The International Dissemination of Chinese Ethnic Language History

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Abstract—The charm of a nation's culture and the cohesion of its people are primarily expressed and transmitted through language. As a vital carrier of cultural heritage and national unity, language embodies the cultural allure and centripetal force of a nation. In this context, the translation and overseas dissemination of China's domestic academic works hold significant strategic importance for enhancing national cultural confidence and strengthening the country's cultural soft power. This study focuses on the international promotion of ethnic language history, systematically reviewing its developmental trajectory and current status. By employing a dual-dimensional approach that combines diachronic and synchronic perspectives, as well as integrating quantitative and qualitative research methods, the study delves into the primary obstacles and underlying causes faced during its overseas dissemination. Building on this analysis, the research aims to construct an academic discourse system for ethnic language history with Chinese characteristics and explore practical pathways for international promotion, thereby showcasing the unique theoretical contributions and practical wisdom of Chinese ethnic language studies to the global academic community.

Keywords—academic translation, ethnic language history, international dissemination

I. INTRODUCTION

In the era of global community development, establishing an external discourse and narrative system for the Chinese national community is imperative. Under the framework of nation-state theory, language is closely intertwined with ethnic origins, identity, and recognition [1]. The emergence and survival of nations are shaped by the ability to have a common language, that people can speak as even more important read and write. The emergence of a standardized common language preceded the evolution of modern Western national states, laying the groundwork for nation building [2]. The importance gained historical clout in the process of German unification, out more than 300 partly German microstates. The common mother tongue served as a point of reference, laying the groundwork for a common identification as Germans striving for a united German national state [3]. Another particular case can be found in Iceland's language purism, where, due its isolated location, modern Icelanders are still able to read Icelandic texts from the 10th century. The Icelandic government actively promotes a language planning, keeping foreign influence outside, searching for Icelandic correspondence to neologism and preserving the ancient character of the language [4].

Language in that context serves a demarcation and boundary function. Especially in the European context, reminding the 21 working languages at the European Parliament, emphasizes the importance of language for the formation and expression of a national identity [5]. The classification and affiliation of languages share a co-evolutionary relationship with the history of ethnic development. Re-examining the integration history of the Chinese nation from a linguistic perspective has become a focal point in ethnic linguistics and chronology. Western academia, dominated by Euro-American linguistic anthropology and glottochronology, often relies on empirical qualitative analysis when exploring China's ethnic language relationships and contact history. However, from this perspective conducting a comparative linguistic approach is often dominated by lexical categories of Western languages. As emphasized by Bianca Basciano and Antonella Ceccagno, lexical categories do exist in the Chinese context, however a direct application is not possible, yet, requiring lexical categories to be identified on the basis of language-specific grammatical criteria [6]. This approach lacks objective quantitative methods to accurately describe the degree of linguistic kinship, leading to questionable reliability in some research conclusions. For instance, certain studies exploit controversies over the classification of Chinese languages and dialects to distort historical interethnic relationships. For example, some scholars claim that the ethnic languages of Taiwan belong to the ancient "Austronesian language family", asserting that Taiwan is one of the early birthplaces of the Austronesian people. However, research from the Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, using ancient DNA technology, has empirically demonstrated that the Austronesian homeland is in Fujian, closely linking the ethnic histories of Taiwan and mainland China [7]. Therefore, in-depth research on the international dissemination of Chinese ethnic language culture not only enhances China's international discourse power in this field but also effectively safeguards the diversity of China's ethnic languages, showcasing the rich history of ethnic cultural integration to the world.

II. CURRENT STATUS

Under the existing framework of "international dissemination of ethnic discourse systems", the international dissemination of China's ethnic language culture primarily unfolds through three channels.

A. National-Level Channels

These include initiatives such as the "National Social Science foundation of China (NSSFA): Chinese Academic

Translation Project", the "China Book International program", and the "Classic China International Publishing Project". Among these, the Chinese Academic Translation Project has garnered significant academic attention in recent years. Data shows a steady increase in the number of projects approved, rising from 185 in 2018 to 257 in 2023–2024, reflecting the nation's ongoing efforts to promote academic achievements globally. However, in the field of ethnic linguistics, the number of works translated and promoted overseas remains limited, with only a few representative works, such as Li Yunbing's *Typological Studies on the Word Order of Southern Chinese Ethnic Languages* and Xiang Xi's *A Concise History of the Chinese Language*. This indicates that despite significant progress in academic translation, the international dissemination of ethnic language culture still faces notable shortcomings in terms of scope, depth, and impact.

B. Ministerial-Level Platforms

Platforms such as the National Ethnic Affairs Commission's annual research projects have played a role in promoting ethnic language studies. However, their support and coverage remain insufficient. Over the past five years, only a few projects related to ethnic minority languages have been approved, such as the 2018 project on "*Language and Cultural Security under the Belt and Road Initiative*". This highlights the limitations in policy support and the marginalized status of ethnic language research within the broader academic landscape.

C. Media and Civil Society Channels

Institutions such as Confucius Institutes (see Fig. 1), the Chinese Ethnic Language Society, and the Chinese Ancient Script Research Association have facilitated the international dissemination of ethnic language culture through academic conferences, cultural exchanges, and publications. While these channels have achieved some success in broadening the reach of dissemination, their depth and influence remain limited.
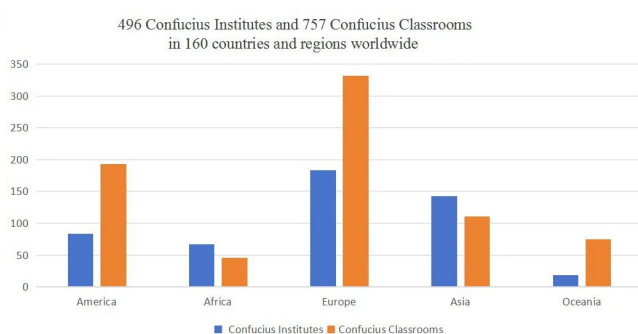

Fig. 1. Confucius institutes worldwide (Chinese International Education Foundation, 2023).

For instance, the audience for related activities is primarily confined to academic circles, and the content often lacks systematic output of in-depth theoretical research. On a positive note, the project "European Bench-marks for the Chinese Language", funded by the European Commission, brought together four renowned European Universities (SOAS), namely, School of Oriental and African Studies London, Freie Universität Berlin, Université de Rennes, Università La Sapienza in Rome. Considering the differences between European languages and Chinese, the project team developed particular descriptors for Chinese, that fit into level A1 and A2 of the "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages" (CEFR), measuring the level of language competence (see Fig. 2). Such efforts serve a bridge building function between two separate linguistic systems [8]. [1] Nevertheless, on a future prospect more of these initiatives, converging Western and Chinese efforts are welcomed.

A: Basic User	B: Independent User	C: Proficient User
A1: Have simple conversations about personal information, understand basic signs and notices	**B1:** Participate in discussions on familiar topics, write simple text on topics of personal interest	**C1:** Produce clear, well-structured text on complex subjects, understand a wide range of demanding texts
A2: Write short, simple notes and messages, understand frequently used expressions	**B2:** Understand the main ideas of complex texts, interact personally with a degree of fluency and spontaneity	**C2:** Express oneself spontaneously, fluently, and precisely, summarise information from different spoken and written sources

Fig. 2. Common European framework of reference for languages (European Commission, 2024).

In conclusion, while the international dissemination of China's ethnolinguistic culture has established a tripartite framework encompassing national-level initiatives, inter-ministerial collaborations, and media-civil society exchanges, this multidimensional approach continues to encounter significant challenges that substantially impede the development and global recognition of China's ethnolinguistic academic discourse.

III. CHALLENGES

The international dissemination of China's ethnolinguistic culture confronts three principal challenges that warrant scholarly attention:

(1) Geopolitical Barriers and Ideological Misinterpretation: The evolving geopolitical landscape has significantly impacted the reception of Chinese cultural exports. A case in point is Germany's inaugural "China Strategy" (July 2023), which framed China through the tripartite lens of "Partner, Competitor, and Systemic Rival", emphasizing "de-risking" measures. This politicization has not only heightened international skepticism toward Chinese cultural initiatives but also erected substantial barriers to the global dissemination of Chinese language and culture.

(2) Academic Hegemony and Epistemological Bias: The relatively late emergence of systematic theoretical research in Chinese ethnolinguistics has rendered it vulnerable to Western academic dominance. Many Western sinologists, operating within Orientalist frameworks, have systematically marginalized Chinese ethnolinguistic scholarship. As Helena Casas-Tost and Sara Rovira-Esteva elucidate through their critique of Oriental and Occidental paradigms, persistent misconceptions about Chinese language structures — such as the erroneous notion of Chinese as a "grammarless" language — have historically influenced both Western perceptions and Chinese linguistic reforms [9]. This academic hegemony has significantly impeded the global recognition of China's contributions to ethnolinguistic contact and language evolution studies.

(3) Linguistic Barriers and Dissemination Challenges: The predominance of Chinese-language publications in ethnolinguistic research has created substantial barriers to

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[1] The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages covers six different levels of language fluency, with Basic User (A1 and A2), Independent User (B1 and B2) and Proficient User (C1 and C2).

international engagement. As Zhao Zhuolun and Ju Hui emphasize, the complexity of achieving "China competence" extends beyond mere linguistic translation, requiring deep cultural and contextual understanding [10]. This linguistic divide often leads to misinterpretations or selective appropriation of Chinese scholarship. The *German Academic Exchange Service* (DAAD) advocates for fostering critical dialogue that acknowledges both commonalities and differences, highlighting the need for more nuanced cross-cultural communication strategies [11].

The enhancement of translation quality emerges as a pivotal factor in facilitating the global dissemination of China's academic works. Effective translation necessitates not only bilingual proficiency but also comprehensive cultural literacy, encompassing an in-depth understanding of cultural nuances, social customs, and linguistic subtleties across both source and target languages. This dual competence enables translators to achieve the essential qualities of translation: accuracy (letter), comprehensibility (reach), and aesthetic appeal (elegance), thereby enhancing the reception of translated works among target audiences.

In advancing the internationalization of Chinese thought and culture, publishers must adopt innovative dissemination strategies that harmoniously integrate core conceptual frameworks with engaging narrative techniques. This approach should strategically employ cultural vectors, including historical allusions and anecdotal references, to transform abstract ideological constructs into accessible, figurative narratives. Such methodology capitalizes on universal human emotional resonance to amplify the relatability and impact of terminological dissemination. Concurrently, it is imperative to establish a robust quality assurance system for terminological interpretation and translation. This system should ensure the precise transmission of cultural connotations while incorporating internationally accessible expressions, thereby maintaining both philosophical profundity and contemporary relevance.

The implementation of this "sophisticated yet accessible" communication paradigm serves dual purposes: it preserves the authenticity of Chinese intellectual and cultural traditions while enhancing their global appeal. This strategy facilitates the creative adaptation and innovative evolution of Chinese thought within cross-cultural contexts [12].

These persistent challenges have substantially undermined the global reach of China's ethnolinguistic culture while simultaneously distorting its objective perception and equitable assessment within international academic discourse. Consequently, it has become imperative to implement a comprehensive, multi-faceted strategy to enhance the global dissemination of Chinese ethnolinguistics. This strategic approach should encompass three critical dimensions: (1) the development of robust multilingual translation mechanisms for academic publications, (2) the establishment of substantive collaborations with leading international academic institutions, and (3) the systematic construction of a distinctive Chinese ethnolinguistic theoretical framework. Such concerted efforts are essential for securing China's appropriate standing in global academic circles and effectively showcasing the rich historical legacy and unique scholarly contributions of Chinese ethnolinguistic studies to the international community.

IV. REFLECTIONS

A comprehensive analysis of the underlying factors contributing to these challenges is essential for developing targeted solutions. These factors encompass not only academic knowledge gaps but also the complex interplay between national interests and cultural exchange, revealing significant limitations in current communication strategies. The following examination addresses three critical dimensions:

1) Epistemological deficits in academic exchange

The primary constraint on the international dissemination of Chinese ethnolinguistics lies in fundamental epistemological barriers. The international academic community's limited understanding of Chinese ethnolinguistic research often leads to misinterpretation and systemic bias in evaluating its scholarly contributions. The current academic exchange paradigm remains predominantly unidirectional, focusing on importing Western scholarship while inadequately exporting China's cutting-edge ethnolinguistic research. This imbalance has resulted in superficial international engagement with Chinese ethnolinguistics, obscuring its theoretical sophistication and practical relevance. To address this, a systematic academic translation initiative is urgently needed to showcase China's significant ethnolinguistic research, particularly in areas such as ethnic integration history through linguistic contact analysis. Such efforts would facilitate genuine bilateral academic dialogue and dismantle existing knowledge barriers.

2) Geopolitical dimensions of linguistic discourse

The competition for ethnolinguistic discourse power is inextricably linked to national interests. Language serves not merely as a cultural vehicle but as a fundamental component of national identity construction and soft power projection. As Li Qiyong observes, language proficiency directly correlates with cultural export capacity and international competitiveness [13]. Western nations have long recognized language as a strategic asset in global cultural competition. Consequently, the emergence of Chinese ethnolinguistics challenges Western academic hegemony, extending beyond scholarly discourse to encompass broader cultural influence and national image projection. Enhancing China's ethnolinguistic discourse power thus constitutes a crucial element of national cultural security and identity preservation in the global arena.

3) Integrated approach to cultural-linguistic communication

The intrinsic relationship between language and culture necessitates an integrated communication strategy. As Zhao Shiju emphasizes, language constitutes both the medium and essence of cultural expression [14]. Current international promotion efforts, exemplified by Confucius Institute activities like Tibetan calligraphy exhibitions, calligraphy classes, or other cultural promotions, while valuable for initial engagement, remain largely superficial. These technical-level language promotions fail to convey the profound historical depth and academic significance of China's ethnolinguistic heritage. Chinese national languages embody millennia of cultural wisdom and historical consciousness, demanding communication strategies that highlight their theoretical sophistication and cultural value through high-quality academic output and in-depth research

dissemination.

In conclusion, the internationalization of Chinese ethnolinguistics faces three interrelated challenges: epistemological barriers, geopolitical competition, and communication strategy limitations. Overcoming these obstacles requires a multifaceted approach that combines enhanced academic translation, strategic discourse power development, and optimized communication strategies that integrate academic research with cultural promotion. Only through such comprehensive measures can the unique value and global significance of Chinese ethnolinguistics be effectively communicated to the international community.

V. STRATEGIES FOR INNOVATION

To overcome the challenges in establishing an international academic discourse system for Chinese ethnolinguistics, a tripartite approach encompassing paradigm shift in conceptual framework, strategic adaptation and systemic integration, and innovative collaborative mechanisms is essential (see Fig. 3).
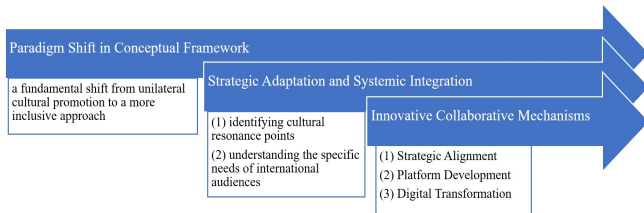

Fig. 3. The tripartite approach (depiction by the author).

A. Paradigm Shift in Conceptual Framework

The transformation of conceptual paradigms necessitates a fundamental shift from unilateral cultural promotion to a more inclusive approach that serves the construction of the Chinese national community. This shift aims to counter the Western academic tendency to portray Chinese ethnolinguistics and ethnographic evolution as ideological indoctrination or cultural imposition. Instead, it fosters equitable international academic dialogue and facilitates profound exchanges in the fields of linguistic and ethnic studies. This transformation is crucial for establishing a balanced and mutually respectful academic discourse.

B. Strategic Adaptation and Systemic Integration

The principle of adaptability emphasizes the importance of identifying cultural resonance points and understanding the specific needs of international audiences. As Zhao Shiju noted, citing Confucius Institute consultant Ackerman, "Cultural exchange is not merely about exporting culture but about the interaction of diverse cultural values and systems." [14] Therefore, developing an international academic discourse system for Chinese ethnolinguistics requires a deep understanding of the cultural, political, and economic contexts of target countries. Efforts should focus on integrating into local social, ecological, and discursive systems, conducting thorough research on local linguistic and cultural needs, and actively participating in relevant local activities. For instance, in German Sinology, while the focus has shifted from classical to modern Chinese studies, linguistics, particularly Oriental linguistics, remains foundational. Highlighting the historical evolution of Chinese characters and the integration history of the Chinese

nation can effectively engage international audiences, showcasing the enduring legacy and dynamic growth of Chinese language and culture.

C. Innovative Collaborative Mechanisms

Innovative collaboration involves multidimensional strategies and developmental approaches. Key initiatives include:

(1) Strategic Alignment: Leveraging national initiatives like the "Belt and Road" to integrate the dissemination of Chinese ethnolinguistic history into broader language services, thereby facilitating synergistic cultural promotion.

(2) Platform Development: Constructing a multifaceted promotional platform system that incorporates channels from enterprises, civil society, overseas media, and the Chinese diaspora to enhance the global reach of Chinese ethnolinguistic culture.

(3) Digital Transformation: Utilizing digital technologies to create multimedia and digital humanities-based dissemination methods. This approach not only modernizes the presentation of Chinese national languages and cultures but also counters misconceptions about China's ethnic systems, promoting the vision of a shared destiny for the Chinese nation.

By implementing these strategies, the international academic discourse system for Chinese ethnolinguistics can achieve greater global recognition and influence, effectively communicating the rich heritage and contemporary relevance of Chinese language and culture.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study presents a comprehensive analysis of the current landscape and challenges in the international dissemination of China's ethnolinguistic history, offering a multidimensional framework for both academic research and practical implementation. Through the integration of interdisciplinary resources and the synthesis of historical and contemporary perspectives, the research establishes a robust foundation for advancing China's global discourse power in ethnolinguistics. The findings underscore the necessity of a tripartite strategy encompassing conceptual transformation, adaptive integration, and innovative collaboration to effectively communicate the richness of Chinese ethnic cultures.

The study highlights the importance of shifting from unilateral cultural promotion to a more inclusive approach that emphasizes mutual understanding and equitable academic exchange. By addressing epistemological deficits, geopolitical dimensions, and communication strategy limitations, the research provides actionable insights for enhancing the global recognition of Chinese ethnolinguistics. Key recommendations include the development of systematic academic translation projects, strategic alignment with national initiatives like the "Belt and Road," and the utilization of digital technologies for innovative dissemination methods.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader goal of showcasing the diversity and integration of Chinese ethnic cultures, thereby enriching the global academic discourse. It offers Chinese wisdom and solutions to the construction of a global community of shared future, emphasizing the role of

ethnolinguistics in fostering cross-cultural understanding and cooperation. The proposed framework not only aims to elevate China's international academic standing but also to promote a more inclusive and balanced global cultural exchange.

APPENDIX

Fig. 1: Chinese International Education Foundation. (December 2023). Confucius Institute Annual Development Report 2023 [Online].
https://ci.cn/qkylxq?file=/profile/upload/2024/07/03/471606 610_20240703165613A988.pdf

Fig. 2: European Commission. (September 2024). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [Online].
https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/en/discover/news/step-step-using-cefr-classroom

Fig. 3: The tripartite approach (depiction by the author).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Jie Li established the foundation of the paper, setting the conceptual framework; Junlai Nie carried out the data analysis, ensuring precise evaluation and interpretation; Stephan Raab reviewed and organized the material, ensuring a clear and structured presentation; all authors had approved the final version.

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