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THEORETICAL DEMANDS AND CONSTRUCTIVE PATHS FOR BUILDING AN AUTONOMOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM OF CHINESE BORDERLAND STUDIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE HOLISTIC VIEW OF NATIONAL SECURITY

Geng Qian[1], Fang Luo[2*]
[1]*Southwest University of Political Science and Law, Chongqing 401120, China.*
[2]*Centre for Studies of the Ethnic Minorities in the Borderlands of Southwest China, Yunnan University, Kunming 650091, Yunnan, China.*
[*]*Corresponding Author: Fang Luo*

Abstract: Based on the theoretical demands of China's borderland governance, this paper provides an in-depth analysis of Western security theories—namely, geopolitics, regional reshaping, human security, and securitization—and demonstrates that these theories exhibit structural biases when applied to explaining issues concerning China's borderlands. Western theories either position borderlands as bargaining chips in great-power balancing, or sever the historical integrity of borderlands through academic discourse, or carry out intervention under the guise of individual security, or stigmatize normal governance through discursive manipulation. Grounded in Western historical experience and interest-based appeals, these theories cannot account for the historical realities of interaction, exchange, and integration in China's borderlands, nor can they explain the development logic of enriching the people and revitalizing the borderland and of stabilizing and consolidating the borderland. In response, this paper, guided by the Holistic View of National Security, proposes four localized concepts—the "Harmonious Borderland" geopolitical outlook, the "Historical Integrity" borderland regional perspective, the "People's Security" borderland security outlook, and the "Development and Security" borderland governance outlook—to construct an autonomous knowledge system for China's borderland security and provide reference for deepening the theoretical development of Chinese Borderland Studies.
Keywords: Chinese Borderland Studies; Autonomous knowledge system; Holistic View of National Security; Western security theory; Borderland security

1 BORDERLAND SECURITY AND THE AUTONOMOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM OF CHINESE BORDERLAND STUDIES

Borderlands are the peripheral zones of state territory and are closely related to state sovereignty. Li Dalong divides "China's borderlands" into narrow and broad senses: in the narrow sense, "China's borderlands" refer to the nine provincial-level land border regions and all maritime border regions; in the broad sense, "China's borderlands" expand upon the narrow sense to encompass state interests extending beyond sovereign territory [1]. Borderlands are simultaneously geographical connectors between states and important security barriers for China, bearing responsibilities for international exchange. Borderland security is an important component of China's overall national security. China's border line is long, and the social conditions, popular sentiments, resources, and environments of borderland areas each have their own characteristics; ethnic and religious issues are intertwined, contradictions among the people and contradictions between ourselves and the enemy intersect, and non-traditional security influences are on the rise [2].

Chinese Borderland Studies is an interdisciplinary field taking China's borderlands as its research object. Its research content covers multiple dimensions including borderland history and geography, borderland governance practice, borderland policy evolution, borderland security and stability, and borderland economic and social development. It is a comprehensive discipline that explores the laws of formation and development of China's territory, summarizes historical experience in borderland governance across dynasties, and serves contemporary borderland governance practice [3]. In December 2024, when presiding over the 18th collective study session of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized: "To advance borderland governance, theoretical support must be strengthened. It is necessary to strengthen multidisciplinary research related to borderland history and borderland governance, and to accelerate the construction of an autonomous knowledge system for Chinese Borderland Studies" [4]. General Secretary Xi Jinping's important thesis has pointed the direction for the deepening development of Chinese Borderland Studies.

Regarding the construction of an autonomous knowledge system for Chinese Borderland Studies, academia has already unfolded discussions from different dimensions. First, at the level of disciplinary positioning and knowledge structure. Li Dalong believes that "China's borderlands" are the object of exposition for China's autonomous knowledge system of Borderland Studies, that "autonomy" and "system" are its distinctive features, that discourse system construction is its main content, that multidisciplinary cross-fertilization is its basic path, that innovative concepts are its basic

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guarantee, and that construction must proceed under the guidance of the "five shared" principle [1]. Li Guoqiang believes that constructing an autonomous knowledge system is the central task of Chinese Borderland Studies. An autonomous knowledge system is a generalized, systematic body of knowledge formed on the basis of a comprehensive and scientific understanding of China's borderlands and an integrated, regularized summary of practical experience in China's borderland governance. Only by constructing an autonomous knowledge system can the historical origins of borderlands be better revealed and the historical laws of borderlands better explored, thereby solidifying the theoretical foundation for advancing the modernization of contemporary borderland governance systems and governance capacity [5]. Second, at the level of discourse system and subjectivity. Zhu Jian believes that the construction of an autonomous knowledge system for Chinese Borderland Studies has a long history, and that construction and improvement in the new era is an important prerequisite for the deepening development of the discipline. Full consideration should be given to possessing a Chinese discourse as the foothold, serving the overall situation of national borderland governance as the point of departure, highlighting the particularity of borderland research as the key point, and achieving the breakthrough point of integrating ancient and modern and converging Chinese and foreign [6]. Yu Ke believes that subjectivity is the core proposition for constructing an autonomous knowledge system. The subjectivity of the autonomous knowledge system of Chinese Borderland Studies originates from the wisdom of borderland social governance accumulated through Chinese civilization, and is generated from the vivid practice of contemporary borderland social governance. It is necessary to grasp the connotation of subjectivity from five dimensions: culture, practice, theory, discourse, and value [3]. Third, at the level of disciplinary construction and talent cultivation. Luo Qun and Hu Pengfei believe that accelerating the construction of an autonomous knowledge system for Chinese Borderland Studies is closely related to and mutually reinforcing with the construction of the disciplinary system, academic system, and discourse system of Chinese Borderland Studies, and that talent cultivation is the key. It is necessary to establish Chinese Borderland Studies as a first-level discipline, improve the academic system of borderland research, reshape the discourse system of borderland studies, adhere to the cultivation of high-quality compound talents, and provide historical reference and theoretical support for contemporary borderland governance [7].

The above research provides an important foundation for this article. However, existing achievements mostly proceed from macro-level dimensions such as disciplinary system construction, knowledge structure sorting, discourse system reshaping, and subjectivity elaboration. They lack systematic critique of the applicability and harmfulness of Western security theories in the borderland field, and the original theoretical construction at the level of borderland security theory is relatively weak. At the same time, as borderland security is an important component of overall national security, its research has not yet fully absorbed the theoretical vision of National Security Studies, interdisciplinary integration is clearly insufficient, and the theoretical characteristics of interdisciplinary studies have not been effectively demonstrated. This article introduces the theoretical thinking of National Security Studies, analyzes the applicable biases and theoretical loopholes of Western security theories when analyzing China's borderland security, and demonstrates the theoretical demands and practical needs for constructing an autonomous knowledge system for Chinese Borderland Studies.

This article returns to the fundamental demand of building an autonomous knowledge system for China. Existing Western theories cannot explain the practical problems of China's borderland governance and cannot adapt to the needs of borderland governance and development. This article successively analyzes the applicability of Spykman's Rimland Theory, Scott's "Zomia" theory, human security theory and critical security studies, and the Copenhagen School's securitization theory to borderland issues, analyzing the inapplicability of Western theories when applied to China's borderlands. On this basis, guided by the Holistic View of National Security, it explores the constructive direction of an autonomous knowledge system for Chinese Borderland Studies, with a view to fully and accurately understanding General Secretary Xi Jinping's important expositions on borderland governance, adhering to the "two integrations," and making due contributions to the construction of the knowledge system of Chinese Borderland Studies with new ideas, new discourse, new mechanisms, and new forms.

2 LIMITATIONS OF WESTERN SECURITY THEORIES WHEN APPLIED TO CHINA'S BORDERLANDS

2.1 Rimland Theory

American geopolitician Nicholas J. Spykman systematically expounded the Rimland Theory in America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power, published in 1942, and further perfected it in The Geography of the Peace in 1944. Spykman believed that "the power conflicts of the Eastern Hemisphere have always been related to the relationship between the Heartland and the rimlands, to the distribution of power within the rimlands, to the pressure of sea power upon the continental coasts, and finally to the participation of the Western Hemisphere in that pressure" [8]. The strategic attribute of the rimland is dual: it is sometimes divided between maritime powers and Heartland powers, and sometimes maritime powers and Heartland powers join forces against a powerful rimland state. Throughout history, alignments have always involved certain rimland countries together with Great Britain against other rimland countries and Russia, or Great Britain together with Russia against a powerful rimland state [8]. Thus two patterns of confrontation are formed: the confrontation between maritime states and their rimland allies against Heartland states and their rimland allies, and the confrontation between maritime states and Heartland states joining

forces against a powerful rimland state. Which side gains the upper hand depends on the distribution of power in the rimland.

Spykman believed that Europe and the Far East are the two most important power centers of the rimland. Whether a country with overwhelming superiority emerges in these two regions concerns the security interests of the United States. Therefore, the United States must maintain the balance of power in Europe and Asia. Compared with other power patterns, the balance of power can better promote cooperation, compromise, and the development of international law, and better safeguard peace and justice [9]. Spykman's view on the Far East direction is that a modernized, powerful China poses a serious threat to the position of Western countries in the Western Pacific. Therefore, after the war, the United States needs to shift from supporting former allies to supporting former enemies [8]. The Rimland Theory advocates that "only power that is checked, not power that is allied, truly serves our interests" [9].

China is a powerful country in the rimland of the Eurasian continent. In the Rimland Theory, a rising China should become the object of balance-of-power constraints. China's normal governance and security maintenance in borderland areas are interpreted by Western countries as actions that change the regional distribution of power. China's normal exchanges with neighboring countries are regarded as wooing and balancing. China's relations with neighboring countries are presupposed as zero-sum confrontation. Expectations for stability and development in border areas are undermined. Neighboring countries are guided toward guarding against and containing China. In recent years, the measures taken by Western countries against China's borderlands under the framework of the Rimland Theory have already left traces. In the Northeast Asian theater, the U.S.-Japan "Keen Edge" joint military exercise conducted island seizure and amphibious landing drills in the Southwest Islands in October 2026, with both the scale and scope being unprecedented in history. [10]. In the South China Sea direction, in April 2026, the Philippines-U.S. joint military exercise involved more than 17,000 troops. Japan participated for the first time as a formal member and deployed land-based anti-ship missiles in the Philippines for live-fire exercises. The exercise area covered the northern Philippines facing the Taiwan Strait and disputed waters in the South China Sea [11]. In the southwestern theater, the U.S.-India Yudh Abhyas-2026 joint military exercise was conducted in northern Uttarakhand in September 2026, situated less than 50 kilometers in straight-line distance from the disputed territory along the middle sector of the China-India border. [12].

It is thus clear that Western borderland security theories are proposed and practiced by Western countries to safeguard their own interests and expansionist demands. From their perspective, China's borderlands are not merely territories under Chinese governance. China's relations with neighboring countries are not developing and mutually beneficial neighborhood communities, but rather zones of great-power constraint and balancing. They are strategic deployments for the United States to maintain hegemony in the Far East. If China adopts their concepts in borderland governance and conducts exchanges and dialogue within their framework, it will instead fall into a self-certification trap, be forced into zero-sum game relationships. Measures that should have been win-win cooperation with neighboring countries will also be misinterpreted as Chinese countermeasures against the West. An unstable international public opinion environment will be a potential threat to China's borderland security.

2.2 "Zomia" Regional Reshaping Theory

American political scientist James C. Scott, in The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia published in 2009, created a "Southeast Asian continental upland" and called it "Zomia." He reshaped all places above 300 meters in elevation from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to Northeast India, including five Southeast Asian countries (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar) and four Chinese provinces (Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and part of Sichuan), into a regional community encompassing southern Chinese borderlands and the "stateless" world of Southeast Asia and South Asia [13]. The Western historical view upheld by Scott is an extreme constructivist perspective divorced from historical facts. The book is filled with binary oppositions such as center versus periphery, oppression versus freedom, and civilization versus barbarism, shaping borderlands into a "binary borderland." It characterizes the interaction, exchange, and integration between central Chinese dynasties and southwestern borderlands as processes of "expansion," "conquest," and even "colonization," neglecting the complementary and symbiotic relationship between them [14]. It artificially constructs a "new region" like "Zomia" that has no historical foundation and is entirely created by academic discourse. The "non-Chineseness" and "de-Sinicization" of borderland ethnic groups in political, economic, and cultural aspects are exaggerated. The sovereign ambiguity and competitiveness of "Zomia" are emphasized, greatly damaging the integrity of Chinese historical development and the historical fact that the Chinese nation is an organic whole.

Coincidentally, in 2024, Turkey launched the "Turkish Century Education Model" curriculum reform. In 2025, the "Central Asia" expression in its textbooks was largely replaced with "Turkestan." In September 2026, two sets of nationally unified textbooks were simultaneously put into use in primary and secondary schools across the country and overseas school networks. The accompanying maps demarcated northwestern Chinese territories including Xinjiang, Gansu, and Qinghai into the so-called "unified Turkic civilization territory." Turkey, using the national education system as a carrier, through intergenerational transmission of maps and textbooks, renames cross-border areas as a civilizational region, and then fixes the renaming as institutionalized geographical cognition. Western theories shaping "Zomia" and promoting Pan-Turkism—one operates in academic discourse, the other in the national education system—have different forms but the same mechanism. Both reshape regions to sever historical continuity and geographical objectivity, weakening the historical and geographical basis for China's governance of borderlands.

Western theories advocating regional reshaping aim to sever the historical integrity and geographical continuity of China. If China continues to adopt their regional framework in borderland governance and research, it will harm national interests and security at three levels. At the level of historical facts, the Zomia theory divorces itself from the historical context of China's unified multi-ethnic state, simplifying human adaptation to nature and group strategies for risk avoidance as "escaping governance." It ignores the endogenous unity of the southwestern region with China's unified multi-ethnic state and severs ethnic relations. Scott made simplistic treatments of the society of southwestern Chinese borderlands and the regional ethnic ecology, completely lacking sufficient analysis of historical facts. The so-called "Zomia" is purely a fabricated fiction, ignoring that the history of the southwestern region is an important part of the history of China's unified multi-ethnic state, and severing the historical connection between southwestern China and other regions of China [14]. At the level of sovereignty, the so-called "Zomia" merely places southwestern Chinese borderlands within "supra-state" topics for discussion, ignoring the historical context of China's multi-ethnic unified state, blurring China's borderland sovereignty, and diluting the consciousness of the Chinese national community. At the level of governance, once China's borderland governance accepts this supra-state framework, normal production, construction, and resource development in borderland areas will be defined as transnational regional issues, and sovereign affairs will thereby be internationalized.

2.3 Human Security Theory

After the end of the Cold War, Western liberalism and human rights discourse prevailed. In 1994, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report defined "human security" as freedom from fear and freedom from want [15]. Against the background of international discourse at that time, "human security" was mainly embodied as "human rights above sovereignty." "Human security" was almost synonymous with "human rights" and was endowed with higher value and priority than national security [16]. European critical security studies further proposed that security is not an objective or politically neutral condition, but a concept fully subjectively constructed [15]. The subject of security, or referent object, should be shifted from the state to the individual. Whether an individual is secure needs to be judged from their social gender, history, race, or economic relations, rather than merely focusing on international relations.

From the definitions alone, it is evident that the above two types of theories influenced by Western liberalism, especially critical security studies, deviate from China's definitions of "security" and "people's security." The "individual" concerned by "human security" either refers to all insecurity issues related to human integrity, underdevelopment, poverty, and deprivation, or mainly concentrates on the consequences of military conflicts manifested in personal terms and the predicaments suffered by citizens under oppressive regimes and state failure. Its content is so generalized that it is fundamentally indefinable and difficult to measure [15]. This generalized content endows it with strong malleability. In practice, it is easily filled by specific human rights agendas and then transformed into a legitimacy tool for interfering in the internal affairs of sovereign states. In borderland issues, "human security" is alienated into human rights issues of people within borderland areas. Western countries use this as a pretext for so-called humanitarian intervention, increasingly becoming a hegemonic discourse. Taking Xinjiang as an example, in recent years the U.S. Congress has passed multiple Xinjiang-related bills, restricting imports of Xinjiang products on the grounds of so-called "forced labor," and imposing sanctions on Chinese officials. After the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a Xinjiang human rights assessment report without field investigation, the U.S. State Department issued a statement making unfounded accusations about the human rights situation in Xinjiang, China. These practices do not truly focus on individual security, but rather use "human security" as a tool serving specific strategic purposes, transforming borderland affairs from domestic governance issues into international human rights issues, directly threatening borderland security and eroding state sovereignty security [17].

The "people's security" established by China's Constitution and National Security Law takes state sovereignty as its prerequisite and the right to development as its guarantee. It fundamentally differs from the Western discourse of "human security." Western theories place the individual and the state in an oppositional position, presupposing the state as a threat source. This premise itself does not conform to the practical experience of China's borderland governance. This further highlights the urgency and necessity of accelerating the construction of an autonomous knowledge system for Chinese Borderland Studies. Under the Western theoretical framework, normal governance behaviors in borderland areas will be fabricated as evidence of "state failure" or "regime oppression." People's security will thereby be alienated into an object of external evaluation. External interference will thereby obtain a sustained theoretical entry point. At that time, internal affairs within the scope of sovereignty, such as enriching the people and revitalizing the borderland and counter-terrorism and stability maintenance, will all be elevated to international human rights issues.

2.4 Securitization Theory

Securitization theory was pioneered by the Copenhagen School. It understands security as a self-referential practice. Whether an issue becomes a security issue does not depend on the existence or absence of an objective threat, but on whether actors elevate it to a security issue through specific discursive operations [18]. The securitization dilemma generally refers to the practical difficulties faced when applying securitization theory in a global context. Securitization is divided into three stages: initiation, process, and outcome. In the initiation stage of securitization, there are mainly two dilemmas: "over-securitization" and "under-securitization" [19]. Existing securitization theory has never been able

to propose a clear basis for judging when a public issue constitutes an "existential threat"—whether such judgment is based on objective security, subjective security, or intersubjective security cognition. The securitization preferences of security actors and the influence of political systems on such preferences also have certain impacts. When the initiation of securitization lacks clear judgment criteria, under any circumstances it may lead to the emergence of the securitization dilemma. In the initiation stage, the emergence of the securitization dilemma is based on two factors: first, the inability to clarify judgment criteria for initiating securitization; second, the limited referent objects covered by security issues, making it difficult for issues concerning the interests of vulnerable groups to be elevated to security issues. Securitization actors, driven by interest preferences, often obsessively persist in initiating securitization regardless of changes in the international security environment. Meanwhile, out of consideration for political interests or social costs, public issues involving vulnerable groups or detrimental to the interests of powerful groups, even when necessary to be elevated to security issues, will inevitably be followed by the dilemma of "over-securitization" or "under-securitization."

Securitization theory is always colored by European experience. Its analytical framework contains a basic presupposition: only issues that normal political procedures cannot cope with need to be securitized. This presupposition does not match the practice of China's borderland governance. Water conservancy projects, border trade cooperation, and port construction activities in China's borderland areas are components of sovereign states' normalized governance. Their goals lie in developing the economy, improving people's livelihoods, and maintaining stability, not in creating threats. If securitization theory is used as an analytical tool, regular governance and constructive behaviors within the scope of China's sovereignty may be redefined as existential threats by other countries according to securitization logic. Their legitimacy is thereby weakened theoretically, and neighboring countries thereby obtain the power to use this as a pretext for securitization and introduce external intervention.

The Mekong River water resources issue and related controversies are the result of combining Western securitization theory with borderland security issues. China's normal water conservancy development and cross-border water resources cooperation on the Lancang River are shaped as security issues by some Vietnamese media and scholars through speech-acts. Related reports and comments make a big fuss about the ecological environment of the Mekong Delta, promoting the "China responsibility theory," and even accusing China of implementing so-called water monopoly and being a "water hegemon." The water resources issue is thereby partially elevated to a security issue [20]. Mekong River basin downstream countries "elevated China's water resources development and utilization behavior in the upper reaches to a political issue, and finally to a security issue related to national security. The water resources of the Mekong River were gradually securitized by all downstream parties" [21]. Western securitization theory is proposed and practiced based on safeguarding its own interests and expansionist demands. Under the Western theoretical framework, any of China's activities in borderlands will be plunged into a passive situation in securitization games. Measures that should have been win-win cooperation with neighboring countries will also be misinterpreted as actions creating threats.

3 CONSTRUCTIVE PATHS FOR BUILDING AN AUTONOMOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM OF CHINESE BORDERLAND STUDIES UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF THE HOLISTIC VIEW OF NATIONAL SECURITY

Borderland areas are the first line of defense for national security barriers, the front-line positions for defending state sovereignty security and territorial integrity. Borderland security is an important component of national security. The two are intertwined and inseparable. The Holistic View of National Security, as the theoretical system for safeguarding national security in the new era, makes it imperative that the theoretical construction and governance practice of borderland security be completed under its guidance. The application of Western security theories in the borderland field has already posed threats to the historical basis, geographical basis, exercise of sovereignty, and development space of China's borderland governance at multiple levels. Therefore, building an autonomous knowledge system for Chinese Borderland Studies under the guidance of the systematic thinking and the methodology of overall planning and coordination of the Holistic View of National Security already possesses theoretical necessity, practical urgency, and historical inevitability.

3.1 Building an Autonomous Knowledge System of Chinese Borderland Studies with a "Harmonious Borderland" Geopolitical Outlook as the Core

The history of China's borderland governance spans more than two thousand years. The governance strategies of successive dynasties for borderlands each had their own emphases—some through appeasement and conciliation, some through military garrisoning, some through establishing commanderies and counties—with specific means varying according to time and place. But regardless of how strategies were adjusted, the fundamental goal of borderland governance always pointed toward the order and stability of the central dynasties and the integrity of their territories. What successive dynasties adopted for borderlands was not confrontational control, but rather governance relations maintained through ritual order, economic reciprocity, and political subordination, emphasizing both soft and hard measures, combining firmness and flexibility. The relationship between the center and localities was built upon political identity formed through long-term exchanges, fundamentally differing from the zero-sum presupposition of Western geopolitical theory that regards borderlands as the front line of power games. Among these, the tribute system is the

most widely known interactive system between central dynasties and borderlands. It originated from the Chinese-centered consciousness, the great unity concept, and the "serving the great and caring for the small" neighborly way of the pre-Qin period. Its essence was to establish political order and cultural identity through the exchange of rituals and materials [22]. Under the logic of the tribute system, borderlands were not dividing lines, but rather junction points for exchanges between central dynasties and neighboring regions. The concepts of "benevolence toward neighbors," "though a state is great, if it loves war it will perish," and "trustworthiness and harmony" in borderland governance across dynasties constitute the concrete content of the political wisdom of "harmonious coexistence" in Chinese civilization. The geopolitical attribute of borderlands was formed through long-term exchanges; its internal logic is interaction and coexistence, not confrontation and balancing.

The Holistic View of National Security further refines the above historical experience. The Holistic View of National Security takes the promotion of international security as its foundation, advocating a global security outlook featuring common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security, and emphasizing the organic unity of national security and international security. Its methodological core is that borderland security is not a negative state maintained through balance-of-power constraints, but a positive construction achieved through regional cooperation mechanisms. China has advanced pragmatic cooperation through mechanisms such as Lancang-Mekong cooperation, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor in six strategic directions: Northeast, North, Northwest, West, Southwest, and South. The geopolitical function of borderlands as regional linkage zones has already been confirmed in practice.

The "Harmonious Borderland" geopolitical outlook is a theoretical perspective of Chinese Borderland Studies proposed under the guidance of the excellent historical culture of Chinese civilization and the theoretical system for safeguarding national security in the new era. Its purpose is to construct a localized, Sinicized, and contemporary autonomous knowledge system for Chinese Borderland Studies. China's borderland regions and their neighboring countries have never been bargaining chips in great-power games, but rather frontier platforms for building a community with a shared future for neighboring countries. Neighboring countries are partners formed through our long-term exchanges. They are channels and hubs for regional linkage, not objects of balancing, much less areas for power division. Borderland security is achieved through cooperative governance by all parties, not maintained through confrontation. The "Harmonious Borderland" geopolitical outlook takes "interaction," "coexistence," and "mutual benefit" as its identifying concepts and the community with a shared future for neighboring countries as its analytical framework, forming a theoretical formulation that differs from the zero-sum logic of Western geopolitics.

The construction of an autonomous knowledge system for Chinese Borderland Studies needs to be based on the political concept of "harmonious coexistence" in the excellent traditional culture of Chinese civilization and the global security outlook in the Holistic View of National Security, so as to form a theoretical system of Chinese-characteristic geopolitics. The "Harmonious Borderland" geopolitical outlook restores the historical facts of exchanges between borderlands and neighboring regions, clarifies the regional linkage function of borderlands, and summarizes the practical experience of cooperative governance between China and its neighbors, providing theoretical support for the geopolitical dimension of the autonomous knowledge system of Chinese Borderland Studies.

3.2 Building an Autonomous Knowledge System of Chinese Borderland Studies with a "Pluralistic Integration" Borderland Regional Perspective as the Center

In 1988, Fei Xiaotong proposed the "pluralistic integration pattern of the Chinese nation." That is, the Chinese nation is an ethnic entity encompassing all 56 ethnic groups within China. It is an interdependent, unified, and indivisible whole. The 56 ethnic groups are the foundation; the Chinese nation is the superstructure. High-level identity and low-level identity can coexist without conflict. On the basis of different levels of identity, each can develop its original characteristics, forming a multilingual and multicultural whole [23]. The "pluralistic integration pattern of the Chinese nation" theory provided a programmatic exposition of the meaning and origin, structure and levels, and historical ethnic exchanges and ethnic relations of the Chinese nation, opening up a new academic system regarding the structure of the Chinese nation. The theory posits that borderlands are not external appendages to the territorial whole, but natural components in the process of pluralistic foundations converging toward a unified superstructure. The differences between borderlands and the interior are manifestations of pluralism; the unity between borderlands and the interior is the requirement of integration. The two coexist without conflict, together forming a complete territorial picture.

Forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation is the main line of the Party's ethnic work and the work in ethnic regions in the new era [24]. Borderland regions and ethnic regions are highly overlapping. Borderland governance must take forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation as the main line, build a regular mechanism for publicity and education on forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation, and guide cadres and masses of all ethnic groups to establish correct views of the state, ethnicity, culture, history, and religion [24]. The above policy orientation transforms the pluralistic integration pattern theory from an academic proposition into governance practice, providing contemporary policy support for the borderland regional perspective. The pluralistic integration pattern theory has an inherent theoretical connection with China's traditional territorial outlook. The formation of China's territory experienced a historical process from the "territory with boundaries but no borders" of the "all-under-heaven state" to the "territory with both boundaries and borders" of the modern sovereign state. The pluralistic integration pattern theory proposed by Fei Xiaotong completes the modern transformation of China's traditional territorial outlook: transforming the "unity" in the great unity concept into "integration," transforming the

pluralistic ethnic exchanges under the tribute system into the "pluralistic" foundation, and transforming the territorial whole of dynastic states into the territorial integrity of the modern nation-state. The pluralistic integration pattern theory thereby becomes the theoretical expression of China's traditional territorial outlook in modern times.

The Holistic View of National Security provides support for the pluralistic integration borderland regional perspective at the level of security theory. The Holistic View of National Security takes political security as its foundation. Territorial security is the basic condition of political security, emphasizing that maintaining territorial integrity and sovereignty unity is unshakable [25]. Under the Holistic View of National Security, the theoretical positioning of borderland studies must return to territorial security itself. Borderlands are the edge barriers of national territory. Their regional attributes are determined by the historical formation of the territorial whole and cannot be artificially severed. Borderland security has a natural connection with national security. Borderlands themselves are an indispensable and organic component of national territory and a strategic barrier for safeguarding national security. Without the security and stability of borderlands, national security cannot be discussed [24]. The "five pairs of relationships" in the Holistic View of National Security, including attaching importance to both territorial security and national security and attaching importance to both one's own security and common security, provide methodological guidance for understanding the position of borderlands in the pluralistic integration pattern: territorial security requires borderland territorial integrity; national security requires the well-being of borderland people. The two are unified in the construction of the Chinese national community.

The key question in constructing an autonomous knowledge system is: what concept is used to explain the regional attribute of China's borderlands? Western theories use original concepts like "Zomia" that have no historical basis to reshape territories and create regional opposition. From the perspective of the pluralistic integration pattern theory, pluralism is not an opening for division, but an objective description of internal differences within the territory. Integration is not forced assimilation, but a unified pattern formed through history. Using pluralistic integration to explain the regional attribute of borderlands, the relationship between borderlands and the interior is no longer a confrontation between center and periphery, but an organic connection between different components within a unified whole. Reshaping the borderland discourse system is an important measure for constructing an autonomous knowledge system for Chinese Borderland Studies. The "pluralistic integration" territorial outlook should take the "five shared" principle as its foundation, incorporate borderlands into the process of national unification for examination, break the binary opposition created by Western regional reshaping theories, and use identifying concepts such as "pluralism," "integration," "identity," and "cohesion" to replace Western terms such as "Zomia," "regional homogeneity," and "supra-state region," forming a theoretical formulation of borderland regions with a Chinese standpoint and international dialogue capacity. This enables Chinese Borderland Studies to be distinguished from Western regional research theories in the direction of regional cognition.

3.3 Building an Autonomous Knowledge System of Chinese Borderland Studies with a "People's Security" Borderland Security Outlook as the Purpose

China's security theory has undergone an evolution in its positioning of the bearer of security, from "human security" to "people's security." In the process of participating in global governance, China absorbed the humanistic orientation of the "human security" concept proposed by the United Nations Development Programme, but did not copy its Western individualist theoretical framework. In 2014, the Holistic View of National Security was formally proposed, taking people's security as its purpose and establishing "the people" as the core category of national security [26]. Article 3 of the National Security Law of the People's Republic of China stipulates that national security work takes people's security as its purpose, political security as its foundation, and economic security as its basis [27]. Here, "the people" is a collective concept, fundamentally different from the "individual" in Western "human security" theory. People's security, as a value standard and practical principle, runs through all aspects of national security work. In the field of borderland security, people's security is further specified as border residents' security. Border residents are people of all ethnic groups living in border areas. Their life safety, development rights, and well-being are the core content of borderland security. From "human security" to "people's security" and then to "border residents' security," the levels of the bearer of security continuously change, but always remain within the state framework, never departing from the protection of state sovereignty.

China's borderland governance practice has always taken people's security as its purpose. The goals of poverty alleviation, enriching the people and revitalizing the borderland, and the creation of ethnic unity and progress all point toward improving the living and development conditions of borderland people. In 2025, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized during his inspection of Yunnan: "It is necessary to deeply advance the new-era enriching the people and revitalizing the borderland and people enrichment action, and to effectively safeguard ethnic unity and frontier stability" [28]. China's practice in borderlands is always the unity of people's security and state sovereignty. The realization of people's security takes state sovereignty and territorial integrity as prerequisites. State governance takes safeguarding the security of people of all ethnic groups as its destination. The people are not passive objects of security, but key subjects and fundamental forces for safeguarding national security.

The relationship between the people and the state in China's security theory has never been oppositional. Western human security theory presupposes the state as a threat source, magnifying individuals' sense of insecurity, and placing individual security and state sovereignty in a zero-sum relationship. China's security theory rejects the Western presupposition. People's security takes political security as its foundation. Political security takes regime security and

institutional security as its core. The people's character of the regime and institutions determines that the state itself is the guarantor of people's security. Article 1 of the National Security Law takes "protecting the fundamental interests of the people" as its legislative purpose. Article 2 incorporates "people's well-being" into the definition of national security. Article 16 identifies "protecting people's security" as an important task for safeguarding national security [29]. These provisions confirm the consistency of security interests between the state and the people at the legal level. In borderland areas, the state improves border residents' livelihoods through enriching the people and revitalizing the borderland and people enrichment actions, improves border residents' quality of life through infrastructure construction, and guarantees border residents' lives and property through border control. It is thus clear that the state has never been a threat to people's security, but rather the fundamental guarantee of people's security.

The proposal of the Holistic View of National Security has provided a ready-made theoretical framework for "people's security" from the perspective of borderlands. Political security ensures the stability of borderland regimes and institutional security. Economic security ensures borderland development and border residents' livelihoods. Military security ensures that borderland territory is not violated. Cultural security ensures borderland ideological security. Social security ensures borderland order and stability. International security ensures a peaceful environment surrounding borderlands. People's security runs through all the above fields and is the ultimate direction of borderland security. The "five pairs of relationships" in the Holistic View of National Security, including attaching importance to both territorial security and national security, provide methodological guidance for understanding borderland security: territorial security requires borderland territorial integrity; national security requires the well-being of borderland people. The two are unified in the realization of people's security [24].

The borderland security outlook with "people's security" as its purpose possesses necessity for the autonomous knowledge system of Chinese Borderland Studies. Western human security theory takes the opposition between the individual and the state as its premise and cannot explain the unified relationship between people's security and state sovereignty in China's borderland governance. If Chinese Borderland Studies lacks an autonomous security value framework, borderland people's security issues will be transformed by external forces into pretexts for intervention, and people's security will thereby be alienated into an object of external evaluation. The borderland security outlook with "people's security" as its purpose also possesses appropriateness. The theoretical positioning of the Holistic View of National Security with people's security as its purpose, the practical experience of China's borderland governance with enriching the people and revitalizing the borderland and people enrichment as the handle, and the legal confirmation of the consistency of interests between the people and the state jointly constitute the theoretical foundation of the "people's security" borderland security outlook. The autonomous knowledge system of Chinese Borderland Studies must take "people's security" as its purpose, abandon the erroneous presupposition of opposition between the individual and the state, and unify border residents' security and state sovereignty within the theoretical analysis of borderland security. It should use identifying concepts such as "people's security," "border residents' well-being," and "common prosperity" to replace oppositional expressions such as "individual liberation" and "state threat" in Western "human security" discourse, forming a theoretical framework that unifies people's security and state sovereignty, and providing theoretical support for the security value dimension of the autonomous knowledge system of Chinese Borderland Studies.

3.4 Building an Autonomous Knowledge System of Chinese Borderland Studies with a "Development and Security" Borderland Governance Outlook as the Theme

Securitization research generally holds that "over-securitization" will cause securitization actors in international security to regard any public issue as an "existential threat" and securitize it [30]. The implicit judgment of securitization theory is that issues that normal political procedures can handle should not be securitized. Securitization itself is a deviation from normal order, and desecuritization is the ideal state of returning to normal procedures. The water resources securitization issue of the Mekong River described above is a typical example. But the actual situation in China's borderlands is that development itself is the basic condition of security. Forcing development issues into the binary analytical framework of securitization or desecuritization—whether securitization or desecuritization—severs the internal connection between development and security.

The proposal of the Holistic View of National Security has transcended the theoretical trap of the Western binary framework. The Holistic View of National Security takes economic security as its foundation and emphasizes the coordination of development and security. Article 8 of the National Security Law stipulates that safeguarding national security should be coordinated with economic and social development [31]. Coordination is not simple addition, but rather grasping primary and secondary aspects in dynamics and determining priority in relationships. The theoretical connotation of coordinated development and security in borderlands must return to the ontological presupposition of the Holistic View of National Security: security and development are not two independent domains competing for resources, but two aspects of the same governance process. Economic security, as the foundational domain of the Holistic View of National Security, means that the stable operation of the borderland economic system, autonomous and controllable resource supply, and rational layout of industrial structure are themselves important components of national security. Borderland development is not an economic issue external to security, but a positive construction of security conditions. Borderland security is not a political issue external to development, but a guarantee mechanism for development achievements.

The relationship between borderland development and borderland security presents a forward-propagation logic at the theoretical level. The transmission logic from development to security is as follows: improvements in people's livelihood enhance the masses' sense of belonging, the elevation of a sense of belonging translates into an intrinsic willingness to guard the border and defend the frontier, and this intrinsic willingness coalesces into a popular foundation for social stability. The transmission logic from security to development is as follows: orderly stability reduces investment risks, reduced risks attract factor inflows, factor inflows promote industrial agglomeration, and industrial agglomeration creates employment and income. These two transmission directions thus form a closed loop: development achievements consolidate the foundation of security, and a secure environment guarantees sustained development.

In Western theory, securitization is the opposite of desecuritization: the two alternate in dominance, and resources shift back and forth between the two domains. Whether borderland development succeeds or fails does not depend on actual results but on the discursive characterization by external observers; normal economic construction may at any time be read as an existential threat.

The "Development and Security" governance outlook rejects the binary presupposition of Western securitization theory, shifting the analytical focus from discursive manipulation to actual results, from threat construction to condition creation, and from negative value to positive construction. Through such signature concepts as "coordinating development and security," "promoting security through development," and "enriching the people and revitalizing the borderland," it constructs a borderland governance outlook that unifies development and security, thereby providing Chinese Borderland Studies with an autonomous theoretical starting point in the governance dimension. Together with the "Harmonious Borderland" geopolitical outlook, the "Pluralistic Integration" regional perspective, and the "People's Security" security outlook, it constitutes the four theoretical pillars for constructing an autonomous knowledge system of Chinese Borderland Studies.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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