

A Study on the Cultural Identity of Mongolian Women in Contemporary Society

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Abstract. In the context of globalization and modernization, the cultural identity of ethnic minorities is undergoing a dynamic transformation. As a specific ethnic-gender group, Mongolian women face particularly salient issues regarding cultural identity. They not only bear the responsibility of carrying forward traditional culture but also confront the challenges of modernity, rendering them a crucial lens through which to observe cultural adaptation and identity construction. Therefore, the study of the cultural identity of Mongolian women holds both theoretical and practical significance. This study employs a combination of literature review and case study analysis to focus on the mechanisms and expressions of cultural identity among contemporary Mongolian women, exploring their pathways of identity negotiation and construction within multicultural contexts. The findings indicate that their cultural identity is shaped by historical, social, and individual factors. Subsequent to the establishment of New China, their social roles underwent significant transformation, revealing a dual nature of cultural self-perpetuation and social construction, while also facing pressures from modernization and inherent tensions between ethnic and gender identities.

Keywords: Mongolian women, Cultural identity, Self-identity, Social identity, Gender and ethnic tension

1. Introduction

Research on ethnic cultural identity indicates that in the process of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, the cultural adaptation of ethnic members manifests as a continuous learning and internalization of the common cultural values, beliefs, attitudes, behavioral patterns, and language of the Chinese nation [1]. Cultural identity refers to an individual's sense of belonging and attachment to their own culture, which is formed through cultural transmission and innovation. It not only contributes to cultural continuity, multicultural coexistence, and social harmony, but also encourages people to value and preserve their own culture while embracing and respecting the unique values of other cultures [2]. The cultural identity of the Mongolian people is deeply rooted in Shamanistic beliefs and ancestor worship systems, with the veneration of Genghis Khan serving as a core symbol throughout its ethnic history and collective memory. Through ritual ceremonies, ethnic language, and other folk symbols, the Mongolian people continuously sustain their identification with and

reverence for tradition, thereby strengthening national cohesion and a sense of belonging [3]. This study employs literature review and case study methods to explore the cultural identity of contemporary Mongolian women, specifically in the dimensions of self-identity and social identity. This work aims to lay a theoretical foundation and initiate an exploratory inquiry into this specific research area.

2. The construction of self-identity: from cultural inheritance to modern awakening

From the perspective of self-identity, prior to the founding of the People's Republic of China, socio-cultural norms influenced most ethnic minority women to possess a weak sense of cultural self-identity, leading them to perceive themselves in subordinate roles. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, advancements in education and social progress catalyzed an awakening of self-awareness among ethnic minority women, who gradually came to recognize their own value and rights. They began to actively participate in social affairs, particularly in politics and the economy. Through this engagement, they advocated for both individual and collective interests, which reflected an affirmation of their self-worth and capabilities[4]. Mongolian women, throughout this historical process, gradually developed a strong identification with their ethnic culture and abilities. For instance, Narisu has demonstrated confidence in her capabilities and social contributions through her dedicated efforts in promoting tourism in Chifeng City and serving as an Olympic torchbearer[5]. Many Mongolian women have excelled in various fields as professors, entrepreneurs, and artists, embodying traits such as resilience and courage inherent in Mongolian culture throughout their professional development—a clear reflection of self-identity within vocational and social roles[6].

Within traditional Mongolian culture, women consciously preserve cultural practices through participation in rituals such as the worship of Genghis Khan, by using the Mongolian language for prayers and sacrificial songs, and by preserving ethnic attire and dietary customs. They actively internalize and sustain their ethnic culture. Often serving as transmitters of sacrificial ceremonies and oral traditions (such as legends and epics) within families, they foster a profound sense of cultural belonging and self-identity[3]. Influenced by Shamanistic beliefs, many Mongolian women also embrace religious and spiritual concepts, upholding notions of “the immortality of the soul” and “animism,” which reinforce their spiritual connection to ancestors and nature, thereby strengthening their role within the ethnic belief system. Similarly, they internalize the symbol of Genghis Khan. As a national hero and cultural icon, his image and narratives are embedded in women's self-perception through folk legends, ritual texts, and familial education, thereby becoming a core source of pride and identity[3]. Many Mongolian female writers, such as Xi Murong and Sa Rentuya, exhibit a strong sense of ethnic belonging and cultural pride in their works, frequently returning to their “native homeland” through poetry to express nostalgia and a quest for Mongolian history and culture. This sentiment constitutes an essential component of their self-identity. A new generation of Mongolian female writers is also exploring self-identity between tradition and modernity. They neither wish to completely sever ties with their ethnic cultural roots nor to abandon their pursuit of an independent voice as modern women[7].

3. The formation of social identity: from traditional roles to political participation

From the perspective of social identity, in pre-modern society, most ethnic minority women were constrained by traditional patriarchal norms and religious doctrines, which positioned them primarily as appendages to their families and restricted their participation in public affairs, including

politics. After the founding of New China, socio-cultural attitudes gradually promoted gender equality, granting ethnic minority women legal equality and increasing social recognition of their political participation. More ethnic minority women became involved in various levels of people's congresses, political consultative conferences, and party and government organs[8]. Specifically regarding Mongolian women, social and cultural acceptance of their political engagement grew significantly. The government emphasized the training of Mongolian female officials, resulting in Mongolian women holding positions at all levels of governance. Examples include Wuyun Qimuge, who served as Vice Chairperson of the National People's Congress Standing Committee, along with many others working in party committees, government agencies, and legislative bodies.[4] This reflects broader social acceptance and recognition of Mongolian women's political participation, thereby demonstrating an enhanced sense of socio-cultural identification.

Within the framework of Mongolian culture, women reinforce their identity as members of the ethnic community through participation in collective rituals such as the worship of Sulide. These activities not only honor ancestors but also reproduce and consolidate social relationships, with women's roles being endowed with cultural significance by society. In traditional society, women were often regarded as guardians of family and ethnic culture, responsible for transmitting language, customs, and ethical values to younger generations[3]. They also safeguard the purity and sanctity of national symbols, thereby assuming distinct social identities and cultural responsibilities. The cultural identity of Mongolian women is further shaped and affirmed through interactions with external societies (e.g., other ethnic groups). Society assigns Mongolian women a visible and recognized "ethnic representative" identity through public ceremonies such as the Genghis Khan Mausoleum rituals, folk performances, and cultural policies, thereby strengthening their social identity. Women also play significant roles in Mongolian film and television productions. Motherhood is a significant element in Mongolian culture; many Mongolian folk songs praise mothers. This is a fundamental aspect of grassland culture. The image of the father, in terms of humanity, is somewhat inferior to that of the mother[9].

4. The dilemma and challenge of cultural identity in the modern era

However, challenges to cultural identity arise alongside the decline of the Mongolian language and changes in living patterns, social structures, and other ethnic symbols. For instance, in Henan Province, resides a community of Mongolian descendants who trace their lineage to Genghis Khan's lineage from the Yuan Dynasty. After the fall of the Yuan Dynasty, they migrated south and concealed their identities to survive, gradually integrating into Han society. In this process, compiling genealogies became a key means of maintaining family identity, yet they adopted the Han practice of "excluding women from genealogies." Consequently, women in these families are recorded in historical records only by their husband's surname, their own names and contributions effectively erased, thereby causing a rupture in matrilineal history. This practice starkly contrasts with traditional Mongolian respect for women and remains a deeply regrettable cultural memory. From a social identity perspective, this practice has dealt a significant blow to the cultural identity of Mongolian women. Moreover, traditional rituals like the Nadam festival and Ovoo worship, as previously mentioned, are vital for sustaining cultural identity. However, the continuity of these practices is now threatened, and female participation is diminishing[10].

From the perspective of Mongolian female writers, although ethnic identity remains prominent, gender perspectives are gradually being incorporated into their self-identity. Writers such as Huang Wei and Han Jinghui attempt to address issues such as female experience, bodily awareness, and family memory in their works, striving to establish a female discourse. However, these explorations

are often overshadowed by or subsumed within dominant ethnic narratives, resulting in an inadequate expression of gender consciousness that remains in a “hidden stream” state. Furthermore, current research on Mongolian women’s literature predominantly approaches the subject from the angle of ethnic cultural construction, emphasizing “ethnic identity” over “gender identity.”[7] While this approach can enhance the sense of cultural belonging in literary works, it may also obscure multiple identities, such as female consciousness and individual experience, ultimately leading to the predicament of “over-representation of ethnicity.”

5. Conclusions

This study concludes that the cultural identity of contemporary Mongolian women is a dynamic and multifaceted construct, shaped by a complex interplay between self-perception and societal recognition. The research reveals a dual trajectory: on one hand, Mongolian women actively construct a robust self-identity through cultural inheritance, modern professional achievements, and a profound reconnection to their ethnic heritage. This self-identity is fortified by the veneration of Genghis Khan, the preservation of traditions, and the literary expressions of pride in their “native homeland.” On the other hand, their social identity has evolved from traditional, subordinate roles to active political participation and public representation, reflecting broader societal shifts towards gender equality and multicultural recognition. However, this evolution is fraught with challenges. The decline of ethnic symbols, the erosion of the Mongolian language, and historical practices like the exclusion of women from genealogies create significant ruptures in their cultural continuity. A central dilemma identified is the tension between ethnic and gender identities. While literary and academic work often emphasizes ethnic belonging, it risks subordinating female consciousness and individual experience, leading to an “over-representation of ethnicity” that silences other vital aspects of their identity. Therefore, the cultural identity of Mongolian women is a continuous negotiation between preserving tradition and navigating modernity, requiring a more nuanced understanding that equally values both their ethnic and gendered identities. This study is limited by its focus on specific literary and historical examples. Future research could employ quantitative methods to assess the prevalence of these identity dynamics among a broader demographic and explore the impact of digital media on the formation of contemporary Mongolian women’s cultural identity.

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