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Analysis of Interethnic Relationship Governance in the Context of the Digital Network Era: A Case Study of Strengthening the Common Consciousness of the Chinese Nation

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Abstract: With the widespread adoption and development of digital network technology, the communication and interaction activities between different ethnic groups have transcended the traditional spatial barriers. The digital network space is becoming an emerging field for interethnic communication, interaction, and integration in contemporary China. Simultaneously, as interethnic interactions extend to the digital network domain, the utilization of digital network technology to govern interethnic relationship issues has become a common phenomenon. In order to better serve the strategic goal of strengthening the common consciousness of the Chinese nation, this study first systematically summarizes the characteristics and trends of governing interethnic relationship issues in the context of the digital network era in China. Secondly, the study conducts a detailed analysis of the main challenges that hinder the full effectiveness of digital network technology in governing interethnic relationship issues. Finally, based on the political standpoint of constructing a common consciousness of the Chinese nation, the researchers propose corresponding strategies to address the limitations of digital network technology in the process of governing interethnic relationship issues.

Keywords: Digital network; Interethnic relationship; Governance; Strengthening the common consciousness of the Chinese nation

I. Introduction:

For thousands of years, the interactions and exchanges among different ethnic groups have gradually shaped China into a unified multi-ethnic nation. Through analyzing and reviewing the history of interethnic practices on the Chinese land, it is evident that interethnic unity, mutual assistance, shared honors and disgraces, and harmonious coexistence are crucial factors that have enabled the people of various ethnic groups in China to develop a sense of common identity and construct a unified multi-ethnic nation. Essentially, the formation of a common consciousness among multiple ethnic groups and the establishment of a unified multi-ethnic nation are historical outcomes shaped by interactive practices in different contexts. Therefore, "context" serves as the main independent variable in shaping the common ethnic consciousness and the unified multi-ethnic nation. Once the context changes, corresponding dependent variables, such as "common ethnic consciousness" and "unified multi-ethnic nation," will also undergo corresponding changes. Since the advent of the Digital Cyber Era, the rapid development of digital network technology and the increasingly convenient access to the internet have encompassed people of various ethnicities worldwide. The Digital Cyber Era, also known as the "Digital Cyber Age," can be broadly characterized as an emerging era supported by data information carriers, with the freedom of access for various nodes as a premise, guided by the development of artificial intelligence technology, and facilitated by big data computing.[1-4]The comprehensive arrival of the Digital Cyber Era has greatly transformed the modes of interaction among different ethnic groups and has led to various changes in interethnic relationships. In this context, traditional approaches and methods for governing interethnic relationships may struggle to effectively address the interethnic issues that arise in the digital network domain.

In the Central Conference on Ethnic Work held in August 2021, General Secretary Xi Jinping explicitly pointed out the key to strengthening the common consciousness of the Chinese nation and promoting the high-quality development of the Party's ethnic work in the new era lies in innovating the ideological approach to ethnic work while comprehensively

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improving the modernization level of the governance system and governance capacity of ethnic affairs.[5] Essentially, General Secretary Xi's emphasis on enhancing the modernization level of the governance system and governance capacity of ethnic affairs is based on the objective reality that globalization, urbanization, and networking have become the mainstream trends in today's world, and that the environment and subjects of ethnic affairs governance in our country have undergone profound changes.[6] Against the backdrop of digital networks having become the primary domain for interethnic interactions, the academic community should take the strategic positioning of strengthening the common consciousness of the Chinese nation as a starting point. Based on a comprehensive analysis of the changes and challenges in governing interethnic relationship issues in the digital network era, it is necessary to analyze and explore targeted strategies for effectively governing interethnic relationship issues using cutting-edge digital network technologies.

II. Characteristics and Trends in Governing Interethnic Relationship Issues in the Digital Network Era

Through a systematic analysis and research, the author has identified three persistent issues in the governance of interethnic relationship issues in China from the establishment of the People's Republic of China to the late 1990s. These issues include a relatively limited range of participating actors, with governance tasks predominantly led by the government; a fixed governance approach lacking necessary transparency and interactivity; and a relatively informal governance process, lacking corresponding refined governance measures. However, since the beginning of the 21st century, with the rapid development of digital technology and the continuous lowering of barriers to access digital networks, the highly open nature of digital networks has not only broken the technological constraints that previously hindered interactive communication among different ethnic groups but has also facilitated efficient and smooth interethnic interactions through emerging digital spaces. In this context, as the scope and intensity of interactive practices conducted by various Chinese ethnic groups using digital networks continue to expand, the governance of interethnic relationship issues has exhibited new trend characteristics.

2.1 Diversified Characteristics of Participating Actors in Governance Activities

Under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, at various levels of the people's government, from the strategic standpoint of promoting social stability, maintaining national unity, and consolidating ethnic unity, significant efforts have been made to govern interethnic relationship issues based on the conscientious implementation of the Party and the state's guiding principles and policies. These efforts include the establishment of specialized institutions for managing ethnic affairs, the selection and training of ethnic minority cadres, the promulgation of the "Law of the People's Republic of China on Regional Ethnic Autonomy," and the establishment of research institutions focusing on ethnic issues. These initiatives aim to promote harmonious and stable interethnic relationships. Essentially, the achievements mentioned above are the outcomes of repeated practices and experiments conducted by various levels of government in response to specific interethnic relationship issues under the special historical conditions of the planned economy era. However, the traditional model where the government acts as the main actor in governing interethnic relationship issues has led to the long-standing problem of "the state bearing the costs and risks of ethnic issues."[7] This is evident in issues concerning land resource allocation and reforms of the forest tenure system, which directly affect the vital interests of various ethnic groups. During the planned economy era, before the application of digital network technology, most grassroots cadres in towns and villages would rely on past experiences to determine the final distribution and reform plans for such issues. However, in the process of formulating and implementing these plans, conflicts often arose due to the plans' contradiction with the customary traditions of different ethnic groups in cultivating land and forests. This lack of an information exchange platform frequently resulted in tense interethnic relations and instances of mass petitions by ethnic groups at the grassroots level in ethnic autonomous regions involved in land resource allocation and forest tenure system reforms. In order to alleviate tension among ethnic groups and address issues such as mass petitions by various ethnic groups, the government, as the representative of state governance authority, had to invest more resources and efforts to resolve these conflicts. This phenomenon has led to the situation where the costs and risks of governing ethnic issues are borne by the state, as mentioned earlier.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, with the continuous improvement of digital network infrastructure and the deepening proliferation of digital network technology, particularly in the context where relevant digital network technology has been integrated into the process of interethnic relationship issues, there have been new changes in the pattern of government-led governance of interethnic relationship issues. Correspondingly, non-governmental actors that exist as nodes within the digital network have gradually evolved into important elements participating in and even leading the governance of interethnic issues. From a technical explanatory perspective, the main reason for this change is that the digital network, based on the foundation of digital network infrastructure, has encompassed various actors such as ethnic cadres, masses, and social organizations representing the interests of specific ethnic villages. Therefore, these diverse actors connected to the digital network can express their views and opinions on specific interethnic issues through network terminals such as computers and smartphones. At the same time, as various ethnic groups gain increasing access to social and political knowledge related to building a democratic society, a society based on the rule of law, and a harmonious society through digital networks, some non-governmental organizations spontaneously organized by ethnic groups, subject to government review and filing, participate or even take the lead in the governance of interethnic conflicts and disputes that were originally the domain of government actors only, by collecting online public opinion information and conducting online mediation activities. Additionally, the virtual and anonymous functions of the digital network field can eliminate

factors such as individual, social group, non-governmental organization identities, class, and economic income levels that hinder the governance of interethnic relationship issues. As a result, different actors can express their views and suggestions on current interethnic governance processes as unified network nodes. Importantly, the emergence of this leveling effect not only changes the passive and submissive position of non-governmental actors in the governance of interethnic relationship issues during the planned economy era but also provides opportunities for non-governmental actors, who previously only accepted instructions, to participate in third-party mediation activities, propose governance recommendations, and even actively engage in the governance of interethnic issues through digital network platforms. Therefore, this change fundamentally breaks the previous single pattern where only government actors could lead the governance of interethnic relationship issues.

It should also be noted that with the deep transformation of modern social development needs and government governance concepts, in order to fully realize the governance function of a modern service-oriented government, governments at all levels in China are currently comprehensively exploring the experiential model of coordinating and coordinating social resources to participate in the governance of interethnic relationship issues. In this regard, the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China explicitly stated that the whole country should take the opportunity to deepen the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity, improve the social governance system, and establish a sound system of co-construction, co-governance, and shared social governance. By continuously improving the grid management, fine-grained services, and information-supported governance platform, a social governance community where everyone has responsibilities, everyone fulfills their responsibilities, and everyone enjoys the benefits will be comprehensively created.[8] Considering the actual reforms in the governance of interethnic relationship issues carried out by governments at all levels and the actions of the Party Central Committee issuing relevant major reports, it is evident that China is seeking to construct a diversified participation mechanism in dealing with the governance of interethnic relationship issues. Specifically, this involves utilizing the advantages of digital networks in aggregating various node information, while maintaining government actors' leadership, adhering to the basic principles of "diverse participation, promoting democracy, and pooling collective wisdom,"[9] and ultimately constructing a new model of interethnic relationship governance that relies on the people of all ethnic groups and serves the people of all ethnic groups at the institutional and guiding levels.

2.2 Pathways of Governance Issues Have Undergone a Series of Systemic Changes

From the establishment of New China until the late 1990s, China consistently adhered to a "top-down" pathway model in governing interethnic relations, which involved centrally formulating guidelines and policies to guide the work at various local levels. While this "top-down" pathway model allowed for the hierarchical management and handling of complex interethnic issues through clear lines of authority, it also had numerous adverse effects. Specifically, in the process of implementing governance work, the interethnic policies formulated by the central government did not always fully consider the actual situations of local officials and the masses from various ethnic groups, leading to a frequent disconnect between policy expectations and actual outcomes. For instance, the "egalitarian distribution" policy during the planned economy era met the basic living needs of ethnic groups in border regions. However, in some areas with relatively developed levels of production, the implementation of this policy not only greatly dampened the production enthusiasm of certain ethnic groups but also perpetuated issues of imbalanced rewards for different levels of labor, resulting in interethnic tensions and even collective conflicts arising from distribution issues.

In contrast, since the beginning of the 21st century, with the comprehensive advent of the digital network era, China has witnessed significant changes in the pathway model for governing interethnic relations, driven by the introduction of relevant digital network technologies. From the perspective of constituent elements, in addition to the necessary hardware infrastructure, the large-scale digital network nodes have become critical elements for the construction and formation of digital governance networks. Particularly in highly open network environments, various types of network nodes can publish and transmit data information in diverse forms at any time and from any location. Therefore, almost all nodes within the same governance network can access the same data information at the same time. The emergence of this phenomenon also signifies that government actors, who share the same network as other nodes and hold the same node identity, will lose their central position in the traditional state structure. From a more micro perspective, the digital network space is actually a synthesized spatial product composed of "human-physical space-intelligent mechanisms-virtual information world."[10] In the scenario where interethnic relations have been incorporated into this emerging spatial product, the pathway for governing interethnic issues has undergone numerous new changes compared to before the advent of digital networks.

Firstly, significant changes have occurred in the pathway reflecting interethnic relations issues.[11] Prior to the widespread application of digital network technologies, within the governance framework dominated by government actors, the reflection of interethnic relations issues was primarily accomplished through two approaches: "top-down" and "bottom-up." "Top-down" refers to the relevant functional departments within the government conducting investigations at the grassroots level through visits and discussions, aiming to identify conflicts that exist between different ethnic groups. "Bottom-up" refers to the grassroots government departments reporting specific conflicts and issues to higher-level authorities with full functional authority through a hierarchical consultation and reporting process, ultimately leading to the formulation of corresponding governance plans by these higher-level authorities. However, with the advent of the digital network era, the pathway for reflecting interethnic relations issues has undergone new changes within the digital network

environment. Specifically, as ethnic cadres and the masses, acting as network nodes, can directly reflect the existing conflicts and issues between ethnic groups to government departments of different ranks through open network channels provided by functional departments, such as sending emails, text messages, recordings, videos, and other means. The emergence of this new pathway for issue reflection not only changes the traditional "bottom-up" approach but also, by eliminating the hierarchical reporting process in traditional methods, enables government functional departments with corresponding authority to initiate investigations and governance work promptly upon receiving information about conflicts and issues. In summary, since the introduction of digital network technologies into the process of governing interethnic relations issues in China, the relevant governing entities have significantly reduced the governance response time and greatly enhanced the efficiency of addressing interethnic relations issues.

Secondly, there has been a significant transformation in the pathway for governing interethnic relations issues.[12] Within the traditional governance framework dominated by government actors, whether utilizing the "top-down" or "bottom-up" approach, the focus has mainly been on addressing explicit interethnic conflicts. The main reason for the frequent occurrence and long-term existence of such problems has been the outdated technological means. Particularly, before the application of digital network technologies in governing interethnic conflicts, there were limitations in obtaining data and information related to interethnic relations issues through the "top-down" or "bottom-up" pathways. This information was often insufficient to truly reflect the major underlying conflicts that occurred and existed between ethnic groups.

For example, after the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, in order to help ethnic minority areas in the southwest border regions achieve the goal of poverty alleviation and prosperity as quickly as possible, economically developed coastal regions in the east began to provide targeted assistance to these ethnic minority areas under the unified arrangements and deployment of the central government. In this process, the eastern coastal regions responsible for the targeted assistance often provided high-quality seeds, pesticides, fertilizers, and other agricultural aid materials to improve the backward agricultural production conditions in ethnic villages in the southwest border regions. However, due to historical issues stemming from inadequate and inappropriate governance of interethnic conflicts by grassroots township officials, neighboring ethnic villages would often use the excuse of local villagers from neighboring villages seizing agricultural aid materials to engage in interethnic clashes. Before the application of digital network technologies in governing interethnic conflicts, the relevant government functional departments could typically only initiate corresponding "top-down" governance work after receiving "bottom-up" reports. Specifically, higher-level functional departments would dispatch working groups to physically enter the affected villages, and only after completing the necessary investigation tasks would they proceed with specific governance work related to the conflicts. Although this traditional approach has played an important role in governing interethnic relations issues, it has several shortcomings in the process. Firstly, the practice of dispatching working groups to affected villages from higher levels requires significant resources and financial investment, which can impose a financial burden on ethnic autonomous regions already facing tight fiscal situations. Secondly, the pathway for obtaining investigation data and information primarily relies on manual methods. The responses and information provided by ethnic cadres and the masses who are interviewed and questioned may be influenced by emotions, culture, and other factors, resulting in incomplete and contradictory data. Lastly, while conducting investigations and implementing specific governance measures, the working groups may also have to simultaneously address other challenging unforeseen events. Therefore, in situations where time is limited, tasks are demanding, and comprehensive and precise data cannot be obtained, this traditional model relying on manual investigations, evidence collection, and governance has faced widespread criticism from grassroots officials and the masses.

However, since the widespread application of digital network technologies in governing interethnic issues, the relevant government functional departments have made significant progress in addressing interethnic conflicts. For instance, in terms of the pathway for obtaining interethnic conflict information, with the help of network big data intelligent mining technology, the relevant functional departments can not only access a larger volume of data but also, supported by cloud computing technology, they can rapidly and accurately identify explicit issues while systematically understanding the hidden problems deeply entrenched between ethnic groups. Additionally, with the assistance of advanced network optimization algorithm technology, the network computing system can quantitatively and visually present the pros and cons of different governance approaches to the relevant governing entities, thus providing them with the optimal options for their upcoming governance work.

Thirdly, there has been a notable trend towards bidirectional interaction in the pathway for governing interethnic relations issues. The traditional model of governing interethnic issues has been hindered by factors such as poor data and information transmission between different levels and multiple circulation channels. As a result, after receiving governance instructions from higher authorities, the response from ethnic cadres and the masses in the affected areas where interethnic issues occur has been minimal. Alternatively, in cases where ethnic cadres and the masses in the affected areas have strong reactions, the existing transmission pathways have been unable to promptly convey the true feedback of the interethnic issues to the higher-level supervisory departments. In stark contrast, since the widespread application of relevant digital network technologies in governing interethnic relations issues, the transmission pathway of data and information between the governing entities and the governed entities has evolved from a unidirectional mode to an interactive mode. At the same time, there has been significant improvement in addressing the issue of blocked data and information transmission, and an interactive data and information transmission pathway has emerged between the governing entities and the governed entities. For example, after the introduction of relevant digital network technologies into the mechanism for governing interethnic relations issues, the relevant functional departments of various levels of

government can utilize dedicated data network platforms to publicly release governance drafts while accepting feedback and suggestions from ethnic cadres and the masses at the grassroots level. This development has led to a clear trend of bidirectional interaction in the pathway model for governance issues. Furthermore, the emergence of this interactive transmission pathway has not only effectively alleviated previously confrontational and tense interethnic relations but also objectively enhanced the awareness of ethnic cadres and the masses in actively participating in social governance activities as stakeholders.

2.3 Upgrading and Iteration of Interethnic Relations Governance Methods

Currently, the governance approach to interethnic relations in China has evolved from the traditional extensive model to a more scientific and refined mode.[13-15] During the special historical period from the establishment of the People's Republic of China to the late 1990s, before the application of relevant digital network technologies in governing interethnic relations, the government primarily adopted an extensive mode of governance influenced by traditional hierarchical management systems and planned economic development approaches. This extensive mode was characterized by excessive reliance on manpower and material resources, widespread use of administrative intervention, and the reliance on intuition and experience.

Due to the reliance on the authority and coercive power possessed by the government as the driving force for specific governance efforts, this mode had limited effectiveness in dealing with complex interethnic conflicts. However, since the introduction of relevant digital network technologies into the practice of governing interethnic relations in China, the entities involved in interethnic relations governance have gradually abandoned the traditional extensive mode and transitioned towards a more refined governance model. In this transition, network big data technology first enables the participating entities to have a deeper and more accurate understanding of the current status and development trends of interethnic relations within specific areas by collecting, integrating, and analyzing interethnic relations data. Additionally, cloud computing technology allows the exclusion of irrelevant data interference related to interethnic conflicts based on the initial acquisition of network data, enabling the entities to develop and implement more targeted governance strategies based on precise data information. Furthermore, the promotion and application of network big data monitoring and early warning technology enable the participating entities to timely adjust governance strategies based on the changing trends of interethnic conflicts during the actual implementation of governance activities. In summary, the practical application of the refined governance model in governing interethnic relations in China has two main benefits: first, it improves the efficiency of governance for the participating entities while effectively alleviating unnecessary resource allocation; second, it enables the governance process to develop precise governance strategies and implement targeted governance based on dynamic adjustments.

III. The Main Challenges in Governing Interethnic Relations Using Digital Network Technologies

The Emergence and Development of Digital Network Technologies have shortened the temporal and spatial distances for interethnic interaction, communication, and integration. Furthermore, the widespread adoption and advancement of these technologies have provided a convenient platform for in-depth interactive exchanges among different ethnic groups. Therefore, the proliferation and application of these cutting-edge technologies facilitate a deeper mutual understanding among diverse ethnic groups, assisting them in finding commonalities and similarities in various aspects such as culture, history, and values. This, in turn, lays the foundation for the formation of a shared national consciousness.[16] However, within the realm of the digital network space, there are inherent challenges that impede the full potential of these technologies in governing interethnic relations. These challenges include the dissemination of false information, the exacerbation of the digital divide, and the lagging governance concepts and practices of governing entities, limiting the effectiveness of digital network technologies in addressing interethnic relations issues.

3.1 Dissemination of False Information

From the perspective of the results generated by the dissemination and propagation of network information between ethnic groups, two types of effects can be observed: positive effects and negative effects.[17-20] Positive effects primarily refer to the dissemination and propagation of data information that enhances understanding among different ethnic groups, leading to acceptance, respect, and even the formation of a sense of community. On the other hand, negative effects occur when the dissemination and propagation of data information escalate interethnic conflicts and lead to interethnic tensions.[21-22] In particular, when discourses aimed at provoking interethnic conflicts spread through digital network channels, they can potentially cause significant negative impacts on previously harmonious and stable interethnic relations, leading to large-scale conflicts or disturbances.[23]

Numerous historical facts repeatedly demonstrate that the development and trends of interethnic relations primarily depend on the feedback information obtained through communication and interaction between different ethnic groups, regardless of the specific spatial context. This feedback information plays a crucial role in determining the future direction of interethnic relations. Narrowly defined, interethnic relations refer to social relations between ethnic or ethnic groups, while broadly defined, interethnic relations encompass the interactions and relationships between different ethnic or ethnic groups in various dimensions such as politics, economy, and culture.[24] Regarding the characteristics of interethnic relations in contemporary China, it primarily involves two specific dimensions: "First, each ethnic group is an ethnic community within the country, not a nation within the nation-state. They are a collective formed by a common history and

culture, namely a historical-cultural community. Second, these historical-cultural communities have coalesced into the Chinese nation, with each being a constituent unit of the Chinese nation, rather than independent 'ethnic groups'."[25] In the context of consolidating the sense of community of the Chinese nation, the core of using digital network technologies to govern interethnic relations lies in effectively filtering and removing false discourses hidden in various areas such as politics, economy, and culture that undermine ethnic unity and progress. However, certain characteristics of digital networks constrain the effective use of these technologies in governing interethnic relations.

First of all, the main components of the digital cyberspace not only include necessary hardware infrastructure but also various actors such as individuals, non-governmental organizations, and social groups living in the world, all of which have become important nodes in the composition of the digital cyberspace. The openness and transparency features of the digital cyberspace itself allow these actors, existing as network nodes, to publish, receive, or forward public opinion information related to inter-ethnic relations at any time and place. As a result, the social public information publishing power, originally dominated by government actors, has not only been greatly weakened but also the existence of such phenomena has increased the dissemination of false network information by non-governmental actors through digital network nodes, aiming to provoke inter-ethnic relations, hatred, and conflicts.

Secondly, in the anonymous digital cyberspace, the interaction between ethnic groups is no longer hindered or restricted by physical space and time. Therefore, conflicts and disputes arising from differences in ideologies, cultures, and customs between different ethnic groups can easily be amplified infinitely by various actors in the digital cyberspace through the intentional fabrication of false statements and attacks on other ethnic groups. In particular, in the scenario of open access to social platforms such as ChatGPT and Claude, various network nodes with different intentions can use open data information platforms to create and disseminate a massive amount of false network information that undermines inter-ethnic harmony and creates problems.[26-29]

Thirdly, although the emergence of digital network technology has constructed a multicultural society based on the foundation of "communities without proximity," as mentioned by Manuel Castells,[30] the cultural tensions that originally existed between different ethnic cultures are likely to be deliberately amplified by certain actors in this unique space of the digital network. For example, once some inconspicuous inter-ethnic cultural differences are deliberately spread through fabricated network rumors by radical elements within a particular ethnic group, such harmful information may be received by multiple ethnic groups with objective cultural differences at the same time, leading to prejudice and misunderstandings between ethnic groups. Especially when such prejudices and misunderstandings accumulate to a certain scale, they can easily transform into inter-ethnic hatred and intensify conflicts and disputes between ethnic groups on a larger and deeper level. In addition, influenced by the unreasonable algorithm design and push mechanism of current digital network platforms, different ethnic groups with different cultural traditions mostly have selective biases in accessing and processing network information, resulting in the phenomenon of "information cocoons." "Information cocoons" mainly refer to the preference-based demand for network information during the process of interactive communication. Different users tend to focus on network information that meets their own needs or brings them a sense of pleasure. However, over time, the data information received by users through network platform pushes becomes increasingly narrow in scope. This phenomenon is similar to a silkworm wrapping itself layer by layer with the silk it spits out. Eventually, network users will be completely immersed in the specific network information they prefer and lose the opportunity to obtain other information and explore unknown areas.[31] In the current situation where the digital network has infiltrated almost all aspects of people's daily lives, every digital network user with specific ethnic attributes will, to a greater or lesser extent, selectively accept certain types of data information while consciously excluding or blocking data information that they consider irrelevant. Therefore, the phenomenon of information cocoons caused by information preferences can easily lead to the easy dissemination of false data information to certain specific users, laying the groundwork for future inter-ethnic conflicts.

3.2 Accentuation of the Digital Divide Issue

The popularization and development of digital network technology serve as a crucial foundation for expanding and extending interactive communication among ethnic peoples into the digital network space. However, the existence of the "Digital Divide" not only hinders interactive communication between ethnic peoples in China but also presents new challenges to the governance of contemporary interethnic relations in China. The Digital Divide primarily refers to the gap in accessing data and information through digital networks among different actors.[32] According to the 51st Statistical Report on Internet Development in China released by the China Internet Network Information Center in March 2023, "As of December 2022, the number of internet users in China reached 1.067 billion, an increase of 35.49 million compared to December 2021. The number of rural internet users in China reached 308 million, accounting for 28.9% of the total internet users; the number of urban internet users reached 759 million, accounting for 71.1% of the total internet users."[33] These statistics objectively reveal the existence of the digital divide between urban and rural areas, implying that the digital divide between urban and rural areas poses new challenges to the governance of interethnic relations in contemporary China.

"Although the total population of ethnic minorities in China is only 125,467,390, accounting for 8.89% of the total population,[34] the total area of ethnic autonomous regions accounts for 64% of the national territory."[35] At the same time, influenced by multiple factors such as history and economic development, the urbanization rate in non-ethnic autonomous regions in China is much higher than in ethnic autonomous regions. This phenomenon means that ethnic minorities living

in vast rural areas have significantly lower opportunities to access information and engage in network interactions through digital networks compared to Han people living in non-ethnic autonomous regions. Looking at the development pattern in today's international society, besides the level of material development, the proportion of access to and acquisition of data and information through relevant devices also reflects the disparities among contemporary nations.[36] Similarly, apart from differences in the level of material development, the degree of differentiation in accessing network data and engaging in network interactions using relevant devices among people living in different regions is also a concrete manifestation of regional disparities. In the current interconnectedness of digital networks with employment, healthcare, education, commerce, and other areas related to people's livelihood and development, the extent to which individuals and regions can interact and obtain effective information through digital networks largely determines their development fate. Therefore, the digital divide derived from the dualistic development pattern between urban and rural areas not only restricts the rights of ethnic people living in autonomous regions to access network data and information but also creates secondary development stagnation issues for certain ethnic groups due to the loss of crucial data and information. As a result, the digital divide existing in the digital network space can transform into a development gap issue among interethnic groups in the real society. Additionally, the digital divide problem easily leads to communication barriers between ethnic groups, intensifies mutual suspicion among ethnic groups, and undermines the foundation of ethnic community consciousness that has already formed.

From the perspective of goal orientation, one of the main objectives pursued by governance entities is to incorporate all 56 ethnic groups in China into the network woven by digital technology, enabling real-time and dynamic monitoring of interethnic conflicts and disputes among them. However, the existence of the digital divide poses certain constraints on achieving this goal. Based on the basic logic of technological analysis, these constraints primarily manifest in the following aspects. Firstly, the objective data divide makes it challenging for the governance network woven by digital technology to cover every individual with specific ethnic attributes in China and address interethnic conflicts and disputes in a timely manner. Secondly, in the environment where the digital divide still exists, the governance network system woven by digital technology fails to include every individual with specific ethnic attributes, resulting in a one-sided and incomplete representation of interethnic conflicts and disputes. As interethnic conflicts and disputes occurring outside the governance network system cannot be promptly addressed and eliminated, they tend to erode the collective consciousness of the Chinese nation that has already formed in the minds of various ethnic peoples to some extent.

3.3 Relative Backwardness of Governance Concepts and Practices

From a governance perspective, the introduction of digital network technology in the current process of interethnic relations governance aims to improve governance efficiency and gradually address the shortcomings of ineffective and unscientific governance practices. Although China has established a basic framework of government-led and multi-participation governance in addressing social issues through a series of administrative reforms guided by the policy of reform and opening up,[37] the overall situation of interethnic relations governance indicates that government actions ultimately determine the direction. Other actors involved in governance have a lower proportion of discourse power and narrower scope of involvement, which significantly dilutes the expected effectiveness of digital network technology in interethnic relations governance.

Through in-depth research and analysis, it has been found that during the process of political system reform, ethnic autonomous regions commonly face the issue of a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Specifically, many ethnic autonomous regions have not actively explored and enacted reform implementation rules that are tailored to their local governance of interethnic conflicts, even without fully implementing the central government's guidance on reform. Additionally, in the corresponding government institutional reforms, many ethnic autonomous regions show a common problem where the lower the level, the more similar the reform objectives are to non-ethnic autonomous regions at the same level, and the less sound the hierarchical setting and upward integration mechanisms.[38] When this problem is transmitted to the level of interethnic relations governance, it often leads to the practice of ethnic autonomous regional governments and their affiliated functional organizations simply adopting and replicating the approaches and models used by non-ethnic autonomous regions or higher-level counterparts in governing interethnic relations. Consequently, the lack of innovative governance concepts and a proactive mindset hinders the realization of the expected functions and utilities of digital network technology in interethnic relations governance.

On one hand, this is because the ethnic autonomous regions tend to adopt and replicate the approaches and practices of non-ethnic autonomous regions or higher-level counterparts, making it difficult for the data and information obtained through digital network technology to reflect the essence of conflicts and contribute to resolving interethnic conflicts. On the other hand, due to outdated governance concepts and a lack of innovation, the data and information obtained through digital network technology mostly remain at the stage of collection and aggregation. Particularly at the grassroots level of township governance, these types of data are often not effectively utilized in practical governance. Relevant functional departments at the township level fail to conduct in-depth exploration and analysis of such data information, resulting in a lack of information decision-making solutions that can be directly used by higher-level supervisory departments. Moreover, when facing pressure from performance evaluations by higher-level departments, some officials at the grassroots level of ethnic autonomous regions often use such data and information as a form of material to meet the requirements of performance assessments in interethnic relations governance.

At the level of governance practices, two common factors hinder the full utilization of digital network technology in interethnic relations governance. The first factor is human-related, manifested by a lack of understanding and mastery of the functions and roles of digital network technology in governing interethnic conflicts among grassroots governance bodies at the township level. As a result, some township officials have inherent resistance in their thinking when participating in training on how to use digital network technology to govern interethnic issues. Consequently, despite attending comprehensive training in their capacity as firsthand participants, these township officials find it challenging to effectively apply the acquired skills to practical governance work due to their resistance. The second factor is technological, where the complex and cumbersome technical processes contribute to the hesitance of grassroots governance officials to adopt such technologies for governing interethnic conflicts. For instance, before obtaining data on interethnic conflict relationships, relevant governance bodies must go through various complex and tedious processes such as data mining, data cleansing, and data verification, based on preliminary identification of data sources. However, in the demanding reality of tight deadlines and heavy workloads, it is difficult for grassroots officials involved in interethnic relations governance to follow and adhere to these procedures to acquire data information. Consequently, the process of referencing the obtained data information, formulating governance plans, and subsequently implementing and carrying out follow-up governance work becomes unattainable. Based on the above analysis, it is evident that due to technological limitations, frontline grassroots governance bodies in China face a common dilemma of being unable to fully utilize the advantages of digital network technology in practical governance work.

IV. Strategic Reflection on Enhancing the Efficiency of Utilizing Digital Network Technology in Governing Interethnic Relations Issues

With the popularization and development of digital network technology, the digital network space has gradually become an important domain for various ethnic groups in China to engage in communication, interaction, and integration activities. Countless historical facts have proven that various spatial domains embedded within the national framework system serve as core components for ethnic groups to engage in practical interactions and construct a sense of national-level ethnic community consciousness. If interethnic relations within these spatial domains can be guided by the principles of "harmony, unity, and equality," the overall effect formed will undoubtedly play a positive role in shaping and developing the consciousness of the ethnic community. Conversely, if "suspicion, conflict, and contradiction" become the negative "main theme" in interethnic relations, not only will it hinder the formation of ethnic community consciousness, but tense interethnic relations can also lead to the disintegration of the nation. Therefore, starting from the strategic perspective of forging a sense of the Chinese ethnic community, it is particularly important and meaningful to propose targeted strategies for utilizing digital network technology in governing interethnic relations issues, based on a clear understanding of existing problems.

4.1 Gradually Improving and Enhancing the Mechanisms of Internet Governance to Prevent the Spread of False Information in All Aspects

Based on the current reality, the problem of the dissemination and spread of false information within the digital network domain has had an adverse impact on the consolidation of the consciousness of the Chinese ethnic community. From a scientific and comprehensive governance perspective, relevant stakeholders involved in problem governance should establish and improve comprehensive governance mechanisms specifically designed to address and manage such negative influences. Firstly, as the absolute main body participating in the governance of interethnic relations issues, the ethnic and religious management departments affiliated with the government can collaborate with specific functional units such as internet information offices and public security departments to gradually establish and improve information registration and publishing regulations related to interethnic affairs based on existing relevant laws and regulations. They should also impose strict administrative or criminal penalties on individuals or organizations intentionally disseminating information that undermines the consolidation of the consciousness of the Chinese ethnic community. Secondly, governments at all levels need to guide and encourage communities, mass organizations, and other relevant actors to organize knowledge competitions and conduct special lectures to help ethnic cadres and the general public improve their ability to discern false information and enhance their ideological consciousness to reject the fabrication and dissemination of false online information. Thirdly, to address the proliferation of false information caused by the problem of "information cocoons," internet companies that provide data loading and transmission services need to establish institutionalized data algorithm upgrade plans. This includes strengthening the monitoring of data loading and the behavior of network users in transmitting data, as well as timely intercepting false data information that may flow to user terminals. Additionally, it is necessary for the government, internet companies, and users to establish a specialized mechanism platform aimed at blocking and removing false information. This mechanism platform enables any party within it to promptly block and eliminate such information in a coordinated response when false information is discovered, thus maximizing the protection of the consciousness of the ethnic community within the digital network environment.

4.2 Making Every Effort to Fill the Supporting Elements and Striving to Bridge the "Digital Divide" Gap as Soon as Possible

The emergence and existence of the "digital divide" phenomenon are not only the result of imbalances in urban-rural and regional development. From the perspective of interethnic development, it reflects the unequal relationship among

different ethnic groups in accessing digital dividends, digital knowledge, and digital wealth. Although there are signs of the narrowing of the digital divide between different ethnic groups in China's current development situation, there is still a risk of the problem reemerging due to factors such as uneven economic development levels and significant differences in technology adoption. Therefore, in order to prevent secondary interethnic conflicts caused by the digital divide, promote harmonious interethnic relations, and strengthen the consciousness of the Chinese ethnic community, relevant actors need to make every effort to fill the supporting elements. This will provide a solid foundation for the greater functional utility of digital network technology in governing interethnic relations issues. At the level of policy guarantees, the governments at various levels in ethnic autonomous areas can formulate and implement digital network development strategies that are adapted to the local socio-economic conditions based on relevant central regulations and local circumstances. Specifically, this involves issuing strategic documents, providing financial support, and introducing technologies to comprehensively advance the construction and upgrading of the digital network governance system in ethnic autonomous areas. In terms of implementation, first, in the process of tendering and purchasing digital network governance systems, the governments at various levels in ethnic autonomous areas should fully consider the communication and dialogue habits and traditions of various ethnic cadres and the general public who use local languages in their daily interactions. They should strive to procure and apply network governance systems that support the national lingua franca while also being compatible with the main local ethnic languages. Secondly, the behavior entities involved in governing interethnic relations, such as governments at all levels, communities, and schools, need to enhance the practical capacity of their ethnic cadres and the general public in operating and using terminal devices when accessing the digital network system. This will not only improve the skills of ethnic cadres and the general public in using digital network terminal devices but also expand the coverage of the digital network governance system as much as possible. Lastly, internet service providers should shoulder their social responsibilities. On the one hand, they should innovate internet technologies to ensure smooth access to the governance network by existing terminal devices. On the other hand, these companies should increase research and development efforts and produce affordable and user-friendly terminal devices. Through policy coordination, they should quickly distribute these devices to the rural markets in ethnic autonomous areas. This will ensure the effective bridging of the digital divide gap between interethnic and urban-rural areas and comprehensively improve the actual coverage rate of the digital network governance system in ethnic autonomous areas.

4.3 Enhancing the Understanding of Grassroots Governance Entities towards Digital Governance and Focusing on Optimizing Corresponding Governance Practices

In the era where the digital network environment has deeply penetrated various sectors of society, interethnic interactions and dynamics within the social structure are also profoundly influenced by the digital network. Therefore, it is particularly important to enhance the understanding of governance entities regarding the use of digital network technology in managing interethnic relations and optimize the corresponding governance practices. To effectively improve the ideological understanding of governance entities, the relevant units responsible for providing training services to grassroots officials in townships and communities need to patiently and comprehensively impart relevant strategies and techniques. After completing the technical training, these units should also provide more tailored follow-up guidance to frontline governance practitioners as they apply digital network technology in managing interethnic relations. This will enable them to truly experience the advantages of digital network technology and eliminate any negative emotions towards emerging technologies. In terms of optimizing governance practices, technology companies responsible for delivering digital governance network systems to governance entities should strive to enhance the system's level of intelligence while making efforts to improve the ease of operation for the delivered systems and their corresponding terminal devices. For example, through technological innovation, complex processes such as target data identification, data mining, and cleansing, which previously required manual operation, can be automated using more efficient artificial intelligence components. This ensures that frontline practitioners can significantly improve their work efficiency in effectively managing interethnic conflicts and disputes while proficiently grasping key technological essentials. At the same time, relevant governance entities, while fully utilizing digital technology, need to consider the actual situation and avoid excessive reliance on online data, neglecting the occurrence of actual interethnic conflicts and disputes. For instance, grassroots frontline entities responsible for managing interethnic relations can adopt a combination of "online + offline" approaches in their work, repeatedly verifying the authenticity of data and conducting collaborative analysis of interethnic conflicts. Based on this, they can use big data analytics and optimize the details to formulate the best strategies for managing specific interethnic issues and thus strengthen the consciousness of the Chinese ethnic community.

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