A Study on the Expression of Interests and Demands of Ethnic Minority University Students in Border Areas and Guidance Strategies: A Case Study of Yunnan Province

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Abstract: The expression of interests and demands by ethnic minority university students in border areas is a critical issue in promoting educational fairness and maintaining campus harmony. This paper, taking Yunnan Province as a case study, analyzes the types of interests and demands of ethnic minority university students, their modes of expression, and the obstacles they face. It explores how factors such as culture, institutional frameworks, and society influence their ways of expressing demands and proposes targeted guidance strategies. The research finds that the interests and demands of ethnic minority university students are primarily centered on economic assistance, equitable access to educational resources, and the protection of cultural rights. Their expression is often passive and disorganized due to traditional beliefs and institutional constraints. The paper suggests improving diverse channels of expression, strengthening legal education, and building mechanisms of cultural inclusivity to enhance the initiative and effectiveness of their expression of interests, providing valuable insights for the governance of higher education institutions in border areas.

Keywords: Border Areas; Ethnic Minority University Students; Interests and Demands; Expression Modes; Yunnan Province

1. Introduction

As a multi-ethnic province located in the southwest frontier of China, Yunnan has a significant proportion of ethnic minority students in its higher education institutions. With the increasing popularity of higher education, the awareness of rights among ethnic minority university students has gradually awakened, yet their expression of interests and demands still faces multiple challenges, including cultural differences and institutional barriers. In recent years, frequent student rights protection incidents in Yunnan universities have exposed the inadequacies in the mechanisms for expressing these demands. How to guide ethnic minority students to express their demands in a rational manner is not only an urgent need for university governance but also a key factor in maintaining social stability in border regions. Therefore, it is crucial to delve deeper into the characteristics and optimization pathways of ethnic minority university students' interest expression in Yunnan.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

Existing studies have primarily focused on the general university student population, emphasizing the issues of weak awareness of interest expression and the limited channels available for such expression [1]. Zhou [2] points out that the lack of a mechanism for student demand expression in universities can easily lead to collective incidents, and calls for the construction of a "student-centered" service system through meticulous management. Wu [3], based on empirical research in Yunnan, found that the expression of interests among ethnic minority students shows significant gender and cultural differences: female students are more inclined to peaceful communication, while male students tend to adopt more extreme methods. However, specialized studies on ethnic minority university students in border areas remain relatively scarce, and their unique cultural backgrounds and regional characteristics have not been sufficiently incorporated into analytical frameworks. This paper, based on the "Cultural Adaptation Theory" and "Participatory Governance

Theory", emphasizes the dual shaping role of ethnic culture and institutional design in the expression of demands.

3. Types and Characteristics of the Interest Demands of Ethnic Minority University Students in Yunnan

3.1 Main Types of Interest Demands

3.1.1 Economic support demands: a reflection of the right to survival

Economic development in the border regions of Yunnan has historically been slow, resulting in a significant proportion of students from economically disadvantaged families. As a result, ethnic minority university students place a high emphasis on financial support, such as scholarships, work-study opportunities, and student loans. Their demands are characterized by diversity, individuality, and group-specific needs [4]. For instance, some students from the Wa and Lisu ethnic groups, who come from financially struggling families, are particularly sensitive to the fairness of scholarship and financial aid evaluations. They call for a more transparent and equitable funding process, hoping to avoid instances of "personal favoritism" in aid allocation. Additionally, some students have expressed concerns over the insufficient number of work-study positions or the unfair distribution of available spots, which fail to meet their practical needs.

3.1.2 Demand for educational resource equity: an essential component of the right to development

Historically, education in Yunnan has been underdeveloped, and it was only in modern times that educational opportunities for ethnic minorities began to expand [5]. However, the unequal distribution of educational resources remains a prevalent issue. Ethnic minority students frequently cite concerns such as outdated laboratory equipment, inadequate library resources, and curricula that do not align with their cultural needs. These challenges are particularly evident in certain subjects, such as English, computer science, and the more complex fields of science and engineering [6]. Furthermore, language barriers create additional obstacles to achieving educational equity. Many ethnic minority students, who have limited proficiency in Mandarin, face difficulties in

understanding specialized courses. The lack of targeted language support programs further exacerbates the inequality in accessing educational resources.

3.1.3 Cultural rights demands: a deep expression of identity and belonging

Cultural rights demands are primarily centered around issues of language, religion, and customs. Some universities fail to accommodate the specific needs of ethnic minority students, such as not providing halal food in cafeterias or lacking ethnic cultural representation in campus activities. This neglect leads to a crisis of cultural identity for some students. For example, Hui students' request for halal food in the cafeteria is often overlooked, leading to dietary inconveniences. Similarly, Yi and Hani students have expressed a desire for cultural activities during traditional festivals, such as the Torch Festival, but these requests are often unmet by their institutions. Additionally, some universities place excessive emphasis on "de-ethnicization" in their management policies, which is perceived as an implicit denial of the students' cultural identities, thereby fostering resistance and resentment among the affected students.

3.2 Characteristics of Demand Expression

3.2.1 Passivity and endurance: the dual influence of traditional culture

Influenced by Confucian ideals of moderation and the ethnic culture of compliance, most ethnic minority students in Yunnan tend to adopt a passive or enduring stance when expressing their demands. They often prefer to rely on counselors to mediate issues rather than actively assert their rights. For instance, students from the Lahu and Dai ethnic groups generally perceive challenging authority as impolite, so dissatisfaction with teaching quality or administrative issues is often expressed through private complaints rather than public confrontation. This passive approach reflects a deep respect for authority and a lack of trust in the formal channels available to protect their rights. Additionally, some students, fearing that their demands will be ignored or lead to retaliation, opt for silence, causing their grievances to accumulate over time without resolution.

3.2.2 Lack of organization and dispersed nature: weakening of institutional channels

Traditional student organizations, such as the Student Union and Youth League, have become overly bureaucratic and no longer effectively represent the interests of ethnic minority students. As a result, individual expressions of dissatisfaction have become more common, with students turning to informal platforms like social media and regional student associations to voice their concerns. However, these channels lack the organizational structure needed for collective action. For example, a group of Hani students at a university had a heated discussion on WeChat about dormitory relocation issues, but due to a lack of coordination and organization, the matter was ultimately left unresolved. This fragmented approach prevents their demands from forming a unified voice, reducing the effectiveness of problem-solving efforts. Furthermore, some students have lost trust in traditional student organizations and increasingly turn to online platforms to express their discontent, complicating campus management.

3.2.3 Cultural sensitivity: language and cognitive barriers

Language barriers and differences in cognitive styles contribute to the inefficiency of demand expression. Many ethnic minority students have limited proficiency in Mandarin, which can lead to confusion and misunderstanding when they express their concerns, both orally and in writing. For example, Nu students may struggle to convey their needs clearly in written feedback due to differences in grammar. In addition, cultural differences in thinking and communication styles further complicate the process. For instance, Dai students often prefer to express themselves indirectly, while Han Chinese administrators typically expect direct communication. These differences create communication gaps, resulting in misinterpretations and hindering effective dialogue.

4. Suggestions for Guidance Strategies

4.1 Building Diverse Channels for Expression: From "One-Way Transmission" to "Two-Way Interaction"

4.1.1 Establishing ethnic cultural mediation rooms: promoting demand expression through cultural identity

The primary function of ethnic cultural mediation rooms is to serve as a bridge for cross-cultural communication. Mediators, including ethnic minority counselors, teachers with experience in ethnic regions, and those who specialize in the management of ethnic minority students, would coordinate the efforts to integrate existing resources and leverage the team's strengths [7]. These mediation rooms should operate on a regular rotation, ensuring accessibility and providing a platform for resolution. The "appointment + rotation" system could be implemented to address issues like language barriers and cultural misunderstandings by offering real-time translation and psychological counseling. For example, in cases where students encounter dining disputes due to religious dietary restrictions, the mediators could collaborate with the logistics department to establish "ethnic food windows", resolving conflicts while respecting students' beliefs.

4.1.2 Promoting digital platforms: a technology-enabled mechanism for accurate feedback

Social media has become a key outlet for university students to freely express themselves, exchange ideas, and vent emotions [8]. To harness this medium, universities should strengthen digital platforms, establishing a transparent, end-to-end system for submitting, processing, and providing feedback on grievances. The platform could include modules like "anonymous complaints", "emergency assistance", and "progress tracking", with the ability to analyze big data to identify recurring issues. For instance, if "lab equipment shortages" emerge as a common complaint among Yi students in a given semester, the system would automatically trigger a warning and prioritize resource allocation to the relevant departments. Additionally, the platform should incorporate a "student satisfaction rating" system to evaluate the problem-solving efficiency of administrative departments, holding them accountable for improving service quality and efficiency.

4.2 Strengthening Legal and Rights Education: From "Passive Rights Protection" to "Active Empowerment"

4.2.1 Introducing ethnic-specific legal courses: legal enlightenment embedded in cultural contexts

Legal courses should move beyond a one-size-fits-all theoretical approach and instead integrate case studies specific to ethnic minority regions, thereby contextualizing legal education. For example, a case study analyzing "Tibetan students initiating administrative lawsuits due to restrictions on major transfers" can be used to help students understand the clauses in the Regulations on Student Management in Higher Education Institutions regarding academic autonomy. The course could also invite ethnic minority judges and lawyers to conduct specialized lectures, using a bilingual format to enhance relatability and engagement. Additionally, a Handbook of Minority Rights for University students should be created, using a combination of images and text to illustrate the process of rights protection. This resource should be integrated into the freshman orientation program to ensure that legal awareness is instilled from the very beginning of a student's academic journey.

4.2.2 Establishing legal aid centers: a collaborative rights protection network between universities and local authorities

Universities could partner with relevant social departments or set up specialized offices to provide legal assistance to young students [9], forming a dual-track mechanism of "on-campus consultation" and "off-campus collaboration". The center should include a dedicated "Ethnic Rights Specialist" role to provide targeted services for issues such as ethnic cultural conflicts and religious discrimination. For example, if Hui students face problems with the "mismanagement of halal food facilities", the legal aid team could help students negotiate a solution with the university based on Article 18 of the Urban Ethnic Work Regulations (which protects the dietary customs of ethnic minorities). Furthermore, a "Rights Protection Case Database" should be established, and mock court sessions could be regularly organized to enhance students' practical legal skills through role-playing exercises.

4.3 Improving Participatory Governance Mechanisms: From "Symbolic Participation" to "Substantial Co-Governance"

4.3.1 Implementing student representation: reconstructing the allocation of decision-making power

Student representation should transcend mere "formal attendance" at meetings and instead grant ethnic minority representatives actual proposal and voting rights within university decision-making processes. A "proportional representation system" could be adopted, allocating seats based on the number of students from each ethnic group, ensuring that smaller communities, such as the Miao and Bai, are not marginalized. Representatives should regularly convene an "Ethnic Student Assembly" to gather concerns and submit formal proposals to relevant university departments. For instance, if Hani students request the introduction of "elective courses in ethnic languages", the representatives could collaborate with the academic affairs office to assess feasibility and integrate the course into the credit system. The university should establish a "closed-loop management" mechanism for proposal implementation, ensuring that rejected proposals are accompanied by written explanations and publicly disclosed.

4.3.2 Regularly hosting ethnic cultural festivals: bridging cultural gaps through interaction

Innovative campus cultural activities rich in ethnic elements should be launched to fully engage students from frontier ethnic regions and promote cultural exchange [10]. For example, a "Cultural Mediation Workshop" could be organized, inviting students from different ethnic backgrounds to engage in cross-cultural dialogue on topics such as "dormitory conflicts" and "academic pressure". A "Heritage Craft Corner" could be established, where minority students serve as mentors to teach traditional crafts such as Dai brocade weaving and Naxi Dongba painting. Additionally, universities could collaborate with local communities to host a "Frontier Cultural Study Camp", where students visit ethnic villages and participate in festive rituals. Such hands-on experiences would deepen their understanding of diverse cultures, thus fostering an inclusive campus cultural ecosystem.

5. Conclusion

The interests and demands expressed by ethnic minority university students in Yunnan serve as a microcosm of educational equity and

social stability in frontier regions. This paper analyzes the types, characteristics, and obstacles of their demands, proposing that efforts should be made in three key areas: cultural adaptation, institutional innovation, and legal education, to construct a guiding mechanism that integrates "smooth channels—cultural inclusivity—legal protection". Future research could further explore comparative studies between universities in frontier regions and inland areas, as well as the evolving trends of ethnic minority student demands in the context of globalization.

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