was the

most powerful organization with both economic resources and discursive legitimacy. The HOA even declined RC's request for some funding to support cultural activities, citing that this was not the HOA's responsibility.

This network was highly institutionalized, with clearly defined roles, problem definitions, and interorganizational relationships. The RC and SO recognized that the HOA was solely responsible for property-related decisions and chose not to intervene, instead focusing on their own responsibilities, such as delivering social services. The property management firm, hired by the influential HOA, also had a clear understanding of its role. Viewing itself as a service provider and the HOA as its employer, the firm maintained full financial transparency and worked closely with homeowners. As the representative of homeowners, the HOA held well-organized regular meetings to make property management decisions. Figure 2.5 illustrates this network's high level of collaboration, reflected in a density score of 0.73, indicating strong interorganizational cooperation.

Although the figure cannot show the power relations between organizations, my fieldwork suggested the HOA played a central role. It controlled not only discursive legitimacy but also considerable economic resources, which made it the most powerful player in the network. However, it did not infringe upon others' sphere of activities or impose its problem and role definitions on others. It generally respected other organizations but firmly defended its legal roles. Compared with the above-mentioned "insurgent domination" governance structure, this governance structure also has an imbalanced power structure; however, one key difference is that the high degree of institutionalization becomes an institutional force that helps to regulate how organizations interact with each other and stop the most powerful one from infringing upon others' sphere. This type of governance is accepted by organizations and has legitimacy.

Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on resource dependence theory and institutional theory and based on neighborhood governance networks in Beijing, this paper develops a new framework to explain how different types of governance structures are formed. The balance of power and degree of institutionalization are two important variables that affect how organizations interact with one another, resulting in four different governance structures: shared governance, inertial governance, insurgent coalition domination, and lead organization governance. Table 1 presents a summary of the four neighborhood governance networks representing four types of governance structures. The balance of power determines who can participate in neighborhood governance, but the degree of institutionalization checks and balances the use of power. Shared governance and lead organization governance exhibit higher levels of network density, suggesting a healthy level of collaboration among organizations.
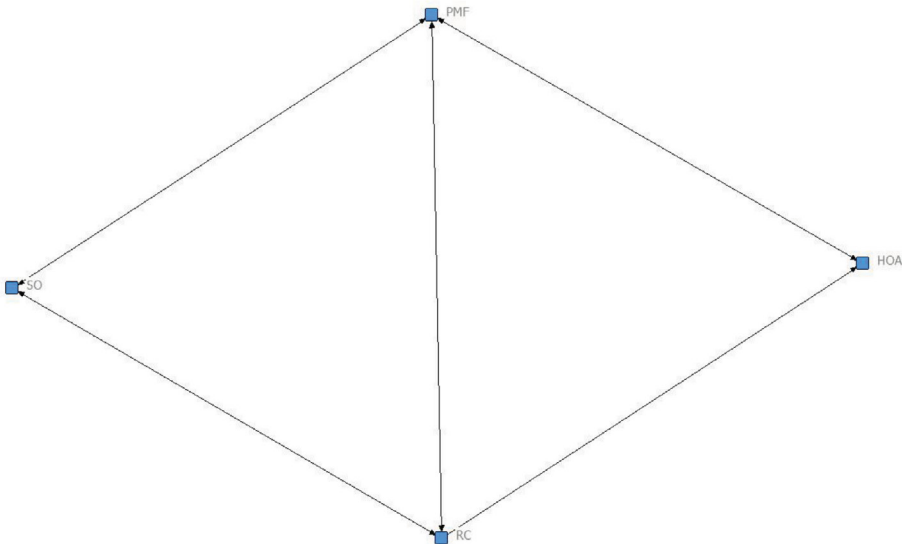
Figure 5. The Network of Chao-Yang Garden

Table 1. A summary of four governance structures

Neighborhood Name	Power balance	Institutionalization	Network density	Governance structure
Shang-Di	Balanced	High	1	Shared Governance
Feng-Dan	Balanced	Low	0.583	Inertial Governance
Rong-Feng	Imbalanced	Low	0.47	Insurgent Domination
Chao-Yang Garden	Imbalanced	High	0.73	Lead organization governance

One key contribution of this paper is that it deepens our understanding of the governance structures of serendipitous networks. The governance structure of serendipitous networks is a surprisingly understudied area (Provan & Kenis, 2008). Serendipitous networks are more common in the real world than goal-directed networks, yet they are often left unstudied in the public administration literature. Provan and

Kenis (2008) studied the governance structure of goal-directed networks, but their typology may not work for serendipitous networks in which the network change is primarily driven by serendipity (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003). Organizations usually interact with others on the basis of their interests and take a "tit-for-tat" strategy. The behaviors of organizations are not planned and are affected by various circumstances. Therefore, the

framework developed in this paper may deepen our understanding of how organizations interact with one another in serendipitous settings and fill a critical gap in the current literature. It may provide building blocks for further theoretical development.

Another contribution of this paper is that it furthers the research on the relationship between power and the institutionalization process. Previous research has studied the relationship between power and institutionalization (Phillips et al., 2000). The basic argument is that the rules, interpretations and problem definitions of powerful members are more likely to be institutionalized (Phillips et al., 2000). Some scholars went so far as to argue that institutionalization is a political process that reflects the interests of powerful members (Maguire et al., 2004; Seo & Creed, 2002). Despite its theoretical insight, this argument ignores the possible effect of institutionalization on power dynamics. This research studies different modes in which power may interact with the institutionalization process and highlights a reciprocal relationship: a high degree of institutionalization may also serve as a check to power use. The shared normative beliefs about the roles and scopes of each organization, as well as taken-for-granted assumptions, may force organizations to conform to these normative beliefs and constrain or even stop powerful organizations from infringing upon the sphere of activities of other organizations.

Drawing on institutional theory and resource dependence theory, this research offers valuable practical insights. According to institutional theory, Alexander (1998, p. 349) argued that "actors" knowledge of their social context is the basis for the dual interaction between social structures and action. In other words, actors rely on social knowledge or scripts shaped by their previous institutional logic, and their actions, in turn, influence how they engage with other organizations. This knowledge plays a crucial mediating role in interorganizational dynamics. To institutionalize collaboration as a new governance approach, it is essential to raise awareness among all involved actors. Alexander (1998, p. 349) emphasized the importance of "enlightening potential participants in an interorganizational system with an awareness of their interdependence and revealing to them their potential mutual objectives and common goals." In the context of neighborhood governance in China, RCs and SOs are often deeply influenced by government-driven institutional logic, making it difficult for them to adapt to a collaborative governance model. Raising their awareness of how property rights define the limits of their authority can help shift their perspective, encouraging them to see HOAs as partners rather than challengers. However, education and awareness-raising are not straightforward solutions, nor do they always succeed. As Benson (1975) noted, agreements on collaboration—such as defining problems and roles—are only achievable when an organization does not perceive its interests as being threatened.

Another key practical implication is that the four ideal types of gov-

ernance networks can serve as valuable benchmarks for practitioners assessing their own governance structures. By comparing their neighborhood governance to these models, practitioners can quickly identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement, particularly in terms of power balance and institutionalization. For instance, a balanced distribution of power is a critical factor in fostering meaningful participation in neighborhood governance. From this perspective, homeowners seeking to establish HOAs and local officials aiming to mediate neighborhood conflicts can use these ideal types to evaluate whether power dynamics are skewed and whether adjustments are necessary. If power is overly concentrated in certain organizations, they may need to encourage broader participation or break entrenched alliances to foster a more equitable governance structure. Conversely, if governance is too fragmented or unstructured, forming strategic alliances could help build stability and coordination. By applying these ideal types as diagnostic tools, practitioners can move beyond trial-and-error approaches and instead make more informed, strategic decisions to enhance governance effectiveness and collaboration in their neighborhoods.

This paper also has some limitations. One is that, like all typologies, the four types of governance structures are ideal types, which may not be able to capture all the nuances in reality. In the real world, some neighborhoods may not fit neatly, and their boundaries are more blurred. The typologies developed in this paper are by no means an exhaustive or perfect reflection of all governance structures in reality. The goal is to deepen our understanding of how governance structures are formed from the perspective of power balance and institutionalization. I would argue that this framework is useful in explaining existing governance structures and predicting what structures may arise, but unfortunately, there will be a margin of error, and in some cases, the margin may be significant. Another limitation is that the networks under study were quite small—each network had about 4 to 7 organizations. The relationships between organizations may increase exponentially as more organizations are involved in networks. Large networks may have different patterns of interactions between organizations. Therefore, caution is needed when generalizing the conclusions to larger networks. Third, as a qualitative research, it is hard for this paper to provide "airtight proof for a causal inference" (Odell, 2001, p. 176) due to the fact that this method cannot control all possible causal factors. The strength of this paper is not to establish a causal relationship in any sense but to explore the "mechanisms" through which governance structures arise.

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