

From 'National Boundaries' to 'Cultural Continuum': The Evolution of China's Ethnic Policy Discourse System (1949-2025)

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Abstract

In China's modernization process, ethnic issues have always been an important aspect of national governance. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the discourse system of ethnic policy has undergone multiple transformations, gradually shifting from an emphasis on the independence of 'ethnic boundaries' to a more inclusive concept of 'cultural continuum.' This evolution not only reflects China's gradual understanding of ethnic issues but also embodies the country's response to social changes. With the acceleration of globalization and social transformation, the discourse system of ethnic policy has undergone profound changes, especially in the context of cultural diversity, social integration, and global competition. This article aims to analyze the evolution of China's ethnic policy discourse system since 1949 and explore its far-reaching impact on Chinese society, politics, and culture.

In the mid-20th century, 'national boundaries' served as a normative framework that clearly defined the political and cultural identities of various ethnic groups. During this phase, ethnic policies focused on ensuring national independence, strengthening ethnic unity, and achieving social cohesion. However, entering the 21st century, the interaction between cultural identity and diversity has become the core issue of ethnic policy discourse, and the concept of 'cultural continuum' has gradually emerged as a new approach to resolving ethnic conflicts. This article reveals the characteristics of each historical stage and the ideological motivations behind them by sorting out the evolution of China's ethnic policy discourse system(Fu 2024, Yan and Vickers 2024).

1. Introduction

The changes in China's ethnic policy discourse system are, in fact, a response to changes in both internal and external environments. First, with the improvement of China's political system, ethnic policy has gradually moved away from a singular administrative management paradigm and begun to focus on the differences and integration of ethnic cultures. Second, with economic reform and development, especially the rapid rise of the economy in ethnic regions, the core discourse of ethnic policy has shifted to a dual task of cultural identity and economic development. Recognition of ethnic culture is not only a retrospective of history but also a reconstruction of ethnic identity in the process of modernization.

With the progress of the times, the connotation of ethnic policy discourse has been continuously expanding. The concept of 'ethnic boundaries' has gradually been replaced by 'cultural continuum', and the confirmation of ethnic identity no longer solely relies on the delineation of ethnic territories, but emphasizes cultural connections and interactions. Through this framework, the exchange and integration of ethnic cultures have become the focus of policy-making. This shift has profoundly influenced the multi-ethnic structure and cultural atmosphere of Chinese society(Zhang and Lan 2023).

The structure of this article is divided into the following parts: First, it reviews the ethnic policy from 1949 to 1978, analyzing the proposal of the concept of 'ethnic boundaries' and its social background; second, it explores the transformation of ethnic policy discourse after the reform and opening up, especially how cultural identity has become a new policy direction amidst the intertwining of 'ethnic equality' and 'ethnic unity'; then, it analyzes the proposal of the concept of 'cultural continuum' after 2000 and its profound impact on ethnic policy, particularly how it promotes a social model of cultural identity and pluralistic coexistence; finally, through specific cases in Tibet and Xinjiang, it discusses the application of this concept in practice and the challenges it faces.

2. Chapter 2 1949-1978: The Initial Construction of China's Ethnic Policy Discourse System

One of the first major challenges faced by the Communist Party of China after the establishment of the new China in 1949 was how to handle the complex ethnic issues. With the founding of the new China, the country quickly established the policy of "ethnic equality" and set "ethnic unity" as a fundamental principle of national governance. The discourse system of ethnic policy during this period centered on how to effectively integrate China's vast and complex ethnic structure into the socialist state system.

During this period, the formulation of ethnic policies exhibited a strong concept of 'ethnic boundaries.' 'Ethnic boundaries' not only refer to the political division of various ethnic groups but also involve the recognition and distinction of cultural and historical backgrounds. The party's ethnic theory, especially the 'right to self-determination' principle and the slogan of 'equality among all ethnic groups' proposed by Mao Zedong, profoundly influenced the discourse of ethnic policies during this period. The concept of 'ethnic boundaries' was used at this time to define the differences between ethnic groups, emphasizing the protection of the independence of each ethnic group's culture, history, and religion. This protection strategy aimed to eliminate the remnants of feudalism and strengthen the new regime's control over minority regions(Hutton 2017).

3. The establishment and characteristics of ethnic policies in the early period of the founding of New China

In the early years of the founding of New China, the ethnic policy had a distinct sense of historical mission, with the main goal of moving away from traditional ethnic divisions and alleviating historical ethnic conflicts and inequalities by strengthening the concept of "ethnic equality." The Party proposed that "all ethnic groups are equal" and actively promoted self-management and economic development in ethnic regions through the implementation of the "Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy." However, the policy discourse system during this period still maintained a strong "ethnic boundary" color, especially in the policies concerning the western and border ethnic regions, where "ethnic boundaries" remained the core standard for distinguishing the political status and management of various ethnic groups. For border areas, the Party government achieved effective control over these regions by establishing autonomous regions and other administrative divisions, emphasizing the coordination between ethnic self-governance and national unity.

4. The Formation and Significance of the Concept of 'National Boundaries'

The formation of 'ethnic boundaries' is based on a comprehensive consideration of the historical experiences and actual situations of China's numerous ethnic groups. The differences in customs, religious beliefs, and languages among different ethnic groups have led to a culturally distinct division. Therefore, 'ethnic boundaries' are not only politically manifested as regional divisions but also reflected in the differentiation of cultural identity. Through the method of administrative divisions, the government has reinforced the independence of ethnic cultures and protected the possibility of ethnic autonomy. The establishment of 'ethnic boundaries' is an attempt by the state to resolve potential conflicts between ethnic groups by respecting ethnic differences in the process of promoting social unity.

The proposal of this concept has far-reaching political significance. On one hand, it strengthens the cultural independence of ethnic regions, allowing ethnic minorities to maintain their cultural characteristics to a certain extent; on the other hand, it also provides a necessary framework for the governance of the state. In this process, the concept of 'ethnic boundaries' has actually become a regulatory tool for the coexistence of national unity and ethnic diversity both internally and externally.

3. The Influence of the Party's Ethnic Theory on Ethnic Policy Discourse

The ethnic theory of the Communist Party of China, especially the Marxist ethnic theory, had a significant impact on the formulation of ethnic policies during this period. The Party's ethnic policies have always emphasized ethnic equality and national unity, and under this theoretical guidance, the concept of 'ethnic boundaries' further clarified the political equality among various ethnic groups, constructing the framework of ethnic policies for China's socialist state. Mao Zedong's thoughts on ethnic work, particularly the principle of 'national self-determination', provided theoretical support for the implementation of China's ethnic policies and also legitimized the establishment of 'ethnic boundaries'.

4. The Politicization of the 'National Question' and the Construction of National Policy Discourse

The ethnic issues after the founding of the People's Republic of China have undergone a transformation from social issues to political issues. Ethnic policy is not only a means to address social inequality but has also become part of the national discourse system, reinforcing the socialist state's control over various ethnic regions. During this period, the party's ethnic policy gradually politicized ethnic issues, making ethnic policy a tool for national unity. By establishing autonomous regions, the party provided a political framework for the differences among ethnic groups in administrative management and further promoted the integration of ethnic culture and politics through the leading role of the government.

Chapter 3 1978-2000: The Transformation and Adjustment of China's Ethnic Policy Discourse System

In 1978, with the comprehensive advancement of China's reform and opening up, profound changes occurred in the socio-economic environment and the international political landscape. The discourse system of ethnic policy underwent significant transformation and adjustment during this period. Reform and opening up not only signified a transformation of China's economic system but also indicated a change in the state's approach to ethnic issues. Policies that originally emphasized 'ethnic boundaries' and 'ethnic independence' gradually gave way

to concepts that focus more on ethnic equality, ethnic unity, and social integration. Against this backdrop, the core of China's ethnic policy discourse shifted from the delineation of political boundaries to the pursuit of cultural identity and common development.

1. The impact of reform and opening-up on the discourse of ethnic policy

One of the most direct impacts of the reform and opening-up is the change in the economic system. Economic reform has not only further amplified the differences in economic development among various regions of China but has also intensified the policy interaction and cooperation between ethnic regions and the central government. In this process, the adjustment of ethnic policy discourse has gradually shifted from focusing on regional governance and the delineation of ethnic boundaries to placing greater emphasis on the economic development and social integration of ethnic regions. The dual goals of "ethnic equality" and "ethnic unity" have been further strengthened after the reform and opening-up, and the emphasis on economic development in policy discourse has also become a key factor combined with ethnic issues.

2. The Interweaving and Dialectics of 'Ethnic Equality' and 'Ethnic Unity'

After the reform and opening up, the dialectical relationship between 'ethnic equality' and 'ethnic unity' became an important theme in the discourse system of ethnic policy. During this period, 'ethnic equality' was not limited to political equality but was fully reflected in economic, cultural, and social development. At the same time, 'ethnic unity' was elevated to the core goal of ethnic policy, emphasizing the harmonious coexistence of all ethnic groups in common development. Ethnic policy was no longer just a simple issue of equality; rather, it aimed to create a more harmonious multi-ethnic society through cultural interaction and integration. Through this dialectical adjustment, the discourse on ethnic policy not only concerned the political status among ethnic groups but also placed greater emphasis on cultural recognition and sharing.

3. The Transition from 'National Boundaries' to 'Cultural Continuum'

In this historical stage, the concept of 'national boundaries' has gradually been challenged and adjusted. Especially against the backdrop of rapid economic and social development, the focus of ethnic policy discourse has gradually shifted towards the construction of cultural identity. In this process, the idea of 'cultural continuum' has been gradually proposed and started to be applied in policies. The 'cultural continuum' not only refers to the historical and cultural connections among various ethnic groups but also emphasizes the mutual integration and communication among them in modern society. This change reflects a profound transformation in China's ethnic policy, especially today, as globalization and cultural diversity become increasingly evident, the proposal of 'cultural continuum' provides a new path for the cultural identity of China's multi-ethnic society(Callahan 2013).

4. The Adjustment of Ethnic Policy Discourse and the Reshaping of Cultural Identity

With the introduction of the concept of 'cultural continuum', the discourse on ethnic policy has entered a new phase of adjustment. The construction of cultural identity is not only a necessary condition for national unity but also an important support for ethnic policy. In this phase, the government focuses on promoting cultural understanding and recognition among different ethnic groups through means such as education, media, and cultural exchanges. Through this series of measures, the cultural identity of ethnic regions has been further shaped, and 'cultural continuum' has become one of the core contents of the policy system. At this time, the

connotation of ethnic policy discourse is not limited to the political division of ethnic identity but extends to the levels of cultural diversity and cultural symbiosis.

Chapter 4 2000-2025: The Reconstruction of China's Ethnic Policy Discourse System and the Deepening of the Cultural Continuum

Since entering the 21st century, China's ethnic policy discourse system has undergone significant transformation, with the concept of 'national boundaries' gradually shifting to 'cultural continuum.' The core focus of ethnic policy has also shifted from mere political integration to the deepening of cultural identity and social inclusion. In the context of rapid globalization and informatization, the diversity and interactivity of ethnic cultures have become important components of China's ethnic policy. Cultural identity is no longer merely a review of history and tradition, but a key element in constructing a modern multicultural society.

1.The Direction and Characteristics of China's Ethnic Policy in the 21st Century

At the beginning of the new century, as China rose on the international stage, ethnic issues gradually became an important topic in national governance. Especially in the context of globalization, ethnic issues are no longer limited to traditional boundary delineation, but have also sparked attention to ethnic cultural identity and integration. After 2000, the discourse on ethnic policy gradually broke away from traditional political definitions, shifting towards cultural identity, social integration, and the construction of an ethnic community. In the policy discourse system, "ethnic equality" and "ethnic unity" remain core objectives, but there is a stronger emphasis on cultural interaction and cultural inclusiveness. This transformation is reflected in the policy's respect for and inclusiveness of different ethnic cultural backgrounds, no longer merely focusing on the division of ethnic regions, but placing greater emphasis on the fluidity and interactivity of culture(Zhou 2019).

2. The Proposal and Significance of the Concept of 'Cultural Continuum'

With the advancement of globalization, the concept of 'cultural continuum' has received increasing attention. The 'cultural continuum' not only represents the continuity of various ethnic cultures in the historical development process but also reflects the interconnections and interdependencies among ethnic groups in a multicultural context. Especially in the ethnic policies after the reform and opening up, the idea of 'cultural continuum' has become an important tool for harmonizing relations among different ethnic groups. By emphasizing the connections and interactions between cultures, the 'cultural continuum' breaks through the closed-minded thinking patterns of traditional ethnic concepts and constructs a more inclusive multi-ethnic cultural system. The introduction of this concept provides new opportunities for cultural exchanges and interactions among various ethnic groups, while also addressing the cultural conflicts and challenges brought about by globalization.

3. The Multiple Connotations and Challenges of 'Culture' in Ethnic Policy Discourse

In the discourse of ethnic policy in the 21st century, the connotation of 'culture' has been further expanded. From a singular focus on cultural protection to a multi-layered cultural integration, culture is no longer exclusive to a particular ethnic group but is a multidimensional, cross-cultural interaction process. The multiple connotations of 'culture' provide a richer theoretical foundation for ethnic policy, but also bring greater challenges. How to balance the conflicts between traditional culture and modern culture in the context of globalization, and

how to address the contradictions and conflicts between different ethnic cultures, have become difficult issues for policymakers. Especially in some ethnic regions with significant cultural differences, achieving diversity in cultural identity remains a pressing challenge for ethnic policy (Xu, Pittock et al. 2021).

4. The Challenges and Future Development Trends of 'Cultural Continuum' in Current Ethnic Policy Discourse

Although the "cultural continuum" has become one of the core contents of ethnic policy discourse, there are still many practical challenges in implementing this concept. First, the differences in ethnic cultures still exist, especially the significant differences in cultural identity between ethnic minorities and the Han people, which requires ethnic policies to respect cultural diversity while also considering national unity and social stability. Second, globalization has brought about a trend of cultural homogenization, and how to protect the cultural characteristics of various ethnic groups in the context of globalization, while avoiding cultural loss, is a question that needs deep reflection. In addition, the rapid development of information technology and digitization has also brought new opportunities and challenges for the inheritance and exchange of ethnic cultures. In this process, how to use modern technology to promote cultural identity and facilitate cross-ethnic cultural integration has become a new topic for ethnic policy in the new era (Cheng and Liu 2023).

Chapter 5 Case Analysis

Through the review of the evolution of China's ethnic policy discourse system in the first five chapters, we have explored the macro transformation from 'national boundaries' to 'cultural continuum'. In this transformation process, specific cases from individual ethnic regions have demonstrated the concrete application of policy discourse and the challenges they face. The following will further analyze how the concept of 'cultural continuum' is implemented in practice through the two representative ethnic regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, and discuss the complexities and effectiveness of ethnic policy implementation in these areas.

1. The Tibet Issue and the Application of Cultural Continuum

The Tibet region has always been an important focus of China's ethnic policy. Since the 1950s, the central government has implemented a series of measures related to ethnic policy, aimed at promoting stability and development in the Tibet region. Initially, ethnic policy was mainly focused on political control and the realization of ethnic unity, but over time, the concept of a 'cultural continuum' has gradually become an indispensable part of the policy.

In the 1980s, Tibet began to emphasize the interrelationship between cultural identity and national unity. The government not only strengthened the cultural heritage of Tibet but also encouraged interaction and integration between Han and Tibetan cultures. Through the policy of regional ethnic autonomy and a series of cultural exchange activities, Tibet gradually integrated into the larger cultural framework of China, maintaining the unique cultural characteristics of the Tibetan people while interacting with the cultures of other ethnic groups, promoting mutual understanding and integration of cultural identity. The concept of a 'cultural continuum' implemented in Tibet facilitated the common development of various ethnic cultures and also enhanced the sense of national identity among the Tibetan people.

However, the Tibet region also faces challenges in implementing the 'cultural continuum'. Although policies encourage cultural exchange, how to effectively protect Tibetan traditional culture amidst conflicts between some traditional and modern cultures, and to avoid the risk of cultural homogenization, remains a long-standing issue. Finding a breakthrough in balancing the diversity of cultural identity and maintaining cultural uniqueness is still a significant topic faced by the Tibet region(Wu 2013).

2. The Challenge of the Xinjiang Issue and Cultural Identity

The Xinjiang region is another important area in China's ethnic policy. Xinjiang has rich ethnic and cultural diversity and is one of the most complex areas for ethnic issues in China. In the late 2000s, with the transformation of ethnic policy and the introduction of the concept of 'cultural continuum', significant changes also occurred in Xinjiang's ethnic policy. The idea of 'cultural continuum' encourages the exchange and integration of multi-ethnic cultures and strives to promote interaction and coexistence between the cultures of ethnic groups such as the Kazakhs and Uighurs and Han culture.

In Xinjiang, the focus of ethnic policy is on the co-construction of ethnic unity and cultural identity. The government strives to promote cultural interaction and understanding between the Uyghur ethnic group and other ethnicities through measures such as educational reform, ethnic cultural exhibitions, and ethnic exchanges. However, the region faces many complex issues in the implementation of the 'cultural continuum,' particularly the conflict of cultural identity. Due to significant cultural differences between ethnic groups historically, there are notable disparities in cultural identity between the Uyghur and Han ethnic groups. How to eliminate barriers between ethnicities while maintaining the diversity of ethnic cultures has become a major challenge for ethnic policy.

In addition, the Xinjiang region is also facing interference from external factors, especially the intervention of foreign forces in the Xinjiang issue, which has led to increased tension in ethnic relations. How to respond to this situation and balance national sovereignty with ethnic cultural identity remains a key issue that future ethnic policies need to address.

3. The Cross-Ethnic Integration of Cultural Identity and Future Prospects

The actual cases of Tibet and Xinjiang indicate that in promoting the 'cultural continuum', although policies have achieved certain results in fostering cultural identity and ethnic integration, there are still many challenges in effectively implementing these policies when facing cultural differences, regional conflicts, and external interventions. While the concept of 'cultural continuum' provides a new path for China's ethnic policy, balancing ethnic cultural identity with national unity in the context of globalization, and reaching a consensus between cultural diversity and cultural symbiosis, remain key issues for future ethnic policy formulation. In the future, with the development of technology and the deepening of globalization, cultural identity will become an increasingly important part of ethnic policy. The exchange and integration of ethnic cultures will deepen, and the 'cultural continuum' will provide a broader space for the exchange of various ethnic cultures. Through specific case studies of regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang, we can see that the transformation of the ethnic policy discourse system is not only an innovation in theory but also a profound change in practice. This transformation provides more ideas and directions for future ethnic policies, promoting China's continuous development in a multicultural context.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

Through the study of the evolution of China's ethnic policy discourse system from 1949 to 2025, it can be observed that with the changes of the times, China's ethnic policy has gradually shifted from a singular division of ethnic boundaries to an inclusion and respect for multicultural identities. Especially with the acceleration of economic development and globalization, the ethnic policy discourse system has been continuously adjusted, the political divisions of 'ethnic boundaries' have gradually become blurred, and 'cultural continuum' has become a new theoretical framework. This evolution reflects the deepening understanding of ethnic issues in Chinese society and the continuous optimization of response strategies.

1. The historical trajectory of China's ethnic policy discourse system

The discourse system of China's ethnic policy has undergone a transformation from 'national boundaries' to 'cultural continuum.' The starting point of this transformation can be traced back to the period of constructing ethnic policies after the founding of the new China, where the establishment of 'national boundaries' provided a political framework for China's multi-ethnic society, aiding national unity and ethnic solidarity. However, with the development of society and the increasing complexity of ethnic issues, 'national boundaries' gradually became inadequate to meet the demands of the new era for ethnic policies, and cultural identity and cultural exchange have increasingly become important aspects of addressing ethnic issues. Entering the 21st century, the proposal of 'cultural continuum' not only responds to the challenges of globalization to cultural identity but also injects new vitality into China's ethnic policy.

2. The Proposal of 'Cultural Continuum' and the Integration of Multiculturalism

The concept of 'cultural continuum' as a new idea in the ethnic policy discourse system emphasizes the cultural connections and interactions between ethnic groups. The introduction of this concept marks a shift in China's ethnic policy from emphasizing regional political independence to a more inclusive model of cultural diversity. The 'cultural continuum' not only focuses on the inheritance and protection of ethnic cultures but also emphasizes the exchange and integration between cultures, promoting cultural identity and social integration in a multi-ethnic society.

3. Challenges Facing Ethnic Policy and Future Development Trends

Although the "cultural continuum" has become an important component of current ethnic policy, how to balance the conflict between cultural identity and modernization in the context of globalization, and how to promote national unity while respecting cultural diversity, remain pressing issues for policymakers to address. In addition, the advancement of information technology and science has brought new opportunities and challenges for the construction of cultural identity. Future ethnic policies will face various challenges and tasks, such as how to use digital technology to promote cultural exchange and enhance national unity.

4. Future Outlook

China's ethnic policy will be further deepened on the basis of the 'cultural continuum', promoting harmonious coexistence among various ethnic groups. In future development, ethnic policy will place greater emphasis on the interactivity and diversity of cultures, fostering a sense of identity and belonging among different ethnic groups in their common development. By developing the integration and coexistence of ethnic cultures in the context of globalization,

China will further consolidate the unity of its multi-ethnic nation and play a more important role in building a harmonious society, promoting ethnic unity, and advancing social progress.

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