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Cross-Border Ethnic Cultural Narrative Strategies in New Media: A Case Study of Aoluguya Ewenki Reindeer Herders

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Abstract. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, China's cross-border ethnic cultures hold value in both domestic inheritance and international communication. Drawing on the two-step flow of communication theory, this study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining content analysis, case study, and field research, to examine the narrative strategies of Chinese mainstream media's overseas editions and an ethnic key opinion leader on the Chinese social media platform Douyin. Taking the Aoluguya Ewenki as a case study, this research analyzes 13 mainstream media reports and 55 short videos from the Douyin account. Complemented by field research, the study also examines the living conditions of the Ewenki and deviations in media narratives, highlighting the importance of the living inheritance of Ewenki cultural heritage. The findings indicate that mainstream media focus on macro-level national image construction, often exhibiting a sense of distance and stereotyping, whereas social media emphasize micro-level ethnic life presentation and achieve higher audience engagement. This research provides communication insights for mainstream media, local cultural tourism promotion, and ethnic heritage protection organizations, and offers strategic references for cross-border ethnic social media creators. Furthermore, it aims to maintain cultural affinity with neighboring ethnic groups and ultimately achieve people-to-people connectivity.

Keywords: cross-border ethnic groups, new media communication, narrative strategy, Ewenki

1. Introduction

Cross-border ethnic groups are not only security barriers in border areas but also vital resources for building national cultural soft power. Among China's 14 land-bordering neighbors, 12 have signed cooperation agreements under the "Belt and Road Initiative." China's 55 ethnic minorities include 32 cross-border ethnic groups that share geographical proximity, languages, and collective memory with homologous groups abroad. Relying on these shared memories, ethnic narratives are more likely to gain the trust of foreign audiences. Moreover, these ethnic narratives in Northeast Asia contribute to building a cultural community that transcends Western-centrism, filling existing academic gaps, and providing a theoretical foundation for regional cooperation.

Since the 1990s, cultural changes in the Aoluguya Ewenki tribe have attracted academic attention. With fewer than 40 people remaining in this branch, it is a typical case that has both

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research value and urgent communication needs. Existing studies predominantly focus on the southwest border, leaving a research gap regarding cross-border ethnic groups in Northeast China. By analyzing the narrative strategies of three major Chinese mainstream media overseas editions and the Douyin account of an ethnic key opinion leader, supplemented by field research to verify deviations in media narratives, this study aims to provide a reference narrative path for enhancing the national image and promoting neighborhood diplomacy.

2. Literature review

The academic consensus defines cross-border ethnic groups as "the same ethnic group distributed in adjacent countries." However, research gaps remain, as international studies focus more on military and political issues with limited attention to cultural communication, while domestic studies mainly concentrate on the southwest border, leaving the northeast and northwest regions relatively understudied. Research on cross-border ethnic cultural communication has evolved through four stages.

The first stage (before 2008) saw the emergence of the concept of cross-border ethnic groups, recognizing their complexity and comprehensiveness [1], and noting that their cultural communication promoted cooperation among neighboring regions and benefited border residents [2]. In the second stage (2009–2014), communication theories were applied to explore the role of mass media in constructing ethnic identity and transmitting national consciousness [3]. Subsequently, interpersonal and two-step flow communication to advance cross-border communication were proposed in media practices, but classic cases for analysis were insufficient [4]. In the third stage (2015–2022), under the Belt and Road Initiative and media convergence, cross-border ethnic cultural exchanges were integrated into the national cultural layout [5]. Mainstream media introduced various multimedia formats, consequently, academia began exploring the potential of ethnic opinion leaders and minority-language new media, yet talent shortages remained [6].

Since 2023, the fourth stage has extended to how platform algorithms influence ethnic cultural narratives and communication, as algorithmic traffic distribution may marginalize minority cultural content, solidify stereotypes, or generate exoticized ethnic symbol narratives [7-9]. Meanwhile, evaluation of effects has shifted from superficial data (likes and shares) to deeper dimensions such as cross-cultural empathy and ethnic identity [10], refocusing on how narrative strategies influence cultural identity through cultural frameworks [11]. Therefore, narrative strategy has become a key factor in understanding ethnic cultural communication in new media. This study takes the Aoluguya Ewenki in Northeast China as a case to fill the gaps in single-perspective research and insufficient regional samples.

3. Background

The Ewenki ethnic group belongs to the Tungusic branch of the Altaic language family. They believe in Shamanism, have no written language, and rely on oral transmission to preserve their culture. Aoluguya Ewenki consists of 62 households, 14 of which maintain hunting camps in the mountains. It is the only Ewenki branch that herds reindeer and shares a common origin with the Russian Evenki. According to interviews, Russian Evenki relatives visited Aoluguya Village to seek kinship, and they always communicate via WeChat voice messages due to language similarities.

After the ban on hunting in 2003, some elderly hunters struggled to adapt to urban life, leading to the stereotype of alcoholism captured on camera. Currently, tribal members reside in a government-

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built village located near the ethnic museum and tourist attractions. Their Reindeer are managed through semi-wild grazing by young relatives, family income includes handicraft sales, antler products, reindeer tourism, and film cooperation. Due to the media label of "China's last hunting tribe," they have long attracted domestic and international media attention.

4. Research methodology

This study includes two parts: content analysis and field research. Guided by the two-step flow theory and the semiotic analysis framework, it explores narrative strategies in mainstream media's overseas editions and in the social media account. Regarding samples, the mainstream media part includes relevant reports from the overseas editions of Xinhua News, China Daily, and People's Daily; the social media sample comprises the Douyin account of the Ewenki key opinion leader "Yuguosuo". Then, 30 days of field research were conducted in Aoluguya, Genhe City, Inner Mongolia, in April 2023, collecting first-hand data on cultural changes, livelihood sources, policy support, cross-border social networks, and media usage. Through case studies and semi-structured interviews, this research verifies that deviations exist in media narratives.

5. Narrative strategy analysis

5.1. Narrative strategy of mainstream media overseas editions

A total of 13 reports were retrieved by searching for the keyword "Ewenki" in official reports from Xinhua News, China Daily, and People's Daily, from January 2023 to October 2026, including 2 text reports, 3 video reports, and 8 graphic reports. Table 1 lists the sample reports.

Table 1. Sample reports on the Ewenki ethnic group by mainstream media

Platform	Headline	Date
Xinhua News	Visiting China's "last hunting tribe"	2024/8/12
	Traditional Ewenki handicrafts hot souvenirs amid thriving winter tourism	2024/2/27
	People of Ewenki ethnic group attend Naadam Fair in Inner Mongolia, China	2023/8/14
	Reindeer herders in N China embrace Chinese Lunar New Year	2023/1/25
China Daily	Ewenki herders combine traditions, new methods to raise reindeer in mountains	2023/1/22
	Life of reindeer herder of Ewenki ethnic group in N China's Inner Mongolia	2023/1/14
	Assembly helps put reindeer herders in spotlight	2026/10/15
	Tourism boosts incomes for Ewenkis	2024/3/1
People's Daily	Reindeer keeper preserves Ewenki traditions alive in N China's Inner Mongolia	2026/1/26
	China's 'Pole of Cold' turns 'cold resources' into 'hot industries'	2026/1/9
	Traditional Ewenki handicrafts boost local economy in N China's Inner Mongolia	2024/7/16
	Reindeer herders of Inner Mongolia	2024/1/8
	Life of reindeer herder of Ewenki ethnic group in N China's Inner Mongolia	2023/1/14

Headlines serve as condensed news content with both informational and promotional functions [12]. The sample reports exhibit positive macro-level themes, while high-frequency terms like "last" and "reindeer" continue the "last hunting tribe" narrative to attract readers, solidify stereotypes, and result in repetitive topics. Among them, 3 reports are identical, and 5 focus on the same topic of the

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post-pandemic tourism economy, indicating severe homogenization. The narratives focus on reindeer herding, handicrafts, and winter tourism, shaping an image of the Ewenki people as inheritors of traditional culture, living in stability and harmony.

Although these reports were reposted on their overseas social media platforms, overall interactions were low. A Facebook post by Xinhua News on Jan. 4, 2023, about a youth named Juele herding reindeer, received the highest interaction (577 likes, 2 comments, 8 shares). The video begins by calling reindeer in the Ewenki language, showcasing the integration of traditional livelihoods and modern life, reflecting the transitional tension from primitive civilization to modern society.

The new media narrative of mainstream media is dominated by official discourse and oriented toward national image construction. However, it lacks innovation and shows a strong sense of distance, insufficiently presents cross-border ethnic characteristics, making it difficult for cultural exchange. Conversely, the ethnic key opinion leader's account can build cultural memory spaces for homologous ethnic groups.

5.2. Narrative strategy of ethnic opinion leaders on social media

As of October 2026, the Douyin account "Yuguosuo" has 92,000 followers and 1.023 million likes. Since the account had the highest video update frequency and largest sample size in 2023, 55 videos related to the Ewenki culture were collected. The average engagement per-video was 7,212 likes, 385 comments, and 246 shares. The Engagement Rate by Followers (ERF) analysis was 8.525%, see equation (1) for an example.

ERF is a common metric in social media interaction research to measure audience stickiness [13]. The formula is:

$$ERF = \frac{(Likes+Comments+Shares)}{TotalFollowers} \times 100\% \quad (1)$$

Referring to industry benchmarks in digital marketing, ERF of <1% is extremely low, 1%–3.5% is average, 3.5%–6% is relatively high, and >6% is extremely high. An ERF of 8.525% falls into the extremely high range, indicating that "Yuguosuo" established strong interaction willingness and emotional stickiness among core audiences through micro-level ethnic life narratives.

Video content analysis is followed by the semiotic theory to analyze the encoding and cross-cultural interpretation of cultural symbols in highly interactive videos. In terms of linguistic signs, Ewenki greetings directly signify ethnic identity. Regarding non-linguistic signs, environmental symbols (forests, snow mountains, traditional dwellings) and behavioral symbols (chasing reindeer, making traditional food) jointly signify a free lifestyle in the mountainous forest, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Semiotic analysis of video content

Type	Sign	Signifier	Signified
Linguistic signs	Ewenki language	Self-introduction, language teaching, greeting	Ethnic identity
Non-linguistic signs	Costume	Hunters' workwear	Diligent lifestyle
	Behaviors	Working at hunting sites in signal-free mountain areas, chasing reindeer	Simple and peaceful forest life of reindeer herders

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Table 2. (continued)

Non-linguistic signs	Handicrafts	Production of chewing tobacco and traditional food	Distinctive culture different from Han
	Music	SOT; instrumental music	Positive and relaxing life
	Environment	Forests; Mountains; Traditional dwellings; Snow; Reindeers	Primitive natural mountainous forest life

Studies indicate that 70% of the information conveyed in human interaction is non-linguistic, with linguistic communication accounting for only 30% [14]. Unlike mainstream media, social-media narratives use micro-level perspectives and emotional symbols to lower the barriers of grand topics, effectively bridging the psychological distance for cross-cultural audiences and establishing emotional connections.

6. Media narrative deviations

Media coverage of minority groups often features narrative fragmentation and stereotypes, containing implicit frameworks and linguistic labels [15]. The field research revealed two deviations in media narratives. First, The Last Quarter of the Moon is regarded as a classic text of Ewenki culture [16], but it is more like a cultural imagination from a Han perspective, tribal Ewenkis consider it as a fiction. The prototype of the "last shaman" is actually one of the interviewee's grandmother, Niula, but the media often misrepresents it as "the last chief, Maria Suo."

Second, Aoluguya has no tribal chief, their way of life was families helping families, with no role for a leader. Maria Suo's oral interview often lost fidelity in translation from Ewenki to Chinese, resulting in one-way propaganda. Some media directors deliberately filmed alcoholism and conflicts to attract traffic, while foreign media interviews often involve sensitive topics, which must be accompanied by local government officials, making tribal Ewenkis highly wary of cameras and resistant to media overconsumption. Finally, the ethnic museum contains errors regarding family relationships and vocabulary. The younger generation is facing a severe loss of their ethnic language, and numerous hunting terms have no corresponding scenarios, challenging the living heritage of ethnic culture.

7. Conclusion

Cross-border ethnic groups are crucial for border security and economic development. Their cultural communication values the inheritance of ethnic culture and displays a diverse and inclusive national image. Comparing the narrative strategies of mainstream media and the social media account "Yuguosuo", this study finds that the former is objective yet distant, whereas the latter achieves high levels of interaction but lacks sustainable content production. Field research reveals that media narratives still exhibit exoticized deviations, implicitly eroding ethnic cultural subjectivity.

New media narratives of cross-border ethnic cultures should balance cultural commonality and ethnic individuality, value the role of key opinion leaders in two-step flow communication, and use life-oriented narratives to lower cross-cultural barriers. Correcting media stereotypes and maintaining cultural affinity with neighboring ethnic groups will enhance the effectiveness of international communication under the Belt and Road Initiative and facilitate the construction of an approachable national image. This study has limitations in interdisciplinary depth and

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methodological application. Future research will solidify theoretical foundations and refine research directions.

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