

# The Anthropological Construction of Chinese National Identity from "Unity in Diversity" to Community-Building in Contemporary Discourse

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**Abstract:** The construction of ethnic identity is a core issue in contemporary Chinese ethnic studies and an important content in the field of cultural anthropology. Its theoretical development and practical exploration play a significant role in the construction of cohesion in multi-ethnic countries and are crucial to the long-term stability of our country. Based on this, this paper, from the perspectives of the holistic view and process theory of anthropology, sorts out the practical narrative and evolutionary context of Chinese national identity, clarifies the anthropological connotation of "diversity in unity", as well as the overall context of the development of the theory of community building. Based on the three stages of traditional period, modern transformation and contemporary discourse, this paper expounds the evolution logic of the construction of Chinese national identity in stages, and analyzes the identity process of pluralism and integration, Mosaic and mutual construction. The study holds that the construction of Chinese ethnic identity is a dynamic generation process. The contemporary narrative of community construction transcends the binary opposition of diversity and unity and provides certain references for the construction of ethnic identity in multi-ethnic countries, taking a path with Chinese characteristics. The results of this study are helpful to enrich the anthropological perspective of national identity research, so as to strengthen the sense of community of the Chinese nation.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Identity; Ethnic Studies; Anthropology; Diversity and Unity; Ethnic Community

## 1. Introduction

Cultural anthropology is a basic discipline with "culture" as the core research object, focusing on the way of life, meaning system and social

interaction of human groups. Its core objective is to understand how different groups construct meaning, maintain boundaries and shape identities through close field observation. Since its inception, cultural anthropology has always regarded the construction of collective human identity as its core proposition. From the perspective of cultural anthropology, whether it is the maintenance of village clan boundaries or the shaping of identity of modern nation states, it is the result of the joint action of symbol, narrative and daily practice. Compared to other disciplines, cultural anthropology's research on ethnic issues has always focused on the generation process of identity in daily practice. This ethnographic research method, by capturing the specific forms of identity in daily scenarios such as neighborhood interactions, weddings and funerals, and festival celebrations, can enrich the content of ethnic identity research and construct a realistic logic. At the same time, cultural anthropology also provides a more dialectical theoretical framework for dealing with the relationship between "diversity" and "integration". Any complex cultural community is not a homogeneous collection of a single culture, but is formed by the mutual chimerism of multiple heterogeneous cultural elements, and diversity itself is the internal attribute of the community. Based on these unique disciplinary advantages, in recent years, cultural anthropology has formed in-depth interdisciplinary interactions with disciplines such as political science, sociology, and ethnology. A large number of anthropological empirical studies have confirmed that cultural identity has a distinct processuality and strategic nature. As the largest and oldest unified multi-ethnic country in the world, the 56 ethnic groups in China have formed a pattern of mutual integration through thousands of years of development. Its unique experience of identity development provides a rare sample for the study of global multi-ethnic countries, and also

provides a practical sample for the study of cultural anthropology.

In the construction of the contemporary Chinese academic discourse system, the issue of national identity holds great significance. It not only affects the outcome of theoretical construction but also relates to the issues of real national governance and social unity. National identity is not only the connection of emotional bonds between individuals and groups, but also an important entry point for the historical pattern of the multi-ethnic unity of the Chinese nation and its contemporary transformation. As early as the 1980s, Mr. Fei Xiaotong delivered a famous speech titled "The Multifaceted and Unified Pattern of the Chinese Nation" at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, systematically proposing the theory of "the multifaceted and unified pattern of the Chinese nation". He clearly pointed out, "The Chinese nation as a conscious ethnic entity emerged during the confrontation between China and Western powers in the past century, but as an inherent ethnic entity, it was formed through thousands of years of historical processes." This definition first clarified the hierarchical relationship between "multiplicity" and "unity": The so-called "multiplicity" refers to that dozens of different ethnic groups within China all have their own unique historical memories, cultural traditions, languages, and lifestyles. This diversity is a real historical product and not an artificially constructed illusion; while the so-called "unity" means that through migration, marriage, trade, war and other means over thousands of years, various ethnic groups have formed a mutually embedded relationship where you have me and I have you, ultimately coalescing into a higher-level ethnic entity - the Chinese nation. Fei Xiaotong particularly emphasized that unity is not the elimination of multiplicity but "an ethnic identity formed on the basis of multiple ethnic groups, and does not exclude the self-identity of each ethnic group. Instead, it provides a more stable framework for the identity of each ethnic group." Since the new era, with the profound changes in the domestic social structure and the deep adjustments in the international landscape, "strengthening the consciousness of the Chinese nation community" has become the main thread of ethnic work, and the discourse of community construction has gradually emerged. National identity research has gradually shifted from describing the existing pattern to the practical

dimension of actively constructing community identity.

Behind the discourse transformation from "unity in diversity" to community construction, is the logical transformation of China's national identity construction from historical accumulation to active shaping. It also raises new questions for academic research: what is the relationship between theoretical inheritance and innovation? What are the construction characteristics of Chinese national identity in different historical periods? How does the contemporary narrative of community building solve the proposition of "diversity" and "unity"? What are the theoretical contributions and practical value? Existing studies mostly focus on single-dimensional analysis, either concentrating on the textual interpretation of the "diversity and unity" theory or separately discussing the policy implications of community building. Few studies have systematically examined this complete evolutionary process from an anthropological perspective and conducted theoretical refinement.

Based on this, this paper will take the holistic view and process theory of anthropology as the foundation, and combine the research results of interdisciplinary studies to systematically examine the construction process of Chinese national identity from "diversity as one" to community building, clarify the anthropological discourse connotation of "diversity as one" and the evolution logic of community building theory, and sort out the historical context of the construction of Chinese national identity from the traditional period to contemporary times. It provides certain references for forging a strong sense of the Chinese nation as a community in the new era.

## **2. Anthropological Perspectives on National Identity**

### **2.1 The Concept of "Unity in Diversity" in Anthropological Discourse**

Cultural anthropology places great emphasis on cultural diversity and regards culture as the fundamental premise for understanding human society. In the context of Chinese ethnic identity, the concept of "unity within diversity" is not a simple acknowledgment of cultural differences, but rather a more deeply explanatory structural cognitive framework. In the theory of the multi-integration pattern of the Chinese nation

proposed by Fei Xiaotong in the 1980s, it was fully emphasized that in the long-term historical interaction between the Han nation and other ethnic minorities, the integration structure of "come and go, I come and go" was formed, and through the integration and communication of these ethnic groups, a highly identified whole was condensed. Compared with political science research, the multi-unity in the discourse of cultural anthropology is not a simple union. Instead, it regards cultural diversity as an endogenous structural feature of the Chinese nation. Under this structure, each ethnic group has its unique language, customs, religion and artistic traditions. However, in the process of integrating with the Central Plains culture, there has been an evolution of homogenization and integration. This is a process of ethnic symbiosis. Current research suggests that Chinese ethnic culture is not the simple sum of 56 ethnic cultures, but is an organic whole formed by the integration of cultures from various ethnic groups and regions over thousands of years of interaction. From the perspective of the holistic view of humanistic culture, this organic formation comes from both the differences of ethnic groups and the multi-level convergence of regions, clans, and religious traditions. Many ethnic minorities have different branches, use different languages, and have different cultural features, but these branches are also incorporated into the overall narrative of the Chinese nation. Thus, diversity is the local foundation for the recognition of various ethnic cultures, providing a solid and reliable basis for the evolution of cultural recognition, while unity serves as a higher-level cultural symbol, laying a shared value foundation for the identification of the Chinese nation. Cultural anthropology interprets this evolution as a process of cultural interweaving and identity superimposition. It is a cultural product accumulated over a long history through ethnic integration and also a dynamic outcome of cultural integration, dissemination, and continuous reproduction among multiple ethnic groups in their daily practices.

## **2.2 Community-Building Theory and Its Evolution**

The theory of community construction is a new form of the current theory of unity in diversity. If the theory of unity in diversity focuses on the description of the existing cultural pattern, the theory of community construction reflects a

more active and constructive identity shaping. It actively answers the question of how we should shape a higher-level identification of the Chinese nation. The emergence and development of this theory have been influenced by multiple factors, including social identity theory and constructivist thought. Among them, social identity theory holds that group identity is not an innate and original attribute but is constructed by individuals through three stages: categorization, identification, and comparison, and they will actively internalize group norms and thereby form an emotional attachment to the belonging community. Constructivist thought, on the other hand, from a macro perspective, points out that any ethnic community is essentially an "imagined political community". The boundary of this community is no longer determined by innate factors such as bloodline and race, but is formed through specific symbol systems, public discourse, and institutional arrangements. The community integrates scattered individuals into a community with a shared historical memory, common interests, and a common future. At the beginning of its birth, the theory of community construction has been freed from the limitation of the original theory, and the national identity is regarded as a dynamic process that can be shaped and constructed, rather than a fixed historical result. Since the new era, the proposition of strengthening the awareness of the Chinese nation community has marked that China's theory of community building has gradually matured. This theory emphasizes the process of integration and mutual construction, that is, on the basis of respecting the uniqueness of each culture, through cultural integration, economic interdependence, and the cultivation of emotional bonds, achieve the organic integration of the identities of various groups, and ultimately form a "you are in me, I am in you, and no one can be separated from the other" community of destiny. It no longer considers "diversity" and "unity" as an either/or zero-sum relationship, nor does it believe that identity construction is a top-down one-way inculcation process. Instead, it emphasizes that community identity is generated through the interaction of state guidance, social participation and individual practice.

## **2.3 Interdisciplinary Research between National Identity and Cultural Anthropology**

The construction of national identity lies at the

intersection of anthropology, political science, sociology and other disciplines. Cultural anthropology mainly explains the micro-mechanism of national identity construction through ethnographic methods. In recent years, more scholars have combined macro-level institutional analysis with micro-level field observations to explain how national identity is received and creatively transformed by grassroots society. For instance, Yang Qi (2025) [1] in her research analyzed the construction system of intangible cultural heritage inheritors, pointing out that the state naming folk artists as national and provincial-level inheritors not only incorporates their personal memories into the protection framework at the national level, but also elevates their identity to that of cultural representatives of Chinese culture. This identity transcends the level of local folk representatives and establishes a systematic connection between individual identity and the national identity of the Chinese nation. Yang Yaxiong (2024) in her research pointed out that the Southeast Asian returned overseas Chinese communities are multi-ethnic mixed spaces, and the cultural of the returned overseas Chinese group and other groups have natural differences and boundary consciousness. However, the relationship between borders and national identity is not zero-sum. On the contrary, people have a clearer understanding of the common national affiliation in comparison and interaction. The results of these two studies both indicate that cultural identity has a distinct processuality and strategic nature. The same individual may emphasize their national identity when facing state institutions and display the traditional identity of their own ethnic group within the local community. This identity is dual, but it precisely reflects the considerable elasticity and depth of contemporary Chinese national identity. It can also be seen from the above research that the current research on national identity has gone beyond the simple text analysis and paid more attention to the tracking of individual life course, analyzing how the national identity has been imprinted on the individual, and this kind of research also provides a more three-dimensional basis for understanding national identity.

### **3. Historical Evolution of Chinese National Identity Construction**

#### **3.1 Traditional Period: Cultural Identity Based on "Unity in Diversity"**

During the long history preceding modern times, China's national identity was mainly manifested as a cultural worldview rather than a modern national identity based on clear territorial and citizenship concepts. During this period, cultural identity was deeply influenced by Confucianism, centered around the ritual and music civilization and the Chinese character writing system, and constructed a unified cultural community that transcended the rise and fall of specific dynasties. Since the establishment of a unified political structure in the Qin and Han Dynasties, although the territory of the central dynasties has shrunk from time to time, it has continued to promote the integration process with Chinese culture as the main stem and compatible with other frontier ethnic cultures in the cultural level. The ruling elites and intellectual classes of ethnic minorities often actively absorbed the Confucian tradition and incorporated their own regimes into the lineage of the Chinese mainstream culture. The Hanization policies implemented by the Northern Wei Xianbei rulers, the respect for Confucianism during the Yuan and Qing dynasties, all demonstrated the high degree of recognition and conscious alignment of the minority-dominated dynasties with the mainstream Chinese culture. In this context, "diversity" was not completely opposed to "unity". There was a great deal of mutual learning between the Han ethnicity and ethnic minorities. Although ethnic minorities retained their own languages, clothing, and religious life, they also accepted imperial enfeoffment, used Chinese characters for documents, and participated in the imperial examination. Such cultural inclusiveness under the framework of unification has effectively protected the cultural diversity of the Chinese nation and enhanced its identity in a subtle way. The construction of identity in the traditional period largely relied on shared historical memories and written practices, such as official compilation of history books, construction of Confucian temples, and promotion of Confucian education. These institutional measures shaped the allegiance of ethnic elite leaders to the Chinese cultural community in an intangible way. Although the national consciousness of the general public is still relatively vague, in comparison with the outside world, the boundary consciousness of "the distinction between Hua and Yi" has laid a

solid psychological foundation for a higher level of Chinese identity.

### **3.2 Modern Transformation: Challenges and Reconstruction of National Identity**

After the middle of the 19th century, the impact of Western powers prompted China to undergo a rapid transformation from a feudal state to a modern sovereign state. Traditional cultural identity faced unprecedented severe challenges. Against this backdrop, the modern concept of national identity was put on the agenda. Modern intellectuals began to redefine the concept of "Chinese nation" and tried to integrate all ethnic groups within the territory into a unified political nation. This slogan explored and attempted to establish ethnic identity at the institutional level, and also opened an important path for the construction of China's national identity. It was a dual reconstruction of national identity and recognition of ethnic identities. This dual reconstruction of the slogan also sowed the seeds for the profound differences in ethnic concepts between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party of China later. The Kuomintang once implemented the policy of national assimilation, denying the unique identities of various ethnic minorities. However, such measures not only induced the backlash of Han chauvinism, weakened the moral legitimacy of national integration, but also failed to play a good role in gathering the identity of all parties. In sharp contrast, the Communist Party of China in the revolutionary practice always emphasized the liberation and unity of all ethnic groups, adhering to the principles of ethnic equality and regional autonomy. This position won the high recognition and sincere support of ethnic minorities for the new regime, and also increased the ethnic identity of all ethnic groups. However, this narrative of ethnic equality, while emphasizing the particularity of each ethnic group, also to some extent led to the weakening of the overall narrative of the Chinese nation. Therefore, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the state re-constructed a set of collective identity framework centered on class identity and socialist value system through a series of political movements such as ethnic identification, land reform, and socialist education. From 1949 to 1978, the sense of belonging of social members was highly dependent on the state, class identity and national identity were deeply overlapped,

collectivist organization and egalitarian distribution concept made people form a relatively stable sense of national loyalty in a relatively closed institutional environment. After the reform and opening up, with the comprehensive transformation of the economy and society, this sense of national loyalty was also strongly impacted, and the original ethnic identity foundation faced great pressure, requiring adjustment.

### **3.3 Contemporary Discourse: the Rise of Community-Building Narrative**

Since the reform and opening up, the economic system transition and the sharp differentiation of social structure have led to profound changes in the original identity foundation. Under the clear guidance of "taking economic construction as the center", the life focus of social members has gradually shifted to individual development and family well-being, the interest differences between different regions and groups have been widening, and people's cognition of the country's political, economic and social construction goals has become increasingly diversified. The national identity of the Chinese people showed a certain degree of fluctuation between 1995 and 2007, but since 2008, it has shown a significant recovery under the catalysis of major public events and national ceremonies, forming a "V" shaped trajectory. The narrative of community building gradually took the leading position and became the core discourse guiding the construction of national identity. Different from previous identification strategies, community building no longer inculcates grand narratives from top to bottom, but pays more attention to activating the existing shared values and emotional bonds within and among ethnic groups. The strengthening of the sense of the Chinese nation community has been established as the main thread of ethnic work in the new era, with the core being to achieve the identity elevation from "each being their own best" to "mutual harmony and coexistence" through economic mutual assistance, cultural mutual learning and emotional mutual integration. In practice, the state has increased investment in infrastructure and public services in ethnic areas, promoting the establishment of multi-ethnic interwoven communities, and creating solid platforms for different ethnic members to live and work together in employment, education and residence. The state has shifted from

emphasizing revolutionary history and political loyalty to more relying on traditional culture, historical heritage and common destiny to evoke a deep sense of belonging. For example, the systematic exposition of excellent Chinese culture and the excavation and protection of cultural heritage have become important means to strengthen the common memory of the Chinese nation. On the one hand, the inheritor system of intangible cultural heritage recognizes the unique value of local knowledge, on the other hand, it also integrates it into the framework of national cultural narrative, making the inheritor become the conscious defender of Chinese culture at the same time. This contemporary narrative refuses to view "diversity" and "unity" as a choice relationship, but emphasizes the integration and interconnection of the two, striving to unite consensus in differences and tolerate differences in consensus, leading the construction of national identity onto a more dialectical and sustainable development path.

#### 4. Conclusion and Prospects

##### 4.1 Research Conclusions

This article, from the perspective of cultural anthropology, examines the construction process of Chinese ethnic identity from its diverse unity to the formation of a community. The concept of diverse unity provides the basic framework for describing the internal composition and structure of the Chinese nation. At the civilization level, it integrated the identity of many ethnic groups and laid a deep cultural foundation for later generations. Since the modern era, the construction of the nation-state has become the core issue of national identity. The relationship between "unity" and "diversity" has developed forward through repeated adjustments and explorations. The contemporary narrative of community construction is a construction path that transcends binary oppositions. It is embedded in daily life at the institutional level and uses Chinese excellent traditional culture as a bond at the cultural level. In this process, nation-state identity is no longer a sign externalized in life, but a dynamic experience constantly generated through generation inheritance, ritual practice and emotional labor, with continuous vitality.

##### 4.2 Theoretical Contributions and Practical

##### Implications

This study incorporates the holistic perspective and process theory of cultural anthropology into the analysis of ethnic identity. On one hand, it highlights the strategic nature of cultural identity. This paper provides a research perspective on how different groups flexibly weave multiple identities between national institutions and local knowledge. On the other hand, this study also analyzes the nonlinear characteristics of identity construction, emphasizes the review of the process of national identity from a dynamic perspective, pays attention to the fluctuations in the formation of national identity, and pays attention to the interaction of individual experience, time changes and specific social events on national identity. From a practical perspective, the results of this study are helpful in strengthening the sense of the Chinese nation community, deeply rooted in the minutiae of daily life. In the perceptible world of people's lives, cultivating a sense of community. Policy design should be keenly response identification characteristics of different groups, make the community consciousness of the Chinese nation more approachable, more in line with the cognitive habits of different groups.

##### 4.3 Research Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study integrates the historical macro-process with the perspective of cultural anthropology. The research level is more at the macro level, and it has not fully compared in-depth ethnographies of different regions and ethnic groups. In the future, it is necessary to further focus on the daily interaction of multi-ethnic interembedded communities, use long-term observation and oral history and other methods to capture the specific micro-situation of community perception and key turning points, and analyze the specific logic of national identity construction at a more subtle level.

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