

An Analysis of Pathways for Ethnic Social Work Intervention in Rural Industrial Development: Based on a Fieldwork on the Sheep Industry in Jingyuan County

Liyun Yang*, Shaomin Jiang, Wanfeng He

Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, 730070, China

*Corresponding author: yangly@nwnu.edu.cn

Abstract: Ethnic unity is inseparable from the economic symbiosis and industrial collaboration in multi-ethnic regions. Relying on the sheep industry chain, the Hui and Han ethnic groups in Jingyuan County have formed a functionally complementary pattern of economic symbiosis. However, this symbiotic relationship faces structural conflicts, including uneven benefit distribution, asymmetric market information, an imperfect trust mechanism, and insufficient policy support, which restrict industrial upgrading and in-depth inter-ethnic cooperation. In response, from the perspective of ethnic social work, this paper proposes building a platform for interest negotiation, constructing a multi-channel information-sharing mechanism, fostering a cross-ethnic trust network, and linking policy resources to empower the industry. These measures aim to promote the transformation of the Hui and Han ethnic groups from a shallow division of labor to a deep symbiosis, thereby providing a practical reference for the coordinated development of industrial revitalization and ethnic unity and progress in multi-ethnic regions.

Keywords: Ethnic social work; Industrial development; Hui-Han collaboration; Economic symbiosis

1. Problem Introduction

In regions where multiple ethnic groups coexist, economic activity serves as the most direct and enduring bond for promoting ethnic interaction, communication, and integration. Furthermore, the division of labor, collaboration, and economic symbiosis within industrial sectors constitute a crucial vehicle for forging a strong sense of ethnic identity and consolidating a sense of community. Currently, while significant achievements have been made in the economic and social development of China's ethnic regions, some multi-ethnic areas still face practical challenges in industrial collaboration. These challenges not only hinder the high-quality development of the regional economy but also have a potentially impacting the very foundation of ethnic unity.

As a professional force focused on improving people's livelihoods, resolving social conflicts, and promoting social integration, ethnic social work possesses irreplaceable professional advantages in building inter-ethnic communication bridges and solving problems in industrial cooperation. Its practical value in intervening in scenarios of economic symbiosis and promoting coordinated industrial development and social harmony in ethnic regions is becoming increasingly prominent. However, existing research lacks depth in its examination of multi-ethnic economic symbiosis scenarios, and the design of intervention pathways from an industrial perspective remains insufficient. This, therefore, leaves room for reflection in this study^[1].

The sheep industry in Jingyuan County, Gansu Province, serves as a regional pillar industry and has formed a complementary pattern based on the division of labor within the industrial chain between the Hui and Han ethnic groups. The Hui people play a dominant role in the areas of sheep procurement, slaughtering and processing, and terminal sales, while the Han people provide fundamental support through sheep breeding and forage supply. This economic interdependence should, in theory, contribute to ethnic unity. However, a field investigation reveals that this symbiotic system faces multiple challenges, which not only hinder industrial upgrading but also impact the trust relationship between the Hui and Han ethnic groups. Therefore, this study takes Jingyuan County as its research site. By examining the production, operation, interactions, and engagement of the Hui and Han ethnic groups within the local

sheep industry chain, it explores effective pathways for ethnic social work intervention in industrial development from the perspective of economic symbiosis. The aim is to provide a reference for the harmonious development of multi-ethnic regions.

2. Current Status of Economic Symbiosis between the Hui and Han Ethnic Groups in the Sheep Industry Chain of Jingyuan County

The three core segments of the sheep industry chain—production, circulation, and sales—serve as the practical basis for systematically analyzing the division of labor and collaboration between the Hui and Han ethnic groups. By presenting the functionally complementary pattern formed by these groups leveraging the region's resource endowment, this section clarifies the supporting role of this symbiotic relationship in ensuring industrial operations and promoting inter-ethnic interaction, thereby laying the groundwork for an in-depth exploration of the practical challenges within the symbiotic system in the subsequent text.

2.1 Division of Labor and Collaboration in the Production Segment

First, in terms of basic supply and demand, within the sheep breeding sector of Jingyuan County, the Han ethnic group relies on their own cultivated land resources to develop family-based breeding, ensuring the supply of lambs. In contrast, the Hui ethnic group leverages their experience in livestock trading to engage in the lamb purchasing business, thereby adding value. This collaboration has formed a long-term foundation for supply-demand relations and mutual trust. Consequently, a stable and enduring supply-demand relationship has been established between the two groups: the Han people rely on the Hui to solve their sales challenges, while the Hui people depend on the Han to secure a stable source of lambs. This relationship not only reduces the livelihood risks for both parties but also lays a foundation of trust for their subsequent collaboration.

Second, there is demand-oriented breeding. To precisely cater to the specific needs of the Hui people regarding sheep breeds, Han farmers purposefully cultivate and breed specific types of breeding sheep. Through scientific breeding, they ensure that the breed and quality of the subsequent lambs meet the trading standards, making the supply more responsive to market demands. In addition to small-scale family farming, some Han people have also joined forces to establish breeding cooperatives. These cooperatives not only expand the scale of breeding but also implement standardized management, thereby enhancing the batch volume and stability of lamb supply. This, in turn, better satisfies the operational needs of the Hui people for bulk purchasing^[2].

Third, there is the assurance of forage quality. The Hui ethnic group maintains strict requirements regarding the feed quality for sheep. In response, Han farmers use specialized straw cultivated on their own farms as the core forage to ensure the sheep's meat quality and taste meet the required standards. When their own straw production is insufficient, they purchase the same type of high-quality straw from neighboring farmers. This practice not only guarantees the continuity of the forage supply but also promotes the recycling of local straw resources. This approach of optimizing breeding practices based on specific needs further deepens the collaborative bond between the two groups, making the supply-demand match more precise and solidifying the breeding foundation for quality upgrading within the sheep industry chain.

2.2 Complementarity and Interaction in the Circulation Segment

First, there is the optimization of purchasing coordination. Leveraging their long-term experience and deep engagement in the market, Hui purchasers not only precisely grasp the price fluctuation patterns of sheep in surrounding areas such as Baiyin and Lanzhou, as well as the quality requirements of end customers, but also meticulously understand the inventory levels and growth conditions of sheep on various farms in both Hui and Han villages. This has enabled them to establish an efficient purchasing coordination system. In response to the fragmented nature of Han family-based farming, these Hui purchasers have introduced a flexible purchasing model. This involves proactively visiting farms to collect sheep door-to-door, agreeing on purchase times in advance based on the farmers' needs, and even providing integrated services for small-scale farmers, such as bulk reservations and consolidating small shipments. This approach minimizes sales costs and transportation losses for the Han farmers to the greatest extent possible. In turn, Han farmers, without needing to invest effort in navigating unfamiliar markets, need only prepare their sheep for sale as agreed, allowing them to monetize their livestock with

case.

Second, there is the guarantee of transportation and circulation. Relying on their capacity for cross-regional resource integration, Hui purchasers have established a transportation and circulation network covering surrounding cities and even more distant markets. By considering factors such as the number of sheep and transportation distance, they scientifically design transport plans to ensure the quality of the sheep upon arrival at the terminal market. Simultaneously, these Hui purchasers have also established long-term cooperation with slaughtering and processing points along the transport route, forming an integrated circulation chain encompassing purchasing, transportation, and delivery. This enables Jingyuan lambs to flow quickly and steadily to external markets, effectively mitigating the circulation risks associated with market fluctuations^[3].

Third, there is empowerment through experience sharing. For Han people who wish to expand their capabilities in the circulation sector, Hui purchasers adopt an open and collaborative attitude, offering a learning-by-doing growth path. The Han people can accompany Hui purchasers to wholesale markets and terminal retail outlets to learn trading techniques through on-site observation. As the Han people gradually master the key skills involved in the circulation process, some can not only independently connect with local, small-scale clients but also assist Hui purchasers in expanding procurement channels in surrounding villages. This deep interaction not only enhances the livelihood capabilities of the Han people but also further deepens the trust and mutual understanding between the Hui and Han ethnic groups through shared experience, achieving complementarity and mutual benefit in the circulation segment.

2.3 Interest Linkage in the Sales Segment

First, there is the linkage through dining scenarios. Relying on their generational inheritance of slaughtering techniques and secret recipes for cooking lamb, the Hui people have established specialty restaurants in Jingyuan County and surrounding cities. These restaurants consistently adhere to dietary standards, ensuring the purity and safety of the meat. For their part, the Han people frequently choose these Hui restaurants to taste the local specialty lamb during casual family gatherings or social meals with friends. On important occasions such as festivals, weddings, and funerals, they also select Hui restaurants as venues for their banquets. This dining linkage, where the Hui people prepare the food and the Han people enjoy it, has continuously broadened the consumption scenarios for Jingyuan lamb, forming a stable local consumption loop.

Second, there is the inheritance of skills. Many Han people, having keenly identified the market potential of Jingyuan lamb in the catering industry, take the initiative to formally apprentice themselves at Hui restaurants. Hui masters, embracing an open and inclusive attitude, impart their core techniques without reservation. After mastering these traditional skills, a considerable number of these Han apprentices go on to open their own lamb restaurants. This model of skill inheritance not only enables the Han people to start their own businesses and increase their income but also further expands the sales channels for Jingyuan lamb.

Third, there is a trust-based transaction mechanism. In scenarios involving the retail or bulk purchase of mutton, Hui operators offer a credit mechanism without requiring collateral or a guarantor to address the temporary cash flow difficulties that Han people might encounter or their need to purchase mutton in bulk during festivals. This system, often based merely on verbal agreements or simple bookkeeping, allows for consumption first and payment later. The repayment period is also flexibly tailored to fit the income cycles of the Han people, with adjustable terms based on actual circumstances. This transaction model, rooted in ethnic trust, not only resolves the temporary financial shortages for the Han people but also helps Hui operators firmly secure their core customer base and reduce customer attrition, thereby creating a differentiated advantage in the market. Through this mutually beneficial arrangement, both parties establish a long-term and stable sales cooperation relationship.

3. Challenges in the Economic Symbiosis between the Hui and Han Ethnic Groups

Building on the analysis of the current state of symbiosis within the Hui-Han sheep industry chain, the author further focuses on the structural issues that have emerged during the large-scale development of the industry. Based on fieldwork data, this section analyzes the challenges facing the current symbiotic relationship from four core dimensions: the pattern of benefit distribution, the flow of market information, the building of inter-ethnic trust, and the provision of policy support. These challenges not only hinder

the upgrading of the sheep industry towards standardization and higher efficiency but also have a potential impact on deepening the cooperative trust between the Hui and Han ethnic groups.

3.1 Uneven Benefit Distribution

Hui purchasers, leveraging their generational experience in purchasing and sales, have constructed a stable channel network covering multiple segments of the industry. Having established long-term cooperation with various parties, they hold the dominant position in purchasing pricing and sales premiums. In contrast, Han farmers, who mostly operate as scattered family units, are confined to the upstream segment of the industry chain. Lacking access to information channels and possessing weak collective bargaining power, they are forced to passively accept prices. This reveals an implicit competitive boundary in the distribution of industrial benefits between the two ethnic groups: the Hui people occupy the more profitable middle and downstream segments, while the Han people bear the costs and risks of production but receive lower returns. This imbalance in benefits can easily lead to ethnic psychological barriers and distrust^[4].

3.2 Asymmetric Market Information

Hui purchasers and sellers, having worked in the industry for a long time, not only possess real-time order demands from major clients in places like Lanzhou but also can grasp price fluctuation patterns in advance through intra-ethnic industry support networks. Han farmers, on the other hand, mostly rely on local traditional breeding experience or information passed on by intermediaries. To facilitate transactions quickly, these intermediaries often conceal key information such as final market prices. This results in Han farmers lacking effective channels to directly obtain market data. Consequently, although Han farmers sell their lambs through Hui purchasers, they have limited knowledge of information such as final market prices and are forced to passively accept quoted prices during negotiations, making it difficult to avoid the risk of prices being undervalued. This information gap not only diminishes the profit margin for Han farmers but also makes the Hui-Han cooperation prone to misunderstandings arising from information monopolies.

3.3 Imperfect Trust Mechanism

The foundation of trust in the economic interactions between the Hui and Han ethnic groups remains relatively weak, which constrains the deepening of their symbiotic relationship. Although there are cases of long-term cooperation between individuals from the two groups, most interactions are still confined to shallow, one-off transactions, lacking a stable bond of trust. Han farmers harbor doubts about the dominant market position of Hui purchasers, worrying that the latter might use their information advantage to push down prices. Conversely, the Hui people remain wary of Han people entering the sheep business on a large scale, fearing that the Han might consolidate resources through collective action to seize wholesale and retail channels, thereby undermining the market advantages the Hui have accumulated over decades. This guarded mentality stems from the uncertainty about the other party's expected behavior. Furthermore, the ambiguity of transaction rules exacerbates the lack of trust. For instance, while Han customers can purchase on credit at Hui-owned shops, there is no unified credit evaluation system between the two groups. Consequently, if a Han person faces cash flow difficulties due to rising feed costs and delays a payment, the Hui person involved may readily attribute this to an ethnic group's breach of trust, which can easily escalate into an inter-ethnic trust crisis^[5].

3.4 Insufficient Policy Support

The development of the sheep industry chain lacks targeted policy support, which hinders the possibility of deep cooperation between the Hui and Han ethnic groups. From the production side, Han farmers commonly face dual financial pressures when attempting to expand their breeding scale or improve sheep breeds: difficulty in accessing credit and a lack of special investment. Most farmers, due to an absence of fixed assets for collateral, struggle to obtain low-interest breeding loans from financial institutions. Furthermore, local government subsidies specifically for sheep breeding tend to favor large-scale enterprises or farms, leaving scattered family-based farmers beyond their reach. From the organizational side, although establishing cooperatives can qualify for state subsidies, many of these entities have become hollow shells due to issues such as a lack of operational premises or the requirement to pay thousands of yuan in taxes annually. Consequently, they have failed to play their intended role in integrating the resources of the Hui and Han peoples. From the market side, there is a lack of standardized

industry regulations. For instance, in the purchasing segment, processes like weighing and pricing rely entirely on the experiential judgment of practitioners. Both Hui and Han stakeholders have noted that the absence of uniform standards easily leads to disputes. In summary, this lack of policy support not only limits the large-scale and standardized development of the sheep industry chain but also deprives the cooperative efforts of the Hui and Han ethnic groups of institutional safeguards. This makes it difficult to form unified and stable symbiotic rules, thereby constraining the establishment of a deep cooperative relationship^[6].

4. Pathways for Ethnic Social Work Intervention in Industrial Development

In response to the challenges faced by the Hui and Han ethnic groups in their symbiotic development within the sheep industry, the author will design specific pathways based on the professional orientation of ethnic social work, which aims to promote social integration, resolve developmental conflicts, and link resources for empowerment. These pathways are structured around four dimensions: interest coordination, information sharing, trust cultivation, and policy linkage. This approach not only addresses the practical concerns of Hui and Han practitioners but also provides actionable practical solutions for promoting the coordinated development of industrial revitalization and ethnic unity in multi-ethnic regions.

4.1 Building Communication Platforms to Facilitate Interest Negotiation

Ethnic social workers can take the lead in constructing a collaborative system for the Hui-Han sheep industry, promoting deep cooperation among practitioners at all stages. First, collaboration teams should be formed. Organized by village, these teams will include Han farmers, Hui purchasers and sellers, and be staffed with two to three social worker coordinators and one technical advisor from the township livestock station. Under this structure, three sub-groups—for production coordination, circulation supervision, and benefit calculation—will be established. With balanced participation from both Hui and Han village representatives, this structure ensures the effective transmission of demands. Second, a benefit negotiation mechanism should be established. Quarterly negotiation meetings will be held at the end of each quarter. Prior to each meeting, cost and profit data for all segments will be disclosed. Referring to the average industry profit margin and calibrating the distribution ratios in light of market fluctuations, a written agreement will be formed and put on record. Additionally, village-level industrial discussion points should be set up. Using idle village collective buildings, these points will be staffed on a rotating basis by social workers and Hui and Han representatives. They will undertake functions such as information synchronization, mediation of minor disputes, and collection of needs. Through regular communication, this will promote the shared interests of the Hui and Han peoples.

4.2 Establishing a Multi-Channel Information Sharing Mechanism

Social workers can systematically integrate resources from the Jingyuan County Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, the local sheep industry association, and e-commerce platforms such as the Jingyuan Agricultural Specialty Mall to build an online-and-offline integrated information sharing platform for the Jingyuan sheep industry. Online, a WeChat mini-program will be developed, featuring three core modules: real-time pricing, technical services, and supply-demand matching. Offline, two to five information service stations will be established in service centers within Hui-Han villages. These stations will be staffed by part-time information officers, with equal representation from both ethnic groups, who will print core information from the platform daily, post it on public bulletin boards, and forward it via village WeChat groups, thereby covering middle-aged and elderly practitioners who may not use the mini-program. Concurrently, monthly tiered training sessions will be conducted, avoiding the two months before the Spring Festival and the peak summer epidemic season. Basic training courses will involve staff from the county agricultural bureau teaching Han participants how to interpret price curves, and Hui purchasers sharing customer demand characteristics from slaughterhouses. Advanced courses will be led by e-commerce operators explaining the relationship between terminal sales volume and purchasing prices. A Jingyuan Sheep Industry Information Handbook will also be distributed for practitioners' reference. Quarterly joint inspection tours will be organized; after prior communication with market management and supermarket procurement departments, visits will be made to venues like the Baiyin Agricultural Wholesale Market. On-site, Jingyuan-born merchants will explain the logic of profit distribution from procurement to the terminal stage. Post-visit debriefing meetings will be held, allowing participants to share their insights, and a summary of the tour's findings will be compiled and

synchronized on the platform. Through this combination of measures, the timely and accurate dissemination of information can be ensured. Furthermore, it will encourage Hui and Han practitioners to collectively acquire, interpret, and utilize information, effectively breaking information monopolies, enhancing both parties' overall understanding of the industry chain, and solidifying the information foundation for deepening cooperation.

4.3 Cultivating a Cross-Ethnic Trust Network

To implement a trust cultivation project for the Hui and Han ethnic groups centered on embedded interaction, ethnic social workers need to take the lead in establishing deep collaboration mechanisms from key segments of the industrial chain. In the production segment, based on the principles of complementary skills and matched scales, Hui farmers with purchasing experience will be paired with Han farmers skilled in corn planting and straw silage production. Through on-site guidance from Hui participants on fattening practices and knowledge sharing from Han participants on feed crop cultivation techniques, supplemented by daily Q&A in mutual aid WeChat groups and semi-annual effectiveness evaluations, mutual learning of skills and mutual understanding will be enhanced. In the sales segment, two to three joint supervision teams, with a 1:1 ratio of Hui and Han members, will be formed at the township level. These teams will supervise weighing during on-site purchases, establish guiding price ranges based on average prices in major sales areas, and concurrently mediate transaction disputes. Monthly debriefing meetings will be held, and reports will be submitted to the township for record-keeping, thereby reducing suspicion. In the customer resources segment, a sharing platform will be established, comprising an online WeChat mini-program and offline township service points. Rules for referral rewards will be clearly defined, and quarterly joint meetings with major clients will be organized. Credit ratings will be determined based on customer satisfaction surveys. Simultaneously, a project working group, led by the township government and involving multiple departments, will be established. Publicity and mobilization will be conducted through village broadcasts and representative forums. Special funds for ethnic work will be sought to support platform development, subsidies, and rewards. These measures will comprehensively promote the transition of Hui and Han participants from mutual learning of skills and mutual supervision of processes to mutual sharing of benefits, thereby cultivating a stable trust relationship.

4.4 Linking Policy Resources to Support Industrial Development

Social workers can promote the connection of Hui and Han practitioners with government resources to break through industrial development bottlenecks through a closed-loop model of precise identification of needs, targeted linkage of resources, and full-process assistance in procedures. Regarding the application for sheep breeding subsidies, a two-week period of household interviews and discussion forums will first be conducted, covering over 80% of Hui and Han farmers. The needs will be categorized, such as small-scale feed subsidies for scattered Han households and large-scale facility subsidies for joint Hui-Han farms, to form a needs list. Subsequently, social workers will proactively engage with the County Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, establish a tracking ledger for applications, and communicate the approval progress weekly. Within one week of the subsidy disbursement, a feedback meeting will be held to publicize the details and collect suggestions. To address the difficulties faced by cooperatives, social workers, in collaboration with the local agricultural economic station, will diagnose core problems such as a shortage of operational space, insufficient management knowledge, and high tax burdens. They will connect with university teams to form a guidance group, conduct quarterly training sessions on formulating bylaws and financial norms, assist in securing short-term rent-free use of idle village collective buildings by liaising with the township, and organize sessions with the tax bureau to explain preferential policies, helping small cooperatives with annual revenues under 100,000 yuan submit applications for appropriate tax reductions and exemptions.

Fund Projects

2025 National Social Science Fund Youth Project "Research on Multi-Ethnic Livelihood Interembedding and Symbiotic Development in Northwest Oases under Ecological Constraints" (Project No.: 25CMZ032).

References

- [1] Yang, D. L. (2023). *The Evolution of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry, Economic Symbiosis, and Ethnic Integration in the Qinghai Lake Region*. *Northwestern Journal of Ethnology*, (05), 135-143.
- [2] Li, J., & Zeng, J. (2023). *A Study on the Evolution of Hui-Han Ethnic Boundaries and the Condensation of Commonality Based on Economic Interaction*. *Guangxi Ethnic Studies*, (02), 171-179.
- [3] Liu, Y. (2024). *Common Prosperity, Sharing, and Integration: Inter-Ethnic Reciprocity and Symbiosis in a Village Community in an Agro-Pastoral Ecotone*. *Guangxi Ethnic Studies*, (06), 120-129.
- [4] Ma, Q., & Han, F. X. (2019). *A Study on Economic Interaction and Harmonious Ethnic Coexistence between Hui and Tibetans in Xiahe, Gansu*. *Journal of Hui Muslim Minority Studies*, 29(04), 41-45.
- [5] Wang, W. Y., & Ren, J. W. (2016). *A Study on the Embedded Development Path of Ethnic Social Work in China*. *China Nationalities Exhibition*, (16), 16-17.
- [6] Yang, C. G., & Yang, J. J. (2024). *Research on Social Work's Participation in the Rural Revitalization of Ethnic Areas*. *Journal of Anhui Agricultural Sciences*, 52 (14), 250-256.