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A Study on the Online Construction of Chinese Cultural Identity: Based on a Field Investigation in Boshu Hui Township, Northern Sichuan

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Abstract:
This study conducts both offline and online fieldwork in Boshu Hui Autonomous Township, located in Langzhong, the only Hui autonomous township in northern Sichuan. The findings reveal that while Boshu Hui Township preserves its traditional Hui cultural identity, it also demonstrates a strong centripetal force towards Chinese culture and a profound sense of national identity. Moreover, the township actively manifests this ethnic self-awareness in the online space. This research provides a novel perspective for understanding ethnic relations in the context of new media.

Keywords:
Northern Sichuan, Chinese Culture, Cultural Identity

With the development of mobile internet technology over the past decade, the internet has evolved into a unique ecosystem through technological integration and content assimilation. It not only reshapes people's daily lives but also redefines cultural symbols in profound ways. Within this media context, the construction of Chinese cultural identity among ethnic minorities in China emerges as a critical area of study. This research aims to explore how the Hui community in Boshu Hui Autonomous Township, located in northern Sichuan, utilizes online platforms to reconstruct its identification with Chinese culture, while addressing the challenges and opportunities encountered in this process.

By delving into these issues, this study seeks to offer valuable insights into the preservation and development of Chinese culture in the digital age. Moreover, it provides theoretical support for policy-making and cultural preservation. The findings are intended to serve as a reference for subsequent policy formulation and educational planning, fostering cultural development and identity-building in Boshu Hui Township and similar regions.

1. Geographical and Cultural Background of Boshu Hui Autonomous Township in Northern Sichuan

The geographical location and cultural background of Boshu Hui Township are fundamental to understanding the reconstruction of Chinese cultural identity in this region. Boshu Hui Township is situated in the

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northern part of Sichuan Province, under the jurisdiction of Langzhong City, a county-level city in Nanchong. Geographically, the township lies on the edge of the Sichuan Basin, characterized by abundant natural resources and diverse terrain. It is also located along the Jialing River, which provides a rich cultural and ecological resource base rooted in water culture.

Administratively, Boshu Hui Township is the only Hui settlement in Nanchong, encompassing one community and four administrative villages, which serve as the fundamental units for local governance and village autonomy. Established as Boshu Hui Township in 1986, evolving from its previous designation as Boshu Township, this administrative structure reflects traditional Chinese governance while facilitating targeted management and policy support for ethnic regions.

In terms of demographics and ethnic composition, the population of Boshu Hui Township primarily comprises Hui people, although other ethnic groups also reside in the area, contributing to a diverse social structure. As one of China’s prominent ethnic minorities, the Hui have successfully preserved and developed their culture and lifestyle within the township.

Understanding this context provides a foundation for subsequent fieldwork and analysis, enabling researchers to examine how Chinese cultural identity is constructed in this region under the influences of economic globalization, digital networks, and other multifaceted factors.

2. Religious and Cultural Identity in the Hui Township of Northern Sichuan

As the only Hui Autonomous Township in northern Sichuan, Boshu Hui Township in Langzhong is defined by its distinct religious and cultural identity, which is key to understanding the region's social structure and cultural heritage. This section explores the religious practices, rituals, and cultural identity of the community, shedding light on the sources and characteristics of their cultural identity.

Historically, the Hui community in Boshu Hui Township has been deeply influenced by Islam. Islamic teachings, rituals, and festivals are integral to the daily lives of the Hui people, serving as a cornerstone of their cultural identity. For instance, religious events such as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are widely celebrated within the community and regarded as significant occasions for family and community gatherings.

In addition to religious practices, cultural identity is shaped by unique dietary habits, traditional clothing, and interactions with other ethnic groups. One defining feature of Hui dietary culture is the preparation of halal food, which not only reflects their religious beliefs but also serves as a marker of distinction from other ethnic communities. Similarly, traditional Hui clothing, such as women’s headscarves and specific styles of headdresses, acts as a visible and cultural symbol that differentiates them from other groups.

Overall, the cultural identity of Boshu Hui Township is a complex interplay of history and modernity, religion and society, tradition and change. Through religious rituals, festival celebrations, education, and daily practices, the Hui people's cultural identity continues to be preserved and developed. Understanding these religious and cultural dimensions offers a more comprehensive perspective on the region’s social structure, cultural traditions, and interethnic relations.

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3. Online Practices of Chinese Cultural Identity in the Hui Township of Northern Sichuan

Zhao Shilin posits that “culture is a social product of humans adapting to their environment, shared by a social group; thus, culture and ethnicity are inseparable.” Ethnic identity is intrinsically linked to cultural identity, and studies on cultural identity often reflect ethnic or group-specific characteristics. British scholar Anthony D. Smith highlights “shared myths or historical memories” as a key feature of ethnic identity, with ethnic symbols serving as vital connectors in forming this sense of identity. Based on these perspectives, this study interprets its findings through three theoretical lenses:

3.1 Shared Historical Memory

The Hui community in Boshu Hui Township of Langzhong is believed to have migrated to the region during the Qing dynasty. Due to the absence of precise historical records, some believe they arrived during the late Ming and early Qing periods as part of the Qing military’s southward campaigns, while others trace their ancestry back to migrations from Quanzhou. It is generally accepted that most Hui residents settled in Boshu during the Qing era.

From the late Qing period onwards, China experienced over two centuries of turmoil and resilience, including the 14-year-long War of Resistance Against Japan. During this period, many Hui individuals across Sichuan actively participated in the national resistance. Among Langzhong's 23,000 Red Army recruits, several were Hui youths. Field interviews revealed that seven Hui villagers from Boshu had visited the Langzhong Red Army Martyrs Memorial Hall, sharing their experiences on social media platforms like WeChat and Douyin. Some noted that they often liked and shared online content featuring Hui heroes from the war, such as videos commemorating Hui Red Army martyr Zuo Baogui, distributing them within Hui online communities. On National Memorial Day, Hui users from Boshu created videos featuring poems, memorials to the Nanjing Massacre, and virtual exhibitions of the War of Resistance, fostering a collective emotional resonance tied to shared national history.

By leveraging digital platforms, users participate in creating and sharing content that reconstructs collective historical memories. These practices cultivate a shared emotional connection within the online space, reinforcing the narrative of a "community of shared destiny" and establishing an emotional linkage mechanism rooted in collective identity.

3.2 Shared Ethnic Symbolism

Shared ethnic symbols evoke a sense of belonging among group members, maintaining connections to collective heritage and identity. These symbols include tangible elements such as flags, monuments, and traditional attire, as well as intangible ones like language, songs, festivals, myths, and values. For the Chinese nation, symbols like the Yellow River, the Great Wall, the dragon, the 24 solar terms, the Spring Festival, and tea represent centuries of cultural continuity. Modern symbols, including the national flag, National Day, and the Monument to the People's Heroes, further enrich this shared heritage.

In the digital realm, Hui users from Boshu actively engage in the dissemination of these shared symbols.

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For instance, during major national holidays like National Day, they adopt profile pictures featuring the national flag. On karaoke platforms, some participate in singing patriotic songs, fostering cultural exchange and integration. The long-standing coexistence of Hui and Han communities has led to mutual cultural influence, with many Hui celebrating the Spring Festival and sharing greetings online. Given Langzhong's historical ties to the festival, Hui users often promote this cultural heritage on Douyin, Kuaishou, and other social platforms.

Enhancing the emotional dimensions of Chinese national identity involves embedding these shared symbols into the daily lives of diverse ethnic groups. By invoking collective memories and leveraging the multimodal affordances of the internet, these practices vividly showcase and strengthen emotional ties within the national community. This process underscores the critical role of shared cultural symbols in fostering interethnic empathy and solidarity online.

3.3 Shared Chinese National Identity

The core of cultural identity lies in recognizing one's cultural and national affiliation. In the online sphere, Hui users from Boshu actively engage in discussions on national identity, often balancing their micro-level Hui identity with their macro-level Chinese identity. Comments such as, "I am Hui, but I know I am primarily a Chinese," reflect this dual recognition. Responses from others echo this sentiment: "Indeed, China is a union of diverse ethnic groups, all part of the greater Chinese nation." Another user remarked, "I am Hui, but also a Chinese citizen; ours is a faith of purity, a noble ethnicity, and a spirit of patriotism."

Some Hui residents also de-emphasize their ethnic identity in favor of geographic affiliation, referring to themselves as "people from Boshu Township" on social media. When asked about this, respondents explained that their primary identification was with Boshu Township, which is inherently part of China. This positioning highlights a nested relationship between Hui identity and Chinese national identity, reflecting a conscious acknowledgment of belonging to the broader Chinese nation.

Overall, the Hui people's identity in the Boshu Hui Autonomous Township establishes a subset-to-superset relationship with the broader Chinese national identity. This dynamic fosters a conscious sense of Chinese national identity, which is actively expressed on digital platforms, highlighting their strong alignment with national cultural values.

However, the influence of the internet on the Chinese cultural identity of the Hui community in northern Sichuan is not without challenges. On the one hand, the diversity and complexity of online information can lead to fragmentation, hindering a comprehensive understanding of Chinese culture. On the other hand, the virtual and anonymous nature of the internet can contribute to the polarization of online discourse, potentially destabilizing individual cultural identities. Thus, exploring how to leverage the internet to strengthen rather than weaken Chinese cultural identity is a critical topic for further research and discussion.

In summary, the internet's impact on the Chinese cultural identity of the Hui community in northern Sichuan is multifaceted. It offers new opportunities for the reconstruction of cultural identity while also presenting significant challenges. Future research should focus on harnessing the positive potential of the internet while addressing its challenges to enhance the cultural identity and sense of belonging among the residents of the

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Boshu Hui Autonomous Township.

4. Conclusion

"Chinese national cultural identity refers to the self-affirmation, self-unification, self-motivation, and self-cohesion of the nation, mediated through the essence of traditional Chinese culture." For ethnic minorities, the identification with the Chinese nation and their own ethnic culture forms a unique dual cultural identity structure. According to the dual ethnic cultural identity theory, individuals can simultaneously develop a positive emotional attachment to both their own ethnic group and the broader mainstream society.

This study reveals that, unlike the Hui populations in Northwest China, the Hui community in Southwest China, although smaller in scale, demonstrates a strong sense of identity with both their Hui ethnicity and culture, as well as a profound recognition, pride, and belonging to the Chinese national identity and culture. This dual identity is not merely an inherited cultural characteristic but also a psychological construct shaped through lived experiences. It is manifested in both real-life interactions and online practices that reinforce this high degree of cultural identification.

However, the study has its limitations. First, the virtual and anonymous nature of online spaces presents challenges that may affect the reliability and depth of the findings. Additionally, the dynamic and evolving characteristics of the digital environment necessitate long-term observation and continuous updates to research methodologies to adapt to the rapidly changing landscape.

In sum, while the study underscores the significant role of the internet in fostering cultural identity among the Hui in Southwest China, it also highlights the need for ongoing exploration and methodological refinement to better understand and address the complexities of online cultural identity formation.

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