Comparative Study on the Path of Building National Communities in China and European Countries from the Perspective of Cultural Identity

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Abstract: In the process of globalization and modernization, the construction of ethnic communities has become a core issue in the governance of multi-ethnic states. This paper, based on cultural identity theory, constructs an analytical framework of "historical memory, value consensus, and symbolic representation" to conduct a comparative study of the paths taken by China and typical European multi-ethnic states in building ethnic communities. The research finds that China has formed a path of cultural identity construction with "plural unity" at its core, characterized by state-led efforts through historical narrative integration, shaping of core values, and innovation in symbolic systems, achieving deep integration of ethnic and national identities. European countries, on the other hand, exhibit characteristics of "citizen integration and plural co-governance," relying on equal cultural rights within institutional frameworks and interactions in the public sphere, but face tensions between cultural pluralism and identity politics. The differences in historical foundations, driving mechanisms, and practical strategies between these two paths essentially reflect the interactive logic between civilizational traditions and modernity aspirations. The study proposes that the construction of ethnic communities in multi-ethnic states should balance cultural diversity and unity, building dynamic consensus in historical inheritance, providing new analytical perspectives for contemporary state governance.

Keywords: cultural identity; national community; pluralism; multiculturalism; state governance

I. Theoretical framework: the construction logic of cultural identity and national community

(1) The core dimension of cultural identity

Cultural identity, as the confirmation and belonging of a group to its own cultural characteristics, is essentially a multi-dimensional system of meaning. [1]It involves individuals or groups' cognition, acceptance, and inheritance of their cultural traits, values, and behavioral norms. It carries the long historical memory and cultural traditions of a nation or group, serving as a spiritual bond connecting the past with the present. Through shared cultural symbols, values, and behavioral norms, it unites individuals into an organic whole, forming a stable social structure. As it evolves with the times and social progress, it not only retains the essence of traditional culture but also absorbs beneficial elements from foreign cultures, demonstrating strong vitality and creativity. From the perspective of the interweaving of diachronic and synchronic perspectives, its core dimensions can be analyzed into three interconnected levels:

First is the dimension of historical memory, which forms the temporal foundation of ethnic identity. The origin narratives, major historical events, and shared experiences in collective memory shape the group's self-awareness through intergenerational transmission. Benedict Anderson points out in Imagined Communities that the nation, as an "imagined community," [2]constructs "deep, horizontal solidarity" through shared historical narratives. This narrative not only includes the remembrance of glorious history but also encompasses the recognition of common suffering, both weaving together to form the temporal bond that sustains group identity.

Second is the dimension of value consensus, which at its core consists of the core values, ethical norms, and behavioral standards universally recognized by members of society. Emile Durkheim emphasized in his discussion of social integration that collective consciousness, as a "moral authority," unites individuals into an organic whole by shaping shared beliefs and emotions[3]. In the context of multi-ethnic states, this value consensus encompasses both national-level values that transcend ethnic differences and common ethical orientations formed through long-term interactions among different ethnic groups, serving as the spiritual adhesive that binds the nation together. These ethical orientations are not only the inheritance and development of traditional moral concepts, but also the acceptance and integration of modern social moral norms. They together constitute the spiritual bond within the national community and enhance the cohesion and centripetal force among members.

Finally, there is the symbolic dimension of culture, which encompasses linguistic, religious, artistic, and customary symbols. These cultural symbols serve as material carriers of identity, possessing both intuitive recognition functions and emotional connections. They are not only external manifestations of cultural diversity but also distinctive markers

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of group identity. These symbols carry rich historical and cultural information and are crucial for members within a nation to recognize and identify with each other. Through these symbols, people can intuitively perceive the cultural characteristics and group affiliations of different ethnicities, thereby forming strong feelings of identification and belonging psychologically[4]. At the same time, these symbols act as bridges connecting the past and future, recording the historical changes and cultural inheritance of the nation, providing a shared spiritual home and emotional anchor for its members. They convey cultural meanings in concrete forms, reinforcing group identity across generations, and serving as cultural labels that help outsiders recognize the group.

(2) The construction path of national community

The essence of building a national community lies in shaping a sense of belonging that transcends local identities on the basis of a pluralistic society. Due to differences in historical traditions, social structures, and paths to modernization, China and European multi-ethnic countries have formed two typical models. China tends to promote the narrative of a community from "spontaneous" to "conscious" through strengthening historical memory, value consensus, and innovative symbolic representation, achieving a cultural identity of unity among diverse ethnic groups. This approach emphasizes finding common historical memories and value pursuits while respecting the differences among ethnic groups, promoting mutual understanding and recognition through education, propaganda, and the construction of public culture. On this foundation, it innovatively integrates traditional elements with modernity to create widely recognized national symbols and cultural markers, enhancing the cohesion and centripetal force of the national community. In contrast, Europe faces the challenge and adjustment of multiculturalism. Under the long-term influence of colonial history and immigration waves, European multi-ethnic countries have developed complex ethnic structures and identity issues. To address this challenge, European countries often focus more on shaping citizenship and adjusting identity politics in the construction of national communities, aiming to build an inclusive civil society while respecting the differences among ethnic groups. However, this process is also accompanied by controversies over symbolic representation and identity dilemmas. How to find a balance between the "melting pot" and the "mosaic" has become a common challenge for European multi-ethnic countries. Specifically, this can be divided into state-led integration models and socially interactive integration models.

One is the state-led integration model, exemplified by China's "Chinese National Community" initiative(fostering a strong sense of the Chinese national community). This model relies on national authority and employs institutional design (such as the system of regional ethnic autonomy), policy guidance (such as activities promoting ethnic unity and progress), and cultural development (such as constructing a unified historical narrative). It aims to foster a shared identity that transcends ethnic boundaries while respecting the diversity of each culture. The core logic is to integrate diverse cultures into a unified national identity framework through comprehensive planning at the national level, achieving an organic unity of "diversity" and "unity."

The second model is the social interaction integration model, exemplified by Europe's "multiculturalism" practices. This model relies on the development of civil society, dialogue in the public sphere, and multicultural policies. It emphasizes forming inclusive common identities through equal interaction and consensus-building among social members, while respecting the cultural rights of minority groups[5]. A key feature is the relatively limited role of the state, which focuses more on ensuring the equal coexistence of cultural differences through institutional safeguards rather than actively constructing a unified cultural narrative. Compared to the state-led integration model, the social interaction integration model places greater emphasis on bottom-up forces, such as autonomous choices and interactions among people in their daily lives. The crux lies in gradually blurring ethnic boundaries through natural integration at the societal level, fostering a shared sense of belonging that transcends ethnic differences. Each model has its strengths, reflecting different approaches and explorations in the construction of national communities in Central Europe.

2. The cultural identity path of the construction of Chinese national community: the historical construction of pluralism and unity

(1) The integration of historical memory: the narrative of community from "autonomous" to "conscious"

The continuity of Chinese civilization provides a unique historical foundation for the national community. Fei Xiaotong's "plural unity" theory profoundly reveals the formation patterns of the Chinese nation. Throughout the long historical process, various ethnic groups have formed a symbiotic relationship characterized by "you come and I go, I come and you go, you in me, me in you" through migration, trade, and intermarriage[6]. This process can be divided into three key stages:

First, the construction of unity in ancient civilizations laid the foundation for cultural integration. The Qin Dynasty's policy of "uniform script and standardized chariot tracks" established the framework of cultural unification at the institutional level for the first time[7]; after the Han Dynasty, Confucianism's concept of "the world as one family"

transcended ethnic boundaries, forming a tradition of distinguishing between Chinese and non-Chinese based on culture, making cultural identity a higher marker than blood ties. This "diverse yet integrated" civilizational pattern provided rich historical resources for the construction of ethnic communities in later generations.

Second, the awakening of modern national consciousness marked a significant turning point in the narrative of the community. After the Opium War, facing the national crisis, thinkers like Liang Qichao were among the first to propose the concept of "Chinese nation," aiming to integrate various ethnic groups within the country and foster a collective identity[8]; during the Anti-Japanese War, the collective memory of "the rise and fall of the nation concerns every individual" was reinforced through countless heroic resistance stories, closely linking the destinies of all ethnic groups and strengthening their emotional attachment to a shared homeland. This period's historical narrative completed the cognitive leap from an "unconscious" community to a "conscious" one.

Third, contemporary China has further deepened the narrative of a shared community. Through ethnic identification projects, unified historical textbook compilation, and museum exhibition design, the history of the 56 ethnic groups is integrated into the grand narrative framework of "the diversity and unity of the Chinese nation." For example, historical textbooks not only document the unique contributions of each ethnic group but also emphasize their mutual exchanges and integration[9]; museums showcase artifacts to vividly demonstrate the mutual learning and integration among ethnic groups in areas such as economy, culture, and art, making the concept of a "community" tangible through perceptible historical experiences.

(2) The shaping of value consensus: the fusion of socialist core values and common ideals

China, through the process of "socialization of national values," has deeply integrated core values into the construction of a national community, achieving comprehensive integration from concept to practice. This process is not only reflected in the reform and innovation of the education system but also deeply rooted in all aspects of daily life. It forms three levels of practical approaches:

First, institutional embedding provides legal safeguards and policy guidance for value consensus. The Constitution explicitly states that "the state maintains and develops the equal, united, mutually supportive, and harmonious relationships among all ethnic groups," incorporating the construction of an ethnic community into the rule of law[10]; policy documents such as the "Implementation Outline for Patriotic Education in the New Era" refine the core socialist values into actionable behavioral guidelines, providing a common value framework for all citizens.

Secondly, practical cultivation involves transforming value concepts into daily recognition through diverse channels. In school education, ethnic unity courses and ideological and political education classes work together to foster students' sense of community from a young age; media dissemination conveys the value of "one big family" through documentaries (such as The Chinese Nation) and public service advertisements[11]; public ceremonies like National Day celebrations and ethnic unity progress award ceremonies reinforce collective memory and value recognition through solemn rituals.

Finally, the formation of developmental consensus relies on shared goals. Since the reform and opening up, visions such as "common prosperity" and "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" have transcended regional and ethnic differences, becoming spiritual banners that unite all ethnic groups; the implementation of national strategies like the "Belt and Road initiative"has strengthened economic interconnectivity and cultural exchange, allowing all ethnic groups to truly feel the interconnected benefits of "shared prosperity," further solidifying the practical foundation of value consensus[12].

(3) Innovation of symbolic symbols: creative integration of traditional elements and modernity

In the construction of symbolic systems, China emphasizes activating traditional cultural genes while endowing them with modern connotations, rejuvenating ancient cultural symbols. For example, traditional festivals such as Spring Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival have been endowed with new contemporary significance, not only becoming moments for family reunions and cultural inheritance but also important platforms for showcasing national images and promoting international exchanges. At the same time, traditional arts like Peking Opera, paper cutting, and calligraphy, through integration with modern technology, such as digital displays and virtual reality experiences, make traditional culture more vivid and intuitive, enhancing the younger generation's sense of identity and pride in traditional culture. Additionally, China actively promotes the modern transformation of elements such as traditional clothing, cuisine, and architecture, infusing traditional culture with new vitality and vigor in modern society. Overall, this forms four dimensions of innovative practices:

On the level of linguistic symbols, the promotion of Mandarin as the national common language has broken down communication barriers between regions, becoming a common tool for ethnic interactions. At the same time, the state has established projects to protect minority languages and scripts, implementing "bilingual education" in ethnic areas, which not only ensures cultural diversity but also promotes overall recognition[13]. This "unified subject, coexisting diversity" language policy achieves a balance between communication efficiency and cultural respect. Additionally, the

state actively promotes the digital protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, transforming traditional crafts, folk stories, music, and dance into digital formats. This not only facilitates preservation and dissemination but also provides more people with the opportunity to access and appreciate these precious cultural legacies. Meanwhile, incorporating elements of traditional culture into public space design, such as urban sculptures, murals, and public art installations, beautifies the urban environment and enhances public awareness and recognition of traditional culture. These innovative practices collectively form an important part of China's symbolic innovation, showcasing the unique charm and value of traditional culture in modern society.

Secondly, at the level of ritual symbols, traditional festivals have undergone dual transformations of nationalization and modernization. Festivals such as Spring Festival and Dragon Boat Festival have been incorporated into statutory holidays, expanding their connotations from family reunions to cultural symbols of "homeland and state integration"[14]; the newly established "Chinese Farmers' Harvest Festival" integrates elements of agricultural culture from various ethnic groups, becoming a modern ritual that showcases the coexistence of diverse cultures. These rituals not only carry historical memories but also respond to contemporary social needs, serving as important vehicles for fostering community consciousness. Additionally, by hosting various cultural and arts festivals, combining traditional culture with modern creative industries has not only promoted the development of the cultural industry but also provided a broader stage for the inheritance and innovation of traditional culture. For example, using modern technological means like AR and VR technology allows visitors to experience the charm of ancient culture in an immersive way, significantly enhancing the appeal and influence of culture. Through these innovative practices of symbolic representation, Chinese traditional culture has rejuvenated and invigorated itself in modern society, further strengthening the cultural identity of the national community.

In terms of material symbols, historical relics and modern technological symbols together form the national image. Cultural heritage sites like the Great Wall and the Forbidden City, as material representations of ethnic spirit, continuously convey the profound essence of Chinese civilization; achievements in high-speed rail networks and space projects showcase cultural innovation capabilities with "Chinese speed" and "Chinese height." [15]The combination of these two elements shapes a cultural identity symbol that is both historically profound and brimming with modern vitality.

Fourth, at the level of spiritual symbols, traditional festivals and emerging celebratory events complement each other, reinforcing the cultural bond of the ethnic community. The sound of firecrackers during the Spring Festival and the full moon during the Mid-Autumn Festival, these traditional festivals not only carry warm memories of family reunions but also serve as emotional bridges connecting overseas Chinese in a globalized context. Meanwhile, emerging celebratory events such as the "Belt and Road Initiative" International Cooperation Forum and the CIIE not only showcase China's open and inclusive international image but also promote cultural exchange and mutual learning between China and foreign countries, further enriching the cultural connotations of the ethnic community. These innovative practices of spiritual symbols not only enhance national pride and a sense of belonging but also contribute unique cultural strength to building a community with a shared future for mankind.

3. The path of cultural identity in the construction of European nation community: the challenge and adjustment of multiculturalism

(1) Reconstruction of historical memory: the transformation from ethnic state to pluralistic society

The formation of European nation-states is essentially a process of "homogenization" in cultural integration. In the 19th century, Germany standardized German language education and compiled national epics (such as the "Nibelungenlied") to construct a unified German cultural identity[16]; France, on the other hand, promoted French education and shaped the image of "Republican citizens" to dissolve local cultural differences, forming an identity paradigm of "one people, one country." This integration model centered on the core culture of the dominant ethnic group provided support for the stability of early nation-states but also sowed the seeds for minority group recognition issues.

After World War II, large-scale immigration waves disrupted the monolithic cultural landscape of Europe. In response to the cultural differences between Turkish immigrants in Germany and Arab immigrants in France, countries generally adopted "multiculturalism" policies[17], recognizing the linguistic use, religious practices, and other cultural rights of minority groups, aiming to achieve social integration through "inclusion of diversity." However, these policies have gradually revealed their problems in practice[18]. During the 2015 refugee crisis, the influx of a large number of Middle Eastern immigrants sparked cultural conflicts, leading to the spread of "Islamophobia." Countries like the Netherlands and Germany had to re-emphasize "core cultural values," such as democratic systems and principles of gender equality, attempting to rebuild the foundation of shared identity.

Despite multicultural policies alleviating the cultural exclusion of minority groups to some extent, they have also intensified the cultural divide between mainstream society and immigrant communities. This divide is not only evident

in overt cultural aspects such as language and religion but also penetrates deeper into implicit cultural dimensions like values and lifestyles. Therefore, European countries have begun to reflect on the applicability of multiculturalism, exploring more inclusive and cohesive cultural policies that foster shared identity. On one hand, they emphasize "cultural diversity" rather than "cultural pluralism," aiming to build common cultural values while respecting differences. On the other hand, they enhance civic education, promote national languages and cultural symbols, and facilitate mutual understanding and integration among different groups. These efforts aim to construct a European cultural identity that is both diverse and unified, laying a solid foundation for the development of the European nation-state.

(2) The dilemma of value consensus: the tension game between citizenship and identity politics

First, the "citizen integration" model in Europe faces multiple challenges. At the institutional level, while the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights safeguards minority rights, member states show significant differences in immigration policies and cultural identity. For instance, Hungary refuses to accept refugees citing the need to "protect Christian cultural traditions"[19]; Austria has enacted laws restricting religious attire for immigrants, reflecting varying interpretations of "shared values." On the identity politics front, there are discrepancies among different ethnic groups and immigrant communities within Europe regarding their recognition of citizenship. On one hand, first-generation immigrants often struggle to fully integrate into mainstream society due to language barriers and cultural differences, leading them to identify more with their ethnic group. On the other hand, local residents have mixed attitudes toward immigrants; some groups feel uneasy about the influx, fearing it will dilute local culture and even threaten national security. This tension in identity politics further exacerbates the challenge of building a unified national community, making it difficult for Europe to achieve this goal. Additionally, the trend toward cultural homogenization brought about by globalization conflicts with the cultural diversity within Europe. How to strengthen a shared cultural identity while maintaining cultural diversity is an urgent issue that European countries must address.

Second, the fragmentation of public spaces exacerbates the fragility of value consensus. Under multicultural policies, minority communities form relatively independent cultural spaces, leading to isolation from mainstream society in areas such as education and media exposure, with the space for dialogue on shared values shrinking[20]. For example, Arab immigrant communities in suburban France have formed "cultural islands" that are significantly different from the mainstream urban center in their understanding of "Frenchness". This isolated state not only limits mutual understanding and communication between different groups but also increases the risk of social division. Mainstream society may develop biases and misunderstandings due to a lack of understanding of minority communities, while minority communities may feel excluded and marginalized, leading to resentment and opposition. This mutual isolation makes it even more difficult to build shared values, as there is a lack of an inclusive and diverse platform for dialogue. Moreover, with the rise of social media, information dissemination channels have become more diversified, but this can also lead to echo chambers, making it harder for different groups to access information that contradicts their views, further solidifying existing prejudices and positions.

Third, the rise of populism directly challenges the consensus on multiculturalism. The Brexit in the UK and the rise of the "National Rally (formerly National Front)" in France reflect the dissatisfaction of some citizens with multicultural policies. They believe that excessive cultural inclusiveness undermines national identity and advocate for strengthening "cultural purity" to rebuild recognition[21]. This trend highlights the deep-seated contradiction between "differential equality" and "collective identity" in Europe. On one hand, populists emphasize the uniqueness of national culture and advocate protecting local culture from external influences to maintain so-called "cultural purity." They often criticize multicultural policies, arguing that they lead to cultural homogenization and weaken the uniqueness and cohesion of the nation. On the other hand, those who support multicultural policies stress the diversity and inclusivity of cultures, believing that the exchange and integration of different cultures are the sources of social progress and innovation. They advocate respecting and protecting the uniqueness of various cultures to build a more open and inclusive society. The conflict between these two perspectives reflects the dilemma of value consensus in European society. How to preserve the characteristics of national culture while achieving harmonious coexistence among different cultures is a major challenge facing the construction of a European community of nations.

(3) The controversy of symbolic symbols: the dilemma of identity from "melting pot" to "mosaic"

The reconstruction of the European cultural symbol system is fraught with tension. In the realm of language policy, the long-standing opposition between the French-speaking and Flemish-speaking regions in Belgium, and the French-language protection movement in Quebec, Canada, highlight the high sensitivity of language as a symbol of identity[22]. Language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a symbol of ethnic identity; any policy adjustment can spark political controversy. Moreover, in many cities across Europe, iconic symbols representing different ethnic groups and cultures, such as architecture, festivals, and celebrations are vying for visibility and influence in public spaces. This competition over symbolic representation not only concerns cultural expression but also touches on core issues of ethnic identity, power relations, and a sense of belonging. Therefore, how to achieve equal respect and harmonious coexistence among different cultures at the level of symbolic representation has become one of the

pressing issues in building a European community of nations.

Secondly, the controversy over religious symbols vividly illustrates the conflict between secularism and religious pluralism. In 2004, France passed the "Headscarf Law," prohibiting the wearing of Islamic headscarves in public schools, arguing that religious symbols should not enter the public domain[23]; German courts ruled that local governments could ban civil servants from wearing religious symbols, reflecting Europe's insistence on "state secularism" and its negotiation with minority religious expression rights. In some Eastern European countries, such as Poland and Hungary, religion plays a more prominent role in national identity, and the display of religious symbols is often seen as a respect and promotion of ethnic traditions. This difference in attitudes toward religious symbols not only reflects the diversity of historical, religious traditions, and social structures across European countries but also exacerbates the identity dilemma in building a unified European community. How to respect the religious pluralism of each country while maintaining Europe's overall secularist stance has become a question for European policymakers to ponder deeply.

The attempt to reconstruct commemorative symbols demonstrates Europe's diverse orientation. Germany has adopted Holocaust remembrance as a new national identity symbol, conveying the value of "never letting history repeat itself" through memorials and educational programs; Spain recognizes Catalonia's "national" status, allowing it to have its own flag and festivals, aiming to balance national unity with regional differences by granting legitimacy to local cultural symbols[24]. These practices reflect the difficult balancing act between "unified symbols" and "differential symbols" in Europe. France, on the other hand, strengthens the memory of national unity through the establishment of national anniversaries and the construction of national monuments, such as those commemorating World War I and World War II, while also accommodating the historical memories of different ethnic groups to some extent. However, this reconstruction of commemorative symbols has not fully resolved the identity dilemma within Europe, especially in addressing issues related to immigration and refugees. European countries still differ on how to build an inclusive national identity. On one side, some countries emphasize a unified national identity to maintain social stability and national security; on the other side, others focus more on protecting the rights of minority groups to avoid cultural conflicts caused by excessive assimilation. This divergence is evident not only in policy-making but also in public understanding and recognition of national identity. Therefore, Europe must continue to explore and adjust in the reconstruction of symbolic representations to find a more balanced and inclusive path for national identity.

4. Comparative analysis of the construction of national community between China and Europe: path differences and deep logic

(1) Historical basis: the distinction between continuous civilization and broken reconstruction

The construction of the Chinese nation community relies on a five-thousand-year uninterrupted civilization system, where historical memory has a natural continuity. From the "distinction between Chinese and barbarians" in pre-Qin times to the contemporary concept of "plural unity," cultural identity has always evolved within existing frameworks, forming a characteristic of "historical natural continuity."[25] In contrast, Europe has experienced multiple rupturing events such as the disintegration of the Roman Empire, religious reform, and colonial expansion, leading modern national identity to rely more on "artificial construction." For example, Italy has revived ancient Roman culture, while Poland has reconstructed its history of resistance against foreign enemies, artificially shaping national identity. This difference determines the "endogenous" nature of China's identity construction and the "exogenous" nature of Europe's. In China, this endogenous identity construction endows the building of the nation community with deep cultural heritage and historical accumulation, contributing to the formation of stable and strong cultural identity. By comparison, the fragmented reconstruction in Europe makes its national identity more diverse and complex, with significant differences in historical memory and symbolic representation among different countries. This exogenous identity construction requires European nations to pay greater attention to inclusiveness and diversity in the construction of the nation community, to address cultural conflicts and social divisions caused by historical ruptures. Therefore, the differences between China and Europe based on history not only manifest in the continuity of civilizational development but also profoundly influence their paths and strategies for constructing the nation community.

(2) Power mechanism: different logics of state leadership and social drive

China's identity construction centers on the power of political parties and the state, promoting cultural integration through top-level design. From ethnic identification to value cultivation, from symbolic innovation to policy implementation, the state consistently plays a leading role, emphasizing the institutional advantage of "concentrating resources for major tasks." In contrast, Europe relies on civil society, non-governmental organizations, and judicial institutions to drive identity construction, with a relatively limited role for the state[26]. For example, multicultural policies in the Netherlands are more often advocated by social welfare organizations, while immigrant integration in Germany depends on the autonomous practices of local communities. This difference reflects the fundamental distinction between the "state-society" relationship in Eastern and Western governance traditions.

In China, the state's leading role is not only reflected in policy formulation and implementation but also deeply

involved in the shaping of cultural identity. Through systematic education and propaganda, the state can effectively disseminate mainstream values, promoting mutual understanding and respect among ethnic groups. At the same time, the state organizes various cultural activities, such as ethnic festivals and cultural exhibitions, to enhance public cultural identity and a sense of belonging. This top-down approach ensures that the construction of China's ethnic community has a high degree of organization and efficiency. In Europe, however, civil society and non-governmental organizations play a more significant role in fostering cultural identity. They promote integration and understanding between different ethnic groups through policies advocating multiculturalism and organizing cultural exchange activities. Additionally, European judicial institutions play a crucial role in protecting minority rights and promoting social justice. Although this bottom-up approach may lack some organizational and efficiency, it better reflects the real needs and wishes of the people, enhancing social cohesion and stability.

(3) Practical strategies: the value differentiation of inclusive integration and differential recognition

China's "diverse unity" model pursues "harmony in diversity," ensuring cultural diversity while fostering consensus through shared historical narratives, core values, and development goals, thus forming an "inclusive integration" strategy. In contrast, European multiculturalism emphasizes "equality of difference," stressing institutional recognition of minority cultural rights, but overemphasizing cultural particularity can lead to fragmented identity[27]. For example, the Scottish independence movement in the UK and the Catalan referendum in Spain both reflect the inherent tension between recognizing differences and maintaining overall identity.

In practice, China has achieved inclusive integration of different ethnic cultures by strengthening national identity and the sense of community among the Chinese nation. This strategy not only respects the cultural traditions of each ethnic group but also promotes exchanges and integration between them, forming a multicultural landscape that is both diverse and unified. At the same time, the Chinese government actively encourages all ethnic groups to participate in national construction and social development, enhancing their sense of identity and belonging to the country. In contrast, European multiculturalism has made positive efforts in safeguarding the cultural rights of minority groups but also faces the risk of fragmented identity. To address this challenge, some European countries have begun to explore ways to promote communication and understanding among different ethnic groups by strengthening civic education and social integration, while respecting cultural differences. However, how to ensure cultural diversity while achieving harmonious coexistence and common development among all ethnic groups remains a significant issue for the construction of European national communities.

5. Challenges and implications

(I) Challenges and directions for China

On the one hand, in the digital age, the way young people perceive traditional cultural symbols has undergone a dramatic change. New technologies such as short videos and the metaverse are reshaping the ecosystem of cultural dissemination. It is necessary to leverage digital technology innovation to transform communication methods[28], for example, presenting ethnic artifacts through virtual exhibitions and spreading stories of various ethnic cultures via short video platforms, thereby enhancing the appeal of traditional culture to the younger generation[29]. On the other hand, border regions' cross-border ethnic groups face the risk of identity dilution due to external cultural infiltration. Efforts should be made to strengthen "border cultural security," protecting minority traditional cultures while reinforcing their sense of belonging to the Chinese nation through cultural exchange activities in border areas (such as cross-border ethnic cultural festivals).

(2) Challenges and adaptation paths facing Europe

On the one hand, the rise of far-right forces poses a threat to multicultural coexistence, and Europe needs to strike a balance between upholding core values and protecting minority rights. It is essential to recognize the non-negotiability of fundamental values such as democracy and the rule of law, while ensuring their participation through institutional design (such as increasing political representation for minorities) to prevent marginalization of minority groups[30]. On the other hand, the EU's cultural integration mechanisms are weak, and member states have low willingness to cede sovereignty, making it difficult to construct a sense of "European identity." In the future, efforts could be made through "soft integration" approaches, such as promoting common European history courses and creating cultural symbols at the EU level (like a unified cultural heritage symbol), gradually fostering a regional identity that transcends national boundaries.

(3) Common implications for multi-ethnic countries

First, historical narratives must remain open. Avoid solidifying ethnic identity into "essentialist" narratives; instead, allow the voices of marginalized groups to enter the mainstream. For example, China has compiled epics of ethnic minorities (such as "Gesar"), and Europe has recorded the histories of minority immigrants, making historical

narratives a space for dialogue among diverse voices[31]. At the same time, focus on the popularization and deepening of historical education. Through school education, public lectures, media campaigns, and other forms, enhance public understanding and recognition of diverse histories, promoting mutual respect and tolerance among different ethnic groups. Additionally, strengthen international exchanges and cooperation in history, drawing on successful experiences from other countries in historical narrative, to jointly explore diverse historical expressions that meet the demands of our times, laying a solid foundation for building a harmonious ethnic community.

Secondly, institutional design should be inclusive and flexible. Establishing a dual-track mechanism of "differential inclusiveness-consensus building" has been proven by China's system of regional ethnic autonomy and Europe's cultural autonomy agreements[32]. This approach ensures that while differences are institutionalized, consensus is also constructed, which is key to avoiding identity fragmentation. Under this mechanism, it is essential to respect and protect the cultural differences of all ethnic groups, ensuring their cultural rights are fully realized. At the same time, through shared cultural activities and value education, mutual understanding and integration among ethnic groups should be promoted. For example, a dedicated cultural fund could be established to support the inheritance and innovation of each ethnic group's culture; meanwhile, multicultural education should be integrated into school curricula so that children can be exposed to different cultures from an early age, fostering their cross-cultural understanding and respect. Additionally, the government and social organizations should actively build platforms to promote exchanges and cooperation among ethnic groups, making culture a bridge connecting them rather than a barrier.

Finally, the symbol system needs to keep up with the times. It should create new carriers of identity by integrating modern life scenarios. China's "China-fashion" culture combines traditional elements with the fashion industry, while Europe's "Digital Union" initiative aims to consolidate regional identity through technological symbols[33]. Both demonstrate the positive role of symbolic innovation in identity construction.At the same time, the construction of a symbolic system should also emphasize inclusiveness and diversity. In multi-ethnic countries, different ethnic groups possess their own unique symbolic systems. These systems are not only symbols of ethnic culture but also important markers of ethnic identity. Therefore, when building a national-level symbolic system, it is essential to fully respect and protect the symbolic traditions of each ethnic group, avoiding forced assimilation or marginalization. Instead, efforts should be made to actively find commonalities among the symbols of various ethnic groups, promoting mutual learning and integration through cross-cultural dialogue and exchange. This will help construct a national symbolic system that is both inclusive and diverse. Such a symbolic system can better reflect the multicultural characteristics of the country and also enhance the sense of identity and belonging among different ethnic groups.

Conclusion

Cultural identity, as the spiritual bond of a nation, is deeply rooted in historical traditions, institutional choices, and contemporary contexts. China's "pluralistic unity" model, grounded in the continuity of civilization, promotes inclusive integration through state leadership. This approach protects cultural diversity while shaping shared values that transcend ethnic groups, offering an Eastern wisdom of "harmony in diversity" for governance in multi-ethnic states. The practice of multiculturalism in Europe, however, highlights the potential identity crisis that can arise from overemphasizing differences, and the social conflicts that can result from neglecting minority rights. It warns that while respecting cultural diversity, it is essential to establish a minimum baseline of common values.

In the era where globalization and localization intertwine, the core challenge for multi-ethnic states is to establish a dynamic balance between "unity" and "diversity." This means avoiding the stifling of cultural vitality due to an excessive pursuit of uniformity while preventing the fragmentation of identity caused by unchecked differences. Future identity construction must be supported by open historical narratives, flexible institutional designs, and innovative symbolic systems, making cultural identity a genuine resource for rallying national strength and addressing global challenges. This research not only provides a new theoretical perspective for Sino-European comparisons but also offers valuable references for the development of human civilization in a pluralistic yet integrated framework.

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