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CULTURAL IDENTITY AND MECHANISM INNOVATION IN THE MODERNIZATION PROCESS OF EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

The modernization of educational governance constitutes an indispensable dimension of national governance modernization and a foundational driver of sustainable national development. Existing scholarship has principally addressed institutional reform, resource allocation, and governance capacity, yet has systematically undertheorized the role of cultural identity as an active mediating mechanism. This paper addresses that lacuna by advancing a culture-embedded theoretical framework that positions cultural identity not as backdrop but as a constitutive force shaping the legitimacy, cohesion, and effectiveness of educational governance systems. Drawing on Collaborative Governance Theory (Ansell & Gash, 2018), Cultural Identity Theory (Hall, 1990; Tsang, 2023), digital divide scholarship (van Dijk, 2020), and a systematic review of recent Chinese and international empirical literature, the study examines how cultural identity interacts with institutional innovation and technological empowerment to produce – or undermine – governance outcomes. Four interconnected mechanism innovation pathways are proposed: multi-stakeholder collaborative governance grounded in shared cultural values; culture-oriented educational policy innovation that shifts from resource compensation to cultural recognition; culturally responsive digital empowerment that addresses both connectivity and content equity; and a third-party evaluation system incorporating cultural performance indicators alongside conventional metrics. The integrated framework clarifies that cultural identity is simultaneously a foundational condition for system stability, a driver of equitable resource distribution, and a key criterion for evaluating governance effectiveness. The paper concludes by identifying empirical research priorities and policy implications for China's ongoing Education Powerhouse initiative.

KEYWORDS: Educational governance modernization; Cultural identity; Mechanism innovation; Educational equity; Digital divide; Multi-stakeholder collaboration; China

1. INTRODUCTION

The accelerating pace of globalization, digital transformation, and economic restructuring has placed educational governance systems under unprecedented pressure worldwide. As the institutional architecture through which societies transmit knowledge, cultivate values, and reproduce social capital, education occupies a structurally pivotal position in national governance modernization. China, which operates the world's largest educational system serving over 286 million students across 470,000 institutions (Ministry of Education, 2024), faces a governance challenge of exceptional complexity: how to simultaneously advance educational quality, promote resource equity, harness digital technologies, and maintain cultural coherence in a period of profound social change.

Scholarly attention to educational governance modernization in China has grown substantially over the past decade. Tsang (2023), reviewing governance reform trajectories in the Chinese Education & Society journal, observes that China's governance initiatives echo international patterns of "centralized decentralization" and network governance, while simultaneously reflecting the nation's distinctive social, political, and cultural contexts. Yang (2020) similarly emphasizes that a nation's educational governance system is inextricably embedded in its broader social and cultural environment—an insight that cautions against unreflective application of Western governance frameworks to the Chinese case. Yet despite these scholarly acknowledgments, the operational role of cultural identity in governance modernization remains undertheorized: it tends to appear in the literature as a contextual factor rather than as an active mechanism with measurable governance consequences.

This theoretical gap has practical significance. China's rapid online education expansion—with a projected market scale of 350 billion yuan in 2023 and year-on-year growth exceeding 15%—has simultaneously democratized access to high-quality resources and threatened to homogenize pedagogical content, erode regional cultural distinctiveness, and weaken students' sense of local and national belonging. At the same time, the country's 1.092 billion internet users (CNNIC, 2024), of whom a disproportionate share are youth, navigate an algorithmically curated digital environment that may reinforce value fragmentation and accelerate the erosion of

traditional cultural knowledge. Survey evidence reported by Xu (2025) indicates that a meaningful proportion of contemporary Chinese teenagers demonstrate weakened familiarity with excellent traditional Chinese culture—a trend that directly threatens the cultural coherence undergirding governance legitimacy.

Against this backdrop, the Chinese state has responded with a series of landmark policy initiatives. The 2019 "China Education Modernization 2035" document established a comprehensive governance reform agenda; the 20th National Congress (2022) set the goal of building an education powerhouse by 2035; and the January 2025 "Education Powerhouse Plan 2024–2035," jointly issued by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council, articulates an educational vision simultaneously characterized by "strong ideological guidance, talent competitiveness, scientific and technological support, social synergy, and international influence" (State Council, 2025). The October 2023 adoption by the National People's Congress of a law mandating patriotism education further signals that cultural identity formation has been elevated from a soft pedagogical aspiration to a hard governance imperative.

This paper makes three original contributions. First, it synthesizes fragmented insights from governance theory, cultural identity scholarship, and educational technology research into an integrated framework that positions cultural identity as the mediating mechanism linking governance inputs to governance outcomes. Second, it proposes four operationalizable mechanism innovation pathways through which cultural identity considerations can be systematically embedded in governance practice. Third, it advances a multidimensional evaluation framework—the Composite Governance Modernization Index (CGMI)—that incorporates cultural performance indicators alongside institutional and digital equity metrics, thereby providing a measurable basis for tracking governance modernization progress. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 establishes the conceptual foundations; Section 3 examines the relationship between governance modernization and cultural identity; Section 4 maps the key challenges; Section 5 proposes the four mechanism innovation pathways; Section 6 synthesizes the integrated theoretical framework; and Section 7 offers conclusions and directions for future research.

2. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS: EDUCATIONAL MODERNIZATION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

2.1 *The Modernization of Educational Governance: Scope and Dimensions*

Educational governance modernization is a multidimensional construct that extends well beyond administrative reform. At its core, it involves the reconfiguration of the structures, processes, and normative frameworks through which decisions about education are made, implemented, and evaluated (Yang, 2020). In the Chinese context, this encompasses three interrelated dimensions. The first is stakeholder diversification: moving from a state-centric model toward networked governance that actively incorporates schools, families, enterprises, social organizations, and communities as co-responsible actors rather than passive recipients of policy. The second is

procedural democratization: ensuring that decision-making processes are transparent, evidence-based, and responsive to diverse stakeholder inputs, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of educational governance institutions. The third is technological intelligence: systematically deploying big data, artificial intelligence, and cloud computing not merely to automate administrative tasks but to enable real-time monitoring, targeted resource allocation, and personalized learning at scale.

Comparative analysis of governance frameworks reveals an evolutionary trajectory from traditional centralized models toward increasingly culture-sensitive approaches, as illustrated in Table 1 below. The culture-embedded governance model that this paper proposes represents a qualitative advance over the collaborative multi-stakeholder model by treating cultural identity not as a stakeholder preference to be managed but as a constitutive mechanism that shapes the effectiveness of all other governance dimensions.

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Educational Governance Frameworks

Dimension	Traditional Centralized Model	Decentralized Model	Collaborative Multi-stakeholder Model	Culture-Embedded Governance Model
Decision-making Authority	Top-down; state monopoly on policy design and implementation	Shared between central and local governments; institutional autonomy expanded	Networked: government, schools, families, enterprises, NGOs	Value consensus-driven; cultural norms co-constitute policy logic and legitimacy
Core Goal	Administrative compliance and uniformity	Institutional efficiency and local responsiveness	Resource integration, equity, and multi-party coordination	Cultural identity reinforcement + equity + quality + social cohesion
Role of Culture	Negligible; culture treated as static backdrop	Implicit background; occasionally cited but not operationalized	Acknowledged as stakeholder value diversity; managed but not cultivated	Central driver: culture actively mediates policy implementation and cohesion
Technology Integration	Absent or minimal; paper-based administration	Emergent data systems; limited EdTech adoption	Big data, cloud computing, AI in governance and teaching	AI + culturally responsive design; digital equity explicitly addressed
Equity Mechanism	Uniform national standards applied regardless of local context	Local adaptation permitted; resource disparities may widen	Collaborative resource pooling; targeted compensation for disadvantaged groups	Culture-sensitive redistribution + digital inclusion + heritage-curriculum integration
Representative Policy	Pre-1985 centralized curriculum system	1985 Education System Reform Decision	China Education Modernization 2035	Education Powerhouse Plan 2024–2035 (State Council, 2025)

Note: Developed by the authors based on Tsang (2023), Yang (2020), Ansell & Gash (2018), Burns (2000), Ngok (2007), and State Council (2025).

2.2. *Cultural Identity: Theoretical Dimensions and Educational Significance*

Cultural identity, in the foundational sense articulated by Hall (1990), denotes the ensemble of shared meanings, values, practices, and narratives through which individuals and communities locate themselves in relation to a particular cultural tradition. It is neither a fixed essence transmitted unchanged across generations nor a purely subjective construction; rather, it is a dynamic process of positioning, shaped by historical

inheritance, institutional mediation, and ongoing negotiation with competing cultural forms. In the educational context, cultural identity performs at least three governance-relevant functions: it provides the motivational substrate for policy compliance and civic engagement; it constitutes the normative framework within which diverse stakeholders find common ground; and it serves as the criterion by which communities judge the legitimacy and relevance of governance decisions.

In the Chinese context, cultural identity is anchored in the rich heritage of Chinese

civilization—including Confucian values of relational ethics and social harmony, socialist revolutionary culture, and the diverse traditions of the country's 56 ethnic groups—while being actively shaped by state-led initiatives that seek to cultivate shared national belonging. As General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized at the 20th National Congress, China's central task is the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation through Chinese-style modernization, a formulation that explicitly positions cultural confidence as both the foundation and the purpose of national development. Educational governance, in this frame, is not merely a service-delivery system but a primary mechanism through which cultural identity is reproduced, contested, and renewed across generations.

The digital age has introduced new complexity to cultural identity formation. China's digital landscape, with 1.092 billion internet users as of December 2023—1.053 billion of whom engage with short-video platforms and 816 million with live-streaming ecosystems (CNNIC, 2024)—has created a cultural information environment of unprecedented scale and velocity. Digital-native youth occupy this environment as both consumers and producers, navigating a constant flux of cross-cultural content that challenges the coherence of locally grounded identity narratives. Xu (2025) demonstrates that while online platforms such as Weibo, TikTok, and Bilibili provide new channels for traditional culture dissemination, they simultaneously generate value fragmentation, cognitive overload, and vulnerability to ideological polarization. These dynamics place direct pressure on educational governance: unless

governance frameworks actively cultivate cultural identity, the default trajectory of digital media consumption tends toward cultural erosion rather than consolidation.

The significance of cultural identity for educational governance is further underscored by research on ethnic minority contexts. Zhai (2024), studying Xinjiang college students, finds that weakened cultural identity is directly associated with reduced national belonging and diminished engagement with civic life—effects that cascade into governance challenges including lower policy compliance, reduced stakeholder trust, and diminished legitimacy for reform initiatives. Conversely, *Frontiers in Education* (2025) research on ethnic minority learner identity suggests that when educational governance frameworks acknowledge and affirm local cultural identities rather than subordinating them to a uniform national norm, students demonstrate higher academic engagement, stronger institutional trust, and more resilient national belonging. These findings suggest a positive-sum relationship between cultural diversity recognition and national cohesion—one that governance modernization frameworks must learn to cultivate rather than suppress.

Figure 1 below presents the integrated theoretical framework proposed in this paper, illustrating how cultural identity mediates between external pressures and governance outcomes through the school, family, community, policy, and digital channels.

Figure 1. Integrated Theoretical Framework for Cultural Identity-Embedded Educational Governance Modernization

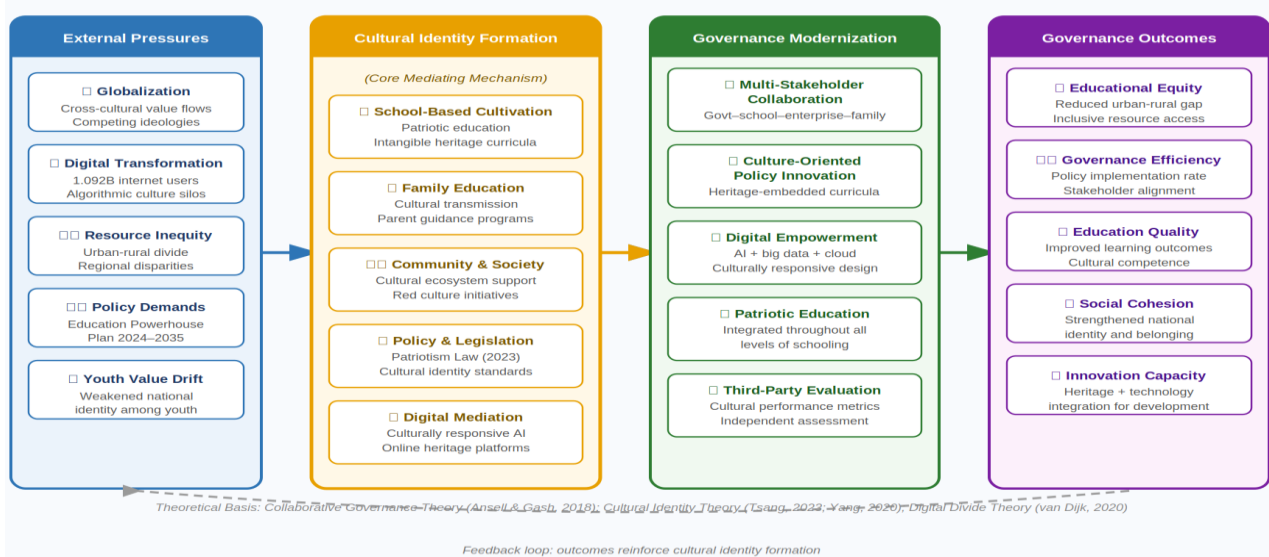


Figure 1: Integrated Theoretical Framework for Cultural Identity-Embedded Educational Governance Modernization

3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL MODERNIZATION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

The relationship between educational governance modernization and cultural identity is neither linear nor unidirectional; it is, rather, a mutually constitutive dynamic in which governance structures shape cultural identity formation while cultural identity simultaneously conditions the effectiveness of governance structures. Understanding this bidirectional relationship is essential for designing governance reforms that are both institutionally robust and culturally legitimate.

At the macro level, educational governance modernization shapes cultural identity primarily through curriculum design, resource allocation, and institutional culture. When governance frameworks incorporate traditional cultural content, ethnic minority heritage, and locally relevant knowledge into curricula—as mandated by the 2025 Education Powerhouse Plan and implemented in provinces such as Yunnan and Guizhou—they signal to students, families, and communities that their cultural identities are valued rather than merely tolerated. This recognition effect has measurable governance consequences: communities whose cultural identities are validated within the governance framework demonstrate higher levels of institutional trust, greater willingness to participate in multi-stakeholder mechanisms, and stronger compliance with governance directives (Tsang, 2023). Cultural identity, in this sense, functions as an invisible adhesive that transforms a collection of governance actors with competing interests into a coherent governance community with shared commitments.

At the meso level, cultural identity shapes governance effectiveness through its influence on teacher professionalism and institutional culture. Research by Hai, Chen, and Fan (2025), drawing on multi-source flow theory, demonstrates that ethnic region educational governance faces distinctive challenges precisely because governance modernization initiatives designed for majority contexts fail to resonate with the motivational frameworks and cultural assumptions of minority communities. Teachers whose own cultural identities are affirmed within the governance system are more likely to exercise professional discretion in ways that advance governance goals; conversely, when governance reforms are experienced as culturally alien or threatening,

teachers and school leaders tend to comply formally while resisting substantively—a form of implementation failure that quantitative governance metrics typically fail to detect. This finding underscores the importance of incorporating cultural identity cultivation into teacher preparation and continuing professional development programs.

At the micro level, the relationship between governance and cultural identity manifests in student learning experiences and civic formation. Research on China's civics curriculum (Tandfonline, 2024) traces how successive administrations from the late Qing through the Xi Jinping era have used educational governance as the primary instrument for constructing shared meanings of national belonging, citizenship obligation, and cultural pride. The current emphasis on cultivating "socialist builders and successors" who are simultaneously globally competitive and culturally rooted reflects an attempt to resolve the tension between cosmopolitan educational aspirations and nationalist cultural reproduction—a tension that governance frameworks must actively manage rather than suppress or ignore.

The digital economy adds a further layer of complexity to this relationship. Online education has grown to represent a market of 350 billion yuan (2023 projection), offering both the promise of equitable resource distribution and the risk of cultural displacement. When digital platforms deliver culturally neutral or culturally alien content at scale, they may simultaneously improve test scores and erode cultural identity—a trade-off that conventional governance evaluation frameworks, focused on academic performance metrics, are poorly equipped to detect. This is precisely why the integrated evaluation framework proposed in Section 5.4 incorporates cultural identity indicators as primary governance outcome measures rather than treating them as supplementary concerns.

The relationship between governance modernization and cultural identity also has important equity dimensions. Lin (2024), analyzing educational equity in mainland China and Hong Kong, demonstrates that the most persistent forms of educational inequality are not merely resource-based but identity-based: students whose cultural identities are marginalized within governance systems face compounding disadvantages that resource redistribution alone cannot address. Building cultural recognition into governance frameworks is therefore not merely a cultural policy preference but an equity imperative—a necessary

condition for achieving the inclusive educational development that SDG 4 and China's own educational modernization agenda both demand.

4. CHALLENGES FACING THE MODERNIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE

China's educational governance modernization confronts a constellation of challenges that are simultaneously structural, technological, and

cultural. These challenges are not isolated pathologies but interconnected systemic pressures; addressing any one of them in isolation risks displacing rather than resolving the underlying governance deficit. Table 2 maps these challenge domains systematically across their empirical manifestations, cultural identity dimensions, and current policy responses.

Table 2: Key Challenges in Educational Governance Modernization: A Multidimensional Analysis

Challenge Domain	Empirical Manifestation	Cultural Identity Dimension	Policy Response
Structural Resource Inequity	90% of illiterates concentrated in rural areas (2020 Census); per-student expenditure in eastern provinces 3× that of western provinces	Weakened local cultural belonging; erosion of intangible heritage in migrant communities; identity fragmentation among left-behind youth	Targeted investment in western and ethnic minority regions; cultural curriculum integration mandated in 20+ provinces
Urban-Rural Digital Divide	Rural teachers' AI adoption significantly lags urban counterparts (Springer, 2024); broadband gaps persist in mountainous regions despite 80%+ school connectivity nationally	Algorithmic content homogenization suppresses regional cultural expression; digital platforms privilege urban cultural norms	'School Connectivity' & 'Classroom Connectivity' initiatives; TPACK-based professional development for rural educators
Youth Cultural Identity Erosion	China's 1.092 billion internet users (Dec 2023) disproportionately exposed to cross-cultural content; youth show declining familiarity with traditional practices (Xu, 2025)	Value fragmentation from algorithmic silos; weakened national belonging; competition between global and local identity narratives	Patriotism Education Law (Oct 2023); NPC mandate; intangible heritage curricula; red culture themed activities
Governance Fragmentation	Siloed departmental management; limited family/community voice in institutional decision-making; coordination failures at prefecture level	Absence of shared cultural values undermines multi-stakeholder trust and coordination capacity	Parent committees (Shandong pilot); campus injury mediation centers; inter-departmental 'Double Reduction' coordination mechanisms
Evaluation System Deficiency	Cultural performance entirely absent from standard education quality metrics; over-reliance on quantitative test-score proxies	Governance reforms lack legitimacy among culturally diverse stakeholders when evaluation ignores identity outcomes	'Education Modernization 2035': third-party evaluation mandated; Jiangsu expert supervision teams piloted; public participation mechanisms

Note: Compiled by the authors from Ministry of Education (2024), China Statistical Yearbook (2020), CNNIC (2024), Shen et al. (2025), Xu (2025), and Springer (2024).

The structural resource inequity challenge is both the most visible and the most persistent. According to the 7th National Population Survey, while the number of individuals holding bachelor's degrees grew from 89.3 million to 154.6 million between 2010 and 2020 and the national illiteracy rate declined from 4.08% to 2.67%, 90% of remaining illiterates are concentrated in rural areas—a geographic concentration that reflects decades of underinvestment in rural educational infrastructure, teacher quality, and curricular relevance. Per-student educational expenditure in eastern provinces exceeds that in western provinces by a factor of three or more, creating a structural inequity that not only limits human capital development in disadvantaged regions but also weakens the cultural identity formation capacity of rural schools, which are typically the primary institutional carriers of

local cultural heritage. When rural students are systematically denied access to quality education, they are simultaneously denied meaningful access to the cultural resources that anchor local identity—a dual deprivation that governance frameworks must address holistically rather than sequentially.

The digital divide challenge has grown more acute as educational technology adoption has accelerated. Research employing the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework with a sample of 366 primary school mathematics teachers across urban and rural China (Springer, 2024) reveals stark contrasts: urban teachers demonstrate significantly higher technology proficiency, more favorable attitudes toward digital integration, and substantially greater access to professional development opportunities than their rural counterparts. These disparities

reflect not merely individual capability differences but structural inequities in school resourcing, professional culture, and institutional support that governance frameworks have been slow to address. Critically, the digital divide operates through cultural as well as material channels: when digital platforms systematically privilege urban cultural content and pedagogical norms, they function not only as access barriers but as identity barriers, signaling to rural students that their cultural experiences and local knowledge are peripheral to the dominant educational narrative.

The challenge of youth cultural identity erosion deserves particular analytical attention because of its governance implications. Survey evidence reported by Xu (2025) indicates that contemporary Chinese teenagers demonstrate declining familiarity with excellent traditional Chinese culture, a trend attributable to the convergence of algorithmically curated short-video consumption, cross-cultural peer influence, and educational curricula that have struggled to make traditional culture compelling for digitally socialized youth. This erosion is not merely a cultural loss; it has direct governance consequences. Research reviewed by Wang and Zhang (2025) demonstrates that reduced cultural identity among college students is associated with lower civic engagement, weakened institutional trust, and greater susceptibility to ideological destabilization—all of which undermine the social capital on which effective governance depends. The October 2023 Patriotism Education Law reflects the state's recognition of this challenge as a governance emergency requiring a legislative, not merely pedagogical, response.

The governance fragmentation challenge operates at multiple scales. At the system level, fragmented departmental management creates coordination failures between education, culture, technology, and finance ministries, preventing the integrated governance approach that cultural identity-embedded modernization requires. At the institutional level, the limited voice of families and communities in school governance decisions weakens the multi-stakeholder trust networks that collaborative governance theory identifies as essential for effective policy implementation. At the evaluation level, the absence of cultural performance indicators from standard governance assessment frameworks means that cultural dimensions of governance effectiveness remain invisible to decision-makers—a measurement gap that perpetuates the underinvestment in cultural identity cultivation that the governance challenges identified above both reflect and reinforce.

5. MECHANISM INNOVATION PATHWAYS FOR MODERNIZING EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE

Addressing the multidimensional challenges identified above requires not incremental adjustments to existing governance instruments but substantive mechanism innovation—the introduction of new coordination structures, policy logics, and evaluation frameworks that can simultaneously advance institutional efficiency, cultural identity, and digital equity. This section proposes four interconnected innovation pathways, which are compared systematically in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Mechanism Innovation Pathways: Structural Comparison

Mechanism	Core Function	Cultural Identity Linkage	Illustrative Case	Expected Outcome
Multi-stakeholder Collaborative Governance	Integrate government, schools, enterprises, families into structured co-governance networks with defined roles	Shared cultural values provide the coordination substrate; reduces stakeholder interest conflicts through identity-based trust	Campus Injury Mediation Centers; prefecture-level 'Double Reduction' coordination; community education councils	Enhanced governance efficiency; strengthened social cohesion; reduced coordination costs
Culture-Oriented Policy Innovation	Embed local cultural values in resource allocation, curriculum design, and teacher preparation frameworks	Shifts from resource compensation to cultural recognition as primary equity mechanism; validates local identity within national curriculum	Miao batik and Dong grand songs in Yunnan/Guizhou ethnic minority curricula; cross-cultural teacher training modules	Increased student cultural engagement; intangible heritage preservation; improved policy legitimacy
Digital Empowerment with Cultural Responsiveness	Deploy AI, big data, and cloud platforms to optimize governance; design digital content with explicit cultural sensitivity	Culturally responsive AI prevents algorithmic homogenization; local-language content platforms maintain regional identity	Cloud for Youth initiative (Shen et al., 2025); One Screen rural education; 80%+ school broadband by end-2023	Narrowed urban-rural gap; culturally inclusive digital learning; equitable resource access
Patriotic Education Integration	Systematically embed patriotism and traditional culture education across all schooling levels and age groups	Builds nationally shared cultural identity narrative; counteracts globalization-induced value drift among youth	Beijing 'Red Genes' exhibitions; Zhejiang red tourism routes; NPC Patriotism Law (October 2023)	Stronger youth national identity; improved cultural confidence; reduced value fragmentation

Third-Party Evaluation with Cultural Metrics	Introduce independent evaluation bodies; incorporate cultural identity indicators alongside academic performance metrics	Cultural performance measures provide governance legitimacy signal; enables evidence-based policy refinement	Jiangsu Province expert supervision teams; Shandong county parent committees; provincial third-party pilot programs	Greater policy transparency; enhanced public trust; culturally grounded accountability
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Note: Developed by the authors. Cases drawn from Ministry of Education (2024), State Council (2025), Shen et al. (2025), Xu (2025), and field policy documentation.

5.1. Multi-Stakeholder Collaborative Governance: Building Coordination Mechanisms Grounded in Cultural Values

The first and most foundational mechanism innovation is the construction of a multi-stakeholder collaborative governance architecture in which cultural values function not merely as contextual background but as the active coordination substrate. Ansell and Gash (2018) argue that collaborative governance is most effective when participants share not only instrumental interests but normative commitments—precisely the function that cultural identity performs in the Chinese educational governance context. When government officials, school administrators, teachers, families, enterprises, and community organizations share a common cultural frame, coordination costs decrease, trust deepens, and the systemic resilience of governance networks increases.

In practice, this pathway requires institutional innovation at multiple scales. At the system level, prefecture-level coordination bodies—including the specialized inter-departmental mechanisms established under the 'Double Reduction' policy and the campus injury mediation centers—provide templates for how multi-stakeholder coordination can be institutionalized without sacrificing accountability. At the institutional level, schools must develop governance structures that genuinely incorporate family and community voice rather than treating parental involvement as a compliance formality. The Shandong Province parent committee pilots, which give families substantive roles in school management and decision-making, represent a promising model. At the enterprise level, China's vocational education sector—with a market exceeding 1.2 trillion yuan and enterprise funding contributions of nearly 40% for practical training and teacher development—demonstrates how industry partnership can advance both skills development and cultural vocational identity when governance frameworks explicitly link economic and cultural goals.

Wu et al. (2025), analyzing multi-agent collaboration pathways using Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis with Chinese official Weibo data, find that effective network governance is not a

simple function of stakeholder diversity or resource availability but requires the presence of shared cognitive frameworks that enable rapid trust-building and conflict resolution. Cultural identity, understood as a shared cognitive framework rather than a fixed essence, performs precisely this function: it provides governance actors with a common interpretive language for negotiating competing interests and a shared normative horizon for evaluating governance outcomes. Governance reforms that invest in cultural identity cultivation—through joint cultural activities, shared heritage initiatives, and cross-sector cultural learning programs—are therefore not peripheral to but constitutive of the collaborative governance infrastructure that modernization requires.

Non-profit organizations merit particular attention in this governance architecture. The Hope Project's support for over 10 million underprivileged students since its inception demonstrates that civil society organizations can complement state and market governance actors in ways that are both culturally resonant and institutionally effective. Unlike state agencies, which must maintain administrative neutrality, and enterprises, which are driven by commercial logic, civil society organizations can explicitly embrace cultural identity cultivation as a primary institutional mission—making them uniquely positioned to address the cultural dimensions of governance failure that market and state mechanisms tend to overlook.

5.2. Culture-Oriented Educational Policy Innovation: From Resource Compensation to Cultural Recognition

The second mechanism innovation pathway involves a fundamental reorientation of educational policy logic from resource compensation to cultural recognition. Traditional redistributive approaches to educational equity—increasing per-student funding, improving physical infrastructure, recruiting qualified teachers—address material dimensions of governance failure but leave intact the cultural assumptions that determine how resources are used, which knowledge is valued, and whose experiences count as educationally legitimate. Culture-oriented policy innovation challenges these assumptions by

embedding cultural recognition into the design of curricula, assessment frameworks, teacher preparation programs, and resource allocation criteria.

The ethnic minority education initiatives piloted in Yunnan and Guizhou provinces provide a particularly instructive example. Rather than simply increasing resource transfers to underserved minority schools, these initiatives integrate culturally distinctive content—Miao batik techniques, Dong grand song traditions, Dai water festival practices—into standard curricula, thereby transforming traditionally marginalized cultural knowledge into recognized educational capital. This approach not only improves student engagement and attendance rates, as reported by Ministry of Education (2024) documentation, but also strengthens intergenerational cultural transmission by creating institutional contexts in which traditional knowledge is formally validated. Teacher training programs accompanying these initiatives include cross-cultural communication modules that help educators understand and work with students' culturally specific cognitive patterns and learning dispositions—an approach that research on culturally responsive pedagogy consistently identifies as among the most effective interventions for improving outcomes in multicultural educational contexts.

The "Internet + Education" model that has spread rapidly across China since 2020 represents both an opportunity and a risk from the cultural recognition perspective. Over 80% of Chinese primary and secondary schools had achieved high-speed broadband connectivity by end-2023, fulfilling the School and Classroom Connectivity program targets. Yet Shen et al. (2025), evaluating the Cloud for Youth initiative in rural areas, caution that digital educational interventions achieve their equity objectives only when they are designed with explicit attention to local cultural realities: content that is culturally alien or pedagogically misaligned with community knowledge frameworks tends to be superficially adopted and deeply resisted, producing compliance theater rather than genuine educational transformation. This finding has significant implications for the design of culture-oriented digital education policy: technical connectivity is a necessary but insufficient condition for equitable digital education; cultural connectivity—the alignment of digital content with local cultural knowledge frameworks—is equally essential.

Integrating patriotic education and traditional culture education as the core thread of educational policy innovation addresses the challenge of youth cultural identity erosion identified in Section 4. The "Implementation Guidelines for Patriotic Education in the New Era" mandate that patriotism education permeate the entire national educational system from early childhood through higher education—a scope of ambition that reflects the governance priority accorded to cultural identity formation. Beijing Municipal Education Commission's "Inheriting Red Genes, Promoting Revolutionary Spirit" exhibition program and Zhejiang Province's red tourism curriculum routes exemplify how policy innovation can simultaneously serve cultural transmission, civic education, and community development goals. Critically, the most effective of these initiatives are not didactic impositions but participatory cultural experiences: when students engage with historical sites, master traditional crafts, or participate in community cultural festivals, they construct personally meaningful connections to national cultural heritage that prove more durable than classroom instruction alone.

5.3. Culturally Responsive Digital Empowerment: Bridging the Access and Identity Divides Simultaneously

The third mechanism innovation pathway involves redesigning digital empowerment strategies to simultaneously address the access divide (the gap in physical connectivity and device availability) and the identity divide (the gap in culturally relevant and locally responsive digital content). Lu and Sun (2024), reviewing evidence from rural China, demonstrate that AI devices significantly improve educational quality by enabling personalized learning, reducing resource gaps, and expanding access to expert instruction—effects that are particularly pronounced for female students and children from low-income households, suggesting that well-designed digital interventions can advance both efficiency and equity goals. However, the same evidence base emphasizes that these positive effects are contingent on integration with culturally appropriate pedagogical frameworks and adequate teacher professional development.

Van Dijk's (2020) digital divide framework provides a theoretically precise vocabulary for distinguishing the access challenge (first-order divide: physical infrastructure and device availability) from the skills challenge (second-order divide: digital competence and pedagogical

integration capacity) and the usage challenge (third-order divide: culturally meaningful and identity-affirming digital engagement). China's governance response to the digital divide has progressively addressed the first-order divide through the School and Classroom Connectivity programs, achieving over 80% broadband coverage in primary and secondary schools by end-2023. The second-order divide is being addressed through TPACK-based teacher training programs targeting rural educators, though evidence from Springer (2024) indicates that urban-rural disparities in digital teaching competence remain substantial. The third-order divide—ensuring that digital educational content actively affirms rather than erodes students' cultural identities—has received the least systematic governance attention and may be the most consequential for long-term governance outcomes.

The Cloud for Youth initiative examined by Shen et al. (2025) illustrates both the potential and the limits of technology-led governance innovation. The initiative successfully deployed cloud-based educational resources in remote rural schools, demonstrating measurable improvements in student learning access and teacher professional development. However, the evaluation also identified that sustainability and scalability depend critically on local institutional capacity, community cultural buy-in, and ongoing technical support—none of which can be provided by technology platforms alone. The most durable positive outcomes were achieved in schools where the digital intervention was explicitly connected to local cultural identity projects: where students used digital tools to document local traditions, create cultural heritage archives, or connect with diaspora communities. This finding suggests a promising governance model in which digital empowerment and cultural identity cultivation are designed as integrated rather than sequential interventions.

Governance frameworks for culturally responsive digital empowerment must also address the algorithmic dimension of the identity divide. When AI-powered educational platforms optimize content recommendation for engagement metrics without incorporating cultural diversity and local relevance criteria, they tend to reproduce and amplify existing cultural hierarchies—privileging urban, national, and globally mainstream cultural content at the expense of regional, minority, and locally distinctive knowledge. Governance innovation in this domain requires both regulatory frameworks—mandating cultural diversity and local relevance standards in AI-powered educational platforms—and

procurement policies that incentivize the development of culturally responsive AI content. The Education Powerhouse Plan's emphasis on "culturally rooted" educational development provides a policy mandate for this kind of governance innovation; what is now needed is the institutional architecture to operationalize it.

5.4. Third-Party Evaluation with Cultural Metrics: Making Cultural Identity Outcomes Governmentally Visible

The fourth mechanism innovation pathway addresses the evaluation deficit identified in Section 4: the systematic absence of cultural performance indicators from governance assessment frameworks. This absence is not merely a measurement oversight; it reflects and reinforces a deeper governance logic that treats cultural identity as a soft value rather than a hard outcome variable—and thereby renders cultural governance failures invisible to decision-makers, inaccessible to public accountability mechanisms, and unresponsive to evidence-based reform. Introducing cultural performance metrics into governance evaluation frameworks is therefore a precondition for closing the feedback loop between governance intentions and governance outcomes.

The "Education Modernization 2035" initiative's mandate for third-party evaluation agencies and public participation mechanisms provides the institutional foundation for this pathway. Current provincial pilot programs—including Jiangsu Province's expert supervision team and Shandong Province's county parent committee system—demonstrate that independent evaluation can strengthen governance transparency and public trust when properly designed and resourced. Kong and Xu (2025) argue that the evaluation framework for private college governance must incorporate multi-dimensional indicators that capture not only academic performance but institutional culture, stakeholder satisfaction, and social impact—a model that can be extended to include cultural identity indicators across the public school system.

The Composite Governance Modernization Index (CGMI) proposed in this paper and visualized in Figure 2 below structures this evaluation innovation around three weighted pillars: Institutional Effectiveness (35%), capturing policy implementation rates, stakeholder participation indices, and resource equity coefficients; Cultural Identity Indicators (40%), measuring youth cultural identity scores, intangible heritage curriculum coverage, patriotism education integration rates,

and cultural confidence indices through annual stakeholder surveys; and Digital Equity Metrics (25%), tracking urban-rural broadband coverage gaps, AI tool adoption rates by region and school type, and student-teacher digital literacy assessments using validated instruments. The higher weighting assigned to Cultural Identity

Indicators reflects the argument advanced throughout this paper: cultural identity is not one governance dimension among many but the foundational mechanism through which all other governance dimensions achieve their systemic effectiveness.

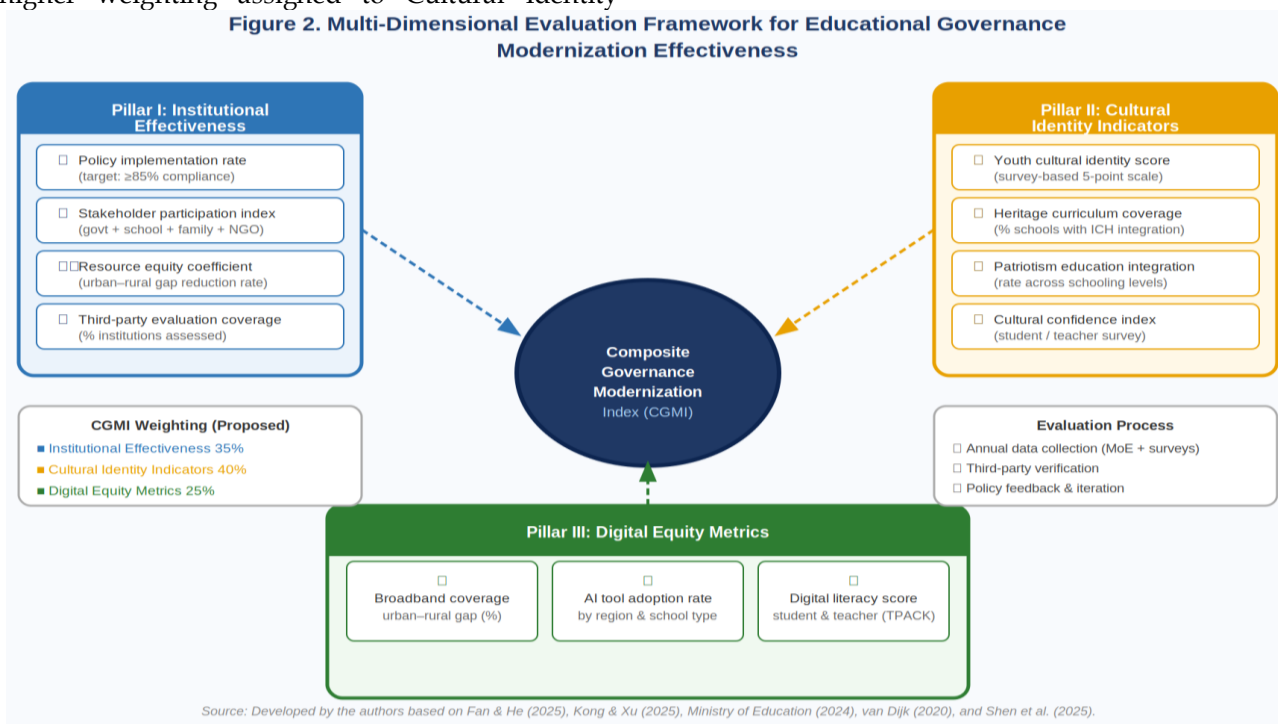


Figure 2: Multi-Dimensional Evaluation Framework for Educational Governance Modernization Effectiveness

Fan and He (2025) emphasize that the most consequential hidden obstacles to school curriculum governance modernization are not resource constraints or technical limitations but the absence of evaluation frameworks capable of capturing the cultural and relational dimensions of governance quality. Future governance scholarship must therefore develop and validate culturally sensitive metrics that can bridge the gap between quantitative governance performance indicators and the qualitative governance outcomes—cultural confidence, community belonging, intergenerational knowledge transmission—that ultimately determine whether educational governance modernization achieves its stated social purposes.

6. TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis presented in preceding sections converges on the need for a theoretical framework that is simultaneously analytically precise and practically generative—capable of specifying the mechanisms through which cultural identity shapes governance outcomes, identifying the conditions under which this shaping is most powerful, and guiding the design of governance innovations that leverage these mechanisms. Table 4 maps the theoretical foundations of the integrated framework, locating its contributions relative to existing theoretical traditions and identifying the empirical agenda that remains to be addressed.

Table 4: Theoretical Foundations of the Integrated Cultural Identity-Embedded Governance Framework

Theoretical Lens	Core Proposition	Application to Educational Governance Modernization	Key Scholars	Limitation in Chinese Context
Collaborative Governance Theory	Multiple stakeholders achieve shared goals through structured cooperative processes and trust-building	Provides the structural architecture for government-school-enterprise-family co-governance networks; informs coordination mechanism design	Ansell & Gash (2018); Bryson et al. (2020)	Underweights cultural consensus as coordination substrate; treats stakeholder values as given rather than cultivated

Cultural Identity Theory	Cultural belonging shapes cognitive schemas, motivational structures, and behavioral dispositions	Explains why cultural recognition underpins policy legitimacy, stakeholder alignment, and system-wide cohesion	Hall (1990); Tsang (2023); Yang (2020); Zhai (2024)	Insufficiently operationalized in institutional governance literature; lacks quantitative measurement frameworks
Decentralized Governance Theory	Distributing governance authority to local actors improves responsiveness and contextual fit	Underpins China's post-1985 education reforms; enables local cultural adaptation while maintaining national alignment	Burns (2000); Ngok (2007); Hawkins (2000)	Risk of reproducing local inequities; decentralization without cultural equity frameworks may widen disparities
Technological Empowerment (EdTech)	Digital technologies expand educational access, personalize learning, and optimize resource allocation	AI, big data, and cloud platforms enhance governance efficiency; risk of exacerbating digital divide without equity measures	Lu & Sun (2024); Shen et al. (2025); van Dijk (2020)	Effectiveness contingent on human/institutional capacity and cultural responsiveness; technology-neutral deployment often worsens inequities
This Paper's Integrated Framework	Cultural identity as the active mediating mechanism through which governance modernization achieves systemic legitimacy and effectiveness	Culture-embedded multi-stakeholder governance + digital equity + patriotic education + culturally sensitive evaluation = comprehensive governance modernization	Wang Yitong & Nur Ajrun Khalid (2025)	Requires empirical testing across diverse regional and institutional contexts; cultural indicators need operational validation

Note: Developed by the authors based on Ansell & Gash (2018), Hall (1990), Tsang (2023), Yang (2020), Lu & Sun (2024), and van Dijk (2020).

The integrated framework proposed in this paper advances existing scholarship in four substantive respects. First, it elevates cultural identity from background context to operational mechanism by specifying the pathways—motivational, normative, cognitive, and evaluative—through which cultural identity influences governance processes and outcomes. This move from contextual acknowledgment to mechanistic specification is essential for transforming cultural identity from a rhetorical commitment into a governable variable. Second, the framework explicitly links the cultural identity dimension to digital governance, recognizing that the governance challenges of the digital age are simultaneously technical and cultural: technological empowerment divorced from cultural responsiveness risks widening inequities and accelerating identity erosion rather than achieving the inclusive governance outcomes that modernization aspires to deliver.

Third, the framework introduces cultural performance measurement as a core governance accountability instrument, arguing that the systematic exclusion of cultural indicators from governance evaluation frameworks has created a measurement gap that renders cultural governance failures invisible and thereby perpetuates underinvestment in cultural identity cultivation. The Composite Governance Modernization Index (CGMI) operationalizes this argument by assigning

cultural identity indicators the highest weighting among the three evaluation pillars, reflecting the theoretical claim that cultural identity is the foundational mechanism through which institutional and digital governance dimensions achieve their systemic effectiveness. Fourth, the framework is explicitly designed as an integration rather than a synthesis: it does not merely collect existing theories but specifies how they interact, identifying the points of tension and complementarity that make their combined application more powerful than any single theoretical lens applied alone.

The framework's implications extend beyond the Chinese context. Tsang (2023) argues that while Chinese governance experiences reflect the nation's distinctive social, political, and cultural contexts, they may also offer lessons for other societies navigating the intersection of cultural identity, technological disruption, and governance modernization. The integrated framework is particularly relevant for multi-ethnic societies managing the tension between national unity and cultural diversity; for post-colonial educational contexts seeking to decolonize governance frameworks without sacrificing systemic coherence; and for rapidly digitizing developing nations where the race to close the access divide risks creating new forms of cultural marginalisation. In each of these contexts, the core theoretical claim of this paper—

that sustainable governance modernization requires cultural identity to function as an active mechanism rather than a passive backdrop—has direct practical implications for governance design, policy innovation, and evaluation practice.

Important limitations and boundary conditions of the framework should be acknowledged. The mutual constitution of governance and cultural identity, while theoretically compelling, raises the risk of tautology: if cultural identity shapes governance effectiveness and governance shapes cultural identity, the causal arrows may be difficult to identify empirically. Future research should address this challenge through longitudinal designs capable of establishing temporal precedence, and through natural experiments—such as comparative analysis of governance reform implementations in culturally similar but institutionally different regions—that can isolate causal mechanisms. The CGMI evaluation framework, while theoretically grounded, requires operational validation: the weighting structure, indicator definitions, and measurement instruments proposed here are working hypotheses that must be tested against empirical data before being adopted as policy instruments. Finally, the framework's applicability across China's extraordinary regional diversity—from the rural villages of Guizhou to the technology hubs of the Pearl River Delta, from the ethnic homelands of Xinjiang to the cosmopolitan universities of Beijing—has not been empirically established and may require regional adaptation to account for context-specific governance challenges and cultural dynamics.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has advanced a theoretically grounded and practically oriented argument: that cultural identity is not a peripheral consideration in educational governance modernization but its foundational mechanism—the force that determines whether governance reforms achieve lasting legitimacy, whether multi-stakeholder coordination transcends formal compliance to produce genuine collaboration, and whether technological empowerment serves inclusive cultural development or merely extends existing hierarchies into digital form.

Drawing on Collaborative Governance Theory, Cultural Identity Theory, digital divide scholarship, and a systematic review of Chinese and international empirical literature, the paper has made four original contributions. It has constructed an integrated theoretical framework positioning

cultural identity as the active mediating mechanism linking governance inputs to governance outcomes. It has mapped four interconnected mechanism innovation pathways—multi-stakeholder collaborative governance grounded in shared cultural values; culture-oriented policy innovation shifting from resource compensation to cultural recognition; culturally responsive digital empowerment addressing access and identity divides simultaneously; and third-party evaluation incorporating cultural performance indicators—that together constitute a comprehensive governance modernization strategy. It has proposed the Composite Governance Modernization Index as a multidimensional evaluation instrument capable of making cultural governance outcomes governmentally visible and publicly accountable. And it has identified the implications of the framework for comparative education scholarship and governance practice beyond the Chinese context.

The urgency of this agenda is underscored by the convergence of three governance pressures that China's educational system currently faces. The scale and speed of digital transformation are eroding cultural identity formation mechanisms faster than governance frameworks can adapt, creating a growing gap between the cultural coherence that governance requires and the identity fragmentation that algorithmically curated digital environments tend to produce. The persistent structural inequities between urban and rural, eastern and western, majority and minority educational contexts mean that governance modernization risks reproducing rather than transcending existing hierarchies unless cultural recognition is explicitly embedded in governance logic. And the ambitious goals of the 2024–2035 Education Powerhouse Plan—building an educational system with strong ideological guidance, global talent competitiveness, and international influence—cannot be achieved through institutional reform and technological investment alone; they require the cultural confidence and national belonging that only sustained, evidence-based cultural identity cultivation can produce.

Future research should pursue three priorities. Empirically, longitudinal studies tracking the relationships between cultural identity indicators and governance outcomes across diverse Chinese regions would provide the causal evidence base needed to validate the integrated framework's core claims and calibrate the CGMI's weighting

structure. Methodologically, participatory action research approaches that engage local communities in the co-design of cultural identity cultivation programs would help ensure that governance innovations are genuinely responsive to cultural realities rather than imposing standardized solutions that reproduce the assimilationist patterns that the framework explicitly seeks to transcend. Comparatively, analysis of educational governance modernization in other multi-ethnic developing nations—drawing on cases from Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America—would test the generalizability of the framework's core theoretical claims and identify context-specific adaptations needed for its application beyond the

Chinese case.

The ultimate measure of educational governance modernization is not the efficiency of its institutional architecture or the sophistication of its technological infrastructure, but the quality of the human development it enables: whether it produces, as China's foundational educational purpose demands, well-rounded citizens who are intellectually capable, morally grounded, physically vital, aesthetically sensitive, and practically skilled—and who experience their cultural identity not as a constraint on their aspirations but as the living source from which those aspirations draw their deepest meaning and motivation.

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