
Review and Reflection on the Research Approach of Ethnic Relations in the New Era

Min Zhao, Pengfei Liao*

Yuxi Normal University, Yuxi 653100, Yunnan, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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Abstract: Since the reform and opening up, the study of ethnic relations has gradually formed a system. The study of ethnic relations from a multidisciplinary perspective has gained more depth and breadth, with a stronger combination of theoretical frameworks and empirical research, and increasingly diversified research methods. In the new era, research on ethnic relations should continue to deepen the theoretical and practical study of new ethnic relations with Chinese characteristics, achieve a more balanced approach to studying ethnic relations at different levels, and urgently strengthen comparative studies of various types of ethnic relations.

Keywords: Ethnic relations; New ethnic relations; New era

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1. Introduction

After the reform and opening up, China entered a new period of development, accelerating the pace of modernization, rapidly improving the levels of industrialization, informatization, and urbanization, and significantly improving the quality of life for people of all ethnic groups. With the eradication of absolute poverty in China and facing the new era and situation, Chinese ethnic relations have once again entered a new historical period. This article takes the study of ethnic relations in China as the object of review, focusing on summarizing the research achievements of domestic academic circles since the reform and opening up in terms of the connotation of ethnic relations, the evolution of ethnic relations, the influencing factors and early warning mechanisms of ethnic relations, and ethnic relations theories. It explores the gains and losses of existing ethnic relations research and the path for future research.

2. Connotation of ethnic relations

The understanding of ethnic relations varies from era to era, and these differences constitute the rich connotation of ethnic relations. Overall, the academic community has explored the connotation of ethnic relations mainly from aspects such as essential characteristics, manifestations, and functional roles.

Jin believed that ethnic content is the key to constituting ethnic relations ^[1]. To determine the extension and connotation of ethnic relations, Liao and Qin believed it is necessary to examine the elements that may produce ethnic relations in inter-ethnic exchanges ^[2]. Zhang and Zhong emphasized that the core issues of ethnic relations are ethnic interests, ethnic rights, and ethnic development ^[3]. Yuan believed that mutual benefit and symbiosis between ethnic groups are the foundation of ethnic relations ^[4]. Ethnicity is the nature that distinguishes ethnic relations from other social relations, and interest is the driving force for the occurrence and development of ethnic relations. In terms of manifestations, Xu pointed out that ethnic relations are manifested as peaceful, conflicting, or coexisting relations within and between ethnic groups ^[5]. In terms of function, Li believed that ethnic relations transmit or exchange “energy” between ethnic groups, promoting the ordering and integration of multi-ethnic societies ^[6]. In the process of ethnic relations evolution, Liu believed that ethnic relations have their own development laws under the influence of various internal and external factors ^[7]. Based on the above scholars’ discussions, ethnic relations arise from the inherent drive for survival and development, characterized by ethnicity and interest, and have the function of promoting the orderly development of inter-ethnic relations, with groups as the basic form of expression.

3. Evolutionary forms of ethnic relations

Ethnic relations are a dynamically developing process. Bai believed that the mainstream of ethnic relations development is the co-creation of history, joint efforts, mutual dependence, and mutual support among multiple ethnic groups, jointly pushing forward the development of Chinese history ^[8]. Yang thought that long-term contact, close interaction, mutual dependence, and common development are the mainstream of ethnic relations in Chinese history ^[9]. Chen pointed out that when discussing ethnic relations in history, it is important to value the contributions made by ethnic minorities to the creation of a unified multi-ethnic country in China ^[10]. From a dialectical perspective, China’s ethnic relations contain contradictions within the trend of harmonious development ^[11]. As China’s ancestors evolved from barbarism to civilization, they experienced three stages of development: antagonistic ethnic relations, closed ethnic relations, and open ethnic relations ^[12]. In the study of ethnic relations, Fei’s theory of the “diverse yet unified pattern of the Chinese nation” has had the greatest influence ^[13]. With the changes and development of social history, the nature of ethnic relations in China has undergone fundamental changes. The ethnic relations of oppression and exploitation have become history, and a new type of ethnic relation featuring equality, unity, mutual assistance, and harmony has become the mainstream. After the founding of the country, the exchanges between various ethnic groups have continued to deepen, and the feelings of mutual understanding, respect, and identity have further strengthened ^[14]. Historically, the general trend of ethnic relations in China has been to value harmony and coexistence in diversity, with various ethnic groups united and helping each other to create Chinese history.

4. Influencing factors and early warning mechanisms of ethnic relations

Research on the influencing factors and early warning mechanisms of ethnic relations can timely guide ethnic relations onto a healthy development path. In the period of social transformation, due to various reasons, there are disparities in the economic and social development of various ethnic groups, and conflicts and collisions can easily arise from differences in interactions ^[15]. The mobility of ethnic populations has had a positive impact on the formation of a “diverse yet unified” Chinese culture ^[16]. However, factors such as high population mobility, strong ethnic and religious consciousness, and poor ability to actively adapt to cities have also had a negative impact on urban ethnic relations ^[17].

Constructing a scientific, reasonable, and feasible early warning mechanism for ethnic relations has become the focus of current research. Yang explored the functional orientation, construction principles, and basic structure of the early warning mechanism for ethnic relations ^[18]. Zheng and Zhang believed that the monitoring and evaluation of ethnic relations should be gradually analyzed and summarized from both macro and micro perspectives, and an indicator system for evaluating ethnic relations should be extracted ^[19]. Yan *et al.* thought that the early warning system for ethnic relations includes organizational structure, division of responsibilities, operational processes, supervision and implementation, and a safeguard system ^[20]. For the complex urban ethnic relations and their potential risks during the economic and social transformation period, Zhang proposed regulatory countermeasures and a monitoring and early warning mechanism for urban ethnic relations during the economic transformation period ^[21]. The research on the early warning system for ethnic relations is of great significance, and currently, domestic research in this area is still in its infancy.

5. Multidisciplinary exploration of ethnic relations theory

Significant efforts have been made by Jin’s team and the “Heilongjiang Ethnic Publications” in researching and elaborating on the theory of ethnic relations with Chinese characteristics. In 2003, the “Heilongjiang Ethnic Publications” consecutively published 14 papers by Jin and others, providing a systematic and comprehensive exposition of the theory of socialist ethnic relations. Scholars have introduced the concept of “inter-embedding” and proposed the construction of an “ethnically inter-embedded community” to address how to build ideal ethnic relations in society (community) ^[22]. The cultural aspect serves as a crucial link for the existence and functioning of such communities, facilitating the diverse coexistence and mutual integration of various ethnic cultures through long-term cultural exchanges ^[23]. The construction of an “ethnically inter-embedded society” involves creating social structural connections that maintain social solidarity. Different ethnic groups are brought together through these structural connections, as well as connections based on shared interests and social participation, fostering an organic unity ^[24]. From a psychological perspective, ethnic interactions are inherently linked to motivational factors. This process encompasses the psychological motivations underlying ethnic interactions, including the cognitive, emotional, volitional, and behavioral dimensions. Establishing an awareness of ethnic equality stands out as a particularly significant aspect of these interactions ^[25]. In the context of ecology, some scholars argue that “ethnic symbiosis reflects a complementary relationship in ethnic interactions. The emergence and development of this relationship can evolve the ethnic symbiosis system towards a more vital direction” ^[26]. The integration of symbiotic complementarity theory with sociological theories provides valuable insights for constructing an ideal model of

“symbiotic complementarity” in ethnic relations in scattered and mixed areas.

6. Reflection and prospects

Academic research on ethnic relations has achieved fruitful results. Firstly, the study of ethnic relations has gradually formed a system. Secondly, from the perspectives of multiple disciplines such as ethnology, sociology, history, political science, psychology, and ecology, new breakthroughs have been made in the depth and breadth of research on ethnic relations. Thirdly, the combination of theoretical research and empirical research on ethnic relations has been further strengthened. Fourthly, the use of qualitative and quantitative methods in the study of ethnic relations has gradually increased, but further advancements in broader and deeper directions are needed based on existing research results.

Firstly, it is necessary to continue strengthening the research and interpretation of the theory of ethnic relations with Chinese characteristics, focusing on the study of empirical facts of ethnic relations in a specific time and space. Research should be based on national conditions and facts, constantly enriching its theoretical connotation in the dynamically changing ethnic relations.

Secondly, a more balanced approach is needed in the hierarchical study of ethnic relations. China's ethnic relations can be divided into three levels. For the convenience of expression, the relations between ethnic groups can be called primary; the relations between ethnic minorities and the Han nationality can be called intermediate; the relations between all ethnic groups and the Chinese nation can be called advanced. Primary ethnic relations are the foundation, intermediate ethnic relations are the core, and advanced ethnic relations are the goal. Among existing studies, high-level ethnic relations represented by “pluralistic integration” have achieved significant research results; intermediate-level ethnic relations research results are second; primary ethnic relations research still has much room for improvement, and empirical research can still make a significant contribution.

Thirdly, the comparative study of ethnic relations urgently needs to be strengthened. The holistic study of China's ethnic relations, on the one hand, requires comparing the similarities and differences between the three levels of ethnic relations and studying the interactive relationships among them. On the other hand, it also necessitates comparing various ethnic relations within each level, discovering the similarities and differences in the formation reasons, influencing factors, interaction modes, and identity consciousness of different types of ethnic relations through comparison, and identifying their unique and common features.

Fourthly, the study of ethnic relations should be based on the new era. After decades of development, China has become the world's second-largest economy. With the comprehensive eradication of absolute poverty, China has embarked on its second centenary goal, and the Chinese nation has begun to move towards becoming stronger. In this context, the living standards of all ethnic groups have been greatly improved, the scope and frequency of exchanges and interactions among ethnic groups have gradually increased, and ethnic relations have developed positively overall. However, the new era brings new situations and problems, such as how to overcome the contradictions arising from the widening economic gap among ethnic groups, how to achieve symbiotic complementarity of ethnic cultures within Chinese culture, how to anticipate and resolve ethnic conflicts in new situations, and how to unite the consciousness of various ethnic groups under the consciousness of the Chinese nation community. Facing these new situations and problems, researchers should adopt new ideas and methods, base their work on current social realities, seek truth from facts, and deeply explore the path of healthy development for socialist ethnic relations with Chinese

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